

JYU DISSERTATIONS 87

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**Annukka Lahti**

# Bisexuality in relationships

A queer psychosocial approach

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UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND  
SOCIAL SCIENCES

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**Annukka Lahti**

**Bisexuality in relationships**  
**A queer psychosocial approach**

Esitetään Jyväskylän yliopiston humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellisen tiedekunnan suostumuksella  
julkisesti tarkastettavaksi Agora-rakennuksen Delta-salissa  
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Olli-Pekka Moisio

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä

Timo Hautala

Open Science Centre, University of Jyväskylä

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## ABSTRACT

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Bisexuality refers to the experience of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of more than one gender. Bisexuality is persistently culturally associated with being only a temporary identity, having multiple partners and being promiscuous. This study explores how bisexuality emerges in contemporary relationships: how it fits, contests or expands normative understandings of couple relationships, which continue to draw upon the discourses of romantic love, marriage and the ideal of finding 'the one' who meets all our romantic and sexual needs. In particular, it examines how a sample of Finnish bisexual women, and their (ex-)partners of various genders, negotiate bisexuality in their relationships, and the affective consequences it has for those partners and relationships.

The study draws on a longitudinal set of interviews, which consists of five (originally seven) couple interviews with bisexual women and their partners conducted in 2005, and 11 individual follow-up interviews conducted some 10 years later in 2014–2015. It develops a theoretical-methodological hybrid: a queer psychosocial approach to analysing participants' relationships talk. This means attending to interviewees' investments in certain heteronormative discourses and identity categories, as well as taking account of affective, unconscious and excessive aspects of experience, which can be noted by paying attention to affectively intensive moments, thickly narrated passages, tensions and discrepancies in interviewees' talk.

The analysis highlights how the binary logic of the heterosexual matrix together with the strength of the monogamous norm produce conditions of possibility for bisexualities to emerge in relationships. Through those conditions, bisexuality emerges as a 'weak' identity. Given the strength of the homo/hetero binary, bisexual women's accounts of their desires wavered between this binary, which implied that bisexual women did not easily gain 'a sense of being' as a bisexual person in a relationship. Bisexuality often disappeared in normative relationship talk.

The majority of the interviewed bisexual women and their (ex-)partners lived in monogamous long-term relationships. Yet, the women's bisexuality and the presence of their desires for people whose gender(s) were other than their partners', often brought the monogamous norm under explicit negotiation. Bisexuality highlighted the typical tension of contemporary relationships: the tension between 'unstable' and excessive sexual desire and the wish for a stable and secure (monogamous) relationship. Several of the bisexual women also discussed affective experiences of sexual excess beyond cultural norms about relationships and gender. Excessive sexual experiences often played a propulsive role as women strived to become sexual subjects. Sexuality's excess thus has the potential to complicate bisexual women's relationship with norms that dictate how they should be sexual.

Keywords: bisexuality, relationships, queer, psychosocial, monogamy, non-monogamy, affect

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Lahti, Annukka

Biseksuaalisuus: queer-psykososiaalinen lähestymistapa

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Biseksuaalisuus määritellään emotionaaliseksi, seksuaaliseksi ja/tai romanttiseksi kiinnostukseksi useampaa kuin yhtä sukupuolta kohtaan. Kulttuurisesti biseksuaalisuutta pidetään usein häilyvänä seksuaalisuutena, ja biseksuaaleja monia kumppaneina kaipaavina ja yliseksuaalisina. Tämä väitöstutkimus tarkastelee, miten biseksuaalisuus sopii yhteen, laajentaa tai on jännitteisessä suhteessa normatiivisten parisuhdekäsitysten kanssa, jotka nojaavat usein edelleen romanttiseen käsitykseen 'yhdestä ainoasta oikeasta', joka täyttää ihmisen kaikki romanttiset ja seksuaaliset tarpeet. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, minkälaisia ristiriitaisuuksia, affektiivisia jännitteitä tai yllätyksiä on nähtävissä, kun haastattelemani suomalaiset biseksuaalit naiset ja heidän (entiset) kumppaninsa neuvottelevat biseksuaalisuuden ja parisuhteen merkityksistä.

Tutkimuksen aineiston muodostavat biseksuaalisten naisten ja heidän kumppaneidensa parihaastattelut, jotka tehtiin vuonna 2005 ja tavoitettujen osallistujien yksilöhaastattelut vuosina 2014–2015, jolloin osa pareista oli eronnut. Tutkimuksessa kehitetään queer-psykososiaalinen menetelmä aineiston analyysiin. Queer-psykososiaalisessa analyysissä kiinnitetään huomiota parisuhdepuhetta rakentavien heteronormatiivisten parisuhdediskurssien ja identiteettikategorioiden lisäksi myös siihen, miten affektiiviset suhteissa olemisen puolet, jotka voivat olla tiedostamattomia, irrationaalisia ja eksessiivisiä, vaikuttavat biseksuaalisuudesta puhumiseen haastateltavien suhdekertomuksissa.

Kaksijakoinen käsitys sukupuolesta ja seksuaalisuudesta yhdessä monogaamisen parisuhdenormin kanssa vaikutti biseksuaalisuuden ilmenemiseen parisuhteissa. Biseksuaalisuus näyttäytyi kulttuurisesti heikkona identiteettinä ja biseksuaalinen halu haastattelupuheessa usein häilymisenä kulttuurisesti vahvojen vastakohtaparien, naisten ja miesten sekä homo- ja heteroseksuaalisuuden välillä. Biseksuaalisessa identiteetissä ei ollut helppo saavuttaa jatkuvuuden tunnetta parisuhteessa, ja biseksuaalisuus hävisi usein näkyvistä normatiivisesta parisuhdepuheesta.

Ollessaan suhteessa haastatellut biseksuaalit naiset ja heidän (ex-)kumppaninsa tavoittelivat useimmiten pysyvää kahdenvälistä eli monogaamista parisuhdetta. Naisen biseksuaalisuuden läsnäolo suhteessa ja kiinnostus sellaisia ihmisiä kohtaan, joiden sukupuoli oli eri kuin heidän kumppaninsa, toi usein suhteen monogaamisuuden avoimen neuvottelun kohteeksi. Biseksuaalisuus tuokin esiin monille nykyparisuhteille tyypillisen jännitteen, jota usein koetaan turvallisen ja kestävän parisuhteen ja parisuhteen rajat ylittävän seksuaalisen halun välillä. Monet biseksuaalit naiset myös toivat haastatteluissa esiin eksessiivisiä seksuaalisia kokemuksia parisuhteidensa rajalla tai välissä. Nämä kokemukset haastoivat kulttuurisia normeja siitä, miten naisten tulisi toteuttaa seksuaalisuuttaan ja olivat eteenpäin työntävä voima naisten elämässä.

Avainsanat: biseksuaalisuus, parisuhde, queer, psykososiaalinen, monogamia, ei-monogamia, affektit

<b>Author's address</b>	<p>Annukka Lahti  Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy  University of Jyväskylä  annukka.p.lahti@jyu.fi</p>
<b>Supervisors</b>	<p>Professor Kimmo Jokinen  Family Research Centre  Department of Psychology  University of Jyväskylä</p> <p>Adjunct Professor Tuula Juvonen DSocSci  Institute for Advanced Studies and Gender Studies  School of History, Culture and Arts Studies  University of Turku</p> <p>Adjunct Professor Tuija Saresma PhD  Contemporary Culture Studies  Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies  University of Jyväskylä</p>
<b>Reviewers</b>	<p>Professor Ann Phoenix  Institute of Education, UCL  a.phoenix@ucl.ac.uk</p> <p>Adjunct Professor Antu Sorainen PhD  University of Helsinki  antu.sorainen@helsinki.fi</p>
<b>Opponent</b>	<p>Professor Ann Phoenix  Institute of Education, UCL  a.phoenix@ucl.ac.uk</p>



## ESIPUHE

Tämä väitöskirjan valmistumiseen on vaikuttanut suuri joukko ihmisiä, joita haluan nyt lämpimästi kiittää. Väitöstutkimukseni aikana olette kommentoineet tekstejäni, olemme käyneet lukemattomia keskusteluja tutkimuksen tekemisestä sekä inspiroivista tutkimusaiheistanne. Antoisimpia ovat kuitenkin olleet keskustelut kaikesta niiden ulkopuolella. Paras puoli väitöskirjan tekemisessä onkin se, ettei sitä tarvitse tehdä yksin. Matkan varrella saa upeita työkavereita, joiden kanssa voi jakaa innostuksen tutkimustyöhön, sekä tutkimuksen tekoon liittyvät huippuhetket ja turhautumiset. Tämän matkan aikana olen oppinut myös, että ystävien ja perheenjäsenten kannustus, huumori ja tuki yltävät aina oman uskon tuolle puolelle. Teidän kanssa viettämäni aika muistuttaa, että tutkimuksen teon ulkopuolella on elämä, josta motivaatio tutkimuksen tekemiseenkin kumpuaa. Ilman teitä, rakkaat ihmiset, tätä väitöskirjaa ei olisi olemassa, eikä tutkimuksen tekemisessä olisi mieltä!

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Annukka Lahti

## LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

- I            Lahti, A. (2015). Similar and equal relationships? Negotiating bisexuality in an enduring relationship. *Feminism & Psychology*, 25(4), 431–448.  
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- II           Lahti, A. (2018). Bisexual desires for more than one gender as a challenge to normative relationship ideals. *Psychology and Sexuality*, 9(2), 132–147.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2018.1441896>
  
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ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Bisexuality refers to the experience of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of more than one gender. This gender studies doctoral study explores how bisexuality – which is persistently culturally associated with being only a temporary identity, having multiple partners, and necessarily being promiscuous – emerges in contemporary relationships: how it fits, contests or expands normative western understandings of couple relationships, which continue to draw upon the discourses of romantic love, marriage and the ideal of finding ‘the one’ who meets all our romantic and sexual needs. In particular, it examines how a sample of Finnish bisexual women, and their (ex-)partners of various genders who do not identify as bisexual, negotiate bisexuality in their relationships, and the affective consequences it has for those partners and relationships. The study draws on a longitudinal set of interviews, which consists of five (originally seven) couple interviews with bisexual women and their partners conducted in 2005, and 11 follow-ups conducted some 10 years later in 2014–2015. Its methodological starting point is queer psychosocial analysis of participants’ relationship talk.

The doctoral study consists of three published journal articles and this summary. I begin the summary by presenting the central concepts and aims of the study. Then I outline its theoretical and methodological foundations, and I go on to explicate the research materials and research process. Thereafter I summarize the main findings of the study, and I conclude by discussing my contribution to relevant research fields.

This study is situated within the intersecting fields of bisexuality studies, feminist and queer studies, research on contemporary intimate relationships, and psychoanalytically informed psychosocial studies. It connects and travels through these fields by developing an understanding of an emerging queer bisexual psychosocial subject in the context of contemporary relationships. By exploring how bisexuality emerges in relationships as a culturally weak identity, the study makes visible the dichotomies, hierarchies and norms related to gender(s) and (bi)sexualities in which the cultural understanding of normative relationships is embedded. In doing so, the study emphasizes relationality: bisexual subjectivities are always embedded in and lived through relationships



with others (Saresma, 2007). This study also shows that negotiations around bisexuality and relationships are not only made through discursive regulation, but are also shaped in interaction with the affective, non-rational psychic dimensions of being in a relationship. This reflects the psychoanalytic notion of the non-unitary, defended subject, which refers to our inability to know ourselves completely or to be entirely in control of ourselves (Berlant & Edelman, 2014; Pirskanen, 2008; Roseneil, 2006). Likewise, this notion suggests that we are often not completely aware of our own motives and desires (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. viii). The interview data from bisexual women and their (ex-)partners is analysed by utilizing a psychoanalytically informed queer psychosocial methodology. This means attending to the interviewee's investments in certain discourses and identity categories, as well as taking into account affective and irrational aspects of experience that are not always easily expressed in words (Roseneil, 2006; Woodward, 2015, p. 82).

## **1.1 Finnish bisexuality in contemporary relationships**

Studying Finnish bisexualities in contemporary relationships requires taking account of their historical, cultural and political contexts. Jenny Kangasvuo (2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2014) has studied the cultural terms and usages of the concept of bisexuality in Finnish sexual culture from the 1970s to the early 2010s. She has shown that during the 1990s bisexuality became an intelligible means for self-identification in Finnish sexual culture. Before that, bisexuality had been used mainly as a concept to explain the basic nature of human beings. If all people are to a certain extent bisexual, homosexuality should not be condemned (Kangasvuo, 2014). It was also used in sexual minority politics as a way to make homosexuality understandable and acceptable (Kangasvuo, 2014). In 1999, when Kangasvuo interviewed 40 self-identified Finnish bisexuals for her study, she noted that the interviewees' definitions of bisexuality were rather consistent (Kangasvuo, 2011). Kangasvuo's interviewees saw their bisexuality mainly as a positive feature in their lives, yet they also mentioned that they confronted negative stereotypes about bisexuality in their everyday lives. The stereotypes and cultural associations surrounding bisexuality that these Finnish bisexuals recognized were similar to those found in international studies on bisexuality (Kangasvuo, 2011, 2014). As a desire for more than one gender, bisexuality is persistently culturally associated with stigmatizing notions of wavering desire, promiscuity and multiple partners (e.g. DeCapua, 2017; Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield, Clarke & Halliwell, 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2005, 2011; Souto Pereira, Becker & Gardiner, 2017).

Kangasvuo's interviewees wished that bisexuality were more visible, for example, in sex education and sexual minority politics in Finland (Kangasvuo, 2011). Many of them felt that an improvement in the legal status of same-sex couples would also improve the situation of bisexuals in Finland (Kangasvuo, 2011). At the time of their interviews, there was no such legislation for same-sex

couples, but a heated public debate about same-sex couples' right to register their partnerships was ongoing (Charpentier, 2001; Kaskisaari, 1997). Yet bisexuality was barely discussed publicly in Finland, and nor was there any recognizable bisexual community (Kangasvuo, 2011).

During the past two decades, same-sex desire has finally gained some social acceptance and legal recognition in a range of western countries, including Finland. The registered partnership law for same-sex couples (Act 950/2001) was followed by a law to allow fertility treatment for single women and female couples (Act 1237/2006). In 2009 it became possible to adopt the child of one's same-sex partner (Act 391/2009). On 1 March 2017, marriage became gender-neutral as amendments to the Finnish Marriage Act came into force (Act 98/2017). Finland thus joined the 26 countries and 50 states of the United States where same-sex marriage has been adopted during the 21st century so far (Pew Research Center, 2017). On 28 February 2018 the Finnish parliament voted to allow the female partners of pregnant women to be formally recognized by maternity clinics as social mothers (Act 253/2018). The law comes into force on 1 April 2019, and social mothers will be formally recognized from the beginning of 2020 onwards. These legal changes challenge the two basic assumptions of heterosexual hegemony: that marriage-based relationships and parenting are both founded on gender difference. These are also the two main reasons why same-sex marriages and relationships continue to encounter resistance and antipathy in Finland (cf. Jowett, 2014). Nevertheless, the changes in legislation highlight that possibilities to negotiate intelligible relationship and family forms have increased at least to some extent in Finland.

Kangasvuo's (2014) doctoral study reveals that during the 2000s bisexuality also became more visible in the Finnish media landscape and sexual minority politics. This made it more accessible as a sexual identity, especially for young women. However, bisexuality continues to be presented as merely a fleeting and trendy identity. Furthermore, in both pornography and mainstream media, women's bisexuality is often given an air of inauthenticity, represented for the purpose of attracting (presumed male) audiences (Kangasvuo, 2014).

It can therefore be asked whether the notions of ordinariness and respectability that have gradually become applied to the sexual categories of lesbian and gay (see for example Heaphy, Smart & Einarsdottir, 2013) also apply to bisexuality (Kangasvuo, 2014; Lahti, 2015). During the long and complex lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer struggle for recognition, cherishing the normative form of the couple and appearing 'just like heterosexuals' has been a central means through which non-heterosexual desires and relational lives have been made intelligible (Butler, 2004; Clarke, 2003; Dahl, 2014; Warner, 2000). However, in campaigns for 'gay marriage' rights, it has remained largely invisible that many people have relationships with people of various genders throughout their life course. For example, in the Finnish 'I do 2013' campaign, launched in support of a gender-neutral marriage law, there was very little space to discuss other issues than those concerning apparently cisgendered 'same-sex' couples (Lahti, 2015).

In sexual politics, as well as in research on intimate relationships, it is often assumed that there is no need to address bisexuality separately, since discussions of homo- and heterosexualities also encompass bisexuality (Hemmings, 2002; Klesse, 2011; Maliepaard, 2015). Notwithstanding the statistics and research that show bisexual identification to be as common as, or even commoner than, lesbian and gay identity among 'sexual minorities' (Barker, Richards, Jones, Bowes-Catton & Plowman, 2012; Diamond, 2008; Gates, 2011), bisexuality is still often regarded as a marginal phenomenon. It is similarly downplayed as a sexual identity in its own right. The Bisexuality Report (Barker et al., 2012) concludes that bisexuality is still invisible in many areas of public debate, such as in the media, research, and professional psychological literature. However, the report highlights that bisexual people's experiences differ from those of lesbians, gays, and trans and non-binary gendered people, and should be addressed separately. Because bisexuals do not fit the homo/hetero model of sexuality, they are subject to specific prejudices and forms of discrimination, which differ from the prejudice and discrimination faced by the aforementioned groups. It is often thought that bisexual people have uncomplicated access to heterosexual privilege, but many bisexuals can feel unwelcomed and unsupported by both heterosexual and LGBTIQ communities, which can be an isolating experience (Barker et al., 2012; Hayfield et al., 2014).

In research on intimate relationships, bisexuals are often grouped together with lesbians or gays (see for example Barker et al., 2012; Klesse, 2011). Early research on bisexuality often touched on the topic of bisexual people's relationships (e.g. Bertilsdotter, 2003; Kangasvuo, 2006b; Klesse, 2005), but only recently have a number of studies concentrated specifically on this topic (see for example DeCapua, 2017; Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield, Campbell & Reed, 2018; Lehtonen, 2015; Lynch & Maree, 2013; McLean, 2004; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016). The research highlights that bisexual people engage in relationships from a challenging cultural position. Normative western understandings of intimate relationships continue to draw upon the discourses of romantic love and the ideal of finding 'the one'. As a desire for more than one gender, bisexuality is persistently culturally associated with stigmatizing notions of wavering desire, promiscuity and multiple partners. These associations place bisexuality in tension with normative understandings of relationships.

## 1.2 Queering bisexuality

Queer theoretical approaches to sexuality, identity and intimate lives have been very influential on my thinking, as they also resonate with my personal experience. The queer theoretical notion that desire and desiring subjects cannot be comfortably placed into fixed and clearly defined identity categories (Butler, 1991; Giffney, 2009) is a central starting point for this study, as are queer theorists' critiques of mainstream culture's normative relationship ideals in LGBTIQ politics (Kuosmanen, 2007; Warner, 2000).

Of course, starting my study with an identity category – bisexuality – might therefore seem to be in tension with queer approaches. Queer theory's aim is not only to make visible the lives, identities and histories of 'sexual minorities', but also to theorize sexuality as produced within a complex set of power relations. It is theoretically concerned with disrupting binary categories of sex, gender and sexuality; it provides a radically different way of understanding sexuality, selfhood and politics, and thus calls into question many common-sense western understandings of sexuality and gender (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Sorainen, 2005, p. 23-24). I align my own study with this tradition.

When queer theory emerged during the 1990s as a new academic field, it drew essentially on Michel Foucault's (1981) and Judith Butler's (1990) anti-foundationalist theorizations of sexuality and gender. In Finland too it offered a radically new way of conceptualizing sexuality and gender (Juvonen, 2002; Karkulehto, 2007; Kaskisaari, 2000). Queer theoretical thinking is interested in analysing how sexual identity categories that are considered marginal, such as bisexuality, are constructed in available discourses and practices as different from the taken-for-granted heterosexual norm (Scott, 1993; Sorainen, 2005; Sullivan, 2003). The deconstruction of stable and essential identity categories has been central to queer approaches: rather than being seen as identities with an essential foundation, gender and sexuality are thought of as truth effects of a power/knowledge system that conceals its own regulatory effects (Butler 1990; Foucault, 1981).

However, as Karkulehto (2007, p. 29) notes, replacing sexual identities with an undetermined notion of 'queer' might not be very effective while society and culture remain heteronormative. Similarly to lesbian and gay identities, bisexuality is a concept that has been used as a means for self-understanding, and forms of activism and communities have been built around it (Firestein, 1996a; Hemmings, 2002; Monro, 2015). People feel togetherness and separateness in relation to each other, and being in relation to others is an important part of human agency (Rossi, 2008, p. 30; Saresma, 2007). Moreover, the history of bisexuality is a history of erasure and invisibility (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Bowes-Catton & Hayfield, 2015; Monro, 2015), since bisexuality continues to struggle to be understood as a valid sexuality in its own right (Eisner, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014). A hasty appropriation of queer theoretical perspectives might contribute to 'silencing bisexuality before it has even found a voice' (Barker & Langdridge, 2008, p. 392). Hence, Barker and Langdridge (2008) suggest a dialectical approach for bisexuality research, one which acknowledges the value of more traditional identities but does not neglect queer theories.

Furthermore, it seems to me that bisexual identity in particular is prone to invite the question 'why do we need labels?' Bisexuality is often dismissed as a concept because it is thought to reproduce the binary categories of sex, gender and sexuality that queer theory seeks to undermine (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Eisner, 2013; Hemmings, 2002). As Eisner (2013, p. 49) remarks, because the word 'bisexuality' contains 'bi' – literally, 'two' – the concept of bisexuality is believed

to refer to a two-gender structure. When I have presented findings from this study at conferences and seminars, other terms to define sexual and romantic desires that exceed the heterosexual/homosexual binary, such as sexual fluidity and queer, have been suggested to me, as they are thought to be more inclusive and to better convey attraction to more than one gender. By contrast, it is notable that (binary) gender as a basis of attraction in lesbian, gay and heterosexualities does not provoke accusations of acquiescence in the binary gender structure as readily, or in the same way, as the concept of bisexuality does.

Usage of the term 'bisexuality' has developed in parallel with the development of queer theories of gender (Wilchins, 2004) and trans\* studies (Bishop, 2016; Kähkönen & Wickman, 2013). Trans\* refers to a broad variety of genders and gender identities beyond binary understandings of sex, gender and sexuality, including for example trans people, whose gender identity differs from that to which they were assigned at birth, and non-binary gendered people, whose gender identity does not fit the gender binary, and who might identify as neither male nor female, or as both male and female (Kähkönen & Wickman, 2013). Bisexuality can still be defined in research (or by bisexuals themselves) as an attraction to both same-sex and other-sex persons, or as an attraction to both men and women (see Monro, 2015, p. 19; Souto Pereira et al., 2017); yet, in one of the earliest interdisciplinary collections on bisexuality, Beth Firestein's *Bisexuality: the psychology and politics of an invisible minority*, bisexuality was already being defined as 'one's experience of erotic, emotional, and sexual attraction to persons of more than one gender' (Firestein, 1996b, p. xix).

Along with contemporary bisexual researchers and activists, I am allied with the queer agenda of challenging binary categories of sex, gender and sexuality (e.g. Barker & Langdridge, 2008). Storr (1999, 10) refers to Ann Kaloski, who suggested as early as 1997 that in a postmodern world where sexual differences are multiplying, 'bisexuality' may no longer be recognizable as a term, especially among younger queer generations, who might prefer the term 'pansexuality' to refer to their attractions to multiple genders (Morandini et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the term bisexuality is still used and recognized alongside other terms and identity labels such as pansexuality, non-monosexuality and polysexuality, the plurality of which indicates that we need multiple identities. In this study, I aim to use bisexuality in such a way that its futural significations are not foreclosed (Butler, 1991; Giffney, 2009).

I study bisexuality from the point of view of bisexual women and their (ex-)partners of various genders who do not identify as bisexuals. In this study bisexuality refers to an identity label – 'I am bi/bisexual' – which was (sometimes) used by those who accepted my research invitation to talk as bisexual women, but which, as this study shows, could also easily disappear from view. I do not use bisexuality to refer to a fixed sexual identity that can 'stand the test of time' or whose meaning will always remain the same (either for the interviewees or for their surrounding culture). Rather, as this study will show, the concept initiates negotiations of intelligible identity categories and discourses that define the subject (Butler, 1991). In this study, bisexuality entails that the women's life

stories encompass sexual and/or romantic relationships with partners of various genders. It also refers to aspects of sexuality that cannot be reduced to identity or sexual behaviour alone, namely sexual desire and fantasy (Storr, 1999).

### **1.3 Combining psychological, (anti)social and queer perspectives in the analysis of bisexual relationships**

Bisexual people engage in relationships from a tricky cultural position, because of the stigmatizing cultural conceptions of bisexuality. Kangasvuo (2011) notes that there have been few longitudinal studies exploring the lives and experiences of bisexuals. Furthermore, existing studies have often concentrated on changes in participants' psychological characteristics (see for example Diamond, 2008). In her own longitudinal study of Finnish bisexuality and bisexuals, Kangasvuo (2011, 2014) explores how changes in culture, legislation and media affect the ways in which bisexual people make their lives intelligible. In my study, I combine psychological, social and queer perspectives to understand bisexual women's and their partners' experiences of their relationships.

Queer theory offers theoretical tools that make it possible to attend to (bi)sexual identities as processual, contingent and undetermined, as well as to pay continued attention to the marginalization and erasure of bisexual identities. Yet, in a Foucauldian vein, queer theoretical approaches have often taken the power of language and words very seriously (Giffney, 2009; Kangasvuo, 2006a). In empirical queer analyses the focus has often been on the discursive regulation of sexuality and intimate relationships, to the extent that the material, bodily and psychical aspects of experiencing have often been bypassed (de Boise, 2015; Kangasvuo, 2006a; Roseneil, 2006; Storr, 1999).

The first set of interviews analysed in this study was originally conducted for my master's thesis (Lahti, 2006, 2007). I focused on bisexual women's relationships and interviewed seven bisexual women and their partners together as couples. I approached the interview talk from Foucauldian and Butlerian perspectives, with the aim of studying how the relationships were made and shaped as performative processes of repeating (and failing to repeat) some already existing relationship discourses and practices in a customary manner. Although an observation of the performative elements was present in the research, it turned out to be a rather typical critical discourse analysis (see Clarke, 2002; Jokinen, 2004). I identified the dominant discourses in interviews, and I analysed the strategic uses and consequences of those discourses (Jokinen, 2004, pp. 192–193; Lahti, 2007). But the interview material also highlighted that living in a relationship, or discussing it, might entail affective tensions, ambivalences, contradictions, 'irrational' behaviour and 'positive surprises' (Sedgwick, 2003), which could not be sufficiently taken into account by focusing solely on the discursive regulation of the subjects and their relationships. While planning this study I became interested in how psychical and affective aspects of experience –

for example, (unconscious) feelings, desires, memories and imaginings – constitute dating and couple relationships, and how they are constructed in relation to powerful heteronormative relationship discourses. In this I followed many feminists' and queer scholars' reawakened interest in affect and in new ways of conceptualizing subjects as corporeal and relational (Koivunen, 2001, 2010a, 2010b).

With the aim of addressing the affective and psychical aspects of being in a relationship and accounting for it in an interview (de Boise, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003), I turned to a psychosocial approach. This is a theoretical framework and a method in which attention is given to both the psychic and social dimensions of intimate relationships. It takes psychic reality and the irrationality of the unconscious seriously, but it does not disconnect them from socially constructed reality. Personal relationships are seen both as socially constructed and as something that an individual experiences as 'inner and their own' (Roseneil, 2006, p. 850). In psychosocial approaches, the subject is conceptualized as always made through discursive regulation (Foucault, 1981), but also as constrained by its own (conflicting) desires, anxieties and needs (Woodward, 2015, p. 62).

Psychosocial studies address the relationship between the social and the psychic, and seek to conceptualize the subject as shaped by the complex intertwining of the 'internal' psychic and the 'external' social (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 35; Woodward, 2015). Psychosocial studies strive to study this intertwinement through particular processes that can be examined and analysed (Woodward, 2015, 5). Offering useful concepts for analysing the interaction between the psychic and social, psychoanalysis is often added to psychosocial studies' disciplinary arsenal (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Emotion and affect are central topics for psychosocial study, because they offer a site for a 'revision' of the space between the psychic and the social (Woodward, 2015).

However, my interest in utilizing psychoanalytic concepts and theories in my study also comes from (antisocial) queer scholars who have found in psychoanalytic thought conceptual tools to both analyse and oppose the processes of normalization (Caserio et al., 2006; Halberstam, 2008; Johnson, 2015). The so called antisocial turn (Caserio et al., 2006; Halberstam, 2008) in queer studies challenges LGBTI politics' customary aim of inclusion in society as good citizens. This aim often leaves the heteronormative structures of society unchallenged. Instead, antisocial theorists suggest that queer ethics lie in the willingness to continuously disrupt the prevailing social and political order, from the (psychic) place of unruly and abjected queer desire (Bersani, 1995; Edelman, 2004). Many antisocial queer theorists have embraced unruly queer desires as a way to challenge normative relationship ideals in LGBTIQ politics (for example Bersani, 1995; Edelman, 2004). Yet, this critique operates mostly on a cultural and societal level, and does not approach the matter from the perspective of the experiencing psychosocial subject.

In order to explore how bisexual women and their (ex-)partners experience the unruly desires and discontinuous gendered and sexualized positionings theorized in queer theory, I present a theoretical-methodological approach that I

have named a queer psychosocial approach to bisexuality. I carry out the analysis by combining Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Jokinen, 2004) and Butler's (1990) thinking about the heterosexual matrix with a psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2007; Woodward, 2015). This sheds light on the affective work bisexual women and their partners need to do when negotiating bisexuality in their relationships.

In order to work with aspects of experience that are not consciously known or easily represented linguistically (Baraitser & Frosh, 2007; Blackman, 2010; Koivunen, 2010a, 2010b; Sedgwick, 2003), I combine Judith Butler's (1991, p. 315) notion of the excess that 'exceed[s] the domain of conscious subject' with contemporary psychoanalytic ideas about excess (Benjamin & Atlas, 2015; Laplanche, 1987, as cited in Benjamin & Atlas, 2015; Stein, 2008). Inspired by antisocial queer theory, I explore sexuality's excess as part of bisexual women's ongoing identity work, and as an energy that might not only allow us to question the frames that regulate sexuality but might also enable (psychic) change (see Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. viii; Bersani, 1995). Sexuality's excess might be necessary in order to transgress the deeply intertwined personal, interpersonal and cultural boundaries which regulate how bisexual women should be sexual.

## 1.4 Research questions and overview of the articles

The aim of this doctoral research is to provide new theoretical, methodological and empirical insights into how bisexuality emerges in relationships. Does bisexuality fit, contest or expand normative western understandings of couple relationships? I approach these questions from the point of view of my interviewees: Finnish bisexual women, and their (ex-)partners of various genders who did not identify as bisexuals. The aim of the research was fulfilled with the help of the following research questions:

- 1) How do interviewees use cultural discursive resources on relationships?
- 2) How is bisexuality negotiated in relationship discourses?
- 3) How do the affective, unconscious and excessive dimensions of relating complicate the emergence of (bi)sexualities in intimate relationships?

These research questions embrace my doctoral study as a whole. All of the original articles address these questions, but each emphasizes them differently. Each article also asks specific research questions related to the particular discourses of relationships or bisexuality that it examines. In this study, the queer psychosocial approach functions not only as a theoretical framework, but also as a methodological framework: a theoretical-methodological hybrid developed in order to analyse the longitudinal interview data collected in 2005 and 2014–2015 from Finnish bisexual women and their (ex-)partners of various genders. I originally conducted interviews with seven bisexual women and their partners



of various genders together as couples in 2005 for my master's dissertation. For the purposes of this study I was able to reach 11 participants: six bisexual women and five (ex-)partners. I was able to use five original couple interviews and 11 individual follow-up interviews in this study.

During the course the study, as my understanding of the psychosocial approach deepened, I moved from utilizing predominantly Foucauldian discourse analysis inspired by psychosocial thought in the first article 'Similar and equal relationships? Negotiating bisexuality in an enduring relationship' (Lahti, 2015), to conducting psychosocial analysis in the second article 'Bisexual desires for more than one gender as a challenge to normative relationship ideals' (Lahti, 2018a) and in the third article 'Too much? Excessive sexual experiences in bisexual women's life stories' (Lahti, 2018c). However, in all three articles psychosocial concepts are employed for the purposes of the analysis. In the study as whole, the queer psychosocial method means paying attention to the interviewee's investments in certain (heteronormative) discourses and identity categories, as well as taking account of affective and irrational aspects of experience that are not easily put into words (Woodward, 2015, p. 82). The latter can be noted by paying attention to affectively intensive moments, thickly narrated passages, and tensions and discrepancies in interviewees' talk.

