

## Section I ~ Psychology: Facing Ourselves

### Overview

from *Bi any other name*. Loraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumanu (eds). Alyson Publications, 1991.

*Bisexuals' lives provide new psychological and social understandings of sexuality and closeness, highlighting the mechanics of sexual decision-making as potentially self-determined action. Research is needed about all areas of the bisexual experience, including studies of common qualities of bisexuals, therapeutic case studies, and longitudinal studies of bisexuals' relationships. The bisexual experience calls into question traditional definitions of the nature of sexual identity development. Fluid, ambiguous, subversive, multifarious, bisexuality can no longer be denied.*

—Rebecca Shuster<sup>1</sup>

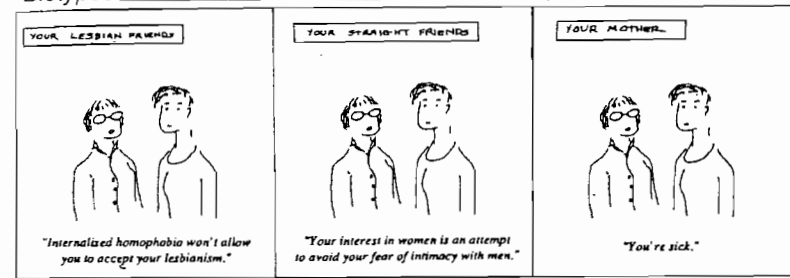
### Defining bisexuality

As Kate Millett once said, "Homosexuality was invented by a straight world dealing with its own bisexuality."<sup>2</sup> So it is not surprising that looking up the word *bisexual* in the dictionary is like blinking into the distorted mirror of Western society's ambivalence over sexuality.

The prefix *bi* means two, or dual. Therefore the word *bisexual* is used to refer to things involving both sexes. However, this can mean an individual who possesses physical organs of both sexes, or it can mean some event or setting that involves both sexes at once. *Bisexual* can also refer to individuals of either sex who are attracted to both sexes. In this book, we use this last meaning. But our common frame of reference is loaded with the combination of all of these definitions together and how they affect our understanding of what is meant when one says "bisexual." These multiple and contradictory meanings limit our ability to discuss the subject clearly. For instance, someone who possesses both male and female qualities, either psychologically (as in being androgynous) or physically (as in being an hermaphrodite<sup>3</sup>), is not necessarily attracted to both male and female people. To further complicate matters, the definitions of *androgynous*, *bisexual*, *hermaphrodite*, and *homosexual* all overlap in many dictionaries and reference books. For instance, the first definition of *bisexual* in Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary* is "hermaphrodite." Yet the same dictionary defines the actual word *hermaphrodite* as "1 ... b. homosexual. 2. something that is a combination of diverse elements."<sup>4</sup> Are homosexuals physical

### Biotypes

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hermaphrodites? Not usually. Are they bisexual? Not necessarily. So, what "diverse elements" are combined?

Are we going round in circles? Perhaps what's really got us spinning are the contradictory, confusing definitions of sexual orientation manufactured by this heterosexist, sex-negative society. Unraveling *this* conditioning is the key.

Coming out bisexual, as Shuster's opening quote attests, truly does affect everyone. It breaks the conspiracy of silence, as gay people have also done. But it also challenges current assumptions about the immutability of people's orientations and society's supposed divisions into discrete groups. Bisexuals' coming out challenges other people's understanding of themselves. Our bisexuality reflects on society as a whole, threatening the monosexual<sup>5</sup> framework that heterosexism needs to survive.<sup>6</sup>

Since bisexuality threatens how society is organized, bisexuals often become the targets of discrimination, stereotyping and jokes. We are considered more sexual, more confused, more fickle than others,<sup>7</sup> whereas in reality all disempowered groups are sexualized in a hierarchical, sex-phobic society — as a way to divide and maintain fear of The Other.<sup>8</sup>

As the stories in this book show, we have the same hopes, fears, problems, and experiences as monosexuals do in relationships. But we are the target for the projected fear of being "other," from both the gay and the straight sides of humanity.

