

Sexuality

MJ Barker

Introduction

Welcome to my free book on sexuality. These free books are collections of the pieces and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

Note that some of these pieces were written over a decade ago now, and before many of the most profound shifts that the world - and I - have recently been through. I hope that it is of interest to see how my ideas have evolved over this period. But please do be mindful of the context in which they were written as they may not always represent either my own, or culturally current, thinking/practice on these topics.

If you enjoy the book, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

- patreon.com/MegJohnBarker
- paypal.me/MegJohnBarker

Contents

Introduction	1
Contents	2
Sexuality in General	3
Figuring out your sexuality	3
Coming out	6
The snowflake generation	9
Sexual fluidity and 'Call Me By Your Name'	12
What can we learn from the history of sexology?	15
Heteronormativity and Heterosexuality	19
What's wrong with heteronormativity?	19
Straight culture	27
Straight people going to gay events and venues	31
Bisexuality and Pansexuality	34
Bisexuality and biphobia	34
Bi Visibility	38
Bisexuality interview	41
Bi visibility day: Gay invisibility	44
The pansexual revolution?	47
Heteroflexibility and bicuriosity	50
Bi visibility: how to be a good friend	52
Queer Issues	56
Born this way? Thoughts on the gay gene	56
Same-sex Marriage: Opening Up and Closing Down	59
Will gay rights and feminist movements please return to your (binary) assumptions	64
Queer loneliness and friendship	68
Further Sexualities	71
BDSM: What do we know?	71
Sapiosexuality	75
Flashing	79
Pornography	83
Studying pornography	83
Porn again	87
Thank-you for reading	90

Sexuality in General

Figuring out your sexuality

November 2019

Thanks to Paisley Gilmour for including me in this nice [netdoctor overview](#) about [figuring out your sexuality: Am I gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual or LGBTQ+?](#) This came at a great time for me as [Alex Iantaffi](#) and I were just working up a proposal for a new book on *How to Understand Your Sexuality*, to follow up our book *How to Understand Your Gender*. Hopefully we'll get that written next year. In the meantime, here are my thoughts in response to Paisley's questions.

Is it common for people to question their sexuality?

It's actually really common. Although many people assume that we're born with a fixed sexual orientation, actually recent research has found that most people's sexuality is fluid, meaning that it changes over the course of their lives. For example, we might have been attracted to one gender for our whole lives but experience an attraction to somebody of another gender. This might start us questioning how we identify our sexuality going forward.

It's also important to remember that sexuality isn't just about what gender or genders we're attracted to. It's also about the amount of sexual attraction we experience (from none to high), the kinds of sex we enjoy, the types of people we find attractive, the roles we like to take sexually (more active or passive, submissive or dominant), and many other things. All of these aspects of our sexuality can change over time meaning that we might start to question what our sexuality is, or how we identify it.

Can this happen at any time in your life?

Absolutely. Most people experience some changes in their sexuality over the course of their lives, for example in the age of the people they're attracted to, the amount of sex they want to have, or the types of things that turn them on. Our sexuality can be impacted by our physical and mental health, the amount of energy we have, the people we hang out with, who we're in relationships with, and the messages about sex that are around us in our communities and cultures. All of those things change over time as well.

Why might someone question their sexuality?

Some common reasons for questioning our sexuality include:

- Finding that we're attracted to someone who is quite different to our usual attractions (e.g. a different gender, physical appearance, or background)

- A friend, colleague or family member coming out as a different sexuality which can make us realise that it might apply to us too
- Learning about a sexuality we were previously unfamiliar with in the media or from a friend. This can give us a sudden sense of realisation: ‘oh maybe I could be that,’ ‘that label might apply to me.’
- Watching porn, reading erotica, or having a fantasy and realising we’re turned on by something that we didn’t used to be turned on by, or which we just hadn’t thought about before.

What should you do if you think you might be gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer etc?

First of all it’s really important to remember that whatever your sexuality is – and however you decide to label it – is absolutely fine. Sadly we live in a culture which gives us the idea that it’s more ‘normal’ or ‘better’ to be straight than it is to be gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, etc. Actually, recent research suggests that at least as many young people are on the spectrum from ‘exclusively heterosexual’ to ‘exclusively homosexual’ than are at the ‘exclusive heterosexual’ end of that spectrum. Also more people have some kind of kinky sexual desires than don’t. And many people are on the asexual spectrum. Even if your sexuality is very rare or unusual, it’s still completely legitimate, so long as you only act on it consensually (that’s also true for common sexualities too of course!)

If you think you might be a different sexuality than the one you thought you were then it’s a great idea to do some self-exploration. Give yourself time to reflect on your sexuality and how you might like to label it, if at all. Journaling, engaging with ethical porn (and paying for it!), reading erotica, and fantasising are all great ways to do self-exploration.

It can also be really helpful to get support from other people who are in these sexual communities. There are online groups, meet-up groups, and community resources for all of these sexualities, as well as books and videos online. Check this stuff out but do remember that nobody should be pressurising you to label yourself in any way, or to come out unless that feels good to you. Go gently and take your time.

Is there a way to know?

Sexuality is a complex, constantly changing and evolving, thing so there’s no way to be sure whether you are ‘really’ straight, gay, bi, pansexual, asexual, demisexual, submissive, etc. It’s much more about whether those words – or others – feel like a good fit for you. It’s fine to just call yourself ‘questioning’ for as long as that feels right, or simply not to label yourself. It’s also fine to use one label for a while, and then change it if it stops feeling like such a good fit.

The main thing to remember is that it is perfectly legitimate to have whatever attractions and desires you have sexually, so long as you only act upon them consensually. If that feels like a struggle for you – or if these questions are causing you distress – then it’s worth getting some professional help from a therapist or counsellor. The [Pink Therapy](#) list in the UK is a good one for therapists who specialise in this area. The [Kink Aware Professionals](#) and [Poly Friendly Professionals](#) lists online are also useful international resources.

What would you recommend for people who think they might be but aren't sure – any resources, books, practical tips?

I'm writing a book called *How To Understand Your Sexuality* next year which will hopefully be helpful! Meanwhile [BishUK](#) and [Scarleteen](#) are excellent resources for younger people questioning their sexuality, and contain useful material for people of all ages too.

You might also find these zines helpful to work through:

[Mapping Your Sexuality](#), [Make Your Own Sex Manual](#)

Coming out

*Based on a podcast with Justin Hancock, 2017-2020:
megjohnandjustin.com/you/coming-out-at-christmas/*

How might we come out to friends and family - or share other big news - over the holidays.

Why consider this?

Many people feel they need to share important aspects of their identity or lives at this time of year for the following kinds of reasons:

- It's essential if they are to spend time with loved ones, for example if it's something obvious about them or their partner/s like being pregnant, not being pregnant any more, expressing their gender differently, their partner being of a different gender to previous partners, there being more than one partner, or having broken up with a partner.
- It may be the only time of year they get to see these friends and family so there is no other time to tell them face-to-face.
- They might have reached the end of their rope keeping this thing a secret and just need to get it out there.
- What's going on in wider culture might have helped them to realise something about themselves that feels urgent to share with loved ones or that is likely to crop up in conversation because of it being in the news - such as #metoo helping them to realise they're a survivor, or all the trans media helping them to recognise their own gender.
- Somebody might already know and there's a risk of others finding out if they don't say anything.

Three big caveats

Before getting into it, there's some important things to say about coming out:

- People shouldn't have to come out at all. The only reason some people do have to is because our culture makes assumptions about the 'normal' way people should be and the 'normal' life they should have. So anybody who deviates from that in any way (which is most of us at some point) has to choose either to keep that a secret (if that's even possible) or to share it and face rejection and discrimination. Neither option is great. It'd be far better if we all stopped making these normative assumptions (e.g. that people will remain in the gender they were assigned at birth, will form romantic and sexual relationships, will have one partner of the 'opposite' gender, will get married by a certain time, have kids at a certain time, do certain kinds of work, have a certain kind of body, not experience mental health problems or abuse, etc.)
- For many people it is impossible to come out so we should never pressurise anyone to do so. Many face homelessness, loss of essential care, physical violence, or rejection from vital communities if they come out. The idea that coming out is what everyone should do comes from a place of privilege and a certain way of viewing the world which not everyone shares.
- The onus should really be on the people receiving the coming out to receive it well, rather than on the person doing the coming out to do it in the best way for everyone else. The person coming out is already having to do a heap of emotional labour that they wouldn't have to be doing if everybody didn't make normative assumptions.

How to go about it

Here are some things you might think about - if you are the one sharing something about yourself - in order to make it as safe as possible. The onus shouldn't be on you to ensure that it is well-received, and however you do it is okay. However, you might want to think about some of these ideas also in terms of the other person being in a good-enough place to hear you.

- Think about self-care and support around it - what might you do to look after yourself before and after, can you have your people online or with you to help you through it?
- Think about safety too - emotional and physical - can you have escape routes for if it goes badly, e.g. other places to stay or easy ways of getting out of the situation for a while or completely.
- Meta-communication could be a good idea in advance if possible - checking out how you like to communicate this kind of thing, and how the recipient likes to have it communicated.
- You might even want to communicate it before actually spending time together - perhaps in writing - so people have time to process it and check in before deciding whether to spend time together.
- People often feel under pressure over holidays, and therefore may well not be at their best, so it is worth thinking about whether there are other - less pressured - times when the conversation might happen, or about when during the holidays would be the best time to do it. But remember also there is not perfect way to do these things and whatever happens is okay.

How to receive it

Sadly people on the receiving end of these kinds of things often respond poorly: focusing on the impact on them rather than the person it is happening to (e.g. 'Was it my fault?', 'How will I ever tell so-and-so this?'), questioning it, asking lots of inappropriate or intrusive questions, expecting the other person to support them with difficult feelings, minimising the importance of it (e.g. 'Are you sure it's really that big a deal?' 'It's probably just a phase'), or catastrophising the situation (e.g. 'This is terrible', 'I'll never be able to look so-and-so in the face again').

Here's some pointers to receiving well:

- What the person telling you this information generally needs most is to be heard, acknowledged, and affirmed. It'd be great if you could also express your gratitude at them telling you (which was probably very scary for them) and your reassurance that this doesn't change your love for them.
- For now leave it at that. There'll be time for more conversations later. Just focus on enabling them to say everything they want to say to you. Good questions include: 'Is there anything more you'd like to say?' 'What do you want me to know about this?' 'How can I best support you?' 'I imagine that it is a lot telling me this, what can we do to make the rest of today as easy as possible for you?'
- Take what they say at face value - they will have thought long and hard about this.
- If you're struggling at all don't ask them for support - practice self-care and go to your other people who aren't directly involved (if the person gives you their consent for that) and/or to helplines, knowledgeable professionals or other support.

If you want information don't ask them to educate you beyond saying you'd love to look at any resources they'd like you to see. There's lots of helpful support available online - ideally access materials from people within the relevant communities.

The snowflake generation

March 2019

Recently I was interviewed for [an article in OUTNews](#) about the term 'snowflake' and whether we are in the midst of a snowflake generation. You can read the full article [here](#), and here's what I had to say...

How would you respond to common accusations of “snowflakery” within the LGBTQ+ community?

The snowflake insult tends to conflate a few different things. If you look into the meaning it includes the idea that 'snowflakes' believe they are particularly unique and special (like every snowflake is different), as well as the idea of being particularly fragile – and therefore in need of protections like safer spaces.

Teasing these things apart I wouldn't say that LGBTQ+ people are especially unique, but I do think the snowflake metaphor is useful for thinking about gender and sexual diversity. When we consider intersectionality, and how every person is positioned in relation to multiple intersecting aspects including gender, sexuality, race, class, disability, age, generation, nationality, etc. then snowflake is about right. There won't be any two people where this constellation of aspects is identical. That helpfully draws our attention to the ways in which all of us are privileged in some ways, marginalised in others, and how we need to hold our similarities and our differences simultaneously. Snowflakes all look similar, but in fact they are unique.

Are LGBTQ+ people particularly fragile? Again it's more complex than that. We live in a culture which is rooted in hierarchies whereby some people, bodies, and lives are regarded as – explicitly or implicitly – more normal, healthy, or highly valuable than others. All of the groups on the more marginalised end of those hierarchies have less power and privilege and face more discrimination and hatred on a daily basis. This takes a toll as we can see when looking at statistics on mental and physical health. LGBTQ+ people – like women and BAME people – have higher rates of mental health problems than average because they're disadvantaged – and often traumatised – in a society that sees heterosexuality and cisgender as the normal, superior, way of being. This can make us more fragile. It can also make us more resilient. George Takei's comment about snowflakes being powerful when they take the form of an avalanche captures that duality.

How would you respond to those who accuse, for instance, trans people requiring safe access to spaces appropriate for their gender of being “snowflakes”?

To my mind this is not about trans people saying we are particularly unique, or particularly fragile. It is more about recognising the unequal power dynamics in wider culture and trying to even the balance. If we can agree that no people, bodies, or lives are inherently more valuable or 'normal' than others, then everyone should have equal access – for example to

bathrooms where they can pee in safety, to media which represents people like them in positive ways, and to daily interactions with others where their identity isn't constantly called into question or they have to answer intrusive questions about their genitals or medical history. If there's no media debate on whether cisgender people's genders are real or whether they might be misguided in believing they are the gender that they say they are, then there shouldn't be a media debate on that in relation to trans people. That doesn't mean we shouldn't all be having interesting conversations about how gender works and the impact it has, but don't focus that on trans people.

Even some members of the LGBTQ+ community say that many of these accusations are valid, and that sometimes we try to move too fast and harm our movement in the process, for example by quickly attempting to introduce non-binary genders into common parlance. How would you respond to this?

I feel like we're starting from the wrong place if we take for granted that there is some kind of a normal group in society that we're gradually working to add all the marginalised or minority people into. That's the model here. It's like the norm could just about cope with adding in lesbian and gay people twenty years ago, but bisexual people were told they had to wait their turn because they were confusing and they muddied the water. Now there's a sense that maybe we can begin to open to trans people, but perhaps only trans men and women because non-binary people will be too complicated for 'normal folks' to get their head around.

Instead we need to question this whole model of normal versus abnormal that we've been fed. It's not that LGBTQ+ people – or trans and non-binary people – are snowflakes. The point is that we are *all* snowflakes. Everyone is diverse in terms of their gender and sexuality. There is no norm. For example, over forty percent of young people are somewhere on a spectrum between heterosexual and homosexual. Over a third of people feel that they are to some extent 'the other gender, neither gender, or both genders'. Well over two thirds of people have some form of kinky fantasies, and a similar number are non-monogamous at some point in their life. Add all this together and the number of people who are some kind of pure heterosexual, cisgender, only into penis-in-vagina sex with a monogamous partner is actually pretty low.

So I don't think it's about gradually adding new identity categories to the group of people who is seen as normal or valid, with each new group having to somehow wait their turn for grudging acceptance. Rather it should be about shifting the whole understanding of gender and sexuality to one of diversity – or snowflakes – rather than a normal/abnormal binary.

How would you respond to the idea that those who object to things such as two men holding hands in an advert are in fact guilty of being "snowflakes" themselves?

I think it's clever how people have turned the snowflake accusation around on the accusers. If people become so upset and offended about LGBTQ+ rights then aren't they being just as 'fragile' as the people they are accusing of being too-easily upset and offended? Again though I would question an 'us and them' approach as any kind of long term solution to this.

As long as we remain in separate camps accusing each other we won't get very far, and a lot of people will be hurt in the process. What's needed is an end to the attempt to categorise people into more or less normal, or more or less snowflakey, and a recognition that we're all diverse across multiple spectrums of gender, sexuality, and much else. Then we can work to redress the balance whereby some of been valued less than others on the basis of such spurious distinctions.

Sexual fluidity and 'Call Me By Your Name'

October 2019

Recently I got interviewed for [this great article](#) about sexual fluidity which interviewed author [André Aciman](#) about his work. As a huge fan of [Call Me By Your Name](#) I was very pleased to be interviewed about my thoughts, based on my book with [Alex Iantaffi](#), [Life Isn't Binary](#).

You can read the article [here](#), and my full interview below.

Why are people calling this gay instead of sexually fluid or bisexual?

This story is being treated in a very similar way to 'Brokeback Mountain', which was almost unanimously hailed as a 'gay cowboy story' although it could more accurately be described as a 'bisexual shepherd story', given that both male characters had female partners and there was certainly some depiction of romantic and erotic attraction within those relationships too.

The reason for this is certainly that we're culturally mired in the gay/straight binary. We see a similar thing when celebrities mention attraction to more than one gender, often mainstream media announces that they are 'gay now'. Unfortunately the interconnected binary understanding of gender and sexuality is strongly embedded in Western culture. Until recently even the science of sexology insisted that humans could only be men or women, and could only be attracted to the 'same' or 'opposite' sex.

Thankfully the work of sex historians, queer theorists, bisexuality researchers, and scientists have challenged this view, pointing out that this is a relatively recent way of understanding human experience, which is a poor fit for many people, and which isn't supported by either biological or psychological research. Not only is sexual attraction not a same/opposite binary, but sexuality is fluid (our attractions, desires, and identities can change over time), and multidimensional (not just about gender of attraction).

Is bisexuality still being erased or considered non-existent? Do we need more fiction like this that envisions desire as unmoored from gender and sexual identities?

Sadly bisexuality is still erased. Until recently most mainstream depictions of characters with attraction to more than one gender were almost always depicted as going from straight to gay or gay to straight. If they were depicted, bisexual characters were confused, going through a phase, or otherwise suspicious. Still bisexual characters are often represented as evil, greedy, or manipulative, think of Frank Underwood in House of Cards, for example (check out the media section of [The Bisexuality Report](#) for more examples).

It would be great to see more fiction that unmoors desire from gender and sexual identities. We know that around 40% of young people experience their attraction as somewhere

between 'exclusively heterosexual' and 'exclusively homosexual'. Many identify as bisexual (attracted to more than one gender), pansexual (gender not being the key feature of their sexual attraction), or queer (challenging the whole gay/straight binary).

Going back to multiple dimensions of sexuality, many find that their extent of sexual attraction is equally – or more – important than gender of attraction (people on the asexual spectrum). Many define themselves more in terms of the kind of people they're into (e.g. sapiosexual), the kind of desires they have (e.g. people in the kink or BDSM community), the positions they take (e.g. top, bottom, switch), or the kind of relationships they form (e.g. solo-poly, monogamish). People can be in different places in relation to their erotic attractions and their nurturing attractions (the people they want to form more romantic or close bonds with), and in relation to what they enjoy in solo sex or fantasy, and in sex with other people. Sari van Anders is one key researcher who is teasing apart these dimensions in scientific research (basic overview [here](#)).

Is there something political or profound about imagining non-normative desire/ love that is unhindered by the usual obstacles, and not sensationalized or othered?

In a world which is still mired in an outdated understanding of sexuality as fixed, defined by gender of attraction, and only acceptable within a monogamous context, I would say that this kind of fiction is indeed political. It's worth remembering that the dominant cultural understanding of sexuality – where heterosexuality is normal, homosexuality is less than normal (still requiring of explanations and people 'coming out') and anything else is invisible – is grounded in a historical approach to science and psychiatry which saw its purpose as delineating 'normal' from 'abnormal' behaviour. This, itself, was related to the early 20th century scientific projects of delineating different races as inferior/superior (in order to justify colonialism), and the eugenics movement (trying to prevent supposedly inferior classes and races, as well as disabled people, from reproducing).

Producing depictions of non-normative desire are a step in the direction of challenging all sense that there is a normative (white, middle class, male, heterosexual) way of being that everyone should be judged against, and questioning the related view that some bodies and lives are inherently more valuable than others. Follow this thread and it leads to some far more obviously political questions about the way we relate to other humans, other species, and the planet.

Are portrayals of desire as sexually fluid/ bisexual becoming more common? Are there any examples in contemporary culture that you feel are getting it right?