## 2 RELATIONSHIPS AND BISEXUALITY

### 2.1 Contemporary relationships

At the beginning of the 1990s, sociological theories of reflexive modernization suggested that a comprehensive change in personal and sexual commitments was underway (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Giddens, 1992). It was claimed that (heterosexual) intimate relationships were no longer regulated by expectations of normative life course progression, such as finding 'the one', getting married and remaining 'happy ever after' in a monogamous relationship, but were increasingly based on individual choice and mutual negotiations (e.g. Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Jokinen, 2014). Intimate relationships were to last only as long as they offered personal fulfilment to both partners, meaning that emotional satisfaction was now central when people were deciding whether to continue a relationship (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992).

During the past 30 years family forms have become pluralized in western countries, as blended families, single-parent families and same-sex families have gradually been accepted alongside heterosexual nuclear families (Forsberg, 2003; Moring, 2013). However, the monogamous couple relationship has not lost its cultural status, and it is still regarded as the most respectable way of organizing intimate life (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2013). Other ways of arranging intimate life – for example, non-monogamous relationships, staying single, and kink communities, where intimacies and sexualities are often organized beyond the monogamy/non-monogamy binary – remain marginalized (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Klesse, 2007; Lahad, 2017; Pohtinen, 2016, forthcoming). Furthermore, the couple norm remains strong because family life and sociability are organized around couple relationships (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Ketokivi, 2012).

A couple relationship is a cultural object with a strong affective promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010). It holds expectations of reciprocity, intimacy, continuity, stability and equality – rather than of fragmentation, fracture,

discontinuity or inequality. Also, many hierarchies concerning gender and sexuality persist, both between different forms of relationship and within relationships (Jokinen, 2004; Magnusson, 2005; Roseneil, 2007; Sihto, Lahti, Elmgren & Jurva, 2018). On the one hand, reflexivity – which is often highlighted in sociological theories of the individualization and democratization of intimate life – does not necessarily lead to change in everyday gendered practices (Adkins, 2002; Kolehmainen, 2012a, 2012b; Sihto et al., 2018). On the other hand, LGBTIQ people's relationships still do not enjoy the same structural, institutional, cultural and social support that heterosexual couples enjoy. Thus, relationships cannot be treated simply as what Giddens (1992) calls 'pure relationships', formed between two equal partners with no pressure from 'external factors' such as the expectation to participate in the traditional institution of marriage and the responsibilities attached to it.

Drawing on Berlant (2007), Hemmings (2012, p. 131) has argued that 'people attach even more firmly to the norms that are nostalgic fiction for something that never was, let alone ever will be, precisely to the extent that they face no other prospect of recognition.' As traditional forms of family and kin decreasingly provide sources of belonging, and as working life becomes increasingly precarious with no guarantee of long-term contracts or workplace communities, romantic relationships have even increased in importance as a source of validation, meaning and security (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Hemmings, 2012). The cultural ideal of romantic love – forming a durable relationship with one person for the rest of one's life – has not lost its hold (Barker, 2013; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Heaphy, Smart & Einarsdottir, 2013; Smart, 2007). The notion of endurance has also become a means to assert the legitimacy of non-heterosexual relationships (Lahti, 2015; Weston, 1995). This reflects the cultural logic which associates genuineness with endurance, echoing the idea that 'what's real must last' (Weston, 1995, p. 104).

Yet there are also ambivalences and tensions around contemporary couple relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Perel, 2007; Shaw, 2013). Alongside the persistent ideas about romantic love, 'the one' and the couple, people are expected to pursue their personal life goals and to express their individual selfhood through sexuality (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Gill, 2008b). This tension may have become pronounced in a culture of 'romantic renaissance', where individual pleasures are more and more integrated into romantic relationships (Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009). As a result, attitudes towards infidelity in relationships have become increasingly condemnatory since the turn of the millennium (Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009; van Hooff, 2017). Sexual exclusivity is deemed very important, especially among younger generations. This is explained by the expectation that contemporary relationships should be significant sites of emotional and sexual fulfilment (Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009). 'Infidelity' is not seen in a favourable light, as relationships are thought to reflect individual choice and the strength of the emotional bond between partners.

However, it has been suggested that relationship partners today are more faithful in words than in deeds, since statistics indicate that affairs are frequent

(Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009; van Hooff, 2017). Experiences of affairs – covert non-monogamy, in other words – are common, but they are usually kept secret in the context of normative relationships (Jyränki et al., 2007; Kipnis, 2003; Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009; Mazzarella, 1997; van Hooff, 2017). Monogamy as the cultural ideal is rarely questioned (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Klesse, 2005; van Hooff, 2017). Thus, non-monogamous ways of arranging intimate life remain marginalized (Barker & Langdridge, 2010) and do not seem to be a negotiable alternative for the majority of heterosexual men and women (van Hooff, 2017).

## 2.2 Normalization of same-sex relationships?

Prizing the couple as the normative form of intimacy has been the central means through which same-sex desire has gained social acceptance and legal recognition in an increasing number of western countries (Butler, 2004; Clarke, 2003; Dahl, 2014; Warner, 2000). The discourse of sameness – emphasizing same-sex couples' equal worth and similarity to heterosexual relationships – was invoked, for example, in the heated media debate about registered partnerships at the turn of the millennium in Finland (Charpentier, 2001; Kaskisaari, 1997), and later in the 'I do 2013' campaign in favour of a gender-neutral marriage law. In the discourse of sameness, couple relationships are constructed as almost genderless – similar in essence across all people and all couples, regardless of sexual orientation or gender and other differences. However, in this discourse of sameness, the long-term heterosexual relationship founded on gender difference remains the norm to which other relationships are compared. The discourse of sameness thus paradoxically produces the hierarchical homo/hetero distinction (Clarke, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Young & Boyd, 2006).

In this discourse of sameness with heterosexuality, which draws on notions of romantic love, it is difficult to articulate heterogeneity within the LGBTIQ community, or to engage with inequalities linked for example to gendered, classed and racialized positions or disability (Browne, 2011; Heaphy et al., 2013; Young & Boyd, 2006). As a result, diverse queer lives that do not conform to this norm are marginalized even further and rendered invisible (Butler, 2004; McLean, 2004). For example, the 'I do 2013' campaign was often referred to in the media as promoting 'gay marriage', emphasizing the right to marry for 'same-sex couples'. In these discourses, there is little room to address issues other than those of apparently cisgendered homosexual couples – for example, the issue of making diverse trans identities and bisexualities visible (Eisner, 2013).

The expectation that even non-heterosexuals should organize their lives in terms of normative, marriage-like, monogamous relationship ideals, procreation included, is relatively new. By contrast, earlier generations of lesbians and gays often embraced and accepted lifestyles without normative families or children (Kuosmanen, 2007; Weston, 1991), which Kath Weston (1991), an anthropologist who has studied queer kinship and families in San Francisco, describes as 'chosen families'. In chosen families, intimate lives are not arranged so centrally around

couple relationships: friendship and community play a more central role (Kuosmanen, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991).

Weston (1995) locates the emergence of chosen families in the late 1970s and 1980s Western lesbian and gay movement, where disclosing one's homosexuality – 'coming out' – was stressed as an important political and personal act. In a homophobic society, coming out as lesbian or gay often meant rejection by one's biological relatives. Many queers thus saw friendship as the most reliable and enduring kinship relationship (Weston, 1995). The meaning of chosen families as providers of emotional, practical and financial support was further stressed during the 1980s and 1990s AIDS pandemic, when many biological relatives – along with the rest of society – turned their backs on dying gay men (Weston, 1995; see also Alasuutari, forthcoming; Sorainen, forthcoming). In lesbian separatist communities too, alternative forms of family were sought in order to find alternatives to traditional patriarchal family forms (Kuosmanen, 2007; Rich, 1986/1993).

In Weeks et al.'s (2001) study of British non-heterosexuals whom the authors interviewed between 1995 and 1996, the interviewees often stressed that they wanted to explore non-normative ways of organizing intimate relationships and to make 'life experiments'. Non-monogamous arrangements were especially common among gay men (Klesse, 2007), but in feminist and lesbian communities too, monogamy was criticized as echoing patriarchal ideas about (men's) ownership of women (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Deri, 2015; Jackson & Scott, 2004; Kuosmanen, 2007). Sexual exploration and the living out of non-capitalist ideas of sexuality were stressed (Wekker, 2006). Yet, a decade after Weeks et al.'s interviews, in 2009 and 2010, young British couples who had entered civil partnerships described their relationships in terms of ordinariness (Heaphy et al., 2013; see also Moring, 2013). Most of them also spoke about monogamy in very self-evident terms (Heaphy et al., 2013). A similar shift can be seen in Scandinavia (Rydström, 2011), including Finland (Kuosmanen, 2007; see also Moring, 2013). Paula Kuosmanen (2007) has referred to this normalizing development, which was strengthened by political demands for family rights made by the lesbian and gay movement, as a turn to 'rainbow familism'. Although intelligible relationship and family forms have increased to some extent, the turn to 'rainbow familism' also runs the risk of narrowing the imaginative horizons of close relationship arrangements (Barker, 2012; Butler, 2004; McLean, 2004).

## 2.3 Bisexuality in relationships

But how do common associations of bisexuality, such as wavering desire, hypersexuality and promiscuity (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuori, 2014; Klesse, 2011), fit in with what constitutes an ordinary relationship in a discourse that draws strongly on 'marriage and family'? Not without tension: bisexual people's relationship choices are often read through bisexuality's negative cultural associations (Hayfield et al., 2014; Klesse, 2011).

In bisexuality research from the 1990s (e.g. Rust, 1996; Spalding & Peplau, 1997) to the present (e.g. Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014; Souto Pereira et al., 2017), the findings are highly consistent about western cultural (mis)conceptions among non-bisexually identified people (Souto Pereira et al., 2017; Spalding & Peplau, 1997). The same cultural (mis)conceptions have been found in various areas of society, whether in representations of bisexuality in the media (e.g. Barker et al., 2012; Kangasvu, 2014; Karkulehto, 2011), bisexuality's position in professional psychological literature (Barker & Langdridge, 2008), or bisexually identified people's experiences of social marginalization (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Eisner, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014). These cultural conceptions have been found in both mainstream culture and the LGBTIQ community (Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014; Souto Pereira et al., 2017).

One set of associations supports the notion that bisexuality is ontologically unstable, suggesting that heterosexuality and homosexuality are the only valid forms of sexual identity (Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014; Souto Pereira et al., 2017). In this line of thinking, bisexuality is constructed as merely a temporary and trendy identity, or as a developmental phase between heterosexual and homosexual identities (Eisner, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014). Bisexuals are portrayed as immature, confused or attention-seeking – as sexual subjects who have not yet made up their minds (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Hayfield et al., 2014; Alarie & Gaudet, 2013).

Another set of associations delegitimizes bisexuality in a culture where monogamous partnering is regarded as the most respectable way of organizing intimate relationships. Bisexuals are stigmatized as hypersexual and necessarily non-monogamous. These associations persistently link bisexuality with multiple partners and promiscuity, sexual obsessiveness, untrustworthiness and incapability of long-term commitment (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvu, 2014; Klesse, 2005; McLean, 2004; Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). Promiscuous bisexuals – particularly bisexual men, but also bisexual women – have also been represented as a threat to their partners, as it is anticipated that they will spread sexually transmitted infections and HIV (Eisner, 2013; Klesse, 2011; Spalding & Peplau, 1997).

Associations that invalidate and stigmatize bisexual identities might give rise to destabilizing dynamics in bisexual people's relationships, regardless of whether they wish to engage in monogamous or non-monogamous relationships (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005, 2011). In contemporary research on bisexual people's relationships, such stigmatizing notions are often conceptualized as 'binegativity' (for example DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011), 'bisexual erasure' (Yoshino, 2000) or the social marginalization of bisexuality (Hayfield et al. 2014, 2018). These concepts relate to the notion of biphobia (DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011). However, like the concept of homophobia, 'biphobia' derives from a liberal humanist framework and is thus thought to refer to individual prejudices and irrational fears (DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al., 2018). Therefore, bisexuality researchers

who want to emphasize the wider social context that maintains harmful attitudes, stereotypes and practices against bisexuality usually use the concepts of binegativity or bisexual erasure (DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011).

For example, in an article with the telling title 'Shady characters, untrustworthy partners, and promiscuous sluts: creating bisexual intimacies in the face of heteronormativity and biphobia', Christian Klesse (2011, p. 227) shows that binegative representations often result in cultural stereotypes of bisexuals as problematic or risky lovers or partners. This cultural undermining of bisexuality might contribute, for example, to non-bisexual people worrying that their bisexual partners will eventually conclude that they are more attracted to another gender. Bisexual women are particularly vulnerable to stigma if they wish to engage in non-monogamous relationship practices (Klesse, 2005, 2007). As Klesse (2011, p. 228) writes, it is problematic to think that bisexual people's relationships will somehow be more prone to problems than any other relationships. It is likely that the problems bisexual people face in their efforts to build and maintain intimate relationships are similar to those experienced by people of other social and sexual identities. When bisexual people are asked about their experiences of their own bisexuality, they often engage in 'border work', drawing a line between their own experiences of bisexuality and bisexuality's binegative cultural associations, which include wavering desire, multiple partners, and overt, unrestrained sexuality (Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Kangasvuo, 2014). In particular, they often want to question whether these notions should be essentially linked to bisexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Kangasvuo, 2014).

Yet, the theorization of bisexualities cannot stop with the concept of binegativity. With such a strong emphasis on binegativity as an analytical tool, there is a risk of creating the idea that bisexuality as such suffers binegative oppression, thereby universalizing bisexual experience and perhaps producing too simple an idea of how bisexual experiences come about (Barker, Yockney, Richards, Jones, Bowes-Catton, & Plowman, 2012, Hayfield & Lahti, 2017). There is a constant need for the critical deconstruction of the sexual category of bisexuality (Hemmings, 2002).

Gustavson (2009) argues that because bisexuality as a concept is defined as an attraction to more than one gender, it suggests multiple partners (Gustavson, 2009; Toft, 2014). Gustavson has therefore striven to develop an understanding of bisexuality as a praxis, focusing on how bisexuality is practised and performed 'within a bundle of factual relationships' (Gustavson, 2009, p. 410). Previous research on bisexuals' intimate relationships highlights bisexuals' common wish to challenge the notion that bisexuality is necessarily non-monogamous, but at the same time many also arrange their relational lives in ways other than normative monogamous relationships (Gustavson, 2009; Kangasvuo, 2011; Klesse, 2007; McLean, 2004; Rust, 1996). It is also suggested that, at least for some people, there is an intersection between kink sexualities and bisexual or pansexual identities (Spratt & Hadcock, 2018). Exploring kink or BDSM sexualities that involve intense sensations (pain), eroticized power exchange, or

sensual experiences labelled fetishes can also allow the exploration of bisexual or pansexual desires, or vice versa (Juvonen, under review; Kangasvuo, 2014; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). However, in Finland there is a scarcity of research on kink communities (Pohtinen, 2016, forthcoming). Existing research does not necessarily support the idea that bisexualities have a central place in Finnish kink communities (Pohtinen, 2016, forthcoming). Furthermore, constructions and practices of bisexuality vary in different contexts, and not all bisexuals want to arrange their lives in non-normative ways or have access to discourses of non-normative relationships or sexual arrangements (Klesse, 2007). In this study, my aim is to explore in detail how bisexualities are experienced, lived and negotiated affectively within the relational processes of bisexual people's relationships.



### **3 A QUEER PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH**

#### **3.1 Combining queer and psychosocial theorizations**

I believe it is necessary to explore undermined and stigmatized bisexuality through a queer theoretical lens. The tensions around the notion of bisexuality and bisexual people's relationships cannot be solved simply by cleansing bisexuality of negative stereotypes. Rather, continuous attention needs to be paid to how and why complex bisexual experiences are culturally and relationally undermined, and why bisexuality seems to be repeatedly constructed as a threat to monogamous relationships norms.

Queer theoretical approaches are adept at analysing why bisexuality is constantly constructed as a threat to mainstream culture's normative relationship ideals and respectable lesbian and gay politics. Queer theory's aim is not only to make visible the lives, identities and histories of 'sexual minorities', but also to theorize sexuality as produced within a complex set of power relations. Rather than being something knowable in advance, queer 'acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm' (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). As a theoretical position, queer marks a refusal to be pinned down by the discourses and dichotomies within which it operates (Giffney, 2009; Sorainen, 2005, p. 23-24).

Associations attached to bisexuality point to a cultural hotspot (see MacLure, 2013), a place of trouble that is definitely worth a closer look. In a culture that regards the monogamous couple as the most respectable way of arranging one's intimate life, bisexuality is cast as other, associated with wavering, promiscuous and multiple partners. Yet, to date it has not been fully explored. What new insights does bisexuality's emergence in intimate relationships offer about the sexual and relationship norms that regulate all contemporary sexualities and relationships?

In a Foucauldian vein, existing queer theoretical analyses have often paid close attention to the discursive regulation of sexuality and intimate relationships (Clarke, 2003; Giffney, 2009; Kangasvuo, 2006a; Kaskisaari, 1997, 1998, 2000; Lahti, 2007; Pearce & Wisker, 1998; Warner, 2000). However, if they were to focus solely

on discursive power relations, queer theoretical approaches might fail to engage with the material conditions, affective consequences and social realities of bisexual people (Kangasvuo, 2014; Nelson, 2018). Embodied, affective experiences of being in relationships and accounting for them in interviews cannot be seen simply as an effect of discursive power relations or as a site for the reproduction of power (de Boise, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003). Rather, these experiences must be seen as comprised of social and psychical aspects, which cannot be easily separated but instead are inextricably intertwined.

In order to address the emotional, affective and relational dimensions that are meaningful for being in and discussing relationships, I have turned to psychosocial conceptualizations of the subject (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Woodward, 2015). Psychosocial studies has long attended to the relationship between the social and the psychical in subject formation (Woodward, 2015). Since psychoanalysis offers useful concepts for analysing the interaction between the psychic and the social, it is often added to psychosocial studies' disciplinary arsenal (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008).

Yet, it must be noted that when I incorporate psychoanalytic concepts and theories into my study, I am also following (antisocial) queer scholars. For example, Judith Butler (1990, 1991, 1997), Lee Edelman (2004), Leo Bersani (1995), Teresa de Lauretis (1994), Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (2001) all embrace psychoanalysis's critical potential for analysing the normalization process of sexualities and how it may be resisted. These scholars theorize desire as disruptive and antinormative, as something that unsettles the fantasy of the sovereign subject (Berlant & Edelman, 2014; Butler, 1991; Stein, 2008). Nevertheless, (antisocial) queer theory has often been criticized for being overly theoretical and hence difficult to apply in empirical analysis. In contrast to this US tradition, the psychosocial approach is a theoretical framework and method developed in a British academic context, with a long tradition of attending to theoretical-methodological concerns. It is widely mobilized in empirical analyses of intimate relationships (e.g. Jamieson, 1998; Roseneil, 2006, 2007). While for the proponents of antisocial queer theory the efficacy of queerness or queer desire lies in its willingness to refuse the social and political order, the psychosocial approach regards matters from the perspective of the experiencing psychosocial subject.

According to the psychosocial understanding, the subject is formed when the 'internal' psychic and 'external' social intertwine, 'always immersed in a flux that is neither inside nor out' (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 354; Pirskanen, 2008). Thinking psychosocially means mobilizing the idea of the psychic reality in which the subject lives. Importantly, as Frosh and Baraitser (2008, p. 354) suggest, psychic reality is already hybrid, which is why it can be considered neither 'inside' nor 'out'. It is more like a constant folding of space that comes close to the idea the Moebius strip. By interrogating the psychosocial (bi)sexual subject, my aim is to address emotional, affective and relational aspects of being in a relationship, and to explore how this complicates the view of how (bi)sexualities emerge within intimate relationships.

I mobilize a queer psychosocial approach because it highlights how bisexual women's and their (ex-)partners' experiences comprise various elements that cannot be reduced to exclusively 'psychic' or 'social' dimensions. Interrogating the notion of the queer psychosocial subject makes it possible to address the contradictory positionings, tensions and affective dimensions of being in and discussing bisexuality in relationships, in new ways. My study offers a new perspective on bisexuality in relationships, which diverges from the assumption that discursive power – for example, binary divisions and hierarchical subject positions in certain discourses – simply determines other – affective, unconscious, irrational – dimensions in women's and their ex-partners' accounts. By interrogating the queer psychosocial sexual subject, I am able to produce new knowledge about the affective, non-rational and excessive psychic dimensions of bisexual women's and their (ex-)partners' relationships.

In the following, I will first give a short genealogy of the concept of bisexuality in western thinking. Then I will introduce the conceptual tools offered by queer theory that I use in the analysis in my data, namely the heterosexual matrix, antisocial queer thinking, and queer theory. Thereafter, I will go on to explicate my understanding of the psychosocial (bi)sexual subject and how I interrogate it in this study.

## **3.2 Queer theoretical tools**

### **3.2.1 Genealogy of the concept of bisexuality**

In a queer theoretical vein, Hemmings (2002), Storr (1999) and Kangasvuo (2014) advocate an epistemological and genealogical research perspective concerned with the formation of bisexual knowledges both historically and contemporarily (Hemmings, 2002, p. 1). For Foucault (1981), it was important to trace genealogies of sexuality: to trace historically where hegemonic discourses regarding sexuality have come from, their origins and conceptual linkages, how they continue to shape theoretical, societal and historical discussions of sexuality today, and how they define the possibilities for the appearance of current forms of sexuality. Thus I consider it important to offer a short genealogy of the concept of bisexuality in western (sexological) thinking, since this also affects how bisexuality is understood today in bisexuality research that draws on queer theory such as Judith Butler's (see also Hemmings, 2002; Kangasvuo, 2014; Storr, 1999).

Bisexuality has had different meanings at different times. In western thinking, bisexuality has mainly had three different meanings since the 19th century (Kangasvuo, 2014; MacDowall, 2009; Storr, 1999). The first meaning – which was particularly common in 19th- and early 20th-century sexology, and occurs for example in Havelock Ellis's texts (1897, 1915) – is that bisexuality is a combination of maleness and femaleness in a biological or anatomical sense, meaning that female and male physical characteristics appear in the same body (Storr, 1999, p. 3). Another influential meaning ascribed to bisexuality has been

that bisexuality is a combination of masculinity and femininity in an individual, in a psychological sense (Bowie, 1992; Kangasvu, 2014; MacDowall, 2009; Storr, 1999). As Storr (1999) points out, the most famous and influential writer promoting this view is Freud (1905/2000), who discusses bisexuality in his *Three essays on the theory of sexuality, 1: the sexual aberrations*.

For Freud (1905/2000), bisexuality was the starting point of human sexual development. However, his ideas on bisexuality were ambiguous and contradictory (Monro, 2015, p. 15). For Freud, the ideal course of sexual development would lead to the differentiation of femininity and masculinity through identification and repudiation during the Oedipal phase. Freud believed that in ideal circumstances during the Oedipal phase, most people would resolve or repress their same-sex desires, and the development would lead to mature heterosexuality (Bowes-Catton & Hayfield, 2015; Kangasvu, 2014; Storr, 1999). In Freud's theory, the gendered object of desire (either male or female) determines the individual's sexuality. Thus, homosexuality, although an aberration, becomes a possibility, but there is little room for mature bisexuality (Freud, 1905/2000; Kangasvu, 2014). However, Freud's idea of bisexuality as 'polymorphous perversity' – the origin of sexuality, which can be used to explain the basic nature of human beings – was very influential in western sexology and sexuality research up to the 1980s (Kangasvu, 2014).

The third meaning ascribed to bisexuality, which is the most commonly used meaning today, is that bisexuality is the combination of homo- and heterosexuality (Kangasvu, 2014; Storr, 1999). As Storr (1999, p. 3) notes, the shift from the masculinity/femininity paradigm towards the heterosexuality/homosexuality paradigm seems to have taken place during the 1970s, and it was largely influenced by the gay liberation movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Finnish sexual culture, bisexuality was also used in sexual minority politics as a way to make homosexuality understandable and acceptable (Kangasvu, 2014) by referring to the idea of bisexuality as the basic nature of human beings. It was only during the 1990s that bisexuality became an intelligible means of self-identification in Finnish sexual culture (Kangasvu, 2014).

Between the late 1970s and the 1990s, there was already some anglophone scholarship that addressed bisexuality as a sexuality in its own right (Monro, 2015, p. 14). During the 1990s and early 2000s, the burgeoning field of bisexuality research took as its task to strengthen the bisexual identity and community by conducting research on self-identified bisexuals' definitions and experiences of bisexuality, bisexual identity, and bisexual people's understanding of social marginalization (Bertilsdotter, 2003; Kangasvu, 2001; Ronkainen, 1997; Rust, 1996). In Finland too, the first studies on bisexuality were published during this period (Kangasvu, 2001; Ronkainen, 1997).

From the early 1990s to the present day, bisexuality research has addressed the stigmatization of bisexuality and its absence from psychological, anthropological, sociological, political and queer theoretical discussions (Firestein, 1996a; Hemmings, 2002; Kangasvu, 2001; Monro, 2015). The starting

point of this bisexuality research is bisexuality's dual position, on the one hand as an invisible identity, and on the other hand as a concept with transformative potential for the societal order, which rests on binary categorizations of sex, gender and desire (Bertilsson, 2003; Firestein, 1996; Haasjoki, 2005; Hemmings, 2002; Kangasvu, 2001). Bisexuality challenges the exclusive division of homo- and heterosexuality, and the normative frame in which the gendered body is emphasized as a defining feature of object choice (Firestein, 1996a; Gustavson, 2009; Souto Pereira et al., 2017). At the turn of the millennium, this was the dominant paradigm of bisexuality: theorizations of bisexuality often conceptualized bisexuals as marginalized yet transgressive sexual subjects, who as critical outsiders were able to better see and act outside the pervasive binary categorizations of sex, gender and sexuality (Hemmings, 2002, p. 4). 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 and categories that produce them (Hemmings, 2002).

### 3.2.2 Heterosexual matrix

In this study, I theorize bisexuality in intimate relationships as produced through the binary categories of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, 1993). At the beginning of the 1990s, Judith Butler's influential book *Gender trouble* (1990) continued Foucault's theorization of subjectification. In addition to sexuality, Butler's theorization denaturalizes gender. In Butler's (1990, 1991, 1993) performative theory of gender, which draws on both Foucault's thought and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, the normalcy of heterosexuality is produced through constrained repetitions of two intelligible genders whose opposing biological bodies, social gender roles and (mutual) desires are combined coherently according to a heterosexual matrix. Yet, to be able to present itself as natural, the heterosexual matrix always needs an abjected 'other' that is excluded from cultural intelligibility. Heterosexual hegemony thus builds itself on a hierarchical homo/hetero distinction and a binary understanding of gender. Within these polarities, there is very little room to do gender or desire differently – for example, to make diverse trans identities and bisexualities visible. However, Butler (1990, 1991) treats normative categories of gender and sexuality as regulatory ideals that subjects can imitate but never perfectly repeat. In a Butlerian frame, bisexual can be considered alongside lesbian and gay as an identity that threatens the coherence of the heterosexual matrix. However, bisexual performative acts are repetitively interpreted as homosexual or heterosexual, which adds to bisexuality's cultural invisibility (Barker & Langdrige, 2008; Callis, 2009; Haasjoki, 2012; Hemmings, 2002).

Of course, the three decades since *Gender trouble* have seen a multiplication of non-binary gender and trans\* identities, and a diversification of sexualities beyond the heterosexual matrix's dichotomies (Pulkkinen & Rossi, 2006, p. 10). Yet, as my study shows, dichotomous and hierarchical understandings of gender and sexuality continue to haunt bisexual women's and their partners' relationships. This is the reason why the cultural frame of intelligibility that

Butler (1990) first named the heterosexual matrix and later heterosexual hegemony (Butler, 1993) is an important analytical tool in this study. The binary logic of the heterosexual matrix, together with the strength of the monogamous norm, produces conditions of possibility for (bi)sexualities to emerge in relationships. It also sheds light on how binary understandings of sex, gender and sexualities contribute to stigmatizing cultural notions of bisexuality.

Trans\* people and the theorization of transgender were at the centre of queer theoretical discussions from very early on (Kähkönen & Wickman, 2013). Trans\* people's experiences seemed to condense some very central ideas in queer theory, such as the performativity of gender and the calling into question of binary notions of sex, gender and sexuality (Kähkönen & Wickman, 2013). Not all trans\* people were happy about having this role assigned to them as the forerunners of the gender revolution, which some felt was being used as a yardstick of their very existence by some queer and feminist scholars (Kähkönen & Wickman, 2013). Moreover, queer theory's performative-discursive emphasis was seen as insufficient for theorizing embodied trans\* experiences. However, the theorization of transgender continued to develop, and trans\* studies is now an inextricable and institutionalized part of queer studies (Kähkönen & Wickman, 2013).

Many trans\* and non-binary gendered people identify as bisexual or pansexual (Barker, Richards et al., 2012; Morandini et al., 2017). Furthermore, many people who go through the gender transition process also define their sexual identity anew in that process, although of course this is not necessarily the case (Zamboni, 2006). It seems nevertheless that there are important intersections between the calling into question of the gender binary and the sexual binary (Juvonen, under review; Morandini et al., 2017). However, the theorization of transgender, non-binary genders, and bisexualities and other non-binary sexualities is often done separately. Theorizations of bisexuality should better acknowledge that people's genders might change, and that not all people identify with one gender. However, in queer theories of gender, it often goes unexplored that bisexual people's desires for more than one gender(ed) body also challenge the cultural conceptualization of desire that emphasizes (one) gendered body as an object choice (Butler, 1990), and that these desires thus fail to ontologize genders within the normative binary frame (Gustavson, 2009).

Bisexual people's desires for people of various genders create trouble within the normative logic of the heterosexual matrix, where sex, gender and sexuality are mutually constitutive (Butler, 1990; Gustavson, 2009). Within this normative frame, the gendered body is emphasized as a desired choice of object, whereas other aspects of a person are sidelined (Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2002). 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, promiscuity and hypersexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Klesse, 2005). Rodríguez (2016) has remarked that although through bisexuality it is sometimes also possible to articulate non-sexual attractions and affinities, in

current cultural conditions bisexuality ‘never fully escapes its association with overt, unrestrained sexual desire’ (Rodríguez, 2016, p. 171). The idea of multiple partners is thus possibly a 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).

In this study, my aim is to mobilize the hierarchical divisions of the heterosexual matrix – which cast men and women and homo- and heterosexuality as opposite poles – as an emphatically psychosocial tool in the analysis. When I write about the dichotomies and hierarchies that the heterosexual matrix produces, I stress my view of the heterosexual matrix as ‘always already unstable’. Thus, rather than solely emphasizing the coercive force of the binaries and hierarchies of the heterosexual matrix, I stress the psychosocial aspects of Butler’s work (see Liljeström, 2015; Pirskanen, 2008). In Butler’s (1990, 1991) thought, sexuality always exceeds the regulatory categories of gender and sexuality, in the sense that sexuality can never be fully expressed in gender presentations or identity labels. With the concept of excess, Butler refers to a psychic space that always ‘exceeds the domain of the conscious subject’ (Butler, 1991, p. 315). The notion of psychic excess also refers to the opacity of the subject, to the subject’s inability to tell or know itself fully (Pirskanen, 2008, p. 2; see also Saresma, 2005). As Giffney (2009, p. 8) has aptly written, ‘queer is all about excess, pushing the boundaries of the possible, showing up language and discursive categories more specifically for their inadequacies.’ The excess thus refers to something that cannot be categorized or expressed through language; it becomes ‘the queer remainder’ Giffney (2009, p. 8). Indeed, for Butler, the potential for change is present within the intervals or leakages in the constrained repetitions of intelligible performances of gender or sexuality.

Yet, the dominant cultural frameworks limit the conditions of possibility for (bi)sexualities to emerge in relationships. They also have some affective consequences for bisexual women’s and their partners’ relationships, with which the partners have to deal (Lahti, 2018b). The tension between culturally intelligible categories and psychic excess might require some affective work, not only by bisexual women but also by their partners, which is not always experienced as pleasant or subversive by the subjects themselves.

