

D. Joye Swan · Shani Habibi *Editors*

Bisexuality

Theories, Research, and
Recommendations for the Invisible
Sexuality



Springer

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D. Joye Swan • Shani Habibi
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Theories, Research, and Recommendations
for the Invisible Sexuality

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To Isfly for making me believe. To my children who make me proud by their compassion and their ability to think in a world of belligerence. To all those who fight to be visible, I see you. -DJS

To my son-shine, Richmond Carlton McMurray II. You are my heart in human form - you have shown me a love I never knew existed. To Roya, I would be nothing without you. You are my backbone - you give me strength and set a resounding example of unconditional love. I hope I make both of you proud. -SH

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Introduction

Emily E. Prior

What is bisexuality? What does it mean to be identified as bisexual? What behaviors or attitudes are connected to bisexuality, and are they different or distinct from other sexual orientations? The fact is we really don't know. Due to a long history of negative attitudes toward sexuality, marginalized groups have gone understudied and/or unrecognized. Negative social attitudes toward sexuality, or "sex negativity," have pervaded our sex education programs, healthcare services and training, and research. Thus, very little research has been conducted on the topic of bisexuality specifically. Often, research on bisexuality has been a by-product of researching heterosexuality and/or homosexuality, with bisexual behaviors and identities being collapsed in with lesbian and gay behaviors and identities. As we will find, it is not likely that bisexuality is the same as homosexuality, although often people in each of these groups have some similar experiences of exclusion and oppression.

This collapsing of data renders bisexuality invisible within research which, in turn, contributes to its continued invisibility in the social world. For example, self-identified heterosexual individuals who exhibit same-sex attractions or behaviors may not be identified as bisexual or be appropriately labeled by others, including researchers. In gay and lesbian communities, bisexual individuals are often shunned until or unless they "realize" they are truly solely attracted to the same sex and give up their interest in cross-sex relationships or behaviors, or, in contrast, realize that their interest in the same-sex was "just a phase" and return to engaging in heterosexual relationships.

Whether from a hetero- or homo-sexual perspective, bisexuality is often seen as a transitional phase, where one tries out "the other side" for a variety of reasons, but is expected to eventually choose between one or the other monosexual identity (i.e., heterosexuality *or* homosexuality). Bisexuality ends up invisible as a distinct identity, making access to resources and support extremely difficult to find. Another way in which bisexuality is made invisible is through monogamy. If a person has one partner, then the bisexual individual is seen as homosexual or heterosexual, depending on the partner's sex and/or gender. As this book discusses, there are many ways in which bisexuality is erased.

The evidence of negative mental and physical health outcomes demonstrates the need for further discourse about bisexuality. Using a positive sexuality approach, where people and identities are valued and humanized, we may be able to facilitate this discussion further. This approach creates a framework in which research, policy reform, clinical practice, and individual relationships can be open to a variety of identities and epistemologies, through ethics, open communication, and peacemaking (Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Walters, 2015). Although a difficult topic to approach due to a lack of useful or clear research, bisexuality pervades popular culture. This book hopes to address what questions need to be asked about bisexuality and how we might find the answers to those questions.

Chapter 1 covers the history of the term *bisexuality* and early research related to the topic. As in much early research of sexual behavior, most information on bisexuality was based on individual case studies and the presumption that the condition, in this case bisexuality, was something abnormal and to be pathologized. Although famed sex researcher, Alfred Kinsey, would later suggest that bisexuality is normal, the debate about what bisexuality is and how we can measure it continues today.

As discussed in Chap. 1 and several subsequent chapters, Kinsey developed the first scale that differentiated between exclusively heterosexual and exclusively homosexual behaviors (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). This was the first time research acknowledged bisexual behavior, even though the term *bisexual* was never used. Unfortunately, his methods allowed for great subjectivity on behalf of the researcher to define what behaviors constituted a bisexual orientation. Although Kinsey's research was a landmark beginning in this field, showing that many people were not completely heterosexual or homosexual, bisexuality itself was not clearly defined or studied.