The majority of depictions do still fit the monogamous gay/straight binary model sadly. However, we do now have some excellent stereotype-busting bi characters now in the form of Rosa Diaz in *Brooklyn 99* and Callie Torres in *Grey's Anatomy*. Bisexuality is also well represented in Issa Rae's TV show *Insecure*, and will be centred in her follow-up *Him or Her*. Relatedly, we've seen some good depictions of non-binary gender in shows like *Billions* and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Very few mainstream depictions ever truly acknowledge that a person can be attracted to – or love – more than one person without that being a problem. So much drama revolves around the love triangle.

Sense8 is an example of a nice recent exception. The movies *Shortbus* and *Kinsey* from a while back, and more recently *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, are pretty positive. The TV shows *You, Me, Her* and *She's Gotta Have It* deal with this topic, but fall into some more stereotypical and problematic portrayals of open non-monogamy. Queer fans enjoy the depictions of gender, sexuality, and relationships in the cartoon series *Steven Universe* for being far less normative, and sci-fi and fantasy in general can be better places to turn for non-normative depictions.

What are the possible benefits of seeing examples of openly non-monogamous desire in fiction and film?

The benefits are potentially huge. Monogamous relationships are currently under huge pressure to meet all of a person's needs, with partners expected to provide sexual passion, best-friendship, caring support, co-habiting, co-parenting, and more, for life. Therapists like Esther Perel point out that it's incredibly hard to get both 'warm love' and 'hot love' within the same relationship, and this may explain why over fifty percent of people see themselves as having one or more sexual dysfunctions, and rates of infidelity are similarly high.

The pressure on monogamy keeps many people in unhappy and damaging relationships, while others go from break-up to break-up because nobody can match up to these high ideals, collecting more emotional bruises along the way.

We need depictions of people doing relationships in all kinds of other ways in order to know that these are available and to have some model for how to navigate them. Open non-monogamy is just one example. It would be great to also see positive depictions of soloness and singledom, people who prioritise friendship over love when it comes to close relationships or cohabiting, aromantic people, relationship anarchists, people whose relationship style is based around friends-with-benefits, fuckbuddy, or hook-up arrangements. People are living their lives in these ways but struggling to see themselves represented.

What can we learn from the history of sexology?

November 2014

This morning I was very excited to be included on Radio 4's [Today Programme](#) talking about the new [Wellcome Collection](#) exhibition: [The Institute of Sexology](#). You can listen to the piece on their website (it aired around 12 minutes to 9). The post that follows contains material covered in more detail in my book [The Psychology of Sex](#).

The radio piece also meant that I got the chance to have a sneak preview of the exhibition before it opens tomorrow. I would definitely encourage people to go. It is fascinating to view all of the sexological objects and texts that [Henry Wellcome](#) collected over the years, and to check out the contemporary artwork which they have displayed next to the various sections. However, for me, the most interesting thing was to get such a strong sense of how sexology has shaped the ways in which we understand sex today.

The exhibition gives us a clear sense that the way we currently view sex came from somewhere: that this history had a huge impact on the ways in which we now experience sex and sexuality.

The first sexologists

The first few display cases in the exhibition include some of the early attempts to categorise and classify sexuality by the likes of Richard von [Krafft-Ebing](#), [Magnus Hirschfeld](#), and Henry [Havelock-Ellis](#). These texts, which came out towards the end of the 19th century, started a shift from sexuality being seen as something you *did*, to something you *were*. For example, it was not just that you were attracted to tall women and enjoyed oral sex best, but rather that your attractions and sexual preferences made you a certain kind of person.

Thus, terms for sexual identities like homosexual, heterosexual, sadist and masochist emerged from the writings of these sexologists. This opened the door to discrimination, criminalisation and pathologisation (seeing people as wrong, bad or sick) on the basis of their sexuality. However it also opened the door to the fight for rights on the basis of being a certain kind of person, and indeed some of these sexologists were involved in the earliest versions of the gay rights movement.

There was also an emphasis in early sexology on dividing sex into normal and abnormal kinds: a project that lingers till this day in the American Psychiatric Association and World Health Organisation [diagnostic manuals](#). Each of these has a list of 'sexual dysfunctions' and 'paraphilic disorders' which aim to capture dysfunctional and abnormal kinds of sex. So early sexology concretised the idea that there are good and bad kinds of sex, not just a diverse range of possible practices and attractions: this weighs heavy on many people to this day as we will see.

Freud and the psychoanalytic approach to sex

When you reach the end of the corridor of early sexology, in the Wellcome exhibition, you come to a room called the 'consulting room' which includes materials from [Sigmund Freud](#) and [Marie Stopes](#).

Freud popularised the idea that the main purpose of sex was pleasure rather than procreation. This had a huge impact as Krafft-Ebing had claimed that sex was pathological unless it was procreative. It opened up the possibility that it might be okay to want sex for the pleasure of the act itself.

Freud also introduced the idea of sexuality as something that develops rather than being something present in the brain from birth: a debate which is still going strong to this day. However, Freud's [stage model of sexual development](#) still suggested very strongly that certain sexualities and sexual practices were less mature or healthy than others. It is here that heterosexual penis-in-vagina sex becomes the gold standard against which all other sexualities and sexual practices are measured: something that my recent analysis of sex advice books suggests is still going strong to this day.

Although Freud himself was fairly positive about homosexuality, and actively advocated against attempts to make a person heterosexual on at least [one occasion](#), the psychoanalysts who immediately followed Freud left a terrible legacy of viewing homosexuality as a sickness and trying to 'cure' it. We can see the tragic impact of this in the current film, [The Imitation Game](#), where Benedict Cumberbatch plays one of our greatest British minds – [Alan Turing](#) – who had a major role in bringing the second world war to an end, and in inventing the computer. Turing took his own life at only 41 because of the hideous 'treatments' he was given for being gay. Sadly there are still some therapists today who advocate [conversion therapies](#) for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, although the major psychotherapy organisations [forbid it](#).

Kinsey and Masters & Johnson

The next parts of the exhibition demonstrate a shift that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s to the heart of sexology being located in the US rather than Europe. The work of [Alfred Kinsey](#) and his colleagues, and [William Masters and Virginia Johnson](#), had a huge impact on how we understand – and study – sex today. And both have recently been depicted in fictionalised representations, in the film [Kinsey](#), and the TV drama [Masters of Sex](#).

Kinsey and his colleagues interviewed thousands of Americans in detail about their sex lives. They found a huge diversity in sexual attractions and sexual practices. The famous [Kinsey scale](#) demonstrated that many people were not exclusively attracted to the 'same gender' or the 'other gender' but were somewhere in between.

Sadly we haven't kept hold of Kinsey's ideas in wider culture anywhere near as much as some of the other sexologists. There are still strong assumptions that people can be divided

into binaries of gay and straight, normal and abnormal, functional and dysfunctional, when it comes to sex.

Masters and Johnson conducted thousands of observations of people masturbating and having sexual intercourse in their lab. Their research greatly improved understandings of what happens physiologically during sex, including – vitally – the fact that most women need external clitoral stimulation in order to have an orgasm, and that clitoral and vaginal orgasms were physiologically identical (before that the prevailing view had been Freud's: that vaginal orgasms were more mature and healthy).

However, unlike Kinsey, Masters and Johnson overwhelmingly studied heterosexual couples having penis-in-vagina intercourse, which shored up the view that that was what sex is: a myth that continues to this day meaning that lots of people think that others kinds of sex are not 'proper' sex.

NATSAL and British sexology

The final room of the exhibition brings us to the major UK sexological work: the **NATSAL** survey. The UK is a really thriving hub of sexology today with many of us studying sex in a much more **critical** way which reflects on the impact of the history I've summarised here on how we experience and understand sex.

The NATSAL British survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles is conducted every ten years to provide a picture of the changing nature of British sexualities and sexual practices. Perhaps the key finding, for me, from the current NATSAL survey, is the fact that **42% of men and 51% of women** report having a sexual problem. Sexual problems are generally defined as some difficulty with Masters and Johnson's sexual response cycle (i.e. something that gets in the way of penises entering vaginas, or with orgasms).

Given this it seems that we could usefully go back to some of the earlier categorisations of sex – and Kinsey's work – and emphasise the massive diversity of what can count as sex. Walking through the exhibition it is clear that, over time and across cultures, sex has been viewed in highly varied ways, with different practices being encouraged and prohibited at different times. For example, when we were conducting the Radio 4 interview we stopped at a device designed to stop people masturbating. The curator of the exhibition pointed out that, at the same time that masturbation was considered dangerous in Britain it was regarded as an ultimate pleasure in other cultures around the globe. Of course, such massively diverse views of sexual practices are still present today, and we may one day look back on current fears around porn addiction, compared with those who applaud the pleasures and powers of porn, with similar bafflement.

What we can learn from sexological surveys, and from looking back through time and across cultures in an exhibition like this, is that sex is hugely diverse. Perhaps our project moving forward could be to embrace that diversity rather than continuing the projects of delineating normal and abnormal, functional and dysfunctional kinds of sex. This might enable people to

tune into what they actually enjoy, and to focus on how they can engage in sex consensually, instead of concentrating on trying to conform to a one-size-fits-all model of sex.

Heteronormativity and Heterosexuality

What's wrong with heteronormativity?

August 2011

This post that I wrote way back in 2011 is one of the most popular from my website, so I'm sharing it here along with a page from my book [Queer: A Graphic History](#) explaining the idea of heteronormativity. That book has a lot more to say about this issue if you're interested.

HETERONORMATIVITY

An extremely helpful concept in queer theory, which encapsulates a lot of what we've just covered is *heteronormativity*. Queer theorist Michael Warner popularized this term in 1991, drawing on Rubin's sex hierarchy and Rich's compulsory heterosexuality.

Heteronormativity refers to a set of related cultural assumptions:

- The "normal" or "natural" form of attraction and relationships is one man and one woman who:
 - Normally or naturally embody conventional gender roles and norms; and
 - Have sex whereby the man's penis penetrates the woman's vagina (PIV sex).



- Other forms of sexuality and gender are less normal or natural than this (or not normal or natural at all).



- Thus, people are assumed heterosexual unless proven otherwise.

Yesterday a couple of things happened in quick succession which left me feeling strange and sad. They both called something into question which I have thought about, spoken about, and written about so much for so many years that I regard it as obvious. Having it questioned left me struggling to find words at all.

Reflecting on this today I'm reminded that, of course, this is not something which is obvious to everybody. So I thought I would write a post where I try to articulate what it is that I usually take for granted: that there is something wrong with heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity is the idea that attraction and relationships between one man and one woman are the normal form of sexuality, that sex itself should involve a penis penetrating a vagina, and that any other forms of sexuality, or gender, are not normal, or at least not as normal as this.

Important

Challenging heteronormativity is not about challenging heterosexuality. It is about questioning the idea that heterosexuality is the only normal, natural, or good form of sexuality. Anyone can be heteronormative, including people who are not heterosexual, and many heterosexual people are not heteronormative (i.e. they embrace a diversity of sexualities, forms of sex, and/or gender identities).

Apologies that this blog entry ended up being rather extensive. If you don't have time to read it all then you can jump to 'the short version' which I've provided at the very end.

What is heteronormativity?

The first thing that happened was that a group of colleagues and I received a response to a complaining letter which we had written to a television company. We had complained about a recent documentary about sex which they aired. One of our main problems with the programme was that virtually all of the sex that they included in it was heterosexual sex (heterosexual couples kissing and cuddling, or – when it got more explicit – somebody with a penis penetrating someone with a vagina). A small part of the final episode was given over to considering why some people are attracted to the 'same sex', but the vast majority of representations of sex were heterosexual. The response from the television company was that they didn't really see a problem with their representations given that 'the majority of the British population is heterosexual'.

After receiving this email, I took a bit of a break and read a few news articles which my friends had linked to online. I found a particularly **interesting one** about a legal case where a woman wanted the right to wear a collar to work because she was into BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadomasochism). After finishing the article I looked through the comments which people had written on the website. I was struck by how many of them argued that the woman should keep her sexuality to herself, 'leave her sexual proclivities at home like most people', stop 'going on' about what she does in private, in her

bedroom, etc. A similar issue has recently come up in psychotherapy and counselling, whereby some people have argued that lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) counsellors should not let their clients know about their sexualities, and that being open about them could be harmful.

All of these are examples of heteronormativity. The first example which I gave is pretty obvious. The argument from the television company is that it is okay to present heterosexuality in virtually all of the examples of sex on the show because 'the majority' of people are heterosexual. The second example is perhaps a little less clear, but none-the-less I think it is an example of heteronormativity. People generally have no problem with a person wearing a wedding ring to work, having a picture of their heterosexual partner on their desk, or talking about what they did with their heterosexual partner at the weekend. The suggestion that it might not be okay to wear clothes, or have conversations, which imply that a person is lesbian, gay or bisexual, or a BDSM practitioner, is heteronormative because the same kinds of things which are challenged – or regarded as strange – here go unquestioned for non-kinky heterosexual people.

These second kind of challenge also reveals that people are generally assumed to be heterosexual (and interested in heterosexual, non-kinky, sexual practices) unless proven otherwise. This is another example of heteronormativity. People who are not heterosexual (or who are kinky, or non-monogamous, or otherwise outside the heteronorm) have to make a decision whether to let people know this or not, whereas people inside the heteronorm know that people will make the correct assumptions about their sexuality, relationships, gender, etc.

Why is it a problem?

So what the television company, and (by implication) many of the people commenting on the collar story are saying is that heterosexuality *is* normal, and therefore it is fine to depict it as such, and to see people as strange who do not fit within it, and to put different restrictions on their behaviours than we do on heterosexual people.

I'm guessing that many of the people concerned would agree that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are bad things: it is not okay to be prejudiced towards, or to harm people on the basis of, their sexuality or gender. However, they don't see a problem with regarding people outside of heteronormativity as somehow 'less normal' and treating them differently on the basis of that.

Why do I think this is such a problem? There are many reasons, but here I am going to focus on three rather practical ones. First, rather obviously perhaps, heteronormativity is bad for people who are outside of heteronormativity. Secondly, it is based on some quite problematic ideas about what is normal, and whether that should be what we base our treatment of other people on. And finally, perhaps less obviously, I would argue that heteronormativity is also bad for people who are within it.

Heteronormativity is bad for people outside of it

Psychologist Catherine Butler wrote a [short story](#), which was eventually produced as a film, called '[homoworld](#)'. This imagined a world in which heteronormativity was reversed: where being gay and lesbian was seen as the norm, whilst heterosexuality was regarded as peculiar and requiring explanation. It is a useful exercise for people who are heterosexual themselves to reflect upon what it might feel like to be outside of the sexuality norm. For example, the characters in homoworld have to decide whether to come out (and deal with the stress of possible rejection or prejudice) or to hide their relationship (and deal with the stress of keeping such an important thing secret). They also have to cope with questions from others about the ways in which they decide to commit to their relationship or to have children. On a very everyday level, they are surrounded by lesbian and gay representations: on billboard advertisements, in pop songs, and on the street where it is generally only lesbian and gay people who are kissing or holding hands.

It can be useful also to check out the [heterosexual questionnaire](#), and the [straight privilege checklist](#), to get a sense of how heteronormativity feels for those who are outside of it. These tools raise awareness of the fact that it is not just outright homophobia which is bad for LGBT people. It is also tough if everybody around you feels that it is okay to ask what you think caused your sexuality, or to question whether you are *really* that sexuality, or whether it might be better just to keep quiet about it. Similarly, there is a degree of privilege, comfort and security, in having a sexuality which nobody else feels discomforted by, which isn't used as a reason to question your masculinity or femininity, which isn't the basis of derogatory language (e.g. 'that's so gay'), which is not seen as the totality of who you are, and whereby you are not expected to speak for everybody else who has that sexuality. The [monosexual](#) and [cisgender](#) privilege checklists are similarly useful in relation to bisexuality and trans.

Psychologists know that dividing people into '[us](#)' and '[them](#)' is often the first step towards treating 'them' differently, and even cruelly. So we can see that heteronormativity and homophobia cannot be as easily disentangled as people might hope. When we heteronormatively separate 'normal' heterosexual people out from other groups (e.g. LGBT, BDSM, non-monogamous, asexual), we reinforce divisions which then make it easier for those groups to be ridiculed, stigmatised, and attacked. We know that biphobia, transphobia and homophobia still exist at worrying levels: there are still countries where people can be [put to death](#) for these things, and in the UK the extent of LGBT [bullying](#) and discrimination is still extremely problematic. If we are serious about ending [hate crime and prejudice](#) we need to look beyond just criminalising transphobia, homophobia and biphobia, towards addressing the heteronormative society which suggests that it is acceptable to see LGBT people, and other groups, as 'different'.

Heterosexuality might not be normal, and why are we so concerned with normality anyway?

This is all very well, you might say, but the television company is right that surveys *have* found that most people are heterosexual. Perhaps it is just bad luck for those who are

outside of heteronormativity. We can't stop presenting heterosexuality as the norm just because it is hard for a few minorities that we do so. Facts are facts.

There are many answers to these challenges. First we might think about the findings of those surveys which are mentioned. The percentage of heterosexual, and non-heterosexual, people found in such surveys depends an awful lot on the **questions which are asked** and the way that they are asked. In the UK, the national census does not ask questions about sexual identity for precisely **these reasons**. The national treasury estimated that between 5% and 7% of the UK population were LGB, whereas the **International Household Survey** found that **1.5% of people** said they were LGB. However, a further 3.8% said that they were 'other', didn't respond, refused to respond, or reported that they didn't know. Given high levels of stigma and prejudice we might well suggest that these surveys are actually measures of 'out' LGB people who are happy to use this terminology (which not all cultural groups use, for example). The **NATSAL survey**, which asks about 'sexual experiences' rather than sexual identities, found that 8-10% of people in the UK had had sexual experiences with a partner of the 'same sex' in 2000. This had gone up from 3-5% of people in 1990, so clearly experiences, or at least reporting of them, is not static over time. Also, people may well answer differently to a postal survey (whether they answer at all, and whether they answer honestly) than to an in depth interview, for example. This could partially explain why Kinsey's famous study in the US found that **over a third of men** reported some 'homosexual' contact.

So we can question whether heterosexuality really *is* the norm. By some ways of assessing normality (number of people who identify as heterosexual on a survey), we could argue that it is. However, if we turn to behaviour, particularly if we include all of the groups who fall – in some way – outside of mainstream heteronormativity, then we would conclude that it is not. In fact, non-kinky, monogamous, 'opposite sex', relationships and attractions would certainly be the minority if we considered all those people who have had some kind of 'same sex' sexual experience, those two thirds of people who enjoy some kind of BDSM practices or fantasies, the high number of people whose gender identity doesn't fit into traditional masculinity or femininity, and all of the people who are in some way **non-monogamous**.

But even if we went by the most conservative of statistics, we might ask how big a minority it has to be before we include a group of people as part of the norm, or at least stop treating them as different from everybody else. Analogies could be made here with other minority groups such as ethnic and religious minorities, and those with certain disabilities, although there are clearly different issues with different types of 'difference', and they often intersect with one another. Discussions of sexuality often focus on trying to prove, or disprove, **naturalness** or normality, but we might ask a bigger question of whether either of these is really a good foundation to base our treatment of people on. We can think of example of very unusual things (being highly intelligent, or a person like Gandhi or Nelson Mandela) which we would agree are good, and very 'normal' things (like being unkind or standing by when others are in trouble) which are not. We might also start to ask questions about why we focus so much on **some divisions** that it is possible to make between people (about sexuality and gender, for example) and not on others (for example, about eye-colour, food preference, or handedness).

Heteronormativity is bad for people within it

My final point is that heteronormativity is not just problematic for people who are located outside it. It is actually pretty bad for those inside it for many reasons as well. These have been particularly brought home to me in my work as a sexual and relationship therapist. Almost every seemingly heteronormative client who I've seen in this capacity has expressed an overwhelming desire to be 'normal' and often a desperate fear that they might not be, which has frequently made their life a misery. Normality is often privileged over everything else including having pleasurable sex, positive relationships, and open communication.