### **3.2.3 Antisocial desire**

Along with the notion that sexuality never fits neatly into clearly defined identity categories (Butler, 1991; Giffney, 2009), there is yet another reason I believe it is necessary to explore bisexuality through queer theoretical thinking. Queer theoretical approaches are uncompromising in their critical analyses of sexuality-related norms, restrictive identity categories and the shoring up of heteronormative lifestyle(s) in various societal and cultural-political contexts. There is a need for caution about the normalizing logic of (bisexual) activism and research, which often seeks to represent bisexuals as being as (non-)monogamous, (un)stable and harmless as anyone else (Barker, 2016; Dahl, 2014; Eisner, 2013;

Klesse, 2018). As Eisner (2013, p. 42) writes, while some bisexuals feel comfortable and well represented by the normalized picture, others do not:

Some bisexuals are sluts (read: sexually independent women), some bisexuals are just experimenting, some like people of certain genders only sexually and not romantically, some like to have threesomes and perform bisexuality to men, some are HIV and STI carriers, some don't practice safer sex, some are indecisive and confused, some cheat on their partners, some do choose to be bi, as well as many other things the 'myth busting' tries to cast off.

Bending Jack Halberstam's (2011) idea, presented in *The queer art of failure*, that there is not only one model of success (in life), I want to suggest that there is not only one model of success in being bisexual in a relationship – the model of forming a lifelong monogamous relationship with one person who is supposed to fulfil all one's emotional and sexual desires. As Halberstam states, 'the wound can be the gift, the thing that marks you as other can be the place that you actually want to claim as your own, not the place you want to leave' (Halberstam in Sexsmith, 2012). I think it has not been explored fully how bisexuality's otherness, its association with wavering, promiscuity and multiple partners, could be thought of as a gift.

In antisocial queer theory, desire is theorized as unruly and anti-normative, as something that is always disruptive of societal norms, structures, categories and coherent identities (Berlant & Edelman, 2014; Edelman, 2004). Because desire in itself is antisocial, it faces constant attempts to normalize and regulate it (Johnson, 2015; Kangasvuo, 2014). Many antisocial queer theorists, such as Lee Edelman (2004), Leo Bersani (1995), Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (2001) and others, are inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis. As Dean and Lane (2001, p. 28) write:

Sexuality resists social norms, according to Lacan, not so that some pure form of desire can be liberated from cultural constraints, but because unconscious contradictions cannot be eliminated by imaginary or symbolic identifications, whether normative or queer. Owing to the unconscious impasse of sex, sexuality will always be subject to sociocultural constructions, and those constructions will inevitably fail.

Yet, Corie Hammers has (2015) argued that antisocial queer theory privileges sexuality at the expense of gender, and also privileges masculine modes of (queer) sexual transgression. Although it has addressed gay men's non-normative sexual practices, such as sadomasochism (Bersani, 1995) and barebacking (Dean, 2009), which are thought to reveal a lot about where the borders of normative and anti-normative sexual practices are drawn, queer theory has not been particularly curious about women's bisexuality, for example (Callis, 2009; Hemmings, 2002, 2012; Klesse, 2014). This is surprising in light of the fact that mainstream culture, and also the LGBT community to some extent, seems to place bisexuality and its association with instability, hypersexuality and promiscuity on the side of threat, anxiety and subversion (Eisner, 2013; See & Hunt, 2011).

Despite queer theoretical efforts to deconstruct the homo/hetero divide, this binary also haunts queer accounts of sexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings,



2012; Klesse, 2014). Hemmings (2012, p. 122) remarks that queer theorists have done outstanding work critiquing the history of the homo/hetero divide (Hemmings refers to Angelides (2001), Katz (1995) and Sedgwick (1990)) and have analysed how identity politics re-establishes that divide's epistemological and political effects (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1981). Yet, in its seminal works, feminist and queer scholarship continues to understand sexuality in terms of a heterosexual/homosexual divide. Hemmings (2012) draws attention to how gay and lesbian subjects continue to be the measure of sexual inequality within late capitalist societies. In her analysis of the debates, and of how far these subjects of rights remain marginal or have gained cultural recognition, she notes that queer theory 'is consistently drawn back to same-sex desire as a uniquely queer kind of evidence' (Hemmings, 2012, p. 122). Gustavson has also argued that in queer theoretical accounts, bisexuality is usually treated as a variant of homosexual identity, where same-sex behaviours are meaningful but mixed-sex behaviours non-meaningful (Gustavson, 2009, p. 261).

In the current cultural climate, where the (monogamous) same-sex couple (with children) is almost the only culturally intelligible way to represent one's queer desire (Kuosmanen, 2007; Lahti, 2015), I want to explore the queer potential of bisexuality. As a desire for more than one gender, bisexuality is often positioned as an excessive sexuality from the perspective of monogamous relationships. Bisexual yearnings for partners of various genders and (possibly) multifarious sexual pleasures place it on the outskirts of a social order where sociability is organized around couple relationships and the idea of relationships revolves around the ideal of a partner who meets all our emotional and sexual needs.

### **3.3 Approaching the queer psychosocial subject**

Next, I will explain how psychosocial studies emerged as a critique of critical feminist discursive psychology in the British academic context, and how this resonated with the development of my own thinking as I turned to psychosocial studies for the purposes of this study. Then, I will highlight how the concept of the psychosocial subject can be thought in relation to and expanded by relational affect studies and queer theory. Thereafter, I will go on to explicate my understanding of the queer psychosocial (bi)sexual subject and how I interrogate it in this study.

#### **3.3.1 Turning to psychosocial studies**

In the British academic context, psychosocial studies is known as a distinct research field with a long tradition of attending to subjectivity, relationality and affect (Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos & Walkerdine, 2008; Ringrose and Renold, 2014, p. 778). Psychosocial studies addresses the fact that in many areas of the social sciences and psychology the 'psychological' and the 'social' are

treated as empirically and theoretically separate fields of enquiry (Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2006; Woodward, 2015). As scholars proposing psychosocial perspectives have noted, when theorizing issues such as the contemporary condition of personal life (Roseneil, 2006, 2007), sexuality (Johnson, 2015, p. 1), and affect and emotion (Ahmed, 2004; Chodorow, 1999) – all of which are of interest to this study – late 20th-century thought tends to polarize psychological and socio-historical perspectives. The tendency to treat ‘psychological’ and ‘sociological’ fields as separate risks reducing the one to the other (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Roseneil, 2006) and leads to impoverished research designs. As the Association for Psychosocial Studies (2018) states: ‘Psychological issues and subjective experiences cannot be abstracted from societal, cultural, and historical contexts; nor can they be deterministically reduced to the social. Similarly, social and cultural worlds are shaped by psychological processes and intersubjective relations.’ What psychosocial approaches share is an interdisciplinary approach to theorizing the complex intersections of the psychic and the social (Burkit, 2014; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Roseneil, 2006, p. 851). By doing this, psychosocial approaches seek to go beyond the dualism of the individual and the social (Roseneil, 2006, p. 847).

Psychosocial studies emerged out of critical feminist discursive psychology in the British academic context. *Changing the subject*, a pioneering work within British critical psychology, first appeared in 1984 (Blackman et al., 2008; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Couze & Walkerdine, 1998). It was a collection of writing which attempted to critique the individualism, Cartesianism and positivism of mainstream psychology by retheorizing subjectivity through Lacan’s and Foucault’s thinking (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 5). Post-structuralist critiques, and the Foucauldian conceptualization of knowledge as produced through a complex set of discursive power relations, also offered new perspectives on psychology as a subject field (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 4). Nikolas Rose’s (1979) radical critique of psychological knowledge had already appeared in ‘The psychological complex: mental measurement and social administration’. Later, Rose used Foucauldian genealogy to critique psychological knowledge as a technique of government and self-government that submitted the psyche and subjectivity to new forms of regulation and normalized the idea of individualized psychic interiority (Rose, 1990).

Critical psychology highlighted that psychology was a discipline with moral, political and social implications, and that it participated centrally in the production of its own subjects (Clarke, 2003; Henriques et al., 1998; Kurri, 2005). Yet, the authors of *Changing the subject* did not address the field of psychology as a unitary discipline that only oppresses, constrains and enchains its subjects; rather, they saw psychology as a productive force. They acknowledged that psychology’s insertion into modern social practices had helped to constitute the form of modern individuality (Henriques et al., 1998, p. 1). Yet, they argued that by demonstrating how psychological knowledge centrally constitutes subjectivities, it is also possible to deconstruct taken-for-granted psychological ‘facts’ about human beings and our lived experience (Henriques et al., 1998, p. 1).

and to make visible the multiplicity of power relations through which the psychological subject is constituted (Blackman, 2008, p. 7). Such interrogations are necessary if we are to understand and bring about change within and through psychological knowledge (Henriques et al., 1998, p. 1).

Internationally, there is a long tradition of feminist psychology (e.g. Burman, 1998; Henriques et al., 1998; Kitzinger, 1988) and feminist psychoanalysis (Brennan, 1989; Wright, 1992; see also Koivunen, 2010a, p. 22), as a continuation of which psychosocial approaches have also emerged (Henriques et al., 1998; Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine, 2003). In the Finnish gender studies field, however, scholars working with psychological (Päivinen, 2016) or psychoanalytic perspectives (e.g. Jokinen, 1996; Kalha, 2007; Koivunen, 2004; Uimonen, 2008), or who have a background in psychology or in social psychology, are scarce (some notable exceptions are Katri Komulainen (1998), Päivi Korvajärvi (1998) Paula Kuosmanen (2000), Minna Nikunen (2005), Suvi Ronkainen (1999)). The individualist and positivist starting points of mainstream psychology are often critiqued from feminist and queer studies perspectives (e.g. Henriques et al., 1998; Juvonen, 2002; Saresma, 2007). Furthermore, it has been remarked that mainstream psychological research (e.g. Marttinen, Dietrich & Salmela-Aro, 2016) still treats psychological characteristic and trajectories as taking place in a social vacuum (Husu & Välimäki, 2017, p. 610).

Yet, as Blackman et al. (2008) note, we are often ill-informed about work going on at the margins of many disciplines, such as psychology, which generate rather different concepts of 'affect, relationality and subjectivity' (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 12; see also Päivinen, 2016). Critical and feminist psychology has received little attention from other social sciences, although it comes close to them in many ways. Utilizing post-structuralist criticism, critical and feminist psychology has brought about an understanding of subjectivity that addresses the complex effects of power on subject formation (e.g. Henriques et al., 1998; Kitzinger, 1988; Wahlström, 1992).

Early on in feminist and critical psychology's empirical analyses, attention was often paid to the available discursive resources within a culture – and the effects of those discourses on those who lived in that culture. Language and its role in the constitution of social and psychological life became the focus of psychological research that relied on (Foucauldian) discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Clarke, 2002; Kitzinger, 1988).

However, as the authors of *Changing the subject* noted, with the turn to discourse, the theorization of the subject encounters a new set of problems (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Subjects cannot be thought of as discourses, nor are they determined by them (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008, p. 5) argue that discourse is not really a 'theory' of the subject. They remark that the Foucauldian notion of discursive power is effective in explaining 'the local and heterogenous positioning of the subjects within relations of power' – that is, subjectification (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 94) – but it fails to explain the differences between particular subjectivities (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Since it does not ask why certain

discourses appeal to some but not to others, it fails to capture the diversity of individual experiences. This was not even of interest for Foucault in his early work. For him, the subject was a textual position, which is not equivalent to a person (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 7). He did not consider how people experience the contradictory and often discontinuous positionings he theorized (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 6).

By contrast, psychosocial studies engages with how identity positions such as gender, sexuality, race or class are produced through ideological and normative processes; it also asks why one comes to occupy a particular position, and how the subject experiences the world in which they live (Johnson, 2015, p. 6). *Changing the subject* was one of the first attempts to theorize subjectivity psychosocially (Blackman et al., 2008; Henriques et al., 1998). It sought to develop an understanding of the subject that is multiple and relational, and not bound by reason (Henriques et al., 1998, p. xviii). The authors did not want to give up that which continues to fascinate those who are drawn to psychology, namely 'the intricacies of the mind, mysteries of emotional life, the processes through which we become thinking, feeling, acting creatures' (Henriques et al., 1998 p. x). Psychoanalysis was reinvoked in order to understand subjectivity as a site of 'multiplicity, of continuous and discontinuous forces, states and feelings' (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 6). The authors of *Changing the subject* brought psychoanalytic thinking together with the Foucauldian understanding of discursive power in order to understand the human subject as conflicted, complex and contradictory.

Today, psychosocial studies is an expanding and vibrant research field intertwined with psychoanalysis, sociology, critical psychology, critical theory, post-structuralism, process philosophy, feminism, postcolonial theory, queer theory and affect theory. Psychosocial thinking resonates with post-structuralist feminist and queer theorization, which has challenged the Cartesian idea of the autonomous, coherent subject and replaced it with the idea of a subject that is corporeal, relational and in a constant process of becoming, shaped by social and cultural factors, history, ideology and even the unconscious (Rossi, 2010, p. 32). This is my study's point of departure for exploring bisexual women's and their partners' relational subjectivities.

### **3.3.2 Psychosocial studies and affect**

By adopting a psychosocial approach, I seek to work with aspects of experience that are not always consciously known or easily represented linguistically. These aspects are often referred to as affect (Baraitser & Frosh, 2007; Blackman, 2010; Koivunen, 2010a, 2010b; Sedgwick, 2003). From a psychosocial vantage point, the concept of affect refers to the unconscious, unspoken, excessive and often irrational aspects of experience (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2006). Psychosocial studies shares many interests with the theorization of affect, which during the past two decades has constituted another 'turn' as feminist and queer scholars have reawakened their interest in emotions,

sensations and affect. This has brought theories of affect to the centre of feminist and cultural studies (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Koivunen, 2010a).

The debates around affect are inter- and transdisciplinary, and thus can travel from one discipline to another (for example, from neuroscience to feminist studies) and form theoretical hybrids. However, the genealogies of psychosocial studies differ from the genealogies of affect studies within feminist and cultural studies (Blackman et al., 2008, p. 12). Burkitt (2014) has described the genealogy of psychosocial studies as a re-emergence of psychoanalysis within the field of feminist and critical psychology after critical psychology had passed through a 'turn to language', then a 'turn to discourse' and a finally 'turn to subjectivity' (Burkitt, 2014; Henriques et al., 1998). In feminist and cultural studies too, the turn to affect can be conceived as a broad criticism of the linguistic turn and of research designs that are thought to focus on language, discourse and representation (Koivunen, 2010a; Sedgwick, 2003).

In affect studies inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (2004), affect is often conceptualized as an effect of somebody or something on another, and as often not consciously experienced. The situational nature of affects is emphasized, as affects are thought to emerge out of the dynamic encounters of multiple and complex elements (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Seyfert, 2012). In these encounters, different forms of affective interaction meet – for example, in material, physiological, sensory, ideological, psychosocial and discursive modes of affective transmission (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019; Lahti, 2018b; Seyfert, 2012). In this sense, affects do not 'belong' to anybody and cannot be attributed to only human bodies (Seyfert, 2012, p. 27). Affects involve encounters with all kinds of body: organic, non-organic, artificial and imaginary. The psychical mediation of affect is often not emphasized in this strand of affect theory, as Deleuze and Guattari (2004) are highly critical of psychoanalytic approaches, which according to them 'remain trapped within the logic of family' (Walkerdine & Jimenez, 2012, p. 49). Yet, in my work I am inspired by such thinkers as Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez (2012), who instead of emphasizing psychoanalysis's developmental ontology (which focuses on infancy) point to the embodied ways in which, for example, anxiety might be transmitted across communities and generations. Likewise, Patricia Clough (2013, p. 177) has brought affect theories into discussion with psychoanalytic thought in order to widen the psychoanalytic notion of intimacies to encompass a 'very wide canvas' upon which 'things and persons can feel and be felt by one another and by feeling become however slightly or massively changed'.

I follow Blackman (2010, p. 172) and Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012, p. 51), who argue that when we continue to work on affect as something that is not consciously known and which can transfer between bodies (human and non-human), it is necessary to take into account the psychic mediation of affect. Embodied affective relations are also experienced psychically (Walkerdine & Jimenez, 2012, p. 51), and thus cannot be reduced to the neurophysiological body (Blackman, 2013, pp. 23–24). This is the point where psychosocial thinking can make important contributions to affect theories and vice versa. Psychosocial

thinking utilizes psychoanalytic concepts to explore the intertwinement of the psychic and the social, and can contribute to a more nuanced theorization of affect than the notion of affect as just an effect of somebody or something on another.

By following a theoretically and methodologically psychosocial position, I utilize such feminist and queer approaches to subjectivity, relationships and affect, which raise new questions about sexual subjectivities by unleashing the critical potential of psychoanalytic thought (Berlant & Edelman, 2014; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Koivunen, 2010b, p. 59). This does not mean an easy psychologization of affect (Blackman, 2010), but rather emphasizes the tentative and disruptive potential of psychoanalytic thought for sexual subjectivities within intimate relationships (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Following Johnson (2015, p. 10), I wish to utilize the theoretical tools offered by psychosocial thought to explore how those concepts might 'conjure up alternative ways of understanding (bi)sexual subjectivities in relationships'.

### 3.3.3 Combining psychosocial studies with queer studies

As Koivunen (2004, p. 21) notes, many queer scholars read Foucault's *The history of sexuality* (1981) solely as criticizing psychoanalysis as a problematic regime of sexuality and a technology of the self. For example, David Halperin (2007) and Michael Warner (1993) have insisted that Foucault's theory of sexuality rejects the 'inner life of male homosexuality' (Johnson, 2015, pp. 106). Of course, there is a need for caution around psychoanalysis, because of its pathologizing interpretations (Giffney, 2017) of homosexuality (Ståhlström, 1997), sexual identity development (Uimonen, 2008) and gay men's sexual practices (Halberin, 2007). For example, Halperin (2007) has critiqued the conceptualization of gay men's sexual practices in terms of risk, internalized homophobia and the 'death drive', since these always carry the notion that homosexuality is pathological.

Those scholars who have embraced psychoanalysis's critical potential for queer theory have found in psychoanalytic thought conceptual tools for analysing processes of normalization, and also tools to oppose those processes (Bersani, 1995; Butler, 1990, 1991; de Lauretis, 1994; Dean & Lane, 2001; Edelman, 2004; Johnson, 2015). Johnson (2015) argues that queer theories are psychosocial because they place psychoanalytic theories in their socio-historical contexts and thus develop them further. Furthermore, although many feminist and queer scholars note that psychoanalysis as a field of study has often neglected social and cultural influences, Freud's theorization of gendered identity development through melancholic identification processes is inherently social and relational (Butler, 1990; Zakin, 2011).

Teresa de Lauretis proposes that Freud's work entails two different approaches to sexuality that are in tension with each other (Koivunen, 2004, p. 22). On the one hand, Freud proposes a trajectory of 'normal' development: when everything goes right in a child's sexual development, the child will eventually become a 'healthy' heterosexual adult, and thus a coherent gendered subject. From this point of view, perversions are signs of disorder and development gone

awry (Koivunen, 2004). However, as Teresa de Lauretis (1994) suggests, Freud was the first to suggest that 'normal' should be placed within scare quotes (Koivunen, 2004, p. 22). Unlike his contemporaries, he did not see sexuality solely in terms of procreation. For Freud, the object of desire is always uncertain and volatile. The question is not only about the social and societal repression of drives, but also about how objects of desire are formed in negotiation between imaginings and social fantasies – not just between 'inner drives' and 'outside facts'. As Kalha (2007, p. 26) notes, Freud is ceaselessly curious about perversions, and he directs his gaze towards places it should not go: to the margins, to trivial details that are often neurotically repressed, to different kinds of otherness and othering, to all that which contemporary culture would rather hide from view.

Instead of conceptualizing sexuality first and foremost in terms of the object of desire, psychoanalytic thinker Jean Laplanche has turned his attention to sexuality's excess. Contemporary psychoanalytic thinking on sexuality is strongly influenced by Laplanche (1987, cited by Stein, 2008; Benjamin & Atlas, 2015), who conceives of sexuality in terms of the early overwhelming of the psyche (Benjamin & Atlas, 2015). The child is overwhelmed by the parent's excess – the parent is older and bigger, and the adult's unconscious messages about sexuality are too abundant for the child to contain in its psyche. Thus sexuality always starts with an unconscious communication from the (excessive) other (Laplanche 1987, cited by Benjamin & Atlas, 2015).

Stein (2008) too draws on Laplanche's (1987) thinking, but she is able to shift the universalizing tendencies of psychoanalytic theorizations of excess, keeping the concept in motion by discussing it through different conceptualizations. Stein suggests that the various types of excess together constitute the compelling power of sexuality: 'the overstepping of boundaries, the sense of overbrimming with inordinate arousal that makes one feel it cannot be encompassed' (Stein, 2008, p. 44). Her discussion of sexual experiences that can 'sometimes be strange, excessive, "perverse" and irrational' (Stein, 2008, p. 45) does not pathologize these experiences, but rather comes close to de Lauretis's (1994), Dean and Lane's (2001) and Kalha's (2007) queer readings of Freud (1905/2000), for whom all desire is more or less perverse. Not only does excess transgress regulatory frames, as in post-structuralist theories (Stein, 2008, p. 50), but it can also transgress boundaries between self and other, and within oneself (Stein, 2008, p. 63). Laplanche's thinking offers important analytical tools for this study, as it emphasizes that the transgressiveness of bisexual women's sexual and relationship choices cannot solely be understood through how they take up normative or non-normative positions such as monogamous or non-monogamous relationship discourses, or through for example the gender of their partner. Rather, this study argues that without psychoanalytic theorizations of sexual subjectivity, it is impossible to understand these women's and their (ex-)partners' sexual experiences – which are sometimes excessive and irrational – in the context of their relational life and affective life stories.

Psychoanalytic theorizations of sexuality and desire reflect the notion that sexuality unsettles the fantasy of the sovereign subject (Berlant & Edelman, 2014;

Bersani, 1995; Butler, 1991; Laplanche, 1987; Stein, 2008). This points to the fact that sexuality is not only constrained by norms that dictate how one should be (bi)sexual in a relationship, but also contains affective, non-rational psychic dimensions of relating (Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2006).

Yet, according to Frosh and Baraitser (2008), psychoanalysis is normative when it is understood as way of knowing the subject 'better', for example in the assumption that it is possible to access a research subject's permanent and real unconscious, or to firmly identify the reasons behind a subject's discursive investments in their unconscious. In this study, I follow Frosh and Baraitser's (2008) suggestion that psychoanalytic ideas always need careful contextualization because they might not function in the same way in and out of the consulting room. Coming close to queer readings of psychoanalysis, and drawing on Lacan, Frosh and Baraitser (2008) suggest that the unconscious cannot be invoked as an explanation; rather, psychoanalysis's role is to disrupt sense. When I utilize psychoanalytic insights in my study, I follow their mobilization of Lacan, who treats interpretation as an interruption in the psychoanalytic setting (Frosh & Baraitser 2008, p. 356). The interpretative action does not reveal an unconscious that is already there, but rather produces the unconscious and causes it to exist (Nasio, 1992, p. 46, cited by Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Thus, in research settings, psychosocial phenomena are produced through the interwoven actions of the researcher and the researched. In this way, Frosh and Baraitser (2008, p. 362) stress the performative elements of psychoanalysis. Yet, they do not want to give up on psychoanalytic insight, which they see as crucial for thinking psychosocially:

This is the claim, that psychological and social, inner and outer, are only artificially separated, and are constituted by something else that runs through them, sometimes emerging in surprising ways that psychoanalysts code as the 'unconscious' in its signifying, 'non-sensical materialization'.

Following Frosh and Baraitser (2008), then, I utilize a psychoanalysis in a queer psychosocial manner, which does not believe in psychoanalysis's ability to reveal the 'true nature' of human sexuality, but rather emphasizes the tentative and disruptive potential of psychoanalytic thought for the study of bisexuality within intimate relationships.



## **4 MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **4.1 From Foucauldian discourse analysis to queer psychosocial analysis**

In queer psychosocial thinking, it is challenging to take psychoanalytic theory into account alongside the understanding that intimate life is socially and discursively patterned. Foucault's (1981) theories of discursive regulation have been important throughout my study. Foucauldian discourse analysis explores institutionalized hegemonic discourses – meaning-making, practices and ways of thinking that become normalized and naturalized at certain historical times and places and that are endorsed and sustained by societal institutions (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Jokinen, 2004). Hegemonic discourses about normative relationships, and the gendered and sexualized subject positions enabled by them, have become an integral part of socially shared reality. They are so well known that they are no longer recognized as having been learned and normalized. The aim of discourse analysis inspired by Foucault's thinking is to make these hegemonic discourses visible, to pluralize them, and in that way to open up possibilities for change (Vuori, 2001). It aims to deconstruct taken-for-granted ontologized truths and to show that they are discursively constructed (Jokinen, 2004). In this study, which makes visible the repetition of existing relationship discourses and of dichotomized gendered and sexualized subject positions, the aim is also to deconstruct the ontological 'truth' of those discourses.

Yet embodied affective experiences of being in relationships – and accounts of them in interviews – cannot be seen simply as effects of discursive power relations, or as a site for the reproduction of power (de Boise, 2015; Sedgwick, 2003). How (bi)sexualities emerge (or do not emerge) in relationships is always embedded in the affective, lively and often messy realities of relationships. If in the analysis of relationship discourses attention is paid only to binary divisions and hierarchical subject positions, the affective and relational aspects of being in a relationship may be bypassed (de Boise, 2015; Kangasvuo, 2006a; Roseneil, 2006; Storr, 1999). In order to attend to the contradictory positionings, tensions and

affective dimensions of discussing bisexuality and being in a relationship that were present in the interviews, I have mobilized a queer psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2007; Woodward, 2015). This approach is aligned with (antisocial) queer theories and psychosocial studies, which use psychoanalytic thinking in conjunction with a Foucauldian understanding of discursive power in order to understand the subject as messy, conflicted, complex and contradictory (Berlant & Edelman, 2014).

For the purposes of this study, while analysing the interviews I followed Sedgwick's (2003) suggestion that the non-representational – the affective, the excessive, the unconscious – does not provide access 'beneath, behind and beyond' but rather is 'parallel with' and 'beside' (Koivunen, 2010b, p. 50) the representational and discursive realm. As Koivunen points out (2010b, p. 50), in this way Sedgwick gestures towards Deleuzian planar relations and diverges from the assumption that, for example, discursive power determines other (affective, excessive or unconscious) dimensions. In my interpretation of the psychosocial too, bisexual women's and their (ex-)partners' experiences comprise various elements that cannot be reduced to either 'psychic' or 'social' dimensions. In interviewees' accounts, the psychic and the social are inextricably intertwined. The queer bisexual psychosocial subject emerges to the surface through an analytical reading of different aspects that come together in interviewees' accounts (Blackman, 2015a).

## 4.2 Interviewing queer psychosocial subjects

As my theoretical-methodological focus is a (queer) psychosocial one, I wanted to ensure in this study that the interview material was composed in such a way that it suited the purposes of the analysis, and that it allowed a nuanced interpretation of the movement of discourses and the affective qualities of the interview material. Interviewing has often been critiqued as a traditional qualitative method that leans heavily on language (Back, 2010) and is densely influenced by the conventions of narrating life in an 'interview society' (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997). What this critique disregards, however, is that 'speech is both embodied (in sound and gesture) and also produces embodiment (the feelings and actions of the listener)' (Muller, 2007, p. 11). I see interviewing as an affective, bodily and lively interaction, and therefore I advocate making use of the complexity and affective qualities of interview data (see Lahti, 2018c).

The semi-structured couple interviews in 2005 with bisexual women and their partners were conducted for the purposes of my master's dissertation. I chose to conduct couple interviews because I wanted to explore how bisexuality is constructed in an interview situation where both partners in a couple are present (Lahti, 2006). According to Liisa Tainio (2000), 'relationship talk' is a socially constructed acting category where being a couple is made a relevant part of the discussion. Talking as a couple can affect the course of a discussion, for example, when the partners act as a team in the situation, or when they construct

the moral framework of the discussion by drawing a line between appropriate and inappropriate talk. I wanted to find out whether bisexuality could be seen as part of appropriate relationship talk (Lahti, 2006, 2007). I had formulated the couple interview themes and questions (Appendix 3) beforehand (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001).

Even though the questions had been formulated beforehand, I tried to create an atmosphere in the couple interviews whereby the participants could talk about their relationships in a manner that was characteristic for them. I would describe my interviewing style as attentive and sensitive, and as one that built rapport and respect. This produced rich interview material in both the couple interviews and the individual follow-up interviews.

In the follow-up interviews my conscious aim was to conduct them using an interview method that would go beyond the explicit discourses through which people speak about their lives (Roseneil, 2007, p. 88) and reveal something about the ways in which relationships were constituted by affects, desires, memories and imaginings, along with normative (or other) relationship discourses. In psychosocial literature that concentrates on methodology, open-ended interview questions are recommended for interviewing defended psychosocial subjects, because such questions encourage storytelling, or at any rate are more likely to do so than closed questions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Roseneil, 2006; Woodward, 2015). Some propose that the interviewer's role should be almost invisible, more like that of a facilitator to the interviewees' stories (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In Wengraf's (2001) biographical narrative interview method, it is also important to prevent the interviewer from imposing a structure on the interviewee's narrative; instead the interviewer should try to follow the interviewee's own structure very closely, including when formulating further questions and analysing the data (Wengraf, 2001). However, although my own way of interviewing was sensitive and gave a lot of space to the interviewee, it is also necessary to acknowledge the interviewer's role in the production of the interview (see Lahti, 2018b).

Hence, following a long tradition of feminist critiques of research methods and methodology (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1986; Oakley, 1981; Oinas, 2004; Phoenix, 2010; Thwaites, 2017), for me interviewing is not an 'objective' method for gathering 'true' information or stories about the interviewee's life. In this study, I formulated the research agenda, research request (Appendix 1) and interview questions (Appendices 3 and 7), I conducted the interviews, and I transcribed most of the interviews. I regard the interviews as co-produced, since both interviewer and interviewee engaged actively in the interview's production.

#### **4.2.1 Interviewing bisexual women and their (ex-)partners**

I originally recruited the participants through a research request (Appendix 1) addressed to bisexual women and their partners, which was sent to various (student) mailing lists. The majority of the participants who responded had seen the research request on a Finnish email list targeted at lesbian women and

women interested in women ('Sappho-list'). One couple had been forwarded the request by a friend.

In 2005 I conducted seven couple interviews: four with bisexual women and their female partners, and three with bisexual women and their male partners, one of whom was a transman. When I contacted the participants some 10 years later for the follow-up interviews, I discovered that the majority of the participants had separated, and most of them had new partners. One other-sex couple was still married. Because most of the couples were no longer together, I decided to conduct the follow-up interviews as individual interviews. By conducting individual interviews with all participants, I wanted to treat all the participants in a similar manner. In hindsight, I missed the opportunity to interview the partners of the couple who were still married in both a couple interview and individual interviews.

For the follow-up interviews, I was able to reach 11 participants: six bisexual women and five (ex-)partners. I was unable to reach one female couple; in addition, one female ex-partner of a bisexual woman did not want to participate and also refused me permission to use the 2005 couple interview in the study. I was therefore able to use five original couple interviews in the analysis for this study, and to conduct 11 individual follow-up interviews. The participants were white ethnic Finns/Europeans, aged 22 to 42 at the time of the couple interviews and 10 years older at the time of the follow-up interviews. In previous interview studies on bisexuality, the participants have tended to be young, well-educated women (Hartman, 2011; Kangasvuori, 2014). In this study too, the majority of the participants were well educated: by the follow-up interviews, eight of them had higher-education degrees, and three had vocational qualifications. Yet this study also included bisexual women and (ex-)partners from lower educational backgrounds. Also, using longitudinal data enabled me to analyse changes in how the participants saw their (bi)sexual identities and relationships over time when they were no longer quite so young.

I conducted both the semi-structured couple interviews (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2001) and the individual follow-up interviews myself. They took place in five Finnish cities, in participants' homes or other places that offered privacy. The participants never suggested cafés or other public places for the interviews, which is telling of the intimate nature of the interviews. Both sets of interviews were in-depth interviews that lasted between one and four hours. They were audio-recorded and transcribed using a simplified version of Jefferson's (2004) system. The aim of Jefferson's transcription system is to capture not only *what* is said but also *how* it is said. Therefore, specific symbols are used in the transcript, for example, to mark overlapping talk ([]), and brief and longer pauses: (.) notes a pause which lasts less than a second; (2) notes the duration of the pause in seconds. This transcription style is often used in conversation analysis, and it was familiar to me from my master's studies in psychology. When I transcribe I like to follow the flow of the speech, and instead of using punctuation marks I often mark the pauses with Jefferson's symbols. However, in this study, the focus of the analysis was not on the characteristics of speech noted by Jefferson's system.

Therefore, the symbols used during the transcription phase were removed from the interview excerpts presented in the articles, and sometimes some punctuation marks were added. However, I added information about interviewees' tone of voice and their reactions in double brackets, such as ((laughing)), and I marked the excerpts with --- when I had omitted some material, such as repetitions or expletives.

