

Abstract

The emerging concept of relational orientations makes shifts in sexual identity difficult to accommodate and may mask women's actual sexual practice. Drawing on a qualitative study of 40 bisexual women in Toronto, this paper argues that polyamory and monogamy are strategies by which bisexual women explore their sexuality, rather than cohesive identities or behavioural orientations. Nearly a quarter of the monogamous-identified women reported having previously identified as polyamorous. Among total participants, 12.5% reported shifting between monogamy and polyamory more than once. These shifts enable women to manage and negotiate their visibility as bisexuals. There was a significant disjoint between self-identity and sexual behaviour. The majority of the polyamorous women were not dating multiple partners at the time of the interview, while over a quarter of the monogamous women reported having threesomes in their current relationship. Viewing monogamy and polyamory as strategic identities can help health care practitioners more accurately assess their clients' needs and risks, within a social determinants of mental health framework.

Polyamory And Monogamy As Strategic Identities

Increasingly, challenges to anti-polygamy legislation and social tradition have proposed that polyamory is a sexual orientation (Anapol, 1997; Bensen, 2008; Breitman, 2007; Chapman, 2010; Newman, 2004). Anne Tweedy [in press] suggests that legally defining polyamory as a sexual orientation would offer protection from discrimination and serve social justice. Francis J. Beckworth (2011) argues that if polyamory is a sexual orientation, "it would seem to be as unconstitutional to limit marriage to two as it would be to limit it to opposite genders." A landmark case now before the British Columbia Supreme Court challenges the constitutionality of Canada's laws against multiple partners, and leads the Canadian Polyamory Advocacy Association (Zoe, 2010) to ponder whether polyamory might be "the new gay."

The view of polyamory as an orientation is gaining currency within the helping professions as well. Psychologist Amity Buxton writes, "just as people vary in sexual orientation, so too do they vary in preference for intimacies with one vs. multiple partners" (2006, p.140). Psychologist Geri Weitzman refers to a "polyamorous orientation," and outlines a model of identity development that parallels that for gays, lesbians and bisexuals (2006, p. 160). Drawing

on biomedical research, professor of psychology Jorge N. Ferrer proposes that “a diversity of relationship styles—both monogamous and polyamorous—may be genetically imprinted in humans” (2007, p. 37).

However, the concept of relational orientation makes shifts or disruptions in identity difficult to accommodate and may mask women’s actual sexual practice. I argue that polyamory and monogamy are better conceptualized as strategies, rather than as orientations. Drawing on my qualitative study of 40 bisexual women in Toronto (Robinson 2009), I argue that polyamory and monogamy are strategic identities by which women shape and explore their bisexuality. The term strategic identity refers to identities that serve a political, social, or inter-personal function, and are adopted by in-groups living under the surveillance of powerful out-groups (Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2009; Klein, Spears & Reicher, 2007). Polyamory refers to the practice of having multiple sexual relationships with informed and consenting partners. Such practice may include swinging, polyfidelity (a closed relationship consisting of more than two partners), or a variety of open relationships models.

Overview Of The Study

The interviews for my study were conducted through email between August and September of 2006. Participants were bisexual-identified women living in the Greater Toronto Area. Since my study focussed on women, my arguments apply primarily to them, as bisexual men may differ in important ways. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 51, (M=33), with 42.5% identifying as monogamous, 47.5 % identifying as polyamorous, 5% identifying as swingers, and the remaining 5% describing their relational identity as in flux or undetermined. The women in my study adopted these labels at different times, for different purposes. Reflecting on polyamory,

one participant, Diane, writes, “I don’t consider it an identity for me personally, as I’m not that invested in it. Sometimes I want monogamy...for a period of time in a relationship.”¹

Among the polyamorous women, 78.9% had previously identified as monogamous—not surprising, since this is an enforced social norm. Yet nearly a quarter of the monogamous-identified women (23.5%) reported having identified as polyamorous at a previous point in their lives. Of those who had shifted identities, 23% had shifted more than once. Phoenix, a forty-year old butch dyke, discovered that she preferred emotional monogamy, but sexual polyamory:

Experience showed me that conducting emotional affairs with more than one person was too draining and demanding for me on an emotional level. I also found out that I naturally focus on one person at a time, emotionally and romantically. However, I still enjoy and am able to be sexual with more than one person, even within the context of an emotionally monogamous relationship.