First, given the degree of stigmatisation of those who are outside heteronormativity there is a lot of pressure on those who are inside heteronormativity to stay within it. They know that stepping outside means, at least, being questioned and seen as less than normal, and, at worst, being attacked, oppressed, and discriminated against. This means that heteronormativity can feel like a dangerous and precarious place to be, especially in these days where everyone is also expected to be quite sexually adventurous in order to prove that they are interesting people with exciting relationships. The lines between heteronormativity and the 'outside' can seem pretty blurry. Where, for instance, do bicurious women fit, or metrosexual guys, or people who buy the fluffy handcuffs and jewelled riding crops sold by mainstream sex shops, or those who have a **new monogamous** arrangement where it is okay to occasionally get off with somebody other than their partner at a nightclub?

So those who have some kind of desires and inclinations beyond rigid heteronormativity, and who act on these, often live in some degree of fear of others finding this out and of how they might be treated if they do.

Others try to remain completely within heteronormativity, but this often brings with it problems as well. Many people, for example, simply do not tune into their sexuality at all for fear of what they might find if they do so. Instead, they focus on trying to have a certain kind of sex with a certain kind of partner the number of times per week which they have been told is 'normal'. Quite often, this **results in problems** such as people being penetrated finding it painful or difficult and/or people penetrating finding that they lose their erection or ejaculate too quickly (see www.cosrt.org.uk). Statistics on these kinds of 'sexual dysfunctions' go up to between a third and a half of people, suggesting that they are extremely common. However, we might question whether it is right to see these as 'sexual dysfunctions', or as 'societal dysfunctions' whereby people are being told to have a certain kind of sex which isn't really what they'd most enjoy. Sex therapists often find it useful, when working with these kinds of problems, to get people reading about the vast diversity of sexual practices and fantasies that human beings have, either by reading **collections of fantasies** and/or making **checklists** of what they might like to try. It can also be helpful to question the idea that everybody **needs to be sexual** in order to be regarded as healthy or normal. All of this involves questioning heteronormativity.

Moving from sex to romantic relationships more broadly, we can see that heteronormative models of **everyone needing a opposite-sex partner to spend their life with** can be very tough on those who are single, or who go through relationships break-ups, as well as sometimes

encouraging people to stay in relationships which are not good for them, and sometimes meaning that people leave relationships too quickly due to **expectations of the 'perfect' match**.

What does an alternative look like?

It is often easier to point out what is wrong with something – like heteronormativity – than it is to offer anything else to put in its place. To end this blog (which has become rather long already!) I will try to offer some quick ideas which might be of help to people like the television companies and commentators who I mentioned earlier, if they are convinced by my arguments.

First of all it is vital to point out that it isn't just heteronormativity that is a problem. Any kind of normativity would be equally problematic. There is a tendency for those who step out of one kind of normativity to quickly produce their own form of normativity in its place. This is pretty understandable because being on the outside is a scary and precarious place to be, and we seem to be drawn to seeing the world in 'us and them' kinds of ways. However it is also unhelpful, and reinforces the very divisions that we are saying are so problematic. For example, it isn't great for LGBT people if, on coming out, they are faced with a whole load of new and rigid rules about how to be *properly* lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans. Similarly, for the person who is struggling with sex in the ways which I wrote about above, it isn't great if the only other option that they can find is another kind of normativity where everybody is expected to be hugely sexually creative and try everything once.

So the answer is not just to come up with another kind of normativity that we expect everybody to adhere to. However, what we can do is to replace the normativity model with what **Gayle Rubin** calls a model of 'benign variation'. This is the idea that there is a diversity of sexual desires, practices and relationships, and – so long as they are engaged in **consensually and ethically** – they are all equally fine. Here we are not concerned with how normal something is: a person can equally take part in something which is completely unique to them, or which most other people have experienced.

What would this look like in practice? Here are a few ideas, but I would be very interested in hearing others' thoughts.

- Programme-makers, advertisers, magazine editors and so forth would be less concerned with representing what is 'normal' and would instead go out of their way to ensure that the full diversity of sexual practices, relationships, bodily forms, and so forth, were represented in their materials. In addition they would take care not to present any sexual practice, identity or relationship as ridiculous or problematic on the basis of its unusualness.
- Instead of asking whether something like wearing a collar to work was a more or less normal activity, we would afford each person with the same rights to express their sexuality or relationships through their appearance.

- Researchers in this area would be less concerned with questions of what are, or are not, normal sexualities, and with trying to find **explanations** for certain sexualities. Instead they would attend to documenting the diversity of sexualities that exist, to exploring the **lived experiences of different people and communities**, and perhaps to examining which ways of understanding sexuality are most positive in terms of decreasing stigma and discrimination.
- Educators and parents would be keen to ensure that young people grow up with an understanding of the **range of possible** relationships and identities available to them, rather than the idea that some of these are better than others. The focus would be on ethics, consent, and communication, and on tuning into our own bodies, desires and feelings.

The short version:

What is wrong with heteronormativity?

- It leaves people feeling alienated and alone.
- It is bad for LGBT people and other people who are outside of it.
- It sets up an 'us and them' which enables homophobia, biphobia and transphobia to exist.
- It is questionable whether the 'normative' form of heterosexuality actually *is* normal.
- Our treatment of others should not be based on how normal, or not, they are.
- It is bad for those who have some desires or feelings outside the 'norm'.
- It puts pressure on those who are inside it to stay inside it, and may prevent them from finding the kinds of sex and relationships that work for them.

What can we do about it?

- Move to a model of sexual diversity rather than normality/abnormality.

Straight culture

July 2019

I was recently interviewed by Jake Hall for an article on [straight culture](#). You can read Jake's piece [here](#), and my full interview below.

Straight Pride has raised questions around 'straight culture' and what it is. What are your thoughts on this, and what do you think of the tongue-in-cheek examples of 'straight culture' we tend to see in listicles / videos?

My unpacking of all of this would start with the way wider culture understands sexuality and gender. The heteronormative understanding is that people can be divided into men and women (gender) and straight and gay (sexuality), with the former being historically and culturally massively privileged over the latter in each case.

So there are two major problems with the idea of straight pride. The first – which these listicles and things like the [heterosexuality questionnaire](#) and the [straight privilege checklist](#) are pointing out – is that straightness is massively privileged culturally over gayness. The reason that LGBTQIA+ prides are needed is due to the invisibility, marginalisation, and oppression of queer people in a culture that regards straightness as natural, normal, and superior in all kinds of ways. We have to point out that we exist and that that could be something worth celebrating rather than seeing as a problem.

The second issue with the idea of straight pride – which the critiques don't usually get into – is that the heteronormative model that it's based on is grounded on this binary understanding which does not capture how gender or sexuality actually work, and which erases many people's experience.

Tongue in cheek jokes about straight culture are amusing and helpful in the way they question how great the supposed natural, normal, ideal way of being is: pointing out how bland it is, or how it appropriates things from queer culture, or how aspiring to these norms doesn't really make people very happy, for example.

However, this kind of flipping which suggests – albeit in a humorous way – that gayness is better than straightness still maintains a binary way of thinking whereby people could be divided into straight and gay. So it could be seen as shoring up one aspect of heteronormativity (the binary) even as it critiques another (the hierarchy or power imbalance inherent in it).

J.J. Halberstam wrote about his experiences as a Gender Studies professor, in particular about his course 'What is Heterosexuality?' which flipped the script and examined heterosexuality in the way we normally examine queerness. How effective

do you think approaches like these are, and what do you think are the core cultural tenets of heteronormativity?

The great thing about this kind of approach is that it reveals the hierarchical heteronormative model and how it operates. It's a similar approach to the [heterosexual questionnaire](#) which asks straight people the kinds of questions that queer people are often asked, like when did you first know you were straight? might it be a phase? have you tried not being straight? what made you straight?

This last one in particular is important. Because straightness is culturally regarded as the norm, queerness is constantly called upon to explain itself – from parents asking a queer kid if it was their fault, to scientists searching for a gay gene or a physiological cause of transness. Nobody asks for explanations of why people are straight or cisgender. The only reason that people have to 'come out' at all is that the default assumption is that people will be straight and cis (the supposed norm).

This is all rooted in the long history of a scientific approach which divides 'normal' from 'abnormal' and endeavours to explain, treat, or even eradicate the 'abnormal'. This is interwoven with the history of colonialism, ableism, and capitalism, as well as heteronormativity, as it is strongly linked to the projects of proving that certain racial groups were intellectually or morally inferior, in order to justify enslaving or colonising them, as well as eugenic projects to eradicate certain bodies, and capitalist projects of proving women inferior in order to justify their unpaid labour in the home or low paid labour in the workforce.

The project of turning the lens of study on whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, etc. is a vital one for revealing this historical context, and for situating the problem in the structures of power which sustain it – and in those who benefit from this.

While definitely a useful move, my issue with approaches like turning the lens on heterosexuality is that, again, they often still accept a binary understanding where people can simply be divided into straight and queer, cis and trans. It's important to dismantle these binary understandings entirely given they are a key underpinning of heteronormativity.

You recently co-authored [Life Isn't Binary](#). You're an advocate for queer thinking, and for dismantling oppositional categories. Do you think society at large is becoming more open to resisting binaries? If so, what could the long-term effects of this be on heterosexuality?

So my approach would be to point out how binary understandings don't work for most people.

1. Most of our genders and sexualities do not fit neatly into these binary understandings
2. Gender and sexuality is way more multifaceted than these ways of understanding it suggest
3. The binaries are bad for everyone – those who fit on the privileged and marginalised side, and those who are erased by the binary entirely.

To unpack these points:

1. Recent research suggests that nearly half of young people don't experience themselves as exclusively gay or straight (even within a heteronormative culture). Over a third of people experience themselves as to some extent 'the other gender, both genders, or neither gender'.
2. Many queer theorists and scientists have pointed out that gender of attraction is only **one dimension of human sexuality**, with many others being equally – or more – important, such as how much attraction we experience, what kinds of people we're attracted to, what roles we take sexually, what desires or fantasies we have, etc.
3. There is a good deal of evidence that endeavouring to fit rigidly into gender norms, and a heteronormative lifecourse (dating, settling down, marriage, kids, etc.) is pretty bad for people's mental and physical health, including high rates of depression, body dissatisfaction, and relationship problems for women, and high rates of addiction, aggressive behaviour, and suicide for men.

If we put together all of the people whose genders and sexualities are – in some way – non-normative, we actually get the vast majority of people: all those who experience little or no sexual attraction (on the asexual spectrum), all those attracted to more than one gender (bi, pan, queer) or the same gender (gay, lesbian), all those whose sexual desires are other than penis-in-vagina sex leading to orgasm (e.g. kinky desires), all those who deviate from mononormativity (e.g. people with multiple partners, open relationships, or having affairs), all those whose gender doesn't completely fit the one they were assigned at birth (either in terms of identity, role, expression, or experience).

I think there is increasing awareness of this diversity of gender and sexuality (rather than binaries), for example in the claiming of multiple identity terms or the expansion in meaning of terms like gay and queer. This may offer an alternative model for dismantling heteronormativity (and potentially so much more), but there is also a massive backlash against it currently (which the whole straight pride story is but one tiny part of), so we will have to see

What are your thoughts on 'ally' as one of the As in LGBTQQIAA+?

Hm. I guess I like the additional Q for questioning because it includes those who are not clearly in any identity politics place (maybe it is more about their experience or attraction), and potentially makes that radical point that being questioning, uncertain, in a 'phase' or fluid about our sexuality and gender is a valid place to be (perhaps a more honest place for many people to be than ticking a box).

Ally however is a potentially problematic term. It feels a bit like woke to me. Like anybody who claims to be an ally, or to be woke, almost certainly isn't. Like one could be aiming at allyship and wokeness, but if you ever imagine that you've got there, you haven't. It's an identity or state that can never be achieved, and one that it might be okay for more marginalised folk to say they felt you were, but never to claim yourself.

If you think of yourself as an ally I suspect you're in grave danger of being in a rescuer/saviour place – that sense that you are going to help to poor, marginalised people which furthers an 'us and them' binary rather than recognising these structures and systems as ones that hurt us all – and working to dismantle them in sustainable ways for the benefit of all – including yourself.

Another risk with rescuers is that they are invested both in the people they are helping getting better (to prove that they have been a great rescuer) and in those people staying victims (in order that they will still have a job – as a rescuer). There's a danger of that with allyship: allies still distancing themselves from the people they are allies to – and being invested in that group shoring them up (giving them a cookie for being so helpful) at the same time as staying marginalised (so they can keep performing great allyship).

Any more thoughts?

I think it's a great idea to look at those issues of appropriation and assimilation too in relation to what straight culture is. However, I was amusingly dismayed that many of the music-related straight culture things on the questionnaire applied to me. Being horrifically cheesy and uncool in your musical taste should not be a marker of straightness I think!

Perhaps there is something interesting here about the conflation of queerness with youth – and perhaps being of a certain class background/education/wealth – too. I know that some queer events have had issues with being alienating to older people and more working class people – often because it's assumed that people will be into certain music, television, movies, arts, etc.

Straight people going to gay events and venues

August 2019

Recently Grace Walsh interviewed me for this [great piece](#) about straight people going to gay bars. You can read my full thoughts here on straight people going to queer venues and events like Pride here...

How can straight, cis people be respectful in LGBTQ+ spaces?

This is a topic that comes up a lot around Pride season. Some of the bigger prides becomes so inundated with straight, cis people who want to enjoy the parade and festivities that it stops feeling like a proud – or safe enough – space for the LGBTQ+ people it was designed for. This also often elevates the prices making them increasingly inaccessible for more marginalised LGBTQ+ people.

Similarly LGBTQ+ friendly areas like Brighton, London Soho, or Canal Street in Manchester have become go-to places for stag-dos, hen-dos, and other straight, cis celebrations, perhaps seen as appropriate places for people to experience one final ‘walk on the wild side’ before tying the knot.

Why are queer events and spaces important?

It's worth remembering the roots of queer venues and celebrations like Pride. Back in the late 1960s in the US gay, queer, and trans folks had to fight not to be ejected from venues like the Compton Cafeteria in San Francisco, or raided by the police in pubs like the Stonewall Inn in New York. The first Pride marches had their foundations in the riots that took place to protect these queer spaces, often led by those who were also working class, sex workers, and/or people of colour.

It's easy to imagine that things are far better now than then, but rates of homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic hate crimes and discrimination have all gone up markedly since the Brexit vote, and we're in the midst of a huge moral panic against trans people, as well as ongoing battles around how sex, gender and sexuality are taught in schools. Globally there's still the need for a trans day of remembrance every year to mourn the frightening numbers of trans people – mostly trans women of colour – who are murdered annually. Related to all of this, mental health and suicide rates among – particularly young – LGBTQ+ people remains a big concern.

In many places LGBTQ+ people still don't feel safe enough to express themselves – or their relationships – openly. Even where they do the backdrop is of heteronormativity: the assumption that people are straight and cis unless they ‘come out’ otherwise, and that being LGBTQ+ means being different from the norm in ways that we need to explain and justify in some way, with pressure to prove that we're ‘normal’ in every other respect. Many LGBTQ+

people have strained or non-existent relationships with previous friends and family, so building their own **friendships, support networks, and social spaces** is important.

LGBTQ+ people often become used to having to come out repeatedly, to being asked intrusive questions about their bodies and sex lives, and to being treated as an object for people (the weird one in the office, or the gay best friend, for example). They have to be part of everyday workplace and family conversations which assume that everybody wants – for example – to find a partner, get married, and have (and gender) kids, and that those things require celebrating in ways that transitioning, finding a community, or coming out, do not. It's understandable that they might want some spaces where they don't have to worry about that stuff or self-monitor constantly: where they can assume that everyone will 'get it', relax, and breathe easy.

Think about your motivations

So if you are straight and cis and thinking of attending an LGBTQ+ space or event, think about your motivations. Generally speaking it's probably a bad idea if you're looking for the following:

- To share your opinions about LGBTQ+ people or get into arguments or debates
- To see something strange, exotic, or titillating
- To flirt or get off with somebody LGBTQ+ because you're curious or want to have a story to tell – this involves treating people as objects for your pleasure, not full human beings
- To have a laugh by doing something a bit crazy and out-there
- To exploit or appropriate the coolness of LGBTQ+ culture in some way

These are better reasons:

- You want to support your LGBTQ+ friends who are keen for you to go along
- It's an event or space that's particularly looking for allies to support it – and the people going
- You're genuinely questioning whether you might be LGBTQ+ yourself
- It's an educative space and you want to learn something

What not to do

- Go with your straight, cis partner and get off together very publicly in the space – remember that everyday spaces are safe for you to do that in a way they aren't for the rest of the people there
- Go with your straight, cis mates and take up a lot of room in the venue with your bodies or your noise – many people will feel less safe if you're doing that
- Go to places with a maximum capacity which are already pretty full – better to let LGBTQ+ people be the people who get to use the space

- Ask intrusive questions of anybody there or touch anybody without consent
- Get super drunk or high so others have to look after you

What to do

- Check beforehand whether you will be welcome there – with staff or others attending
- Be friendly and treat people as full human beings, not just their sexuality or gender
- Do your homework if it's an unfamiliar community for you – there are plenty of vids out there about things LGBTQ+ people are sick of hearing, or what not to ask them, as well as easy 101 introductions to language
- Be kind, consensual and unobtrusive – it's not your space and you're privileged to be welcomed here

And LGBTQ+ people need to remember...

Not everybody who appears to be straight and cis in an LGBTQ+ space actually will be. There are plenty of people who, for whatever reason, are not safe to be out as LGBTQ+, or don't identify with that terminology, but are still attracted to the same gender or more than one gender, or living in a different gender to the one they were assigned at birth. There are also lots of people who don't look like the common image of an LGBTQ+ person (which is so often white, young, slim, non-disabled, and middle class). There are many who aren't into the LGBTQ+ 'scene' but are still LGBTQ+. This is often an issue particularly for bi people. Remember that just because somebody is with a different gender partner, or hooking up in that way, doesn't mean they are straight. And even if they are straight, they may not be cis. They may be there because they are trans. Also femme women can feel very invisible in LGBTQ+ spaces.

Many people may access LGBTQ+ spaces because they're questioning their gender and/or sexuality and that's a really good reason. Insisting that they make definite decisions, identify or express themselves in certain ways is not okay. Also remember the + on LGBTQ+. There are good reasons to consider including asexual, intersex, kinky, and/or non-monogamous people, as well as sex workers, under the broad umbrella of people who are excluded from heteronormativity and discriminated against by virtue of their gender and/or sexuality. There are legitimate conversations to be had about who should and shouldn't be included, and in what contexts – for example, not all intersex folk want to be added to the LGBTQ+ acronym and it's very important to respect that – but generally it's worth being as careful when making assumptions about somebody who doesn't appear LGBTQ+ as we'd want people to be when coming into contact with somebody who does.

Bisexuality and Pansexuality

Bisexuality and biphobia

September 2021

Earlier this year, Carla Merino from *El Pais* interviewed me about bisexuality and biphobia. You can read the article [here](#). Below is the full interview in honour of [Celebrate Bisexuality Day](#). For more on all of this check out my book with Jules Scheele: [Sexuality: A Graphic Guide](#).

How much does social acceptance or rejection define our sexual identity and orientation? It's curious to see that Generation Z is the one with most LGBTQIA+ members, and, going back, there's less and less in each generation. What's the correlation between the two factors?

Social acceptance has a big impact on how open people feel able to be about their sexual attractions and how free they feel to act upon them. It's likely that shifting proportions of LGBTQIA+ people across the generations reflects how socially acceptable diverse sexualities and genders are in wider culture, as well as how possible it has been to act upon them without stigma, discrimination, or restriction. Another factor is how important it has been seen over the years to identify your sexuality and gender.

It's also important to remember that the proportion of people who identify with a particular sexuality is the tip of the iceberg. For example, with bisexuality, far more people will have sexual experiences with more than one gender than identify as bisexual, and even more will experience attraction to more than one gender which they don't act upon.

Are sexual orientation and identity biological or a social construct?

