Bisexuality and Relationships Project

Summary of Project Findings
September 2017
Who took part?

We were really pleased that 20 people were happy to be interviewed; some of you face-to-face, and some of you via Skype. Of those that participated, 13 of you were women, 4 were men, and 3 of you were genderqueer or nonbinary. We asked you about what other terms you used to describe your sexuality, apart from bisexual, and some of you mentioned pansexual, queer, panromantic, and sapiosexual.

We also asked you for 5 words to describe yourself, the results are on the right. The larger the word, the more people who also used it to describe themselves.

You were in a range of different types of relationship – some of you had been in a relationship for around a month when we met for our interview, whilst others had been with partners for 10 years. Lots of you were monogamous – 14 people – and 6 of you were in non-monogamous, open, or polyamorous relationships. Out of everyone who took part, two of you had children.

On the whole, the people we spoke to were mainly white British or white European, with 4 people describing their race and ethnic background differently. Most of you described yourselves as middle class – 13 of you – with 7 describing themselves as working, or working-middle class. Everyone we spoke to was either in full or part time employment, or education, or both. The people we spoke with were aged between 18 and 40. The majority of you were under 30.

What did you find out?

We asked you lots of questions and really appreciated the time you took to answer these and to tell us about your experiences of being bisexual and being in relationships. We noticed some key patterns that came up across lots of your interviews. Although of course, everyone also had unique experiences too, so we can’t capture everything you told us about in this summary.

The key points we found are:

- There are lots of negative stereotypes about bisexuality and these often relate to how bisexual people will act in relationships.
- There’s a lot of pressure on bisexual people to explain what their sexuality means and to repeatedly ‘come out’.
- People assume that bisexual people are either straight or gay depending on the gender of their partner.
- There is no one type of ‘bisexual relationship’ but there are lots of good things about how relationships might look or be arranged, which bisexual people associate with being bisexual.
- It’s really important to bisexual people that their sexuality is acknowledged and made visible and there were lots of different ways people tried to achieve this.

We sum up some of these common experiences below and use extracts from your interviews to give you some examples of the types of things that you, and other participants said.
Bisexual stereotypes

Pretty much everyone we spoke to generally agreed that there were a lot of negative stereotypes about bisexuality, and we were really struck by how easily lots of you could reel off a list of these misconceptualisations. For example, Kate Slater talked about other people’s ideas about bisexuality:

They’ll say they’ll never date a bisexual girl, or “oh that just means your gay and you’re too scared of saying it”, “oh that means you’re straight and you just want to experiment”, “oh do you mean you’re just confused?”, “you haven’t decided”, “but don’t all bisexual girls cheat on people”, ”oh but aren’t all bisexual girls sluts?”, “oh do you want to have a threesome” (Kate Slater, woman, 22, relationship with a woman)

We found that these kinds of negative stereotypes - which have been around for a long time - were something that participants (understandably) found really frustrating. These negative ideas were a lot more prominent than positive ideas of what being bisexual is all about. Lots of our participants said they found it hard to give an example of a widespread positive understanding of bisexuality.

Despite this, participants did sometimes present their own versions of bisexuality which often resisted the negative stereotypes. This meant that participants often had a clear sense of what bisexuality meant to them (beyond those stereotypes), what they thought was good about it, and how it could be quite liberating to be bisexual:

[Being bisexual means] you can appreciate the beauty in humans, a lot more...You can appreciate everyone (Rosalina Robbins, genderqueer, 25, relationship with a man)

As we mentioned above, for some participants, it was helpful to use other words to describe their identity. This meant that they could highlight their attraction to more than one gender (and sometimes also their non-binary gender identity) and avoid some of the negative ideas associated with bisexuality:

Queer is just a bit more neatly packaged and I feel like...queer is a bit more ambiguous? And therefore it just allows you a bit more wriggle room I suppose in terms of...it’s harder for people to, like, pin their perceptions on you. And I feel like, for myself, I think I put that I like [to use] genderqueer as well...I feel it sort of encompasses it for me. It’s not just about my sexuality, it’s about how I view myself and my gender, so “queer” just seems to kind of carry all that yeah. (Bo, woman, 34, relationship with a man)

Bisexual stereotypes mean having to explain bisexuality when ‘coming out’

Lots of you spoke about being out, but explained how being out was no guarantee that people understood what bisexuality was all about for you. This was linked to those prominent negative stereotypes about what bisexuality means. It also related to relationships and telling prospective partners, which could be really difficult.