According to the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity's ethical principles for research in the humanities and the social and behavioural sciences, study participants must be informed regarding what the study is about, what taking part in the study means in practice, and how long the participation will take (TENK, 2009). My research request (Appendix 1) included a short description of all of these aspects and the aims of the study, which I also repeated at the beginning of the couple interviews. The participants then signed a consent form before I started the couple interviews (Appendix 2). I stressed that participating in the research was voluntary, and that the participants could discontinue their participation in the study at any time throughout its duration (Appendix 2) (see TENK, 2009).

When I contacted the participants for the follow-up interviews some 10 years later by phone, email or Facebook, I reminded them of their participation in the original study, and I explained the aims and practical aspects of participating in the follow-up study (Miller, 2015). After the phone conversation, I sent the participants an email containing a written description of the research so that they could take their time and familiarize themselves with the aims of my research, what participation would mean in practice, and how long it would take (Appendix 4). At the same time, I also asked the participants for their consent to use the 2005 couple interviews in this study. If they gave verbal consent, I sent them a written consent form, and an envelope so that they could sign it and send it to me (Appendix 5). At the beginning of the follow-up interviews, I went through the grounds, aims and practical procedures of the research (Appendix 4), and the participants signed the consent form for the follow-up interview (Appendix 6). Again, I stressed that research participation was voluntary and that they could end their participation at any time if they so wished (Appendix 6).

I organized the questions for the semi-structured couple interviews around the following themes: their relationship ideals, their current life situation, the history of the relationship, the couple's family and friends, the meaning of gender and (bi)sexuality in the relationship, and the couple's future plans. Specific interview questions translated from Finnish can be found in Appendix 3. These themes were analysed in my master's dissertation, and therefore have not been handled extensively in this study (Lahti, 2006, 2007). As I was interviewing the couples together, I posed one question at a time and allowed them to discuss it freely. If only one partner answered, I tried to make sure that both partners' voices were heard by asking about the other partner's outlook on the issue. As a method of eliciting the norm against which the couples compared their own

relationship, I asked how similar to or different from other relationships they thought their own relationship was (Lahti, 2015).

Following feminist research ethics, my aim was to give as much space as possible for the interviewees themselves to define the topics and discourses that emerged as central (Oinas, 2004; Thwaites, 2017). Following this logic, the sequence of the research questions varied if the interviewees brought up a theme spontaneously in the course of the interview. Nevertheless, I took care to cover all of the themes I had planned.

At the time of the first interviews, none of the partners (three women and three men, one of whom was a transman) identified as bisexual, and nor did any of the couples identify their relationship on the basis of one partner's bisexuality. Rather, the interviewees placed their relationships within the homo/hetero distinction on the basis of the partners' genders. The relationships had lasted between three and seven years, and all were cohabiting. In these couple interviews, relationship stories that drew on discourses about the ideals of enduring relationships and romantic love were dominant: participants aspired to form a durable relationship with one person, possibly for the rest of their lives. One mixed-sex relationship was a consensually open relationship, but it 'had never been tested'. For most of the interviewees it was important to register their partnership or to get married, and most of them also considered children to be a part of couple relationships. Two female couples were in registered partnerships; one other-sex couple was married; a bisexual woman and her transman partner were planning a wedding. One female couple had children, as did one other-sex couple; other couples envisaged having children in the future.

By the time of the follow-up interviews in 2014–2015, most participants had separated and found new partners. One mixed-sex couple had stayed married. Two of the bisexual women were now in long-term relationships with (cis)men, two were married to men instead of being in long-term relationships with women or transmen, and one was involved with both men and women. Three of the male ex-partners were in heterosexual marriages, one woman was in a registered partnership with a woman, and one ex-partner was single. By the time of the 2014–2015 interviews, nine of the 11 interviewees had children, either from the relationship they had been in during 2005 or from their relationship at the time of the follow-up interview.

Although the criterion for participation in the follow-up interviews was that interviewees had been in a relationship during the 2005 interviews, I did not want to set the first interview as the point of departure for the follow-up interviews; instead, I left it to each participant to judge the significance of that particular relationship within the entirety of their relational life. In order to do this, I 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 (Appendix 7).

My study confirms Heaphy and Einarsdottir's (2013) finding that interviewing couples together and apart generates different kinds of interview talk. During the couple interviews I was rather baffled by the unanimity of these

relatively young couples' investment in a relationship discourse that drew strongly on 'marriage and family'. In the follow-up interviews, participants again made sense of their new relationships through the discourse of enduring relationships and romantic love. However, all of them talked about the relationships they had been in at the time of the couple interviews, and often the break-up of that relationship was handled extensively. Possibly because their partners were not present in the individual interviews, they gave a much more complex picture of their past and current relationships than in the couple interviews. In individual interviews, they did not act as a team with their partners, which often happens in couple interviews (Tainio, 2000). Instead of giving accounts of their relationships, they gave accounts of themselves in the follow-up interviews. It is quite striking that women's bisexuality had often hidden from view in the couple interviews. In the individual interviews, it became visible through bisexual women's biographical accounts of their past and current relationships and sexual experiences.

While planning the follow-up interviews, I had become interested in what the interviewees might think now about what had seemed to be rather idealized pictures of their relationships in the couple interviews. In the follow-up interviews, I utilized a method of 'bringing the past to the present' (Lahti, 2018b). I chose a passage from the couple interview carried out some 10 years earlier, and the interviewee and I listened together to the old tape recording. I thought listening to a passage from a previous interview where participants conversed with their (ex-)partners might produce affective responses that would give a new perspective on the presentation of their relationships and their (or their partner's) bisexuality in the couple interviews. The passage was listened to in the last part the follow-up interview, because I did not want to affect participants' spontaneous accounts related to their earlier relationships (Lahti, 2018b).

However, all of the interviewees also talked about their relationships before we listened to the tape. Listening to a passage from their earlier interview thus did not seem to yield much new material for me to analyse. This was especially true regarding the research question of how bisexuality was negotiated in relationship discourses. Often the immediate response to listening to the 'old tape' was somewhat neutral. It was often only a while after we had listened to the tape that some painful or problematic aspect of the previous relationship would be brought up that had not been mentioned previously in the couple interviews. These contradictory aspects of the longitudinal interview set were analysed more extensively after this study was conducted (Lahti, 2018b).

It was only after I had familiarized myself with a Deleuze-Guattarian (2004) approach that I could make sense of what had happened in the interviews after we listened to the tapes (Lahti, 2018b). Theoretically, I treated the passages from the old interviews as parts of the old interview assemblages that were now being plugged into the follow-up interview assemblages (Ringrose & Renold, 2014). I analysed how listening to a passage from the previous couple interview affected the possibilities for becoming of the follow-up interview assemblage.

This raises questions about the limits of the queer psychosocial approach. The Deleuze-Guattarian (2004) approach and relational affect studies (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Seyfert, 2012) encouraged me to pay attention to the multisensory potential of the interviews, and to explore the affective flow of relationship events, scenes and experiences that came together in the follow-up interviews, which I now thought of as assemblages (Lahti, 2018b). While the Deleuze-Guattarian approach is not so bound to a (psychosocial) subject, it highlights how affects emerge through encounters between bodies and things (Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018). However, what is often missing is the psychosocial mediation of affects, which lies at the centre of this study.

#### 4.2.2 Building rapport in the interviews

Building good rapport – a relationship of mutual trust and respect – is usually considered a key element in the successful production of research material (Thwaites, 2017) using the interview method. In feminist methodological literature, rapport in feminist research interviews is often thought to be of a particular kind, ‘created through mutual sharing, minimal power hierarchies, and a feeling of trust between interviewer and interviewee’ (Thwaites, 2017, p. 1, citing Oakley, 1981). Researchers are encouraged to build rapport with their participants and to make them feel at ease by sharing stories about their own lives and thoughts. This creates a sense of togetherness and closeness in the research setting.

Even though I did not share details of my personal life, the interviewees in this study felt safe enough to disclose their life stories to me. Most of the interview co-production resulted in rich, wide-ranging material, and it seemed to me that the interviewees were pleased to share their life stories for the purposes of my research. The atmosphere during the interviews was good and respectful; in other words, I felt I was successful in building rapport. This was also reflected in interviewees’ comments at the end of the interviews. For example, one bisexual woman said at the end of the interview, ‘it was nice to have this opportunity to concentrate on these kinds of issues and take the time for it. It was nice to answer your questions.’ Another participant, a bisexual woman’s ex-partner, said:

It was quite interesting to contemplate these things, one’s past and present, and see how much good there is both in the present and in one’s past. It was great to notice that I could talk about that one past relationship, considering how much it hurt me. Clearly I have moved forwards, so this was also a somewhat therapeutic conversation.

Comments like these speak to the rewarding aspects of interviews for interviewees as well as researchers. This is also aligned with the feminist research aim of giving something back to the research participants and not just ‘taking material’ from them.

However, as Thwaites (2017) has pointed out, building rapport can also be problematic and even exploitative, for example if interviewees end up sharing more about their lives than they had originally intended. This was the case for



one interviewee, who contacted me after the interview and said that she felt she had said more than she wanted to say about problematic aspects of her past relationships. However, she felt it was good that I had said during the interview that if anything came to mind or bothered her after the interview, she could contact me. She considered the study important and did not want to withdraw her interview entirely. Therefore, we agreed that there were certain parts of the interview that I would not use for my research, and I abided by that agreement.

Another interviewee emphasized right at the beginning of the interview that it was very important that I should not reveal certain aspects of their current life situation to their ex-partner, if I were to interview the latter. I reassured this interviewee that I would follow ethical research guidelines and would not reveal any details of the interview to anyone else. This conversation underlined the need to take special care with the anonymization of interviews (Sauders et al., 2015). When quoting the interviews for the purposes of analysis in my research publications, I not only had to protect the participants from identification by any readers, but I also needed to ensure that (ex-)partners would not recognize each other and gain private information that they did not already have. Keeping all this mind, I took special care with the anonymization of the interview material (Saunders et al., 2015). Following Saunders et al.'s (2015) principles, I changed quotations with the aim of preserving the richness and integrity of the interviews while also ensuring the anonymity of the interviewees. This kind of anonymization is challenging, since removing or changing details can change the meaning of quotes and the interpretation of affects (Taylor, 2015). With this in mind, I only changed details that I thought would not substantially affect the meaning of the quote in question. For example, I might change the genders of participants' children or their marital status in particular situations, or I might slightly modify the number of years they had been together with their partners. In the main, I strove to ensure the participants' anonymity by choosing interview quotes in a manner that did not reveal too much of the context of the interviews. I also used different pseudonyms for the participants in each publication, and in this way I tried to avoid the possibility that readers of several publications might build narratives about the participants on the basis of analyses and quotes. Throughout the research project, I have appreciated the information and life stories the participants shared with me. My aim has been to treat their accounts with the utmost respect when reporting my findings in my publications.

#### **4.2.3 Sexual and gender identities produced during the interviews**

Following Butler's (1997, p. 33) notion of interpellative identities, my original research request, which was worded as 'I am seeking couples where one partner – a woman – is bisexual' (Appendix 1), can be considered an invitation to talk as a bisexual woman, as a bisexual woman's partner, or as a (bi-)couple. Instead of producing uniform bisexual or bi-couple identities, the invitation initiated a negotiation of intelligible identity categories and discourses defining the subject (Butler, 1991). Although the woman's bisexuality was discussed in the couple interviews, it did not become the central theme or definer of the couple's

relationship in an identity-installing manner. Instead of centring on bisexuality as such, the couple interviews were dominated by gendered relationship talk. In this talk, the interviewees often positioned their relationship within the homo/hetero distinction or as a trans couple on the basis of the partners' genders. Thus, as a researcher, I was faced with the question of how to refer to these couples.

As the interviewees positioned themselves differently during the interviews – sometimes, for example, on the basis of their (bi)sexuality, and sometimes on the basis of the form of their relationship – they could not be described solely as bi-couples. However, referring to them as heterosexual or homosexual couples depending on the partners' genders was not appropriate either. I therefore decided to refer to them as female couples, other-sex couples and a trans couple, the latter being a term used by the partners themselves.

Four of the six women who had responded to the original research request as bisexual women also identified as bisexuals in the follow-up interviews. One identified as non-heterosexual. One woman did not define her sexuality, but said that she felt strongly that she wanted to share her life with a man; however, she referred to many of her past and present (sexual) experiences as bisexual. Generally, bisexual identification entailed complex negotiations around sexuality and identity labels in both sets of interviews. This highlights the queer theoretical notion that desire and desiring subjects cannot easily be put into clearly defined identity categories that will remain fixed for life (Butler, 1991; Giffney, 2009).

Most partners reported unaltered sexual identities in both interviews. At the time of the couple interviews in 2005, the bisexual women's cis and trans male partners all identified as heterosexual. The bisexual women's female partners often did not label themselves but implied that they were lesbians rather than bisexuals; one did not label herself at all. 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 female ex-partner implied that she was now also attracted to men. None of the (ex-)partners identified as bisexual. Most interviewees' gender identities stayed the same across both interview rounds. The ex-partner who had identified as a transman in the couple interview identified as a man in his follow-up interview. One ex-partner who had identified as a woman at the first interview said during the follow-up interview that their gender was 'in the making'.

According to feminist research ethics, the researcher needs to reflect carefully how they position themselves within their research, and on how they influence the production of their research material, analysis and results (Haraway, 1991; Phoenix, 2010; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Thwaites 2017). If one thinks of interviews as an exchange produced in response to a research request, it is also necessary to consider to whom the participants were being requested to speak. In feminist research ethics there has been a debate over whether a 'matching' of interviewee with interviewer produces the best results. Despite the somewhat idealistic perspective of the 1980s, when research

interviews were thought of as a mutual and equal sharing between women (Oakley, 1981), it has rightly been noted that it is very difficult to match the interviewer and the interviewee in all possible respects – for example, if both the interviewer and the interviewee identify as bisexual, there will still be intersectional differences. Even though my interviewees never asked me about my sexual identification, during the course of the study other researchers did enquire whether I was a bisexual person, and if so how this ‘insider’ position regarding shared sexuality might have played a part in the identities produced during the interviews (Juvonen, 2017).

The choice I made in this study was not to discuss my own sexual identity, either in the interviews or in my research reports. While it is possible and even probable that many of the interviewees considered me to be a bisexual woman (or at least a bi/queer affirmative person) because of my choice of research topic and the respectful tone of the research request, I wanted to stay true to my training as a psychologist and give space to the interviewees’ own (possibly shifting) identities, (unconscious) identifications and meaning-making in the interview situation. I consider (unconscious) identifications between interviewee and interviewer to be always partial and shifting, and this was another reason why I did not want to constrain the interviewee situation by offering my own (shifting) sexual identity as a starting point or reflection point for the interviews (see also Thwaites, 2017).

### **4.3 Queer psychosocial analysis**

In many qualitative studies, a distinction is made between theory-driven analysis and analysis driven by the interview material itself. However, I see my process of analysis and interpretation as equally driven by and intertwined with both my theoretical framework and my interview material. The process of analysing the interviews was circular: it started from the interview material, went back to theoretical ideas, and then went back to the interview material again, and at times I needed to go back yet again and revise analytical choices I had made earlier. Because I conducted both sets of interviews, the analysis started during the interview situation itself, continued while I listened to the audio recordings and transcribed the interviews, and continued further while I read and reread the transcripts several times.

During the interview situation and immediately after each interview, I made notes about the affective tone and especially affective passages. I usually made these notes by audio-recording my own speech, so I also had access to how my voice sounded and what it conveyed about how I felt after the interview. Nevertheless, I also always went back and listened to interviews several times to confirm my initial interpretations.

From a theoretical perspective, my ‘affective note-taking’ draws on psychoanalytic literature, where affective intensity is seen as a signal of where to look for important material (Baraitser & Frosh, 2007). Coming from a different

theoretical framework – Deleuzo-Guattarian thought – Maggie MacLure (2013) suggests that affective intensities that refuse to settle into decisive meanings can be treated as ‘glowing’ data hotspots, including in qualitative research (Ringrose & Renold, 2014). Paying attention to affective intensities – ‘emissions that lie on the boundary of language and body’ – makes it possible to explore phenomena such as affect that might ‘belong to both language and body’ (MacLure, 2013, p. 170).

In relational psychoanalysis, affect has been understood as an unconscious form of communication, where unconscious feelings and aspects of selfhood are communicated to the other. In this approach, affect not only marks important material (in a therapeutic setting), but also reveals crucial characteristics of that material. For example, it is thought that the therapist’s affective experience of the patient (and vice versa) reveals something central about the patient’s relational experiences (Baraitser & Frosh, 2007).

Taking psychoanalysis as their starting point, Baraitser and Frosh (2007) reflect on encounters between people. They explore the relationship between affective communication and intersubjective encounters. However, they do not commit to a version of psychoanalytic theory in which affect would carry a very specific meaning. Rather, they develop their thinking about affective communication through contemporary theorizations of affect, which offers a way to incorporate corporeality into the analysis. They want to keep in mind the Deleuzian notion of affectivity as a bodily intensity that disrupts meaning-making and produces certain affective states. They understand affect as something that emerges as an excess, which confuses and pushes the subject into a ‘state’. This intersubjective state is felt as an intensity that passes from one person to another, rather than being a specific communication or message that would be easily codable. Thus affective intensity is seen as a signal of where to look for important material (Baraitser & Frosh, 2007). Encouraged by these scholars, I chose to combine Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) with a psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Roseneil, 2006; Smith & Shin, 2014) that explores affective intensities.

However, it is challenging to pinpoint the exact spots in interview material where affective and excessive aspects – ‘the unthought’ – come to the representational surface (Clough, 2013, p. 176). Working in a Foucauldian vein throughout this study, I have been attentive to the workings of discursive power, and especially to the consequences of the heterosexual matrix’s hierarchies and binaries in bisexual women’s relationship talk. Yet, I have also tried to make space for and notice the leakages where the affective, the unconscious and the excessive complicates bisexuality’s emergence in participants’ relationship talk.

As the first step in my queer psychosocial analysis, I followed Foucault’s (1981) theory of subjectification and his notion that discursive power both enables and delimits the possibilities for subjects to emerge. I identified the cultural relationship discourses that were frequently reiterated in the interviews. For example, my interviewees mainly told their relationship stories by drawing on the discourse of the enduring monogamous couple relationship, which in turn

drew on the discourse of romantic love. However, according to the queer psychosocial theoretical framework, it is never simple to take up a position in either normative or non-normative relationship discourse, and this was also palpable in the interviews.

In my analysis, I was therefore sensitive to the movement of discourses during interviews. Throughout my analysis I made links to psychoanalytic theory, but while doing so I tried to avoid an approach that would be too intrusive and speculative about one person. As Sasha Roseneil (2007) points out, psychosocial analysis does not mean psychoanalytic interpretation of the research subjects. Mobilizing queer psychosocial analysis made it possible for me to point to certain dynamics and tensions in shared discourse, and to offer a psychoanalytically informed interpretation; yet, in doing so I always avoided positioning individuals in fixed ways. Rather, I strived to offer insights into how these tensions and dynamics might function and how they might be negotiated.

In couple interviews, there were notable tensions and affective negotiations present when interviewees were trying to fit their relationships into the normative relationship discourse. Similarly, it turned out that bisexuality in a relationship context is a much more complex matter than simply accepting or rejecting stereotypical cultural constructions of bisexuality. In the follow-up interviews it struck me that interviewees often contradicted themselves, and that affective tensions were present when the interviewees were discussing their bisexual identity and desires, their relationship arrangements and ideals (monogamous or non-monogamous), and the attractions they or their partners might feel to someone outside the relationship.

In the follow-up interviews, the 'hot' concentration on sexuality – the gratitude, pleasure and affectivity with which women spoke about their sexual experiences at the edges of or between relationships – caught my attention and could not be bypassed. It 'haunted' me (Blackman, 2015b, p. 26), and I felt that I should also try to understand theoretically why women's experiences appeared sexually excessive.

I identified these affective tensions and intensities by paying attention to affectively saturated moments, thickly narrated passages and contradictions in the interviewees' talk. In the interview situation, affective tension could be identified in interviewees' facial expressions of distress or sadness, in their tense or quiet tones of voice, in their postures, as tears in their eyes, or in long silences or pauses in their talk (see also Lahti, 2018b). I also noted interview passages where an interviewee struggled to give verbal expression to their experience. These tensions and affective intensities were something that often I registered as a researcher as an affective intensity in my own body during the interview situation – for example, as the feeling of a lump in my throat in an interview situation when the tone of the interview was very sad. It might also be that when I could see that an interviewee was moved or shaken or had tears in their eyes, I could feel tears come to my eyes too. These affectively intense moments were also the moments that I would often remember for a long time after the interviews,

which highlights the fact that affectively intense memories are easily retrievable (Buchanan, 2007).

It is important to reflect on the impact of my interpellation in these affective intensities on the analysis conducted in this study. Instead of making a detailed analysis of affectively intensive moments in the interviews – whether I registered them in my own or the interviewee’s bodily reactions, or understood them as produced jointly between us in the interview interaction – paying attention to affectively intensive moments meant that I treated them as signs of important material in the interviews. I analysed these passages in interaction with participants’ interview talk and their use of discourses. I also evaluated the relevance of these passages in relation to my research questions. There were affectively intensive moments in the interview material which I did not analyse as part of this study. For example, I can still remember the affective moment when an interviewee told me about a night when she had stood on a bridge thinking of killing herself. Two women had turned around when they had seen her standing there, and suddenly she had been struck by the thought that instead of killing herself she could move away to another town and leave the violent male partner she was with at that time. This was clearly a turning point in her life, and I can still remember being deeply affected by it. Yet I did not analyse this passage, because it was not intrinsic to the research questions in this study.

In this study, psychosocial analysis also refers to another level of analysis. It is clear to me now that throughout the analysis, I avoided dividing the research subjects’ (bisexual women’s and their partners’) affective accounts during interviews into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ categories – normative versus non-normative, for example (Eisner, 2013). This was another reason why I was able attune to the subtle nuances and complexities of their experiences. As I now understand, I was conducting my research as a combination of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) terms paranoid and reparative readings. This was not a completely conscious choice, since I was able to identify it not so much while doing the analysis as afterwards. It points to the fact that I too am a psychosocial subject, and I am not completely consciously aware of my own motives and strivings as a researcher (see also Phoenix, 2010). Queer psychosocial methodology can thus be understood as the scholar oscillating between paranoid and reparative readings, or between schizoid/paranoid and depressive positions.

Koivunen (2010b, p. 52) offers an important key to understanding Sedgwick’s (2003) notion of paranoid and reparative reading by highlighting its correlation with what psychoanalyst Melanie Klein calls the schizoid/paranoid and depressive positions respectively. Sedgwick’s (2003) paranoid mode of analysis typically aims to reveal hidden power relations in the research material. According to Sedgwick, this mode of criticism is often reflexive and mimetic, and has the aim of disclosing ‘bad news’ – for example, about homophobia and sexism – that is already known in advance and that this mode of analysis always ultimately confirms (Koivunen, 2010b, p. 47). In the context of my study, it is plausible to ask whether the dichotomies and hierarchies of the heterosexual matrix, and the cultural associations which cast bisexuality as a wavering identity

and promiscuous sexuality associated with multiple partners, constitutes bad news that we already know.

The fragile and violent paranoid-schizoid position, into which Klein says we are all born, is motivated by innate threat, and is marked by hatred, envy and anxiety. As Sedgwick describes it (2003, p. 128):

For Klein's infant or adult, the paranoid position [...] is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of and ingests from the world around one.

Typical defence mechanisms for the schizoid/paranoid position are splitting, omnipotence, and violent projection and introjection. The paranoid reading linked to this affective mode is very effective at identifying power relations. As important as this 'terrible alertness' (Sedgwick, 2013, p. 128) 'to wrongs and injustices' (Koivunen, 2010b, p. 59) is, the mimetic identification of oppression might sometimes prevent one from facing the pain of the oppressive reality – as it needs to be discovered over and over again. The paranoid mode of reading might thus function as a defence, a shield against humiliation (Koivunen, 2010b, p. 47), and might lead to a splitting of the world's objects – here theories, texts, research subjects, interview excerpts, accounts and so on – into 'good' and 'bad'. For example, Giffney (2017, p. xx) points out:

The always-in-opposition to the norm stance of many queer theorist [...] might serve to split off feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness and the potentially painful reality that these exciting thought experiments are unlikely to produce the kind of social change theorists might hope for.

It might be painful to acknowledge, for example, that hierarchical and binary understandings of gender and sexuality, or the cultural associations of bisexuality, are also 'in' us. In my analysis I strive to show how oppressive cultural discourses work and cause pain, including from within bisexual subjects themselves.

As an alternative to paranoid reading, Sedgwick (2003) proposes reparative reading, which invests in hope and searches for positive affect and surprises (Koivunen, 2010b, p. 48). And yet, as Anu Koivunen writes, affect as a method 'is more than a yearning for reparation and comfort as researcher and queer subject' (Koivunen 2010b, p. 59). As Koivunen (2010b, p. 53) remarks, Sedgwick does not locate her interest only in the objects of research. Her focus is on the scholar – 'a subject participating and constructed within the textual dynamics'. As Sedgwick (2003, p.128) writes:

[The d]epressive position is an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting: this is the position from which it is possible to use one's own resources to assemble or 'repair' the murderous part object like a whole – though, I would emphasize, not necessarily like any pre-existing whole.

In the depressive position it becomes possible to integrate love and hate, good and bad into the same object. Thus, within this affective mode, (research) objects too can be constructed as 'good' and 'bad' at the same time.

My analysis strives not only to reveal how bisexual women and their partners take up positions in normative or non-normative relationship discourses, but also to show how their experiences result from ongoing affective negotiations and positionings that are not only based on conscious, rational choices. These negotiations might also include positive surprises and empowering aspects, to which I have attuned in my analysis.

However, as Sedgwick (2003) notes, paranoid knowledge is often a necessary condition for non-paranoid knowing. In Klein's theory, the depressive position is a fragile achievement, and infants and adults alike oscillate between paranoid and depressive positions. According to Koivunen, this is also the methodological option that Sedgwick proposes. Paranoid and reparative positions are linked to each other, and hence neither offers better or more ethical knowledge than the other. Rather, the psychosocial method can be understood as the scholar oscillating between paranoid and reparative analysis, or between schizoid/paranoid and depressive positions. It means moving between positions of suspicion and trust, between a 'terrible alertness' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 128) to wrongs and injustices – for example, the workings of the binary divisions of the heterosexual matrix – and moments of hope and comfort – for example, when the 'excess' of bisexuality pushes a woman forwards in her life and makes it possible for her to have a new kind of relationship with her sexuality.

#### 4.4 Evaluating the study

The interview set in this study consists of five couple interviews conducted in 2005 with bisexual women and their partners, and 11 follow-ups conducted some 10 years later in 2014–2015. The complex question is how many interviews are enough when one is conducting qualitative research. Baker & Edwards (2012) collected expert advice on this difficult question, and the somewhat predictable answer is that there is no single solution. As one of their respondents, the pioneering qualitative researcher Harry Wolcott, wrote to them in an email (Baker & Edwards, 2012, pp. 3–4):

That is, of course, a perennial question if not a great one. The answer, as with all things qualitative, is 'it depends.' It depends on your resources, how important the question is to the research, and even to how many respondents are enough to satisfy committee members for a dissertation. For many qualitative studies one respondent is all you need – your person of interest. But in general the old rule seems to hold that you keep asking as long as you are getting different answers, and that is a reminder that with our little samples we can't establish frequencies but we should be able to find the RANGE of responses. Whatever the way the question is handled, the best answer is to report fully how it was resolved.



The advice to keep asking as long as you are getting different answers refers to the idea of data saturation. The saturation point is reached when the addition of new interviews would not lead to any new emergent themes or variations in interviewee data (Saunders et al., 2018). Considering my research questions and the psychosocial methodology I used, which took into account the variations in the affective aspects of the interviews, it would have been very difficult to ever reach a point of saturation. However, others have suggested that even five participants may be enough to reveal a variety in cultural constructions regarding a specific theme or identity, if those constructions are contextualized within the current socio-historical context of the participants' lives (Addie & Brownlow, 2014).

As I find the question of variation and saturation rather complex (Saunders et al., 2018), I will try to explain why I consider my data sufficient for the purposes of this research. In the early stages of my research, I had plans to conduct more interviews on bisexuality in relationships than just those produced for the longitudinal aspect of the study. However, after conducting the follow-up interviews, I was convinced of the richness and depth of my research data. I also knew that, at least in the western context, previous studies on bisexuality had already produced a very convincing body of knowledge about societal (mis)conceptions of bisexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2005, 2011) and how they might affect bisexual people's relationships (Klesse, 2005, 2011; McLean, 2004). In this study I wanted to go beyond that by exploring the affective, irrational and messy realities of how bisexuality emerges in relationships. I was interested in how interrogating psychosocial subjects complicates the view of how (bi)sexualities emerge within intimate relationships. For these purposes, I consider my body of interview data, which is relatively small but longitudinal in design and rich in material, to be appropriate (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Blackman, 2015b).

With a large number of interviews, the kind of immersion in the data that characterized my analysis would not have been possible. My way of analysing the data was thorough, as I tried to attune sensitively to the nuances, the movement of discourses, the subtle tensions and the affective intensities in the interviews. I could not only search for reoccurrences of certain discourses, but I could also search between the lines. In this way, for example, the meaning started to emerge of bisexuality as something that could not be addressed as a strong identity.

The limited numbers of interviews (five and 11) made it possible for me to pay attention to the affective tensions in participants' positionings as sexual subjects in (normative) relationship discourses. Thanks to my psychosocial approach and my attunement to the affective parts of the interviews, the affective tensions and discrepancies around (bi)sexual identities and relationship norms did not go unnoticed.

## 5 OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLES

This study consists of three original articles, the results of which are summarized in the following sections. The first article, 'Similar and equal relationships? Negotiating bisexuality in an enduring relationship' (Lahti, 2015), explores how and to what effect bisexual women and their partners use the normative relationship discourse of romantic love that has been invoked by public debate in Finland, where same-sex couples' right to legal recognition is routinely defended by stressing their sameness to heterosexual couples. The second article, 'Bisexual desires for more than one gender as a challenge to normative relationship ideals' (Lahti, 2018a), seeks to answer the question of how bisexuality emerges in the relationship discourses used by interviewees. Given the persistent cultural associations of bisexuality with wavering desire, promiscuity and multiple partners, the article takes a closer look at how bisexuality emerges in bisexual women's and their (ex-)partners' relationship narrations. In light of bisexuality's cultural associations, I explore how Finnish bisexual women – and their (ex-)partners of various genders who do not identify as bisexuals – negotiate desires that exceed the boundaries of normative relationships, such as an attraction to 'someone else', and what this reveals about how bisexuality fits within normative relationship ideals. The third article, 'Too much? Excessive sexual experiences in bisexual women's life stories' (Lahti, 2018b), analyses bisexual women's sexual experiences that are 'too much' according to the prevailing social norms regulating women's sexuality. To gain an enriched view of the complex meanings of sexual exploration in women's lives, this article incorporates contemporary psychoanalytic thinking about sexuality as excess into the analysis.

Each article sheds light on the cultural relationship discourses bisexual women and their partners draw on (research question 1), how bisexuality emerges in these discourses (research question 2), and what the affective, unconscious and excessive dimensions of relating add to the emergence of bisexualities in intimate relationships (research question 3). The results and their implications are further dealt with in Chapters 6 and 7.

## 5.1 Similar and equal relationships? Negotiating bisexuality in an enduring relationship

Regarding the cultural power and topicality of discourses that emphasize sameness between homosexual and heterosexual couples (Charpentier, 2001; Clarke, 2002; Kaskisaari, 1997; Richardson, 2005; Young & Boyd, 2006), my first article, 'Similar and equal relationships? Negotiating bisexuality in an enduring relationship' (Lahti, 2015), explores how bisexual women and their partners – whose relationships or desires transcend the homo/heterosexual binary – use these discourses of sameness when making their lives intelligible to themselves and others. It explores how and when bisexuality figures in these discourses, and when the homosexual/heterosexual binary is drawn on as a discursive resource.

The article draws on the first set of interviews I conducted, namely the couple interviews with five bisexual women and their partners (three women, two men, one transman) in 2005. In my analysis I identify the cultural relationship discourses the interviewees used and the subject positions enabled by them, but I also analyse the affective tensions and discrepancies that arose when interviewees positioned themselves and their relationships within these discourses.

My analysis shows that the relationship talk of the bisexual women and their partners reiterated the normative relationship discourses stressing sameness that had been fostered by Finnish public debates about registered partnerships and later about the gender-neutral marriage law. Romantic love, and marriage as its culmination point, functioned as a normative frame for the couples' understanding of their relationships. Their efforts to renegotiate the meaning of their relationship were made in reference to this frame.