Both! Our sexuality is biopsychosocial, which means that – like most aspects of human experience – it comes down to a mixture of the social context we grow up in, the experiences that we have through our lives, and the ways in which our body and brain function. All of these things interact with each other in complex ways that we could never really tease apart. For example, the ways in which our body and brain function impact how we're treated by others in our particular culture, and also the wider culture shapes the experiences that we're able to have, which – in turn – shapes our bodies and brains.

You might think about the ways in which certain body shapes and sizes, and mental abilities, are deemed 'sexually attractive' in our culture, leading those who have them to have radically different experiences of sex and relationships. Or you might think about the ways in which culture enables and restricts certain forms of sexual expression, meaning that we're more or less likely to have access to those experiences, which will impact how our bodies and brains will respond to those possibilities (e.g. with pleasure, joy, fear, shame, etc.)

What impact does fear of child sexuality have on how we develop our sexual identity and preference?

Fear of childhood sexuality has a massive impact at the moment. Few children receive anything like a good education around sex and relationships because there is so much anxiety about talking with kids about sex. Tragically this actually results in more young people have abusive, unwanted, and risky sexual experiences, not less, because they are so ill-equipped to talk about sex or to navigate sex consensually. Certainly most sex education and advice assumes that people will be heterosexual, or only includes LGB sexualities very briefly. This restricts how able young people are to explore the full range of possible sexual and asexual identities and experiences.

It is often said that everyone is bisexual or that no one is, which are biphobic expressions. Why does society have trouble accepting bisexuality specifically. Could it be a human need to categorise everything in extremes? (black and white/ good and bad)

This is an idea that my co-author [Alex Iantaffi](#) and I explore at length in our book [Life Isn't Binary](#). It certainly seems that humans – particularly in western cultures – are drawn to these kinds of binary polarisations when, of course, so much about human life is diverse rather than binary. It wouldn't make sense to divide people into short and tall – clearly height is a spectrum. A similar thing could be said about various mental capacities, we can't divide people into a binary of unintelligent or intelligent, rather we can locate people in different places on a number of spectrums of various abilities (mathematical, linguistic, spatial, etc.). So why, when it comes to sexuality and gender, do we assume a binary?

You're right that, many times over the years, people have tried to argue that either nobody is 'really' bisexual, or that everybody is bisexual. Both of those extremes risk erasing actual bisexual experience, as well as limiting human sexuality to one dimension (the gender of the people we're attracted to), when really there is [a lot more to it than that](#).

It is often said that putting labels on ourselves or others can be damaging, but by not calling something by a name, you can deny its existence. Do we really need labels to identify ourselves and what we're attracted to? Why?

This is another non-binary! There are many arguments for and against people labelling their sexuality. I find it more helpful to ask what labels open up, and close down, for people, assuming that they probably do both. For people whose sexual attractions – or absence of attractions – are marginalised, labels can be important in claiming their experience, communicating it to others, and finding supportive community within a world that harms them. At the same time, labels can come with a set of expectations which can be limiting and rigid, and it can be difficult to let go of labels – and all that they bring – if things change for you.

Culturally we're in a place where the only accepted way to fight for equal human rights is generally on the basis of identity labels. It's very hard to fight for the rights of a group to be treated in just ways unless that group identifies under a label and can prove, through research,

the negative impact that marginalisation has upon them. This has been a key tension in discussions of the labels around attraction to multiple genders. Some argue for the dropping of labels entirely, or embracing multiple labels like pansexual, queer, omnisexual, plurisexual, and so on. However, most governments and organisations only recognise the 'B' for bisexual, so there are strategic reasons for people to use that term, even when it may not feel the best fit for them.

At least in the United States, bisexuals comprise more than half the LGBTQIA+ collective, but that's not what it looks like. It seems that they're actually a minority. Why could that be?

There's a long history of bisexual people being treated with suspicion in the wider LGB movement and community. This dates back to the fact that 'gay rights' were often fought for on the basis of the idea that sexuality was binary (straight or gay) and that gay people were a minority group who were marginalised and oppressed within that binary. Anybody whose sexuality didn't fit that binary model were seen as 'muddying the water' and potentially jeopardising the fight for gay rights.

Many theorists and scientists now recognise that human sexuality is actually diverse and fluid across many dimensions, and that the proportion of people attracted to the same gender or more than one gender is probably at least equal to the number of people who are attracted to the 'opposite' gender only. However it is taking a long time for this way of seeing things to find its way into mainstream culture and governmental policies.

Have the different definitions of bisexuality through history influenced biphobia and formed misconceptions on what bisexuality is?

Yes certainly they have. The most widely accepted definition of bisexuality within the bi+ community today is 'attraction to more than one gender', with some also using 'attraction regardless of gender'. However, early definitions of bisexuality mixed gender and sexuality and saw bisexual people as people who had more than one gender. Later definitions assumed that bisexual people were attracted exactly equally to men and women. We see the legacy of these kinds of definitions in the assumptions that bisexual people will also be androgynous, and in the equation of bisexual with attraction to only two genders. As [The Bisexual Index](#) points out, if people are concerned about the 'bi' in bisexual meaning 'two', they can understand it as 'attraction to both people of the same gender as themselves, and to people of different genders to themselves'.

It's not common to hear about bisexual characters on the history of LGBTQIA+ rights although they're there. Why are they not that visible?

This is particularly striking when you think that one of the most famous sexologists of all time (Alfred Kinsey) and the woman who co-ordinated the first Pride march in 1970 (Brenda Howard) were both bi! However people who identified as bi or had attractions to more than one gender are often erased from LGBTQIA+ history. I suspect this is for the same reason that I mentioned

above: that a lot of gay rights has been fought for on the basis of a straight (majority) / gay (minority) binary, and the existence and prevalence of bisexuality seems like a threat to this.

What is the reason that bisexual women are the ones to experience the most sexual violence?

Bi women seem to experience higher levels of both sexual and relationship abuse than straight or lesbian women. One reason for this is the stereotype of bi women as hypersexual and sexually available, which means they experience higher levels of sexual harassment of all kinds. Another reason is that so many people find the idea of bisexuality threatening, and sexual violence can be used as a way of policing and punishing that. In relationships, the stereotype of bi people as promiscuous, suspicious, and lying means that bi people are often wrongly assumed to be more likely to leave – or cheat on – a partner. This can lead to biphobia in relationships where bi people are encouraged to hide their sexuality, and may be treated in controlling – even violent – ways by partners who are insecure about their bi-ness.

How do we work towards ending biphobia?

I'd like to see far better awareness and education in wider culture, and for young people, about the diversity of sexuality, moving away from binary models which see it as being all about the gender of the people we're attracted to. In my book [Sexuality: A Graphic Guide](#) I draw together lots of theories and research which suggests that there are many dimensions to sexuality, including the amount of sexual attraction that we experience, the kinds of erotic desires we have, the other features of a person that we find attractive beyond gender, and much more. We need to get to a point where we see all forms of erotic experience as equally legitimate and beautiful, so long as they are acted upon consensually.

Bi Visibility

September 2015

September 23rd is [bi visibility day](#): something I've written about here [before](#). This year I thought I'd post a Q&A I did recently on the topic of bi visibility to say why I think it's still so important. You can also read a lot more on this topic over on the [BiUK website](#) and in [The Bisexuality Report](#).

Why do you think that most research shows that bisexual people are struggling compared to lesbian, gay and straight people?

It seems highly likely that a major reason for this is bi invisibility. Bi people are marginalised in similar ways to lesbian and gay people, for their same-sex attraction, but they also experience something additional to this which is their invisibility – or erasure – in popular culture. Lesbian and gay people are rarely questioned as to whether they are really lesbian/gay. Also generally, once they have come out, people accept that their sexual identity is what they've said it is.

For bisexual people however, the experience of coming out is one of continued questioning, suspicion and even re-closeting (people assuming they must *really* be gay or straight). Bi people also experience double discrimination (from both straight and gay communities) which can lead to a sense of isolation or having no home or sense of belonging. Often bi people turn to LGBT communities when they have experienced biphobia and homophobia, only to find that they are rejected there too.

These things all tap into a couple of major elements of common [mental health difficulties](#): self-criticism and alienation. Bi people are encouraged to doubt and criticise themselves, and they often feel very alone.

Of course the wider reasons for bi invisibility are the [binary assumptions](#) our culture has about sexuality and gender: that people are seen as gay or straight (and male or female).

What do you think the goals of bisexual activism and the bisexual movement should be?

Given the current climate, one priority is to provide supportive and welcoming spaces for bi people so that they don't feel so isolated and so they have at least some spaces in which they feel welcome and able to be themselves. Alongside that it's important to get resources and support to bi people to help those who are already experiencing problems: improving access to mental health services, and awareness within those services, for example.

After that a major priority is shifting biphobia and bi invisibility in the wider LGBT community so that bi people don't experience that double discrimination, and so that LGBT communities and spaces *do* become safer spaces for bi people even when wider culture isn't.

Beyond that what's really needed is to shift wider understandings of sexuality away from a binary model. This could be done through improved sex education which incorporates the full range of gender and sexual diversity rather than being based on a **heteronormative** model as it currently is. It could also be achieved through better media representation of diverse sexual and gender experiences.

How can bisexual people, communities and organisers meet these goals? What activism do you think needs to happen?

Well there is a big question about whether it is down to bi people to achieve these goals or whether wider LGBT communities and organisations should be focusing on this, as well as equality and diversity groups more widely. Should it be the job of the most marginalised people to pull themselves out of marginalisation?

That said, there are a number of bi activists, community organisers, and groups who are putting a huge amount of – often unpaid – time, energy and resources into trying to address this situation (in the UK this includes **The Bisexual Index**, **Bi Community News**, **Bis of Colour**, **BiCon**, and **Biscuit magazine**). Particularly they are trying to create online and offline spaces where bisexual people can go and feel welcome, and to make these spaces diverse enough to include different groups of bi people rather than just appealing to a subset. There are also many bi activists who are trying to train therapists, practitioners, LGBT organisers, and others to improve their awareness. And some are engaged in developing better sex media, advice and education which is inclusive of all rather than bi-erasing.

Where would you like to see bisexual people and the bisexual community in the the future?

A large proportion of people are attracted to more than one gender – far more than the number of people who identify as bisexual. The figure for attraction is between 19% and 43% depending on age according to a recent **YouGov survey**. So we need to encompass this in our understanding of human sexuality. In the long term future it would be great to reach a point where people were accepted regardless of their sexual orientation, and where the gender that people were attracted to was seen as no more important than any other aspect of sexual desire (e.g. the kinds of roles you take sexually, the kind of appearance you find attractive, the kinds of sexual practices you enjoy).

In the shorter term it is really important to see a more diverse set of spaces open up so that bi people of all backgrounds, ages, and cultural groups have somewhere they are accepted and supported. Also a priority is making LGBT organisations and spaces truly bi-inclusive, such that bi people are given at least as much energy, platform, and resources as LG people.

Do you think autonomous or majority bisexual spaces are helpful for bisexual politics and activism? If so, how and why?

I think they are absolutely necessary for now given the biphobia and bi invisibility in all other spaces. [Helen Bowes-Catton](#)'s research on bisexual spaces demonstrated that – for many of the people who access those spaces – they are the one place they can go where they can completely relax and be themselves. It's a disturbing situation that that is the case, but it means that those spaces are still necessary – at least until the point at which LGBT spaces are bi-inclusive in more than just name.

Bisexuality interview

July 2014

I did an [interview with Biscuit magazine this week](#) about bisexuality:

What first drew you to focus on academic research into bisexuality?

A combination of things really. From a research point of view I was always interested in people whose identities were outside the mainstream in some way and what that experience was like. I was engaged with bisexual communities myself so that seemed an obvious place to study.

As I got more involved with bisexual activism I realised how invisible bisexuality was, and how research was needed to increase awareness of the issues faced by bisexual people. That was the thinking behind setting up BiUK (an organisation for bringing together bisexual research and activism), the BiReCon conference, and the Bisexuality Report.

Finally, as I've studied these areas, I've become particularly intrigued how wider culture often sees things in binary ways (e.g. women and men, gay and straight) so my research around sexuality, gender and relationships has focused more on how these things can challenge such binaries.

How do you feel about current bi visibility/portrayal in media?

Generally speaking this remains a big issue. A lot of people still don't regard anything other than gay/straight as viable identity terms to use, despite being attracted to more than one gender. I think that is in large part to do with the fact that there are so few representations of bisexual people around them.

People often assume that bisexuality is rare because few people they know are out as bisexual, but statistics suggest that bisexuality is more common than being lesbian or gay. It is just that people are far less comfortable being out about it due to the stigma they face if they are (often from straight and gay/lesbian people). So there is a vicious cycle of invisibility.

There have been a few more recent portrayals of bisexual people, such as Captain Jack in *Dr. Who/Torchwood*, Ralph Fienne's concierge in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* movie, or Piper Chapman in *Orange is the New Black*. The word "bisexual" is very rarely used to describe any of these characters but at least they are fairly positive portrayals of people who are attracted to more than one gender.

How do you feel about the difference between how bi men and bi women are perceived or portrayed, both in the media and by the “(wo)man” on the street?

We still have quite a gap in this area. Both bisexual women and men are often portrayed as both promiscuous and untrustworthy, with suspicion over whether they are “really” bisexual. But bisexual men are often assumed to be “really” gay, and there has been more suspicion over whether male bisexuality exists at all than female bisexuality. Bisexual women are often assumed to be “bi-curious” and mostly interested in men, and are often presented as hypersexual and titillating to straight men. Some researchers have pointed out the misogyny in the assumption that everybody will really be more sexually interested in men!

There are also increasing numbers of people experiencing themselves as non-binary in terms of both their sexuality (e.g. bisexual, pansexual, or queer) and their gender (e.g. genderqueer, gender fluid, or bigender). There are very few portrayals of this in the media so far, but the Facebook recognition of multiple genders suggests that this will probably be something that is talked about a lot more in the coming years, as it challenges the idea that sexuality and gender are binary.

How do you feel about the state of bi activism worldwide at the moment?

There is some amazing stuff happening in bi activism globally, and the movement is definitely in a pretty healthy state I would say. I’m not an expert in international bi movements, but Surya Monro (an academic up in Huddersfield) is currently researching this area and finding great examples of bisexual activism across different cultures which also engages in intersectional issues (such as anti racism, class politics, trans politics, etc). The UK and US bi movements have a lot to learn from other movements worldwide I think.

A brilliant example is Shiri Eisner who wrote the book *Bi: Notes for a bisexual revolution** which links bisexual activism to feminism, trans activism, anti racism, and the conflict in Israel/occupied Palestine.

I’m also pleased that the BiReCon conference that we set up in the UK, with the idea of bringing together academics/researchers together with activists, community members, and relevant organisations, has been taken up internationally. There has been a European BiReCon and a US BiReCon already as well as the international BiReCon in London 2010.

How does it make you feel that we still have even high profile LGBT groups seemingly forgetting the “b”?

Sometimes it feels pretty dispiriting and exhausting. I move between spaces where everybody gets the importance of the B in LGBT and talks about “homophobia, biphobia and transphobia”, to other spaces where people still question the existence of bisexuality or regard it as a minority within a minority which is fine to include in only a tokenistic manner. “B-no” is a great phrase to capture the fact that so many groups and events are “bisexual in name only”.

When this is pointed out people are often a little embarrassed, or just shrug it off or joke about attempts to make them properly bi-inclusive, but it's important to remember that we're talking about a group of people who have higher rates of mental health problems, suicide, and domestic violence than either heterosexual, or lesbian and gay people. This invisibility takes a real toll on people's lives, and is even putting lives at risk.

Labelling is a hugely tricky issue when discussing gender and sexuality, with many vehemently opposed to the "bisexual" label. What are your thoughts on how to get round this? We try our best but here at Biscuit we're still well aware that, usually for the sake of brevity, we use cis pronouns and refer to bisexuality rather than pan/ambi/omnisexuality etc most of the time – and we are not at all alone in that as a "bi" organisation!

I generally embrace the moves towards a multiplicity of labels for sexuality and gender, including those who prefer not to label these things. Recent studies of young people, like the Metro Youth Chances Survey, suggest that more and more people are using terms beyond the 'LGBT' acronym to describe their sexuality and gender, and it is important to respect that. Also, the proliferation of terms is helpful in demonstrating that both sexuality and gender are not binary, and that everybody experiences them in different ways.

Obviously though this does raise challenges for LGBT movements and publications. BiUK still uses the term "bisexual" (for attraction to more than one gender) as this is well-understood by the people and groups that we are trying to train (for example). But it is important also to consider non-binary sexualities as a whole too, as there are many similar issues faced by all whose attraction is either not based on gender, or to more than one gender.

Regarding pronouns the way to go is to use people's preferred pronouns and to ask if unsure. Again I think the move towards checking out preferred pronouns is a great way of signalling awareness that people experience gender in a multiplicity of ways.

Bi visibility day: Gay invisibility

September 2017

For **bi visibility day** (Sept 23rd) this year I wanted to share a piece I wrote a couple of years back imagining what the world would be like if bi people were treated like gay/lesbian people are now, and vice versa to illuminate the strange place we find ourselves in with bi invisibility. I hope you find it helpful...

Imagine a world where bi people were treated like gay & lesbian people, and vice versa...

You wake up in the morning and smile, remembering it's Pride day. You're going to get to march with all your lesbian and gay mates. Then your heart sinks a little remembering previous Prides. You'll probably be relegated to the back of the march again after all the hundreds of bi charities and groups and organisations. Sure some of them have finally added LG to their names these days, but BTLG is mostly about the B and everyone knows it. It's crazy-making when we know that LG people make up around half of all LGB people. Where are they all?

You know you'll also be lucky this afternoon if there's even one gay or lesbian identified person up on the stage at the end of Pride. Last year one gay activist got about a minute up there before the next bi band came on. It's like the Purple List of influential BTLG people: Published in a major national newspaper every year and almost everyone on it is bi. A small gay magazine published a 'rainbow list', to make the point that there are lots of influential LG people too, but people didn't pay much attention to that. It's so frustrating because you know for a fact that many of the famous bi actors, sportspeople, and pop stars only ever have same-sex relationships, but they still call themselves 'bi' because being gay is so stigmatised. When that swimmer came out a couple of years back the bi press immediately called him bi even though he deliberately only said that he was attracted to people of the same-sex. There's so few gay role-models or gay storylines on TV programmes. It only makes lesbian and gay people more invisible.

You sigh. It's hard being gay in a world where everyone's divided into heterosexual or bisexual. They've even done research now to try to prove that same-sex-only attraction doesn't exist: that you're either 'straight, bi, or lying'. People can wrap their head around attraction to the opposite gender, or to people of any gender, but not to only being attracted to the same gender only. When you try to point out that Kinsey found that sexuality was a spectrum: there were people at the far end who were just attracted to the same gender, they just dismiss you saying that research is outdated.

Over breakfast you flick through the latest report from a major BTLG mental health charity. It's great work they're doing and you try to support them, but the gay invisibility really gets on your nerves. Several places in the document talk about 'biphobia and transphobia' and don't mention homophobia at all. You've brought that up with them in the past and they just claim that homophobia is a subset of biphobia. It's the same kind of argument as people who use

'bi' as an umbrella term for everyone with same-sex attraction whether they're also attracted to the opposite sex or not. You've tried to point out that the word 'bisexual' doesn't accurately capture your sexual orientation but they just look at you like you're making a big deal over nothing. It's all 'bi people', 'bi relationships', 'bi parents', 'the bi community' etc. etc. etc.

The report talks about the fact that BLG people have worse mental health than straight people, but it just lumps all BLG people together. You find that annoying because you know that it's the lesbian and gay people who actually have the highest rates of depression, self-harm and suicide. Research like this means that the money and resources go to BLG people as a whole rather than to LG people in particular. And that mostly means the big commercial 'bi scene' which very few LG people actually access. So the help isn't going to the people who need it most, and the bis are the ones who get all the funding.

