13 Concluding remarks

Proposing future directions

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Introduction

We would like to round out this collection by asking some questions: What topics might need to be tackled in the future? What are the next steps to be taken? How can we make bisexuality research more relevant within sexuality scholarship and the broader social sciences? Even though there has been a rise in research on bisexuality, much remains to be done. This final chapter can be read as a guide to the directions in which bisexual theorising might head, or as humble suggestions for (young) researchers about which topics still need to be addressed. It may also simply inspire researchers to delve more deeply into the realities of bisexual people.

As we mentioned in the introduction, there are a few topics that have been at the centre of bisexual theorising: discrimination against bisexual people; their invisibility in societies governed by binary understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality; and identity formation and development. This has included research on the formation and expression of identity, such as coming-out processes, disclosure, and living as a bisexual person in heterosexual, lesbian, or gay communities. Focusing on these topics made a lot of sense in early bisexuality research, which aimed for the recognition of bisexuality as a viable identity. It was necessary to point out that bisexual people face binegativity from different communities and are not generally in a privileged position. It was also important to show that binegativity has serious health consequences, to strengthen the argument around the impact of binegativity (Jorm et al. 2002; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). Even if we, as editors, think it was a paramount task to create a space where bisexuality research could emphasise the unique situation of bisexual individuals, we also think it is now time to focus on other topics as well, and to move past reparative studies. We must go beyond arguing that bisexuality needs to be studied, and start proving why bisexuality scholarship is important for the advancement of sexuality scholarship, social theory, and health studies. This final chapter aims to provide some guidance on how this might be done.

Embedding bisexuality into theories of sexuality

Bisexuality research to date seems to exist in its own bubble, sometimes loosely tied to disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology. To strengthen research and knowledge about bisexuality, we think it is necessary to introduce bisexuality into the canon of research on sexuality. A first step is to ground bisexuality research firmly in current theorising about sexuality, including in sociology, psychology, and the geography of sexuality. Reparative studies have already paved the way for the next steps here. Second, bisexuality research should inform sexual theorising. As a minimum requirement, bisexuality should be recognised as a viable sexuality that has its own features and is worthy of consideration, separately from homosexuality and heterosexuality. That means understanding that research on monosexual identities does not suffice to understand the lives of bisexuals, because bisexual people do not merely shift between being homosexual and heterosexual. It also means understanding that the unique position of bisexual people offers different perspectives that can enrich sexual theorising. Third, bisexuality research can profit from different (and clear) theoretical perspectives that go beyond the concepts developed within bisexual theorising to understand the marginalisation of bisexuality and bisexual people. Engaging with wider theories is crucial to show the relevance of bisexuality studies, and will help to further research understandings of the lives of bisexual people and others with plurisexual orientations and identities.

Work on *bisexual citizenship* has advocated a greater understanding of specific issues faced by bisexual individuals, such as the recognition of sexual fluidity (rather than essentialist understandings of sexuality), relationship diversity, and queer approaches to sexuality (e.g. Monroe, 2005). Richardson's (2000) typology of sexual citizenship rights could be applied to bisexual individuals to advance discussions of sexual citizenship rights, and could also contribute to larger discussions of liberal, communitarian, and queer perspectives on sexual citizenship. The incorporation of bisexual-specific issues outlined by Monroe (2005) has the potential to change citizenship discussions that are still based on mononormative and heteronormative assumptions. Bisexual citizenship, however, is not limited to the relationship between the state and its sexualised citizens, or between society and sexualised individuals; it can also be applied in international and transnational (legal) contexts. An example is Peyghambarzadeh's theoretical work on bisexuality and refugees (see Chapter 2 in this volume). This work offers a good starting point to dig more deeply into the lived experiences of migrants and refugees, which we believe is one of the most crucial topics. In the case of refugees and the politics around "particular social groups" in need of protection, the combination of binegativity, a lack of knowledge in

both the country of origin and the country of arrival, and certain cultural understandings of bisexuality can be deadly.

