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Bisexual desires for more than one gender as a challenge to normative relationship ideals

Abstract

Normative western understandings of intimate relationships continue to draw upon the discourses of romantic love and the ideal of finding ‘the one’ who meets all our romantic and sexual needs. As desire is not sexually or emotionally exclusive, even people in normative relationships have to make sense of desires beyond the monogamous ideal. Bisexual people engage in these negotiations from a challenging cultural position. As a desire for more than one gender, bisexuality is persistently culturally associated with wavering desire, promiscuity and multiple partners. In light of these cultural conditions, I explore how Finnish bisexual women – and their (ex-)partners of various genders who do not identify as bisexual – negotiate desires that exceed the boundaries of normative relationships, such as attraction to ‘someone else’. I draw on the follow-up interviews of a longitudinal interview set conducted in 2005 and 2014–2015. The majority of the interviewed bisexual women and their (ex-)partners lived in monogamous long-term relationships. Yet women’s bisexuality often brought the monogamous norm under explicit negotiation. In many cases, bisexuality as a culturally ‘weak’ identity did not offer a solid frame for women to interpret their desires for people of more than one gender. The notion of bisexuality highlights the excess of sexuality beyond any normative relationship, but makes bisexual women especially vulnerable to stigma. The negotiations around women’s bisexual desires, however, broadened the participants’ (normative) ideas of relationships, and made space for women’s bisexuality in their monogamous relationships.

Keywords

bisexuality, relationships, queer, monogamy, non-monogamy, psychosocial analysis

Introduction

Despite the ongoing change that characterises many western societies, the romantic ideal of one partner who meets all our romantic and sexual needs continues to hold sway (Barker, 2013; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Heaphy, Smart, & Einarsdottir, 2013; van Hooff, 2017). At the beginning of the 1990s, sociological theories of reflexive modernization proposed that intimate relationships were no longer regulated by traditional institutions or expectations of normative life course progression, such as finding ‘the one’, getting married and staying ‘happily ever after’ in a monogamous relationship (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Jokinen, 2014). It was argued that intimate life had become a matter of reflection and ‘choice’, with emotional satisfaction central when people were deciding whether to continue a relationship (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). However, as traditional forms of family and kin decreasingly provide sources of belonging, and as working life becomes increasingly insecure with no guarantee of long-term contracts or workplace communities, romantic relationships have increased in importance as a source of validation, meaning and security (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Hemmings, 2012; Van Hooff, 2017). In a culture of ‘romantic renaissance’, individual pleasures are increasingly integrated into romantic relationships (Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009).

Consequently, attitudes towards infidelity in relationships have become increasingly judgemental in the early 21st century (Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009; National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, 2013; van Hooff, 2017). Monogamy, as the cultural ideal, is rarely questioned (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; van Hooff, 2017). Yet choosing to live monogamously is not the same as desiring to be sexually and emotionally exclusive (Finn,

2012; van Hooff, 2017). Even people in normative relationships have to negotiate desires that exceed the monogamous ideal (Finn, 2012).

Cherishing the normative form of the couple, and appearing ‘just like heterosexuals’, has also been a central means through which same-sex desire has finally gained social acceptance and legal recognition in a range of western countries in the long and complex lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer struggle for recognition (Butler, 2004; Clarke, 2003; Dahl, 2014; Warner, 2000). In Finland, which is the context for this study, a gender-neutral marriage law came into force on 1 March 2017. Earlier non-heterosexual generations often did not arrange their intimate lives so centrally around couple relationships: friendship and community played a more central role (Kuosmanen, 2007; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). Non-monogamous arrangements were especially common among gay men (Klesse, 2007), but in feminist and lesbian communities too monogamy has been critiqued as echoing patriarchal ideas about (men’s) ownership of women (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Deri, 2015; Jackson & Scott, 2004; Kuosmanen, 2007). During recent decades, consensually non-monogamous and polyamorous relationships have become a focus of academic research, and are culturally more visible across sexuality and gender divides (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Klesse, 2014; Klesse, 2017). Yet, in the current cultural climate, consensual non-monogamy does not seem to be a negotiable alternative for the majority of heterosexual men and women (Van Hooff, 2017). The recent adoption of mainstream culture’s normative relationship ideals in lesbian and gay politics has been criticised from feminist and queer perspectives, and by many LGBTIQ persons themselves. These ideals marginalize diverse queer lives that do not fall in with these norms (Butler, 2004; Peel & Harding, 2004; Rolfe & Peel, 2011; Warner, 2000; see also Jowett & Peel, 2017).

The increasing importance of normative relationship ideals may have particular effects on bisexual people's relationships. In this article, bisexuality refers to the experience of sexual attraction to or desire for people of more than one gender (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Eisner, 2013; Kangasvuo, 2014). Bisexual people's relationship choices are often read through 'negative' cultural associations of bisexuality (Hayfield, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014; Klesse, 2011). The first set of associations support the notion of bisexuality as a shifting and trendy identity, implying that heterosexuality and homosexuality are the proper sexual identities (Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2011; Souto Pereira, Becker, & Gardiner, 2017). Furthermore, women's bisexuality is often imbued with an air of inauthenticity not only in porn but also in mainstream media (see Gill, 2008), with the sole aim of enticing and exciting (presumed male) audiences (Kangasvuo, 2014). Another set of associations function as a way of delegitimizing bisexuality by stigmatizing bisexuals as untrustworthy and necessarily promiscuous in a culture where monogamous partnering is regarded as the most respectable way of organizing intimate relationships (DeCapua, 2017; Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Klesse, 2005, 2011).