Although at first sight the couples seemed to fit effortlessly into the enduring relationship discourse, my psychosocial analysis shows that there were also notable affective tensions when the interviewees negotiated themselves and their relationships within this discourse. Close reading of these negotiations brings to light the hierarchies and norms related to gender and (bi)sexuality that constitute the enduring relationship discourse. The interviewees did not wish to be perceived as traditional heterosexual couples, since for them this perception echoed the traditional hierarchical gender arrangement. Instead, they invested in the discourse of equal relationships. This ideal was shared by all the couples. However, gendered tensions over the unequal sharing of housework in other-sex relationships were portrayed as the main obstacle to living up to this ideal. Thus, according to all the bisexual women, this ideal was more easily achievable in female and trans relationships.

In particular, the female couples' and trans couple's experiences did not fit easily into the discourse of sameness, thus producing tensions within it. Their views and often very positive experiences of intimacy, sex, and the equal sharing of housework and childcare in their relationships did not always fit into the idea that their relationships were the same as heterosexual relationships. In contrast

to these positive experiences, they often described other people's perceptions of their relationships as lacking something. Interestingly, they persistently returned to the discourse of sameness, even when it did not do justice to their positive experiences. While striving to understand why the interviewees resorted to the discourse of sameness, which often failed to do justice to non-heterosexual relationships, I deployed the psychosocial concept of queer blindfolding (Smith & Shin, 2014). Through this concept, sameness can be conceptualized as a discursive strategy in which the differences between heterosexual and LGBTI subjects are minimized. In a psychological sense, it can be understood as a defence mechanism whose function is 'to repress the painful acknowledgment of queer oppression' (Smith & Shin, 2014, p. 952). The logic of this strategy is noticeably similar to the logic of the current LGBTI striving for recognition through the legal right to marry. The lesbian and gay movement has often responded to the stigma of homosexuality by trying to cleanse homosexuality of its association with shameful sex, and has turned instead to the discourse of respectability and the norms of matrimony in order to appear just like heterosexuals (Butler, 2004; Clarke, 2003; Rydström, 2011; Warner, 2000).

Bisexuality often disappeared in relationship talk that drew on the homo/hetero distinction. However, the woman's bisexuality was present in the other-sex couples' talk about her attractions to women, or about the couple's joint fantasies about an imaginary third (female) party in their relationship. As this party was often not an actual person or affair, but a figure that featured in fantasies and infatuations, I refer to it as 'an imaginary third'. In the female and trans relationships, the woman's bisexuality did not give rise to such pleasurable fantasies (Kangasvuo, 2014). Instead, stereotypical depictions of a bisexual woman who might leave her female or trans partner and take off with a (cisgendered) man at any time appeared in the interview talk. This general depiction, identified as a stereotype, was often not attached to the actual bisexual partner in question, yet bisexual women's potential desires for (cisgendered) men were avoided as a conversational topic. Instead, the bisexual women stressed their commitment to their partner.

I interpret this avoidance through Butler's (1990) theory about the formation of the melancholic sexual subject in a heterosexist culture where same-sex object choice is made through the repudiation of heterosexual subjectivity and vice versa. Drawing on Butler's theory, Hemmings (2002) argues that bisexuals have become cultural carriers – or holograms – of this idea: the bisexual woman has not given up her desire for the opposite sex, so she must be heterosexual. If a bisexual woman were to choose a (cisgendered) man as her partner, or even openly express her (potential) desire for men, in the manner in which my female bisexual interviewees with male partners expressed their desires for women, she would be acting in a way that was 'expected' somewhere down the line, given the heterosexist cultural idea of the bisexual woman as 'actually' heterosexual (Hemmings, 2002; see also Lynch & Maree, 2013). In the homo/hetero hierarchy, this would painfully question the worth of the bisexual

woman's female or trans partner. It is thus understandable that the topic of the bisexual woman's potential desire for men was avoided in these conversations.

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

The discourses of romantic love and finding 'the one' continue to function as a normative frame for western understandings of intimate relationships. Therefore bisexuality, as a desire that cannot be bound to only one object choice within the heterosexual matrix, is persistently culturally associated with wavering, promiscuity and multiple partners. In light of these constraining cultural associations, my second article, 'Bisexual desires for more than one gender as a challenge to normative relationship ideals' (Lahti, 2018a), explores how the interviewed bisexual women and their (ex-)partners of various genders negotiated desires that exceeded the boundaries of normative relationships. In this article, the analysis is mainly based on the individual follow-up interviews of 2014–2015, and the first data set of five couple interviews serves as a reference point.

As in the couple interviews, in follow-up interviews most participants presented their relationships as monogamous in practice. One bisexual woman said that she had agreed with her male partner that if an occasion arose when she would like to have sex with a woman, they would discuss it. However, the interviewees' approach to the issue of exclusivity varied, from considering it an unquestioned basis of a relationship to understanding it as a matter of reflection and choice. In an interview question about crushes (one's own or one's partner's) on someone outside the relationship, the presence of the woman's bisexuality evoked multifaceted negotiations of desires that exceeded the boundaries of the normative couple relationship. These negotiations also appeared spontaneously in the interviews.

In this article, the heterosexual matrix can be identified as the psychosocial concept used in the analysis. Hierarchical and dichotomous categories of gender and sexuality were present and strong; yet they leaked, since they also produced a wavering bisexuality associated with multiple partners. The categories of the heterosexual matrix, together with the affective and unspoken dimensions of being in a relationship, shaped and reproduced the negotiations of desires that exceeded the boundaries of normative relationships in various ways. Bisexual women's attractions to people whose gender was other than their partner's evoked questions about the interrelations between their desires, their (bi)sexual identities and their partner's gender. Bisexuality could momentarily appear as a practice of having multiple romantic/sexual relationships with persons of various genders, or as a fantasy of this practice as an ideal way of organizing relationships. These imaginings, however, were easily abandoned as unrealizable 'in the real world'. One reason for participants' abandonment of

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 and their partners from this threat, and from other painful feelings such as jealousy. 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.

Participants' negotiations over desires that exceed the boundaries of the 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 (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Perel, 2007; Shaw, 2013). Women's bisexuality – desire for more than one gender – rendered this tension visible and brought it under scrutiny in these relationships in a particular way.

### **5.3 Too much? Excessive sexual experiences in bisexual women's life stories**

The article 'Too much? Excessive sexual experiences in bisexual women's life stories' (Lahti, 2018c) starts from the notion that there are ambivalences and tensions around contemporary couple relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Perel, 2007; Shaw, 2013). Alongside the persistence of ideas about romantic love, 'the one' and the couple, people are expected to pursue their personal life goals and to express their individual selfhood through sexuality (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Gill, 2008b). Yet the limits of women's sexuality in particular have been refined: women should be sexual, but not too sexual or sexual in the wrong way (Harvey & Gill, 2011; Moran & Lee, 2014). For women in particular, casual sex is often constructed as a transitory and incomplete sexual arrangement (Farvid & Braun, 2013). These constructions strengthen the status of sex in monogamous relationships as the most desirable sex (Farvid & Braun, 2013; Finn, 2012).

The article explores bisexual women's sexual experiences at the edges of or between relationships. Bisexual women's spontaneous, detailed and affective narrations of sexual experiences in the follow-up interviews caught my attention. Although these experiences were often narrated as pleasurable, they could be overwhelming, and women also expressed concern that they were excessive, 'too much'. Women felt that things had got out of control during these life stages, and they could not fully understand why. My psychosocial analysis highlights that the excessiveness of the women's experiences comprises various elements that cannot be reduced to either 'psychic' or 'social' dimensions. In the women's accounts, they are inextricably intertwined. The excessiveness of these women's

experiences emerges through a reading of different aspects that come together in the women's accounts (Blackman, 2015b).

Analysing these experiences through psychoanalytic theorizations of sexual excess (Laplanche 1987, cited by Benjamin & Atlas, 2015) and the different conceptualizations through which Stein (2008) approaches sexual excess reveal the women's experiences in a new light. My deployment of various psychoanalytic concepts of excess in my analysis (Benjamin & Atlas, 2015; Stein, 2008) makes it possible to discover unconscious aspects of the women's sexual experiences that cannot be reduced to the effects of the norms that restrain respectable (bisexual) female sexualities.

The psychosocial analysis of women's sexual experiences highlights the pendulum quality of sexual excess, which can easily turn from (over)excitement and grace to abomination (Stein, 2008). The women could feel that what had happened was 'too much' for them, or that things were unmanageable. There were also other non-rational psychic dimensions of sexual excess present in the women's tumultuous life phases: sexual excess often seemed to carry the function of an 'actively' pursued shattering of structure (Bersani, 1995), or a way of dealing with one's lonely, discontinuous being (Bataille, 1957, 1976, cited by Stein 2008, pp. 54–57) after a painful break-up.

After phases of experimental sexual experiences 'at the edges', the women usually returned (or wished to return) to long-term committed relationships. The non-monogamous ideas they contemplated in the interviews were often abandoned as unrealizable in the 'real world', reflecting the limited choices available to people living conventional (heterosexual) lives (Barker, 2013; Lahti, 2018a, 2018c; van Hooff, 2017). However, my analysis opens up a new way of thinking about the transgressiveness of bisexual women's sexual and relationship choices, beyond simply taking up positions in monogamous or non-monogamous relationship discourses.

The transgressiveness of bisexual women's experiences cannot be separated from gendered power relations in western societies. Women's affective sexual and relationship histories reflect not only their singular life experiences, but also the social and cultural positions available to women as sexual subjects, which often entail limited options for exploring sexuality or pleasure on their own terms. For bisexual women, excessive sexual experiences at the edges of between relationships are part of their ongoing identity work as bisexual women, and perhaps are necessary to transgress the deeply intertwined personal, interpersonal and cultural boundaries that regulate (bisexual) women's sexuality and relationship behaviours. My analysis reveals sexuality's excess not just as a force that might help us to transgress regulatory frames, but also as an energy that might allow (psychic) change (see Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. viii; Bersani, 1995) – not necessarily dramatic or permanent change, but an energy for change that comes about as bisexual women's lives unfold. Within the normative limits of feminine sexuality, sexuality's excess often plays a propulsive role as women strive to become sexual subjects. Sexuality's excess thus has the potential to complicate women's relationship with norms that dictate how they should be sexual.

## 6 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

Through a queer psychosocial theoretical-methodological approach, this study has produced a different kind of knowledge about bisexuality from previous interview studies with self-identified bisexuals. In this study, bisexual identity has appeared as a less central or obvious starting point for interviewees' talk than in other studies of bisexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2011). Previous studies have provided important insights regarding what bisexuality means to self-identified bisexuals, how they define the concept, how they talk about their bisexual identity and its changes (Kangasvuo, 2014), and how they view the social marginalization of both bisexuality (Hayfield et al., 2014) and bisexual relationships (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2011). Research on bisexuality has typically found that self-identified bisexuals recognize the cultural (mis)conceptions of bisexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2011, 2014). For my research participants, bisexuality was not primarily constructed by adopting or rejecting cultural conceptions of bisexuality, although some of those conceptions were identified and sometimes rejected by the interviewees.

The key findings of this study do not contradict previous studies on bisexuality. However, rather than simply reiterating the cultural (mis)conceptions of bisexuality, this study has highlighted the subtle ways in which the hierarchies and dichotomies of the heterosexual matrix – which casts male and female, men and women, and homo- and heterosexuality at opposite poles – together with normative relationship ideals and the monogamous norm affect how bisexuality emerges in interviewees' relationships and relationship histories. In this study, bisexuality is not addressed as a strong identity, but rather as something that emerged through my attunement to the nuances and movement of discourses, subtle tensions, discrepancies and affective intensities in interviewees' talk. My data analyses suggest that bisexual identity is not just something that an individual experiences personally; rather, bisexual subjectivities are always embedded in and lived through relationships with others (Saresma, 2005; Smart, 2007). Psychosocial analysis highlights that negotiations around bisexuality and relationships are not only made through



binary categorizations of sexualities and genders, but are also shaped in interaction with affective, unconscious and excessive dimensions of relating.

The key findings of the study highlight bisexuality as a culturally weak identity as well as its challenges to normative relationship ideals. These findings paint a picture of the bisexual subject as a queer psychosocial subject.

## 6.1 Bisexuality as a culturally weak identity

In this study, bisexuality appears as a culturally weak identity. This points to difficult questions about the recognition of sexual identities and queer intimate lives, and shows that these issues have not been resolved (Butler, 1991, 2004). Bisexuality's precariousness in relationship talk raises 'old' but still very topical queer theoretical tensions between the need to claim cultural space for marginalized sexual identities such as bisexualities and the concern that identity categories are always constraining and are used as a means for normalizing and taming unsettling queer sexualities. Furthermore, shared identities also help people to formulate political claims and form political alliances.

Unlike strong identities, bisexuality sometimes came into view but also easily disappeared in my interviewees' normative relationship talk. This left bisexuality in a much less central position than in other interview studies on bisexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2011). This highlights the fact that when bisexuality is absent from public debates on sexual citizenship rights such as the legal right to marry, which only reiterate the homo/hetero distinction, it is difficult to bring in bisexuality even when one is discussing one's own relationship. This is the case even when participants can account for differences between their own and other couples' relationships – for example, by stating that female couples tend to share household chores more equally than heterosexual couples. Rather than being a definer of their relationships or a bisexual couple discourse, women's bisexuality came into view through their accounts of their attractions to, relationships with and sexual experiences with variously gendered partners.

*Should* bisexuality be a culturally stronger identity? In this study, it has emerged that the lack of validation of bisexual identity in a relationship context is a complex issue that has affective consequences for bisexual women and their partners. This is not just about cultural constructions that invalidate and stigmatize bisexual identity, which might help to unbalance the dynamics in bisexual people's relationships (DeCapua, 2017; Klesse, 2011). The lack of validation of bisexuality also highlights the lack of discourses about the experience of attraction to variously gendered partners, with whom sexual pleasures might (or might not) be experienced differently (Storr, 1999).

Bisexual women's desires and their (ex-)partners' genders often did not conform to binary categorizations of sex, gender and sexuality. Alongside normative genders as men and women, their desires were often attached to 'queer genders' such as butches or femmes (Dahl, 2011; Halberstam, 1998),

and/or their (ex-)partners were trans or non-binary-gendered. Yet, because of the strength of the homo/hetero and man/woman binaries, there was thus often a certain kind of wavering between differently gendered desires in my female bisexual interviewees' accounts. Given the strength of these binaries, bisexual women's attractions to someone whose gender was other than their partner's raised questions about the interrelations between the women's desires, their (bi)sexual identities and their partner's gender. For example, bisexual women might temporarily question their bisexual identities. It was often difficult to gain 'a sense of being' in an identity position or relationship as a bisexual person. This culturally imposed 'existential instability' of bisexuality (Sears, 2014, p. 5) required affective work – not only from bisexual women, but also from their partners.

Bisexual activism and research have the potential to normalize bisexual experiences, and to open up space for bisexual identities that are not so easily undermined. However, from the point of view of antisocial queer theory it is worth asking whether (antisocial) desire is not always in the way of any 'totality or fixity of identity' (Berlant & Edelman, 2014). Furthermore, should we not be cautious about validating and recognizing bisexual identity, in light of the societal normalization of same-sex desire through the strong promotion of one particular lifestyle – marriage and family – as the appropriate way to live out our lives and sexualities?

However, it is rarely noted in theorizations of gender and sexuality that bisexual desires for more than one kind of gendered body pose serious challenges to cultural conceptualizations of desire. Bishop (2016) points out that trans people's partners' changing desires during their partner's gender transition process challenge cultural understandings of the interrelations of sex, gender and desire (Bishop, 2016). Trans people's partners' preferences for certain body parts can change during their partners' transition, and they may become attracted to body parts they previously found unattractive, such as a hairy chest. Bisexual people's desires for more than one gender(ed) body also challenge cultural conceptualization of desire that emphasizes (one) gendered body as an object choice (Butler, 1990; Gustavson, 2009). This is a more complex issue than the mono-normative expectation that people are either homo- or heterosexual, or that they have only one gender – although it is related to that. This is an aspect of bisexuality and non-binary sexualities that future research needs to look at more carefully. How could bisexual people be supported and validated in their desires for differently gendered partners – taking into account that cultural hierarchies construct those desires, placing heterosexual desires at the top? It is necessary to carve out a cultural space for bisexual experiences and identities, yet it is important to do this without scrubbing all the complexity and ambiguity out of bisexuality as an experience and identity.

## 6.2 Bisexuality as a challenge to normative relationship ideals

In this study, at the time of both interview rounds, the majority of the female bisexual interviewees and their (ex-)partners were in long-term relationships, which they presented as monogamous in practice. Yet, the woman's bisexuality and the presence of her desires for people whose gender(s) were other than her partner's often brought the monogamous norm under explicit negotiation in these relationships. Many of the bisexual women also discussed affective experiences of sexual excess beyond cultural norms about relationships and gender, which complicated their monogamous relationship narratives.

My interest in exploring how bisexual women and their partners negotiate desires that exceed the boundaries of normative relationships, such as an attraction to 'someone else', has been seen as problematic during the course of the study. It has been pointed out that there is a risk that my study might reinforce harmful stereotypes about bisexual people and promiscuity, or that I might be buying into the stereotype that bisexual people have a harder time being monogamous than everyone else, or that my study might conflate bisexuality with non-monogamy.

I agree that these issues of non-monogamous desire need careful attention, because of the frequent cultural association of bisexuality with non-monogamy. In the 'Guidelines for researching and writing about bisexuality' formulated by experienced bisexuality scholars and writers, it is explicitly stated that one should avoid repeating the common misconception that all bisexuals are polyamorous or non-monogamous (Barker et al., 2012).

Yet, I felt that if I did not address these issues, which the participants frequently brought up, I would be silencing real issues that bisexual people and their partners needed to deal with, and which above all seemed to require affective work. To do so would be a disservice to the bisexual community.

Many people in relationships, regardless of sexuality, have to negotiate desires that exceed normative relationships: for example, heterosexual men need to negotiate attractions to other women, and lesbians also need to negotiate attractions to other women. However, attraction to people whose gender(s) are the same as one's partner may only further validate one's homo- or heterosexual identity, even though such desires might of course raise a question about where to draw the line of emotional or sexual exclusivity in a normative relationship. In the case of bisexuals, an attraction to someone whose gender is other than one's partner's might be an unsettling experience, especially for bisexuals in monogamous long-term relationships.

The precariousness of bisexuality means that it does not always offer a strong frame of intelligibility for such desires, which means that the consequences of these desires are often interpreted through binary understandings of sexuality and gender. For example, the bisexual women in my study might sometimes ponder whether they should live their lives with a partner of a different gender from their current partner, or whether they wanted

to explore their desires for multiple genders. Given that cultural divisions affect the status of same-sex and other-sex relationships, and also shape relationships in regard to how responsibilities such as housework and emotion work are shared, for example (Brewster, 2017; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Umberson, Thomeer & Lodge, 2015), these are real concerns. My analysis highlights the affective work in which bisexual women and their (ex-)partners engage in situations where there is a scarcity of cultural resources for making intelligible bisexual desires for variously gendered partners.

I have analysed theoretically the negotiation of desires that exceed the boundaries of relationships in the context of normative relationship ideals according to the logic of the heterosexual matrix. Bisexuality, as a desire that cannot be bound to only one object choice within the man/woman dichotomy of the heterosexual matrix, is associated either with wavering between two opposite poles, or with multiple partners and promiscuity. The existence of this imaginary does not mean that bisexual people are unable to commit to a monogamous relationship; but on a conceptual and societal level, it explains why bisexual experiences are unavoidably complex. As my empirical analysis confirms, the idea of multiple partners is a potential 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).

By making this analysis, I wish to shed light on the mechanisms of binegativity and how it functions in the context of relationships (and relationship norms). This does not mean that I buy into the assumption that bisexual people are incapable of committing themselves to monogamous or long-term relationships. The aim of my study is rather to make the cultural anxieties and ambivalences that surround bisexuality more comprehensible and graspable.

As a desire for more than one gender, bisexuality as cultural concept highlights attractions that exceed the boundaries of the normative couple. In the current cultural climate of romantic renaissance, where individual desires are increasingly integrated into romantic relationships and fidelity is thought to reflect the strength of the emotional bond between partners, bisexuality becomes a cultural hotspot onto which typical anxieties about contemporary relationships can be projected. Complex bisexual experiences make hypervisible the tension between 'unstable' and excessive sexual desire, and the wish for a stable and secure (monogamous) relationship (Perel, 2007; Shaw, 2013). Little wonder, then, that bisexuality is poorly represented in the lesbian and gay political activism that focuses on marriage rights, which stresses the similarity of non-heterosexual couples to the heterosexual couple norm.

My study shows that in our normative cultural understanding, not only are sex, gender and sexuality thought of as mutually constitutive, but the ideal of one partner who meets all our emotional and sexual needs is important in keeping these binary understandings alive. Bisexuality as a (potential) yearning for multifarious sexual pleasures and for partners of various genders challenges the cultural ideal of one partner who meets all our emotional and sexual needs. If we

want to make more cultural space for bisexuality, the normative relationship ideal of having feelings or desires for only one person also needs to be rethought and transformed.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study has developed a theoretical-methodological hybrid: queer psychosocial analysis. In doing so, it has offered a new perspective on bisexuality and relationships, as it has made it possible to explore how bisexualities in relationships emerge from the point where the social and psychic aspects of the subject's life intertwine. This is a novel opening in the field of Finnish gender studies, which rarely engages with psychological perspectives. It proposes the queer psychosocial approach as a theoretical-methodological tool for filling this knowledge gap. In this way, the 'psychological' is not simply reduced to a therapeutic discourse that directs attention to emotional reflections rather than societal structures when dealing with intimate relationships. Psychodynamics and the realm of the unconscious are taken seriously, but they are analysed as complexly interwoven with social processes in the theorization of intimate relationships.

Qualitative longitudinal methods have been considered especially suitable for psychosocial research, since they give insights into the dynamic unfolding of experiences and identities over time (Holland, 2011; Thomson, 2012). Such approaches are characterized by the accumulation of contradictory accounts from research subjects, highlighting the opacity of the psychosocial subject (Thomson, 2012). Following subjects over time makes it possible to explore the affective dimensions of how discourses turn into subjectivity (Thomson, 2012). In this research, the longitudinal design allowed the analysis of continuities and changes in participants' accounts of their (bi)sexual identities and relationships over time (Holland, 2011; Miller, 2015; Neale, 2013). This study highlights the complex constitution of queer psychosocial bisexual subjectivities. Despite the lack of social and cultural support for bisexuality, and the wavering in bisexual women's accounts of their desires, most originally bisexually identified women still identified as bisexual or unlabelled in the follow-up interviews (see also Diamond, 2008; Lahti, 2018a, 2018b). As previous studies have often concentrated on the continuities and changes in bisexual identities over time (e.g. Diamond, 2008; Kangasvuori, 2006), the temporal focus in this research was on the momentary yet recurring experiences of wavering in bisexual women's accounts.

Thus, the analysis in this study does not systematically highlight the psychosocial elements that helped these women to sustain their bisexual identities over time. For example, one bisexual woman, who was married to the same man at the time of both interviews, told me that she had never thrown away her ex-girlfriend's love letters. Instead, she had moved the letters with her in boxes every time she had bought a bigger place with her husband. Such affectively saturated psychosocial accounts, and their meaning within the entirety of women's lives, could be analysed in detail by utilizing both interview sets. However, in this study the two sets of interviews were mostly analysed separately (Lahti 2015, 2018a, 2018b). The longitudinal dimension of the study, and the different temporalities present in the interviews, still waits to be fully explored.

In the study, the longitudinal set of interviews supported the finding that bisexuality is often downplayed in relationships: women's bisexuality was not made a central topic in the couple interviews, but rather came into view through bisexual women's biographical accounts of their past and current relationships and sexual experiences. Furthermore, participants' frequent separations by the time of the follow-up interviews complicated the rather idealized pictures of those relationships presented in the couple interviews in 2005.

Queer theoretical analyses have not always been particularly interested in how people experience the contradictory and often discontinuous positionings they theorize. In this study, the focus was to explore in detail how bisexual women and their partners negotiated different gendered and sexualized positions within their relationships, and to analyse the affective consequences of those negotiations. My findings highlight how bisexual women and their (ex-)partners constantly contradicted themselves in their talk about their relationships. These contradictions were not only between different discursive positions; rather, the study has highlighted how bisexual women and their (ex-)partners engaged in two interweaving forms of affective work. They first had to reconcile the tensions among the socially available subject positions of (binary) genders, sexualities and relationships. Second, they had to deal with the 'internal' work of handling (unconscious) desires, conflicts and ambivalences that contradicted those positions (Craib, 1994; Roseneil, 2006).

Addressing the complexity of bisexual women's and their partners' experiences would not have been possible without interrogating the psychosocial subject. Queer psychosocial analysis thus enabled me to develop new perspectives on women's bisexualities in relationships. These perspectives do not engage in 'myth-busting' (Eisner, 2013), creating a harmless and normalized picture of bisexuals that is emptied of all stereotypes. Instead, queer psychosocial analysis has forced me to engage with experiences of bisexuality as wavering and excessive desire which often also disappear from view. It made it possible to attend to these sometimes contradictory experiences in bisexual women's and their partners' talk, and to explore their illogical, painful and affective aspects.

These complex experiences of bisexuality in relationships not only reveal the conflicted human subject, but also highlight that some juxtapositions – for example, some of those made in queer debates – do not hold. In queer political

debates, sexual arrangements other than those that strive for respectability within the norms of matrimony are sometimes held to be more transgressive, or even to be part of more radical political agendas (Edelman, 2004; Halberstam, 2005). This study has found that a striving for respectable romantic love and secure long-term relationships, as well as a desire for sexual experimentation outside the exclusive relationship, are both present simultaneously in bisexual people's biographies. I wonder whether that finding might challenge ways of thinking queer politics. The question is: does envisioning radical queer politics indeed require paranoid knowledge, in Sedgwick's (2003) terms? Or might it be envisaged through reparative knowledge and psychosocial subjectivities which vacillate between yearning for safety and comfort and yearning to shatter the familiar structures of relationships, thereby envisaging better futures for multiple desires yet to come?

This study shows that the transgressiveness of bisexual women's and their (ex-)partners' sexual and relationship choices cannot be understood solely through the positions they take up in normative and non-normative relationship discourses, or through the genders of the bisexual women's partners. Queer psychosocial analysis has made it visible that (bi)sexual subjects cannot be easily placed into binaries such as homo/hetero, monogamy/non-monogamy, conformity/transgressiveness or identity/indeterminacy. Rather, the interwoven psychic and social incoherences in their lives produce queer effects that are not easily known in advance. This was particularly highlighted in the case of sexual excess, which often played a propulsive role as bisexual women strove to become sexual subjects. Sexuality's excess thus entailed the possibility to complicate women's relationships with norms that prescribe how they should be sexual.

This study has shown that bisexual subjects and experiences are complex. I believe it is therefore possible to imagine more sustainable and plausible queer futures for bisexualities. In my imaginary, this future would be more complex, more merciful, and more permissive of multifarious sexual attractions across and beyond the homo/hetero binary, including in relationships. This might mean, for example, that there would be no need to downplay the importance of one's relationships with different genders throughout one's life course. Yet, bisexuality as a desire for more than one gender makes visible the tensions in the normative couple ideology. If the couple ideal were to include bisexuality (and to be more realistic in general), the ideal of having feelings or desires for only one person would need to be revised or changed. Furthermore, it is urgent to change the current idea that one's sexuality is mainly represented by one's respectable couple relationships. Family life and relationships can be an important part of a person's life, but they are not so for everybody. Sexuality can be so much more than a relationship – fantasies, fleeting moments of connection, an energy that pushes forwards and allows change, hook-ups, excessive experiences, different kinds of relationship during one's life course, and so on.

In a culture that regards the monogamous couple as the most respectable way of arranging intimate life, being associated with wavering, excessive



sexuality and multiple partners might not feel very celebratory to bisexual people. It is no wonder that bisexuals also yearn for a place to 'bi'. Yet bisexuality, when conceived of as a movement between differently gendered desires, can also be a source of multifarious fantasies and sexual practices. From this perspective, bisexuality can be regarded as a source of resistance against normative tendencies to tame queer sexualities.

## TIIVISTELMÄ

Normatiiviset käsitykset parisuhteista nojaavat edelleen romanttiseen käsitykseen elämänmittaisesta suhteesta ja 'yhdestä ainoasta oikeasta', joka täyttää ihmisen kaikki romanttiset ja seksuaaliset tarpeet. Tässä väitöskirjassa tutkin, miten kulttuuriset käsitykset biseksuaalisuudesta häilyvänä seksuaalisuutena ja biseksuaaleista monia kumppaneina kaipaavina ja yliseksuaalisina sopivat yhteen, laajentavat tai ovat jännitteisessä suhteessa normatiivisten parisuhdekäsitysten kanssa. Tarkastelen, minkälaisia ristiriitaisuuksia, affektiivisiä jännitteitä tai yllätyksiä on nähtävissä, kun haastattelemani suomalaiset biseksuaalit naiset ja heidän (entiset) kumppaninsa neuvottelevat biseksuaalisuuden ja parisuhteen merkityksistä. Tässä väitöskirjassa biseksuaalisuus määritellään emotionaaliseksi, seksuaaliseksi ja/tai romanttiseksi kiinnostukseksi useampaa kuin yhtä sukupuolta kohtaan.

Analysoin tutkimuksessani laadullista pitkittäishaastatteluaineistoa. Vuonna 2005 haastattelin seitsemää biseksuaalia naista ja heidän eri sukupuolia olevia kumppaneitaan. Neljällä biseksuaalilla naisella oli naiskumppani ja kolmella mieskumppani, joista yksi oli transmies. Kymmenisen vuotta myöhemmin, vuosien 2014–2015 aikana, sain yhteyden 11 haastateltavaan, joiden kanssa tein yksilölliset seurantahaastattelut ja sain luvat käyttää viittä parihaastattelua väitöstutkimuksessa. Pitkittäishaastatteluaineisto antoi mahdollisuuden tutkia muutoksia siinä, miten haastateltavat puhuvat biseksuaalisuudesta ja parisuhteistaan. Kehitän tutkimuksessa queer-psykososiaalista teoreettis-metodologista kehystä, jonka kautta tarkastelen aineistoani. Queer-psykososiaalisessa analyysissä kiinnitetään huomiota parisuhdepuhetta rakentavien heteronormatiivisten parisuhdediskurssien ja identiteettikategorioiden lisäksi myös siihen, miten affektiiviset suhteissa olemisen puolet, jotka voivat olla tiedostamattomia, irrationaalisia ja eksessiivisiä, vaikuttavat biseksuaalisuudesta puhumiseen haastateltavien suhdekertomuksissa.

Olen kääntynyt psykososiaalisen lähestymistavan puoleen tutkiakseni parisuhdekerrontaa rakentavia tunteita ja vaikeasti sanallistettavia affekteja. Psykososiaalinen lähestymistapa on teoreettinen kehys ja menetelmä, jossa huomiota kiinnitetään psyykkisen ja sosiaalisen yhteen kietoutumiseen läheissuhteiden rakentumisessa. Psykososiaalisessa lähestymistavassa hyödynnetään psykoanalyttisen ajattelun näkemystä mielen tiedostamattomasta ja irrationaalisesta puolesta konflikteineen ja ambivalensseineen. Psyykeä ei kuitenkaan tarkastella irrallaan sosiaalisesta todellisuudesta, vaan niiden ajatellaan olevan ovat jatkuvassa kompleksisessa vuorovaikutuksessa toistensa kanssa. Ihmisen läheissuhteet ymmärretään sekä sosiaalisesti rakentuneina että sellaisina, jotka yksilö kokee "sisäisenä" ja vain hänelle itselleen ja hänen ihmissuhteilleen ominaisena.

Kiinnostukseni hyödyntää psykoanalyttisiä käsitteitä ja teorioita analyysissäni kumpuaa kuitenkin myös (anti)sosiaalisista queerteorioista, joissa psykoanalyttisen teoretisointisoinnin avulla on sekä analysoitu yhteiskunnallisia normalisaation prosesseja, että pyritty vastustamaan niitä. Monet antisosiaalisen

käänteiden teoreetikot ovat korostaneet tottelemattoman queer-halun kumouksellista potentiaalia yhteiskunnallisten sukupuolta ja seksuaalisuutta koskevien normien, rakenteiden, kategorioiden ja koherentteina pidettyjen identiteettien kyseenalaistamisessa.