Again you've tried to point this out, but the bi activists you've spoken to argue that it's important to get everyone accepting bisexuality fully as the first step to BTLG rights. Once that's happened they can work on the more 'complicated' identities like gay and lesbian. That's why so many people's energy went into the multiple marriage campaign. Now polyamorous bisexual and straight people can marry more than one partner, or one opposite-sex partner. But there's still no allowance for gay people – and monogamous bisexuals – who want to marry one same-sex partner only. Even during the campaign loads of people were saying that there was a danger that multiple marriage would open the floodgates to same-sex-only marriage, comparing it to incest and bestiality. They call multiple marriage 'equal marriage' now, but it's not truly equal. When you point that out people just accuse you of sour grapes.

Last BTLG history month you tried to get your organisation's BTLG group to do an exhibition of famous LG people through history, but the other people on the committee (all bi of course) said that most of the people you suggested were 'probably bi really'. And they're always going on about Stonewall as this big event in BT history, dismissing all the gay people who were also involved at the forefront of what happened back then. The committee ended up putting a bunch of the Stonewall posters up round the organisation: 'Some people are bi, get over it' and 'One is bi. If that bothers people, our work continues.' You pointed out that there were actually 'gay' posters available as well but they just gave you a look and said 'the campaign's about eradicating biphobia in the workplace, alright.' You hear that Stonewall have consulted with lesbian and gay people to try to improve inclusion, but you feel so jaded after all this time that you'll believe that when you see it.

You check your phone. Looks like a bunch of your mates are going out to a bi bar after the Pride event. You're not tempted. Last time you did that everyone assumed you'd be attracted to multiple genders and it was really uncomfortable when you came out as gay. Like at work and with your family they also kept forgetting and assuming you were bi, so you had to come out again and again. And you're so sick of the stereotypes. Some bi people won't date you for fear that you'll leave them for another gay person. Others treat you with suspicion: 'are you sure you're really gay?'

The double discrimination is probably the worst thing. You kind of expect homophobia from the straight world, but getting it from bi people as well is really hard. Like when you finally left the football team you were on because of the homophobic discrimination there, and joined a BTLG football team only to find that they called you 'gold star' like it was a big joke, and kept going on about your sexuality and how you must be 'picky' or 'confused'.

You remember back to last year's Pride. Double discrimination there too. Your group marching past a bunch of bi people and they all started singing some old Eurovision song 'loosen you mind up' which you know was a homophobic joke. Mostly though the crowd just went quiet when your group walked past and then started cheering for the next bi group.

When you told your bi friends about it in the pub afterwards they said you were probably just exaggerating or being over-sensitive. They think you're crazy to be so bothered by it, but you think the world is crazy for not being able to see gay invisibility when it's right in their face.

Maybe you'll just stay at home.

This story is based on all based on research on bisexuality reviewed in [The Bisexuality Report](#) (with the sexualities reversed of course!)

With many thanks to Catherine Butler and colleagues for their inspiration with the [Homoworld](#) story and [short film](#), as well as this [US version](#).

The pansexual revolution?

February 2019

Recently I was interviewed for [an article in *The Guardian*](#) about whether pansexuality and sexual fluidity are becoming mainstream. You can read the full article [here](#), and here's what I had to say...

The ONS research out this week finds a rise in people picking “other” out of a choice of straight, gay or other. Are people more willing now to embrace the idea that they might not be exclusively heterosexual? If so, what do you think is driving that?

Yes, since the famous Kinsey studies in the 1940s and 50s we've known that a large proportion of people experience some attraction to – and often sexual experience with – people of their own gender (either in addition to other genders, or exclusively). However, those numbers are rarely reflected in national surveys because many of those people don't feel able to be open about this. Year on year more people say they are something other than heterosexual – probably as prevailing cultural attitudes become more open, and people see more positive role models in the media and their everyday lives.

If the increase is among younger people, does it reflect generational differences from growing up in a less homophobic culture?

It seems likely that it is that generational shift and change in wider culture that's responsible, although it's important to remember that there are still significant barriers to people saying they are anything other than heterosexual. The very fact that people need to 'come out' as being LGBTQ+ reminds us that heterosexuality is the assumed norm, and therefore being anything else still holds the stigma of being perceived as 'other' than the norm. For many people identifying as LGBTQ+ still carries risks including hate crime, discrimination, and loss of vital family and community.

Do you think it's likely that as the years go by the number of people identifying as exclusively, never-could-be-anything-but heterosexual will continue to fall?

Certainly, especially given that in terms of attraction and experience a significant proportion of people are not heterosexual (far more than identify as LGB or 'other').

Does the question you ask about sexual identities affect the answer you get?

Yes, this is the key point really. In my book [The Psychology of Sex](#) I point out that YouGov found that 88.7% of adults identified as heterosexual, 5.5% identified as gay, and 2.1% as bisexual. However when they were asked to place themselves on the Kinsey scale in terms of attraction, 72% of all adults, and 46% of adults aged 18–24 years, put themselves at exclusively heterosexual; 4% percent of all adults, and 6% of young adults, put themselves

at exclusively homosexual. That means that around quarter of all adults, and half of young adults, placed themselves somewhere between the extremes. This suggests that being attracted to more than one gender is becoming a majority, not a minority, position. But wider culture is taking a long time to catch up to that fact, still tending to assume that people are either straight or gay, and presenting non-binary attraction as confused, a phase, or somehow suspicious.

In the past many people have (mistakenly) assumed that bisexual necessarily meant equally attracted to men and women. Is that idea now being dispelled?

It certainly has been dispelled in the bi and queer communities! Even the Kinsey type scale from attraction to the 'same sex' to attraction to the 'opposite sex' doesn't actually make a lot of sense. A good analogy for that is liking coffee and tea: just because you like one more doesn't mean you necessarily like the other one less. Of course now we're grudgingly recognising the existence of non-binary people too, any kind of binary – or spectrum – model for sexuality won't really work. That's why the most accepted definition of bisexuality is 'attraction to more than one gender'.

Millennials seem to be using a proliferation of labels for neither-exclusively-gay-nor-exclusively-straight, e.g. pansexual, or sexually fluid as well as bisexual. Is it right to see these as subsets of bisexual identity, separate to it, or is it not that simple?

If we take bisexual to mean 'attraction to more than one gender' then it can be a useful umbrella term for all of those identities – especially because it is a word that the general population understands and the government uses, so it's helpful in fighting for rights and recognition. However, millennials (and many of us who have been thinking about these things for rather longer!) are also pointing out that sexuality is about way more than gender of attraction. Just as assuming a gay/straight binary has been problematic, so the idea that sexuality is all about the gender we're attracted to is problematic. Scientists and social scientists alike agree that there are multiple dimensions of sexuality including amount of desire, roles we enjoy taking, other features of a person we find attractive, etc. There's a zine about this [here](#).

What do you make of the argument that people's sexual identities can change over a lifetime?

Yes the evidence is compelling that many of our sexual desires and attractions change over time: the amount of desire we have, the kinds of things we enjoy doing sexually, what we fantasise about, and the kind of people we're attracted to. We tend to accept that for some dimensions of sexuality but strangely not for gender-of-attraction – why would that one aspect remain static while everything else changes? Lisa Diamond is the go-to researcher who has found that sexuality is fluid for many of us.

The idea that sexuality is not as cut and dried as we once assumed is obviously welcome, but does it have any downsides for LGBT rights?

Well it also means that straight people can change and become gayer too. But yes much gay rights has, unfortunately, had to argue for fixed identities: that people are born gay and remain gay. Part of the reason bisexuality and sexual fluidity are so erased and rejected is because they're seen as muddying the water on that argument. But research suggests that believing that sexuality is fixed and biologically determined doesn't actually make people less homophobic. The way forward is a model of sexual diversity that recognises that actually a majority of people are something other than heterosexual, monogamous, and into only penis-in-vagina sex, and that people have a wide range of sexualities all of which are fine so long as practised consensually.

Are there any lingering myths and misconceptions about bisexuality that you'd like to put to rest for good?

All of them please. Also, as Shiri Eisner argues, we need to go further and put to rest the assumptions behind the myths. For example:

Bisexuality is a phase – for many people it is a static identity – also what's wrong with going through phases?

Bisexual people are promiscuous – no more than any other sexual identity – also we can question the sex negative assumption that it's seen as bad to be sexually desiring (especially for women).

Heteroflexibility and bicuriosity

March 2021

Thanks so much to Paisley Gilmour for including me in this recent [Cosmo article](#) about being heteroflexible: an awesome interview with [sex educator](#) and [podcaster](#) Hannah Witton about why and how she uses this word. Cheers also to Paisley for including a plug for my new book with [Jules Scheele](#) – [Sexuality: A Graphic Guide](#) – which unpacks the understandings of sexuality which make space for heteroflexibility and bicuriosity, as well as those that don't.

Here's what I had to say when Paisley interviewed me about these terms...

My question is always what labels like 'heteroflexible' or 'bicurious' open up and close down – both for us personally – and for the wider world. My sense is that any label can be very helpful if it helps us to name our experience in a way that feels like a good fit and/or find community. But any label can also be risky if we hold onto it too tightly when perhaps it doesn't fit us so well any more. Labels are also problematic if they risk excluding others or making their experience seem less valid.

What does heteroflexibility open up?

So what does heteroflexible open up and close down? It opens up the idea that sexuality can be flexible and fluid – which is far more accurate for most people than the wider cultural sense that it is something we're born with which is fixed for life. It also opens up the sense that hetero people can experience attractions to other genders without that necessarily meaning they have to now class themselves as gay or bisexual. The word homoflexible does a similar thing for people for whom 'gay' is an important identity, but they do experience some attractions to genders other than the 'same gender'.

What does heteroflexibility close down?

However, the risk with both heteroflexible and homoflexible is bisexual erasure. We still live in a culture that is highly skeptical and demonising of bisexuality. Bi people are represented as greedy, suspicious, dangerous and threatening, or dismissed as not real, immature, going through a phase, etc. So it could be that people prefer to adopt words like heteroflexible or homoflexible because saying that they are bisexual feels too risky. The danger is that that supports the cultural assumption that everyone is 'really' more-or-less gay or straight, and there isn't really any bisexuality (even though most studies find that actually most people are somewhere between the extremes of gay and straight in their attractions).

Missing other aspects of sexuality

Finally, any sexuality term that defines people in terms of their gender of attraction can risk missing all the other components that make up our sexuality (like the other aspects of people

that we find attractive, the roles we enjoy taking sexually, the kinds of sex we enjoy and don't, the communities we feel affiliated with, etc.) [This zine](#) goes into all of that in detail.

Bicuriousity

I'd say pretty similar things for the word 'bicurious'. It very helpfully opens up the sense that it's okay to be curious and questioning around our sexuality, which is something that wider culture denies: expecting everyone to be certain about having a fixed sexuality. However, it can also be seen as suggesting it wouldn't really be okay to be fully bisexual. We might ask why we have the word 'bicurious' when we don't have 'heterocurious'.

Should I use these terms?

For anyone considering these terms I'd suggest asking what they open up and close down for you. I'd encourage you to embrace them if they feel like a good fit, if they help you find communities of like-minded people, or if they help you to make sense of yourself.

But try to hold the terms lightly so that you can let them go if things change for you, or if you find a word which is an even better fit. And make sure that, in using these terms for yourself, you don't try to put them on anybody else, or exclude or erase anyone else's experience in the ways you use them.

Bi visibility: how to be a good friend

September 2020

Thanks to [Paisley Gilmour](#) for including me in her great piece for Cosmo on 'how straight people can be better to their bisexual friends'. You can read the full interview I did with Paisley below...

How does coming out as bi, or being bi, affect friendships with [cishet](#) people?

Obviously it depends a lot on the cishet people concerned, but in a situation where most of your friends are cishet identified it can be hard indeed to be the one person who is bi, pan, or queer identified. It is often the case that people are 'recloseted' by their friends even after coming out to them as bi. If they're not actively in a queer romantic/sexual relationship they're assumed to be 'really' straight.

This relates to the common popular stereotypes of bi/pan sexuality being 'just a phase', 'not real', etc. And that relates to the cultural assumption that sexuality is binary: you're either straight or you're gay. Interestingly this is also very patriarchal: bi women tend to be assumed to be 'really' straight, and bi man as 'really' gay, as if everyone would default to being with a man given the chance! It also links to slut-shaming for women, as bi women are often assumed to be promiscuous.

It is stressful indeed to have to come out repeatedly to friends, to have to keep reminding them of your bi-ness, and to have it continually erased in this way. This might take the form, for example, of them assuming you are cishet even after being told otherwise, or of only expressing interest and enthusiasm about your dates who are the 'opposite gender'.

This is all really important because we know that bi erasure, biphobia, and lack of support, [takes a toll](#) on bi people's mental health, which tends to be worse than that of either straight or gay people. Also the rates of abusive relationships are higher for bi people because some partners will use their bi-ness against them, or act in controlling ways because they are threatened by it in a world which equates being bi with being untrustworthy betrayers.

Why are friendships so important for bi folks?

Given cultural biphobia and bi erasure, people may well have problems in their families and/or workplaces when they come out as bi. They may even not be able to be out in those contexts. This can be particularly the case where bi-ness intersects with other aspects of oppression. For example, it may feel unsafe for a bi person to come out to biphobic/homophobic parents, particularly if that might risk them losing their home, their community, and/or a carer if they are also disabled. Black women who are already highly sexualised in the workplace may fear the extra harassment they would receive if they were out there as bi.

For these reasons friendships can be vital. They should be one place where your bi-ness can be seen and mirrored by your close people, and a place where you can feel supported and like people are there for you. It can therefore be particularly painful if the people you have chosen to be close to – rather than being forced to be close to by birth or career – are unsupportive, ignorant, attacking, or bi-erasing.

Why can navigating friendships with cishet people as a bisexual/queer person be so hard?

It's worth thinking a bit about what may be behind some cishet people struggling with bi/pan/queer friends.

First of all, remember that the majority of people experience some attraction to the 'opposite gender'. According to a recent YouGov survey, the majority of young people are something other than 'exclusively heterosexual'.

So it is probably the case that the person coming out as bi or queer in an otherwise cishet group prompts some degree of envy or discomfort in at least some of the others in the group. Some may be consciously hiding queerness from their friends, others may feel edgy or uncomfortable because it prompts them to question themselves in ways they haven't done before. They may not want to look at what it brings up for them.

Some cishet friends – responding to stereotypes of bi-ness and promiscuity – will assume that somebody being bi means they will be attracted to them. There is often discomfort and distancing in friendships where there is the possibility of sexual attraction, compared to those where there is not, which is a real shame. And obviously being bi does not mean being attracted to everyone any more than being straight means being attracted to everyone of the 'opposite gender'.

Finally, bi folks often find themselves questioning other norms around sex, gender and relationships, and more. This is partly because questioning one set of norms often leads to further questioning, and partly because of overlaps between bi community and trans, kink, polyamorous, and other communities. Again, friends may feel a sense of envy seeing these things opened up in a way that doesn't feel possible for them. It may feel threatening to them, or it may create distance in a friendship where people are now on quite different life trajectories (e.g. towards marriage and nuclear family vs. towards an extended polycule of queers).

Bi, pan and queer folks can end up more educated around social justice issues more widely, due to common conversations in their communities, and this can also cause rifts with friends who are less keen to know about social injustice or examine their privileges.

How can we know when to educate, when to shrug off their comments, and even when to end a friendship?

Perhaps this is a broader question to ask of all the relationships in our lives, in an ongoing way. One of the problems with normative models of friendships – and partner and family relationships – is that there isn't often a sense that consent should be at the heart of it. In fact there's often quite a strong sense of duty and obligation: that you should be in this relationship because you were in the past, and that it should remain the same over time.

Consent means checking in, in an ongoing way, about whether a relationship is nourishing everybody in it, and – if not – what it would take to be more nourishing, whether the relationship container may need to change, or even whether people might need to go their separate ways.

A **definition of consent** would be that everyone involved feels free-enough and safe-enough to express themselves, their feelings, their needs, and their boundaries, knowing that these will be respected.

In the case of coming out as bi – as with any new thing – it's fine for friends to need a little adjustment time. But if you are still not feeling free-enough and safe-enough to express your bi-ness, and confident of having it respected, after a while, then there is an issue!

It also should not be on any marginalised person to educate those around them. It's okay to provide a couple of links of good information and expect people to educate themselves a bit. Again those who refuse to do this are giving you some important information right there!

Of course it can be really hard to have conversations about this with your friends if there is a genuine fear that you may lose them. I would suggest slowly, when it feels okay to do so, asking friends one-to-one if they'd be up for a conversation about what the friendship needs to do in order to be free enough and safe enough for both of you to bring yourselves fully. If people aren't up for that, or if those conversations go badly, then focusing time and energy on cultivating friendships where you feel more seen and secure, is a good idea. It's fine for this process to take a while though, and to get some therapeutic support if you find that kind of communication and boundary-setting hard, as many of us do.

Are friendships with other queer people easier? Should we be gravitating towards them?

One tough thing for bi people – certainly in the past – has been the fact that many have had these experiences with straight friends and have then turned to the gay community for friendship and support. Sadly many lesbians and gay men have struggled just as much – if not more so – with bi folks as cishet people have. This is called double discrimination and can be really devastating for people who then feel they don't belong anywhere.

The same kinds of issue around recloseting, casual biphobia, mental health struggles, and relationship abuse, have played out for bi people in gay communities as much as they have in straight ones. Still many older bi folks in relationships with gay or lesbian identified people do not feel able to be out as bi.

There's a history in gay communities of bi people being seen as 'muddying the water' in the campaign for gay rights, or of having privileges that lesbian and gay people don't have, or of being untrustworthy and likely to return to the straight community at some stage.

For these reasons, bi communities have been extremely important to many bi people, and it can still be great to tap into bi-specific events and spaces on or off-line. Check out [Bi Pride](#), [The Bisexual Index](#), [Bi Community News](#), [Bis of colour](#), [BiCon](#), [Biscuit](#), and more in the UK.

However, in younger gay and queer communities there is often far more openness to bi and pan folks than there has been in the past, so it may well be that – if you are younger – the turn towards queer community is a much more positive one, and that you will find many other people there who identify in similar ways to you.

It's certainly very helpful indeed to have friendships with people who mirror your sexuality back to you accurately, who celebrate all your relationships, and who offer you support. However, it's worth being aware that no community is perfect, and most have some implicit norms about how people are expected to be and behave.

You are 'bi/pan/queer enough' whether or not you fit the ways of being bi, pan or queer that you see around you in your community. You may well find it's useful to join some groups – or find some friends – specific to your intersections, if you don't feel well reflected in the wider bi/pan/queer community. For example there are great [QTIPOC](#) groups, events, and helplines in many places.

The points made earlier about consensual relating are important for everyone to take seriously, and not something you can just assume to be the case in communities where people seem to be more like you. It can be the case that people surprise you, and those who are most supportive and celebratory are not always those in your specific community. For example, people who have experienced other forms of difference and oppression in their lives can sometimes be great friends or allies, and those committed to consensual relating without sharing an identity with you, can be a better bet than those who are more similar, but are not aware around consent.

Queer Issues

Born this way? Thoughts on the gay gene

September 2014

In their August issue, [DIVA magazine](#) included a great article by [Louise Carolin](#) about recent questioning of the idea that being gay is 'all in the genes'. This followed a [debate](#) on the matter that DIVA were involved with back in July. Louise interviewed me for the article but I thought I'd include the full interview here because it goes into a bit more depth. You can read more about these ideas in my book [The Psychology of Sex](#).

Why is the notion that genetics might be responsible for our sexual orientations so popular with some LGBTQ people?

I think a big part of the reason is that wider culture tends to regard things that are genetic, or biological in any way, as more real. The idea that we are 'born gay' and that it is in our genes is tempting because it contradicts the homophobic notion that people choose to be gay, or are socialised into it, and could (and should) therefore be otherwise. Gay rights activism has often been based on trying to prove that lesbian and gay people are just as legitimate as heterosexual people and therefore deserving of equal treatment. So you can see why the idea that being gay is genetic might be popular.

However there are some big problems with this approach:

1. It buys into the idea that things that are 'natural' are more legitimate than things that are chosen or social. That presents a problem, for example, for those feminists who chose to be lesbian as a political point, or for anybody whose experience of being gay is not something they've always known from as young as they can remember.