People in various forms of relationships engage in boundary negotiations over where to draw the lines of sexual and emotional exclusivity (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Finn, 2012; Wosick-Correa, 2010). Yet, the cultural constructions that invalidate and stigmatize bisexual identity might prompt destabilizing dynamics in bisexual people's relationships (DeCapua, 2017; Klesse, 2011), whether they wish to engage in monogamous or non-monogamous relationships (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005, 2011). Bisexual women are particularly vulnerable to stigma if they wish to engage in non-monogamous relationship practices (Klesse, 2005, 2007).

Given the persistent gendered hierarchies that constitute relationships and (bi)sexualities (Lahti, 2015; Barker & Gill, 2011; Klesse, 2005), this study takes a closer look at bisexual

women's relationships. In light of the cultural association of bisexuality with being transitory, involving multiple partners, and promiscuity, I explore how Finnish bisexual women and their (ex-)partners of various genders negotiate desires that exceed the boundaries of normative relationships, such as attractions to someone else. I draw on the follow-up interviews of a longitudinal interview set conducted in 2005 and 2014–2015. I analyse how intersecting cultural constructions of relationships, genders and (bi)sexualities co-produce those negotiations. Psychosocial analysis will show that negotiations around bisexuality and exclusivity are not only made through discursive regulation, but are also shaped in interaction with affective, non-rational psychic dimensions of being in a relationship (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2006).

Queering bisexuality?

Queer theoretical accounts are often uncompromising in their critical analyses of the history of the homo/hetero distinction, gender- and sexuality-related norms, restrictive identity categories and the shoring up of heteronormative lifestyle(s) in various societal and cultural political contexts (Giffney, 2009, 2017; Hemmings, 2012). Yet, for the most part, queer theory remains curiously silent about bisexuality (Callis, 2009; Hemmings, 2002, 2012; Klesse, 2014). In this article, I address bisexuality as a contradictory identity that condenses some 'old' and still very acute queer theoretical issues about the recognition of sexual identities and queer intimate lives (see Butler, 2004; Warner, 2000).

Queer theory regards identities as messy, arguing 'that desire and thus desiring subjects cannot be placed into discrete identity categories, which remain static for the duration of people's lives' (Giffney, 2009, p. 2). In a queer theoretical vein, Sears (2014) suggests that the movement and ambiguity associated with bisexuality might be celebrated rather than

rejected. He writes: ‘this state of existential flux affords the opportunity to step outside categorical chains, experiencing life’s wonderment, unchattered, unmediated, and unbridled’ (Sears, 2014, p. 5). Yet it is problematic to expect bisexual subjects to be freer than other sexual subjects, or to assume that they are able to, or should, critically position themselves outside the discourses that produce them (Hemmings, 2002). Moreover, all too often bisexuals are thought to waver between homo- and heterosexuality, which are not questioned as valid sexualities in the same manner. This, again, invalidates the (even momentary) experience of bisexual desire for people of more than one gender at the same time (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014).

Bisexual people’s desires for people of various genders are at odds with the normative logic of the heterosexual matrix, where sex, gender and sexuality are seen as mutually constitutive (Butler, 1990; Gustavson, 2009). Within this normative frame, the gendered body is emphasised as an object choice of desire, whereas other aspects of a person are sidelined (Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2012). As a desire that cannot be bound to only one object choice within the man/woman dichotomy of the heterosexual matrix, bisexuality is associated either with wavering between two opposite poles or with multiple partners and promiscuity (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Klesse, 2005). The idea of multiple partners is thus possibly part of the bisexual imaginary, whether the idea is resisted as a stereotype about bisexuality or affirmed as a way of questioning the monogamous norm (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005, 2011; Lahti, 2015). There is, thus, a need to look more closely at the affective consequences this imaginary has on bisexual people and their relationships with their partners. This article explores how the binary logic of the heterosexual matrix, together with the strength of the monogamous norm, produce conditions of bisexualities to emerge in (normative) relationships.

Procedure

This article draws on a study of bisexuality and relationships with a longitudinal set of interviews.ⁱ The first data set of five couple interviews serves as a reference point. I originally interviewed seven bisexual women and their partners of various genders together as couples in 2005. The couples were recruited through a research invitation aimed at bisexual women and their partners. Four of the bisexual women had a female partner, two had a male partner, and one woman's partner identified as a trans man. I conducted individual follow-up interviews with 11 participants in 2014–2015. I was unable to reach two partners of one female couple, and one former female partner of a bisexual woman declined to participate and refused consent for me to use the 2005 couple interview.ⁱⁱ The longitudinal data enable me to analyse changes in how the interviewees see their (bi)sexual identities and relationships over time.

