

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

Keyword: Biphobia

Biphobia is one of the most controversial concepts that have come out of bisexual writing. The definition of biphobia is quite straightforward: biphobia is the fear, hatred, prejudice, or intolerance against bisexual people. Certain manifestations of biphobia also seem apparent: the perpetuation of stereotypes (e.g., bisexuals as confused, indecisive, greedy, promiscuous, slutty, inherently unfaithful, and carriers of HIV and STIs), and the physical, verbal, and sexual violence enacted on bisexuals permeate public discourse on bisexuality. However, the word biphobia evokes tension among heterosexuals and homosexuals (including those active in LGBTQ+ communities and politics), some of whom are not always convinced of the reality or seriousness of biphobia. This tension occurs even among bisexuals as they disagree about the relative importance of resisting biphobia in a world fraught with so many “more serious” kinds of oppression, such as patriarchy, sexism, cisgenderism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, classism, ableism, nativism...

Reality of Biphobia

Shiri Eisner writes extensively about biphobia and these issues in *Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution*. To the first point of contention that biphobia does not exist, Eisner takes the firm stance that bisexuals do “suffer from a unique type of oppression,” one that is separate from the oppression they share with gays and lesbians (i.e., homophobia) (59-60). Eisner continues: “To claim that bisexuals do not experience oppression differently from gays or lesbians is to subsume bisexual experience into homosexuality, thus eliminating its unique existence” (60). Biphobia is also erased because bisexuals are perceived by homosexuals (and some bisexuals) as benefitting from “straight privilege”—the ability to appear straight and to be rewarded for straightness by society, especially when with a partner of a different gender—and therefore part of the group of oppressors rather than the group of oppressed (Eisner 59-60). Yet once again, bisexuals who “pass” for straight (or gay, or lesbian) are erased as bisexuals, and the claim that bisexuals experience straight privilege because of their ability to pass as straight erases the biphobia that they suffer, whether they appear straight, gay, or bi. The persistence of biphobia in its delegitimization is ironic: if the erasure of biphobia is erasure of bisexuality (which is a form of biphobia), then the erasure of biphobia itself is an act of biphobia. Here, the epistemology and ontology of biphobia become interrelated: the social structure of biphobia reproduces itself endlessly.

What does biphobia look like?

Another common misconception about biphobia is that it is limited to the perpetuation of stereotypes and violence against bisexuals. In writing about biphobia, bisexual writers tend to focus on “personalized negative attitudes” that they have encountered, though there are many more forms of biphobia that affect bisexuals, and on a more frequent basis (Eisner 64). In *Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution*, Eisner cites the eight “faces” of oppression, delineated by Miguel Obradors-Campos in his work, “Deconstructing Biphobia”: exploitation, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, marginalization, heteronomy (i.e., the opposite of autonomy), violence, alienation, and stigma (Eisner 74-82). These faces of oppression reveal the presence of biphobia in every sphere, from the exploitation of bisexuals in LGBT movements and psychological studies, to the discrimination of bisexuals in the workplace in both position and

pay, and to the alienation of bisexuals in the neglect of bisexual issues and internalized biphobia (74-82). Seemingly innocent speech has also been demonstrated to hold implicit biphobia. Writing from a background in linguistics, Ki Namaste discusses the use of the conditional verb tense by Alexander Doty in *Making Things Perfectly Queer* when he discusses “[films] that *could* be discussed as bisexual texts” [emphasis added] (Namaste 81). On this point, Namaste concludes that “The inscription of bisexuality as a mere possibility—never a reality—is achieved through the use of the conditional verb tense. Biphobia is also realized in grammar” (81).

Where does biphobia come from?

As in Namaste’s example and many other examples cited above, the emphasis of bisexuals’ analysis of biphobia is on biphobia produced in the LGBTQ+ community. In her essay, “Power and Privilege Beyond the Invisible Fence,” Brenda Blasingame writes very authoritatively that “bisexuals can only experience biphobia from the lesbian/gay community” (230). From the 1970s when bisexuals first began to assemble, to the 1990s when bisexuals demanded to be included in lesbian- and gay-dominated pride activism, many other bisexual activists believed that their main battlefield on the issue of biphobia was in these homosexual communities (Udis-Kessler 28-29, Donaldson 37). However, recent works that regard biphobia more closely show that heterosexuals are equally, if not more, guilty of biphobia than homosexuals. An alternative term that performs the work of “biphobia” is “monosexism,” the social structure which demands that everyone be monosexual. Eisner suggests that “the term ‘monosexism’ is a tool that can be used to examine and deconstruct the underlying power structure at the basis of biphobia” (63). In some ways, “monosexism” is a more helpful word than “biphobia”, for it clearly indicates that the oppressors of bisexuals are monosexuals, including both homosexuals and heterosexuals. Another term which captures biphobia is “heterosexism,” the designation for the oppression of all LGBTQ+ identities.¹ Regardless of the terminology, it is the either/or mentality, the belief that one must choose between a dyad of gender and sexual orientations in monosexism and heterosexism that facilitates biphobia (Bennett 205) (see [BOTH/AND](#)).

The challenge that biphobia poses to bisexual representation is obvious: if bisexuals are made to feel hated, unwanted, excluded, ignored, or invisible, particularly in the gay and lesbian communities where, Eisner writes, bisexuals “often come seeking help [...] and become heartbroken and even betrayed, as this rejection seems to come from where [bisexuals] least expect it,” then they will be less likely to disclose their sexuality or to seek out other communities (62). Conversely, any existing representation of bisexuality itself is so ambiguous and elusive that bisexuals are at a loss as to how they can demonstrate more visibly their presence and their oppression. Straight people, gay people and lesbian people each have their own distinct and identifiable cultures (though not everyone who uses these identities chooses to assimilate to their respective cultures), and the gay and lesbian cultures have helped these identities to become more mainstream, accepted, and respected in many heterosexual-dominant societies. However, bisexuals (as well as other invisible identity groups like polysexuals,

¹ The use of “monosexism” and “heterosexism” can also have unintended negative consequences. “Monosexism” may erase the oppression of homosexuals by grouping them together with their oppressors, heterosexuals, in the same way that “straight privilege” groups bisexuals with heterosexuals. At the same time, “monosexism” may minimize the dominant role that heterosexuals play in bisexual oppression. While it is a more inclusive word, “heterosexism” may also erase the unique struggles that bisexuals and other multiple gender attraction identifiers face in this structure.

pansexuals, and asexuals) do not have, and may never have, a comparable culture through which monosexuals and other bisexuals can easily perceive and come to accept and respect a bisexual identity.