In more current research, bisexual identities are either collapsed in with homosexual identities, to then be compared to heterosexual individuals, or are compared with those of other orientations with a focus on health disparities or differences. Little to no research focuses on bisexuality as its own group, with its own possible physical, mental, emotional, and social issues.

Another area addressed by this chapter is how bisexuality is erased or overlooked in academia, even within LGBTQ studies programs. Although these programs often include clear curricula around lesbian and gay individuals, there has been no evidence of a focus on bisexuality within these programs. This furthers the invisibility and marginalization of this identity. This chapter offers ideas about how bisexuality can be brought into the spotlight within academia.

Due to criticisms regarding Kinsey's research, other scales have been created in an attempt to measure bisexuality. Chapter 2 details the various scales and methods used to measure bisexuality. The strengths and weaknesses of each scale are discussed along with recommendations for improving them.

The debate over defining bisexuality is explored in detail in Chap. 3. The little research that does exist beyond researcher-driven definitions of bisexual identities and behaviors tends to rely solely on participant self-identification. Although this can be a perfectly valid method of gaining participants for a study, if we don't have an operational definition of bisexuality, it is difficult to know if researchers and

participants are using concordant definitions. Also, by using self-identity, might we be leaving out groups of people who do not self-identify themselves as bisexual yet who engage in same-sex and cross-sex behaviors over the course of their life span? Is someone being labeled bisexual based on one or multiple experiences? What if someone has fantasies or an interest in bisexual interactions, but never acts on them? How do we “qualify” this compared to someone who might have a life history of same-sex and cross-sex relationships? Assuming we can operationalize what it means to be bisexual, do all bisexual individuals fit within this definition? Is the bisexual identity an umbrella term, like pansexual, that might encompass a myriad of identities and behaviors? Again, the empirical evidence is not just there. There is no clear consensus among academics, and certainly no clear consensus among those who may or may not fit the varying definitions.

Another definitional impediment is that an individual’s sexual orientation often becomes dependent on the gender or sexual identity of the partner. This becomes problematic when we include people who do not fit the gender binary or whose sexual and/or romantic attractions are nonbinary. An exploration of plurisexual identity labels, as discussed in Chap. 4, such as pansexual, queer, and fluid, creates a new space in which bisexuality can be imagined. These labels have been created and used as a means of challenging heteronormativity and often are used interchangeably within research and in various communities. Although bisexual people may be included, or collapsed, into these plurisexual identities, often the definitions of these terms are in direct opposition to the concept of a male-female binary, thus, again, potentially erasing the existence of bisexuality.

Not only is bisexuality often rendered invisible in research, but also in the social world. Chapter 5 discusses how compulsory heterosexuality also erases bisexuality by marking anyone who does not behave according to preferred heterosexual norms, the opposite default and nonpreferred orientation—homosexual. Binary thinking has changed the landscape from expecting everyone to be heterosexual to expecting everyone to be monosexual. This not only continues to privilege heterosexuality but also privileges attractions to and relationships with only one gender or sex. This furthers not only invisibility but also hostility toward bisexually identified people.

This hostility, also known as binegativity, comes from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals. Chapter 6 discusses the various ways in which heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals oppress and stigmatize bisexual individuals. It seems clear from the research that although each of these groups is hostile toward bisexual individuals, they enact this in different ways. Chapter 6 also discusses how binegativity may create unique mental and physical health issues that affect bisexual individuals.

Acknowledging that male and female experiences of their sexual orientation differ, Chaps. 7 and 8 look at female bisexuality and male bisexuality, respectively. Although male bisexuality has a long-recorded history, it is difficult to find any mention of female bisexuality in historical or academic accounts. Female bisexuality is often not viewed as legitimate or real. While it is sometimes defined by activities, partner choice, or political frameworks, female bisexuality is mostly viewed as something heterosexual women do (perform) to please heterosexual men

(Fahs, 2009, 2011), or a transitional phase between heterosexuality and homosexuality that may lead to the reaffirming of a heterosexual identity (Zinoy & Lobel, 2014). This chapter also looks at some disparities between self-identified bisexual women and women who may not identify as bisexual, but still engage in same-sex relationships, behaviors, and fantasies. There is also literature supporting the idea that female sexuality is more fluid than male sexuality (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2015), which, on the one hand, opens a space for bisexual women while also supporting the thesis that this is not a concrete identity of its own – bisexuality in women is just a phase. The lack of clarity and support around female bisexuality makes it difficult to study on its own, and even more difficult to ascertain if there are problems specific to bisexual women.