Four of the women who had accepted the original research invitation to speak as bisexual women also used it as an identity – ‘I am bi/bisexual’ – in the follow-up interviews; one identified as non-heterosexual; one woman did not label herself. The latter said that she strongly felt that she wanted to share her life with a man. However, she referred to many of her past and present (sexual) experiences as bisexual. None of the (ex-)partners identified as bisexual.ⁱⁱⁱ Most participants' gender identities stayed the same across both interviews. One partner who had identified as a woman in the first interview reported in the follow-up that their gender was currently ‘in the making’. One partner who had identified as a trans man in the first interview had settled into the gender identity of a man by the follow-up interview.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in five Finnish cities, and lasted between one and four hours. They were audio-recorded and transcribed using a simplified version of Jefferson's (2004) system. The participants were white ethnic Finns/Europeans aged 22 to 42

at the time of the first interview and 32 to 52 at the follow-up. The interviewees were well educated: by the follow-up interviews, eight of them held degrees, and three had vocational qualifications. At the time of the interviews in 2005, the couples' relationships had lasted from three to seven years.

By the time of the follow-up interviews, the majority of the participants had separated, and most of them had found new partners. One other-sex couple had stayed married. In 2014–2015, two of the bisexual women were in long-term relationships with men, three were married to men, and one was involved with men and women. Of the former partners, three men were in other-sex marriages, one woman was in a registered partnership with a woman, and one was single. By the time of the 2014–2015 interviews, nine of the 11 interviewees had children.

Interviewing couples together and apart generates different kinds of interview talk (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013). In the couple interviews of 2005, relationship stories drawing on 'marriage and family' were dominant, and the woman's bisexuality easily disappeared from view (Lahti, 2015). The interviewees positioned themselves within the homo/hetero distinction or as a trans couple on the basis of their partner's gender. The woman's bisexuality was present in other-sex couples' talk as the woman's attractions to women or the couple's joint fantasies about an imaginary third (female) party in their relationship. In the female and trans couples' talk, the woman's bisexuality appeared as a stereotypical depiction of a bisexual woman who could leave her partner and take off with a (cisgendered) man any time. Bisexual women's potential desires for (cisgendered) men were therefore avoided as a conversational topic. Instead, the bisexual women stressed their commitment to their partner (Lahti, 2015).

I did not take the couple interviews of 2005 as the point of departure for the follow-up interviews, preferring to leave it to the participants to judge the significance of that relationship across the entirety of their relational lives. I therefore started the follow-up interviews with an open-ended narrative question centred on participants' romantic and sexual relationships, adopting a focused version of Wengraf's (2001) biographical narrative interview method. The individual interviews in 2014–2015 can be described as rich biographical accounts of interviewees' intimate relationships, which gave a more multifaceted picture of participants' (past and current) relationships and featured women's bisexual experiences.

Since the woman's bisexuality easily disappeared in the normative relationship talk in the couple interviews, and was mainly discussed in relation to the bisexual woman's (potential) desires for people whose gender(s) were other than their partner's (Lahti, 2015), I wanted to address this issue in the follow-up interviews. As a method of eliciting negotiations about attractions to 'someone else', I used an interview question about how the interviewees would react to attractions (their own or their partner's) to someone outside their relationship.

Nonetheless, negotiations around desires that exceeded the boundaries of normative couple relationships also appeared in response to other interview questions – for example, a question concerning how interviewees defined their sexual identity, and a question concerning how interviewees thought their relationships would be organised in an ideal world – and emerged spontaneously during the interviews. Next, I will explain the analytical process through which these negotiations, which were a frequently occurring theme in the follow-up interviews, became the central focus of this article.

Psychosocial analysis

This study highlights the benefits of a close reading of a small body of data (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Blackman, 2015). I conducted the analysis by combining Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) with a psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2007; Woodward, 2015). Following Foucault's (1981) notion of the production of subjects within discursive power relations, my aim was to closely explore the affective consequences of Finnish bisexual women's and their (ex-)partners' utilization of cultural constructions of bisexuality, which have been widely identified in previous research as producing bisexuality as temporary, wavering and promiscuous (e.g. Hayfield et al., 2014; Hubbard & de Visser, 2015; Kangasvu, 2014). Yet, it turned out that bisexuality in a relationship context is a much more complex matter than accepting or rejecting stereotypical cultural constructions of bisexuality. Therefore I began to analyse more closely how bisexualities in relationships are co-produced by the hierarchical cultural construction of (binary) genders, sexualities and relationship discourses.

To better understand the contradictory positionings, tensions and affective dimensions of being in and discussing bisexuality and monogamous relationships that were present in the interviews, I turned to a psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2007; Woodward, 2015). Psychosocial research engages in the question of the relationship between the social and the psychological, and conceptualizes the subject as formed in the intertwining of the 'internal' psychological and 'external' social, 'always immersed in a flux that is neither inside nor out' (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 354; Pirskanen, 2008). While the subject is always constrained and made through discursive regulation (Foucault, 1981), the subject also has (unconscious) conflicting desires, anxieties and needs (Woodward, 2015). In my analysis of bisexual women's and their partners' talk, the psychosocial approach meant paying close attention to the interviewees' utilization of certain discourses and identity categories, as well as taking into account the affective and irrational aspects of experience for

which a person might find it hard to give verbal expression (Woodward, 2015). This meant paying attention in the interviewees' talk to affectively intense moments, absences, silences and contradictions (Roseneil, 2006; Trivelli, 2015).

When reading and rereading the data, it struck me that interviewees often contradicted themselves, and that affective tensions were present when the interviewees discussed 1) their bisexual identity and desires, 2) their relationship arrangements and ideals (monogamous or non-monogamous), and 3) the attractions they or their partners might feel to someone outside the relationship. Through a close reading of these contradictions, I realized that bisexual women's desires for various genders, or desires for people whose gender(s) were other than their partner's, were often at heart of these contradictions. This led me to pose the research question at the heart of this article.