Additionally, it should be recognised that research on bisexuality can help us to understand the current trend towards *sexual diversification* and the complexity of sexuality (Flanders, 2017; Giddens, 1992; Sigusch, 1998; van Anders, 2015). Recent years have seen a general diversification of sexual and gender identities: fewer people feel comfortable using “heterosexual” as a label for themselves, and more people are identifying between or outside the gender binary (YouGov, 2015). There also seems to be a trend towards the pluralisation of labels for sexualities, and plurisexual labels seem to be on the rise. Some research is already heading in this direction (Flanders et al., 2016; Hayfield, 2020; Chapter 12 in this volume). Such research will show whether pansexuality, sexual fluidity, and other labels are used similarly or differently to bisexuality, whether people using such labels have different life experiences, and so on. The way we live and name sexuality is constantly changing; our research should investigate these dynamics. Thus, it remains interesting to study what *different labels* arise, how people conceptualise them, how people understand this diversification, and how these developments impact people’s everyday realities. In this way, research on bisexuality can inform ongoing debates on major questions in gender and queer studies.

The introduction to this book showed that research to date has dealt extensively with bisexual identity. However, bisexuality does not exist as a stable sexual identity only; people live different aspects of it. Although it may seem easier to conceptualise identity in a stable way, the reality is much more fluid, complex, and sometimes messy. Relatedly, a large proportion of people who, to different degrees, are sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of more than one sex or gender do not identify as bisexual; they use different sexual identity labels – and not always plurisexual labels. Thus, studies should not only focus on “safe topics” related to bisexual (or plurisexual) identities, but should also investigate orientations, desires, attraction, fantasies, and sexual and romantic behaviour. We can learn from earlier approaches and models – such as the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, which complicates understandings of sexuality by focusing on exactly these factors – as well as by exploring the practical merit or added value of Van Anders’s recent sexual configuration theory (Klein, 1978; Swan & Habibi, 2018; Van Anders, 2015). Ultimately, our research on bisexuality and plurisexuality can be linked to current theorising on sexualities, and can help to inform future theorising.

There is a long-standing ongoing discussion in LGBTIQ+ activist communities about the labels that are and are not acceptable to use, and the impact of the binary ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality that govern our everyday lives. These questions have not been resolved and are probably not resolvable. Queer theory-informed arguments can inspire us to live with these ambiguities, to use different labels, and to exchange and play

with them, as discussed in the *Journal of Bisexuality* 2009 special issue on bisexuality and queer theory (e.g. Anderlini- D'Onofrio & Alexander, 2009; Barker, Richards, & Bowes-Catton, 2009; Callis, 2009; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009; Gustavson, 2009). Bisexual people encounter the binary system of sex, gender, and sexuality on a daily basis, have first-hand experience of the limits of this system and its labels, and can provide additional perspectives and knowledge to deconstruct it. Chapter 10 in this volume, on the erasure of bisexual knowledge, shows that it is vitally important to learn from bisexual people's experiences in order to further enrich sexuality scholarship on this binary system. Moreover, the question remains of whether bisexuality and the various labels used for plurisexual identities have the potential to change or reinforce binary thinking about sex and gender (e.g. Hemmings (2002) on bisexuality as the middle ground that sustains these binaries). It might also be interesting to further engage with queer theory in order to move towards a postmodern approach to sexuality, researching topics about the complexity, situatedness, and fluidity of sexuality (and gender). Thus, it is not only from an epistemological point of view that it is worth digging into these questions.

Diversification and intersectionality

Our collection shows that most research on bisexuality is still being done about bisexual women (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, 11 and 12 in this volume). This interesting specificity of bisexuality research derives from the fact that the usual gender-discriminatory patterns are reversed in bisexuality. Stereotypes against bisexual women seem to be less pervasive than those against bisexual men. More women identify as bisexual than men (FRA, 2014). Women also seem to be more open about their bisexuality, and hence easier to reach as participants; as a consequence, more research is done on the lived experiences of bisexual women. Bisexual men are still ignored in society and academia. This leaves bisexual men an under-researched group; as Flanders (2017) argues, there is a considerable lack of research on the lives and experiences of bisexual men – that is, men for whom bisexuality is a self-identity, behaviour, and/or attraction – and most such research stems from the last ten years. Thus, researchers on bisexuality should try to include more men, and also to focus on other genders, including people living in between or beyond the gender binary.