In contrast, the study of male bisexuality has existed for quite some time. Currently, there seems to be an increase in men who identify themselves as bisexual (Copen, Chandra, & Febo-Vazquez, 2016). Although previous chapters cover some ways in which bisexual individuals are stigmatized, Chap. 8 also includes the stigma of coming out as bisexual for men. Although bisexual individuals are often evaluated more negatively than all other minority categories, including race, religion, and political groups, bisexual men face the most negative reactions (Herek, 2002). The smallest nonheteronormative behavior, even something that is not directly sexual in nature such as clothing choice, places men into the “gay” category. It is rare that even overt bisexual tendencies will provoke others to label a man bisexual. Any same-sex behavior or perception automatically labels him gay, which further obscures the existence of a male bisexual identity. This also creates a paradox in which the bisexual male’s identity both does not exist and invokes negative attitudes from others. This erasure has serious implications for health and well-being, not only of bisexual men but also of their male and female partners.

Moving from looking at the bisexual individual, Chap. 9 looks at bisexual romantic and sexual relationship experiences. Due to stigma from heterosexual, gay, and lesbian individuals, bisexual individuals often are considered unsuitable as romantic or sexual partners and therefore may not “out” themselves as bisexual. The stigma makes it difficult for identified bisexuals to engage in romantic or sexual relationships with anyone not identifying as bisexual, which may considerably lessen the number of eligible partners. This chapter also discusses the problems and worries monosexual individuals have regarding their bisexual partners, including fears of cheating, unfulfilled sexual needs or desires, and monogamy. Monogamy also serves as a means of erasing bisexual identities. If a bisexual person has one partner, the person’s orientation is then viewed in relation to that partner (e.g., a gay man and bisexual man would be seen as a gay male couple).

The book’s final chapter explores the mental and physical health issues that bisexual individuals face and offers considerations for the mental practitioners who treat them. Although nonheterosexuals are much more likely to seek mental health services, many health practitioners do not feel adequately trained to treat this population. Even fewer feel trained to treat bisexual individuals. This can lead to a lack of services, or, worse, negative experiences, which can further complicate mental and physical well-being. Issues like binegativity, monosexism, and bi-invisibility

create mental health issues specific to the bisexual individual. Bisexuality rarely receives acknowledgment much less support from gay, lesbian, or heterosexual communities and is further marginalized by an inadequately prepared mental health system.

Physical well-being is also a concern, as bisexual individuals experience discrimination, prejudice, and violence based on their actual or perceived sexual identities. Bisexual men and women experience more lifetime sexual violence and intimate partner violence compared to lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals (Hequembourg, Livingston, & Parks, 2013). In addition, sexual health is also a concern for bisexual individuals. Often stigmatized as being disease transmitters or bridges, bisexual individuals are often perceived as having more sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than heterosexual or homosexual individuals. There is not current quantifiable research to support this idea; however, the prejudice and discrimination that follows this concept often leads physicians and partners to treat bisexual individuals as if it were true.

Science is about looking for answers, an attempt to find understanding in the chaos. It is a realization that when we find the answer to one question, we often are faced with multiple additional questions waiting to be resolved. This book is just that: an attempt to answer what may seem to be some very basic questions about bisexuality. How do we define it? How do we measure it? What qualities or variables put someone into, or out of, this category? Are bisexual individuals unique from lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals? Are they similar to plurisexual individuals? And, if bisexuality is an identity in and of itself, what social, psychological, or physical issues may be correlated with this identity that are different, or similar, to other marginalized identities?