Negotiating desires that exceeded the boundaries of normative relationships, however, was not just about the dilemma over whether to be monogamous or not, or about opposing some stereotypical cultural depictions of bisexuality as hypersexual or promiscuous. Rather, the consequences of bisexual women's desires for more than one gender often seemed to be interpreted through a dichotomous understanding of sexuality and gender. For example, women would give thought to whether they should live their lives with a partner of a different gender from their current partner. This did not mean that bisexuality was completely unavailable as an identity position or explanatory frame, but because of the dominant cultural frameworks that still stress the binary understanding of sexuality and gender, bisexuality often appeared as a somewhat 'weak' identity. This produced affective tensions and contradictions that bisexual women and their partners needed to deal with.

By engaging in psychosocial analysis, my article offers a new perspective on bisexuality which shows that 'social' and 'psychic' aspects of experiences cannot be easily separated.

The analysis highlights how bisexual women and their (ex-)partners engage in two inextricably intertwining forms of affective work: reconciling the tensions between the socially available subject positions of (binary) genders, sexualities and relationships with the ‘internal’ work of handling (unconscious) desires; and conflicts and ambivalence that contradict those positions (Craib, 1994; Roseneil, 2006; Woodward, 2015), which can manifest itself for example in the way interviewees constantly contradict themselves in their talk (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Roseneil, 2006). The analysis not only highlights the constraining effects of stereotypical cultural constructions of bisexuality for relationships (see Klesse, 2011), but also the affective work in which bisexual women and their (ex-)partners engage in a situation where there is a scarcity of cultural resources for making intelligible bisexual desires for variously gendered partners.

Analysis

Bisexual, non-heterosexual and non-labelled women’s desires for more than one gender initiated multifaceted negotiations around sexuality and identity labels in the participants’ follow-up interviews, resonating with the queer theoretical notion that an identity label never fully represents one’s desires^{iv} (Butler, 1991; Giffney, 2017; Sears, 2014). Yet these negotiations were also affected by powerful heteronormative epistemologies: women also made sense of their desires through the homo/hetero and man/woman binaries (Klesse, 2011). When they resorted to these binary categories, bisexuality often appeared as a somewhat precarious identity.

As sexuality exceeds the regulatory categories of the heterosexual matrix, this applies equally to monogamy (Butler, 1991; Finn, 2012). In both sets of interviews, most participants presented their relationships as monogamous in practice. In the 2005 interviews, one other-

sex relationship was an agreed open relationship that was only 'put into practice' after the first interview. In the follow-up interviews, one bisexual woman said that she had a deal with her male partner that if an occasion arose when she would like to have sex with a woman, they would discuss it. The interviewees' approach to the issue of exclusivity varied from considering it an unquestioned cornerstone of a relationship – 'the basic thing' (Eva, bisexual woman) (all names are pseudonyms) – to understanding it as a matter of reflection and choice. An interview question about crushes (one's own or one's partner's) on someone outside the relationship evoked multifaceted negotiations about desires that exceed the boundaries of the normative couple relationship.

The following overview of my analytical categories shows how the notion of bisexuality, constructed through the hierarchical and dichotomous categories of gender and sexuality and the affective dimension of being in a relationship, shaped and reproduced these negotiations:

- 1) Bisexual women's attractions to someone whose gender was other than their partner's raised questions about the interrelations between their desires, their (bi)sexual identities and their partner's gender.
- 2) Bisexuality could temporarily appear as a practice of having multiple romantic/sexual relationships with persons of various genders, or as a fantasy of this kind of practice as an ideal way of organizing relationships. These imaginings were, however, quite easily abandoned as unrealisable 'in the real world'.
- 3) One reason for participants abandoning non-exclusive fantasies was the threat their partners' (imagined) attractions to others posed to them as partners. By committing themselves to monogamy, the interviewees wanted to protect themselves from this threat, and from other painful feelings such as jealousy.

4) However, the experience of this threat was also shaped by the dichotomous and hierarchical categories of the heterosexual matrix, which places men above women and heterosexuality above homosexuality. Women's desire for, and even sex with, women was constructed as less threatening to any relationship or partner, which explains why in some cases it became the exception to the monogamous norm.

Precarious bisexuality and gendered attractions

In bisexual women's accounts of their long-term relationships, their desires were gendered in different and often complex ways. Eva's account, in which her bisexual identity offered her a solid frame to interpret her desires for various genders, was an exception rather than the rule: 'I'm always in the relationship where I currently am. Like now I'm with Samuel. It does not change in any way that I'm bisexual. It does not affect, like, what turns me on or... When I was with Jenny, I was with Jenny' (Eva, bisexual woman).

For other women, their desires for people whose gender(s) were other than their partner's raised questions about the interrelations between their desires, their partner's gender, and (bi)sexual identities (see Bishop, 2016). Here, Sara navigates her desires and bisexual identity during and after her previous long-term relationship:

It was a topic of discussion in our relationship --- that they [her partner] are not a woman, at least not 100% a woman --- and it always confirmed my definition of myself as bisexual, like it's okay for me --- now they are in evaluation for the gender transition process --- yes, yes. It was rare, but if I had attractions that were sexual in tone to someone else, it was more towards men. At that stage, I always thought that you desire the most what you don't have. When it is the

other gender that is not present in our relationship. --- That somehow the thing that is lacking is more attractive or what you don't get is more interesting.

