

Dedicated to bisexual people everywhere—
Come out, come out, wherever you are,
It is our time to dance!

Beth A. Firestein
Editor

BISEXUALITY

The
Psychology
and
Politics
of an
Invisible
Minority



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Biphobia

It Goes More Than Two Ways

Robyn Ochs

If I pass for other than what I am, do you feel safer?

*Lani Ka'ahunani*¹

If I pass for anything other than what I am, does it make *me* feel any safer?

*Robyn Ochs*²

Bisexuality makes people uncomfortable. Many people wish that bisexuals would just go away, or at least not talk about it, because the very existence of bisexuality is seen as a threat to the social order. Declaring an open, unequivocal bisexual identity in either straight or gay/lesbian communities often results in experiences of discrimination, hostility, and invalidation. Bisexuals are frequently viewed by gay- and lesbian-identified individuals as possessing a degree of privilege not available to gay men and lesbians and are viewed by many heterosexuals as amoral, hedonistic spreaders of disease and disrupters of families. This "double discrimination" by heterosexuals and the gay and lesbian communities is seldom recognized or acknowledged as a force of external oppression, yet this oppression is real and has many damaging effects on bisexuals. This chapter outlines the realities of external oppression as they manifest in the form of homophobia and

biphobia and discusses how such oppressions are internalized by bisexuals, compromising their health and psychological well-being and ultimately that of all members of "lesbigay" and heterosexual communities. Suggestions are made for addressing sources of external oppression and for overcoming the damaging effects of internalized homophobia and biphobia.

Review of the Literature on Oppression

According to Allport, "Man has a propensity to prejudice. This propensity lies in his normal and natural tendency to form generalizations, concepts, and categories, whose content represents an oversimplification of his world of experience" (Allport, 1954, p. 27). This process of categorization is a way to make some sort of sense out of what would otherwise be overwhelming chaos. However, these oversimplified categories are at times arbitrary and inaccurate. Allport makes the distinction between prejudices and prejudgments, saying that the difference is that prejudices are emotionally resistant to information that contradicts them, whereas prejudgments may be modified by the introduction of new information.

Prejudicial behavior, or discrimination, has been the focus of much attention in U.S. society, particularly the ways in which certain groups of people, such as women and racial minorities, have been denied access to opportunities in areas such as employment, housing, and organizational memberships. McIntosh (1989) points out that there is a rarely discussed aspect to this: members of the dominant group are granted *unearned privileges*. These groups of people are given "special rights" unavailable to other citizens who are not members of the dominant group: preferential treatment in employment, the ability to rent or buy housing in the neighborhood of their choosing, easy access to credit, preferred selection for choice job opportunities, the luxury of being able to see people who look like oneself represented on television, in the movies, and in magazines.

Another aspect of prejudicial behavior and discrimination is stereotyping. For example, bisexuals have been stereotyped as indecisive and promiscuous. We have a propensity to see any behavior of an individual group member that conforms to our stereotypes as "proof" that the stereotype is true and to view information that contradicts our stereotypes as an isolated exception to the norm (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988, pp. 222-223). Sexual orientation is what Allport calls a "label of primary potency," one that is seen to be of such significance that it overshadows other labels applied to the same individual. As

Allport (1954) describes it, "The label magnifies one attribute out of all proportion to its true significance, and masks other important attributes of the individual" (p. 179). Bisexuality thus becomes foregrounded.

According to Blumenfeld and Raymond (1988), in-groups and out-groups exist in every culture (p. 219). Which groups are chosen to be in and out of favor may, of course, vary. To have or develop a sense of togetherness, members of a group frequently create or foster the development of a perceived common enemy. This sense of "us" and "them" serves to create a sense of cohesion in a group, allowing the group thus bonded to believe in its superiority and the superiority of its ways of being. Constructed in this way, the perceived inferiority of the out-group serves to "prove" the superiority of the in-group. This dynamic commonly occurs between members of the dominant culture and minority groups but may also occur between members of one minority group and another.

Another factor that directly affects the experience of oppression is the visibility or invisibility of a particular minority population. African Americans, Asian Americans, disabled persons who are mobility impaired, and some transgendered/transsexual individuals are visible minorities. When a group is visually identifiable, it is easier to target it as self or other. Other groups, such as Jewish people, lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, or people with a history of mental illness are not so readily identifiable. Therefore, these groups have a qualitatively different experience of prejudice and oppression, though no group, visible or invisible, escapes the effects of cultural stereotyping. People whose membership in a stigmatized minority group is externally apparent have to deal with the difficulties that accompany their constant visibility. For example, most ethnic minorities do not have the option of "passing" as a member of the dominant culture in order to avoid discrimination in a given context. For example, when renting an apartment or applying for employment, a Korean woman and an East Indian man cannot appear to be other than what they are.