Tässä tutkimuksessa olen kiinnostunut siitä, miten biseksuaalit naiset ja heidän kumppaninsa kokevat tottelemattomat halunsa ja epävakait seksuaaliset ja sukupuolittuneet identiteettinsä, joita queer-tutkimuksessa teoretisoidaan. Pitkittäishaastatteluaineiston analyysissä yhdistän foucaultlaista diskurssianalyysiä ja Judith Butlerin ajattelua heteroseksuaalisesta matriisista psykososiaaliseen analyysitapaan. Käytän työssäni eksessin käsitettä, jota käsitteellistän Judith Butlerin tietoisien subjektin ylittävän psyykkisen eksessin sekä nykypsykoanalyttisen seksuaalisen eksessin käsitteiden kautta. Antisosiaalisesta queer-teoretisoinnista inspiroituneena tutkin seksuaalisuuden eksessiä osana biseksuaalien naisten identiteettityötä, ja energiana, joka voi auttaa meitä ylittämään ja kyseenalaistamaan seksuaalisuuttamme säätelevät kulttuuriset normit sekä mahdollistaa (psyykkisen) muutoksen.

Tutkimuksen keskeiset tulokset valottavat biseksuaalisuutta kulttuurisesti 'heikkona' identiteettinä sekä tuovat esiin biseksuaalisuuden haasteen normatiivisille kulttuurisille parisuhdeideaaleille.

Tutkimuksessa biseksuaalinen identiteetti ei ollut itsestäänselvä lähtökohta haastateltavien parisuhdekerronnalle. Vuoden 2005 parihaastatteluuissa tämä näkyi siten, että biseksuaalisuudesta ei tullut suhteiden määrittäjää, vaan parit asettivat usein suhteensa homo/hetero -jakoon, puhuen joko suhteestaan joko nais-, hetero-, tai transsuhteena. Haastateltavat tekivät suhteitaan ymmärrettäväksi itselleen ja muille tukeutumalla normatiiviseen puhetapaan pysyvistä, kahdenvälisestä suhteesta, mukaillen avioliiton ja perheen kulttuurisia ideaaleja. Tällöin biseksuaalisuus häipyi helposti näkyvistä tai sitä ei ajateltu suhteessa olennaiseksi asiaksi.

Normatiiviseen parisuhdepuheeseen tukeutuminen ei kuitenkaan näyttäytynyt tarkemmassa analyysissä niin yksinkertaiselta kuin ensi silmäyksellä näytti. Parisuhteen ja biseksuaalisuuden merkityksistä käytiin suhteissa jatkuvaa neuvottelua, joka tuotti haastateltujen parisuhdepuheeseen affektiivisia jännitteitä: Onko suhteemme samanlainen vai erilainen kuin norminmukainen heteroseksuaalinen suhde? Onko se perinteisten epätasa-arvoisten sukupuolittuneiden käytäntöjen rakentama suhde vai kenties tasa-arvoisempi? Mitä naisen biseksuaalisuus merkitsee suhteessamme? Neuvottelujen tarkka analyysi toi esiin sen kulttuuriseen parisuhdeymmärrykseen usein piiloisesti sisältyviä sukupuoleen ja seksuaalisuuteen liittyviä hierarkioita ja normeja.

Huolimatta siitä, että bi-naiset ja kumppanit tavoittelivat pysyviä parisuhteita, he eivät kuitenkaan halunneet, että heidän suhteidensa ajateltaisiin muistuttavan perinteistä heteroseksuaalista suhdetta. Heille perinteinen parisuhde merkitsi epätasa-arvoisia sukupuolittuneita tapoja olla parisuhteessa. Sen sijaan kaikki parit halusivat suhteensa olevan tasa-arvoinen. Sukupuolittuneet jännitteet ja sukupuolittunut kotitöiden jako heteromuotoisissa suhteissa nähtiin kui-

tenkin suurimpana esteenä tasa-arvon toteutumiselle. Kaikki bi-naiset, riippumatta siitä minkä muotoisessa suhteessa he olivat parihaastattelun aikaan, ajattelivat, että tasa-arvoisen suhteen ideaali oli helpompaa saavuttaa naissuhteessa tai suhteessa transmiehen kanssa kuin cis-miehen kanssa.

Kaksijakoinen käsitys sukupuolesta ja seksuaalisuudesta yhdessä monogaamisen parisuhdenormin kanssa vaikutti biseksuaalisuuden ilmenemiseen parisuhteissa läpi pitkittäisaineiston. Biseksuaalisuus näyttäytyi kulttuurisesti heikkona identiteettinä ja biseksuaalinen halu haastattelupuheessa usein häilymisenä kulttuurisesti vahvojen vastakohtaparien, naisten ja miesten sekä homo- ja heteroseksuaalisuuden, välillä. Tämä siitä huolimatta, että biseksuaalien naisten seksuaalinen halu, sen paremmin kuin monien heidän (entisten) kumppaneidensa sukupuoli, eivät sopineet kahtiajakoihin käsityksiin sukupuolesta ja seksuaalisuudesta. Vahvan kulttuurisen biseksuaalisen identiteetin puutteella on affektiivisia seurauksia bi-naisille ja heidän kumppaneilleen. Biseksuaaliseen haluun liittyvä häilyvyyden kokemus vaatii tunnettyötä sekä bi-naisilta että heidän kumppaneiltaan. Kyse ei ole vain biseksuaalisuutta negatiivisesti leimaavista kulttuurisista stereotyyppioista, jotka voivat aiheuttaa jännitteitä biseksuaalien suhteisiin, vaan siitä, että kokemukselle haluista ja kiinnostuksista eri sukupuolia kohtaan ei ole riittävästi sanoja niiden ymmärrettäväksi tekemiselle. Biseksuaalisessa identiteetissä ei täten ole helppo saavuttaa jatkuvuuden tunnetta, koska kahtiajakoinen ajattelu sukupuolesta ja seksuaalisuudesta on edelleen kulttuurissamme niin vahva.

Ollessaan suhteessa haastatellut biseksuaalit naiset ja heidän (ex-)kumppaninsa tavoittelivat useimmiten pysyvää kahdenvälistä eli monogaamista parisuhdetta. Naisen biseksuaalisuuden läsnäolo suhteessa ja kiinnostus sellaisia ihmisiä kohtaan, joiden sukupuoli oli eri kuin heidän kumppaninsa, toi usein suhteen monogaamisuuden avoimen neuvottelun kohteeksi. Haastateltavien neuvottelut kiinnostuksista ja ihastuksista, jotka ylittävät kahdenvälisen suhteen rajat, kertoivat monille tämän ajan suhteille tyypillisestä jännitteestä epävakaaan ja eksessiivisen seksuaalisuuden ja vakaan ja turvallisen monogaamisen suhteen välillä. Näyttääkin siltä, että biseksuaalisuuteen seksuaalisuutena, joka ei suuntaudu vain yhteen sukupuoleen, voidaan sijoittaa kulttuurisesti tämä jännite, jota koetaan, kun seksuaalinen halu tai tunteet eivät kohdistu vain omaan kumppaniin. Tämä altistaa erityisesti biseksuaalit naiset negatiiviselle leimaamiselle. Toisaalta affektiiviset neuvottelut (ei-)monogaamisista suhdejärjestelyistä, joita useimmiten ei kuitenkaan toteutettu, monipuolistivat bi-naisten ja heidän kumppaniensa ajattelua siitä, miten läheissuhteita voisi ajatella ja järjestää ja toi biseksuaalien naisten ja heidän (entisten) kumppaniensa elämään myös monipuolisia seksuaalisia kokemuksia, fantasioita ja nautintoa.

Naisten omassa puheessa, ja erityisesti heidän kanssaan tehdyissä seuranta-haastatteluisissa, heidän biseksuaalisuutensa näyttäytyi kuvitelmina ideaalimaailmasta, jossa ihmisellä voisi olla samaan aikaan romanttisia seksuaalisia suhteita eri sukupuolia olevien kumppaneiden kanssa. Nämä kuvitelmat kuitenkin useimmiten torjuttiin vetoamalla ajatukseen, että ei-monogaamiset suhteet eivät voi toimia todellisuudessa. Sitoutumalla monogamiaan haastateltavat halusivat

myös suojella itseään ja kumppaneitaan ääneen lausumattomalta uhalta, joka heidän kumppaniensa kuvitteelliset tai todelliset kiinnostukset suhteet muihin näyttivät aiheuttavan heille ja heidän suhteilleen. Tähän uhkaan vaikuttivat kuitenkin selkeästi heteroseksuaalisen matriisin hierarkkiset valtasuhteet, jotka asettavat miehet naisten yläpuolelle ja heteroseksuaalisuuden homoseksuaalisuuden yläpuolelle, jolloin naisten suhteet tai seksi toisen naisen kanssa, oli vähemmän uhkaavaa heidän suhteilleen kuin heidän (kuvitteelliset) suhteensa 'toisiin' (cis-)miehiin. Tällöin biseksuaalin naisen suhteista naisen kanssa saattoi tulle ikään kuin poikkeus monogamian sääntöön.

Tässä tutkimuksessa bi-naisten ja heidän kumppaneidensa neuvottelut suhteiden monogaamisuudesta tekivät tilaa naisten biseksuaalisuudelle heidän suhteissaan ja monipuolistivat heidän monogaamisia suhdenarratiivejaan. Biseksuaalit naiset ja heidän kumppaninsa näkivät – ainakin puheissaan – suhteissaan enemmän joustonvaraa monogaamisuuden suhteen kuin mikä on muuten nykykulttuurin romanttisen renessanssin tiukentuneille uskottomuuskäsityksille tyyppillistä. Kulttuurissa, jossa monogaamista suhdetta pidetään kaikkein kunniallisimpana romanttis-seksuaalisten suhteiden järjestämisen tapana, monet biseksuaalit eivät kuitenkaan halua tulla yhdistyksi ei-monogaamisuuteen sen enempää kuin muutkaan ihmiset.

Onkin tärkeää kiinnittää huomiota siihen, miksi monimutkaiset biseksuaaliset kokemukset pyritään usein sekä kulttuurisesti että suhteissa siirtämään syrjään. Usein tämä johtuu juuri siitä, että biseksuaalisuus nähdään uhkana monogaamiselle normille ja normatiiviselle ideaalille yhdestä ainoasta oikeasta, joka voi täyttää kaikki ihmisen emotionaaliset ja seksuaaliset tarpeet. Biseksuaalisuus on käsitteenä lähtökohtaisesti ristiriidassa tämä ideaalin kanssa. Tämä ei kuitenkaan tarkoita sitä, että biseksuaalit eivät voisi olla uskollisia kumppaneilleen. Jos biseksuaalisuudelle kuitenkin halutaan tehdä enemmän kulttuurista tilaa, on myös kulttuurista parisuhdeideaalia ja ajatusta siitä, että ihmisellä voisi olla tunteita vain yhtä ihmistä tai yhtä sukupuolta kohtaan, pyrittävä ajattelemaan uudelleen.

Monet biseksuaalit naiset toivat haastatteluissa esiin eksessiiviä seksuaalisia kokemuksia parisuhteidensa rajalla tai välissä. Queer-psykososiaalisesta näkökulmasta katsottuna henkilökohtaiset ja kulttuuriset sukupuolittuneet ja seksualisoituneet rajoitukset, jotka koskevat sitä, miten meidän tulisi olla seksuaalisia, kietoutuvat monella tapaa yhteen. Olenkin käsitellyt tutkimuksessa eksessiivisiä seksuaalisia kokemuksia tapana käsitellä näitä kulttuurisia ja henkilökohdaisia rajoja. Eksessiiviset seksuaaliset kokemukset haastoivat kulttuurisia normeja siitä, miten biseksuaalien naisten tulisi toteuttaa seksuaalisuuttaan ja olivat usein eteenpäin työntävä voima heidän elämässään.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH REQUEST

Hello!

I am a psychology student at the University of Jyväskylä. I am writing my master's thesis in a research project on couple relationships at the Department of Psychology. For the purposes of my research, I am looking for couples to interview, where the other party – a woman – is bisexual. If you or your partner meet this criterion, please contact me. I am looking for both same-sex and different-sex couples. The aim of this research is to highlight the diversity of relationships. By participating in the research, you can give valuable information about your experiences of relationships.

The interview is conversational. It deals with different aspects of relationships and your understanding of relationships in general. The interview lasts about two hours. I will record the interviews in order to document what was said as accurately as possible and to save time in the interviews.

The interviews can be conducted either at your home or at the Department of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä. Unfortunately, I cannot cover your travel expenses, but I can travel in the Area of Central Finland or, for example, to the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Annukka Lahti  
050 – 350 92 78  
nukka@cc.jyu.fi

## APPENDIX 2: INFORMED CONSENT FORM I

Annukka Lahti  
University of Jyväskylä  
Department of Psychology

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

By signing this research consent form, I agree that Annukka Lahti may use the audio recorded and transcribed interview in her master's thesis and in contexts directly related to it. The data are reported in the research so that individual participants cannot be identified.

I have been informed about what I am committing to. Participation in the study is voluntary, and I may discontinue my participation if I so wish.

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Signature

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Printed name

Researcher

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Signature

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Printed name

## **APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 2005**

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

- Background information: age, occupation / education

### **2 THE UNDERSTANDING OF A COUPLE RELATIONSHIP**

- What is a couple relationship? What does it mean to live in a couple relationship?
- What is a good relationship like? What about a bad one?
- What is important in a relationship? What is less important?
- Do you think there are some basic values or principles involved in a relationship?
- Where do you think your understanding of a relationship comes from?
- Do you talk about your relationships values and understandings with each other? Have you discussed them before?
- Has this relationship changed your understanding of a relationship in some way?
- How are your understandings of a relationship similar or different compared to other couples?

### **3 DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF RELATIONSHIPS**

#### **3.1 Beginning of the relationship and getting to know each other**

- How did you meet?
- What drew your attention to each other, what attracted you or made you fancy each other?
- How did you become a couple?
- How long have you been together?
- Have there been different phases in your relationship?

#### **3.2 Current life situation**

- How is your current life situation?
- How is the rhythm of your everyday life?
- How do you share housework?

#### **3.3 Describing the relationship**

- There are different kinds of couples. How would you describe your relationship (some partners are similar to each other, others complement each other, others are different from each other...)?
- In what ways are you similar to each other, and in what ways do you differ (interests, hobbies, personalities, etc.)?
- Can you say why you are similar to or different from each other?
- How would your friends describe your relationship?
- What about your parents?

- How is your relationship similar to or different from other couples? How would you describe your relationship in comparison with other couples?
- Do you ever discuss this with each other? Do you ever talk about similarity or difference?

### **3.4 People close to you and the environment**

- Do you have close people who are especially important to you?
- What kind of relationship do you have with your parents and other relatives?
- Some couples have many mutual friends, others have their own friends, what about you?
- How is your relationship to friends similar or different in comparison with other couples?
- Couples are different in how much they show public emotion or affection toward each other, what kind of couple are you?
- Are there some external factors that affect your relationship?

### **3.5 Good things and disputes**

- Which things are especially good in your relationship?
- What are the problematic things?
- Do you quarrel?
- What kind of things do you quarrel about?
- How do you quarrel?
- In what ways are you similar to or different from other couples as regard quarrelling?

### **3.6 Couples Therapy**

- Could there ever be a situation in your life in which you would seek couples therapy? (Or has there been such a situation?)
- If yes, what kind of situation would that be?
- How would it feel to go to couples therapy?
- What do you think the therapist should know about your relationship, is there something especially important?
- If you cannot imagine going to couples therapy, why not? What kinds of couples do you think go to couples therapy?

### **3.7 Sex**

- Are sex and sexuality important in a relationship?
- What does it mean to have a good sex life in a relationship, or a bad one?
- What is important in sex?
- Regarding sex, are you similar to or different from other couples?

### **3.8 Gender and relationship**

- What does it mean (if anything) that you are both women / one of you is a man and the other is a woman / you are of the same / of different genders?
- What kinds of things follow from this?



- Do you ever discuss the significance of gender? In regard to what kinds of issues? Have you discussed this before?
- Are there, for example, any benefits/downsides to being the same / of different gender?
- Are you similar to or different from other couples in this respect?

### **3.9 Bisexuality and relationship**

- Do you ever discuss each other's sexual orientation?
- If you think about your present relationship, is it significant that one identifies as bisexual and the other as heterosexual/lesbian/bisexual/other or does not label oneself?
- Do you ever discuss your bisexuality sexuality/sexual orientation in your relationships?
- Advantages/downsides?
- How is bisexuality significant in your relationship, if at all?

### **3.10 Future**

- During the interview, we have discussed the beginning of your relationship, different phases in your relationship, and your current situation in life. What does your future look like?
- Some couples plan their futures with a long-term vision in mind. What about you?
- Do you discuss your future together? Do you have any plans, dreams, and wishes for future?
- Do you ever discuss separating?
- How is your relationship similar to or different from other couples in regard to future plans?

## APPENDIX 4: INFORMATION OF THE FOLLOW-UP STUDY

I am working on my doctoral dissertation in Gender Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. My dissertation focuses on the meanings, emotions and experiences related to dating and couple relationships as well as (bi)sexuality. The current title of my study is “Ambivalence in non-heterosexual intimate relationships”.

In spring 2005, you participated in my master's degree interview concerning the relationship ideas of bisexual women and their partners. Now I hope to reach the participants from 2005 again for individual interviews. These two separate interviews will enable me to examine emotions, thoughts and experiences related to couple relationships – or to leading a single life – at two different points of time instead of just one. Interviewing you again would therefore be particularly valuable.

The interviews will last about two hours, and they will be recorded. You can be interviewed at your own home or in another suitable place. I will store the interview data carefully. The audio files and their transcribed, anonymised text files will be saved in my personal home directory on the University of Jyväskylä server. I will store the printed files in locked premises.

The research provides a basis for lectures and introductions on the topic, scientific articles in English and Finnish, and possibly a book in Finnish. The content of the interviews will be reported in the research publications so that no individual interviewees or other people mentioned in the interviews can be identified. For example, all names will be changed to pseudonyms. To ensure confidentiality, place names and other proper names (e.g. workplaces) will also be changed.

If I need a research assistant to process the interviews, I will make sure that the person will also understand and commit to not reporting the interview data about individual respondents in any way to anyone outside of the study. This applies to all communication, including official, unofficial, oral, written and electronic.

I would be glad to provide you more information on the study:

Annukka Lahti  
Doctoral Student  
Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy / Family Research Centre  
PO Box 35  
FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä  
annukka.lahti@jyu.fi  
+358 40 8054714

**APPENDIX 5: INFORMED CONSENT FORM II**

Annukka Lahti  
Doctoral Student  
Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy  
University of Jyväskylä

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

I have participated in a research interview audio recorded on \_\_\_\_ 2005.  
By signing this research consent form, I agree that Annukka Lahti may use the audio recorded and transcribed interview in her doctoral dissertation, her postdoctoral research and contexts directly related to them. The data are reported in the research so that individual participants cannot be identified.

I have been informed about what I am committed to. Participation in the study is voluntary, and I may interrupt my participation if I want.

----- / ----- 2014/2015

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Signature

---

Printed name

Researcher

---

Signature

Annukka Lahti  
Printed name

## APPENDIX 6: INFORMED CONSENT FORM III

Annukka Lahti  
 Doctoral Student  
 Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy  
 University of Jyväskylä

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I have participated in a research interview audio recorded on \_\_\_\_\_ 2014/2015.  
 By signing this research consent form, I agree that Annukka Lahti may use the audio recorded and transcribed interview in her doctoral dissertation, her postdoctoral research and contexts directly related to them. The data are reported in the research so that individual participants cannot be identified.

I have been informed about what I am committed to. Participation in the study is voluntary, and I may interrupt my participation if I want.

----- / ----- 2014/2015

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Signature

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Printed name

Researcher

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Signature

Annukka Lahti  
 Printed name

## APPENDIX 7: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 2014-2015

### STAGE 1.

Filling in the background information form (recorder on after the name and place)

### STAGE 2.

**Could you please tell me your life story regarding your experiences of couple relationships or other romantic and/or sexual relationships? I would like you to talk about all the events and experiences that have been important to you.**

The intention at this stage of the interview is that you can speak as freely as possible. During your story, I will make some notes and ask you for explanations at the next stage of the interview. (The questions that I have at least asked in long interviews are written in bold.)

### STAGE 2. EXPLANATIONS

#### HOPES/REALITY IN RELATIONSHIPS?

- **Have your relationships been the way you would have hoped?**
- Has it been easy for you to find the kinds of partners you have hoped for?

#### LONG-LASTING COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

- **In your opinion, what kinds of things make a couple relationship last?**

#### BREAK-UP(S) (IF THE THEME BECOMES CENTRAL)

- **What were the things that led to your break-up with X or Y?**
- How have you coped through your break-ups?
- What kinds of feelings did you have during the break-up?
- Do you still keep in touch with X? How is your relationship with X now?
- How did your friends and families react to your break-up(s)? Did your relationship with friends and relatives remain during/after the break-up?

#### SEXUAL ORIENTATION / BISEXUALITY?

- **How do you define your sexuality/sexual orientation now?**
- If you think about your present relationship, how is your sexuality/sexual orientation manifested in it, or how does it affect it? Do you ever discuss your (bi)sexuality / sexual orientation with your partner?

- If you think about your previous relationships, is the significance of sexuality/sexual orientation now different from / similar to your previous relationships?
- You have been in relationships with partner of different genders in your life. **In your opinion, is the partner's gender significant in a couple relationship?**
- How have your friends and family reacted to you having relationships with partner of different genders?

## GENDER

- If you think about your present relationship, how is your gender manifested in it, or how does it affect it? How is this different from or similar to your previous relationships?
- **In your relationship, what is the significance of whether it was a relationship between two women or between a woman and a man or between different genders/of same genders?**
- **How do you divide housework and childcare?**

## FIDELITY AND EXCLUSIVENESS

- **Is fidelity in a relationship important to you?**
- **Have you ever had feelings for someone else or fancied someone else while in a couple relationship? What did you do in that situation? You can imagine what you would do in such a situation.**
- **What if your partner would fancy someone else?**
- Have you ever had an affair with someone else during your present or previous relationship?

## SEXUALITY

- **In your opinion, what is the significance of sexuality and sex in a couple relationship?**

## PRESENT RELATIONSHIP (IF NOT CLARIFIED IN THE PREVIOUS STAGE)

- You just said that you are in a relationship with X? (When talking about your partner, you use the concept X instead of 'partner'. Why?)
- **How would you describe your relationship?**
- **What is best in your relationship? What is most difficult?**
- How do you see your future?
- Have you ever thought about a possible break-up? In your relationship, have you had moments when you've been close to a break-up?
- If you compare your present couple relationship with previous ones, what are the similarities or differences?

- If you compare your relationship with the relationships of other people, what are the similarities or differences?
- Do relatives, friends and other significant people in your life know each other?
- Whom do you invite to, for example, a party? With whom do you spend Christmas or other holidays?

#### IF ONE DOES NOT HAVE A COUPLE RELATIONSHIP

- You just said that you live alone / are single (/ the word that is used by the interviewee). How did you end up being single?
- Please tell me about the people and things that are important in your life at the moment.
- What is best in your life situation? What is most difficult?
- Would you like to have a partner? What kind of a couple relationship would you like to have?
- What is the significance of sexuality or sex in your present life situation?
- How would you like to organise couple/love/sex relationships?
- Do relatives, friends and other significant people in your life know each other?
- Whom do you invite to, for example, a party? With whom do you spend Christmas or other holidays?

#### QUESTIONS ABOUT EMOTIONS

- **Please describe a situation in which you have felt happy in your present (couple) relationship or life situation.**
- **Please describe a situation in which you have felt unhappy in your present couple relationship.**
- **Please describe a situation in which you have felt love towards your partner.**
- **Please describe a situation in which you have felt annoyed in your present couple relationship.**
- **Please describe a situation in which you have been angry.**

#### STAGE 3. Listening to the former interview recording

If you don't mind, at this stage we will listen to a brief extract from the 2005 interview.

**What are your feelings/thoughts when listening to the extract? Do you still recognise yourself and your thoughts? What do you think of them now? Have your thoughts changed?**

How long did your relationship with X last; did you live together, formalise your relationship or have children?

## STAGE 4.

## THE IDEAL WORLD AND EQUAL MARRIAGE LAW

1. **In your opinion, how would couple/love/romantic/sex relationships be organised in an ideal world?**
2. In Finland, a change to the Marriage Act is currently being discussed, giving people the right to get married irrespective of gender and sexual orientation. What do you think about this discussion? Would you personally like to get married, or what do you think of marriage in general?







## **ORIGINAL PAPERS**

### **I**

#### **SIMILAR AND EQUAL RELATIONSHIPS? NEGOTIATING BISEXUALITY IN AN ENDURING RELATIONSHIP**

by

Lahti, A. 2015

Feminism & Psychology 25(4), 431–448

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# Similar and equal relationships? Negotiating bisexuality in an enduring relationship

**Annukka Lahti**

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

*Feminism & Psychology*

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## Abstract

In the public debate in Finland, same-sex couples' right to legal recognition is routinely defended by stressing their sameness to heterosexual couples within the discourse of romantic love. This article explores how bisexual women and their partners use these discourses. The five couple interviews were analyzed by implementing discourse analysis. The results highlight how, when taking positions within the discourse of the enduring couple relationship, the interviewees drew on the discourse of romantic love. Woman's bisexuality disappeared easily in this talk. Although it seemed effortless at first sight, negotiations and affective tensions arose when the interviewees tried to fit their relationship into the normative discourse: Is our relationship like traditional heterosexual relationship or is it more equal? Are we similar or are we different? What role does woman's bisexuality have in our relationship? Close reading of these negotiations revealed the hierarchies and norms related to gender and (bi)sexuality that constitute the enduring relationship discourse.

## Keywords

bisexuality, discourse analysis, heteronormativity, monogamy, same-sex marriage, affective tension

The discourse of romantic love and marriage has dominated the Finnish public debate on same-sex relationships. In the long and heated media debate on registered partnership at the turn of the millennium, same-sex couples' right to legal recognition was defended by emphasizing their equal worth and similarity to heterosexual relationships within the discourse of romantic love (Charpentier, 2001; Kaskisaari, 1997). The discourse of sameness is paradoxically a production of the

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## Corresponding author:

Annukka Lahti, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, FI-40014, Jyväskylä, Finland.

Email: annukka.lahti@jyu.fi

hierarchical homo–hetero distinction (Clarke, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Young & Boyd, 2006). When nonheterosexual relationships are explained as similar to heterosexual relationships, the issue is one of normalization (Butler, 2004; Clarke, 2003; Warner, 2000).

With the adoption of the registered partnership law in 2003 in Finland, the normalizing discourses have strengthened. The “I do 2013” campaign, launched in support of a gender-neutral marriage law, succeeded in collecting 166,851 signatures. Finally, after the Legal Affairs Committee of the Finnish parliament had voted twice against the citizens’ initiative, the Finnish parliament, on 28 November, 2014, voted narrowly to allow gender-neutral marriage. Finland has thus made the first step to join the 18 countries and 32 states in the United States where same-sex marriage has been adopted in the course of the 21st century (International lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex association (ILGA), 2014). Allowing same-sex couples to legally marry puts them on equal terms with heterosexual couples and thus challenges the basic assumptions of heterosexual hegemony: that marriage and parenting are founded on gender difference. These are the main two reasons why same-sex marriage continues to meet with strong resistance and antipathy in Finland (cf. Jowett, 2014).

The “I do 2013” campaign’s black and white campaign poster portrayed two men wearing old-fashioned suits and hair styles. It was accompanied with the text “Honour tradition.” Although this contains an element of parody—the gay male couple can hardly be considered traditional in the conservative sense (Jowett, 2014)—the campaign nevertheless chose to adopt this concept for its own purposes. The desire in the politics of the lesbian and gay equal rights movement for sameness within the traditional heterosexual marriage model has also been criticized from feminist and queer perspectives (Barker, 2012; Butler, 1990; Clarke, 2003; Richardson, 2005; Rolfe & Peel, 2011; Warner, 2000). Marriage has been treated as an institutionalized form of heterosexuality that promotes hierarchical gender relations between the spouses: unequal division of finances, care, household chores, and emotion work (Barker, 2012; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Rolfe & Peel, 2011). These unequal patterns can also find their way into nonheterosexual marriages (Gotta et al., 2011).

Campaigning for same-sex marriage also narrows the imaginative horizons of living in close relationships (Barker, 2012; Butler, 2004; McLean, 2004). In the discourse of sameness to heterosexuality that draws on romantic love, it is difficult to articulate heterogeneity within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community and engage with inequalities linked to, for example, gendered, classed, and racialized positions, and disability (Browne, 2011; Heaphy, Smart, & Einarsdottir, 2013; Young & Boyd, 2006). As a result, diverse queer lives that do not conform to this norm are marginalized even further and rendered invisible (Butler, 2004; McLean, 2004). The Finnish “I do 2013” campaign was often referred to in the media as promoting “gay marriage” with the emphasis on the right to marry of “same-sex couples.” In these discourses, there is very little room to address issues other than those of assumed cisgendered homosexual couples, for example, that of making diverse trans-identities and bisexualities visible (Eisner, 2013).

In the benchmark study by Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan, (2001), British non-heterosexuals interviewed between 1995 and 1996 often stressed their wish to explore unconventional ways of arranging intimate relationships and to make “life experiments.” Yet a decade later (2009 and 2010), young British couples who had entered civil partnerships described their relationships in terms of ordinariness (Heaphy et al., 2013). A similar shift has been seen in Scandinavia (Rydström, 2011) and also in Finland (Kuosmanen, 2007).

### **Bisexuality in a relationship**

But how does the common understanding of bisexuality as hypersexual and promiscuous (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2005) fit with what constitutes an ordinary relationship in a discourse drawing strongly on “marriage and family?” Not without tension: bisexuals often wish to challenge the notion of bisexuality as nonmonogamous by necessity, but many also explore relational constellations other than normative exclusive relationships (Gustavson, 2009; Kangasvuo, 2011; McLean, 2004; Rust, 1996). Equating this with an assumption that bisexuals will always cheat on their partners, or that they are not capable of long-term commitment, is problematic (Kangasvuo, 2014; McLean, 2004). It renders invisible the variety of ways bisexuals arrange and negotiate their monogamous and nonmonogamous relationships (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005; McLean, 2004; Rust, 1996). Particularly within normatively monogamous couplings, bisexuality is largely invisible: individuals in dyadic relationships tend to be regarded as either heterosexual or homosexual (Callis, 2009; Gustavson, 2009).

In Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, gender and sexuality are seen as mutually constitutive. The normalcy of heterosexuality is produced through constrained repetitions of two intelligible genders whose biological bodies, social roles, and (mutual) desires combine coherently according to a heterosexual matrix. In this frame, bisexuality can be treated alongside lesbian and gay as an identity that threatens the coherence of this matrix. Bisexuality as sexuality creates gender trouble because, not bound to only one object choice, it is not easily matched to a gender (Callis, 2009; Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2002). However, bisexual performative acts are routinely interpreted as homosexual or heterosexual, which contributes to bisexuality being a relatively silenced form of sexuality (Barker & Langdridge, 2008; Callis, 2009; Haasjoki, 2012; Hemmings, 2002).

Regarding the cultural power and topicality of the trope of similarity between heterosexual and homosexual relationships in the discourse of romantic love and marriage, it is important to address its effects on the relational life of people whose relationships or desire transcend the homo/heterosexual binary—namely bisexual women and their partners. In this article, I study the uses and effects of the normalizing relationship discourses prompted by the debate on registered partnerships in Finland, and which have been strengthened by the “I do 2013” campaign. I show how bisexual women and their partners, whom I interviewed as couples in 2005, use these discourses when making their lives intelligible to themselves and others and,

more precisely, how the more or less hidden hierarchies related to genders and sexualities emerge and produce tensions in this talk. Finally, I explore how and when bisexuality figures in the interviewed couples' talk, and when the homosexual–heterosexual binary is drawn on as a discursive resource.

## **Procedure**

The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with five couples–bisexual women and their partners—that I conducted in 2005. Two of the bisexual women had a female partner, two were together with a man, and one woman's partner was a transman. The participants were recruited through a research request aimed at bisexual women and their partners, which was sent to various (student) mailing lists. The majority of the participants who responded had seen it on a Finnish mailing list targeted to lesbian women and women interested in women. One couple had been forwarded the request by a friend.

At the time of the interviews, the participants were aged 22–42. They were relatively well educated: seven of the participants had or were pursuing a higher education degree, three had vocational qualifications. This is a typical demographic in the studies on bisexuality: young, well-educated women tend to compose the largest part of the sample (Hartman, 2011; Kangasvuo, 2014). Participants' relationships had lasted from three to seven years and all were cohabiting. The interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, in four Finnish towns. They lasted from one and half hours to four hours. I interviewed the couples together, posing one question at a time and letting the couple discuss it freely. If only one partner answered, I tried to ensure that both of them got their voices heard by asking also the other partner's perspective to the matter. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a simplified version of Jefferson's (2004) system. Interviews were semi-structured and organized around the following themes: relationship ideals, current situation in life, history of the relationship, family and friends of the couple, gender and (bi)sexuality in the relationship, and couples' future plans. As a method of eliciting the norm against which the couples compared their own relationship, I asked how similar or different to other relationships they thought their relationship was.

