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## **The Handbook of Global Sexualities**

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### **Research perspectives on bisexuality**

#### **Introduction**

In Western cultures, 'bisexuality' generally refers to the experience of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of more than one gender. Before the 1980s, bisexuality was often referred to as a concept to explain the fundamental nature of human sexuality (Kangasvuo, 2014). Since the 1990s, bisexuality has become more commonly used in Western societies as a sexual identity term, in a similar manner to lesbian and gay identities, and it has gradually also become an object of study (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Monro, 2015; Monro et al., 2017).

The aim of this chapter is to address the main research perspectives in bisexuality research. When bisexuality research was established during the 1990s, it strove to strengthen bisexual identity and the bisexual community by conducting research on self-identified bisexuals' definitions and experiences of bisexuality, bisexual identity, and bisexual people's understandings of social marginalization (Bertilsdotter, 2003; Firestein, 1996; Kangasvuo, 2001; Rust, 1996). Before long, an epistemological and genealogical research perspective on bisexuality emerged: this analysed where the notion of bisexuality came from, and how its origins and conceptual linkages continued to shape current debates on bisexuality (Angelides, 2001; Hemmings, 2002; Kangasvuo, 2014; Storr, 1999). In contemporary bisexuality research,

emancipatory and epistemological perspectives are often combined. Available cultural and discursive resources on bisexuality are thought to be central to how bisexuality is experienced (Kangasvuo, 2014: 139).

Research has shown that bisexuality is still largely invisible as a sexual identity in Western cultures. Bisexuality is often hidden from view in many areas of public debate, such as the media, sexuality research and even sexual minority politics (Barker, Richards et al., 2012; Kangasvuo, 2014; Maliepaard, 2015; Monro, 2015; Monro et al., 2017). Dichotomous understandings of sex, gender and sexuality in the West affect the recurring invisibility of bisexuality and other non-binary sexualities (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015: 42–43; Klesse, 2011; Lahti, 2015; Maliepaard, 2015; Monro, 2015). Because bisexuals do not fit the homo/hetero model of sexuality, they face particular prejudices and forms of discrimination, which differ from the prejudice and discrimination faced by lesbians, gays, trans and non-binary gendered people.

Bisexuality as a desire for more than one gender is persistently culturally associated with a wavering between men and women and between homo- and heterosexuality; it is consequently constructed in terms of having multiple partners and being necessarily non-monogamous and promiscuous (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2011; Lahti, 2015, 2018a, 2018c). Given the strength of the monogamous norm in Western societies, these cultural conceptions, attitudes and stereotypes stigmatize and marginalize bisexual identities and bisexual people. These stigmatizing notions are often conceptualized in contemporary bisexuality research as sociocultural 'binegativity' (DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al. 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011). Binegativity is widely used in bisexuality research to explain the social marginalization and stigmatization of bisexuality in various areas

of bisexual people's lives (Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011). However, the theorization of bisexualities cannot end there.

As Nelson (2018b) writes, critical bisexuality research – especially that which derives from queer theory – has provided conceptually and theoretically nuanced approaches to bisexuality (e.g. Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2002; Storr, 1999). However, in its focus on discursive regulation it might fail to engage with the material conditions, affective consequences and social realities of bisexual people (Kangasvuori, 2014; Lahti, 2019; Monroe, 2015; Nelson, 2018b). There is therefore now a turn to materialist and new materialist approaches in bisexuality research. The materialist approach strives to take into account the 'realities' of social structures, material forces and embodied subjectivities (Monroe, 2015; Nelson, 2018b). In new materialist approaches, bisexualities are seen as emerging through affective assemblages where multiple and complex elements come together as flows that might go in one direction or another (Lahti, 2018b; see also Puar, 2012). As new materialist approaches do not conceptualize bisexualities (or other sexualities) as identities residing within individuals, they pose challenges to previous conceptualizations of bisexuality (Fox and Alldred, 2013; Fraser, 1999; Kolehmainen, 2018; Lahti, 2018b). Although research on bisexuality is multidisciplinary and takes place in different locations around the world (cf. DeCapua, 2017; Lynch and Maree, 2013; Maliepaard, 2015; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016; Stobie, 2003), most of the work is conducted in the global North, utilizing Western theorizations. However, transnational and intersectional perspectives in the field of bisexuality research are strengthening. Transnational sexuality studies encourage scholars to take into account the variety of social-material conditions in different localities. This perspective also points to the importance of including alternative framings of genders and sexualities that do not correspond with the Western LGBTIQ framework. In locations other than the global North, there might be entirely different conceptualizations and terms for non-binary sexualities (Hemmings, 2007; Monroe, 2015).

Intersectional sexuality studies pay attention to power positions that intersect, and to the concurrent effects of sexualized, gendered, classed, aged and racialized positions, geographical location and ability/disability (Browne, 2011; Ilmonen, 2011; Young and Boyd, 2006). Intersectional and transnational perspectives have not been at the centre of Western bisexuality studies (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015), but a strengthening of them is now being seen (Hemmings, 2007, Klesse, 2018; Monro, 2015). As new materialist approaches turn attention to mobile assemblages where various elements conjoin, multiple power relations are in play and affective forces intensify, many researchers see the new materialist turn as a means to answer the challenges of intersectionality (see Puar, 2012). Exploring what kinds of assemblages allow bisexual bodies to intensify or to live – or force them to deteriorate – might shed new light, for example, on asylum claims, where bisexual claimants have had a hard time proving that they are discriminated against or that their lives are threatened because of their bisexual identities, which are thought to be to be temporary, vague or non-veritable (Klesse, 2018).