Bisexuality is much more than, and different from, the sensationalized "third choice," "best-of-both-worlds" phenomena it's made out to be. Bisexuality is an inclusive term that defines immense possibilities available to us, whether we act on them or not. It opens doors and accepts all the in-betweens, including the more conforming "accepted" ways we've identified in the past or will in the future. We have gay and heterosexual experience. We socialize with both, and we go back and forth interpreting each to the other, whether this service is appreciated

or not. This will be recognized as more of us come out and take pride in the identity we were told is impossible. But first we must face ourselves. Declaring oneself bisexual means trusting one's own experiences. As Loraine has stated, "Unpredictable is not the same as unreliable. Integrating and balancing opposite parts of oneself is not 'confused' or 'unreal.' It might not be your cup of tea, which is fine, but it's a life-long creation I'm dedicated to and enjoying..."<sup>9</sup>

This is difficult, since so many people are confused by and concerned with the (so-called) fluid nature of bisexuality. But think about it. When we examine our lives, they are not neat, well-packaged scenarios. Life is vital and multifaceted, complex. As Adrienne Rich puts it:

Truthfulness anywhere means a heightened complexity. But it is a movement into evolution ... This is why the effort to speak honestly is so important ... Does a life 'in the closet' — lying, perhaps of necessity, about ourselves, to bosses, landlords, clients, colleagues, family, because the law and public opinion are founded on a lie — does this, can it, spread into private life, so that lying (discretion) becomes an easy way to avoid conflict or complication? Can it become a strategy so ingrained that it is used even with close friends and lovers?<sup>10</sup>

### **Bisexual ways of being**

Individual bi identities span many communities. Within this book you will find a wide range of bisexuals. We are bisexuals of all ages and colors. Some of us identify with the gay and lesbian communities, some of us identify with the heterosexual community, some of us identify primarily with other bisexuals. Some of us identify primarily with people of color or with other sexual minority communities such as S/M, cross-dressers, or transsexuals.<sup>11</sup>

Because our society is so polarized between homosexuals and heterosexuals, the bisexual closet has two doors. Both need to be opened. Coming out to the straight world and coming out to the gay world are not the same. Coming out bisexually is also affected by one's gender, one's race and culture, one's class, one's religion, and one's physical abilities or state of health. Once you've read a number of the coming-out stories you'll begin to have a better idea what we mean about how different, and yet how universal, we are.

In the quote that follows, Jane Litwoman expresses one particularly different and unique view of why she herself does, and does not, identify as bisexual:

The sexologist Kinsey has created a 0–6 scale in which people are rated as to their homo/heterosexuality.<sup>12</sup> I think of myself as off the scale. To me, the Kinsey scale has as much relevance as if everyone were evaluated on a spectrum of whether they were more attracted to people with brown

eyes or green/blue eyes. Gender is just not what I care about or even really notice in a sexual partner. This is not to say that I don't have categories of sexual attraction, that I judge each person as an individual — I have categories, but gender isn't one of them. I'm erotically attracted to intelligent people, to people with dark/colored skin and light eyes and hair, to people with a kind of sleazy, sexy come-on, to eccentrics. In some of those categories I am homo-erotic (i.e., I'm intelligent and eccentric), in others I am hetero-erotic (i.e., I have light skin and dark eyes and hair). To be perfectly frank, I can barely imagine what it's like to be a lesbian or a straight woman, to be attracted to women because they are female — and that is sexy — or to men because they are male. In that way I feel like both of them share a common perception which I will never know — that I am color blind or tone deaf to a gender-erotic world.

I can relate more easily to people who are not primarily gender-erotic, but who are what is commonly referred to as fetishistic. At a gut level I can imagine what it might be to be erotically attracted to frilly lingerie or leather or the smell of the sea. The clearest way for me to understand lesbians and straight women is to accept them as fetishists. From my viewpoint straight women are malegender-fetishists and lesbians are femalegender-fetishists who are so culturally supported in their sexual attractions that most of the time they hardly understand my different reality.

Of course I live in a world in which gender is a much more powerful concern than leather or the smell of the sea. Gender, along with race, class, ethnicity, and age, is one of the most profound social status determinants in our society. I could choose to only act on my attractions to female persons for political/social concerns. However, I instinctively resist straight-jacketing my sexual feelings for political reasons...

I don't define my sexuality so much by what I might or might not like — women, men, orgies, masturbation, romantic music, intimacy, anonymous sex, cunnilingus, etc. — but by honest exploration of my sexual desires. What I am sexually is sovereign.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, responsible scientific investigation into the kinds of issues raised above by Litwoman and Shuster is woefully lacking! Even sociologists such as Philip W. Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, who have done extensive research on bisexuality, say that "little research has investigated the route bisexuals take to this identity or any of the common qualities of those who identify themselves as bisexual."<sup>14</sup> Still, so that we may better understand from where we start, a brief survey of the bisexuality research that *does* exist is in order.