Following Butler's (1991) idea of identities as often produced to a request to speak from a certain position, the research request can be considered as an invitation to talk as a bisexual woman, as a bisexual woman's partner and as a (bi)couple. Instead of producing uniform bisexual or bicouple identities, the invitation initiated negotiations of intelligible identity categories and discourses defining the subject (Butler, 1991). Although the woman's bisexuality was discussed, it was not the most central theme in the interviews or the definer of the couples' relationships in an identity installing manner. Instead of centering on bisexuality as such, gendered relationship talk dominated the couple interviews. In this talk, the interviewees often positioned their relationship within the homo–hetero distinction or as a trans couple on the basis of their partner's gender.

As a scholar, I thus faced the question of how to refer to the couples. As the interviewees positioned themselves differently in the course of the interviews, sometimes, for example, on the basis of their (bi)sexuality and sometimes on the basis of the form of their relationship, they could not be described solely as bicouples, whereas to refer to them as heterosexual or homosexual (or nonheterosexual) couples on the basis of their partner's gender was not appropriate either. I thus decided to refer to them as female couples (Heidi and Anna, Nina and Linda), other-sex couples (Helena and Erik, Paula and Thomas), and as a trans couple (Johanna and Max), which was a term used by the partners themselves (all names are pseudonyms).

I conducted the analysis<sup>1</sup> implementing Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). Following Foucault's (1981) thinking on subjectification and discursive power that both enables and delimits the possibilities of subjects to emerge, I paid attention to how the interviewees used cultural resources: the already existing relationship discourses and the subject positions enabled by them. Combining this approach with that more familiar to discursive psychology (Wiggins & Potter, 2008), I observed how language was used in the conversational context of the interviews. Inspired by the psychosocial approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Roseneil, 2006; Smith & Shin, 2014), I paid attention to investments in certain discourses and identity categories as well as to discrepancies and tensions in such investments.

When reading and rereading the data, it became evident that although the couples invested strongly in some relationship discourses, there were also notable tensions when positioning themselves and their relationships in these discourses. Following Butler (1990), I regard the relationship discourses produced in the interviews as regulatory ideals that couples can imitate, but never perfectly repeat. My aim was to not only to identify the discourses and what they consisted of but also to identify the affective tensions that arise when failing to fit in to these discourses. Reading the data in this way, the meaning of bisexuality also started to emerge. It would not be addressed as a strong identity, but as something emerging between the lines.

## Analysis

The central discourses in the relationship talk of the bisexual women and their partners were the following: (1) *the discourse of an enduring relationship*. Although at the time of the interviews, the possibility of a gender-neutral marriage law was not in immediate prospect, the interviewees stretched the discourse of romantic relationship, comprising falling in love, being in a relationship and getting married, to include their own relationship. (2) However, unlike the Finnish "I do 2013" campaign, the interviewees distanced themselves from the traditional heterosexual relationship and its hierarchical gender arrangement. They did this as a means to invest in the discourse of *an equal relationship*. Gendered tension and unequal sharing of housework in an other-sex relationship were portrayed as the main obstacle in living up to this ideal discourse. (3) In order to manage the marginalization of nonheterosexual couples, the interviewees stressed *the sameness of*



*heterosexual and nonheterosexual couples*. However, the female couples' and the trans couple's experiences did not fit easily into the discourse and produced tension in it. (4) When the women's bisexuality was discussed, a so-called *imaginary third* appeared in the interview talk manifesting the desire to experiment outside the exclusive relationship, and so posed a threat to the continuity of the enduring relationship.

### *Enduring relationships*

The interviewees were committed to the discourse of an enduring relationship. This discourse revolved strongly around and imitated the discourse of marriage and family (Lynch & Maree, 2013). For most of the couples, it was important to register their partnership or to get married, and they also considered having children as part of the relationship. However, not all couples were married or in a registered partnership at the time of the interviews. I thus refer to this discourse as one of an enduring relationship. Romantic love and marriage as its culmination point functioned as a normative frame for the couples' understanding of their relationship. All attempts to renegotiate the meaning of the relationship were made in reference to this frame.

However, the discourse of romantic love resonates somewhat differently for same-sex couples and other-sex couples owing to their different status in Finnish law. The female couples sought to stretch the discourse to include their relationship, although marriage was only available for other-sex couples. For the trans couple, getting married would be allowed when Max had changed his name and gendered personal identity code and so become legally male.

The other-sex couples could afford to be more critical. Paula, who was married to Thomas, gave a tongue-in-cheek description of the progression of a heterosexual relationship:

Paula: It's<sup>2</sup> surprising how easy it goes — opposite sex relationships. Relatives immediately start: "When are you going to get engaged, are you getting married, are you planning to have children and do you have an apartment together?" You don't have to do anything yourself. You just are there and there is so much fuss made over you from the outside that the relationship goes forward and soon you'll notice that you are in an old people's home with that same person.

Her humorous tone changes when she refers to her previous relationship with a woman.

Paula: When you are together with a woman nobody asks: "When are you getting engaged or when you are going to register your partnership, isn't it nice." (laughs), or "When did you think of having children?". Certainly not, it's like "Is that person still around, please come to your senses."

As in Paula's description, woman's bisexuality was often present in the interviewees' accounts of their past relationships with both women and men.

These experiences or even the bisexual identity/desire had made these women (and their partners) sensitive to the undermining of nonheterosexual relationships. For example, Helena, who was in a relationship with Erik, refused to get married because of the discriminatory legal situation of same-sex couples. For her, getting married also would have meant that her relationship “would be read as a heterosexual.” She was thus “annoyed that we could not register our partnership,” which would be one way to perform bisexuality when in a relationship with a man.

### *Equal relationships*

The bisexual women and their partners used the concept of tradition in a way opposite to that in the Finnish “I do 2013” campaign, where it was both cherished and played with. They frequently brought up aspects of traditional heterosexual relationships that they wanted to distance their own relationship from. This is how they built up the ideal discourse of an equal relationship (cf. Magnusson, 2005).

Anna compares her own relationship to the traditional relationship.

Anna: Our relationship is different than what you see in the papers or on television. They create this other kind of- (4) traditional. How could one explain that. Our relationship is not like that.

When I ask her to clarify what she means, she continues:

Anna: How can I say it—it comes out as this one and only heterosexuality. There’s like this certain way how you are expected to be in a relationship. There is the heterosexual couple —. There is the man and the woman and the man is in the slightly better occupation and the woman gets paid a little less and they have two kids and a car and a cottage and in the weekends they go to the cottage.

Anna hesitates before she explains how gender and sexuality figure in a traditional normative couple constellation, the one she seeks to distance herself from. Her description reveals the norms and hierarchies in which the couple relationship is often embedded. The self-evident inhabitant of this discourse is a heterosexual couple, a man and a woman who are placed in a nuclear family setting with two children. The difference in the occupational status of the partners and in their wages is indicative of their respective places in the hierarchical gender order. The description of the couple owning a car and a summer cottage signifies their middle-class status.

In all the interviews, the strongest opposition expressed to the “traditional relationship” concerned the gendered sharing of housework and child care.

Paula: [My friend] Jenny takes care of the home and cleans up and cooks for Alex who can go hunting in his free time and then work (laughs). She lives like in this very traditional woman’s role in which I would like die in three days.

Paula's use of the word traditional seems to be very appropriate here. The construction of a woman who takes care of the domestic sphere and cooks for her husband and thus enables him to go out into the public sphere and work brings directly to mind the 1950s (Marander-Eklund & Koskinen-Koivisto, 2014), and Parsons and Bales' (1956) depiction of the naturalized male and female roles in the family. In Parsons and Bales' theory, the gendered division of labor is essential in enabling the family to carry out its functions as a cornerstone of society.

Paula, however, laughs when she tells the story. The words with which she rejects the caricature-like gender arrangement are parodic: "I would like die in three days." This parodic representation of the traditional heterosexual relationship communicates an ambivalent wish to make one's life intelligible through the normative cultural understanding of a relationship (cf. Gill, 2007; Kolehmainen, 2012). By so doing, the bisexual woman is attempting to claim a place of her own and manage the hidden heteronormativity of this discourse. She tries to tell a story that is not exactly "the same."

Paula's caricature thus serves the purpose of highlighting her own relationship ideal, namely that of equality, which was shared by all the interviewed couples. While the equality ideal was mainly articulated through the discourse of a fair division of housework and taking care of children, the absence of domestic violence in the female relationship was also raised by one bisexual woman.

There was a difference in how the equality discourse was constructed as figuring in the relationships of the other-sex couples compared to the relationships of the female couples and the trans couple. The other-sex couples' talk resembled the accounts of "most equal" Nordic heterosexual couples in Magnusson's (2005) research: they did not rely on traditional gendered notions to justify their sharing of housework, but tried to share it equally. Despite their striving for the equality ideal, their talk revealed gendered tensions, as in the case of Erik and Helena.

Erik: Well we try to share it equally and all that — but it's like — it's clearly Helena's rhythm that how everything, like the criteria how we do it around here.

—  
Helena: The thing that unnerves me quite a lot is that Erik does things when I ask but not on his own initiative. Yeah, that's the thing I almost always nag about.

Erik: Yeah but it's not like I didn't do things but then I don't do things like

Helena: but you do you do you do but

Erik and Helena have not quite settled the issue of sharing the housework. The responsibility for coordinating housework often falls to the women in an other-sex relationship (Jokinen, 2004; Van Hooff, 2013): "Erik does things when I ask." This was the main source of gendered tension in this couple's talk. For Paula and Thomas, it was the progression of the relationship, getting married, and having children that was depicted as gendered, something Paula had to persuade Thomas to do, which annoyed her: "That is probably the thing we could pick a quarrel about."

The female couples and the trans couple described a more equal sharing of housework than tends to be the case in heterosexual relationships in general (Jokinen, 2004). This result is also supported by other research on the topic (Gotta et al., 2011). However, one should be careful not take the claimed equality in female or trans relationships for granted or treat them as “gender-free” (Oerton, 1997). Sometimes their description of the sharing of chores was strongly reminiscent of the dynamics of the other-sex couples described above: “the one who was bothered first — got down to business and it took me like a very long time before anything bothered me” (Heidi).

Interestingly though, all the bisexual women depicted a life with a woman as a possible way out of hierarchical gender arrangements and in some cases out of the violent dynamics of an other-sex relationship, regardless of the couple constellation they currently inhabited.

Helena: That friend of ours [Katja]—lived with us for one summer.—My life was made so much easier. When I came home the food was already cooked.

Linda: The last longer relationship [I was in] Sure the dude was a bit crazy. There was mental and physical violence—and now when I’m with Nina—this is actually the first healthy relationship I’ve had.

Nonheterosexual interviewees in the study by Rolfe and Peel (2011) were against the “marriage model” signified by the registered partnership, as it was viewed as promoting unequal gender roles. Here, only one couple, Erik and Helena, were generally against marriage. Most of the interviewees were in favor of marriage, but unlike in the text in the “I do 2013” campaign, they did not put out a flag for the traditional relationship. They wanted to change the hierarchical gendered ways they associated with the traditional heterosexual relationship.

### *Similar relationships*

The discourse of sameness to heterosexuality has been drawn on in the debate on registered partnership in Finland (Charpentier, 2001; Kaskisaari, 1997) and in the “I do 2013” campaign. In it, couple relationships are constructed as nearly genderless, in essence similar across all people and couples, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender. However, in the discourse of sameness, a long-term heterosexual relationship founded on gender difference remains the norm to which other relationships are compared (Butler, 1990). In deploying this discourse, the interviewees thus placed their relationship within the hierarchical homo/hetero distinction, or as a trans couple, on the basis of their partner’s gender.

The constraining effects of the discourse of sameness became evident in the negotiations it gave rise to in the interviews with the female couples and the trans couple. Their views and experiences in relation to intimacy, sex, sharing housework, and taking care of children did not always fit into the similarity

ideal. To demonstrate the effects and logic behind the similarity talk, I present a long extract, in which the similarity talk is particularly pronounced.

Johanna and Max agreed to the interview because of Johanna's bisexuality, which she redefined in the interview as a trans-orientation. During their relationship, Max had started transitioning from female to male. Here they negotiate about how their sex life is similar or different to that of other people.

Max and Johanna

Interviewer: Do you think that your sex life is similar or different to other [couples]?

Johanna: I don't really think that our sex life would particularly differ from other people's.

Max: I feel like, how it differs from the others, well it's maybe how outsiders picture it. Maybe other people, people close to us maybe think that our sex life differs in some very peculiar way from. But I think how we think ourselves maybe it's quite the opposite. I can't figure out how it would somehow differ.

Max: Well it occurred to me Johanna's male friends' comments and questions when we have drunk a couple of beers. It's like then they start to come up with these questions. Like "How do you have sex?"

Johanna: Like their own imagination wouldn't be enough to that. It feels like, I don't know.

Max: Maybe it's just that they think that, that it must be something much more exciting or then it's just simply that they can't imagine —

Johanna: I think that when you have been in a relationship for a long time the sex in a relationship is as a rule good — I don't think that our sex would be especially better or worse than anybody else's —

Johanna: But then again because our sex is not concentrated on erections and it isn't dependent on the man's orgasm, it's better than the sex that I've had before with a man.

Johanna: Yeah, they think more like, they might think that our sex is somehow less when in reality it's probably in many situations much more. It's like more intense and more varied when there is no self-evident way to handle the situation.

Johanna: When it comes from a man it is somehow, like to a biological guy it must be a logical question, because his sexuality is in that one thing. And then there's someone who says that he's a man but he doesn't have that. So it is the first question like "How do you have sex?"

Both Johanna and Max stress the similarity of their sex life to that of other couples. They draw on the discourse of sameness, but before long Max brings into the conversation the perspective of other people, who he believes might think that his and Johanna's sex life is somehow different.

What makes the sex between a transman and a woman unimaginable to people outside the couple and allows Johanna's male friends ask Max intrusive questions, is stated later in the conversation. In the heteronormative frame, the sex of a transman and a woman becomes defined as lacking something—"that one thing." This frame even makes this line of questioning logical for Johanna: for a biological man whose sexuality, according to her, resides in his penis, it must be logical to ask someone who claims to be a man but does not have one, how he has sex. Yet, even when discussing this intrusive and hurtful prying and the discourse of a lack, Johanna attempts to adhere to the discourse of sameness.

When Johanna describes her experiences of sex with Max, it contradicts both the discourse of lacking opposite sex bodies and that of sameness in their sex. As if to strike back, she says: "they might think that our sex is somehow less when in reality it's — in many situations much more." Berlant (2008) has written of the cultural promise of an intimate and rewarding heterosexual relationship, which is always accompanied by "the female complaint." In this way, women can express their dissatisfaction at the lack of fulfillment of this promise without seriously undermining it. It is this discourse that Johanna draws on to intensify her argument. She describes heterosexual sex as centered on the male erection and dependent on the male orgasm—and maybe thus not very satisfactory to the woman involved. In Johanna's account, her sex with a transman is one way out of this female complaint. Without the preexisting script of heterosexual sex, sex with a transman can be more varied and rewarding for a woman than heterosexual sex.

Yet, trying to fit sexuality that is different from heterosexuality into the discourse of sameness is tricky, when difference continues to be constructed as other or as a lack. It leads both Johanna and Max to waver between sameness, lack, and superiority. In doing so, they are struggling with a very limited set of cultural meanings (cf. Nordqvist, 2012).

The logic of the conversation is strikingly similar to the logic of the current LGBTI struggle for recognition through claiming the legal right to marry. On the part of the lesbian and gay movement, a typical response to the stigma of homosexuality has been to try to empty homosexuality of the notion of shameful sex and turn instead to the discourse of respectability and the norms of matrimony, and so appear just like heterosexuals (Butler, 2004; Clarke, 2003; Rydström, 2011; Warner, 2000). This hides the long history of being rejected and shamed, and hence more radical politics have been suggested (e.g., Clarke, 2003; Warner, 2000).

When talking about one's intimate relationship, it can be asked if the affective positions of pride (e.g., in one's sex life) and shame, defined by powerful heteronormative discourses, can be freely chosen. Smith and Shin (2014) analyzed a discursive strategy they refer to as queer blindfolding, in which the differences between heterosexual and LGBTI subjects are minimized. In a psychological sense, this strategy can be understood as a defence mechanism, its function being "to repress the painful acknowledgment of queer oppression" (Smith & Shin, 2014, p. 952). It enables the subject to make a projection of the world as she would wish it to be. Max's and Johanna's persistent return to the discourse of sameness, which fails to do justice to their relationship, resembles queer blindfolding



(Smith & Shin, 2014). Wavering between sameness and superiority can thus be interpreted as a defence against the painful construction of a lack. It reflects the ambivalent wish both to belong to and to question the normative relationship discourse and the sameness of “all couples.”

### *The imaginary third*

The interviewees favored the conventional discourse of a marriage model relationship, in which the relationship was understood and/or lived out as an enduring and exclusive union. One interviewee, Helena, defined her relationship with Erik as “an open relationship that has never been tested.” Although touched upon in the interviews, the female partner’s bisexuality did not become a definer of the couples’ relationships.

Bisexuality, often associated with being hypersexual and promiscuous (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2005) does not sit neatly with talk of an exclusive relationship (Lynch & Maree, 2013). In this study, the other-sex couples wished neither to reject this discourse of bisexuality nor actually live polyamorously. However, sometimes they introduced a third party, which was not necessarily an actual person or an affair into their relationship talk. To analyze this, I propose the concept of “an imaginary third.” By imaginary I refer, in Smart’s (2007) terms, to “the ways in which relationships exist (indeed have a life) in one’s imagination and thoughts” (Smart, 2007, p. 46). However, what is imagined can have actual effects on people’s relationships.

The imaginary third was present in Paula’s frequent infatuations with women and in Erik’s and Helena’s fantasies of either of them having an affair with someone else or sharing a bed with a woman together. The latter talk was related to Helena’s wish to share her life with a woman at some point during her life and in this way also accommodated to her bisexuality. The imaginary third rendered the woman’s bisexuality and her desire for women visible. This way it stretched the normative idea of exclusive desire in a long-term other-sex relationship.

Although experienced as personal, imaginings are affected by social and cultural realms (Smart, 2007). As it is hardly uncommon to fantasize about others outside one’s (exclusive) relationship, I would argue that the tendency of the heterosexual matrix to locate male and female at opposite poles and to ontologize these genders (Gustavson, 2009) contributed to the open emergence of an imaginary third in the couple interviews of a bisexual woman and her male partner. As Paula expressed it, “I do long for women sometimes and then [Thomas] is not a woman but a man.”

For Paula, the consequences of her feelings for women appeared as the product of the homo/hetero-distinction: “I’ve given it some thought whether I should nevertheless live with a woman.” This posited her relationship with Thomas as potentially under threat, which she shook off by saying “I haven’t sunk deeper into that like I’d started to brood over anything. Again it is good as it is.” By acting on the desires manifested as the imaginary third, the interviewees would be at risk of losing their partner. When discussing the couple’s future plans, Erik said “A kind of thing that could be, that could come between us — the only thought is that

Helena will meet a wonderful woman and take off with her.” The psychic threat of a relationship breakup was moderated in the interviews by the assurances given by the bisexual women of their commitment to their current relationship.

The female couples and the trans couple did not introduce the imaginary third into their relationship talk in the same manner as the other-sex couples. Heidi and Anna told about an occasion in the early days of their dating, when a man interested in Heidi had called her up. This incident caused Anna to change her mind about something: “That’s the reason why I wanted to buy the rings. It’s like a visible thing that you are taken.”

The woman’s bisexuality did not give rise to pleasurable fantasies, but was more a straightforward threat to the relationship (Kangasvuo, 2014). This was reflected in the stereotypical depiction of a bisexual woman as one who is not capable of long-term commitment (McLean, 2004):

Johanna: If you say that you are bisexual then it is like okay you can take off with a man any time. It’s like when I sit with you here [in a lesbian party] and talk with you and fall in love with you, tomorrow you’ll have some guy.

In Butler’s (1990) theory of the formation of the melancholic sexual subject in a heterosexist culture, the same-sex object choice is made through repudiation of heterosexual subjectivity or vice versa. Hemmings (2002) claims that bisexuals have become cultural carriers—or holograms—of this idea: the bisexual woman has not given up desire for the opposite sex, so she must be heterosexual. The imaginary third thus appeared in the stereotypical depiction as “some guy” the bisexual woman would “take off with” (Kangasvuo, 2014).

Given this threat, it was possible for bisexuality to be talked about in the interviews with the female couples and trans couple as an identity or sexual orientation, but not as a desire, at least not toward a gender other than their partner’s or, especially, toward men. Anna said to Heidi, in the context of the ring conversation, “You were not interested in that guy, but he was interested in you.” Later on, Heidi commented “Bisexuality is quite a theoretical [concept] for us at the moment.”

Instead, the bisexual women drew on the discourse of romantic love and stressed that their sexual orientation was toward their partner. Johanna explained, “This bisexuality of mine has maybe been more like searching for a transman. If I had run right into Max the first time, I wouldn’t have needed to try straight or lesbian relationships.”

If a bisexual woman were to choose a (cisgendered) man as her partner, or even talk openly about her desire for men in the manner in which the present bisexual women with male partners fantasized about women, she would be acting in a way that would have been “expected” somewhere down the line, given the heterosexist cultural idea of the bisexual woman as “actually” heterosexual (Hemmings, 2002; see also Lynch & Maree, 2013). In the homo/hetero hierarchy, this would painfully question the worth of a bisexual woman’s female or trans partner. It is thus no wonder that the topic of a bisexual woman’s desire for men was avoided in the conversation.



## Discussion

I selected the couples for the interviews on the basis of the female partners' bisexuality. However, it did not become a definer of the couples' relationships, and no such thing as a clear cut bicouple discourse was identified. Bisexuality did thus not appear as central as in other interview studies on bisexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2011). Instead, the bisexual women and their partners made their relationships intelligible by taking up positions in the discourse of the enduring couple relationship. They positioned themselves in the homo/hetero distinction or as trans couple on the basis of their partner's gender. By investing in this discourse, the interviewees sought to fit their relationship into the ideal of romantic love: to form a durable relationship with one person, possibly for the rest of their lives. Although at first sight the couples seemed to slide effortlessly into the normative relationship discourse, it seemed to require constant negotiation: is our relationship traditional or is it equal? Are we similar or are we different? Do gender and (bi)sexuality play a role in the relationship or not? Close reading of these negotiations brought to the light the hidden hierarchies related to gender and sexuality that constitute the enduring relationship discourse. The interviewees did not wish to be perceived as resembling a traditional heterosexual couple, since to them this echoed the traditional hierarchical gender arrangement. Instead, they invested in the discourse of an equal relationship, an ideal, which according to the couples, was more easily achievable in female and trans relationships.

The interviewees also stressed the ordinariness of nonheterosexual couples and their similarity to heterosexual couples (cf. Heaphy et al., 2013). Their persistent return to the discourse of sameness, even when it did not do justice to the experiences of the female couples and trans couple, resonates with the concept of queer blindfolding (Smith & Shin, 2014). In these instances, recourse to the discourse of sameness can be interpreted as a defence against the still widely circulated view of nonheterosexual relationships as shameful or pathological (Smith & Shin, 2014; Warner, 2000). Stressing sameness in the context of the enduring relationship discourse adds to the current queer studies consensus on a prevailing cultural climate where nonheterosexual desire and relational life are made intelligible within the frame of marriage and family (e.g., Butler, 2004; Warner, 2000). The wish to make life experiments (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) seems to have been replaced by a strong desire for sameness (Clarke, 2002; Richardson, 2005), a wish to "fit in" (Nordqvist, 2012).

The interview data analyzed in this study were collected 10 years ago, in 2005. During this time, the category of bisexuality has become more visible in the Finnish media landscape and in sexual minority politics, and it has become more accessible as a sexual identity, especially for young women (Kangasvuo, 2014). Bisexuality, however, is an identity that disturbs the discourse of sameness. It does not fit neatly into the homo/hetero binary that the discourse is based on. In media accounts in the 2010s, a woman's bisexuality was often associated with being shifting and trendy identity and was brought up to excite and entertain audiences

(Kangasvuori, 2014). In normative relationship talk, bisexuality easily disappears (see also Lynch & Maree, 2013). However, in the present interviews it showed up as the imaginary third.

The imaginary third manifests in the desire to experiment outside the boundaries of the enduring, exclusive relationship. The interviewees' responses to these desires were, however, ambivalent. The talk of the other-sex couples allowed room for the woman's desire for women, which also made visible her bisexual identity. Within the power relations of the hierarchical heterosexual matrix, the bisexual woman's desire for men would have been interpreted as undermining her partner. It was thus avoided as a conversation topic. Acting upon desires manifested as the imaginary third would also carry the risk of losing the object of attachment, one's partner. The interviewee's talk can be thus read as an attempt to deal with this ambivalence that is underlined by the woman partner's bisexuality.

Knowing this, it can be asked whether the notions of respectability and sameness within the idealized discourse of "marriage and family" apply to bisexuality in the same way as they have gradually become applied to the sexual categories of lesbian and gay (Kangasvuori, 2014). Allowing same-sex couples to legally marry challenges the basic assumption of the heterosexual matrix and marriage: that it is founded on gender difference. However, the rapid progression of same-sex marriage can also be explained as a way to tame the unsettling notion of "genderless" desire, meaning desire that is not tied to only one (other-sex) gender, that is also present in bisexual women.

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### Notes

1. I conducted the analysis working in Finnish and then translated the excerpts for publication. The original Finnish text of the excerpts is available in a Supplementary file (Available at [fap.sagepub.com](http://fap.sagepub.com)).
2. For legibility, the data excerpts have been slightly modified by adding some punctuation marks and removing some meaningless words and utterances such as hm, er, like. Sometimes the interviewees talk wandered off the topic or repeated what had already been said. Omission of this kind of talk is marked with —.

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### Author Biography

**Annukka Lahti** is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Social Sciences in University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Subject of her doctoral thesis is tensions in bisexual women's and their partners' relationship talk. Her research interests include continuities and changes in contemporary intimate relationships, bisexuality, and affect.



## II

### **BISEXUAL DESIRES FOR MORE THAN ONE GENDER AS A CHALLENGE TO NORMATIVE RELATIONSHIP IDEALS**

by

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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 & Langdridge, 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 & Langdridge, 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 & Langdridge, 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 & Langdridge, 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 & Langdridge, 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 & Langdrige, 2008; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 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.<sup>i</sup> 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.<sup>ii</sup> 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.<sup>iii</sup> 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; Kangasvuo, 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 psychical, and conceptualizes the subject as formed in the intertwining of the 'internal' psychical 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<sup>iv</sup> (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.

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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.’<sup>v</sup> 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).<sup>vi</sup>

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 (Kangasvu, 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.

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<sup>i</sup> 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.

<sup>ii</sup> I was thus able to use five original couple interviews in the study.

<sup>iii</sup> 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

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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.

<sup>iv</sup> 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).

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> 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).



### III

## **TOO MUCH? EXCESSIVE SEXUAL EXPERIENCES IN BISEXUAL WOMEN'S LIFE STORIES**

by

Lahti, A. 2018

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# **Too much? Excessive sexual experiences in bisexual women's life stories**

## **Abstract**

This article explores bisexual women's sexual experiences at the edges of or between relationships. It draws on the follow-up interviews of a longitudinal interview set conducted in 2005 and 2014–2015 with bisexual women and their partners, who do not identify as bisexuals. Bisexual women's spontaneous, detailed and affective narrations of sexual experiences in the follow-up interviews caught the author's attention. Although the experiences were often narrated as pleasurable, they could be overwhelming, and women also expressed concern that they were excessive, "too much". The analysis of the women's accounts utilizes and develops a psychosocial concept of excess. It reveals that the excessiveness of the women's sexual experiences is constituted by bisexuality and monogamy-related norms that restrict women's sexuality, and also by the non-rational psychic dimensions of these experiences. Within the normative limits of feminine sexuality, sexuality's excess often plays a propulsive role as the women strive to become sexual subjects.

**Keywords:** sexuality, excess, women, bisexuality, psychosocial, relationships

## **1. Introduction**

Marriage, cohabiting and gendered ways of being in relationships have become a matter of reflection and "choice" in contemporary Western societies following the individualization and democratization of intimate life (e.g. Adkins, 2002; Barker and Langdridge, 2010; Giddens, 1992; Roseneil, 2007). Yet many relationship-related hierarchies concerning gender



and sexuality persist (Author, 2015; Magnusson, 2005; Farvid and Braun, 2013). A monogamous couple relationship is still regarded as the most respectable way of organizing intimate life (Barker and Langdridge, 2010; Farvid and Braun, 2013), and has been the central vehicle through which same-sex desire has gained social acceptance (Heaphy *et al*, 2013; Warner, 2000). The couple norm remains strong as family life and sociability are organized around couple relationships (DePaulo and Morris, 2005; Ketokivi, 2012).

Despite growing academic and public interest, non-monogamous ways of arranging intimate life remain marginalized (Barker and Langdridge, 2010; van Hooff, 2017). Yet there are ambivalences and tensions around contemporary monogamous couple relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Perel, 2007; Shaw, 2013). Alongside the persistence of ideas about romantic love, ‘the one’ and the couple, people are expected to pursue their personal life goals and express their individual selfhood through sexuality (Barker and Langdridge, 2010; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Gill, 2008). This tension may have become particularly pronounced in a culture of ‘romantic renaissance’ (Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009). Attitudes towards infidelity in relationships have become judgmental to an increasing extent since the turn of the millennium (Kontula & Mäkinen, 2009; van Hooff, 2017).

These norms may have a particular effect on the lives of bisexual women, since bisexuality renders these tensions visible (Author, under review). In this article, bisexuality refers to the experience of sexual attraction to or desire for more than one gender<sup>i</sup> (Barker and Langdridge, 2008; Kangasvuo, 2014; Monro, 2015). In Western cultures, which emphasise the gendered body as an object choice of desire over other aspects of a person (Butler, 1990), the notion of bisexuality draws attention to the excess of sexuality beyond the cultural ideal of the dyadic relationship. It interrogates the normative ideal of one partner who meets all our emotional and sexual needs (Author, under review). People across sexuality and gender divides have to negotiate desires that exceed the monogamous ideal (Finn, 2012), yet

bisexuality is persistently culturally associated with hypersexuality and promiscuity (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al, 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014). Bisexual women thus engage in negotiations concerning sexual and relationship arrangements from a challenging cultural position, because relationship and sexuality related norms may have particularly stigmatizing effects on them (Author, under review, Klesse, 2005).

Despite the recent “sexualisation” of popular culture and an increase in queer content in Western contexts since the mid-1990s (Gill, 2008b; Karkulehto, 2011; Mistry, 2000), feminist scholars have addressed the difficulty of theorizing women’s sexual subjectivity and desire on their own terms (Barker and Gill, 2012). Gill (2007; 2008a) has turned attention to mainstream culture’s “post-feminist” tendency to represent women’s sexuality as autonomous and empowering – although these representations often resemble older sexual scripts that posit women as the object of male fantasy (Barker and Gill, 2012; Kolehmainen, 2012). The limits of women’s sexuality have been refined: women should be sexual in (preferably heterosexual) couple relationships, but not too sexual or sexual in the wrong way (Harvey and Gill, 2011; Moran and Lee, 2014). When women engage in casual sex it is often constructed as “not a natural act” (Farvid and Braun, 2013). Despite its frequent cultural representation, casual sex is often constructed as a transitory and incomplete sexual arrangement (Farvid and Braun, 2013). These constructions strengthen the status of sex in monogamous relationships as the most desirable sex (Farvid and Braun, 2013; Finn, 2012). This article analyses bisexual women’s sexual experiences that are “too much” according to prevailing social norms regulating women’s sexuality and monogamous relationships. To fully understand the excessive character of women’s sexual experiences, it is necessary to bear in mind that sexuality is not only constrained by norms that dictate how women should be sexual (Harvey and Gill, 2011; Moran and Lee, 2014), but is also shaped by affective, non-rational psychic dimensions of relating (Johnson, 2015; Roseneil, 2006). This reflects the

psychoanalytic notion of sexuality as something that unsettles the fantasy of a sovereign subject (Berlant and Edelman, 2014; Butler, 1991; Stein, 2008). Nonsovereignty refers to our inability to know ourselves entirely or to be fully in control of ourselves (Berlant and Edelman, 2014; Pirskanen, 2008; Woodward, 2015). This “prompts our misrecognition of our own motives and desires” (Berlant and Edelman, 2014, viii).