### **Genealogical perspective**

Genealogy can be described as a method of study that explores phenomena that seem ahistorical to us (Foucault, 1977). From a genealogical research perspective, it is important to explore historical ways of understanding and conceptualizing bisexuality, in order to understand how the concept is used in contemporary research (Angelides, 2001; Hemmings, 2002; Kangasvuori, 2014; Storr, 1999). I will thus begin this chapter by providing a short genealogy of the concept of bisexuality in Western thinking.

The work of Western sexologists and psychologists at the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries played a central role in the production of knowledge about bisexualities (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Storr, 1999). In Western thinking, bisexuality has generally had three different meanings since the nineteenth century (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Kangasvu, 2014; MacDowall, 2009; Storr, 1999). The first meaning – which is typical of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexology and can be found in the work of Havelock Ellis (1999), for example – is that bisexuality is a mixture of maleness and femaleness in a biological or anatomical sense, meaning that female and male physical characteristics appear in the same body (Storr, 1999: 3).

The second influential meaning attributed to bisexuality was that it was a combination of masculinity and femininity in an individual, this time referring to psychological features (Kangasvu, 2014; MacDowall, 2009; Storr 1999). In contemporary Western thinking, it is common to define desire by the individual's gendered object choice (either male or female) (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015). However, in early sexology, attention was paid to the desiring subject's gender expressions. It was thought that non-heterosexual desire could be traced back to a person's gender variation: for example, it was thought that a masculine woman would desire women, and a feminine woman would desire men. If a person desired both men and women, it was thought that they had both masculine and feminine traits in their character – so-called psychical hermaphroditism (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Storr, 1999). The best-known and most influential thinker promoting this view was Freud (2000), who discussed bisexuality in his 1905 theory of sexual development (Storr, 1999).

For Freud (2000), bisexuality was the basis of human sexual development. However, his ideas on bisexuality were ambiguous and contradictory (Monro, 2015: 15). On the one hand, Freud proposed a trajectory to 'normal' development: when everything develops correctly in

childhood, it leads to a differentiation between femininity and masculinity through identification and repudiation in the Oedipal phase. Freud believed that during the Oedipal phase, most people would resolve or repress their same-sex desires and become 'normal' heterosexual adults (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Kangasvuo, 2014; Storr, 1999). However, as Teresa de Lauretis (1994) suggests, Freud was the first to suggest that the word 'normal' should be placed in scare quotes (Koivunen, 2004: 22). For Freud, the object of desire is always uncertain and volatile. As Kalha (2007: 26) notes, Freud is ceaselessly curious about perversions, and he turns his gaze where it should not be turned: to the margins, the trivial details and odd desires that are often neurotically repressed.

On the other hand, in Freud's theory, the ideal course of development leads to a choice between male or female as one's object of desire. Homosexuality, although an aberration, becomes a possibility, but there is little room for mature bisexuality (Freud, 2000; Kangasvuo, 2014). However, Freud's idea of bisexuality as the origin of sexuality – 'polymorphous perversity' – has been very influential in Western sexology and sexuality research (Angelides, 2001; Kangasvuo, 2014; Storr, 1999). A version of this idea, in which bisexuality is conflated with 'human nature', is often reiterated in later theorizations of bisexuality. For example, Marjorie Garber (2000) conceptualizes bisexuality as an unpredictable fluidity that challenges fixed and oppositional sexual identities (Angelides, 2001: 3). Bisexuality thus easily becomes coterminous with 'human nature' in sexuality (Angelides, 2001: 3), and is not understood as a sexuality in its own right (Hemmings, 2002).

The third meaning ascribed to bisexuality, and the most commonly used understanding today, is that it is a mixture of homo- and heterosexuality (Kangasvuo, 2014; Storr, 1999). The move from the masculinity/femininity paradigm towards the heterosexuality/homosexuality paradigm appears to have taken place during the 1970s, and was heavily influenced by the gay

liberation movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Storr, 1999: 3). However, in sexual minority politics, bisexuality was first used as a means to make homosexuality understandable and acceptable, referring to the idea of bisexuality as the basic nature of human beings (Kangasvuo, 2014). If all people are a little bit bisexual, homosexuality should not be condemned (Kangasvuo, 2014). Yet, bisexuals were excluded from lesbian and gay narratives, because it threatened those narratives' coherence (Nelson, 2018b). During the 1980s and 1990s, more and more bisexuals started to demand recognition of their identities and to form activist groups (Nelson, 2018b). In the US and UK, by the 1990s, bisexual people had founded their own political networks and established a place within the lesbian and gay movement (Angelides, 2001; Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Monro, 2005).