Rather than viewing such shifts as detours on the way to a more salient identity, I wondered if the shifting itself might serve some purpose for bisexual women.

Polyamorous Identity & Bisexuality

One factor leading women to choose bisexual identity may be a desire for polyamorous relationships. In a non-probability sample of lesbian and bisexual women, Nichols (2004) found that 54% of bisexual female respondents identified as polyamorous compared with 18% of lesbian respondents. Rust (1996) found that bisexual-identified women were twice as likely as lesbian-identified women to be involved in multiple relationships. Only 29.5% of Rust’s bisexuals saw monogamy as their ideal relationship structure, compared with 45.7% of lesbians. Page (2004) found that 54% of bisexual respondents preferred a polyamorous relationship. While people of any sexual orientation may choose to have polyamorous relationships, some research

¹ Participants are cited under their chosen pseudonyms.

suggests that polyamorous *identity* is adopted by bisexuals and heterosexuals more often than by gays or lesbians (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; cf. Weitzman, 2006; Diamond, 2008). Given these findings, it is possible that such identity labels may reflect goals and values more than they do sexual history.

Polyamory and Bisexual Visibility

Much has been written about the erasure and invisibility of bisexuality (Erickson-Schrotha & Mitchellb, 2009; Hutchins, 2005; James, 1996; MacDowall, 2009; Yoshino, 2000). Visibility to one's own group, as well as to others, forms the basis of group cohesion and collective action (Wiley & Deaux, 2010). Successful visibility requires cues capable of representing bisexuality without being absorbed into the categories of lesbian, gay or straight, and an audience capable of reading such cues.

Having others *recognize* us as bisexual is an important part of *feeling* bisexual. Yet as Heather Macalister (2003, p. 28) observes, there is "no hairstyle, clothing, way of walking, way of talking, or tell-tale preference in music, entertainment, or choice of home lighting to help us categorize the next bisexual we meet." Rachel Cohen sums up the challenge of bi visibility when she asks if bi women ought to "only shave under one armpit," or "carry around a copy of *Bi Any Other Name* wherever they go" (Cohen, 1992, 16). Becoming visible requires not only messages that are specific to bisexuality, but people who can understand the message. Bisexual symbols, such as the bi flag, biangles, backing crescent moons, tri-coloured mobius strip, and modified yin-yang have been less successful than lesbian or gay symbols in part because they lack recognition among in-group and out-group members alike.

The practice of having concurrent male and female partners makes bisexuality visible in a way easily read by both in-group and out-group members. Polyamory may also facilitate bisexual visibility for women by helping to distinguish it from lesbianism. Betty a bisexual woman with a lesbian partner writes, “In lesbian spaces, it’s assumed that both myself and my partner are lesbians.” Carrie, in a monogamous relationship with another bisexual woman, finds that people of all orientations read her as lesbian. She writes, “[t]he immediate assumption among straight people and gay men is that I’m a lesbian because I’m in a relationship with a woman. Lesbians tend to think the same thing. Bi people often make the same assumption but kind of check themselves.” While being misread as lesbian may offer social benefits, such as the avoidance of biphobia, it is not affirming of bisexual identity. For women in same-sex relationships, polyamory—whether practiced or simply claimed as an identity—may provide a buffer against bisexual erasure.

Dianna explains that in gay and lesbian spaces it is assumed that “one is monogamous unless stating otherwise.” Awe, a polyamorous woman, writes that in gay and lesbian circles, “my bi relationships are viewed as freakish.” While the lesbian community includes polyamorous women, the women in my study see monogamous values as culturally dominant in lesbian space. B, who came out as lesbian before identifying as bisexual, writes, “As a poly woman with a male partner, I felt instantly like I no longer qualified as potential dating material for lesbians. I felt cut off from my community.”

Just as polyamory can distinguish bisexual women from lesbians, it can also offer a barrier against heteronormativity, enabling bisexual women with male partners to signal their bisexuality. Judith, a 31-year-old in a monogamous relationship with a man, writes, “people usually assume that we’re a straight couple. I’m not very comfortable with this and feel invisible

as a queer person.” Louise Smith observes that “monogamy + man = straight is an assumption people make.” Dinah writes, “Unless I come out to people my partner and I just look like any other monogamous hetero couple.”