In order to get an enriched view of the complex meanings of sexual exploration in women’s lives, I will incorporate contemporary psychoanalytic thinking about sexuality as excess into my analysis (Benjamin and Atlas, 2015; Stein, 2008). My aims are to 1) develop a psychosocial understanding of sexual excess so that it encompasses both sexuality-related norms and non-rational, unconscious psychic dimensions, and 2) show that without the concept of excess it is impossible to understand women’s sexual experiences in the context of their relational and affective sexual life stories.

## **2. Psychosocial exploration of sexuality’s excess**

By adopting a psychoanalytic concept of excess, I seek to work with aspects of experience that are not consciously known or easily represented linguistically – often referred to as affect (Baraitser and Frosh, 2007; Blackman, 2010; Koivunen, 2010; Sedgwick, 2003). I follow such feminist and queer approaches to affect, which continue to formulate new questions about sexual subjectivities by utilising the critical potential of psychoanalytic thought (Berlant and Edelman, 2014; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Koivunen, 2010, 59). My approach to subjectivity, sexuality and affect is thus psychosocial (Baraitser and Frosh, 2007; Blackman *et al*, 2008; Johnson, 2015; Woodward, 2015).

Psychosocial research addresses the question of the relationship between the social and the psychic, which are seen as inextricably intertwined in psychosocial studies (Woodward, 2015, 5). It incorporates a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious (Woodward,

2015, 82), but also seeks to go beyond the universalism of psychoanalytic theory (Blackman *et al*, 2008; Lucey *et al*, 2003; Roseneil, 2007; Walkerdine, 2015). There has been heated debate about the nature of the relationship between “inner” and “outer” (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Johnson, 2015). My study draws on the notion that subjects and desires are formed in the intertwining of the “internal” psychic and “external” social, “always immersed in a flux that is neither inside nor out” (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008, 354; Pirskanen, 2008).

Psychoanalytical concepts, such as excess, are often useful for analysing this interweavement (Frosh & Baraitser 2008).

In many poststructuralist theories, for example in Judith Butler’s (psychosocial) performative theory of gender (1990, 1991), the notion of excess marks “the uncategorizable, the unsymbolizable, that which exceeds the regular frame imposed on it” (Stein, 2008, 48). For Butler (1990, 1991), sexuality is excessive in the sense that it can never be fully expressed in a gender presentation or narrative. With the concept of excess, Butler refers to psychic space that always “exceeds the domain of the conscious subject” (Butler, 1991, 315). However, this conceptualization alone does not explain why some sexual experiences are characterized by “too muchness” and “excess” (Benjamin and Atlas, 2015; Stein, 2008).

Ruth Stein (2008) suggests that contemporary psychoanalytic thinking is necessary in order to explore the excessive, shame-linked and transgressive aspects of sexuality. Contemporary psychoanalytic thinking about sexuality as excess is strongly influenced by Laplanche (1987, cited by Stein 2008; Benjamin and Atlas, 2015), who theorizes it in terms of the early overwhelming of the psyche (Benjamin and Atlas, 2015). The child is overwhelmed by the parent’s excess – the parent is older and bigger, and the adult’s unconscious messages about sexuality are too much for the child to contain in its psyche. Thus sexuality always begins with an unconscious communication from the (excessive) other (Laplanche 1987 cited by Benjamin and Atlas, 2015).

Despite the universalizing tendencies of psychoanalytic theorizations of excess, Stein (2008) keeps the concept in motion by discussing it through different conceptualizations. She suggests that the various types of excess together constitute the compelling power of sexuality: “the overstepping of boundaries, the sense of overbrimming with inordinate arousal that makes one feel it cannot be encompassed” (Stein, 2008, 44). Her discussion of sexual experiences that can “sometimes be strange, excessive, ‘perverse’ and irrational” (Stein, 2008, 45) does not pathologize these experiences, but rather comes close to Kalha’s (2007, 27–28) queer reading of Freud (2000/1905), for whom all desire is more or less perverse. Not only does excess transgress regulatory frames, as in poststructuralist theories (Stein 2008, 50), but it can also transgress boundaries between self and other, and within oneself (Stein 2008, 63).

Therefore, in my psychosocial deployment of the concept of excess, I take seriously how social norms regulating bisexual women’s sexuality may contribute to the ‘feel’ of ‘too muchness’ of women’s sexual experiences. Yet , in order to gain an enriched view of the meanings of sexual exploration in women’s lives, I have incorporated into my analysis psychoanalytic ideas of excess (Stein, 2008) as (1) an actively pursued shattering of structure (Bersani, 1995), (2) a way of dealing with our lonely, discontinuous being (Bataille 1957, 1976 cited by Stein 2008, 54–57), and (3) an (over)excitement that can turn from grace to abomination (Stein, 2008). By showing that these ‘social’ and ‘psychic’ aspects of excess cannot be easily separated, but are inextricably intertwined in women’s accounts of their sexual experiences, the article offers a new, psychosocial understanding of sexual excess.

### **3. Materials and methods**

The article draws on a study on bisexuality and relationships that incorporates a longitudinal set of interviews. I conducted seven original couple interviews with bisexual women and their partners in 2005, and individual follow-ups in 2014–2015. In the couple interviews, four of the bisexual women had female partners, two had male partners, and one woman's partner was a transman. None of the partners identified as bisexual<sup>ii</sup>. For the follow-up interviews I was able to reach 11 participants, six bisexual women and five (ex-) partners: two men and one woman, whose gender identities had stayed the same across both interview rounds. The ex-partner, who had identified as a transman in the couple interview, identified as a man in his follow-up interview. An ex-partner, who had identified as a woman at the first interview, said during the follow-up that their gender was “in the making”. I was unable to reach two partners of one female couple, whereas one former female partner of a bisexual woman did not want to participate while also refusing permission to use the 2005 couple interview in the study. This article mainly draws on the bisexual women's follow-up interviews of 2014–2015, while their ex-partners follow-up interviews and the five couple interviews serve as reference points for my analysis.

I conducted both sets of interviews in five Finnish cities, in the participants' homes or other locations that offered privacy. They were in-depth interviews that lasted between one and four hours. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a simplified version of Jefferson's (2004) system. At the time of the couple interviews, the participants were aged 22–42 (32–52 at the follow-up interviews). They were well educated: at the time of the follow-up interviews, eight participants had degrees, and three had vocational qualifications.

I originally recruited the participants through a research request aimed at bisexual women and their partners. Four of the women who responded to the original interview request as bisexual women mostly still used bisexuality as an identity label in follow-up interviews; one woman 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. Generally, bisexual identification entailed complex negotiations around sexuality and identity labels (see also Author, 2015; Author, under review). This highlights the queer theoretical notion that desire and desiring subjects cannot easily be put into clearly defined identity categories that will remain fixed for life (Butler, 1991; Giffney, 2009).

My study reflects Heaphy and Einarsdottir's (2013) finding that interviewing couples together and apart generates different kinds of interview talk. The couple interviews of 2005 were semi-structured interviews concentrating on the participants relationships. In the couple interviews relationship stories drawing on the ideal discourses of enduring relationship and romantic love were dominant: participants aspired to form a durable relationship with one person, possibly for the rest of their lives. One other-sex relationship was described as an agreed open relationship that had never been put into practice. The individual interviews gave more complex picture of participants' (past and current) relationships and highlighted women's bisexual experiences.

By the time of the follow-ups, most participants had separated and found new partners. One couple had stayed married. Two of the bisexual women were now in long-term relationships with men, three were married to men, and one was involved with men and women. Although the criterion for participation in the follow-up interviews was participation in the 2005 interviews, I did not want to set the former interview as the point of departure, preferring to leave it to the participants to judge the significance of that relationship within the entirety of their relational life. I began the follow-up interviews with an open-ended narrative question, adopting a focused version of (Wengraf, 2001) biographical narrative interview method. As a response to the open-ended question, the interviewees produced rich biographical accounts centred on their romantic and sexual relationships.

Particularly in the follow-up interviews with four bisexual women, sexuality and sexual experimentation emerged spontaneously as a central theme. In addition to their relationship histories, the bisexual women gave affective and detailed accounts of their sexual experiences and sexual experimentation. Yet, one bisexual woman did not talk about such experiences. With some exceptions, the sexual experiences were not located in the bisexual women's long-term relationships, but rather at the edges of or between relationships. Although these sexual encounters were often experienced as very pleasurable, the women also expressed concern that they were excessive, "too much". Women felt that things had got out of control during these life stages, and they could not fully understand why.

The affectivity of the women's narrations "haunted" me, and I felt that I should try to understand why their experiences appeared excessive (Blackman 2015, 26). It was the "hot" concentration on sexuality, the gratitude, pleasure and affectivity some women attached to their sexual experiences, that had caught my attention<sup>iii</sup>. The notion of pleasure alone could not capture the complexity of these experiences (see for example Melzer, 2010). The ambivalence through which the sexual experiences were told led me to address the meaning and function of such sexual experiences to the bisexual women – without forgetting their pleasurable aspects.

My discovering of the contemporary psychoanalytic writing on sexual excess (Benjamin and Atlas, 2015; Stein, 2008) and the different conceptualizations through which Stein (2008) approaches it revealed the women's experiences in a new light. By deploying the various psychoanalytic concepts of excess in my analysis (Benjamin and Atlas, 2015; Stein, 2008), it became possible to discover the unconscious aspects of women's sexual experiences that could not be reduced to the effects of the norms restraining respectable (bisexual) female



sexualities. Especially the ambivalent character of sexual excess, which can easily turn from grace to abomination (Stein, 2008, 48), resonated with women's experiences.

Yet, how to combine psychoanalytic thought with the understanding of intimate life as socially and discursively patterned? What can a scholar do to bring "the unthought" to the representational surface (Clough, 2013, 176)? While analysing my interview data I followed Sedgwick's (2003) suggestion that the non-representational – excessive, irrational, unconscious – does not provide access "beneath, behind and beyond", but rather is "parallel with" and "beside" (Koivunen, 2010, 50; Sedgwick, 2003). In my analysis this meant paying attention both to the interviewee's investments in certain discourses and identity categories, as well as taking into account affective and irrational aspects of experience that are not easily put into words (Woodward, 2015, 82): for example paying attention to affectively intensive moments, to the thickly narrated passages and opacity of the interviewees' talk.

The psychosocial analysis highlighted that the excessiveness of the women's experiences comprised various elements that could not be reduced to either 'psychic' or 'social' dimensions. In women's accounts, they were inextricably intertwined. The excessiveness of women's experiences came to the surface through reading of different aspects that came together in women's accounts (Blackman, 2015).

#### **4. Bisexual women's excessive sexual experiences at the edges of or between relationships**

Now I will analyse bisexual women's accounts of sexual experiences that took place at the edges of or between long-term relationships. These differed from person to person, but there were common factors that could be said to constitute the excessiveness of the experiences.

These factors were 1) bisexuality, which as a desire for more than one gender does not fit neatly into cultural understandings of couple relationships and 2) the monogamous norm, which paradoxically assigns special meaning to sexuality that exceeds relationship boundaries. The narration of “excessive” sexual experiences was also characterized by more psychoanalytic aspects that manifested as 3) thickness and opacity of the narration, 4) excessive pleasure, 5) excess as an actively pursued shattering of structure, 6) excess as a way of dealing with one’s lonely, discontinuous being, and 7) excess that can turn from grace to abomination.

### *Bisexuality*

In the 2005 couple interviews, women’s bisexuality tended to disappear in normative relationship talk, in which the interviewees positioned their relationship as a female or as an other-sex relationship, or as a trans relationship, on the basis of their partner’s gender (Author, 2015). The follow-up interviews also revealed that the sense of being bisexual could decline in the course of a long-term relationship. If bisexual women felt sexual attraction to someone whose gender was other than their partner’s, they often resorted to homo/hetero and man/woman binaries in order to make sense of their desires (Author, under review). This paradoxically raised questions about their (bi)sexual identities. This implicated that it was not easy to gain ‘a sense of being’ as a bisexual person in a relationship (Author, 2015; Author, under review).

Cultural divisions affect the status of same-sex and other-sex relationships, and also shape differences in how responsibilities such as household chores and emotion work are shared (Brewster, 2016; Umberson *et al*, 2015). Little wonder, then, that women would ponder whether they should live their lives with a partner of a different gender from their current partner, or that they would want to explore those desires. For example, for Ella (all names are

pseudonyms) the open relationship arrangement that she referred to in the follow-up interview as her period of “sexual exploration” was at first connected with her wish “to be with a woman at some point”. The periods when women had sex that exceeded a couple commitment were often connected in some ways with their (precarious) bisexual desire, although this was not the most prominent aspect of these periods.

Casual or non-exclusive sex after a break-up, or during phases when a couple commitment is not fixed, is not somehow more typical of bisexuals. Yet an opportunity to have sexual experiences with people of different genders might have special meaning for bisexual people because of the precariousness of bisexual identity (Hemmings, 2002; Sears, 2014; Storr, 1999). Anna explained: “I wanted to explore, like what am I, am I bisexual now or what. After the long relationship I wasn’t sure any more.” Sexual experiences with people of different genders could strengthen women’s bisexual identities.

Nonetheless, the women were quite hesitant to link their sexual experiences to bisexuality, even if they valued them highly. Negative stereotypes of bisexuality haunted their accounts (Blackman, 2015). Anna said: “[B]ut it’s not like I needed to have sex with both genders that otherwise I would feel being somehow in need, it’s not like that --- I don’t feel like that I am that kind of hyper- --- hypersexual bisexual.” In this way she seemed to balance her otherwise joyful tone in the interview – “I enjoy my sexuality and I feel like a sexual being” – against the stereotypes that mark bisexual sexuality as hypersexual and thus too much.

### *Monogamous norm*

The phases when women had sex casually or outside a couple commitment required much more explaining than (taken-for-granted) sex in a relationship (see also Farvid and Braun, 2013). Jenny said:

*I was infatuated with and had a sexual relationship with [a man] --- right after we had bought the apartment [with my husband], it was maybe a bit like, I don't know what it was, when I think about it now. --- Like a really bad idea, but maybe it was some kind of a test that are we serious with Erik.*

Conversely, in the couple interviews of 2005, the couples' sex lives were rarely discussed spontaneously. Sexuality was talked about in a casual and distancing manner, as a taken-for-granted part of a couple relationship. Affectivity was attached to only one couple's account of their sex life: the transcouple defended themselves against the cultural construction of non-heteronormative sex as lack (see Author 2015, 439–441).

Women's affective accounts of their sexual experiences in the follow-up interviews resembled Finnish sexual autobiographies from the 1990s: "each writer's current, long-term relationship frequently received little attention, whereas various parallel relationships that had occurred at different stages of the writers' lives were depicted in great detail and with feeling" (Kontula and Mäkinen, 2009, 149). Finn (2012) argues that maintaining the monogamous order means constantly fending off the chaotic excess outside it. Western cultures, which stress the importance of monogamous couple relationships and fidelity, paradoxically assign special meaning to sexuality that takes place outside a couple commitment, contributing to the experience of it as excessive (Finn, 2012).

#### *Thickness and opacity of the narration*

In what follows I will highlight the women's narration of their excessive sexual experiences, which is constituted not only by bisexuality and monogamy-related norms but also by the non-rational psychic dimensions of those experiences. Excessive sexual experiences were often connected to relationship break-ups – the often difficult and painful task of disengaging oneself from an existing attachment and moving towards something new.

Thickness and opacity characterized women's accounts of their experiences "at the edges". A long period of time could be narrated in one breath. When women described these periods of life, they were often still puzzled about what had happened and why, many years later. This highlights the excessive nature of sexuality: the "reasons" behind a person's actions can remain hidden, from the person herself and from the researcher, although we can try to make sense of them afterwards. This resonates with the notion that sexuality unsettles the fantasy of a sovereign subject (Berlant and Edelman, 2014; Butler, 1991; Stein, 2008), and points to the fact that we often misrecognise our own motives and desires (Berlant and Edelman 2014, viii).

### *Excessive pleasure*

Pleasure was often an essential feature of women's sexual experiences during life phases when they could put their sexuality into practice more "freely" than in (monogamous) relationships. They described this pleasure in hyperbolic terms. Ella explained: "[w]ith that woman, first off the sexuality was absolutely, super super wonderful."

Before these pleasurable experiences the women (and their partners) had often struggled in their relationships in various ways, including sexually. Anna described her long-term relationship with Emma:

*[W]e were together for ten years, and there were times when we had good sex and times we didn't have sex at all --- I stayed faithful but now I regret it --- yet I don't think that our relationship failed because the sex had been bad, it was other things --- the fights.*

This relationship struggle might have added extra pleasure to her new experiences. She expressed gratitude for them: "I am so happy that I have had these experiences --- I have had

this enormous luck that I have by chance bumped into these people [of different genders] with whom I have been able to form these kinds of interesting, mutual, different kinds of relationships.” Women’s gratitude for the pleasurable sexual encounters might reveal the scarcity of these kinds of experiences in their personal past or in their cultural expectations, as they were not taken for granted but rather as a sign of enormous luck (Barker and Gill, 2012). The phase when Anna was no longer bound to a relationship also provided an opportunity to explore aspects of sexuality that had caused her to feel shame in her former relationship:

*I have learned to listen to my body in a different way and notice if I want something. Before, I have suppressed that kind of desire. --- Or like, I knew I have had that kind of fantasy, but I had never thought --- that I’d be in a situation where they can be put [into practice] safely and otherwise that you can tell them to someone without feeling that you should be ashamed. Yeah, there are parts of my sexuality that have been cleansed of shame, because of these new experiences I’ve had after the break-up.*

However, she anticipated an end to these pleasurable encounters: “I’m not expecting this to go on forever.” The implication was that it was a bit too much, after all, for a woman to have this much sex with different partners. Usually it was anticipated that the end would come when the women entered new long-term couple relationships. Interviewees would say playfully that monogamy was not the best option in the long run, but most of them nevertheless settled for it, because they felt non-monogamous ways of arranging relationships “would get too messy” (Author, under review ).

*Excess as an actively pursued shattering of structure*

The (internalized) monogamous norm was only one factor that would bring a feeling of “too-muchness” to women’s non-exclusive sexual experiences. There was often a tumultuous feel to the women’ narration of these life periods. Ella describes this phase of her life:

*[F]or many years we did not really have sex. And in that phase it was already somehow, like I wondered if I was asexual or that I couldn’t be bothered --- At that point we started to discuss poly- or actually it was me who started to discuss the possibility of poly relationships or polyamory, and I guess it was me who decided that from now on our relationship will be like that. After all, it wasn’t like a joint decision at all. It was like my husband just agreed to that --- Then I had a relationship with a woman, at the same time as I was with my husband. --- After that I moved into this other affair with a man --- at the same time as I was with my husband --- at that point our relationship [with my husband] started to be really over, and then I stated that I cannot stay in this relationship any more. It was very much my decision that that relationship ended. --- And after that I still had that relationship going on for some time with that [other] man --- I was so very infatuated with him ---*

*--- For him [the husband] it [the break-up] came as a surprise. In a way he was the only person for whom, who experienced it as coming out of the blue. --- For him the break-up was really horrible.*

Ella’s phase of sexual exploration took place within an agreed open relationship, and at first she enjoyed her new sexual experiences. Her repeated statement that this happened while she was with her husband is telling of her awareness of the monogamous norm. The thick narration of the three different relationships, and her repeated statement that they happened partly simultaneously and in quick succession, might also reveal a “too-muchness” in a

relational sense.. She left her marriage, and sometime later she also ended the relationship with the other man.

It also becomes clear in Ella's narration that she had struggled in her marriage. Her thick account resonates with the psychoanalytic notion of excess as the active shattering of a structure in order to enable new (ego) structures to evolve. This shattering might provide an opportunity to move towards more advanced and integrated ego structures. Bersani's (1995, 100) reading of Freud interprets sexual excess as "an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject's potential for a *jouissance* in which the subject is momentarily undone". Although these women's psychic structures are beyond the scope of my research, Bersani's (1995) notion can highlight why ending a relationship often requires some kind of disaster whose creation the person only becomes aware of afterwards.

Ella became only gradually aware that it was she who had "decided" that her marriage would be an open relationship, and that her husband just "agreed to that". At the end of the interview, she said with tears in her eyes that she never wanted to hurt anyone like that again. Looking back, she reflected: "I don't know if we built this, like a kind of fantasy, that he could play this game that we were still together although this other person has all these other things going on as well." The excessiveness of that life stage was present in Ella's perplexed account of both of her own and her husband's motives in the situation, although she tried to make sense of them in hindsight.

#### *Excess as way of dealing with our lonely, discontinuous being*

None of the women experienced the phase of increased sexual activity as solely pleasurable. Krista described her relationship with her girlfriend in the 2005 couple interview as "the first healthy relationship I've had", and in the follow-up interview as "the first time in my life



when I felt good. --- A kind of happiness and good feeling was present.” After leaving this four-year relationship, she entered a tumultuous, even chaotic phase:

*In a way the year between my ex-girlfriend and my current [male partner] has been the most active regarding sex. Like for a year I had this slave, tried that side and then there was a number of casual- but in way there were like, I have never had, one time only I have been with someone I hooked up with in a bar, had sex with a complete stranger. --- So the people who hung around at that time, they were all people I kind of knew. Some were taken, but it was like maybe it was like searching for oneself, searching. One was quite lost with oneself at that time. Just let go, didn't care about anything at all. I could keep my job though ((laughing)) because of my boss I guess. They were like really flexible. At that point I got these terrible panic attacks and all that interfered with work. --- Before I woke up to reality ((laughing a little)) like this is not my thing. --- There was this workmate who was like a fuck buddy, who was really the only, like one of my only friends, like we were friends and we still are, really good friends. But like then there were others... That was a tough year. Quite educational, like now I know what kind of life is not good for me. That's not the kind of life you'd want.*

At this point her narration thickened, and a whole year of her life was blurted out in almost one breath. On the one hand she described that year as her most active sexually; on the other she pitted her story against the norms of respectable female sexuality. There is a defensiveness when she says that she is not into one-night stands, and when she obliquely admits that she had sex with people who were in relationships. As if to explain herself, she says “maybe it was like searching for oneself.” It appears to have been a turbulent time: her drinking got out of control, she almost lost her job, and she had “terrible panic attacks”.

Despite various sexual encounters, her account of her workmate as “one of my only friends” reveals her as quite lonely. For her it was “a tough year”.

She reflects in retrospect that this phase might have been connected to her break-up: “Maybe it was --- in a way one tried to forget that [the break-up] --- I don’t know, but it was not that easy for me either.” This resonates with Bataille’s notion of the erotic as way of dealing with our “discontinuous” state of loneliness (Stein, 2008, 55), which can be particularly palpable when one has recently disengaged oneself from an important attachment. This resonates with Laura’s account after an especially hard break-up when her partner had cheated on her only a few months after they had married: “When I was single after Ellen, I had a crush on everybody, I was interested in all ... like men. Not like seriously. But I saw every guy as a potential sex partner.” The excess of crushes and sexual desire for men might have served Laura, when she tried to deal with the tremendous sense of betrayal and hurt, still palpably present in the low, sad tone of Laura’s voice, when she talked about the events related to her break-up with Ellen many years ago.

*Excess that can turn from grace to abomination*

Krista closed her account of her tumultuous year with a moral tone: “That’s not the kind of life you’d want.” However, the meaning of this phase in her life does not reveal itself easily. She also enjoyed her sexual experiences:

*But I don’t, like I don’t regret it. For example I visited one couple, and as an experience it was good. In a way I didn’t do anything I didn’t want to do, but then again, like there was this, we were two women and two men and one of them, or both I guess, were junkies more or less and --- you wouldn’t even think of using a condom or anything --- like you wouldn’t take any responsibility for the things you did to yourself.*

Here the twofold character of sexual excess, which can easily turn from grace to abomination (Stein, 2008, 48), is particularly pronounced. Stein (2008, 48) remarks that although there are often attempts to separate “good“ excess, which carries meanings of generosity, grace and freedom, from the “bad” excess of licentiousness, abomination and “sin”, this pendulum quality reveals how excess functions. The pendulum, and the leaning towards the immoderate end of excess, ultimately wore this interviewee out. After a while she disengaged herself from the people she hung out with during the sexually intensive year and moved to another part of town.

## **5. Sexual excess embedded in women’s affective sexual and relationship histories**

After the life phases when bisexual women had excessive sexual relationships at the edges of or between relationships, they usually returned (or wished to return) to long-term, committed monogamous relationships emphasized in Western societies (Barker & Langdrige, 2010; Van Hooff, 2017). However, my analysis troubles the idea that the (transgressiveness of) bisexual women’s sexual and relationship choices could solely be understood through taking positions in monogamous or non-monogamous relationship discourses. It is not possible to fully understand the meaning of sexually excessive life periods without placing them in the context of women’s affective sexual and relationship histories. Excessive sexual experiences can be important in themselves, and can play a propulsive role in women’s lives (see Bersani, 1995).

When we examine how Krista’s life unfolds through different phases, ruptures and (dis)continuities, for example, the affective texture – the “canvas” where her intimacies take place – becomes tangible (see Clough, 2013, 177). Her experiences of crude gendered violence and threat in her first relationship with a man cannot be overlooked as shaping what

intimacy means for her. But also, as she says later in the interview, she grew up with an alcoholic mother, “in an atmosphere where whenever you uttered your own point of view, you would get trashed”. On this affective canvas, the seemingly arbitrary order of Krista’s life events – a stable, happy female relationship followed by a sexually tumultuous and even self-destructive phase – has an unconscious logic, reflecting the opacity of the subject, not totally in control of itself (Berlant and Edelman, 2014; Stein, 2008). Later she started dating a man, which she describes in the follow-up interview as sexually very intense: “our sex life has functioned very well and right from the beginning, it’s been you know, like insane ... I don’t know anybody else with whom it had been like that.” And yet the situation is complicated. “We fight against his alcoholism,” Krista explains.

These ruptures, continuities and discontinuities highlight how women’s biographies are formed by “psychic life structured by temporality and the history of desires and negations” (Koivunen, 2010, 41). Yet women’s biographical narratives do not only reflect their singular life histories, but are entangled with the social positions available to women as sexual subjects. It is not a coincidence that within Western gendered (power) relations women had experienced domestic and sexual violence, suffered eating disorders, and neglected their own sexual desires and needs in order to please their partners, and their female relationships had been downplayed and discriminated against. Ella describes how she experienced sexuality when she was young: “I just wanted to be the right kind of [girl] --- please the other.”

Yet for all women who told affective stories about sexual experiences “at the edges”, sexual pleasure also had a central place in their lives at the time of the follow-up interviews. Ella laughed: “[W]hat I would like to do mostly is to dance and to have sex ((laughs)) that’s like the most important thing.” Ella’s and Anna’s depictions of their current sexual experiences were filled with pleasure:

*[M]y [current] male partner has a very different life history and he's had lots of sex and lots of partners and has had a sexually rich life --- I think that it has been a great gift for me to have someone so free and ready to enjoy beside me --- our sex has been very very wonderful right from the beginning. (Ella)*

*[I]n one event, we danced and all of a sudden I had this orgasmic, ecstatic feeling that my body is jiggling and wiggling --- an intense, strong experience of pleasure about my body which is full of energy and which jiggles. (Ella)*

*[T]he kind of chastity and nervousness of youth is washed away --- and now you notice that sexuality is quite fun and it's something you can play with, that you can be quite liberated with it. Like even at the same time when you have sex you can talk about it --- that's a new experience for me and also that I have had the courage to try sadomasochistic sex --- (Anna)*

Within the normative limits of feminine sexuality, these women have striven (both consciously and unconsciously) to become sexual subjects who find and own their desires (which of course is never fully possible). I have come to think of sexuality's excess not just as a power that might help us to transgress regulatory frames, but as energy that might allow (psychic) change (see Berlant and Edelman, 2014, viii; Bersani, 1995) – not necessarily dramatic or permanent change, but an energy for change that comes about as women's lives unfold.

## **6. Conclusions**

In this article, I have explored the excessive character of bisexual women's sexual experiences at the edges of or between relationships. My analysis develops the psychosocial

concept of excess, highlighting both the discursive regulation that constitutes women's experiences as excessive and the irrational, unconscious psychic dimensions of that excess. The excessiveness of these experiences is constituted by two cultural discursive factors. The first factor is women's bisexuality, which as a desire for more than one gender does not fit neatly into cultural understandings of couple relationships. If a woman feels sexual attraction to someone whose gender is other than her partner's during a relationship, it often paradoxically raises questions about her (bi)sexual identity (Lahti, 2018). Sexual experiences "at the edges" give women an opportunity to explore their sexuality and sexual identities anew. Yet even more prominent was the second factor: the monogamous norm in Western cultures, which stresses the importance of couple relationships and fidelity. Paradoxically it also assigns special meaning to sexuality that takes place outside a couple commitment, contributing to the experience of it as excessive from a moral point of view; a sentiment still applied more harshly to women than men (van Hooff, 2017). This was evident in the various explanations the women gave of the life phases during which they had sex with different partners. However, the life phases when women could explore their sexuality beyond a monogamous couple commitment could be experienced as very pleasurable. This was tangible in the affectivity and gratitude with which the bisexual women talked about their sexual experiences. However, the psychosocial analysis of women's sexual experiences highlighted the pendulum quality of sexual excess, which could easily turn from (over)excitement and grace to abomination (Stein, 2008). Women could feel that what happened was "too much" for them or that things got out of control. There were also other non-rational psychic dimensions of sexual excess present in the women's tumultuous life phases, as the sexual excess often seemed to carry a function of an "actively" pursued shattering of structure (Bersani, 1995); or a way of dealing with one's lonely, discontinuous being (Bataille 1957, 1976 cited by Stein 2008, 54–57) after a painful break-up.

After phases of experimental sexual experiences “at the edges”, the women usually returned (or wished to return) to long-term committed relationships. The non-monogamous ideas they contemplated in the interviews were often abandoned as unrealizable in the ‘real world’, reflecting the limited choices available for people living conventional (heterosexual) lives (Lahti, 2018; Barker, 2013; van Hooff, 2017). Yet, my analysis opens up a new way of thinking about the transgressiveness of bisexual women’s sexual and relationships choices beyond simply taking positions in monogamous or non-monogamous relationship discourses.

My analysis shows that (transgressiveness) of bisexual women’s sexual experiences cannot be separated from gendered power relations in Western societies. Women’s affective sexual and relationship histories did not only reflect their singular life experiences, but also the social positions available to women as sexual subjects, often meaning limited options to explore sexuality or pleasure on their own terms. For bisexual women excessive sexual experiences were part of their ongoing identity work and perhaps necessary in order to transgress the deeply intertwined personal, interpersonal and cultural boundaries, which regulate (bisexual) women's sexuality and relationship behaviours. Excessive sexual experiences often played a propulsive role in the women’s lives and brought them nearer to what they found sexually pleasurable. Sexual pleasure held a central place in the current couple relationships of all the bisexual women who had told affective stories about sexual experiences “at the edges”. Sexuality’s excess thus has the potential to complicate women’s relationship with norms that dictate how they should be sexual.

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<sup>i</sup> Sometimes my use of the term bisexuality is questioned and other terms such as pansexuality, sexual fluidity or queer are suggested instead as they are thought to be more inclusive and convey attraction to more than two genders. Bisexuality, because it has bi in it, literally two, is thought to refer to a two-gender structure (Eisner, 2013, 49). However, the usage of the term bisexuality has developed in concordance with the development of queer theory of gender. In the current academic discussion, and already in one of the earliest interdisciplinary collections on bisexuality, bisexuality was defined as an attraction to more than one gender (Firestein, 1996). I do not see bisexuality and pansexuality as opposed to one another, but rather at least partly overlapping terms. Yet, often bisexuality is a more commonly known concept than pansexuality, which is the reason why I chose to use it in this research. Furthermore, participants of this research were originally recruited to the couple interviews in 2005 through a research request aimed at bisexual women and their partners.

<sup>ii</sup> While most partners reported similar sexual identities in both interviews, there were some fluctuations. Bisexual women's cis and trans male partners all identified as heterosexual in both interview rounds. Female partners often did not label themselves, but implied that they were lesbians rather than bisexuals. One who did not label herself at all in the couple interview identified strongly as a lesbian in the follow-up interview. One former female partner said in the follow-up interview that she was now also attracted to men.

<sup>iii</sup> In psychoanalytic literature, affective intensity is seen as a signal of where to look for important material (Baraitser & Frosh, 2007). Coming from a different theoretical framework, from Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, Maggie MacLure (2013) suggests that affective intensities, which refuse to settle to decisive meanings, can be treated as glowing data hotspots also in qualitative research (Ringrose and Renold, 2014). Encouraged by these scholars I chose to concentrate on these sexual hot spots in my analysis.