Since the 1990s, bisexuality has become more commonly understood as a separate sexual identity, and is used in a similar manner to lesbian and gay identities (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Monro, 2015; Monro et al., 2017). Gradually it has also become an object of study (Monro, 2015). Emerging bisexuality research started from bisexuality's dual position: on the one hand as an invisible identity, and on the other hand as a potentially transformative concept in the societal order, which relies on binary categorizations of sex, gender and desire (Bertilsdotter, 2003; Firestein, 1996; Gustavson, 2001; Haasjoki, 2005; Hemmings, 2002; Kangasvuo, 2001). Bisexuality calls into question the exclusive categories of homo- and heterosexuality, and the normative framework in which the gendered body is assumed to be a defining characteristic of sexual object choice (Firestein, 1996; Gustavson, 2009; Munder, 2004; Souto Pereira et al., 2017).

At the turn of the millennium, it was typical for Western theorizing to conceptualize bisexual subjects as marginalized yet transgressive sexual subjects. As Nelson (2018b: 3) notes, often this kind of thinking portrayed bisexuality not just as a good identity, but as the best identity. It



was thought that as critical outsiders, bisexuals were able to see and act outside the pervasive binary categorizations of sex, gender and sexuality (Hemmings, 2002: 4). Yet it is problematic to expect bisexual subjects to be more transformative than other sexual subjects, or to assume that they can position themselves outside the processes of cultural categorization that produce them (Hemmings, 2002).

### **Current research perspective: binegativity**

Bisexuality research has paid attention to recurring cultural conceptions, attitudes and stereotypes that stigmatize and marginalize bisexual identities and people (Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014; Kangasvuo, 2014; Klesse, 2011). Given the strength of the (monogamous) couple norm in Western societies, Rodríguez (2016: 17) has remarked that although bisexuality is sometimes also able to articulate non-sexual attractions and affinities, in present cultural conditions it 'never fully escapes its association with overt, unrestrained sexual desire'. Such stigmatizing notions are often conceptualized in bisexuality research as sociocultural binegativity (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 concept of biphobia (DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011), which – similarly to the concept of homophobia – derives from a liberal humanist framework and refers to individual prejudices and irrational fears (DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al., 2018). Thus, bisexuality researchers who want to emphasize the wider social context, which maintains harmful attitudes, stereotypes and practices against bisexuality, usually use the concept of binegativity or bisexual erasure (DeCapua, 2017; Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011).

Contemporary bisexuality researchers and activists (Eisner, 2013; Monro et al., 2017; Rodríguez, 2016; Souto Pereira et al., 2016) often cite Kenji Yoshino (2000), who has written about the epistemic contract of bisexual erasure. Binary conceptualizations of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990, 1993) underpin binegative epistemologies (Klesse, 2011). Yoshino writes that suppressing bisexuality is in the interest of both self-identified homosexuals and heterosexuals, because it helps to maintain the stability of exclusive sexuality categories, and for example to articulate political goals such as gay marriage. Bisexuality is often erased from campaigns for gender-neutral marriage laws or other citizenship rights (Lahti, 2015; Maliepaard, 2015): it is seen as too messy as a sexuality.

The concepts of binegativity and bisexual erasure have provided important insights into how the social marginalization and stigmatization of bisexuality functions, for example within intimate relationships (Hayfield et al., 2014, 2018; Klesse, 2011). The 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). Yet, the theorization of bisexualities cannot stop there. Already in the early 2000s, Clare Hemmings (2002) called for ambitious theorizing in bisexuality research. Alongside all other sexual categories, bisexuality is in need of constant 'undoing' (Hemmings, 2002: 5). Without a deconstruction of the sexual category of bisexuality, there is a tendency to create the idea that bisexuality as such exists under the oppression of binegativity. Bisexuality can thus become defined through negation – as *not* being the cultural stereotypes associated with it. However, as Eisner (2013: 42) writes, some bisexuals are just experimenting, some are indecisive and confused, some cheat on their partners, and some like certain genders only sexually and not romantically, as well as other things described in bisexuality stereotypes. Approaching bisexuality through binegativity runs a risk of universalizing and oversimplifying bisexual experience and creating a polished version of

it. A subtler theoretical approach is often needed in order to address complex bisexual experiences (Lahti, 2018a, 2018c, 2019).

### **Queer theoretical research perspective<sup>1</sup>**

Queer theory provides nuanced tools for theorizing the stigmatized category of bisexuality as processual, contingent and undetermined, as well as paying continued attention to the marginalization and erasure of bisexual identities. During the 1990s, the burgeoning field of queer theory drew heavily on Michel Foucault's (1981) and Judith Butler's (1990) anti-foundationalist theorizations of sexuality and gender. These theories offered a radical new way of conceptualizing sexuality and gender. They provided tools for analysing how sexual identity categories that are cast as marginal, such as bisexuality, are produced through available discourses and practices as different from the unquestioned heterosexual norm (Scott, 1993; Sullivan, 2003). The deconstruction of fixed and essential identity categories has been central to queer theory: rather than being seen as identities with an essential foundation, gender and sexuality are thought to emerge through a complex web of existing knowledge-power relations, the regulatory effects of which often hide from view (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1981; Giffney, 2009). Critical bisexuality theorists draw heavily on queer theory (Angelides, 2001; Barker and Langdrige, 2008; Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2002, 2007; Storr, 1999) and pay attention to the discursive regulation of bisexuality: how available cultural and discursive resources produce the conditions of possibility for (bi)sexualities to emerge.