Often, the bisexual people we spoke to found they had to repeatedly explain to their partners what being bisexual meant, spend time reassuring partners they would be faithful, and that their needs could be met when in relationships with partners of one gender.
I’ve always had to be actually, quite careful about telling gents I fancy anyone else. I don’t even think that [my current partner] is ok with it, like, some guys are ok with it if it’s other women? (Natasha Phillips, woman, 38, relationship with a man)

[Some men] think that you can only be one way or another and that, I don’t know, that you’re going to run off and leave them for a woman or something like that because that’s who you really are, or, I don’t know, if you’re seeing a guy and then [if] you [are] no longer in that relationship, and then you’re in a relationship with a woman they might sort of go “I was such a terrible person that I turned him off men forever and now he’s with a woman” (Daniel, man, 32, relationships with a man and a woman)

Stereotypes about hypersexuality and promiscuity, in particular, have significant effects on the way people respond to bisexual people. Some of the women who we spoke to also reported that men in particular seem to see bisexuality as a bit of fun - some partners or ex-partners had joked about having threesomes, which participants found a bit tiresome. These negative stereotypes can place a lot of pressure on bisexual people to explain their sexuality and reassure partners of their fidelity. This can result in people feeling emotionally fatigued as they continually reassure partners and explain their sexuality.

**Bisexual erasure and invisibility in the relationships: Having to repeatedly come out and explain bisexuality**

We talked to participants about what it means to be in a bisexual relationship. One really challenging thing which a number of people reported was that it was difficult to be seen as a bisexual person at all, but particularly when in a relationship. This was because other people made assumptions about bisexual people’s sexual identities based on the gender of a current partner. If participants were known to be in relationships with a partner of a different gender then other people often assumed they were straight. And if participants were in a relationship with someone of a same gender then others thought they must be gay.

In particular, people in relationships with someone of a different gender wanted to stress that whilst ‘passing’ as heterosexual could be perceived to be a privilege, it was also challenging. It meant that they felt their identities were being erased, that there weren’t always opportunities to ‘come out’, or that they felt under pressure to keep correcting people’s misassumptions:

Whenever I tell people I’m really interested in LGBT stuff the first thing they’ll ask is “but you’re not L, G, B or T?” Because they know I have a boyfriend so they assume I’m straight. So I’m just like, why can’t I be one of the four [LGBT] …they’ve never been like “are you bisexual?” or whatever, because I have a boyfriend […] they just [think that they] know, just assume I’m straight (Aidan, woman, 21, relationship with a man)

I’m non-binary so no relationship that I’m ever in is really an opposite sex relationship in the traditional sense. So what I guess I gain in not dealing with homophobic abuse, I lose in…people not, not respecting or acknowledging my identity exists and the revolving door of coming out forever and ever and ever, telling people that I’m bi, because I’m in relationship where I’m perceived to be straight (AJ, nonbinary, 27, relationship with a man)
Several participants also reflected on what their ‘couple’ identity was as a bisexual person in a relationship with a monosexual person, or as a bisexual person in a monogamous relationship.

People think we’re a straight couple. Are we a straight couple? What is our identity as a couple? (Amber, woman, 29, relationship with a man)

These experiences indicate how in wider society, relationships tend to be understood as straight or gay, but never as bisexual.

**There’s not a just one type of ‘bisexual relationship’**

We asked people where they felt their ideas about how to arrange their relationships came from, and whether there was a ‘bisexual relationship’ model. Participants told us that they drew ideas from a range of sources including friends, family, and discussions on the internet about different types of relationships. All in all, there was agreement that there is no one type of relationship for bisexual people. Participants celebrated the range of options open to bisexual people and the conscious choices they had made in building relationships in ways which suited them:

It’s not that my code about being bisexual allows me to have different relationships, no, I just feel freer because I don’t have to follow your not-real rules (laughs). Even if I do! (Sophia, woman, 23, relationship with a man)

As we’ve mentioned, some participants were in non-monogamous/polyamorous relationship. For participants who were in multiple relationships with people of different genders, the ‘revolving door of coming out’ that AJ referred to (above) also often involved making decisions about coming out as non-monogamous/polyamorous, as well as bisexual:

Being poly gives me a lot more opportunities to come out, um, and it gives me reasons to. I literally have to keep a log of who knows about [my boyfriend] because… I could come across as completely [heterosexual] because they would just assume instantly, if I said I was just with [my girlfriend], they would just assume I was a lesbian, nobody ever thinks there is the middle ground! Before I was in two different gender relationships I didn’t have to come out and I very, very rarely did. And it’s hard for me to talk about bisexuality without bringing poly into it now (Michelle, woman, 22, in relationships with 2 men and a woman)

For those participants who were in relationships with people who were trans and non-binary, or who sought to have relationships with less rigid gender roles, being bisexual meant that their relationships had more space, outside of heterosexual norms, to explore and express different gender roles and identities.