Because I still consider having lived with a woman. But now, it was quite a nice experience after the break-up --- to notice that it was interesting --- also for me to go to a women's bar. Like, yes, I've been bisexual. (Sara, bisexual woman)

Neither Sara's desires nor her ex-partner's gender conform to the binary categorizations of sex, gender and sexuality. For Sara, her ex-partner's non-binary gender identity – 'at least not 100% a woman' – strengthened her sense of her own bisexual identity. Yet, parallel to these more fluid experiences and understandings, the binary categorizations of gender and (bi)sexuality affect how Sara perceives her desires. In this frame, bisexuality is understood as a dual desire for 'both' men and women (see Klesse, 2011). Thus the attractions Sara felt towards men during her registered partnership were understandable, since they offered something that was not present in what she perceived as a monogamous female relationship. However, in this binary frame, her attractions for (cisgendered) men, combined with her ex-partner's decision to undergo evaluation for the gender transition process (and possibly to give up her identity as a butch woman), might have prompted doubts about her bisexuality. Early on in the interview, Sara said: 'I wanted to explore, like, what am I, am I bisexual now or what? After the long relationship, I wasn't sure any more.' For a bisexual woman who had been committed to her female relationship, both personally and politically, and who was aware of its inferior status in the homo/hetero hierarchy, such questioning might be a rather unsettling experience. Sara explains joyously that, after the break-up with her partner, she found it interesting to go to a women's bar. Her interest in women was confirmed, and thereby her bisexual identity.

Klesse (2011) has pointed out that the cultural undermining of bisexuality might contribute to bisexual people's partners worrying that their bisexual partners will eventually come to a

conclusion that they are much more attracted to another gender. Discourses on bisexuality not only affect how ‘others’ or bisexual women’s partners construct bisexuality, but also how women perceive their own desires. Sara’s account reveals that the lack of validation for bisexual identity is a complex issue. It also points to the lack of words for experiencing desires for variously gendered partners, with whom sexual pleasures might (or might not) be experienced differently (Storr, 1999).

Another bisexual woman, Emma, who at the time of the follow-up interview had been married to a man for a long period, also constructed her bisexual desire along the homo/hetero and man/woman binaries.

That’s also one thing that can affect my companionable relationship with [my husband] Elias, that in the end he’s only a man ((laughs)) so he’s not so exciting and interesting to me physically. I never have sex dreams about men.

If I’m honest with myself, I had quite a lot of sex with Elias as well in the beginning. He was quite interesting to me then ((laughs)) so I can’t blame him... ((laughs)) (Emma, bisexual woman)

Emma describes her relationship with her husband as ‘companionable’. She explains this by implying that she is sexually more interested in women. Thus her partner (his gender) becomes an exception to her sexual desire. The hegemonic position of the heterosexual relationship, however, affects how this experience can be talked about. Emma can joke about her husband being ‘only a man’ without it seriously threatening her marriage. A competing popular discourse tells Emma that the intensity of one’s sex life tends to decline over the course of a long-term relationship (see, for example, Heaphy et al., 2013). Emma and her

husband enjoyed a lot of sex at the beginning, so she feels she cannot blame his gender for the decline in her physical interest in him.

However, her ex-girlfriend appears in her talk as an imaginary third party (Lahti, 2015). With her, Emma has a conversation in her mind about whether a relationship with a woman would be more appealing:

I'm a little scared if she [interviewee's ex-girlfriend] suddenly came and said should we get back together and then I would suddenly say yes ((laughs)) or then no. I have my family now and this has all been happy and good and I'm not going to give it away any more. (Emma, bisexual woman)

In the heterosexual matrix, an individual's sexual identity is imposed by their partner's gender (Butler, 1990). In the case of bisexuality, the partner's gender in a monogamous relationship fails to do this (Gustavson, 2009). This may be why bisexuality – here referring to the experience of desire for more than one gender – can sometimes become a (mental) pendulum between differently gendered desires, rather than a resting place or stable location. However, as Sears (2014) suggests, this movement can also be a source of pleasurable fantasies, especially in an other-sex relationship, which cannot be culturally undermined as easily as a same-sex relationship.

Tension between secure relationships and non-exclusive fantasies

It became evident in the follow-up interviews that the sense of being bisexual may decline over the course of a long-term relationship. When no longer bound to a dyadic relationship, or when a couple commitment was not 'fully' in place, many of the bisexual women (as well as their former partners) revisited their sexuality (Lahti, 2017). Sexual experiences with

people of various genders could strengthen the participants' bisexual identities; as Mia (bisexual woman) phrased it, 'it reasserted the sense that one [also] likes women.'

When I asked the interviewees how their relationships would be organised in an ideal world, three bisexual women immediately brought up the possibility of non-exclusive emotional and sexual relationships with multiple partners. Sara (bisexual woman) said: 'If I were to get married again I would, I'd probably negotiate a very different deal or I'd bring up that should we keep this relationship open or can we have other relationships. I don't think any more that [monogamy] is the best option.' Yet these remarks were often expressed in a playful tone.