### **Research based on a monosexual framework = Biphobia**

*Dividing people for purposes of study into only two groups, "heterosexual" and "homosexual," which is done most of the time,*

*and defining all people at gay dances or all men found in gay bars as "homosexual," has the effect of lumping bisexuals into these groups and makes interpretation of the results extremely difficult.*  
—Dr. F. Klein, *The Bisexual Option*<sup>15</sup>

Bisexuals are continually being studied, mostly by non-bisexuals, who base their research on a monosexual framework and then claim that we don't exist, or are rare, or are perverted, or are really on our way to something else. And, as with homosexuality, many of the studies on bisexuality are done from the heterosexual assumption that we're unnatural or sick to begin with. These researchers seem to forget they're only studying clients who come to them for counseling. What's important is that these studies, therefore, rarely distinguish between healthy and distressed bisexuals. The researchers have no sense for what is really intrinsic to being bisexual. Therefore, biphobia — the irrational fear of bisexuality in oneself or others and the distrust and discrimination practiced against us because of this fear — has permeated almost all existing research up to this point.

In the seventies, with the unfolding of the women's and gay liberation movements, an explosion of articles and studies on bisexuality appeared in the popular press. Most of them sensationalized us according to the myths mentioned earlier. Even the better books, like *The Bisexual Option*<sup>16</sup> and *View from Another Closet*,<sup>17</sup> rely heavily on the case-study method of interviews and surveys and the voice of the expert authority. The only first-person account, *Barry and Alice: Portrait of a Bisexual Marriage*,<sup>18</sup> is out of print.

Another problem with current studies on alternative sexuality is that they focus on married couples almost exclusively, and within these couples usually only one partner is gay, or bisexual.<sup>19</sup> Not only are single bisexual people ignored, no surveys of the many bisexuals leading closeted lives in the gay and lesbian communities are available. Gay people in heterosexual relationships are mentioned only within the research framework that there is no such thing as a bisexual, and that their homosexuality is their only true sexuality.

Klein's *The Bisexual Option* is especially good in pointing out how invisibility perpetuates research errors. He quotes noted sex researchers claiming that true bisexuality doesn't exist, and then catches them in their own errors.<sup>20</sup> On the gay research side of the myopia surrounding bisexuality, books such as John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman's *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, assign less text and index space to bisexuality than to "bestiality."<sup>21</sup> Bestiality is mentioned three times in their index, bisexuality not once. And their book is not unusual.

What has been written *about* bisexuals is also not grounded in a feminist analysis of sexuality and power. Therefore, this kind of informa-

tion provides an incomplete, distorted picture, and tends more to perpetuate myths about us than to dispel them.

### **Budding bi-positivism: Some signs of change**

*I do not in the least underestimate bisexuality ... I expect it to provide all further enlightenment.*  
— Sigmund Freud<sup>22</sup>

*"There are not two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual ... Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force fact into separated pigeon holes ... The sooner we learn this ... the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex."*  
— Alfred Kinsey<sup>23</sup>

*"What is new is not bisexuality, but rather the widening of our awareness and acceptance of human capacities for sexual love. Today the recognition of bisexuality in oneself and in others is part of the whole mid-20th century movement to accord to each individual, regardless of race, class, nationality, age or sex, the right to be a person who is unique and who has a social identity that is worthy of dignity and respect ... Even a superficial look at other societies and some groups in our own society should be enough to convince us that a very large number of human beings, probably a majority— are bisexual in their potential capacity for love ... We will fail to evolve in our understanding of human sexuality if we continue to see homosexuals merely as "heterosexuals-in-reverse," ignoring the vast diversity actually represented by society's many varied expressions of love between people.*  
— Margaret Mead<sup>24</sup>

Even with these few positive attitudes quoted here, the biological and environmental origins of sexual identification are still hotly debated today. Authorities don't agree on what causes what, much less on what part bisexuality plays. And incredible hostility and misunderstanding is still directed toward bisexuals and bisexuality. However, a number of bi-positive writers and researchers are beginning to speak against the phobic tide.