Me being queer makes it feel a lot safer for him to…have told me that, uh, how he identifies and to feel…like, to feel safe and like, he’s going to be loved whatever (Rose, woman, 28, relationship with [closeted] trans woman).

Overall, there were lots of different ways to be bisexual and be in a relationship, but a common issues was that in any type of relationship, bisexuality often seemed to be invisible. Participants were all united in wanting their identities to be acknowledged.
Making bisexuality visible and valid in and beyond relationships

Lots of participants talked about how they wanted to keep their bisexual identity present in their lives and their relationships and told us about how they tried to do so. This involved a few different strategies, although everyone agreed there was no one way to tackle the invisibility of bisexuality so there were no easy solutions. Some people reported giving thought to the sort of ‘clues’ their style of dress, hobbies, or household items might give other people:

Um…there may be little clues. Because I’m sort of quite heavily involved in the burlesque and exotic dance scene and there’s a lot of alternative sexuality which usually congregate around that scene (Lucy, woman, 40, relationship with a man)

However, the people we spoke with recognised the limitations of these symbols and subcultures in making their bisexuality visible, as the presumption that you can only be attracted to one gender - monosexuality - is so strong:

I think probably [people assume I’m] gay just because it has been rare in my experience that someone has assumed bisexuality? So because there aren’t like pictures of me making out with men and women at the same time. It would just be like ‘oh it’s a gay person’ (Jack, trans man, 24, relationship with nonbinary person)

Participants also told us that when they felt it was safe to do so, they tried to challenge these kinds of assumptions about monosexuality. This could mean correcting people who assumed they were straight or gay based on the gender of their current partner[s] (as discussed above), or taking part in LGBTQ events and activism to help represent bisexual people within different spaces

My agenda [in participating] is kind of [that] there aren’t many bisexual people in [the workplace LGBT network]. But, you know, it’s important because we are everywhere. We’re there, we’re alive, there’s plenty of us, there’s lots more than you think. Uh, can we be more visible. Yeah…I put it on the board, when I go out [of the office] so I make it quite clear [I have gone to the] ‘rainbow group’ (Muriel, woman, 40, relationship with a man)

One thing almost all of the people we spoke to reported doing was making a conscious effort to watch and read LGBTQ films and books, go to LGBTQ events, and share their ongoing attraction to people of more than one gender with their current partners by talking about different people they are attracted to:

I think that the [LGBT] book group is important to me because it connects me to queer history and other queer people who changed things so that they could, so that I could be who I am now (AJ, nonbinary, 27, relationship with a man)

It’s just nice to be able to talk honestly and not have a secret. I guess it sounds really trivial and I feel really silly, but just to be able to say ‘oh, I quite fancy Kristen Stewart’ or something daft…I should be able to do that I think, in the same way I can say I really like Robert Downey Jr or whatever. (Toni, woman, 28, relationship with a man)

In all, LGBTQ and bisexual community and culture played a big role in helping bi people respond to invisibility and provide more of a sense of a positive and visible bisexual identity.
For all of our participants, it was really important to them that their partners acknowledged and celebrated their identity as bisexual people. This happened in different ways and to different degrees. Participants gave us examples of some of these instances which were most important to them. These ranged from occasions when their partners would correct other people who made assumptions about their sexuality, to advocating for bisexual people and their inclusion in professional and social contexts. It also included occasions where talking about bisexuality and the importance of their identity was welcomed and celebrated within their relationships.

He’ll correct people for me. Because most people we’ll talk to know [I’m bisexual and nonbinary] and he’s like, ‘no, you’ll use the right words’ or whatever (Piper, nonbinary, 19, relationship with a man)

[My girlfriend] loves to have those conversations [about bisexual identity]. And um she loves to talk to me about it and it’s fun. (Kate Slater, woman, 22, relationship with a woman)

The bisexual people we spoke with all highlighted this kind of validation and support as hallmarks of a relationship they felt positive about.

What next?
Now that all the interviews have been conducted and we have a summary of the key points about your experiences and stories of being bisexual and being in relationships, we will be writing some formal reports to share with professional organisations. These reports will include recommendations for what needs to happen next in a range of different fields. Some of these points will include:

- Need for more research into an even more diverse group of bisexual people in relationships to continue to discover what matters to them, and what support and action can help support bisexual people
- Bisexual people’s physical and mental health and wellbeing should be a key priority for healthcare and relationship initiatives
- There needs to be increased education and knowledge to legitimise and make bisexuality visible culturally and socially
- Counselling provision needs to be tailored to support bisexual people with sometimes challenging experiences of discrimination, exclusion, biphobia and feeling invisible
Bisexuality and Relationships Project

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