But we also recognize that, as a book written for researchers, academicians, clinicians, and students, the presentation of bisexuality may take on a sterile form, one that reduces it to numbers, data, and output. We understand that bisexuality is also part of real human experiences. It can impact a person's life on a daily basis from the cognitive thoughts and feelings associated with one's sexuality to one's physical daily life. Acknowledging this, we conclude this book with some remarks to bisexual individuals from a bisexual activist and researcher.

We hope that this text will begin a much needed, and well overdue, conversation about the subject of bisexuality. A body of research is needed on the topic, and not all of the answers are here. For example, the study of gender identity and sexual orientation, specifically the number of transgender individuals who identify themselves as bisexual, is a burgeoning area of research that is just in its infancy. As such, it is not included here as a separate chapter, but, in the future, this area, and others as yet unidentified, will be imperative to include in our examination of bisexuality. As incomplete as it necessarily is, we hope this book will help us start to ask the right questions, in the right way, to the right people.

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Emily E. Prior, MA

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1 Mapping Bisexual Studies: Past and Present, and Implications for the Future



John P. Elia, Mickey Eliason, and Genny Beemyn

Over the past several decades, researchers studying sexual orientation have found that many individuals report variability over time in their same-sex and other-sex attractions, raising questions about the nature and expression of sexual orientation over the life course.

L. M. Diamond, J. Dickenson, & K. Blair (2017, p. 193).

Bisexuality is a concept with the potential to revolutionize Western culture's understanding of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Beth Firestein, (1996, p. xix).

Abstract This chapter begins with an examination of bisexuality studies from the perspective of some prominent sex researchers from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century with a focus on how bisexuality was conceptualized by Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, and Alfred Kinsey. Next, the chapter turns to a discussion and analysis of current research on bisexuality, identifying some recurring themes in the body of research such as bisexual identity development, life course changes in identity, attitudes about bisexuality, and debates about definitions and terms related to bisexuality in addition to what research into health and social disparities reveals about how bisexuality is framed and studied. This chapter then turns to an analysis of how bisexuality is taught within the academy, particularly in comparison to lesbian, gay, and queer studies. Finally, this chapter concludes with mapping the future of bisexuality studies with

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emphases on not only making bisexuality more visible but also focusing on physical and mental health aspects in addition to social and sexual justice issues.

Keywords Bisexuality · Bisexuality studies · Bisexuality in the academy · History of bisexuality · Research on bisexuality · Future of bisexuality studies

Introduction

Bisexuality studies, as a subfield of LGBTQ+ studies and sexuality studies, has had its share of difficulties over the past several decades. This chapter traces bisexuality studies from the late nineteenth century to the present and identifies topics and themes that have constituted the scholarly literature on bisexualities and bisexual individuals and communities, including the way bisexuality has been taught in higher education. The following questions are addressed in this chapter: What initially prompted sex researchers and theoreticians to begin the subfield of bisexuality studies? What questions, topics, and concerns have been addressed from the early days of bisexuality studies to the present? What themes about bisexualities have emerged after several decades of scholarship in the area? What aspects of research have provided accurate understandings of bisexualities and have served to legitimize various types of bisexualities as healthy and viable sexual identities and lifestyles? What challenges have emerged in bisexuality studies? What topics have been neglected in bisexuality studies? And finally, with an eye toward interventions, what are some important areas on which education, research, and political action should focus to liberate bisexuality from the stranglehold of sexual prejudice and the constant push toward normative (and monosexual) sexual practices? Besides providing a critical analysis, this chapter urges readers to consider where bisexuality studies ought to focus to maximize social and sexual justice for the betterment of individuals and communities, and to give bisexualities and bisexuality studies a prominent “place at the table” along with other forms of sexuality studies.