In a 1985 article, "Bisexuality: Reassessing our Paradigms of Sexuality,"<sup>25</sup> Dr. Jay Paul — one of a handful of "out" bisexual psychologists writing professionally on bisexuality — identifies current research errors on bisexuality:

There is far more variability and fluidity in many people's sexual patterns than theoretical notions tend to allow, suggesting that researchers have imparted an artificial consistency to an inchoate sexual universe.

It is not that science has ignored the indisputable fact that the sexual biographies of many include sexual experiences with both men and women, but rather the theoretical meanings given to those experiences. The tendency is to deny the legitimacy of one's erotic responsiveness to either males, or females; thereby, one assumes that all people are either basically heterosexual or homosexual. This refusal to allow for an equivalent basic bisexuality in some portion of the population leads to a variety of explanations for bisexual patterns.

(And, we might add, few of them adequate or good.)

Hansen and Evans, writing in the same journal, cite the common misinterpretation or misuse of the Kinsey scale, stressing that it describes only genital behavior patterns, not identity.<sup>26</sup>

In another article in the same issue, Dr. Gary Zinik<sup>27</sup> points out that in the forties and fifties the country was shocked by Kinsey's discovery of high rates of homosexual behavior among men and women. But what was even *more* overlooked was that "significantly higher percentages of people exhibit bisexual behavior than exclusively homosexual behavior." He explains that this is because a "conflict model" of bisexuality (in research circles, in researchers' minds) assumes that homosexual interests eradicate heterosexual responsiveness — that they can't exist peacefully side by side. But this isn't true for a significant number of people. In fact, the notion that "one drop of homosexuality indicates latent homosexuality in a straight" theory sounds suspiciously like the "one drop of black blood makes you black and you can't go to our schools" racist attitude in U.S. public schools last generation.

Zinik instead proposes a "flexibility model," where "indeed men and women are not considered opposite sexes so much as variations on a theme."

After all, what is the theme? The theme is life, in all its diversity. We are trained from birth to think of ourselves as either/or — female or male — and indoctrinated in sex-role conditioning under what Adrienne Rich calls "compulsory heterosexuality," based on and rooted in male supremacy. But if these things change, would we men and women really be so different, so opposite, so far apart?

Some feminists would have us believe so, saying that men's biology dooms them to violence (and thus women to be their inevitable victims and servants, as well as their prized possessions on pedestals). But other lesbian and feminist writers disagree. For example, French writer Elisabeth Badinter has caused great discussion in Europe with her book, *The Unopposite Sex: The End of the Gender Battle*,<sup>28</sup> where she argues that men and women are growing more and more alike in the modern age and that the basic bisexuality of all of us will be more and more revealed.

From the gay research angle, on the other hand, it is interesting to note that *The Many Faces of Homosexuality*<sup>29</sup> — a 1986 cross-cultural, anthropological study of homosexual behaviors in various times and places — clearly illustrates that much homosexual behavior is *actually* bisexual behavior, and that our modern U.S. Western model of who gay people are does not apply cross-culturally at all. Two modern gay writers who would agree are Warren Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, whose highly readable book, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*,<sup>30</sup> features a section called "The Homosexual/Bisexual/Heterosexual Continuum." They discuss the many aspects of gay and bisexual behavior versus identity, physical diversity among all sexual minorities, and what part of our behavior is chosen, what part innate.

Some of the best studies on bisexuality come from outside the U.S. The late-seventies publication *Bisexuality: A Study*, by British author Charlotte Wolff,<sup>31</sup> is still unsurpassed in its feminist understanding of all sexuality, though it is somewhat outdated now in the age of AIDS. More recently, a group of bisexuals living in and around London published a small anthology, *Bisexual Lives*,<sup>32</sup> that served as one inspiration for this book.

The debate and this present polarized state of affairs will go on. However, since AIDS has put sex and sexuality in the public eye more than ever before, we can no longer afford to deny the many issues it exposes, including the current rigid monosexual framework overlying the fluid nature of sex. We need new mediating approaches. Bisexual liberation is one of them. But for a more whole, peaceful way to come into existence, we must face ourselves — name our own bisexual potential— first.

## Notes

1. Rebecca Shuster, "Sexuality as a Continuum: The Bisexual Identity," in *Lesbian Psychologies: Explorations and Challenges*, ed. Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective, University of Illinois Press, 1987.