2. We know that sexuality – like most aspects of human experience – is both fluid (changing over time) and *biopsychosocial*. That means that our sexualities are the result of an array of biological, psychological and social factors, all mixed together in a complex way. There aren't single genes for even very simple things like height or eye colour, so it is very unlikely that there would be for sexuality. Also epigenetics shows us that genes interact with our environment: life experiences can determine whether genes are 'switched off' or 'switched on'. It may well be that our genetic make-up tilts us in certain directions in all kinds of ways, but as soon as we are born, our biology interacts with the culture we're born into – the social messages we receive, our experiences, and the ways we make sense of them – in all kinds of ways. This makes it impossible to tease out what is 'nature' and what is 'nurture'. It leaves each individual with a unique constellation that makes up their own particular sexuality.

3. The Surrey psychologist Peter Hegarty has found that believing in a biological basis of sexuality does not make people less homophobic, so arguing for LGBT rights on this basis is unlikely to work.

Being LGBT is not only okay if it is 'natural' or genetic to be so, it is okay regardless of why a person is LGBT, and to suggest otherwise is to buy into some pretty troubling assumptions.

Why does the focus on the search for the “gay gene” let down bi people in particular?

A lot of the people who argue for a gay gene do so on the basis that sexuality is binary (people are either gay or they are straight). For example the authors of the book *Born Gay* made exactly this point, and it is part of the reason that there has been a lot of research suggesting that bisexual people don't really exist (which even the researchers who conducted that research now dispute).

So the search for a gay gene is implicated in bisexual erasure, which we know to be a big part of why bisexual people experience even higher levels of mental health problems than lesbian and gay people.

An alternative model of human sexuality is that, as with most aspects of human experience, it is on more of a continuum. The Kinsey scale is one (albeit over-simplified) example of such a model.

The idea that sexuality and gender are diverse and fluid has a lot more room in it for bisexuality and for all the other people who don't experience themselves in a binary manner, or don't experience their sexuality as being all about the gender they're attracted to. Suddenly instead of there being a small percentage of LGBT people, we can see that people as a whole are gender and sexually diverse, and that at least a third of people experience their sexual and/or gender as somehow beyond the binary.

Might there be such thing as a “bi gene”? Would looking for that too make things more fair?

As with the gay gene it would be very unlikely that there was a single gene for bisexuality, and also given the biopsychosocial nature of sexuality, I would see it as rather problematic to just focus on the biological part. There's something political about all this research which focuses on genes and on brains (most of which is far more funded than other kinds of research). It seems to be based on the assumption that we need to prove that we are real in order to be treated fairly. And it is based on the assumption that we need to explain why people are gay or bisexual, in a way that we never do in relation to heterosexuality.

I'm not saying that we should never research the biological elements of human experience. It is certainly part of the picture. But we do need to consider why we focus on it to the exclusion of other elements.

Sexuality is diverse thing. We are attracted to all different kinds of people (not just on the basis of gender), we enjoy a wide variety of sexual practices, we take on different roles, we have different fantasies. Perhaps instead of focusing on how to explain one small aspect of human sexuality, we could expand out to capture the full diversity of it in a way that might really let people know that their sexuality was just as acceptable as anybody else's.

Same-sex Marriage: Opening Up and Closing Down

July 2013

This year I was invited to 10 Downing Street for a reception celebrating **the same-sex marriage act** which passed into UK law recently. I felt truly ambivalent about attending the event because I see both highly positive and very negative aspects to this change in the law. So here I want to offer some reflections about possibilities that this shift has the potential to open up, as well as what it risks closing down.

Opening up

Clearly the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act does something extremely important in legally accepting that relationships between two people of the same gender are as legitimate as those between two people of different genders. Whilst civil partnerships brought us some way towards this, marriage is the way in which our society currently recognises relationship commitment, so the cultural impact of this on people who love people of the same gender cannot be underestimated.

As David Cameron rightly remarked in his **Downing Street address**, the potential impact of this on people's everyday lives is immense. Whilst many lesbian, gay and bisexual people currently experience painful responses from family members when they **come out**, and even total exclusion from families, the message that same gender romantic relationships are as real and valuable as different gender ones may well help matters a great deal. Parents at such times often express concerns that they have lost the opportunity to see children reach the important social milestones in life such as getting married and having children, and clearly now this is not the case.

Along similar lines, the statistics on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools make **frightening reading**. As Cameron also suggested, it may well be the case that the knowledge that future relationships will be equally valued, whether they are with people of the same or different genders, will result in some decrease in this bullying culture, greater confidence on the part of teachers in challenging it, and an increase in the comfort in LGB&T people being out in schools, and in their neighbourhoods and workplaces.

When we look back over the last few decades, to the times when having same-gender attraction was regarded as a **psychiatric disorder**, and when it was not even allowed to be **discussed in schools**, this seems like a huge step forward which many **LGB&T organisations** could not even imagine until very recently.

Also, regarding my own particular area of activism and research – bisexuality – the Downing Street event marked an important step forward. Last year was the first year in which a bisexual organisation was invited to the number 10 LGB&T garden party (**Bi Community News**). This year, my own group, **BiUK**, was also invited along. As Jen Yockney from BCN

playfully pointed out, if the number of bisexual organisations included continues to double year on year then this will be a fantastic achievement for bisexual visibility!

More seriously, there have been real issues in the past with the lack of bisexual input into UK LGB&T policy, both nationally and locally. The last couple of years have seen a major shift in this, including regular meetings between UK bisexual organisations and the Government Equalities Office, and the inclusion of BiUK on the [National LGB&T partnership](#) (of the Department of Health), and the LGBT Chief Executives' Network.

The inclusion of bisexual groups at the Downing Street event, and the use of terms 'equal marriage' or 'same-sex marriage' in the act and by the Prime Minister, were important steps in the recognition that many bisexual people have same-gender relationships as well as lesbian and gay people. Given the previous [lack of visibility](#) of bisexual people and their relationships, and the potential [knock on impact](#) of this invisibility on their comfort with being open about their sexuality, and their mental health, this is also extremely important.

Closing down

However, there are several concerns following the same sex marriage act which need to be taken seriously. Broadly speaking these are the remaining issues facing LGB&T people which the act does not address, and the relationship and family issues which the focus on romantic/sexual relationships (whether same or different gender) does not cover.

In both areas there are legitimate concerns that the passing of this act will lead people to believe that all the work has been done and that we no longer need to fund, research, and address LGB&T issues (on the one hand) or relationship issues (on the other).

LGB&T Equality

The saddest moment for me yesterday occurred in David Cameron's speech when he commented that Britain was now "[the best place to be gay, lesbian or transgender anywhere in Europe](#)". UK bisexual groups have fought hard for many years for recognition that bisexuality is a vital part of the LGB&T grouping and that bisexual people face many bi-specific issues, as well as having shared experiences with lesbian gay and trans* people (and of course many people are both bi and trans*). It was hard to hear the B left out of the LGB&T by our Prime Minister.

There is a strange sense sometimes that there is only space for one more spot in the acronym (after L & G) and that bisexuality and trans* have to fight for that place. Many times T is left off by organisations which only speak for LGB people, despite the fact that there are large overlaps in the agendas of these communities, and the involvement of trans* people in the gay rights movement from its early days. Other times people assume that bisexuality is covered by 'lesbian and gay', and so they only need to add the T (as in yesterday's speech and in references to '[homophobia and transphobia](#)', which miss out biphobia).

I realise that this may seem like a picky point to those who are not as immersed in bisexual politics as I am. The reason that it is important to include the B is that our culture tends to regard sexuality as an either/or thing: either you are gay or you are straight. The inclusion of bisexuality in the LGB&T acronym means recognising that some people are attracted to, and form relationships with, more than one gender. Statistics on how many people this covers range from 3% to 20% so it is a significant grouping. When the B is left out this, it perpetuates commonly held assumptions that bisexuality is somehow a questionable identity ('just a phase' or 'a confusion'), or that it doesn't exist at all. This makes everyday life tough for bisexual people, who may have to come out multiple times due to people disbelieving them. It also means that we very rarely see depictions of bisexual people in the media. And the knock on effect is that many bisexual people don't feel confident about their identity or experience, and may not have access to any support from those around them. We know that being invisible or constantly doubted and disbelieved by those around you takes a major toll on mental health and other aspects of well-being. Perhaps a useful thought experiment is to imagine what it would be like if you had to repeatedly remind people that you were straight after they kept assuming you were gay, or if – as a gay man – you had to access services that were labelled as for 'lesbian, bisexual and trans*' people.

The issues around trans* inclusion in the same-sex marriage act are perhaps even more significant than those around bisexual inclusion. An **amendment to the act** means that married trans* people applying for a gender recognition certificate will now require the **consent of their spouse** in order to receive this. There is a real danger that this sends a message that being trans* is not really legitimate, and that transitioning implies a massive change in one's relationship, which it does not for many people. Given the level of transphobia in our culture, we could really do with changes that make trans* people more confident that transitioning is a totally acceptable thing to do, and that enable the significant people in their lives to be more supportive of them in doing this (whether or not they decide to remain in the same kind of relationship together).

Finally, on this note, there is a fear amongst many LGB&T people and groups that same-sex marriage will be regarded as the end point in the journey towards LGB&T equality: that it will be assumed that now we have achieved this there is nothing else to do. People are worried that funding will be withdrawn from LGB&T organisations or that remaining issues will be dismissed. Of course there are still many problems facing LGB&T people which are not addressed by same-sex marriage (such as **hate crimes**, **homelessness**, and specific health issues facing **older LGB&T people** and **black and minority ethnic LGB&T people** to name just a few). And there are the specific remaining problems of **biphobia** and **transphobia** eluded to above. Globally, of course, we are reminded that progress towards equal rights can easily be reversed, as in **Russia** at the moment. It was concerning that the presentations by both David Cameron and Ben Summerskill at Downing Street yesterday seemed to suggest that same-sex marriage meant that we had achieved total equality around sexuality.

Valuing relationships

My other concern about the same-sex marriage act is that, whilst it gives a strong message that same gender and other gender relationships are equally valid, it also reinforces the idea

that romantic and sexual relationships are more valid than any other kind, given that these are the only kind that are legally recognised and celebrating in front of friends and family.

In his speech, Cameron outlined his view that relationship commitment is the best basis for both families and for society as a whole. I agree with him that it is important for humans to commit to each other in all kinds of ways. For example there is the commitment that parents and other people in their lives make to care for children, the commitment of adults who support other adults in their lives in all kinds of ways, and the commitment that those of us who work together make to mutual endeavors and to help each other to achieve our goals.

However, I'm not convinced that commitments between romantic/sexual partners should be regarded as the most important kind of commitment, or the only legitimate basis of families and societies. This is for two reasons: first, this kind of pressure on relationships is actually often damaging rather than helpful; and secondly, there are other kinds of relationships which may be equally valuable for both families and for society as a whole.

To take the first point, the pressures that we currently have on romantic/sexual love to provide us with all our needs and to last forever (many of which are underlined in the common marriage vows), are – I think – to a large degree responsible both for people remaining in very painful and damaging relationships, and for people having non-amicable and even devastating break-ups. Each of these situations is not only hard on the two people involved, but also very troubling for those around them (including any children they may have as well as other family, and friends and colleagues who may be called upon to ignore the suffering of their friend or to 'pick a side' in a separation).

I would like to see romantic and sexual relationship bonds become more flexible such that it was acknowledged that a 'successful' relationship can be one which lasts a lifetime, but equally one where people recognise when it has run its course. Also it would be great if the multiple roles that people have in each others' lives could be equally valued such that it was easier for people to remain co-parents, close cohabiting friends, or engaged in mutual work projects, for example, even if a relationship has ceased to be sexual or romantic, or if other sexual or romantic relationships have been forged.

To me this would seem to fit with some of the current government's ideas about 'big society'. When we are constantly focused on our romantic/sexual relationships – because we are desperate to find one, because we are totally caught up in one, or because they have become painful and hard – we are very turned in towards our internal worlds and our individual lives. If there was less pressure on such relationships, and more of a sense that all the relationships in our lives were valuable, people might find more time and energy to focus outwards on their wider communities, and to connect with diverse people in their lives rather than just those who were seen as 'family' or 'like them'.

Such a perspective might, for example, involve a return to considering the potential of extended family networks where multiple adults are involved in any child-rearing or support of other adults which needs to happen. It might involve people making more flexible commitments in (all) their relationships which recognise how such relationships can – and do

– change over time. Societally it might be about finding ways of celebrating all kinds of relationships (not just romantic/sexual ones), of defining success in other ways than longevity, and of reconsidering the promises that we make on formal occasions like weddings. As with many issues we're currently facing, a good starting point for this might well be a form of relationship education which values all the relationships children currently have – and may have in the future – and considers, with them, how they might engage with these in mutual, kind, and ethical ways.

Read more:

These latter ideas are explored, in much more detail, in the commitment chapter of [Rewriting the Rules](#). For more about bisexuality, see [BiUK](#), [BCN](#) or [The Bisexual Index](#).

Will gay rights and feminist movements please return to your (binary) assumptions

June 2014

Pride season is upon us and I've been struck by the annual tension that exists across various Pride events around the B and T parts of the LGBT acronym (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans). I'll explore this in the post below, and you can read more about it in my books [Queer: A Graphic History](#), and [The Psychology of Sex](#), and my free resource [Gender, Sexual and Relationship Diversity](#).

Two friends attended EuroPride to be on a [panel about bisexuality](#). They [reported back](#) how they were faced with the usual stereotypes about 'making your mind up' and scepticism about the existence of bisexuality. Another friend attended a Pride London event where the words 'gay' and 'homophobia' were used throughout by speakers, despite Pride London claiming to be an [LGBT+ event](#).

Other friends attended the [London DykeMarch](#), the week before London Pride, and were met with a protest by a group of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists ([TERFs](#)) who shouted transphobic abuse at one of the speakers. The speaker in question has written about this [here](#). Whilst we may well have reached a [transgender tipping point](#) – and media representation has certainly improved dramatically in the last few years – trans remains a serious point of contention in some feminist movements, and there is also a good deal of [scepticism around non-binary genders](#) now that these are receiving media attention.

I think that this trouble around bisexuality for gay/LGBT+ movements, and around trans and non-binary genders for feminist movements, stems from the same place. Recognising this provides a way forward that will not only be more inclusive for B and T people, but will be better for everybody, if we're brave enough to do it.

The roots of feminist and gay rights movements

Very broadly speaking, feminist and gay rights movements emerged in similar ways.

With feminism, the world in which it emerged said that there were men and women, and that women were inferior to men. Feminism therefore began to work to get women treated equally to men.

With gay rights, the world in which it emerged said that there were straight people and gay people, and that gay people were inferior to straight people. Gay rights movements therefore began to work to get gay people treated equally to straight people.*

The problem is that while early feminist and gay rights movements rightly challenged the second part of what the world around them said about gender and sexuality (the inferiority

bit), they generally accepted the first part (that everybody could be divided into the binaries of men and women, gay and straight). They didn't realise that the first part was also an intrinsic part of the **patriarchal** and/or **heteronormative** systems that they were trying to challenge.

Of course many feminists and LGBT+ rights movements since then have noticed – and corrected – this error (**intersectional feminism** and **queer activism** being just two examples). However many mainstream feminist and LGBT/T rights organisations and campaigners retain those underlying binary assumptions. And it is generally their voices that get heard.

Retaining binary assumptions

I think that this explains why, when I talk to people from many LGBT/T organisations and media outlets, they argue that they need to keep working to get gay and lesbian people accepted, and homophobia eradicated. Only once that has happened can they start to address bisexual people and biphobia (**despite the fact that there are probably more bisexual people than LG people, and research suggests that they suffer from even higher rates of mental health problems**). This results in the strange situation whereby some campaigners who know lots of bisexual activists, and who even experience sexuality in non-binary ways themselves, still default to talking about 'gay' people and 'homophobia'. The concern is that bisexuality might 'muddy the water' because of the binary assumptions that their campaigns are based on. They don't seem to consider the possibility that it might point the way to an alternative model of sexuality which could be more – rather than less – palatable to the people whose opinions they are trying to change.

The acceptance of binary assumptions also explains why some feminists are so troubled by trans and non-binary genders. The basis of everything they've worked for has been that there are two categories of people – men and women – with one oppressing the other. It therefore feels important that those categories are stable (that people remain in the gender they were assigned at birth), and that those categories are easily readable off a person's general appearance and genitals. If this is not the case, then people worry that campaigns based around women's experience, or what men do, might be called into question, as well as there being difficulties in creating safe spaces for women.

Thinking about it this way helps us to understand why the LGBT+ movement often looks like a **GGGG movement**, and why some radical and liberal feminists struggle with trans and non-binary genders. There is a real, profound, and understandable fear of engaging with fluid and non-binary sexualities, and with genders that don't map onto those assigned at birth, or which are beyond the binary. The fear is that – given that the whole movement has been based on a binary assumption – any questioning of that assumption will somehow challenge, or even invalidate, everything that has been done.

But we have to return to those assumptions

However, we do have to return to those assumptions, and not just because of the exclusions of B and T people.

We have to return to them because they are wrong: because **gender** and **sexuality** simply do not work like that. And we have to return to them because those assumptions are an intrinsic part of the very patriarchal and heteronormative systems that we are trying to change. We won't be able to change these systems if we accept a major part of what they are based on. Perhaps the very reason that we seem to keep stalling on achieving the eradication of sexism and homophobia, is because we are working from a starting point which enables those very things.

An alternative: Gender and sexual diversity (GSD)

So what alternative am I – and many others – proposing? It is this: that we start talking about gender and sexual diversity (GSD) rather than about men and women, straight and gay.

To give one example, current campaigns encourage school education to include LG(B) people and to empower girls and raise boys' awareness of sexism. We could achieve these same goals – and many more – through a broader education about gender and sexual diversity.

For example, education about the range of sexual experiences (including attraction to different genders, enjoyment of different practices, and having different levels of sexual desire) could benefit not just young people who aren't heterosexual. It could also help all young people to understand that there are (often safer) alternatives to penis-in-vagina sex, and that is okay to want sex and to not want sex, and to have all kinds of desires. This could enable them to communicate more openly and consensually about sex, and to respect it when they find that other people have different types and levels of sexual interest to themselves.

Education about diverse genders could not only benefit trans and non-binary young people, enabling them to find ways of making sense of their experience and articulating it to others. It could also help everyone to understand the ways in which narrow gender roles restrict their possibilities, and help them to find ways of experiencing and expressing their genders that don't limit them (whatever their gender) or constrain others. Such an approach would also lend itself to exploring how sexuality and gender intersect with other aspects of experience (e.g. race, class, ethnicity, age, and religion), and how oppressive systems function across all of these areas.

Education is just one example. A GSD approach also has a great deal of value in terms of how we address gender and sexuality in relation to health, crime, the workplace, and media representations. And it is particularly appropriate in relation to international campaigns where we are often working with cultures who do not understand gender or sexuality in a binary manner anyway (otherwise attempts at feminist and LGBT+ rights interventions risk

enforcing compliance with a western understanding of these things in a very problematic way).

Conclusions

It is understandable that some feminists and LGBT campaigners are fearful of returning to the underlying assumptions of their movements and changing them. This would involve challenging how they've been doing things in some radical ways, and it is really hard not to be invested in the ways we've been seeing the world and fighting for our rights for so long.

But I think there is a real possibility that, far from undermining our movements, such an approach could give them more strength and power than they've ever had before. Research suggests that between one and ten percent of people identify as LGBT (depending on which study you read), and probably similar numbers identify as a feminist. However, **well over a third of people** experience attraction to more than one gender, or find that their attraction is not tied to a person's gender but is about other things, or don't experience sexual attraction at all. **Studies of young people** are finding that many of them are using terms other than straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual to identify their sexuality. Similarly **over a third of people** feel to some extent like the 'other' gender to the one they are seen as being, or as being 'both' genders, or as being neither. And young people are using a **wide variety of terms** to capture their gender experience.

