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Biphobia

Marcia Deihl and Robyn Ochs

I was in a feminist bookstore. As the woman rang up my purchase, she asked me if a "lesbian discount" was appropriate. I was somewhat taken aback, but I said (half in jest), "Well, I'm bisexual, so how about half?" She didn't smile and I didn't get a discount.

My friend had been active in her lesbian community for several years. Then she fell in love with a man. When her lesbian "friends" found out, they ostracized her and held a "funeral" for her.

I came out to my brother several years ago and he seems on many levels to accept my bisexual identity. However, about a year ago I was visiting him and he took special care to request that I not discuss my bisexuality in the presence of his friends.

I told a heterosexual male friend that I was bisexual. His response was to make repeated attempts to sexualize our relationship. He made the false assumption that since I was bi-SEX-ual, I was attracted to everybody.

STORIES AND STEREOTYPES

These are all stories that have happened to bisexuals. Some of these mirror homophobia, others heterophobia, and still others are specifically "biphobic." All of them oppress bisexuals.

Biphobia: What is it? It is fear of the other and fear of the space between categories. Our identity categories are founded on the illusion that there are two separate and mutually exclusive sexual identities—female and male—and that there are two separate and mutually exclusive sexual orientations—homosexual and heterosexual. You are either one or the other and are attracted to one or the other. Those who are not like you are very different—opposite, in fact—and you needn't worry about becoming like them. There is no space for fluidity. Biphobia, like homophobia, is prejudice based on negative stereotypes. It is often born of ignorance.

Everybody knows about bisexuals. They're going through a stage before settling into their "mature" gay or straight identity ("She's really a lesbian, but she can't admit it yet." "He's just experimenting. He'll go back to his wife in the end." "She's a BUG: Bisexual Until Graduation."). Or, they're afraid of the other sex and find the same sex less threatening. Or, they're sex maniacs and swingers who can't commit.

In April of 1983, an “April Fools” cartoon appeared in Boston’s *Gay Community News*. It showed a jilted lesbian who had been left by her bisexual lover for a man. After that, she was prepared with “bisexuality insurance.” The BiVocals, a newly formed bisexual support group, angrily responded, “Sometimes we do leave women for men. We also leave men for women, women for women, and men for men. But we don’t leave our lovers any more cruelly or frequently than any other group . . . And sometimes we are assholes, just like some lesbians” (BiVocals 1983, 4).

FEAR FROM HETEROSEXUAL PEOPLE

Homophobic heterosexual men and women alike react to bisexuality as they react to homosexuality. But with bisexuality, there is the added dimension of identification with the perceived “straight half” of a bisexual person. They may be even more threatened, because they see that the “other” is not different enough, turning fantasy into a very real possibility.

Sigmund Freud and Alfred Kinsey agree that there is a spectrum of sexuality from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. This view is shared by a number of current researchers. For example biologist Joan E. Roughgarden of Stanford University says, “We should be calling humans bisexual because this idea of exclusive homosexuality is not accurate of people. Homosexuality is mixed in with heterosexuality across cultures and history” (quoted in Driscoll 2008, para 26). Somerset Maugham once said, “I tried to persuade myself that I was three-quarters normal and that only a quarter of me was queer . . . whereas it was the other way round” (Rutledge 1988, 46).

Heterosexually-identified people resisting their own same-sex fantasies due to internalized homophobia will probably be threatened by bisexuality in others. (“I don’t deserve what I want.” “It’s sinful.”) Those who respond heterosexually for positive, clear, inner-directed reasons are less likely to be threatened.

We can’t “convert” anyone. We don’t have the right to come out for anyone else or to insist that someone is “really bisexual.” We don’t have the right to judge another’s reasons for pursuing or avoiding intimacy with a given sex. We simply want it to be known that there are more than two options, and a wide range of variations. Some of our best allies are secure heterosexual people.

Heterosexual men and women will react slightly differently to bisexual men and bisexual women than they might react to gay men and lesbians. A homophobic straight man may respond similarly to a bisexual man as he does to a gay man (e.g., “Sissy!”). This sentiment may mask the outrage that men feel about other men renouncing their patriarchal prerogative of superiority to women. We have seen documentaries in which the Marines refer to recruits in basic training as “ladies” and “girls” in a derogatory sense. These names are considered the worst possible put-down for men who aren’t being “masculine” enough. Another typical homophobic reaction is “I just know he’s going to make a pass at me.” In this imagined situation, a heterosexual man sees himself in the position of potential “prey.” Terrified and outraged, he fears being overpowered, a situation familiar to most women.