However, the fact that queer theory has not been particularly interested in bisexuality (Callis, 2009; Hemmings, 2002, 2007, 2012; Klesse, 2014) has sometimes made its relationship with bisexuality research somewhat tense. Hemmings (2012) remarks that queer theorists have

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<sup>1</sup> The author has developed her understanding of queer theoretical research perspectives on bisexuality within her thesis, and this section is based on that (see Lahti, 2019).

done groundbreaking work in critiquing the history of the homo/hetero divide (she refers to Angelides (2001), Katz (1995) and Sedgwick (1990)) and in analysing how identity politics re-establishes this divide's epistemological and political effects (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978). However, the homo/hetero divide also haunts queer accounts of sexuality (Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2012; Klesse, 2014). In its seminal works, feminist and queer scholarship continues to understand sexuality in terms of a heterosexual/homosexual divide. Hemmings (2012) pays attention to how gay and lesbian subjects of rights continue to be the measure of sexual inequality within late capitalist societies. In her analysis of the debates, and of the extent to which these subjects 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: 122). Gustavson (2006: 261) 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 are non-meaningful.

Angelides (2001) argues that bisexuality still cannot be acknowledged in the present tense. In psychoanalytical thinking, it belongs to the past and is theorized as 'polymorphous perversity', a developmental stage on the path towards heterosexual maturity. In queer theory, bisexuality is seen as part of a utopian future, when there will be no labels for sexualities. Some bisexuality theorists therefore remain cautious about queer theoretical approaches to sexuality (see Monro, 2015). They point out that when multiplicity, fluidity and the undetermined nature of sexualities and genders are emphasized, bisexuality often disappears from view, but lesbian and gay identities, which are socially stronger and more intelligible, still persist (Monro, 2015).

In some queer theoretical writings, the wavering and ambiguity associated with bisexuality in Western cultures is written about in celebratory terms, as the freedom to experience sexuality

outside restrictive categorizations (Sears, 2014: 5). In these texts there is often an assumption that bisexuals should be able to place themselves outside the discourses that produce them (Hemmings, 2002), but there is little consideration of how being associated with wavering sexuality and 'existential instability' might feel to bisexual people themselves. As Rodríguez (2016) writes, there is a delight in some queer theory's stubborn refusal to be defined, which has the potential to keep notions of sexuality, intimacy, kinship and community in motion. Yet, it might also function 'as a discursive shelter for sexual silences' (Rodríguez, 2016: 172).

However, the queer theoretical blindness to bisexuality does not mean that its tools might not be useful for theorizing bisexuality. There is a need to theorize the 'existential instability' (Sears, 2014) of bisexuality and the experience of wavering desire in bisexual people's accounts, without treating bisexuality or the associated fluidity as the basic nature of human sexuality (cf. Angelides, 2001) or regarding the association with wavering solely in terms of cultural binegativity. As Haasjoki (2012) puts it, vacillation and simultaneity are inextricably linked to exclusive binary oppositions: the centre is denied by the dichotomy, but is nevertheless produced by it.

However, queer theoretical analyses have not always been particularly interested in how people experience the contradictory and often discontinuous positionings they theorize (Lahti, 2019). In order to explore these positionings, it is therefore useful to combine queer theoretical perspectives with psychosocial studies. Psychosocial studies provide a theoretical framework and a method in which attention is given to both the psychic and the social dimensions of intimate relationships. It takes the 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: 850). In psychosocial

approaches, the subject is conceptualized as always made through discursive regulation (Foucault, 1981), but also as constrained by its (conflicting) desires, anxieties and needs (Woodward, 2015: 62). Emotion and affect are central topics for psychosocial studies, because they offer a site for 'revisiting' the space between the psychic and the social (Woodward, 2005).

In my own work, I introduce a queer psychosocial approach (Lahti, 2019) to studying bisexuality in relationships. I theorize bisexuality in intimate relationships as produced through the binary categories of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, 1993). Judith Butler does not particularly address bisexuality, but her concept of the heterosexual matrix is useful, because it shows how bisexuality is often made invisible and thought of as wavering, promiscuous and hypersexual. 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 seen as mutually constitutive (Butler, 1990; Gustavson, 2009). Within this normative framework, the gendered body is emphasized as the desired object choice, whereas other aspects of a person are disregarded (Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2012). As a desire that cannot be tied 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). This does not mean that bisexual people are unable to commit to monogamous relationships, but on a conceptual and societal level it explains why these associations are part of the bisexual imaginary.

My study (Lahti, 2015, 2018a, 2018c, 2019) is based on the analysis of 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–

15. The results confirm that the lack of validation of bisexual identity is not just about binegative cultural constructions that invalidate and stigmatize bisexual identity (DeCapua, 2017; Klesse, 2011). Rather, the consequences of bisexual women's desires for more than one gender are often interpreted through a dichotomous understanding of sexuality and gender by bisexual women and their (ex-)partners themselves. Because of the strength of the homo/hetero and man/woman binaries, there is often a kind of wavering between differently gendered desires in bisexual women's interview accounts (Lahti, 2018a). It is often difficult to gain a 'sense of being' in an identity position or relationship as a bisexual person. Consequently, bisexual women might temporarily question their own bisexual identities. This culturally imposed 'existential instability' of bisexuality (Sears, 2014: 5) requires affective work – not only from bisexual women, but also from their partners. The lack of validation of bisexuality also highlights the scarcity of cultural resources to make bisexual desires for variously gendered partners intelligible. This does not mean that bisexuality is completely unavailable as an identity position or explanatory framework, but because of the dominant cultural frameworks that still stress the binary understanding of sexuality and gender, bisexuality often appears as a somewhat 'weak' identity.