Studies are usually conducted on younger, often academic bisexual people who live in urban areas and are part of bisexual or queer activist communities (see Chapter 8 in this volume). It would be important to gather knowledge about bisexual people living in rural areas, those who are not involved in bisexual communities or activism, those who participate in gay and lesbian scenes and those who not, and so on. Of course, that might complicate the recruitment process; however, social media and the internet can be very helpful in the recruitment of bisexual people (e.g. Maliepaard,

2017). Looking for a rather small group, particularly within sexualities, can be hard; however, we have to make the effort to include a more diverse range of bisexual people if we are to discover the variety and heterogeneity of bisexual experience. This will help to broaden our understandings of the complex lived experiences of bisexual individuals. Furthermore, it will open up possibilities to study people who do not necessarily identify as bisexual, but feel sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of more than one sex or gender. Additionally, perhaps a shift towards plurisexual orientations might be furthered in future research.

Aside from gender, there has been little or no research on bisexuality and other social categories, such as race, class, age, disability, and religion – at least in Europe. There has been more research on these categories and their intersection with bisexuality in the United States (Swan & Habibi, 2018). An inspirational 2019 special issue of the *Journal of Bisexuality* on bisexual people of colour and Indigenous people (Gonzalez & Mosley, 2019), which includes work on bisexual people of colour in Italy (Castro & Carnassale, 2019), provides important starting points to further tease out the intersections between having a biracial/bicultural background and bisexuality, and to challenge existing studies that predominantly focus on Caucasian people. Regarding religion, we have already mentioned the recent book by Yip and Toft (2020), which includes chapters on different faith communities; there are also those authors' respective individual articles on bisexual Christians, as well as work by Shepherd on bisexuality and the church.

From a theoretical perspective, an intersectional approach can help us to work at the intersections of different categories such as sexual identity, gender, and race. At the moment, only a small number of studies make any effort to take this perspective into account at all (see Chapter 9 in this volume; Castro & Carnassale, 2019; Gusmano, 2018; Klesse, 2005; Maliepaard, 2018; Monro, 2015; Popova, 2018). However, we contend that the application of intersectionality should go beyond the mere statement that it is an interesting new approach. It is important to theorise the multiple oppressions that bisexual people may face, and intersectionality can be a highly valuable and revealing perspective and method that should be used more often. Valentine's (2007) article on the potential of intersectionality theory for feminist geography – partly based on a case study of a Deaf lesbian woman's multiple experiences of exclusion – is in our opinion an important intervention regarding how intersectionality can be applied in the social sciences. Valentine (2007, p. 18) argues that

its [intersectionality's] appeal lies in the emphasis this approach places on the complexity of and fluidity in the ways that identities are unmade as well as made, and undone as well as done.

It will be important to focus on the specificity of the lived experiences and challenges faced by different bisexual people – beyond their bisexual/

plurisexual identities and orientations, and related to their other social positions. Bisexual people are a heterogeneous group, and it is not just fascinating but also important to acknowledge this in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their professional, social, sexual, and romantic lives. The first steps would be to identify the social categories that might be crucial for sexualities in general and bisexuality in particular. Focusing on how race, class, disability, age, and religion influence the lives of bisexual people may be a good starting point for this endeavour. For example, it is well known that being Black or coming from a working-class background increases one's risk of being stereotyped as hypersexual (Klesse, 2005, 2011). In contrast, disabled or older people are generally assumed to live their lives without sex (Caldwell, 2010; Johnston, 2016); they may also experience ageism and ableism within LGBTIQ+ communities, and heteronormative and mononormative assumptions and binegativity from their own age groups or in care homes.

Finally, although it is important to move towards a deeper understanding of discrimination against bisexual people, it would be interesting to pinpoint the situations where bisexual people might indeed be privileged, or at least not suffer discrimination based on their sexual identity or orientation. Even though bisexual people do experience hardship, it is possible to move beyond the overarching theme that bisexual people are just victims of binegativity. Studying bisexual people's communities and social support systems, or showing how (bi)sexuality can be empowering, may be a good starting point to explore bisexual agency (Baumgartner, 2017; Heath & Mulligan, 2008; Lahti, 2015; Monro, 2015; see also Chapter 5 in this volume). Furthermore, we think it is time to move towards a more complex understanding of discrimination that works with more shades than just discrimination versus privilege. Intersectional theory might (again) be a good starting point for this endeavour.

