

It Ain't No Lie, Baby Bi Bi Bi: The Challenges of Bisexual Representation

Keyword: Evidence

One of the many challenges of representing bisexuality is the expectation of evidence. In the context of bisexuality, the concept of evidence can be considered on two levels: evidence of viable bisexuality in an individual and evidence of bisexuality as a legitimate sexuality. Heterosexist society (i.e., society that perpetuates the structural oppression of all queer identities) and monosexist society (i.e., society that perpetuates the structural oppression of bisexuals in particular) challenge the existence of bisexuality on both levels, questioning the veracity of an individual's claim to be bisexual and the credibility of the presence of an entire sexuality outside of monosexuality. These interrogations of the legitimacy of bisexuals and bisexuality are among the most common examples of bisexual erasure and [BIPHOBIA](#). The one feeds the other: by delegitimizing bisexual individuals, bisexuality as a sexuality is also attacked or erased; by delegitimizing bisexuality, bisexuals become erased and swept into the monosexual categories of heterosexual and homosexual.

Individual Level

In order to escape this delegitimization and erasure, bisexuals often attempt to provide “hard evidence” of bisexuality. A bisexual individual might point to a romantic or sexual history involving multiple sexes or genders, or otherwise demonstrate their attraction to multiple sexes and/or genders; yet if no such history exists or no such demonstration is possible (and really, how is one supposed to demonstrate something so personal and abstract as attraction?), then proving that an individual is bisexual beyond the words, “I am bisexual,” is futile. For in a heterosexist society, the prevailing, and therefore “default” gender and sexual orientation is cisgender heterosexual; anyone who claims to be anything other than cisgender or heterosexual (or monosexual) must not only affirmatively state their orientation (“I am bisexual”) with every coming-out, but constantly fend off assumptions of cisgenderedness, heterosexuality, and monosexuality which erase them, even from the people who appear to be allies.

Conceptual Level

A significant amount of bisexual writing is in the pursuit of defending bisexuality as a real, full-fledged sexuality. The task of these authors is substantial, for monosexuals constantly misconstrue bisexuality for homosexuality (particularly among bisexual men) or heterosexuality (particularly among bisexual women), according to the phallogocentric “presumption that everyone is really into men” (Eisner 39). One particularly astounding case of such willful misinterpretation is the “Gay, Straight, or Lying? Bisexuality Revisited” study, published by J. Michael Bailey, in which bisexual-identified men were suspected of being homosexual on the basis of their genital arousal in response to different kinds of porn. This study, as well as many other cases of mistaken sexual identity, have been addressed countless times by bisexual writers who seek to establish the validity of bisexuality. For example, in *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, Marjorie Garber contemplates the common perception that bisexuality is a phase to, from, and between other sexualities in “conversion narratives” and locates bisexuality in “homosexual” figures like Oscar Wilde and Stephen Spender and in “heterosexual” figures like Ernest Hemingway and William Shakespeare (Garber 345-364, 502-520). However, Garber's project is complicated: she imposes a modern conceptualization of bisexuality on individuals who may not have understood the uniqueness of a bisexuality, let alone self-identified with the

term. Steven Angelides also employs an evidence-based approach in *A History of Bisexuality* by pointing to instances of bisexual erasure in psychology, sexology, and queer theory; this evidence supports his main argument that the methodology in queer theory and gay/lesbian history needs to be reshaped to recognize bisexuality as an equally important and marginalized identity (Angelides 1, 15).

Some bisexual writers have questioned the value of such a reflexive defense of bisexuality. In her introduction to *RePresenting Bisexualities*, Maria Pramaggiore wonders if the increasing amount of publications and focus in the media on bisexuality have made bisexuality more credible as a sexual identity, or if they have portrayed bisexuality as just another fad (Pramaggiore 1-2). In *Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution*, Shiri Eisner reflects on the defensive behavior of bisexual activists who attempt to respond to every “myth” about bisexuality (e.g. “Bisexuality doesn’t exist,” or “Bisexuals are actually gay or actually straight”) with evidence of bisexuality’s prevalence and normalcy (Eisner 40). Instead of denying these myths to reassure monosexuals and potentially erasing the bisexuals who do not live within a normative bisexual identity, Eisner suggests that bisexuals should try to reveal the social structure of biphobia that underpin such damaging claims (43). Eisner is correct in her estimation of bisexual writing and activism as overly committed to proving the normalcy of bisexuality to monosexuals; yet their persistent defense and excess of evidence of bisexuality are understandable, given the privileged position of “evidence” in our culture.

Citable evidence is highly valued in many domains for its ethos; particularly in courts of law and in published research, evidence is required to make any argument worth considering. There even seems to be a correlation between the amount of evidence in support of a theory and the prestige of such a theory. Yet the empirical approach inherent in fields like psychology, sexology, and history, which have long controlled the conversation of sexuality, may have overstepped its boundaries by demanding proof of sexual identity.

As stated previously, bisexuals have a greater burden in “proving” their bisexuality in a monosexist society than homosexuals who are also questioned about their self-identification. However, this problematic treatment of bisexuals and bisexuality goes beyond a specific sexuality or identity and is more deeply rooted in our culture’s collective understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality. Kenji Yoshino’s seminal text, “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure,” asserts that bisexuality is “threatening to all monosexuals because it makes it impossible to prove a monosexual identity” (4). Logically, one cannot prove a negative, because one cannot have negative evidence; therefore, heterosexuals cannot prove that they do not experience same-sex or same-gender attraction and homosexuals cannot prove that they do not experience different-sex or different-gender attraction. This kind of doubt is not new to homosexuals whose attractions have long been dismissed by heterosexist society or “corrected” to fit the heterosexual norm through conversion therapy. As non-heterosexual identities become more visible and accepted, heterosexuals are also beginning to experience external (and possibly internal) doubts of their own sexualities; to preserve their privileged identity in the face of such doubt, heterosexuals perpetuate homophobia and biphobia with their insistence on “no homo.”

Seeing as this shadow of doubt affects both monosexuals and bisexuals (though to different degrees), all of society would greatly benefit from the abolition of “identity interrogation”—or as I call it, the “evidence requirement” (i.e., the social demand for visible demonstration of any sexuality, especially when an individual’s expressed gender does not correspond with their sexuality as prescribed)—for heterosexuals, homosexuals, and bisexuals alike. Following Yoshino’s argument that bisexuality destabilizes monosexuality, one can

perceive that bi-erasure and biphobia are defensive, even preemptive, measures that monosexuals take to safeguard their socio-political privileges and to avoid identity interrogation. Although removing the threat of identity interrogation would not deprive bisexuality of its influence as destabilizer, it may foster acceptance of bisexuality and other queer identities, if not bring balance to the spectrum of sexualities. While this change may be difficult to enact on a societal level, it may begin on a smaller scale, between two people who respect each other's self-identifications.