As a desire for more than one gender, bisexuality is often positioned as an excessive sexuality from the perspective of a monogamous relationship (Lahti 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). In my study, the majority of the bisexual women interviewees and their (ex-)partners were in long-term monogamous relationships. Yet, these 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. The practice of non-monogamy was imagined as an ideal way of organizing relationships. Bisexuality thus highlighted a tension typical in contemporary relationships: between 'unstable' and excessive sexual desire and the wish for a stable and secure (monogamous) relationship (Perel, 2007; Shaw, 2013).

In our normative cultural understandings, 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. My study (Lahti, 2015, 2018a, 2018c, 2019) shows that 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 needs to be rethought and transformed.

Combining queer theoretical and psychosocial approaches in my study enabled me to address the complexity of bisexual women's and their partners' experiences. Interrogating the notion of the queer psychosocial subject made it possible to address the contradictory positionings, tensions and affective dimensions of being in and discussing bisexuality in relationships in new ways. According to psychosocial understandings, the subject is formed when the 'internal' psychic and 'external' social intertwine, being 'always immersed in a flux that is neither inside nor out' (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008: 354; Pirskanen, 2008). By interrogating the psychosocial (bi)sexual subject, I was able address the emotional, affective and relational aspects of negotiating bisexualities in a relationship, in order to explore how this complicates the view of the emergence of (bi)sexualities within intimate relationships (Lahti, 2018a, 2018c). This provides a more complex picture of bisexuality and bisexual women's experiences in their relationships than, for example, solely addressing it as binegativity. Queer psychosocial analysis thus enables us to develop new perspectives on women's bisexualities in relationships, without engaging in 'myth-busting' (Eisner, 2013) by creating a harmless and normalized picture of bisexuals emptied of all stereotypes. It encourages scholars to engage with experiences of bisexuality as a wavering and excessive desire which paradoxically then often also disappears from view. It makes it possible to attend to these contradictions and



discrepancies in bisexual women's and their partners' talk, and to explore illogical, painful and affective aspects. My exploration of the affective aspects of bisexual women's and their partners' experiences reflects a broader turn to affective, materialist and new materialist approaches in bisexuality research, which I will introduce next.

### **Materialist, new materialist and affective research perspective**

Bisexuality research derived from queer theory has provided conceptually and theoretically nuanced approaches to bisexuality (e.g. Angelides, 2001; Gustavson, 2009; Hemmings, 2002; Nelson, 2018b; Storr, 1999). Following Foucault, queer theoretical approaches have often taken the power of language and words very seriously (Giffney, 2009; Kangasvu, 2006). However, such approaches might fail to engage with the material conditions, affective consequences and social realities of bisexual people (Kangasvu, 2006; Lahti, 2018b; Monroe, 2015; Nelson, 2018b). As Nelson (2018b) and Monroe (2015) point out, the discrimination and erasure bisexual people encounter has very concrete, real-world implications for their lives (Monroe, 2015; Nelson, 2018b). According to a number of studies, bisexuals are subjected to increased rates of sexual violence, mental and physical health problems, and substance use problems (e.g. Feinstein and Dyar, 2017; Madrigal-Borloz, 2018; Office for National Statistics, 2018).

There is now a turn to materialist, new materialist and affective<sup>2</sup> research approaches, in bisexuality research, where attention is being paid to embodied, lived and affective bisexual experiences (Lahti, 2018b; Maliepaard, 2018; Monroe, 2015; Nelson, 2018b). Both materialist

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<sup>2</sup> The author is a researcher on the Academy of Finland-funded project 'Just the two of us? Affective inequalities in intimate relationships' (grant number 287983). She has developed her understanding of affect within this project.

and new materialist theorizations stress material, embodied and temporal aspects in the theorization of bisexuality (Lahti, 2018b; Monro, 2015; Nelson, 2018b); however, there are important differences between materialist and new materialist approaches.

Monro (2015: 50–51), for example, calls for a materialist turn in bisexuality research to engage ‘with lived and socially situated experience, power dynamics and inequalities, economic factors, and biological diversities’. Materialist approaches to sexuality often derive from Marxist and socialist feminisms<sup>3</sup> (but, in order to include the theorization of gender diversity in her materialist approach to bisexuality, Monro rather refers to Myra Hird’s (2006) new materialist discussion of biological sex/gender variance. For Monro, it is important that a mobilization of new materialist theorizations should not only focus on post-structuralist gender deconstruction, but should also engage with bodily realities such as ageing, physical limitations and mortality. For her, a materialist approach to bisexuality means understanding biphobia as a foundational and fundamentally life-shaping force, which works together with other oppressing forces such as sexism and racism, and which has very material effects on bisexual people’s lives – for example, in the form of mental health problems, sexual harassment, and discrimination in education based on their bisexual identity (Monro, 2015: 52–3).