Being invisible to fellow queers has a particularly strong negative impact on bisexual women’s sense of identity. Violet, a 37-year-old with a husband and child, finds it “difficult to fight these assumptions” and adds that “sometimes [it] seems futile, since one’s bisexuality seems to become more theoretical as opposed to lived over time.” She feels invisible as queer, noting, “I don’t register on lesbian gaydar anymore.” Anonymous, who identified as lesbian for twelve years before dating her current male partner, reports a similar feeling of alienation. “When I moved here a year ago,” she writes, “everyone assumed I was a straight married lady.... The lesbian couple who lived upstairs were especially condescending. It drove me crazy!” Identifying as polyamorous can be an effective strategy for achieving and maintaining bisexual visibility and distinctiveness. Such a strategy can be successful whether polyamory is visible, distinguishing them as bisexual in the eyes of others, or is hidden, stabilizing and supporting their bisexuality psychologically.

The psychological function of poly identity may be more salient than the sexual function of polyamorous practice. The majority of the poly-identified women (78%) were not dating multiple partners at the time of my interview with them. Several participants describe their relationship as polyamorous in theory rather than practice, although most attribute the lack of partners to happenstance. While having partners of differing sexes can make bisexuality visible in a way serial monogamy does not, merely identifying as polyamorous, and doing so publically within queer space, may facilitate bi visibility and affirm bi identity. This affirmation and

visibility might be desirable to bisexual women, even if the practice of polyamory itself is socially censured.

Polyamory as Bisexual Authenticity

Increasingly, therapists are seeing polyamory as a healthy option for their bisexual clients. Elizabeth Smiley (1997) suggests that bisexuals may not be able to find happiness within mainstream sexual norms:

For many bisexual people, the American cultural value of monogamy restricts opportunities for a fully integrated, satisfying life. Some individuals discover they need multiple relationships in order to achieve the emotional, sensual and sexual gratification that heterosexuals often experience with one exclusive partner. (p.360)

Among bisexuals, polyamory is often spoken of as the “natural” way to express bisexuality. Coin Flipper, a poly woman with a bisexual male partner, describes monogamy as “having to deny one side of your body.” Bangkok Girl is more emphatic, suggesting “[i]f you are indeed bisexual then there is nothing to like about monogamy.” Even those women who identify themselves as inherently monogamous define bisexuality as a concurrent attraction to men and women (as opposed to other models, such as gender blindness), with polyamory as its implied expression. Adelle writes, “my bisexuality makes me tend towards polyamory for my sexual desires, since I like the idea of both men and women, but relationship-wise I prefer monogamy.”

Polyamory not only makes bisexuality visible, but also is seen as a norm in bisexual spaces. This norm arises in part because of the prominence of poly women in the bi community. Burleson (2005) found that 61% of the bi women who responded to an online survey identified as polyamorous, and 71% reported being nonmonogamous. A number of my participants felt that there is considerable overlap between bi and poly community membership. Since nonmonogamy is stigmatized in the mainstream, its acceptance within bi communities is vital to supporting

polyamorous bisexuals. Over a quarter of the women in my study (27.5%) report first hearing about polyamory through a bisexual group. “In the bi community,” Dianna writes, “it’s not assumed that I’m monogamous unless I specify so.” Community belonging may influence women’s views on polyamory, since more than half of the monogamous women (53%) view polyamory positively. Of those women who report having changed their views, only 11% had become more negative. Of the poly-identified women, 26% report having had negative or mixed feelings when they first heard about polyamory, but all report feeling positively about it now.

Being in a space where polyamory is the norm can be alienating for monogamous women. One participant, Marissa, writes that she had more bisexual friends when she was in an open relationship but adds, “since swearing off polyamory, I feel a bit uncomfortable and not included, because the majority of people are into this.” Diane, a bisexual activist and community leader, says that although bi spaces have been “very supportive” of her poly relationships, they were less so during times when she and her partner were monogamous. She reports, “people didn’t get it or couldn’t understand why we would be monogamous.” Violet reports feeling as if she must “defend or explain” her sexual choices to other bisexuals, and adds, “it sometimes feels like the defining line for being bi has been constructed as being poly.”