To respond to the preceding questions and offer some insights about bisexuality studies, we first turn to a broad historical sketch of research and commentary that started in the late nineteenth century and has continued throughout the twentieth century in Western Europe and the USA.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Conceptions and Research about Bisexuality

Sex researchers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries theorized about bisexuality in ways that set the stage for how bisexuality was both conceptualized and researched for decades into the twentieth century. Specifically, we focus on

Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, and Alfred Kinsey to show some general themes of how bisexual individuals have been characterized in early research. In 1886, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, an Austrian psychiatrist and sex researcher, noted in his authoritative and well-known text on sexuality, entitled *Psychopathia Sexualis*, that individuals who were sexually attracted to and/or had sexual contact with members of both sexes experienced a condition known as *psychosexual hermaphroditism*. This was characterized as a condition in which an individual experiences the psychological equivalent of physical possession of both male and female sex organs. The prominent British sexologist Havelock Ellis (1897) also subscribed to the theory of psychosexual hermaphroditism to characterize bisexual people in his multivolume work, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Both sexologists also believed that bisexual people were “inverts.” Marjorie Garber (1995), a cultural studies scholar, summarizes what Krafft-Ebing and Ellis meant by *invert*:

[t]he “invert” was part male, part female, or rather part “masculine” and part “feminine.” The male invert’s feminine side desired men; the female invert’s masculine side desired women. Thus, human sexuality could still be imagined according to a heterosexual model. (p. 239)

The term *bisexuality* was not used to describe attraction to and/or sexual contact with members of both sexes until about 1915, when Ellis abandoned the term *psychosexual hermaphroditism* in favor of *bisexuality* (Storr, 1999). Before that time, *bisexual* and *bisexuality* were terms used to describe sexual dimorphism. In other words, *bisexuality* referred to “the existence of two biological sexes within a species, or the coincidence of male and female characteristics within a single body” (Storr, 1999, p. 15).

The eminent psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud initially agreed with Krafft-Ebing and Ellis by supporting the idea that bisexuality was both the female and male qualities within an individual. However, Freud would soon depart from this notion and proclaim that all individuals had bisexual predispositions but that at some point they would become heterosexual or homosexual through a psychological developmental process (Storr, 1999). The idea was that eventually people would become either heterosexual or homosexual, with bisexuality as a latent phenomenon. Freud, along with many other sexologists of his time, pathologized any form of sexuality other than heterosexuality. For example, he considered “the theory of bisexuality helpful in accounting for homosexuality, which he [Freud] saw as an indication of arrested psychosexual development” (Fox, 1996, p. 4). Bisexuality was not viewed as a stable, enduring sexual identity. These sexologists were steeped in a monosexual paradigm (i.e., the idea that there are only two sexual identities: the heterosexual–homosexual paradigm) as evidenced by their writings. Put in a different way, “[t]heories about bisexuality were, at the time, above all, theories for explaining the so-called puzzle of homosexuality, whereas manifest bisexuality was either not discussed, was mentioned in passing, or was attributed to homosexuality” (Goob, 2008, p. 10).

In the Western world, attitudes were based on Judeo-Christian beliefs that made sexual transgressions a sin; later, during the rise of science and medicine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those sexual sins were also seen as medical

conditions (Paul, 1985). It is fairly transparent that inversions and psychosexual hermaphroditism were viewed as pathologies and departures from “normal” development. The other interesting aspect beyond pathologizing bisexuality is that there was an erasure of bisexuality in the sense that it was characterized as nonpermanent, fleeting, transitory, and latent.

Alfred Kinsey, a prominent American sex researcher in the mid-twentieth century, and his colleagues published *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) in 1948 and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) in 1953. Kinsey departed from the early sex researchers who were biomedically oriented. Although a biological scientist, Kinsey railed against the pathologization and the monosexual view of sexuality and believed that all individuals are capable of a range of sexual interests and behaviors. Regarding bisexuality, his often described and cited Heterosexual/Homosexual Rating Scale is said to be very inclusive of bisexuality. In fact, the scale ranges from 0 to 6, with the following designations based primarily on sexual behavior:

- 0 = Exclusively Heterosexual Behavior.
- 1 = Incidental Homosexual Behavior.
- 2 = More than Incidental Homosexual Behavior.
- 3 = Equal Heterosexual and Homosexual Behavior.
- 4 = More than Incidental Heterosexual Behavior.
- 5 = Incidental Heterosexual Behavior.
- 6 = Exclusively Homosexual Behavior.