For others, new materialist approaches are part of a broader critique of the linguistic turn across the humanities and social sciences, and of research designs that focus on language, discourse and representation (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018; Koivunen, 2010). For them new materialist relational ontologies pose challenges to the conceptualization of gender and sexuality (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018; Kolehmainen, 2018). Many feminist and queer scholars (e.g. Nigianni and Storr, 2009; Ringrose and Renold, 2014) have utilized Gilles Deleuze

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<sup>3</sup> Monro (2015) refers to Delphy (1984)

and Félix Guattari's (2004) thought to extend subjectivity to the collective, formed as a becoming in and through affective assemblages (Renold and Mellor, 2013: 24). This kind of conceptualization shifts the focus to processes, entanglements and encounters between human and non-human bodies (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018; Kolehmainen, 2018; Nigianni and Storr, 2009; Ringrose and Renold, 2014). In this framework, bisexuality (like other sexualities) is not seen as residing within an individual, nor can it be reduced to social structures, discourses or conventions (Fox and Alldred, 2013; Fraser, 1999; Kolehmainen, 2018; Lahti, 2018b). Rather, these approaches invite us to see bisexuality as an unstable category that is on the move, connecting in new ways and taking new forms (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018; Kolehmainen, 2018; Lahti, 2018b). This also encourages researchers to search for novel ways of addressing affective, complex and messy power dynamics (Juvonen and Kolehmainen, 2018; Kolehmainen, 2018; Lahti 2018b). Paying attention to the changing flows, surges and arrests of affective intensities in multiple encounters complicates the analysis of the workings of binary divisions, hierarchies and inequalities related to bisexuality (Fannin et al., 2010; Lahti, 2018b; MacLure, 2013).

Mariam Fraser (1999) refers to Deleuzo-Guattarian thought to argue that bisexuality cannot be articulated in terms of 'selfhood'. Rather, the Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of flows and forces opens up new ways of thinking about identity. Fraser (1999) refers to Elspeth Probyn (1995), who has used a Deleuzian understanding of desire that 'disconnects images and things' and does not point 'to a person [... or] an individual' (Probyn, 1995: 14). In Fraser's theorization, it is the body without organs of bisexuality, rather than a bisexual self, that will begin to be able to do things or make things happen.

The 'body without organs' does not refer to an actual body or an embodied individual (Fraser, 1999: 160). For Deleuze and Guattari (2004), actual bodies have a limited set of traits, habits,

movements and affects. However, actual bodies also have a virtual dimension: a body without organs is a process of production, through which desire spreads over and across: it is an accumulation of potential features, connections, affects, intensities and movements. This collection of potentials is what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) call the body without organs (Fraser, 1999; Markula, 2006).

The question is not what bodies are or how to define them, but rather what bodies can do – or what they can be made to do as part of an assemblage (Fraser, 1999; Kolehmainen, 2018). My own work (Lahti, 2018b) utilizes a Deleuzo-Guattarian approach to highlight the ongoing and unpredictable becoming of (bi)sexuality assemblages. Analysing ex-partners Laura and Jenny's interviews, I paid attention to lesbian and bisexual identities as (re)territorializing forces that segment and contain affective intensities in an affective assemblage. In Laura's interview, affective intensities seemed to be organized into a coherent and logical whole, segmented by her lesbian identity and centred on living in a happy lesbian family. This can be thought of as an assemblage that increases the body's affective capabilities and vitality. In Jenny's interview, affective experiences of a violent and abusive heterosexual relationship came together with experiences of a stable and happy relationship with Laura, alongside the confusion Jenny felt when she nevertheless wanted to leave the latter relationship. At the time of the study, she was in a sexually intense relationship with a male partner, but she was not sure how long she would put up with his drinking. This wavering and confusion back and forth within the binaries of the heterosexual matrix in the bisexual assemblage could be called a form of affective inequality, especially when by contrast the assemblage marked by monosexual lesbian identity seemed able to segment and contain affective intensities – a happy lesbian family. Jenny stated at the end of her interview that she wondered if life as a whole was only a futile search for oneself. Yet this might also be thought of as an openness of the body and a receptivity to further affective intensities (Lahti, 2018b).

My analysis explored how the becoming of these assemblages increases or diminishes the affective capabilities of the bodies involved (Lahti, 2018b). In Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, the effects of a unique assembling of bodies – an assemblage – are understood through how they increase or diminish the vitality and affective capabilities of the bodies involved (Malins, 2004).

This analysis, of course, cannot be generalized to all bisexuals or all bodies in bisexual assemblages. Yet it gives an example of how bisexuality can be conceptualized as a body's capacity to act: how bisexual assemblages can increase or diminish the vitality and affective capabilities of the bodies involved. This can shed light on how bisexual erasure and discrimination have real-world implications for bisexuals, coming into being through affective intensities within bisexual assemblages.

Deleuzo-Guattarian thought can be utilized in various contexts to investigate what bodies can be made to do, and what potentialities they can actualize in bisexual assemblages (Watson 2014).

### **Intersectional and transnational research perspective**

The majority of theorization and empirical research on bisexuality is conducted in the global North. A common problem in bisexuality research (and research on other sexualities) is its tendency to universalize its research findings (Barker, Yockney et al., 2012). In their 'Guidelines for researching and writing about bisexuality', Barker, Yockney et al. (2012) stress the importance of taking into account the context where research on bisexuality takes place.

Moreover, as Bowes-Catton and Hayfield (2015: 53) note, empirical research on bisexualities in Western countries has often drawn on the experiences of 'the white, middle-class, socially liberal, highly educated, and politically engaged bisexual activists and academics who have found a voice within bi activism and research networks'.