In order to counter the compulsory monogamy that operates in both straight and queer space, bi communities may assume everyone is, or ought to be, polyamorous. May, a 28-year old in a monogamous marriage with a man, finds bi spaces more inclusive and accepting of her than gay or lesbian spaces. Yet her experience of bi space is not entirely positive. She writes:

[T]here is still a focus on poly bisexuals that can feel marginalizing. There are not very many vocal or visible bi woman who have been living these same choices (married, monogamous, male partner) over a long period of time that can tell me how they have done it – reconciled these parts of themselves, kept them

alive, while living monogamously long term. It also feels like I am seen as conservative and not 'cutting edge queer' like the poly bi's.

The women in my study tended to describe their monogamy as a kind of failure, and suspected that others saw it that way too. Monogamous women talked about feeling "square," compared to poly women. Carrie wrote, "I run between feeling less evolved for not being able to share or be shared, to finding it not for me, full stop." Marissa reports feeling pressure to be polyamorous, but adds, "I don't know if it comes from them or me." This sense of inauthenticity may be one of the factors deterring monogamous women from participating in bisexual groups. Only half the monogamous women in my study considered themselves involved in bi community. Violet explains, "I think that it is easier to identify with bisexual culture if you are polyamorous and having relationships with people of both sexes." She adds that she finds it "harder to hold onto a bisexual identity in a long term monogamous relationship," and that her bisexuality leads her to question her fidelity to her partner. She writes:

I sometimes wonder if this temptation is about some idealized freedom or 'other self' that I think exists with a differently gendered partner than I currently have. When I had lesbian relationships, after a while, I also felt tempted by the lure of potential male partners. Maybe this 'two selves' is essential to everyone's bisexual identity – maybe it's just me or maybe it's a result of a gender dichotomous culture?

When bisexuality is assumed to be best expressed through polyamory, even women like Violet, who consciously choose a monogamous relationship, may feel as if they are missing out on some significant experience of identity development or expression.

Strategic Function of Monogamy

Kayley Vernallis (1999) argues that monogamy “involves important sacrifices in bisexuals’ self-expression,” and requires us “to sacrifice full sexual flourishing” (p. 347, 360). This perspective sees monogamous bisexuals as expressing only half their sexuality. Bisexuals sometimes speak this way themselves. One participant in my study, Elèna, notes that polyamory doesn’t fit her personality, but suggests that it “would make being bisexual and always somewhat missing the other gender easier.” This definition of bisexuality constructs monogamous bisexuals as incomplete or as sexually frustrated. Another participant, Judith, objects to the stereotype, observing, “I’m enjoying the benefits that I receive in a monogamous relationship and don’t feel that I’m missing out on anything at all.”

The monogamous women in my study identified intimacy and security as aspects of monogamy they found particularly appealing. Danielle writes, “I like the one-to-one focus... partnering for life and all that. In practice, it can be extremely difficult, but that’s part of its reward.” Adelle writes, “I like the closeness and loyalty it fosters, and I have a hard time imagining the same sort of closeness with multiple people simultaneously.” Several monogamous women associated polyamory with loss of focus. “[I]f you divide the time you spend with partners,” Louise Smith argues, “you also divide the connection and the intimacy accordingly.” For some women, monogamy provides a way to avoid the jealousy, stress and effort of juggling multiple relationships. Louise Smith admits, “I don’t feel that I have the time, emotional energy, or desire to pull it [polyamory] off.” Violet writes that she is “not emotionally secure enough to have a partner with other partners.”

Several women associated security of one type or another with sexual exclusivity. Liz admits that she likes not having to worry about STIs. Betty appreciates “the security of knowing

that there is one person who is there for me always.” Several monogamous women emphasised the secure environment that monogamy provides for raising children. Violet writes, “I like the idea of conventional commitment...I like the traditional nuclear family structure for raising children.” Of course, monogamy offers social benefits as well, not least of which is acceptance. Dinah’ writes, “Monogamy has a social function.... It provides a degree of safety for women (from the advances of other men). It provides economic benefits... and it provides a degree of social acceptance....” Louise Smith admits, “I’d also be lying if I didn’t say that a monogamous relationship is a lot easier to explain to the outside world.”