Heterosexual women cannot write off bisexual men as “just friends” with no potential sexual undercurrents, as they might do with gay men. But they cannot assume that these men are attracted to them either. Heterosexual women may see bisexual women as better “initiation” experiences than lesbians, or they may assume that bisexual women are after them.

Bisexuality defies old categories and evokes new responses. Many heterosexuals and homosexuals alike deny the existence of bisexuality. A great deal of this ignorance is rooted in our invisibility. We range from being dismissed as a politicized identity group (“Oh,

everyone's a little bit bisexual!") to being seen as a point of contention in a film or television plot. In this instance, bisexuality becomes visible when a character who was previously assumed to be heterosexual or homosexual leaves someone for someone else, engages in a triangulated relationship, or "cheats," and is then re-cast as bisexual.

Furthermore, some bisexuals are more invisible than others. Although there are notable exceptions, bisexuals who are not middle or upper class, conventionally "beautiful," able-bodied, or white are rarely represented. And bisexuals who lead unremarkable lives are usually seen by others—depending upon the sex of their partners—as gay or as straight. By and large, the only bisexual people who are recognized *as bisexuals* are those with multiple male and female partners, or those who leave one lover for another, lending fuel to the perception that these are common bisexual behaviors.

FEAR FROM LESBIAN AND GAY PEOPLE

The early homophile (1950s and 1960s), gay liberation (1970s), and later equality movements have fought for the right of gay men and lesbians to exist, to love, and to be treated with dignity. Therefore, any perceived "regression" by gay people "converting" back to heterosexuality is considered a threat. This feeling is understandable. The gay and lesbian communities are under siege, especially in the so-called "culture wars" being waged by the political and theocratic right, and people under constant siege usually respond by banding together to form a united front. Thus, formerly gay and lesbian people who "turn bi" are often met with feelings of betrayal and anger. But these reactions belie the truth of the situation.

Why are bisexuals perceived as such a threat to so many gay men and lesbians? We see a combination of society's homophobia and internalized biphobia at work here. A recurring theme in Robyn's previous same-sex relationships was her lovers' fear that Robyn would leave her for a man. After all, so much of our society is structured to encourage and support heterosexual relationships. Though this has finally begun to change, families, the media, and institutions such as marriage and health insurance "family plans" are largely based on the configuration of the married heterosexual couple. These lovers may have felt that they could not possibly compete with the odds so stacked against them.

There is no denying that the encouragement of heterosexuality and the discouragement of homosexuality are real. But Robyn also felt that there was a certain amount of internalized biphobia at work there, too: the feeling that whatever she had to offer, and whatever they had together couldn't possibly outweigh the external benefits of heterosexual privilege. This view contains an underlying assumption that anyone who has the choice would ultimately choose heterosexuality, and that lesbians and gay men choose homosexual relationships because they are unable to be heterosexual. The number of bisexuals in committed same-sex relationships shows that this isn't necessarily so.

Some say that bisexuals are only half oppressed. Yet we are not put on half-time when we are fired by a homophobic boss; we do not lose only half of our children when we lose a custody battle; we cannot say to a gay-basher, "But I'm bisexual. Please only beat me up on only one side of my body!"

After Marcia was asked if she warranted the "lesbian discount," she thought seriously about it. "I respected the woman's right to run her store the way she wanted. I loved the idea that there was such a thing as a lesbian discount—a rare opportunity for lesbians to be rewarded, not made invisible or degraded. But, then I thought of my many years of gay and lesbian pride marches and my six years of playing in a feminist band that performed 25 to 50 percent lesbian material. During that time, I identified first as straight, then as lesbian,

and finally as bisexual. I think I *did* deserve at least half of the discount! They based their decision on my label, not my *labor*.”

Bisexuals should not automatically be categorized along with heterosexuals and end up being excluded from gay and lesbian communities. Yet, it is generally only famous bisexual people—reclassified as “gay” or “lesbian” people—like Virginia Woolf, Sappho, Christopher Isherwood, James Baldwin, Vita Sackville-West, Kate Millet, and Bessie Smith, who are embraced by lesbians and gay men. Modern-day bisexuals working common jobs and bearing ordinary names are not.