Theoretically grounded research

As previously mentioned, we propose that researchers should conduct (more) theoretically grounded research and focus more on existing social theories. Engaging with mainstream social theories will not only help to shift bisexuality research from marginal practices to mainstream social sciences; such theories can also provide tools and approaches to understand and explain different elements of the everyday realities and experiences of bisexual people and others with plurisexual orientations and identities. This is important for our shift of focus from (bi)negativity to the complexity and richness (including the positive aspects) of bisexual and plurisexual lives. Existing social theories can provide deeper and richer insights into the everyday lived experiences of bisexual people – their social lives, sexual lives, romantic lives, working lives, and so on. Theories such as (post-)phenomenology, practice theory, new materialism, and general non-representational

methodologies are just a few that might prove useful for the exploration of bisexual people's lives and loves (see Chapters 3 and 6 in this volume). Phenomenological theories could be used as a basis to explore how bisexual people make sense of their lives – for example, how they experience disclosure and passing – but that would be just a beginning. There is still a lot of work to be done to understand how bisexual people and people with other plurisexual orientations or labels understand the binary system of sex, gender, and sexuality, the importance of identities, historical and current developments in sexual identities, and also the fluidity, stability, and complexity of bisexual desire.

Practice theory might be a positive approach not just to focus on the bisexual subject/individual, but to understand the interactions between the doings, sayings, and agency of individuals and practices – manifold activities, organised by understandings, rules, and teleoaffective structures (Schatzki, 2002). There are numerous questions regarding what constitutes acceptable behaviour, when it is acceptable to express one's bisexual desire, and what place (bi)sexuality occupies in everyday practices. Practice theory embraces practices as the building blocks of social lives, but its added value lies in the interactions between practices (which partially govern people's behaviour and experience) and individual agency (which is a combination of teleological and affective forces, a combination of body and mind) (e.g. Maliepaard, 2017, 2018). Thus, practice theory may be a valuable perspective from which to study bisexual lives and experiences as temporal products of the interactions between individuals and all kinds of practice, such as sexual practices, working practices, family practices, romantic practices, and so on.

Similarly, assemblage theories focus primarily not on the individual, but on the assemblages in which the individual is involved, as the basic unit of analysis. *New materialist approaches*, such as more-than-representational theories and actor-network theories, focus on how life takes shape in assemblages, and in interactions between human and non-human bodies. These approaches might further understandings of bisexuality as a relational identity – and certainly also as desire and behaviour – that emerges in assemblages and is highly dynamic. Chapter 6 in this volume is an example of how assemblage theories can be concretely applied to understand how relationships and the social environments around them have impacts on people's romantic and social lives. Lahti's discussion of bisexual breakups is an important intervention that embraces the complexity and relational aspects of bisexual identities, which do not exist in isolation from social relations and societal understandings, but actually emerge in those assemblages. Such approaches can be helpful to explore the affective and embodied experiences of bisexual people in social environments and mundane encounters of all types, not limited to romantic relationships and friendships.

Other approaches to open researchers' eyes to the complexity of bisexual lives – approaches closely related to symbolic interactionism,

ethnomethodology, and phenomenology – might include life (hi)story approaches, including life course or narrative approaches. These might help us to obtain more nuanced and vivid pictures of the lives of bisexual people, making sure that developments over time find their way into research (see Chapter 11 in this volume). Such studies could also help to start longitudinal research. Applying such approaches to bisexuality research may lead to more nuanced theorisations of sexualities in general, and could make bisexuality and plurisexual orientations, and their complexities and dynamics, more visible (see e.g. Diamond, 2008; Jones, 2019). Ultimately, the more our research is grounded in theory, the greater the impact we can have.