The bisexual women could fantasize for a while:

There was this film back in the day where the woman had, she lived in a house where there were men and women, was it French...? I don't remember, but when I saw it, I thought, this would be an ideal [situation]. You'd have ((laughing)) a relationship with a woman and with a man, and then there were these third and fifth parties...--- And no one was jealous of anyone. (Emma, bisexual woman)

In Emma's fantasy, emotional and sexual relationships with people of various genders can coexist. Women's bisexual desire is often present in these imaginings, yet it was also downplayed because of the negative associations attached to bisexuality. Sara (bisexual woman) said: 'It's not like I need to have sex with both genders so that otherwise I would feel somehow in need --- I don't feel like I am that kind of hyper- --- hypersexual bisexual.'

All three interviewees who presented the non-exclusive option as an ideal ultimately pulled back. They resorted to the common assumption that non-exclusive arrangements cannot be realised in the 'real world' (Barker, 2013; van Hooff, 2017). The results of people not committing themselves to dyadic relationships were described in somewhat hazy terms, such

as ‘it would get too messy’ (Ella, non-labelled woman) or ‘I don’t think it would be a very nice world’ (Sara, bisexual woman). By regulating their sexuality, people will be protected from their own humanity, from ‘how people are’ (Sara). This reasoning circles around the (moral) idea that monogamy is a choice for those interested in mature and stable relationships (Heaphy et al., 2013). By committing themselves to monogamy, the interviewees also wanted to protect themselves and their partners from painful feelings such as ‘jealousy’ (Emma, bisexual woman), ‘abandonment or being left out’ (Sara, bisexual woman) or ‘being second best’ (Mia, bisexual woman).

Finn (2012) has argued that maintaining the monogamous order requires a constant staving off of chaotic sexual excess. In Emma’s case, this meant working with one’s wants and expectations. She explained: ‘You don’t get everything in life that you want. Not in your sex life either.’ She stressed that ‘if you are content enough’ in your relationship, it is important not to set your expectations too high: ‘If you are not trying to reach for the moon, you won’t fall from on high ((laughs)).’ Emma described the deep intimate connection in her relationship, and explained that she and her husband were moderate people who did not hanker after a lot of adventure and excitement. Yet in another part of the interview she described her current life situation as ‘dead boring’. This was because recently she had felt ‘not even any feeble crushes, no, no, no’.

Like Emma, the other interviewees also kept contradicting themselves on the issue of exclusivity, highlighting a typical dilemma in contemporary western relationships: people yearn for deep and secure connections in their relationships, while also wanting those relationships to feel exciting and alive (Perel, 2007; Shaw, 2013). Bisexuality renders this tension visible and brings it under scrutiny in a particular way. As a desire for more than one gender, bisexuality highlights the excess of sexuality beyond the cultural ideal of the dyadic

relationship, because it challenges the normative ideal of one partner who meets all our emotional and sexual needs.

One's partner's attractions as a threat to oneself

Living monogamously often seemed to come down to the fact that non-monogamous practices 'would mean giving your partner the same possibility' (Mia, bisexual woman).

Many of the interviewees had desires that exceeded relationship boundaries, and most could see that their partners would have them too. However, the interviewees differed in how they dealt with their own attractions to someone else or responded to those of their partners. They talked relatively openly about their own desires and attractions to 'others'. For example, Ella (non-labelled woman) said: 'I'm always falling for someone.' Their accounts highlighted positive affect. Emma (bisexual woman) explained: 'I have told [my husband] about it [the crushes] myself ... it's like ... you like to share, like I've found this this lovely thing or a book ... like you share other joys, like I've met this exciting person.' For Ava (non-heterosexual woman), 'It's a good thing ... it creates energy and I think that it somehow brings joy to one's life.'

When I asked how they would react if they found out their partner had a crush on someone else, the reactions were more negative, with a focus on being hurt, while some even denied the very possibility:

I think it would hurt me or like why. Does he want to be with that other person or with me or what? --- I'd start to think that he should get his own place where he can think about this in solitude. --- I've never had any desire to end up being second best. (Mia, bisexual woman)

Ava (non-labelled woman) would 'rather not know about such crushes'; Kai (ex-partner, man) 'would be quite surprised' if his current female partner would have a crush on someone else and Emma (bisexual woman) was relieved to have a partner who was not keen on others: 'he still hasn't admitted that he might have had a crush on anyone else.' It seemed to me that while the interviewees could discuss their partners' attractions to 'another' at a general level, the interview question about the crushes one's partner might have on 'someone else' seemed to evoke the implicit threat posed by a 'third party' to a dyadic relationship, or to the interviewees as partners (Stenner, 2013). For example, for Kai (ex-partner, man), a crush (his own or his wife's) on 'another' would be 'a big thing' because 'you would start to think what is your place in the relationship.'^v Other interviewees' reluctance to even think that their partners might have a crush on someone else can be interpreted as a defence mechanism (Chodorow, 1999), its function being to repress the painful threat the third party seems to pose to them as partners and to their relationship.