We won’t accept it both ways. Lesbian and gay communities cannot have it both ways; either bisexuals are in or we’re out. The feminist bookstore offering a lesbian discount was a store for *all* women, but lesbians got a discount; heterosexual and bisexual women did not. It seemed in this instance we were *out* of the community. We want to be in, but we are called divisive when we then name ourselves as a distinct category. Such attitudes often keep us away and only reinforce the impression that we have “deserted the ranks.”

Like heterosexual people who may be ignoring their homosexual inner signals, some gay men and lesbians may be repressing their bisexuality. If they act on these desires, they may fear the loss of their gay identity, their community, their culture, and their closest friends, as we noted in the case of the “funeral” story above. Others, who have chosen positively to be gay or lesbian, tend to be supportive of bisexuality in others. Those who are threatened or unsure of themselves are less so.

A clear example of biphobia is the exclusion of some bisexuals from lesbian and gay communities. This is ironic when one considers that the lesbian and gay liberation movement in the United States is united around the right to love whomever we please, and to have our relationships validated and recognized, even when they do not conform to society’s norms. Bisexuals are often pushed into a closet *within* a closet.

THE BISEXUAL ARTIST/CITIZEN TODAY: OUTSTANDING IN OUR FIELD

Can you spot a bisexual when you meet one? Perhaps, but not necessarily. We come in every conceivable outer package—just like all other groups. What is important is what is inside. Our psyches are not split down the middle. We do not get up every day and think, “Should I be straight or gay today?” We are, every day, in all situations, bisexual.

In sum, we are not defined by our behavior, but by our essence. If we walk down the street holding hands with a woman, people will assume we are lesbians. If we walk down the street holding hands with a man, people will assume we are heterosexual. But we aren’t shifting; others’ perceptions are.

As public television’s Mr. Rogers told very young children, each of us is unique, with our own gifts and limitations. We are all artists, we are all queers; we are all “oddists.” And lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have been forced to be creative. We experience a conflict between inner experience and outer demands that requires that we invent ourselves and think on our feet at every moment. Perhaps this is why we have contributed more than our share to the arts. As Fran Leibowitz quipped, “If you removed all of the homosexuals and homosexual influence from what is generally regarded as American culture, you would pretty much be left with *Let’s Make a Deal*” (Rutledge 1988, 93). We would do well to join some Native American Indian cultures in considering differences in sexuality and gender expression as special, honored gifts, not as threatening deviations.

Being bisexual and naming ourselves makes us special. But that’s just the first step. We have our cultural work cut out for us. We need to create what wasn’t there before—our

own lives, music, theater, writing, and art—just as some of us did with women's culture. We need art that reflects, analyzes, reinvents, and inspires our daily lives. We must not simply react to biphobia, we must come together with others like ourselves to create new realities in art and in life.

Though we are unique, we are also like everyone else: we are citizens of this planet. We need to work in coalitions because we want to help clear up the many problems that face us and our children and grandchildren today. Problems of poverty, global warming, unjust wars, and violence affect us all. In order to solve these problems, action must be taken against heterosexism, sexism, racism, and class privilege. And since we are all minorities, we must work together on common causes in order to be effective. As connecting links at the intersection between gay and straight, bisexuals can play a unique role in this work.

Bisexuals are not fence-sitters: there is no fence. Sexuality is a giant field in which lesbian and gay people are clustered mostly on one side and heterosexually-identified people are clustered mostly on the other. We are not locked in place. Sometimes we travel toward one end, sometimes toward the other, and we can do this in a day or in a lifetime. We hereby declare a field day.

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The interSEXion

A Vision for a Queer Progressive Agenda

Deepali Gokhale

This vision is based on the fact that the queer community is a microcosm of humanity, intersecting through the common experiences of the oppression of gender identity and sexual identity, the observation that oppression is rooted in greed and perpetuated by the fear of scarcity, the assertion that no oppression can end without removing the systems that perpetuate it, the recognition that oppression and exploitation are the bases on which current power structures and economies rely, and the observation that because queer liberation requires the end of all forms of oppression and exploitation, the liberation of queer people can be seen as the key to the liberation of humanity itself.