Visibly monogamous bisexuals counter the conflation of bisexuality with polyamory. Carrie reports that she often outs herself as monogamous “to challenge the stereotype.” Adelle admits, “that she might be more open to exploring polyamory herself, “if it weren’t for the fear that I’d be fulfilling the bisexual stereotype of being ultra-horny.” Bisexual activists have sometimes addressed the association of bisexuality with polyamory as a myth to be dispelled (Cahill, 2005; Norrgard, 1991; Human Rights Campaign, 2008). Educator and activist Sharon Forman Sumpter wrote, “Bisexuals are as capable as anyone of making a long-term monogamous commitment to a partner they love” (1991, p. 12). Yet as Bower et al. note, this attempt to counter stereotypes of bisexuals as hypersexual often “reinstates the hetero-normative ideal of monogamy” (2002, p. 38-39). Annie S. Murray (1995) argues that bi women need to examine our expectations of compulsory monogamy in relation to feminist goals, rather than uncritically opposing stereotypical associations between bisexuality and polyamory.

Bisexual women are thus faced with the question of how to challenge compulsory monogamy without defining polyamory as the norm for bisexuals. The issue is by no means easily solved, but I argue that viewing both monogamy and polyamory as strategies is a step

toward acknowledging that the two groups are not as distinct as they may seem. In my study, two monogamous women report having been in polyamorous relationships while still identifying as monogamous. Three of the women in monogamous relationships indicate they would prefer polyamory. In addition, over a quarter of monogamous women reported having threesomes, but did not feel that the practice makes them polyamorous. Adelle identifies as monogamous but was involved in several casual relationships at the time of the interview. She explains “monogamy only applies to ‘serious’ relationships, for me.”

The monogamous women in my study reported many challenges to maintaining their bisexual identity, and worried that others saw them as less authentically bisexual. This is a mental health issue, which requires political action within bisexual communities. Clinical psychologist Mary Bradford (2004) found that forming and maintaining a bisexual identity had positive effects on how bi women saw themselves, how independent they felt, how open they were to other people’s differences, and how rich their lives felt. Unless our communities address the expectation that *real* bisexuals are also polyamorous, monogamous women who join bi communities may be opening themselves to increased feelings of inadequacy and alienation, rather than escaping from them.

Usefulness of Shifting Identities

Having a constantly shifting mix of poly and monogamous women may be crucial to the stability and cohesion of bi women’s community. Julie Estep (2007) argues that polyamorous women find it easier to bond with monogamous people since there is no expectation of a sexual relationship. Bisexual community offers poly women a place of acceptance, perhaps even of social dominance, while also providing the monogamous friendships that Estep argues are so

important. If so, then shifts in identity (monogamous to poly or vice versa) may be responses not only to developments of personal identity, but to community needs.

Periods of polyamorous identity provide bi women with greater visibility, a sense of normative belonging in the bi community, and the caché of being “cutting edge.” Rejecting compulsory monogamy helps bisexual women distance themselves from heterosexist norms. At the same time, monogamy enables women to bond closely with a partner, engage in activities that depend upon that bond, and obtain a feeling of emotional security that ultimately contributes to their sense of identity. Monogamy also provides psychological distance from the stigma of bisexual stereotypes, and if Estep is correct, may facilitate friendships with polyamorous women.

Drawing upon models of sexuality such as the Kinsey Scale, polyamory advocate Peter Benson (2008) speculates that there might be “a continuous spectrum of orientation towards either polyamory or monogamy, with degrees between in which one can be happy with either kind of relationship,” an orientation he calls “bi amorous” (p.12). The existence of biamorous people might account for the 23% of women in my study whose relational identity had changed more than once. However, I agree with bisexual writer and activist William E. Burleson (2005) when he questions whether such orientation language implies that our relationship choices are “fixed and somewhat removed from personal agency” (p. 118). While the language of relational orientation may be politically expedient, it comes with a complex and contested political and scientific history, not least of which is an association with fixity that reflects androcentric models of sexuality.

Viewing monogamy and polyamory as strategic identities, rather than fixed sexual orientations can enable health care practitioners to avoid making facile assumptions about the sexual practice of their clients. Health care practitioners cannot presuppose that a client who

identifies as polyamorous has *any* sexual partners, let alone multiples. Viewing monogamy and polyamory as strategies can also help mental health practitioners assess the value of these strategies in their social context, especially if viewed intersectionally and grounded in the theory that mental illnesses have a social aetiology. Such an approach more accurately reflects the experience of bisexual women in my study, and could help to break down divisions within bisexual communities.

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