None of the interviewees engaged with polyamorous efforts to deconstruct the normative idea that a third party is not a threat to a relationship (Deri, 2015). A monogamous relationship offers a socially respected set of feeling rules for dealing with anxieties and mixed feelings around desires that go beyond the boundaries of normative relationships (Hochschild, 1979). According to these rules, a mature way of dealing with such desires would be to reject or at least not act on them. However, as the analysis in this section shows, (neither) monogamous (nor polyamorous) relationship practices or ideals can protect us from experiencing desires that exceed our current commitments, or from the threat that our partners' desires for others might pose to us as partners or to our relationships (Deri, 2015; Perel, 2007; Wosick-Correa, 2010).

Women's desire for women – an exception to the monogamous norm

The previous section discussed the threat that interviewees' partners' attractions to others could pose to them as partners. It is important to acknowledge that the severity of this threat was gendered. Within the hierarchical power relations of the heterosexual matrix, women's desire for or even sex with women was constructed as less threatening than desire for men to any partner or relationship, and thus became an exception to the monogamous norm (cf. Faderman, 1982).^{vi}

The bisexual women and their male partners alike often constructed the woman's desire for women as different from her desire for men. It was this desire that initiated the negotiations about whether the participants' other-sex relationship should be monogamous.

Well, in the beginning we talked about it [the possibility of the interviewee having sex with a woman], it was more topical at that time because I had been with women, but now I haven't had needs on that side. Well, he has this basic man's view that he would like to participate, but I don't necessarily want that, because for me it would be a rare change to be [with a woman]. Maybe it would be nice to just be the two of us. But I don't know, there's been no concrete situation so far. (Mia, bisexual woman)

Mia comments on her male partner's idea that 'he would like to participate' if she has sex with a woman as 'this basic man's view' (see also DeCapua, 2017). This points to representations of bisexual women in pornography as well as in contemporary media, where 'girl-on-girl' action is understood as exciting, fun and 'hot', but is mainly portrayed as satisfying male fantasies, not as an autonomous sexuality (Gill, 2008; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014). Nevertheless, Mia rejects her partner's participation, because it would be an exceptional opportunity for her to be with a woman.

The power relations of the heterosexual matrix are also reflected in the following account, where a bisexual woman's ex-partner explains how he felt about her sexual relationships with men and women within an agreed open relationship. The woman was allowed to explore her bisexuality with a woman, as the man saw that he 'cannot become a woman'.

I allowed it ... when for the first time ... these others came from outside our relationship, like crushes ... and that way a real sex relationship with a woman ... I quite accepted it ... I had this thought ... she's never been with a woman, like she should experience it, that it wouldn't rock our boat ... but then when these men came along who were completely from a different camp... than I am, well, it was ... I reacted to it in a totally different way and right away it felt so much worse. (Leo, ex-partner, man)

For Leo, his open relationship with Ella was tolerable as long as her affairs were confined to women. When she became involved with men as well, his jealousy was intensified.

For Mia, her male partner's relationships with other women would be more threatening to the relationship than her own relationships with women. Thus, she thought that it would be all right if she had sex with a woman, but if her heterosexual male partner were to do the same it would be different. For another bisexual woman, this was an obstacle to opening up her marriage.

In addition to my partner's gender, I have chosen to live in a monogamous relationship. It wasn't self-evident, but I found that it would have been too difficult for me to keep that option open. I think that if I had had a relationship, like in addition to this relationship, with another woman it would have meant something totally different to me. Well, it could have been something slightly different for him as well, but in my mind it would have felt like a different

thing. I think it would have been complicated and led to risky situations. (Ava, non-labelled woman)

Despite Ava's construction of her desire for women as something different, she nevertheless thought that if the exclusive couple relationship were to be opened up, it should be open for both partners. She did not want this, since she felt it would put her in a competitive position with regard to her husband's other female partners:

For some reason, when I was with Anna, I didn't think it would be a competitive position, or a reason for jealousy. That you would start feeling insecure because the other one has a crush on someone else ... But now I think that I'm more prone to thinking that and I'd rather not know about such crushes. (Ava, non-labelled woman)

When Ava was in a registered partnership with a woman, she did not feel insecure when her partner had a crush on another woman. However, if her husband had crushes on other women it would, according to her interpretation, put her in a competitive position with them, which made her feel vulnerable. This highlights how the unequal gendered positions in other-sex relationships (and the heterosexual matrix) would affect how bisexual women and their partners relate to 'imaginary' (Lahti, 2015) and real third parties in their relationships.

Discussion

In this research, fantasies about and relationships with variously gendered partners were often constructed as different, by both the bisexual women and their partners. Bisexual women's desires for variously gendered partners raised questions about the interrelations between the women's desires, their (bi)sexual identities and their partner's gender. In these cases,

bisexuality as a culturally ‘weak’ identity did not offer a solid frame through which to interpret women’s bisexual desires. Women, therefore, also resorted to homo/hetero and man/woman binaries. Given the strength of these binaries, there was often a certain kind of wavering in bisexual women’s accounts of their desires. This culturally imposed ‘existential instability’ of bisexuality (Sears, 2014, p. 5) requires affective work – not only on the part of bisexual women, but also by their partners.

The majority of the interviewed bisexual women and their (ex-)partners lived in monogamous long-term relationships. Yet women’s bisexuality often brought the monogamous norm under explicit negotiation in their relationships. Participants’ negotiations over attractions that exceeded the boundaries of a normative couple highlight the typical dilemma in contemporary relationships: the tension between ‘unstable’ and excessive sexual desire, and the wish for a stable and secure (monogamous) relationship. Between relationships, bisexuality could temporarily appear as a sexual practice involving multiple romantic/sexual relationships with various genders (Lahti, 2017), or as a fantasy of this kind of practice as an ideal way of organizing relationships.