If we come from a starting point of gender and sexual diversity, we open up our movements to all of these folk as well as to those who identify explicitly as LGBT or as feminist. With numbers like that we could really change the world.

Find out more...

In my books ***Queer: A Graphic History***, and ***The Psychology of Sex***, and my free resource ***Gender, Sexual and Relationship Diversity***.

* Thanks to several people for reminding me that this is an over-simplification. Of course it was only in a specific, western, context that gender and sexuality were viewed in this way (not across the whole world – a vital point I return to later in the post), and even there this binary thinking was a relatively new thing, with gender and sexuality having been understood in quite different ways in the past. Also right at the start of the gay movement, the term 'gay' was used more widely to refer to same-sex attraction and there was more of a sense of sexuality being on a continuum, thanks to **Kinsey's** research in this area amongst other things. This only evolved into the widespread idea (in the gay community) that there was something inherent and fixed about being gay around the late 70s and early 80s (influencing the world in which the current wave of gay/LGBT+ campaigners grew up).

Queer loneliness and friendship

August 2019

I recently did an interview for [this great piece](#) on queer loneliness, and how to find LGBTQ+ friends. It was a nice one for me because I did my PhD on loneliness many years back. It felt good to return to the topic now that I'm leaving academia. You can read the full interview below...

Why is loneliness is so prevalent in LGBTQ+ communities?

One initial reason is that LGBTQ+ people are less likely than straight and cisgender people to have the kind of 'built in' relationships that come from the family you grew up in, school or college friends, or even current colleagues. Of course these days many do, but still many become estranged or distant from old family and friends who struggle with their gender and sexuality. Others just don't feel really comfortable hanging out with people whose assumptions and conversations are always focused around a heteronormative life (e.g. fancying the 'opposite sex', hanging out with the 'same sex', a social life that is linked to stereotypes of masculinity or femininity in particular ways, marrying, having children, etc.) So LGBTQ+ people are more likely to have to forge friendships in later life, which is often more challenging.

Many LGBTQ+ people who live outside of big cities are lonely because of the difficulty finding other LGBTQ+ people in their lives and locations. Within big cities, and other places where there are higher numbers of LGBTQ+ people, loneliness can still be an issue because the visible LGBTQ+ community revolves around specific kinds of socialising which don't work for everyone, and aren't always compatible with meeting like-minded people or forging deeper relationships: like pubs, clubs and parties, or meeting people on sex/dating apps. These can be tricky if you're not a drinker; if noise, mobility or staying up late are difficult for you; or if you're not looking for erotic/romantic connections.

It's also worth remembering that loneliness is not just a matter of being alone. Many in LGBTQ+ communities are lonely because they're able to find people for sexual connections but not for friendship or companionship, or because they have people to socialise with, but not close friends. For some, they have straight friends and colleagues, but it is the lack of LGBTQ+ people which is the issue. For others, they have found a partner, but don't have friendship or support outside of that person – which can put pressure on one relationship to meet too many different needs.

What toll can this, and having no queer friends, have on your mental health?

Huge. Loneliness has been linked to worse mental and physical health in study after study. Social support and close relationships are some of the biggest buffers against both physical health problems and mental health struggles.

Why is having queer friends as well as straight friends so important?

Queer friends are important because – as mentioned – a lot of friendship socialising, and one-to-one bonding, still tends to revolve around doing stereotypically masculine/feminine things which exclude many queer people (e.g. hen and stag dos, certain sports or drinking, spas and shopping). Also conversation is often around dating, relationships, and meeting certain points in an assumed life trajectory (marriage, kids, etc.) which don't apply to all queer people. It takes a toll to always be the person who is not fitting, who has to choose to point out that this doesn't apply to them, or to go along with it even though it doesn't feel comfortable or relevant.

Another important thing for mental health is being accurately mirrored by the people around you – particularly the close people. Queer people often find that straight and cisgender friends don't do this as well as queer ones – although, of course, some do. For example it's important to feel that friends accurately read in your gender, get your relationships and how they work, and see beyond stereotypes of queerness. It's vital that they're not always asking ignorant, intrusive questions, making jokes, or using inaccurate language.

In a culture which assumes heterosexuality and cisgender-ness unless a person 'comes out' as otherwise, queer friendships can enable queer people to breathe easier and have a sense of just being themselves. However, of course, being inaccurately mirrored, or having assumptions made, can also happen in queer spaces or with queer friends. For example, many bi people still experience gay friends re-closeting them or pressuring them to 'pick a side'. Most queer people of colour experience racism, ignorance, and fetishisation from white queer friends. And trans people certainly do not find all queer people friendly **at the moment**.

And how can you take care of yourself in this situation?

Sadly our culture doesn't place enough value on friendship. Even in queer communities the expectation is generally that our relationship focus will be on finding a partner and/or having sexual connections. However, as we see from the sadly high levels of abusive relationships in queer community, partnership is not always a great model for combating loneliness, and can even contribute to it, especially if people fear losing their community in a break-up, or if they don't have other close relationships to turn to when things get hard. Similarly sexual connections alone don't provide the support and intimacy we generally need. So I'd strongly recommend intentionally cultivating some close friendships and a support network of people around you, even over-and-above finding romantic or sexual connections.

Some good pointers for doing this include finding spaces where people who are likely to share your values and interests hang out. Meet-up groups or online communities can be great for this, as can meeting the friends of existing friends if you have some already. Then approaching people one-to-one if you feel a sense of connection in these places is a good way to go: consensually checking out whether they fancy meeting up or chatting online one-to-one.

It's a great idea to build friendships slowly so you can really get a sense of whether it's a good fit, casting your net wide and meet many people before focusing on a few where you feel mutuality, kindness, and connection. Then it's about ensuring that you put the time and energy into cultivating those close relationships.

[Justin Hancock](#) and I did a podcast about [making and developing friendships](#). Our zine [Make Your Own Relationship User Guide](#) helps you think through these things for yourself. My book [Rewriting the Rules](#) also has pointers for how we might value friendship love as much as other kinds.

Further Sexualities

BDSM: What do we know?

July 2014

Here's an interview about BDSM. If you want to find out more check out the links at the end of the post to my [books](#), [zines](#), and [podcast](#) on the topic.

Can you tell me a bit about your background and your past research into BDSM practices?

I'm a senior lecturer in psychology at the Open University and I've been studying BDSM and other sexualities for around ten years now. In 2007 Darren Langdridge and I published a book called *Safe, Sane and Consensual* (Palgrave, 2007) which brought together many of the main people researching BDSM at the time.

What drew you to study this subject?

I'm generally interested in sexualities and relationships that fall outside the mainstream and what people in general might be able to learn from those who do things differently.

I also work as a sex and relationship therapist and we often find that people with sexual difficulties find it difficult to communicate about what they like sexually. People in the BDSM world have come up with lots of ways of communicating about what they do which can be helpful for everyone (for example, 'yes, no, maybe' lists of what they'd like to do; ways of negotiating sexual consent, and safewords for when they want to stop).

Can you tell me overall what kind of conclusions you drew from your research into this area? What were the main findings?

I've studied several aspects of BDSM. Perhaps my main finding was about diversity. People who are unfamiliar with BDSM often assume that it involves a small range of things and that everyone does it for the same reason. For example there is a common stereotype of high-powered businessmen going to a leather-clad dominatrix to be whipped in order to relieve the pressure of their job. I found that BDSM includes many different practices and that people do it for many different reasons.

For example, BDSM can include: physical sensations (from feathers to candlewax to floggers), bondage (from handcuffs to rope to intricate ribbons), domination and submission (somebody waiting on somebody else, somebody ordering another person around), discipline (spanking, telling off, etc.), dressing up, and role-play (cops, pirates, medical, school, etc.). All these things can happen separately or in combination.

For some BDSM can be a way of giving up control and letting go, for others it is a fun, playful activity. It can mean taking on a different role and being somebody else for a while, it can be a form of relaxation, or it can be a way of showing strength and how much you are capable of enduring. It can help some to explore something that scares them (pain or bullying), it can be a way of building intimacy with another person, or it can provide a reason for being looked after and cared for afterwards. It could mean many of these things even for the same person, or on different occasions.

From what you've seen, do you think the BDSM community around the world (and the number of people interested in BDSM and practising it) has grown in the last five years or so?

Definitely.

If so, why do you think more people are becoming interested in BDSM?

I think that the *50 Shades of Grey* phenomenon has been vital in this. It has brought BDSM into the mainstream and enabled a lot more people to be open about their interest and to bring these kinds of practices into their sex lives. I don't think it is so much that more people are interested who weren't before. Surveys have always found high numbers of people to have fantasies about being tied up, spanked etc. (often over 50% of people for these common activities). It is more that people now feel more able to be open about it.

How is BDSM perceived by the public do you think, and has this perception changed recently? If so, due to what?

In the past it has been very stigmatised. I think the perception has changed somewhat due to things like *50 Shades*, and the increasing popularity of BDSM equipment in mainstream sex shops, etc. Lots of people now feel that they should include some 'spicy sex' in their sex life. However they still often draw a line between what they do (e.g. fluffy handcuffs and a little role-play) and 'real' BDSM which can still be ridiculed and distrusted. This is a shame as I think there's actually a lot to learn from people and communities who have been practicing BDSM for years.

How would you explain the benefits (both sexual and psychological) of BDSM to an outsider? What is it about BDSM that attracts people, and how does it differ from other sexual practices?

Like I said before there are many different reasons that people do BDSM. Some simply find it fun or a turn-on. For other it has deeper benefits. For example, some people talk about the trust and intimacy involved with BDSM partners, or how it helps them reach a spiritual state. Some feel that it helps them relax, or that it enables them to get over difficult times in their life.

I think the main sexual benefit is that it can get people talking about what they enjoy sexually. With mainstream sex people often assume that they know what each other wants automatically and that causes many problems. With BDSM the assumption is that you need to negotiate it first.

Does BDSM have to be about sex, or is it more about connection? Is sex usually involved, or only sometimes?

Only sometimes. For some people BDSM is about sex and there are orgasms involved. For other people there might be a different kind of climax (of sensation or emotion, for example), or no climax at all. For some, BDSM is actually something more like a leisure activity, a sport, an art form, or a spiritual practice, than what we usually think of as sex.

What are some popular misconceptions about people who participate in BDSM?

There is still often a view that people who are into BDSM might be dangerous or psychologically disturbed in some way. The evidence actually shows that there is no basis to this stereotype and that people into BDSM are no more likely than anybody else to be criminal or abusive or to suffer from mental illness.

What about this idea that you have to be damaged in some way to like it: do you think that's true?

50 Shades of Grey included the common myth that people who are into BDSM have been abused as children. Again there is no evidence that this is any more common than in the general population.

The book also, perhaps, suggested that men are more likely to be dominant and women submissive. Actually the evidence is that people of all genders can be dominant, submissive or switches (enjoying dominating and submitting).

From a psychological point of view, how does BDSM affect people? Are there dangers?

As with everything there can be risks so it is important that people know what they are doing both physically and psychologically. My main worry is that, if BDSM continues to be stigmatised, people will still find it difficult to be open about it and then they are more likely to do it without education or the support of more experienced people. That is when things are more likely to go wrong. I'd recommend that people read some of the books on the topic (by people like Dossie Easton and Tristan Taormino) so that they know what the potential risks are.

What is it about a person's psychology that allows them to feel pleasure or excitement from physical pain? Is a certain amount of danger in life a need of human beings?

Well first of all, as I said before, there isn't always physical pain involved. Lots of BDSM involves other things than sensation, and even sensation play isn't always painful. Research suggests that much of the pain we experience is down to the anxiety about the pain. Remove the anxiety and the pain is much lower (that is why anti-anxiety drugs can be used to operate on people if anaesthetics are not available). So for people who are sexually excited about pain the sensations are likely to feel very different than for people who are scared by it.

I think that good analogies are to long-distance runners, rock-climbers, or other sports people. They also take part in activities which can be very painful, but because they are excited by what they are doing or committed to enduring it, the experience is very different. I'm not a neuroscientist, so can't comment on exactly how this works on a brain level, but I imagine that we might see similar chemicals (such as endorphins) involved in BDSM as we do in sporting activities.

Is it dangerous to test these boundaries?

Not if people know what they are doing. And, again, it is important to remember that a lot of BDSM play is not about testing boundaries at all. For those who do like to test their boundaries of endurance through BDSM it can be a fulfilling experience, as it can be for sportspeople.

What about the *50 Shades of Grey* phenomenon? Is it good that more people know about BDSM through that, or does it paint a very misguided view of BDSM by perpetuating that only those who are damaged in some way will enjoy it?

As I've said here I think that *50 Shades* has been both a positive and a negative thing. It has opened up the possibility of BDSM for lots of people who hadn't felt able to consider it before, and has got people talking about BDSM and sex more broadly. At the same time it does perpetuate some problematic stereotypes, so I would like to see a more diverse range of books about BDSM (including different practices, gender combinations, and scenarios) so that people can get a sense of the wide range of activities and motivations involved.

Sapiosexuality

August 2020

I was recently interviewed about sapiosexuality for a Cosmo article on the topic. You can read that article [here](#), and my full interview below.

What is sapiosexuality?

Sapiosexual means being erotically, romantically or otherwise attracted to – or aroused by – intelligence.

Like all sexual identity terms – and pretty much everything else really – it's useful to ask what the concept of sapiosexuality opens up and what it closes down, assuming that it probably does both.

The more binary questions which often get asked about sapiosexuality, such as whether it is 'real' or not, whether it is good or bad, or whether it is down to 'nature or nurture' are less helpful. They also echo some of the problematic debates which often happen around sexuality more broadly.

What does sapiosexuality open up?

Along with other relatively recent sexuality and relationship community terms like demisexual, aromantic, pansexual, skoliosexual, biromantic, heteroflexible, fluid, autosexual, etc., the idea of sapiosexuality is most useful in the way it alerts us to the huge cultural misunderstandings we've been labouring under about how sexuality works.

For the last century or so it has commonly been assumed in the west that people *are* a certain sexuality, that that sexuality is based entirely on the gender they are attracted to, that it is binary (gay or straight, with straight being seen as more 'normal' or 'natural'), and that they were 'born that way' and it must remain the same throughout their lives.

Academic thought and scientific research findings now challenge all of these assumptions. Sari Van Anders brings the most recent research together in her [Sexual Configurations Theory](#). This points out, among other things, that:

- People's attractions and desires can vary between who they are attracted to erotically and who they are attracted to emotionally or romantically.
- Desires can also vary between what they like solo, and what they like with other people.
- Gender-of-attraction is one dimension of sexuality, which can be more or less relevant for different people, but even that is multifaceted. For example, does being attracted to

masculinity mean that you fancy 'male bodies', people who identify as men, and/or stereotypically masculine features on a person of any gender?

- There are many other dimensions of sexuality including how much attraction/desire you experience, what other features of people – like intelligence, appearance, personality – you find attractive, what kinds of roles or power dynamics you enjoy in sex/relationships, what kind of sensations give you pleasure, and much more.
- All of these things have been found to be fluid, or changeable over time, and for some people they change more than others.

Our previous cultural understanding of sexuality has limited people massively.

- It has meant that those who experience high or low attraction or desire have feared there is something wrong with them or tried to conform to the norm with painful results.
- It has meant that many gay people have remained closeted and bi people felt pressured to 'pick a side'.
- It has meant that, as people's sexualities have changed over time, they've felt forced to deny that that is happening and to remain in relationships, identities, and communities that no longer work for them.
- It has meant that people have assumed that they must get their emotional and sexual needs met by the same person, and struggled when – as [Esther Perel](#) puts it – they've realised that it's difficult – if not impossible – to get warmth and heat in the same relationship.

So sapiosexuality helpfully opens up the idea that there may be more to sexuality than the gender we're attracted to, and that other features of a person may be as – if not more – important than gender.

What does sapiosexuality close down?

Sapiosexuality has rightly been criticised by people in the LGBTQ+ community, as have some of the other recent sexual and relationship categories which have emerged.

Lack of oppression

One reason for these criticisms is that being LGBT or Q carries with it the huge weight of a history of cultural oppression. This includes many – in their lifetimes – having been criminalised, pathologised, or subject to violent physical or emotional attack because of their sexuality.

It is still unlikely, if you are an LGBTQ person, that you will not have been discriminated for your sexuality/gender, and you will certainly have lived through media debates about your existence, as well as lack of positive media representation of people like you. You will know that around the world there are still many countries where you could be at risk of imprisonment or the death penalty.

None of these things are true for being sapiosexual, unless the way your sapiosexuality works is that you are attracted to intelligence regardless of the gender of a person. If that is the case you may well be subject to the kind of erasure, stigma, and double discrimination (from both straight and gay communities) experienced by many **bisexual and pansexual people**, which is the reason their rates of mental health problems are even greater than those of lesbian and gay people.

Thinking critically about 'attractiveness'

However, another criticism of sapiosexuality is that most people who claim this label are not saying they are attracted to intelligence regardless of gender. For example there are men who say they are sapiosexual, but coincidentally all of the people whose intelligence they are attracted to seem to be young women who conform to cultural ideals of attractiveness. In such cases it seems disingenuous to claim a 'minority' label (sapiosexual) when really the key feature of your sexuality is still that you are heterosexual, indeed **heteronormative**.

Another major issue with sapiosexuality is the focus on intelligence. We need to ask some important questions about what we mean by intelligence here: what kinds of intelligence are valued in our culture, and how that maps onto our attractions if we say we are sapiosexual.

A useful analogy here is to physical appearance. People often say – on dating apps and the like – that they are attracted to a certain physical appearance (e.g. youthful, pale, slim, toned, non-disabled, smooth-skinned). Far from coincidentally this is the appearance that wider culture and mainstream media deem to be attractive, which it is shot through with racist, ageist, ableist, and fatphobic assumptions about what is and is not attractive.

Intelligence normativity

In a similar way, the kind of intelligence deemed attractive by sapiosexual people may well be what we have been taught by our particular culture to regard as smart (e.g. rational, sharp, quick, intellectual – based on knowledge of western science and philosophy).

It is worth thinking critically about who deems this to be 'intelligent', who is excluded from being seen as attractive by such assumptions, and what other forms of intelligence we may be missing with such a narrow definition.

For example, the concept of neurodiversity helps us to see that there are a vast range of cognitive capacities, and that all of us will be stronger on some than others, as well as quicker or slower in different areas.

Concepts of emotional and relational intelligence help us to broaden out what's regarded as valuable intelligence to have.

Also diverse cultures value diverse forms of knowledge and wisdom, such as spiritual, embodied, ecological, and social forms.

To get more political, it is certainly worth questioning just how intelligent forms of intelligence are which are valued in the countries which have the highest rates of social injustice, have lost most people to the global pandemic, and are most culpable in the global climate crisis.

Conclusions

A more complex understanding of how sexuality operates – like that offered by Sari Van Anders – alerts us to the fact that sexuality is biopsychosocial. It can, and does, change over time. It is certainly influenced by what our culture values, what media and communities we engage with, and whether we relate to all of that critically or not.

It is worth thinking carefully about how our attractions and desires develop, how we articulate them to others, and which ones we want to act upon – and in what ways. We need to embrace the diversity of human sexuality – rather than trying to constrain it to certain normative assumptions – and we need to put consent and ethics at the heart of how we engage with our sexuality and that of others.

Flashing

October 2012

I recently read [Kate Gould](#)'s fascinating little book [Exposing Phallacy](#), all about flashing in contemporary culture. Kate set out to understand the experience of flashing from all sides: spending time with flashers on online forums and chat rooms, as well as speaking to people who've been flashed about their responses, considering the gendered dynamics of flashing (comparing women and men who flash), and exploring continua of exhibitionism. Here I will briefly summarise some of the main points of the book before focusing on how therapists today might work with people who find themselves wanting to flash.

Content note: This post contains exploration of flashing behaviour, and also reflections on how people might deal with any desires for non-consensual sexual activity, such as flashing.

