

When all you have is a Freudian, everything looks like a cigar

Historically, psychological theories of sexuality have not dealt with bisexuality very well. Most theories were developed to explain heterosexuality, and treat homosexuality or bisexuality as after-thoughts. When it has been addressed at all, bisexuality has been variously treated as a myth, as a developmental phase with no real meaning, or as a pathology.

As a bisexual, I have looked at some of these theories in self-defence, but I find it pretty hard to take them seriously. Dualistic or essentialist theories of human sexuality can seriously distort reality.

Even putting people into three categories: "heterosexual", "bisexual", and "homosexual" (instead of one or two) is a simplification which ignores other dimensions of sexuality and hides the fact that these are groups with fuzzy edges, not neat boxes.

Everything Old is New Again

Bisexuality is real. Bisexual behaviour has clearly existed for thousands of years. At the same time, until a certain amount of freedom existed for homosexuals, it was difficult to distinguish between "closeted" homosexuals and "closeted" bisexuals, or between marriages of convenience and marriages of choice. With the onset of gay liberation, it became easier to speak of a bisexual identity. Bisexual support groups were started in several major U.S. cities in the latter half of the 1970s.

Bisexual organizations continued to exist and spread in the 80s but had a low profile, perhaps due to fallout from AIDS and the conservative social climate. However, in recent years, bisexual organizations have been on the rise, and have been networking nationally and internationally.

If It's Not Broke Don't Fix It

Counsellors should beware of assuming that a client's bisexuality is the problem to be "solved" (or conversely, that it is a magic solution.)

It is unwise and counterproductive to tell bisexual clients they must "choose" between being homosexual or heterosexual. It is reasonable for bisexuals to seek to develop an integrated identity that encompasses all their sexuality regardless of the nature of their current relationships.

Likewise, one should not make snap judgements about the partners or spouses of bisexuals.

As a counsellor, you have a responsibility to examine your attitudes toward bisexuality so as not to project them onto your clients. A counsellor is more likely to understand a client of the same sexual orientation, but since this is not always the case, you should seek to be informed on the subject so your clients don't have to start by teaching you "Bisexuality 101".

Realise Your Limits

If someone is in the midst of a "coming out" process of exploring their sexual identity, it is virtually impossible for an outside observer to determine if they will ultimately be gay/lesbian, bisexual (or even straight.) Your job is to provide support and respect people's choices, not to predict their future.

There are no sharp dividing lines in behaviour between groups of people who identify as bisexual and those who identify as straight or gay/lesbian. How people identify is their choice. (I would suggest that feelings are as important as sexual history in determining sexual identity.)

Don't Generalise

Bisexuals are very diverse. It would be a mistake to assume they all fit one or two patterns. (For example, a bisexual married man may have a different history and set of issues than a single woman who has dated both men and women.)

There are many different life histories that may lead to seeing oneself as bisexual.

Bisexuals in long-term relationships can be almost invisible, unless they "come out" deliberately, because their sexuality is judged by their primary relationship.

Some bisexuals say they get much the same needs met from both men and woman, others say their experiences of the two sexes are different. Bisexuals are not always equally attracted to both sexes. It is a myth that all bisexuals must be involved with multiple sexual partners. There is as much range and variation among bisexuals as in any other group. Various bisexuals practice life-time monogamy, serial monogamy, poly-fidelity, open relationships, one-night stands, and celibacy.

Try not to not confuse conventional sex roles with sexual orientation. For example, while some bisexuals are attracted to the idea of androgyny, others are not. (Jungians seem especially subject to this error.)

Some bisexuals get support and identity from the gay or lesbian communities, others feel relatively distant from them. Some bisexuals are found in other sectors of society that are relatively tolerant of diversity (for example, science fiction fans or neo-pagans).

Some recognize signs of their bisexuality at an early age; others realise it only after a pattern of feelings or relationships which takes them by surprise.

While we may be open to partners of either sex, in general bisexuals are likely to be as discriminating about their sexual partners as anyone else.

At the same time, we do not always "choose" the object of our attraction. We are as subject to attacks of romance or lust as anyone else.

Coming Out Different

Bisexuals have many things in common with gay men and lesbians. At the same time there are some differences that can make our experience distinctive.

Bisexuals get flak from both sides; we can't take for granted the support of either the mainstream or the gay/lesbian communities.

As someone said (half joking): "Everybody thinks bisexuals are perverts".

There are few places where bisexuality is the norm. If a bisexual leaves a relationship with one sex and enters a relationship with the other sex, they may risk losing their friends and their support network, especially if they have not publicly identified as bisexual.

A socially experienced bisexual may have two public personas and be able to function in either community. This, in itself, is not unhealthy. However, carried to an extreme, this can become a "double closet" where one is hiding significant facts about oneself in both places. This can make it more difficult to develop an integrated self-image. (This is a consequence of structural bias against bisexuals in society.)

Coming out as bisexual may be an incremental process of coming to terms with first one sort of sexual attraction then another, then trying to live with what society says are opposites.

Coming out as gay/lesbian is more clearly a process of directly opposing heterosexual socialisation. In developing their sexual identity, bisexuals can't totally reject their heterosexual socialisation in favour of homosexuality, instead they must pick, choose and synthesise.

Developing a bisexual identity can be more time consuming because of the complexity of the issues and the relative lack of social support.

It is more difficult to "come out" publicly as bisexual because people cannot in general infer your bisexuality from your relationships or other subtle signs. It's difficult to "prove" one is bisexual to everyone's satisfaction.

It has been suggested that bisexuals sometimes have to "come out" over and over because people seem to keep forgetting one "side" or the other of their sexuality.

I suspect that bisexuals are even more likely than gay men and lesbians to be impatient with the limitations of labels like "gay" or "straight". Bisexuals are in the middle of a social polarisation. Heterosexism sets up an "either/or"; we tend to

respond with "both/and" or sometimes "none of the above".

I suspect the grace or lack thereof that people have in exploring their sexuality has to do in part with the variety and flexibility of the models of sexuality presented to them in advance.

I had the benefit of meeting a few bisexuals early in my coming out process, so I was always aware of this alternative and didn't always experience a sharp gay/straight split. But, initially, I felt this was a rare and exceptional experience. It has taken me a long time to have islands of this sort of unified community in my life on an on-going basis.

I wrote this for a presentation to a group of students of psychology and counselling about bisexuality. You may use it in a not-for-profit context, but please include this notice and the copyright, if you use it as a whole, or provide reasonable credits for partial quotes.

Sydney Bisexual Network

SBN is a social and support group, based in Sydney. It has regular social activities and members undertake various activities to raise the awareness of bisexuality.

Web page: <http://sbn.bi.org>

Email: sbn-admin@yahoogroups.com

Info line: (02) 9565 4281

Address: SBN, PO Box 281, Broadway 2007

Australian Bisexual Network

ABN is a national body for bisexual men, women and their partners. It is affiliated with the Sydney Bisexual Network and other Australian bisexual groups.

Web page: www.rainbow.net.au/~ausbinet/

Email: ausbinet@rainbow.net.au

Phone: (07) 3857-2500

Address: ABN, PO Box 490, Lutwyche 4030

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