It has been argued that 1–5 on Kinsey’s scale constitute a range of bisexuality (MacDonald, 2000). While some believe that individuals identifying as 1–5 on Kinsey’s scale are bisexuals, the most fascinating point is that bisexuality per se is never marked on the rating scale. The term *bisexual* or *bisexuality* never appears; it is everywhere (1–5) yet nowhere. Despite Kinsey’s acknowledgment of bisexuality, his scale is yet another way bisexuality is erased—as ironic as this might seem given Kinsey’s inclusive and nonjudgmental approach with people who exhibited varied sexual behaviors.

While there were many more nineteenth - and twentieth-century sex researchers who studied bisexuality than have been represented here, one can nonetheless detect a general theme of pathologization on the one hand and erasure of bisexuality on the other. There has been an uneasiness with the fact that bisexuality defies the neat categories of *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality*; it often blurs the lines and is “messy” for society. Such negative characterizations of bisexuality have been difficult to break. However, to some degree more recent theorizations of bisexuality, such as the work of Fritz Klein, in psychology and the bisexual movement that has emerged in the United States and internationally, have worked to undo the negative effects of bisexuality’s Darwinian heritage through its establishment as a healthy social identity and sexual practice.... (MacDowall, 2009, p. 13)

Although some advances have been made regarding research on bisexuality, there continue to be challenges that need to be addressed. Next, we turn to an overview of more recent research on bisexuality.

Bisexuality and Research

Even when conducting a literature review, it is challenging to identify a distinct role for bisexuality studies within the larger bodies of research on LGBTQ+ issues. We did a search of the LGBT Life database, using *bisexual* and *bisexuality* as search terms specifically within the titles of articles, hoping to narrow the search to articles focused on bisexuality. Of the first 50 articles identified using these search terms, 70% did not focus on bisexuality, but rather lumped groups together (LGBT, or gay and bisexual men, for example). Of the remaining 30%, approximately half of the articles were comparisons of bisexual respondents to gay, lesbian, and/or heterosexual respondents on some variable, with the focus on identifying a health disparity or difference, and about half were focused more directly on issues related to people who identified as bisexual. Across these studies, different response options were used on surveys or to form groups in the case of qualitative studies.

The contemporary research on concepts related to bisexuality will be further discussed in two overlapping categories: (a) studies that specifically examine the concept of bisexuality, such as bisexual identity development, life-course changes in identity (questions of stability versus fluidity), attitudes about bisexuality, and debates about definitions and terms that make up the concept; and (b) health and social disparities research that examines outcomes for differences between bisexual and other respondents. Research over the past 10 years has identified a number of critical themes in both arenas, summarized in the following sections. This is not exhaustive; rather, it is meant to highlight some of the ongoing debates and tensions within the field of LGBTQ+ research, some of which are explored in other chapters in this book.

Studies of Bisexual Identity Development/Management

This research is mostly found in the social sciences and comprises nonrepresentative samples of individuals who self-identify their sexual identities on surveys, in interviews, or in focus groups. These studies are designed to better understand the life experiences of people who identify as bisexual and may or may not compare them to people with other sexual identities. Four of the common questions/themes raised in this research are briefly discussed in the following.

Do bisexual people differ from those with other sexual identities on developmental milestones and/or daily experiences? This line of research focuses on developmental differences between lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations in terms of sexual milestones, sexual behaviors (Savin-Williams, Cash, McCormack, & Rieger, 2017), attitudes about bisexuality (for example, findings that there are more negative attitudes about bisexual men than about bisexual women; e.g., Helms & Waters, 2016), and relationship factors (e.g., Nematy & Oloomi, 2016). This body of literature is probably the most aligned with bisexuality studies as the focus is on