This tendency has been critiqued from the perspective of intersectional and transnational sexuality studies, which pay attention to multiple marginalizations, and which stress the importance of engaging with the concurrent effects of intersecting power positions, including sexualized, gendered, classed, aged and racialized positions, geographical location and ability/disability (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Ilmonen, 2011; Monro, 2015; 2015; Puar, 2012). Intersectionality theory offers insights into how different social power positions intersect in complex and diverse ways: for example, at some point, discrimination on the basis of bisexuality and gender might affect one's opportunities to act in life, while one's (privileged) class position might offer a means to navigate those issues (Monro, 2015: 60).

So far, Western bisexuality research has not widely incorporated the perspective of intersectionality (Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015). Nevertheless, attention to the concurrent effects of multiple marginalizations is not totally absent from bisexuality research. There is quite a lot of work on the concurrent effects of the power positions of gender, bisexuality and relationship arrangements (monogamy/non-monogamy) (e.g. Gustavson, 2009; Hayfield, Campbell et al., 2018; Klesse 2005, 2006; Lahti, 2018a; McLean, 2004). In general, bisexuality studies show that bisexual women in particular who wish to engage in non-monogamous relationship practices are vulnerable to stigma (Barker, Richards et al., 2012; Hubbard and de Visser, 2015; Klesse, 2005, 2007). Moreover, Rodríguez (2016) remarks that the stigma of excessive sexual desire attached to bisexuals is constructed through raced, classed and gendered associations and normative ideas about sexual behaviour. For example, bisexual diasporic African, Latin American and Arab men are frequently represented as pre-modern subjects who cannot fully actualize their authentic gay identity. However, there is more work to be done on the concurrent effects of bisexuality and class, ability/disability, gender, spatial factors, corporeality and age (Monro, 2015: 57).

It is essential that intersectional analysis also takes international inequalities and postcolonial critiques into account (Hemmings, 2007; Kangasvu, 2014; Munro, 2015). As Hemmings (2007) notes, transnational sexuality studies encourage scholars to pay attention to local social and material conditions and limitations, in which (bi)sexualities do or do not emerge. For example, Munro's case study of Indian bisexualities is effective in showing how bisexuality comes about as a lived and socially situated experience, made through 'social structures, material forces and embodied subjectivities' (Monro, 2015: 54).

Indigenous studies scholars, as well as researchers, politicians and activists from the global South, have pointed out that LGBTIQ categories are a Western phenomenon (Monro (2015) cites Rouhani (2007); Tallbear (2018)). It is also essential to keep in mind that the internationally dominant systems for categorizing sex, sexuality and gender, and the social inequalities they are prone to produce, at least partly stem from the Western colonial past (Monro, 2015: 63). These categorizations were developed in synchrony with the racialized, sexualized and gendered social inequalities on which many societies are based even today (Monro, 2015: 63).

For example, in India, indigenous non-normative sexualities and forms of gender variance date back thousands of years (Monro, 2015; Thomas et al., 2011). It is suggested that sex/gender roles were more fluid in ancient India than in the modern West (Thomas et al., 2011), and that Southern homophobias and biphobias are largely an unacknowledged legacy of colonialism (Monro, 2015). When the British took control of India, they imposed (in 1860) legal penalties for same-sex sexualities (Monro, 2015: 67). These legacies of colonialism have proven very hard to decolonize (Singh, 2016).

As Monro (2015: 68) writes, while behavioural bisexuality may be common in India, identity-based bisexualities are rare. The majority of men who have sex with men are married to

women (Monro, 2015; Thomas, 2011). In modern India's deeply patriarchal society, being heterosexually married and having children is regarded as a universal duty (Monro, 2015: 66). As such, both heterosexual and same-sex practices are strictly regulated (Monro, 2015: 66). Despite a landmark victory in struggles for sexual rights in 2009 (Singh, 2016; Waites, 2010), when sex between consenting same-sex adults was decriminalized in India, the ruling was later overturned in December 2013 (Monro, 2015). Finally, in September 2018 The Indian Supreme Court ruled that the law that criminalizes consensual sex between same-sex adults was unconstitutional. This was a historical victory for the LGBTIQ community in India (ILGA , 2018). At the same time, the social situation of gender and sexual diversity is made more complex by the intersections of gender, caste, class and spatial factors.

Along the lines of financial and class privilege, globalized bisexual identities are emerging alongside gay and lesbian identities among upper- and middle-class Indian citizens, especially in metropolitan centres (Monro, 2015). The risks that most Indian people who engage in same-sex sexualities face, in the form of abuse including domestic violence, forced marriage and police violence, can be avoided by some middle- and upper-class Indians who live in safe localities and have more protected lifestyles (Monro, 2015).