Exposing Phallacy

Broadly speaking, Kate concludes that women who flash do so to be validated by men as sexy, desirable beings. The kind of infantilisation and sexualisation of women that occurs in other contexts is apparent here and flashing generally involves displaying a shaved vulva under a skirt in a 'safe' context where escape is possible (such as on a bike or a crowded beach). For men, Kate concludes, flashing is an aggressive act involving the invasion of women's space and an insistence of the man's right to be there; gratification is obtained from the fact that the penis commands a response, whatever that is. It seems that virtually all the flashers that Kate came across online focused on flashing at the 'opposite sex', and there was also no mention of anybody outside of the gender binary (of man/woman) talking about flashing on these fora.

Kate writes powerfully against the victim blame culture in which many women who have been flashed are encouraged to assume responsibility for the experience. She argues that telling women to deliberately avoid potential flashing situations or to alter their behaviour through fear of flashing risks further victimising women and increasing the power of men who flash. She calls for women to refuse the fear of the flasher's imposition and to respond with defiance, whilst placing the blame clearly on the flasher, and calling for a critique of wider gendered and sexualised culture in which flashing occurs, or is enabled. Perhaps we need to think carefully, for example, about the gendered depictions (or not) of genitalia in the media and what messages these give.

'Treating' flashers

One of the most interesting chapters of the book, for me, was the one which examines the ways in which flashing has been treated by the psychiatric profession. Flashing is categorised as a disorder according to the American Psychiatric Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM IV TR) under exhibitionism and this doesn't look like changing significantly in the next revision of the document. The main treatments that Kate reviews involve trying to

make people who flash averse to flashing and/or 'normalising' their sexuality. Examples are given of flashers being given drugs which make them feel nauseas when thinking of flashing situations or making flashers undress in front of 'mixed sex' audiences or audiences who respond with indifference.

I was struck that most of these examples of psychiatric treatment were from the 1960s and 1970s and reflective of the problematic behaviourist focus of the time. Also, like Kate, I was concerned about the ideals of 'normal' sex and masculinity assumed by the psychiatrists involved. I wondered about how a psychosexual therapist today might work with somebody who is sexually excited by the idea of flashing.

It seems important, as part of countering the victim blame culture that Kate speaks of, to focus on changing the behaviour of flashers rather than concentrating on victims' behaviour (as well as addressing the wider culture in which flashing occurs, of course). Here I will give a few of my thoughts but I'd be very interested to hear from others who have worked in this area.

Transgressive/coercive distinction

One of the things that I've found most helpful with clients who are interested in sexual activities which might be abusive or harmful is [Chess Denman's](#) distinction between transgressive and coercive sex. People often make judgements about sexual practices on the basis of whether they fit in with societal norms or not (those that don't being 'transgressive'). Chess suggests that a much better distinction is whether practices involve forcing, pressuring or persuading people or not (those that do being 'coercive').

Kate found that, in common with many others who engage in non-consensual sexual activity, flashers tend to fail to recognise their behaviour as problematic or are forgetful about what they have done. The combination of the power in behaving oppressively, and the guilt at recognising oneself as an oppressor, can result in a lot of fuzziness, emotional confusion, and avoidance.

Working with people who are excited by flashing I think it is useful to attempt to provide a safe-enough space to talk about any sexual practice (with the usual ethical proviso that confidentiality can't be kept if there is a risk of harm to self or others). It can be helpful, within this, to talk about the diversity of sexual practices that exist, the commonality of sexual desire around power and displaying the body, and the fact that most people consider committing acts that would be coercive and/or hurtful at some point in their lives (so having the capacity for harm and coercion is normalised, whilst acting upon it is not).

People often assume that they are entirely good (and therefore their flashing behaviour can't be harmful really), but also harbour a deep fear that they might really be entirely bad (and perhaps it is a terrible, disgusting, unforgivable thing that they are doing). This makes it very hard for them to look at the behaviour at all because of the terror that it might prove that they are completely bad. Encouraging a more complex view of human beings, as all having the

capacity for harming and helping, can make it more possible to openly reflect on frightening urges or desires, and to reach a clearer understanding of them. They can then determine which desires they might previously have regarded as problematic, because they were transgressive, but are actually perfectly possible to engage in consensually, and also which are coercive, and therefore shouldn't be engaged in at all.

Meanings of flashing

Another vital part of the picture is what flashing means to the individual. Kate's sense of the common gendered meanings of flashing are useful here, but it is also important to recognise that the individual meanings for the person in question may differ from these, and also that there are frequently multiple meanings to any (sexual or other) practice.

For example, flashing could be about any and all of the following things and more: feeling powerful, attempting to elicit fear, attempting to elicit desire, being naughty or childlike, exposing one's vulnerability, fighting against cultural norms around being clothed, trying to force some kind of intimate connection, being acknowledged, sharing one's sexuality with another, displaying the body, wanting to confirm negative beliefs about oneself, or wanting negative beliefs disproved.

Once a person feels safe enough to look carefully at their desire to flash (rather than trying desperately not to look too closely at it because they feel so conflicted about it), they can also start to understand what it means to them. This opens up both the possibility of finding ways of doing the same thing in consensual ways, or of finding other activities which meet the same desires.

For example, if somebody finds that what they enjoy about the idea of flashing is sharing their sexuality with somebody else, they might find that they can do this by writing erotica online in places where others know the kind of thing they'll be reading, or by engaging in consensual webchats about their fantasies. If the turn-on is about displaying the body to strangers then there are webcam websites for people who want to do this, or parties and clubs they could go to.

If the coercive aspect of flashing is central (for example if it is about power or about shocking the other person), then hopefully a better understanding of the distinctions between transgressive and coercive sex will help the person to see the problems with acting upon such desires. They can decide to keep those desires in the realm of fantasy and act upon other, consensual, ones (given the diversity of sexual possibilities).

Further exploration of meaning may also reveal other consensual, perhaps non-sexual, activities in which the person could have a need to feel powerful, important, acknowledged, or attractive met (amateur dramatics perhaps, or leading a team activity). It may be that there are broader lacks in the person's life which can be addressed and which will meet these needs/desires.

Conclusions

There are useful ways of working with people who have sexual desires around flashing, around enabling conversation about the diversity of sexuality, clarifying the transgressive/coercive distinction, and considering the meanings for the individual within the wider culture they are situated in.

I also agree strongly with Kate in the importance of cultural, as well as individual, reflection and change. We need more, rather than less, sex education in order that people understand the diversity of possibilities, the problems of coercion, and the importance of consent, from an earlier age. Also, we need to think about the ways in which gendered bodies and genitals are, and are not, represented, and the contexts that this creates in which flashing makes sense.

This issue, like many, demonstrates the importance of holding both the wider culture, and the individual experience, simultaneously, rather than allowing either one to overwhelm the other. We may well see cultural trends and norms which make flashing desirable and possible (such as the way femininity is generally associated with private space and masculinity with public, or the way in which men's sexual desire is generally regarded as something natural that must be acted upon). At the same time, and within this, when we speak to individuals we will find a complex network of meanings, desires, and experiences which needs to be openly engaged with and understood if we are to shift their behaviour.

Pornography

Studying pornography

June 2013

This post discusses the problems of polarisation in discussions around pornography, a theme that is covered in more depth in my book *The Psychology of Sex*.

Recently pornography has been in the news again with arguments that murders and other crimes can be linked to pornography (later amended in this article to 'violent pornography') and that access to pornography should be more tightly controlled.

Such issues are also a major point of argument in the academic world. Recently I found that I've been listed – among other academics – in a rather negative article in *Psychology Today* magazine which argues against the new journal, *Porn Studies*. I was very happy to be invited onto the editorial board of this journal so I thought I would write a few words in response to the criticisms that have been leveled against it, which also relate to some of the wider debates that are going on in relation to pornography.

Arguments Against Porn Studies

The arguments against the journal come from a combination of academics (mostly psychologists and feminist academics) who, themselves, research and write about pornography from the perspective that it causes harm. One group of academics petitioned Routledge, the publishers of *Porn Studies*, because they felt that the journal took a 'pro-porn' perspective and was therefore unbalanced. Generally this group are critical of pornography for perpetuating and reproducing the objectification and oppression of women through common representations of women's bodies as objects for men's sexual gratification and of sex where women are fairly passive and the focus is on men's pleasure. The author of the *Psychology Today* article makes a similar argument about lack of balance, but with particular concerns around the potential individual harms of pornography such as addiction and negative impacts on the developing brains of young people viewing pornography.

Given that there have not yet been any issues of the new journal, these arguments were made on the basis of the members of the editorial board which, critics thought, were weighted in favour of those who were pro-pornography.

Moving Away From Polarisation

I have written previously about the tendency of debates in areas such as pornography to become polarised into 'pro' or 'anti' stances, and we see that happening here: academics position themselves as 'anti' pornography and assume that this journal must therefore be

'pro' pornography because of the lack of academics with whom they are familiar on the editorial board. The argument seems to be that if you are not for us you must be against us.

In contrast, I see the journal as doing something very important in moving beyond such polarisations and in attempting to bring together work about pornography from across all disciplines and from a variety of perspectives, thus refusing the idea that there are only two possible positions.

One key reason why such polarisations are problematic is that pornography is not one singular thing which it is possible to be 'pro' or 'anti' in its entirety. If we take the legal definition of pornography in Britain as materials 'produced solely or principally for the purposes of sexual arousal' then this includes a vast array of different things, from photo shoots in lads magazines, to Fifty Shades of Grey and much of the online fan fiction which that book was based on, to pornographic movies, to online porn sites, to sending somebody an arousing text message or posting a sexual image of oneself on the internet, to erotic comics and a great deal more. Even the category of 'violent pornography' which the [Guardian article](#) and some research in this area is particularly concerned about can be difficult to define. Some would include images of consensual BDSM practices akin to acupuncture in this category, for example, but not the violence of 'torture porn' movies like Saw or Hostel because those are (a) mainstream films and (b) not aiming to sexually arouse.

Pornography can be produced such that it is problematic in many ways, and it can be produced in deliberately ethical, queer, or feminist ways (although there is always the risk that such words are used as selling points and do not really filter down to how the people involved are actually treated). Pornography can serve to perpetuate or to challenge norms, of sex and gender for example. As lawyer [Myles Jackman](#) points out, context can mean that something which was not intended as pornographic becomes so (for example, if the scene from the 12-rated Casino Royal movie where Bond is tortured was cut out and edited together with similar scenes from other films), or that something that was pornographic ceases to be so (for example viral clips from porn movies which are circulated for shock or humour value rather than to produce any kind of sexual arousal).

Balance and Effects

A further point about being balanced in this area is that one would need to consider all potential effects of pornography, both negative and positive, as well as considering interesting and important questions about pornography beyond the effects that it has. For example: Are there cultural differences in porn type and consumption and what can we learn from these? What are the business models employed in mainstream (or other types of) pornography and are these similar to other businesses? What are the structural features of pornographic narratives and how do they operate? How do different audiences make sense of the pornography that they view?

Even if we consider the potential negative effects – or harms – of pornography, these are again multiple rather than singular. There is the potential harm of pornography causing criminal behaviour, violence towards women or other groups, or sexist attitudes. There is the

potential individual harm that the Psychology Today author writes about, of people becoming addicted to pornography or it having adverse effects on relationships. And there are the possible cultural harms of pornography reproducing and perpetuating certain understandings of how sex, gender, and relationships work which limit and constrain individuals, communities and societies in problematic ways.

In relation to this latter point come a number of important and complicated questions about the role of pornography, and other forms of media, in reflecting and/or reinforcing certain problematic practices and dynamics. And, following on from this, where the energies of those who would like to see total gender equality, for example, or better understanding of the diversity of sexual identities and practices, would be best directed. Should we focus on pornography (and if so, which kinds), on more mainstream forms of media, on other aspects of society (such as education or government policy), or on all of these things?

It is important also, of course, to consider the possible **positive effects** of pornography, which include enabling people to figure out what they like sexually, providing sexual enjoyment, exposure to diverse bodies (naturally this depends on the type of porn which is viewed), and helping people to communicate about sex within relationships, amongst many other things. It is important both within academic work and beyond that we are aware of such positive aspects and to include the experiences of those who engage with pornography as viewers, readers, etc. as well as considering the pornographic materials themselves, and the ways in which these are produced and distributed.

I would very much hope that the Porn Studies journal lives up to its aims of publishing papers across the whole spectrum of disciplinary areas which have something to contribute on the topic, and I would certainly hope that perspectives which are critical of pornography are included. Indeed it is vital that submissions demonstrate awareness of the multiple perspectives that exist around this topic.

I would also hope that the journal will represent a move away from polarised positions. The tendency to polarise gets in the way of constructive conversation, and may also result in people feeling backed into a corner such that they feel they need to be entirely 'pro' or 'anti' pornography in all its forms, rather than being able to do the important work – for example – of pointing out problematic representations and damaging practices and proposing more liberating, culturally valuable, or ethical alternatives.

My Role in the Journal

Finally I will respond to the specific charge made against me in the Psychology Today article which claims that I must believe that 'Internet porn is the greatest thing since the invention of "talkies"' on the basis that "most of my research has been conducted within sexual communities, focusing on bisexuality, BDSM, and open non-monogamy."

First I certainly do not believe that all pornography, or all internet pornography, is a purely positive thing. As a sex therapist I have worked with people who have struggled greatly with

online pornography and their relationship to it, and there are many kinds of pornography that I personally (and politically) feel are part of the problematic cultural understandings which require the strongest kind of critical challenging. As a psychologist I know that the research on the potential harmful effects of pornography to date has been very unclear, with evidence both for and against pornography impacting negatively on attitudes and behaviours. And I also see that the study of pornography thus far has been dominated by such negative-effects research and feel that it is time to broaden the net so that people from across disciplines are working together to address all the different important and interesting questions about pornography.

As for the assumption that I would be 'pro-porn' because my research has focused on sexual communities, I am perplexed to say the least. To suggest that sexual and gender diversity is equivalent to being 'pro-porn' is incorrect and does a disservice to these communities. My work in these areas has helped me to recognise the range of experiences of sex and sexuality that are possible, and the ways in which understandings of sex and sexuality (put across in pornography and in many other forms of media) have the potential to constrain and to liberate, to worry and to relieve, to close down and to open up. I would hope that this position will be an asset in my role on the editorial board of Porn Studies as I will endeavour to challenge taken-for-granted understandings and to encourage writers to be aware of multiple possible perspectives, as well as seriously considering the real world ethical implications of both the materials which they are researching and their own writings on the topic.

Porn again

June 2013

This post discusses sex critical studies of pornography, a theme that is covered in more depth in my book [The Psychology of Sex](#).

After my [last post](#) about the debates around the new [Porn Studies](#) journal I wanted to add a further comment on the subject. Writing that post got me thinking about why I consider pornography to be an interesting and useful arena of study.

Studying Sex Advice

Personally I haven't conducted much research directly on pornography, other than [a study](#) on [slash fiction](#) some years back. However, I am currently involved in a project with [Rosalind Gill](#) and [Laura Harvey](#) analysing [various forms of sex advice](#) (TV shows, problem pages, self-help books, sex education websites, and the like).

The reason that I am particularly interested in this genre is because the advice that is given tells us a great deal about people's understandings and assumptions about sex. If we look at the most mainstream sex advice – the self-help books that publishers are happy to take on, or the particularly common kinds of magazine articles that we see again and again – we find out what is considered to be sex in the current time and place in which we are living: who is assumed to be involved, what practices they engage in, what is seen as desirable or 'good' sex and what is not, and so on. Also, if we look across the diversity of sex advice – including self-help books aimed at various sexual communities, and websites designed to be particularly ethical, feminist, or 'sex-positive' – we see what other possibilities are available, and also what the limits seem to be on possible understandings, and where the boundaries are drawn around sex.

I think that this is interesting and useful work because it is helpful (as sex educators, sex therapists, and other kinds of practitioners) to know what people are likely to be talking about when they talk about sex: the assumptions they might be making (some of which may be linked to problems they are having or risks they are taking health-wise), and the ideas they are likely to be familiar or unfamiliar with. Also, looking at the diversity of sex advice is helpful in making us aware of other possibilities which we might offer: different ways of looking at things or alternative practices people might consider. And, in analysing the sex advice that already exists, we can be better informed in producing our own materials in this genre which might aim, for example, to open up multiple possible understandings of sex, to put forward a diversity of possible practices, or to question existing boundaries between sex and other activities (leisure, art, sport, etc.) My chapter on sex in [Rewriting the Rules](#) was my first attempt at something along these lines.

Studying Porn

If all this can be said for studying sex advice, then it seems to me that much the same arguments can be made for studying pornography. Pornography refers to materials 'produced solely or principally for the purposes of sexual arousal'. Looking at the most common and popular versions of pornography (mainstream magazines and top rated movies and websites) can, again, tell us a lot about what people generally understand about sex, and what is imagined or experienced as being sexually arousing. Looking across the ever-increasing diversity of erotic imagery and fiction can tell us about the range of things which are possible in terms of sexual practice and fantasy. And the awareness of the most common understandings of sex, and the different possible understandings of sex, that we gain from this can help us in our more applied work as well as enabling us – potentially – to inform future production of materials in order to address some of the exclusions and gaps in the current ones.

Of course people who research pornography do so for many reasons and with many different aims. I'm not arguing that the aim of understanding how people view sex should replace the aim of assessing whether pornography can be harmful (which many of those who were against the Porn Studies journal have as their aim) or any of the other aims which pornography researchers have. However, I think that it is one legitimate and important reason for studying porn.

Additionally this is an aim which does not fit into the pro or anti polarisation which I wrote about previously. If – as I believe – wider societal understandings of sex are problematic and limited in many ways, then we would expect both sex advice and pornography (and romance fiction and Hollywood movies, and reality TV, and all sorts of other media) to reflect and to perpetuate such problematic and limited understandings. We would expect that the presence of two 'opposite sex' people would be by far the most common representation because sex is seen as being all about the (different) gender a person is attracted to. We would predict that men would be expected to be active and initiating and that women wouldn't be given much agency and would be focused upon meeting men's desires rather than having their own. We'd expect that bodies would behave in certain ways to map on with our common ideas of what makes 'functional' sex (erections, penetration and orgasm). And we'd anticipate that there would be little emphasis on consent or on how to treat people ethically in sex.

Sex Critical Engaged-with-Porn Research

So we would certainly be critical – of mainstream pornographies as of other forms of sexual representation – for perpetuating such constraining and problematic ideas of sex, gender and sexuality. But this would not make us 'anti-porn' as a whole because we would be mindful of the diversity of sexually arousing materials out there which are not limited in these particular ways, and of the fact that people read all materials in different ways which may be more or less aware of such problems, or resisting of such messages. Also we would consider whether our criticism is best levelled at pornography in particular and/or at the whole way of understanding gender, sex and sexuality which it is representative of.

Additionally we might specifically look for pornographies which do something different to these mainstream versions, such as opening up alternative understandings of sex; or explicitly addressing the ethics of sex or the power dynamics between people; or including people, bodies and practices in positive ways which are often excluded or invisible. But this would not make us 'pro-porn' because we'd also be aware of the limitations of such materials which are present despite attempts to do things differently, and we would also be mindful of what such representations might close down for people as well as what they might open up.

Such an approach would hopefully prevent those of us who struggle with a lot of what we see in pornography from failing to engage with why people may find it useful, or from imagining alternatives. At the same time it would hopefully prevent those of us who want to celebrate the potentials of sexually arousing materials from noticing the concerning aspects of many pornographic representations of sex. Remaining open in this way would hopefully enable more fruitful conversations across different views and different types of research as well as making it more likely that future materials could be shaped by our research findings and theories, and that wider understandings of sex, sexuality and gender might also shift instead of remaining static.

It is such a **sex critical** (rather than sex negative or sex positive) and engaged-with-porn (rather than pro-porn or anti-porn) approach that I am hoping and expecting that Porn Studies will take.

Thank-you for reading

You can find my other free books on my website:

- rewriting-the-rules.com

If you enjoyed the book or shared it on, and can afford it, please feel free to support my patreon, or make a one-off donation to my paypal:

- patreon.com/MegJohnBarker
- paypal.me/MegJohnBarker