Nonetheless, fantasies of non-exclusive arrangements were easily abandoned. By committing themselves to monogamy, the interviewees wanted to protect themselves from the unspoken threat their partners’ (imagined) attractions to others seemed to pose to them as partners.

Produced through the gendered hierarchies of the heterosexual matrix, women’s own desire for or even sex with other women was constructed as less threatening to any partner or relationship than desire for other men, and could become an exception to the monogamous norm.

In order to envision new ways of arranging relationships, it is necessary to engage critically with the unspoken vulnerabilities and painful feelings psychosocial analysis has revealed

(Craib, 1994; Deri, 2015). An awareness of the pervasiveness of the triangular, gendered structure of (social) relationships in our culture might help one deal with the rivalry and jealousy it often produces, and which can be played out in various forms of relationships (Stenner, 2013; see also Deri 2015; Wosick-Correa, 2010).

Equally, the ‘vulnerability’ of bisexuality as an easily undermined, excessive and potentially promiscuous sexuality needs further research attention. There has been little space for bisexuality in recent lesbian and gay political activism concentrating on marriage rights, which stresses the similarity of non-heterosexual couples to the heterosexual couple norm (Kangasvuo, 2014; see also Maliepaard, 2015). Bisexual activism and research is still sporadic in Finland, but seems to be gaining momentum in the USA and UK (Barker, 2016). This has the potential to normalize bisexual experiences and open up space for bisexual identities that are not so easily undermined. In a culture that regards the monogamous couple as the most respectable way of arranging one’s intimate life, being associated with wavering and promiscuity might not feel very celebratory to bisexual people. Yet there is a need for caution about the normalizing logic of (bisexual) activism, which often seeks to represent bisexuals as being as (non-)monogamous, (un)stable and harmless as anyone else (Barker, 2016; Dahl, 2014; Eisner, 2013). The tensions around the notion of bisexuality cannot be simply solved by ‘cleansing’ bisexuality of negative ‘stereotypes’.

The bisexual women in this research highly valued their committed long-term relationships; yet, desires to explore their sexuality beyond normative couple relationships were also present in their biographies. Their bisexual identities often persisted over the longitudinal study, but because of the strength of the homo/hetero and man/woman binaries, it could also be difficult to gain ‘a sense of being’ in an identity position or relationship as a bisexual person.

Continuous attention needs to be paid to how and why complex bisexual experiences are culturally and relationally undermined. Often this is because bisexual desires are seen as a threat to the monogamous norm and the normative ideal of one partner who meets all our emotional and sexual needs. This makes bisexual people (unjustifiably) vulnerable to stigma. However, in this study, the negotiations around women's bisexual desires broadened participants' (normative) ideas of relationships, and made space for the women's bisexuality in their monogamous relationship narratives. Most of the participants did not talk about monogamy in such self-evident terms as might be expected in the current cultural climate of romantic renaissance. Bisexuality cannot be easily tied down to a culturally stable identity position. Yet the wavering associated with it might also keep (bi)sexual desire moving, and function as a form of resistance to the normative tendencies to tame queer sexualities.

References

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ⁱ This article analyses follow-up interviews with bisexual women and their (ex-)partners. Only one other-sex couple had stayed married. I therefore analyse the parts of their individual follow-up interviews that concern the woman partner's bisexuality. The ex-partners' data play a relatively minor role in the analysis, because the interviews revealed that none of the ex-partners' current partners identifies as bisexual. However, I do analyse those parts of the ex-partners' data that concern their relationships with their bisexual (ex-)partners. Section three of the analysis also analyses all the parts where interviewees discuss their own or their partners' attractions to someone else.

ⁱⁱ I was thus able to use five original couple interviews in the study.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the time of the couple interviews in 2005, bisexual women's cis and trans male partners all identified as heterosexual. Female partners often did not label themselves, but implied that they were lesbians rather than

bisexuals; one did not label herself at all. Most participants reported similar sexual identities in both interviews. One female (ex-)partner, who had not adopted any specific label in the couple interview, identified strongly as a lesbian in the follow-up interview; one former female partner implied that she was now also attracted to men.

^{iv} One non-heterosexually identified woman's account highlighted the complexity of negotiating sexual identity beyond the hetero/homo binary. She said she had accepted the original research invitation to talk as a bisexual woman as a compromise, but that she would not deliberately label herself bisexual. She said that she used the term non-heterosexual, which she specified to mean that she was not interested in men. She said that she also would not want to say that she was a lesbian who had found one exception among men (referring to her current husband).

^v Stenner (2013) has analysed jealousy as emerging out of social systems that have an implicit triangular structure. For example, romantic relationships can be understood as psychosocial systems where unity is achieved by excluding a 'third'. According to Stenner (2013), a rival threatens to 'interrupt' a valued relationship and expose the subject to exclusion from their relationship with the valued object – in this case the interviewee's exclusion from the relationship with their partner.

^{vi} Bisexual women's situation in heterosexual relationships curiously echoes the situation in the west during the 18th and 19th centuries, when women's romantic friendships were tolerated because women's oppression prevented those relationships from being a serious threat to marriage or male power (Faderman, 1982).