2. As quoted in *Bisexual Lives*, London: Off Pink Publishing, 1988. This quote was originally from Millett's book *Flying*, now reprinted by Simon & Schuster, 1990.

3. Noted sex researcher Dr. John Money of Johns Hopkins University estimates that there may be as many as one hermaphrodite born per thousand births, but that we cannot know accurately at this time. Doctors do not report such statistics to any national database, and often perform surgery on such children's "in-between" genitals shortly after birth to make them one sex or the other.

4. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1977, p. 536.

5. *Monosexual* is a term coined by the bisexual movement to mean anyone (gay or heterosexual) who is attracted to just one sex, their own or the opposite one.
6. For definitions of *heterosexism* and many other words, see the glossary.
7. For more on this, see "Myths/Realities of Bisexuality," following these notes.
8. When society is dominated by one race, sex, or class of people, the groups not in power are seen as Other. White-male-dominated society, for instance, has portrayed women as more sexually insatiable and unclean than men; people of color as more immoral and sexual; and gays as child molesters. Actually it's mostly straight men who molest, and women and people of color, as groups, certainly do not have the negative characteristics that have been projected upon them as Other.
9. Loraine Hutchins, "Biatribute: Towards a Politic of Feminist Bisexuality," *off our backs*, February 1988.
10. From *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*, Pittsburgh: Motherroot Publications, 1977.
11. See the glossary for definitions of any of these terms.
12. See the glossary for a definition of the Kinsey Scale.
13. From "Some Thoughts on Bisexuality," *Lesbian Contradictions*, Winter 1990.
14. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, "Bisexuality: Some Social Psychological Issues," *Journal of Social Issues* 33 (Spring 1977): 30-45.
15. Dr. Fred Klein, M.D., *The Bisexual Option: A Concept of One Hundred Percent Intimacy*, New York: Berkeley Books, 1980, p. 152.
16. Ibid.
17. Janet Bode, *View from Another Closet*, New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976.
18. Barry Kohn and Alice Matusow, *Barry and Alice: Portrait of a Bisexual Marriage*, Prentice Hall, 1980.
19. See, for instance, *The Bisexual Spouse* by Ivan Hill, McLean, Va.: Barlina Books, 1987; and *Uncommon Affairs: Gay Men and Straight Women*, by Catherine Whitney, New American Library, 1990.
20. Klein, *The Bisexual Option*. See in particular pp. 126-128 and 139.
21. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, Harper & Row, 1988. Billed as the "first full-length study of the history of sexuality in this country," this book contains much fascinating information. However, its fourteen-page index lists three references for bestiality, six for cross-dressing, and eleven for sexual revolution (including feminists, gay liberation, singles life, youth rebellions, and sexual vulnerability of women), but not

one mention of bisexuality! You would think our experience is rarer than any of the above and that we played no part in the entire sexual revolution they chronicle over the past twenty to two hundred years.

22. Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *Readings in Human Sexuality*, ed. Samuel T. Wilson, Richard L. Roe, and Lucy E. Autrey, pp. 71-79, New York: West, 1975. And as discussed by Christine Downing, a lesbian Jungian, in her *Myths and Mysteries of Same Sex Loving*, Continuum, 1989. (*Myths and Mysteries* is also of interest because its Jungian author discusses her own heterosexual marriage, her current long-term partnership with a woman, and her sexual, loving relationships with gay men.)
23. *Bisexual Lives*, op. cit.
24. Margaret Mead, "Bisexuality: What's It All About?" *Redbook*, January 1975, pp. 29-31.
25. F. Klein, M.D., and Timothy J. Wolf, Ph.D., eds., *Bisexualities: Theory and Research: Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 2, nos. 1/2, Haworth Press, 1985, pp. 21-22.
26. Ibid., p. 3.
27. Ibid., pp. 7-11.
28. Elizabeth Badinter, *The Unopposite Sex: The End of the Gender Battle*, Harper & Row, 1989. (First published in English in Great Britain by Collins Harvill under the title *Man/Woman: The One Is the Other*.)
29. Evelyn Blackwood, ed., *The Many Faces of Homosexuality: Anthropological Approaches to Homosexual Behavior*, New York: Harrington Park Press, 1986.
30. Warren Blumenfeld and Diane Raymond, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.
31. Dr. Charlotte Wolff, *Bisexuality: A Study*, London: Quartet Books, 1979.
32. *Bisexual Lives*, op. cit. (See note 2.)