In contrast, Finland – the context for my own study of bisexuality, referred to above – can be thought of as part of the 'the "fairytale" of Nordic queer' (Ilmonen et al., 2017: 96), which usually refers to the changing legal landscape in Nordic countries. 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. On 1 March 2017, marriage became gender-neutral as a result of an amendment to the Finnish Marriage Act (Act 98/2017). However, it can be asked whether the notions of ordinariness and respectability that have gradually been applied to the sexual categories of lesbian and gay (see e.g. Heaphy et al., 2013) also apply to



bisexuality (Kangasvuo, 2014; Lahti, 2015). During the long and complex LGBTIQ battle for recognition, cherishing the normative form of the couple and appearing 'just like heterosexuals' have been crucial means through which non-heterosexual desires and relational lives have been made intelligible (Butler, 2004; Clarke, 2003; Lahti, 2015; Warner, 2000). At the same time, the fact that many people have relationships with people of various genders throughout their life course has remained generally invisible in campaigns for gay marriage rights. 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 seemingly cisgendered 'same-sex' couples (Lahti, 2015). During the past ten years, bisexuality too has become more visible in the Finnish media landscape and sexual minority politics, and it has become more acceptable as a sexual identity, especially for young women (Kangasvuo, 2014). However, in media representations in the 2010s, female bisexuality is often treated as a transient and merely trendy identity, and is often invoked to excite and entertain audiences (Kangasvuo, 2014).

Although part of the West, Finland is rarely presented as a universal example of the LGBTIQ movement in the way that, for example, the US often is; Finland can thus be seen as a 'less central location' (Mizilienska, 2006: 87). Unlike in the UK and US (Angelides, 2001; Bowes-Catton and Hayfield, 2015; Monro, 2005), there is still no recognizable bisexual community in Finland (Kangasvuo, 2011, 2014). This has possibly led me to pay special attention to bisexuality as a culturally 'weak' identity, and to explore the cultural mechanisms that produce the wavering of desire in bisexual experiences (Lahti, 2018a, 2019).

Postcolonial critiques stress that it is problematic to assume that contemporary Western LGBTIQ identity categories are universally applicable (Hemmings, 2007: 17). As Hemmings (2007) notes, these studies may continue to use the terms 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'homosexual' to

describe same-sex behaviour transnationally, but the invocation of bisexuality is particularly problematized. The use of 'lesbian' and 'gay' can be seen as strategic, but naming some sexual practices as bisexual is often seen as an invocation of Western identity categories (Hemmings, 2007). In her reading of some transnational queer studies texts, Hemmings (2007: 21) notes that when there is a question over whether to name certain sexual acts 'bisexual', there is a heightened insistence on the limits of Western naming practices compared with cases where the question concerns notions of lesbian and gay. Klesse (2018) sees this as an effect of the widespread marginalization of bisexuality within sexuality studies and social theory (Monro, 2015; Monro et al., 2017). The lack of attention to bisexuality in transnational queer studies also extends to studies concerned with sexuality, gender identity and asylum. In his own study, Klesse (2018) concludes that this has particular effects on asylum claimants who refer or allude to bisexuality in their asylum applications. Bisexual claimants have a hard time proving that they belong to a 'particular social group', and bisexuality is still seen as an unstable signifier for a phenomenon that is assumed to be temporary, undefinable or non-existent.

Because of the difficulty of attaching the signifier of bisexuality to a stable identity, Jasbir Puar's work on intersectionality as an assemblage might be especially fruitful for thinking intersectionality and bisexuality together. As Puar (2012) notes, Crenshaw's (1989) foundational example of the traffic intersection describes intersectionality as an event: 'discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions, and sometimes, from all of them' (Puar, 2012: 59, citing Crenshaw 1989). Puar moves away from understanding intersectionality as the intersection of identities – which often leads to little actual intersectional analysis – to reading Crenshaw's example as an event and an encounter. She proposes that intersectionality might be conceptualized as an assemblage where the focus is not on the entities or bodies themselves, but on patterned

relations. When these relations intensify, they can give new capacities to the bodies involved (Puar, 2012: 61). As this chapter has highlighted, the unique assembling of bodies may increase or diminish the vitality and affective capabilities of the bodies involved (Malins, 2004). With regard to asylum claims, it would be crucial to investigate what kinds of assemblage allow bisexual bodies to intensify, to live.

## **Conclusion**

Heteronormative epistemologies and binary understandings of sex, gender and sexuality affect the recurring invisibility and erasure of bisexuality in Western cultures today. Bisexuality research has also pointed to the particular prejudices and forms of discrimination bisexual people face. In current research perspectives these are often conceptualized as forms of binegativity. The concept of binegativity is widely used in bisexuality research today to explain the social marginalization and stigmatization of bisexuality in various areas of life. However, queer theoretical tools are needed in order to gain a more complex picture of bisexual experience than the one that comes into view when one solely addresses those experiences through binegativity. A queer psychosocial approach (Lahti, 2019) enables us to develop new perspectives on bisexualities in relationships, without creating a harmless and normalized picture of bisexuals emptied of all stereotypes. It encourages scholars to engage with experiences of bisexuality as a wavering and excessive desire which paradoxically often also disappears from view.

In order to explain and explore the material conditions, affective consequences and social realities of bisexual people, there is now a move towards materialist, new materialist and affective research approaches, which pose challenges to previous conceptualizations of

bisexuality. In these approaches, bisexuality (like other sexualities) is not seen as residing within an individual. Rather, these approaches invite us to see bisexuality as an unstable, processual category, which is connecting in new ways and taking new forms in and through affective assemblages. Another important turn in bisexuality research is the strengthening of transnational and intersectional research perspectives. Turning attention to how multiple assemblages can increase or diminish bisexual bodies' capacities to act, I propose that the new materialist turn also offers a means to answer the challenges of intersectionality and bisexuality.

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