Bisexual health

Interestingly, as we observed in the introduction, bisexuality research in Europe has been predominantly the domain of qualitative researchers, or at least based on qualitative research methods. There have been remarkably few quantitative studies published on the realities of bisexual people – for instance, studies that focus on the mental, sexual, and/or physical health of bisexual subjects. Some studies have been conducted in the United States and Australia, such as the Australian ‘Who I am’ study by Julia Taylor and colleagues (Taylor et al., 2019). We do have some preliminary research on bisexual health in Europe, mostly from the United Kingdom and Sweden (Bränström, 2017; Bränström et al., 2018; Colledge et al., 2015; Hatzenbuehler, Bränström, & Pachankis, 2018). However, the extent to which these studies’ findings can be generalised to all bisexual people is questionable. First, different geographical regions will have different outcomes due to their different laws, policies, sexual cultures, and degrees of bisexual community organisation. Second, focusing only on people who participate in bisexual communities, as some of these studies do, leads to bias in the understanding of bisexual lives, as bisexual communities and groups may serve as support groups for people who cannot find such support elsewhere, and may thus also attract a lot of people who face (social and mental) difficulties (Colledge et al., 2015; see also Chapter 3 in this volume). It is important to recruit participants from outside bisexual communities too, because there are likely to be differences between the experiences of those who identify as bisexual and those who experience bisexual desire but identify differently, or between people who are involved in the bisexual community and people who are not (e.g. Maliepaard, 2017; Toft & Yip, 2018).

We are aware that some research is conducted by *national research organisations* and is not published in peer-reviewed English-language journals. This is the case with studies conducted by Dutch research organisations that for various reasons rarely publish in peer-reviewed journals. However, collaborations with research institutions or universities that carry out large-scale quantitative studies may help us to gain further insight into the health situations of bisexual people, and to differentiate between different types

of experiences and realities – for instance, depending on people’s relationship types (relationship diversity), the sex/gender of their partner(s), and their lifestyles, age groups, community involvements (or lack thereof), and self-identifications (bisexual versus other sexual identities). It is also worthwhile to engage with existing theories, such as minority stress theory, although these may not be entirely applicable to bisexual individuals (Ross et al., 2018).

Generally, it is important to develop further understanding of the possible causes of bisexual people’s mental, sexual, and physical health issues. For example, studies of binegativity should go into more depth and focus on the actual health implications of invisibility, microaggressions experienced in relationships and from different communities, and internalised forms of binegativity. Research on bisexual communities and events, as well as psychological models of minority stress processes, indicate that being in a community or among friends who are truly understanding and supportive may alleviate some of the distress faced by bisexual people (Meyer, 2003; Monro, 2015; Ross et al., 2018). More interaction is also needed between qualitative and quantitative studies. Mixed methods research into the health situations of bisexual people – or better, people with plurisexual orientations – might be profitable to further our understanding of the prevalence of certain health issues, the factors that impact on them, and any correlations found between them. Finally, producing figures on the prevalence and possible causes of health issues would have tremendous power to urge governmental organisations and policy-makers to pay attention to bisexual people, instead of submerging bisexuals within the categories of homosexual or LGBTIQ+. To provide a concrete example: an American study of 750 plurisexual people provides information about their motivations for non-disclosure (or concealment), and the correlations of those motivations with mental health outcomes. This study reveals that interpersonal motivations to not reveal one’s plurisexuality – that is, because of the fear that disclosing one’s sexuality will lead to discrimination and victimisation – are correlated with higher levels of depression and general anxiety, whereas intrapsychic factors – such as not yet being ready to accept one’s own sexuality, or not believing in sexual identity labels – are not correlated with negative mental health outcomes (Feinstein et al., 2020). This and similar studies – for instance, on bisexual people’s mental health – provide evidence for governmental action and policies with regard to people with plurisexual orientations and identities. At the same time, it is important to establish where bisexual people’s sensitivities lie, and in what contexts they are indeed agents of their own lives.

There is still much to be done

While we were putting this volume together, it was a pleasure to see the diversity of research and bisexual theorizing across Europe. It is good to see

that research on bisexuality and plurisexuality is growing and evolving, and we are convinced that this anthology is living proof of the developments and challenges that bisexuality theory faces – and not just in Europe. We encourage researchers and scholars to gather their strengths, to delve more deeply in the lived experiences of bisexual and other plurisexual people, and to proactively engage with existing social theories and sexuality scholarship, in order to bring bisexuality research to a higher level and prove the relevance of bisexuality to these wider social theories and approaches.

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