Groups with invisible identities, such as bisexuals, gays, and lesbians, have a different experience. They have the advantage of avoiding being constantly identifiable, which may in certain contexts protect them from discrimination. However, they have the disadvantage of not being able to readily identify other members of their own group. This can result in feelings of isolation and a distorted view by both members of the invisible minority and members of the dominant group of the large numbers of people who compose this group. For example, in one bisexual women's support group meeting, of eleven women present, only two were aware of having met another person who identified as bisexual prior to attending the group.³ In addition,

the "privilege" of passing possessed by invisible minorities also carries as its counterweight the onus of having to actively announce one's identity group membership in order to avoid being assumed to be other than what one is, as well as feelings of guilt or discomfort that may arise when one is silent. If we are silent or neutral, we are subject to misinterpretation, invisibility, and even the perception that we do not exist at all. We carry the weight of constantly having to make the decision of how and when to come out and at what cost.

It is important to remember here that each individual is a member of numerous identity groups. A person may be female, African American, Christian, a recovering alcoholic, able-bodied and lesbian, or a transsexual agnostic of Belgian descent. To further complicate reality, many of us are members of more than one identity group within a given category; for example, ethnically, someone may have Mexican and Chinese ancestry; religiously, one may have one Jewish and one Muslim parent. Some of our identifications may be as members of the majority, or in-group (European American, Protestant, able-bodied); others may be as members of the minority, or out-group (Jewish, gay, Haitian).

Various forms of oppression are inextricably linked and closely interrelated, and people doing anti-oppression work often caution against attempts to create a hierarchy of oppressions. "Each [form of oppression]," Pharr (1988) notes, "is terrible and destructive. To eliminate one oppression successfully, a movement has to include work to eliminate them all or success will always be limited and incomplete" (p. 35).

Nonetheless, there are frequent debates and arguments between members of various oppressed groups over who is more oppressed. When members of one group draw analogies between their experiences of oppression and the oppression experienced by members of another group, their comments are often met with anger on the part of the group to which the comparison is being made. For example, some African Americans have expressed resentment over attempts made by many lesbian, gay, and bisexual people to compare homophobia to racism. This was used to justify homophobia in the videotape *Gay Rights, Special Rights*, produced in 1993 by the conservative Coalition for Family Values, that begins with declarations by various people of color objecting to the attempts by homosexuals to draw analogies between racism and homophobia. Although it is true that racism is not the same as homophobia, and furthermore, racism against African American people is not the same as racism against Asian American people, oppression is not a zero sum arrangement. In another instance, some lesbians resist assertions by bisexual women that their oppression in some ways resembles lesbian oppression.

Somehow, we have come to think that there is only so much oppression to go around and only so much liberation, and if we give attention to understanding the oppression or working toward the empowerment of one group of people, then this will somehow detract from understanding and eliminating the oppression of another group. In holding this perspective, an important truth is overlooked: There is, unfortunately, no scarcity of oppression and, fortunately, no scarcity of potential liberation.

Homophobia

Biphobia cannot be understood in isolation. It shares many characteristics with other forms of oppression, especially with homophobia, and persons who are bisexual generally experience their share of both. In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde (1984) defines homophobia as the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby the right to dominance and the fear of feelings of love for a member of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others.

The Campaign to End Homophobia, an organization dedicated to raising awareness among heterosexuals, divides homophobia into four distinct but interrelated types: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. Personal homophobia is an individual's own fears or feelings of discomfort toward homosexual people or homosexuality. Interpersonal homophobia is defined as that same fear manifest in hurtful behaviors, such as name-calling, negative jokes, or the physical violence directed at bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians, known as "gay bashing." Institutional homophobia consists of a broad range of discriminatory practices toward lesbian, gay, or bisexual people, such as prohibiting same-sex couples from obtaining health insurance under their partners' policies or denial of legal protection against discrimination in employment, housing, or public accommodations. Cultural homophobia is defined as cultural standards and norms that pervade society, such as the assumption that all people are heterosexual or the paucity of lesbian, gay, or bisexual characters in movies and on television (Thompson & Zoloth, 1990).

There is no doubt that homophobia and heterosexism exist.⁴ Victim service agencies in six U.S. cities (Boston, Chicago, Denver, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New York City, and San Francisco) documented 1,813 antigay incidents in 1993. These data included incidents such as bomb threats, murders, physical assaults, arson, vandalism, telephone harassment, and police abuse. Actual numbers are likely much higher, as it is believed that reported incidents represent only a

fraction of actual incidents (National Gay & Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, 1994).

How does homophobia affect bisexuals, gays, and lesbians? Allport (1954) lays out multiple ways in which individuals respond negatively to stigmatization, which he calls "traits due to victimization" (p. 142). Of special importance to the discussion of biphobia are two of these characteristics: aggression and blame directed at one's own group and prejudice and discrimination directed against other minorities. Theoretically, this may assist us in understanding two phenomena frequently observed in sexual minority populations: (a) internalized homophobia and (b) the hostility directed at bisexuals and transgendered persons by others who are also members of the stigmatized group. Thus, feelings of victimization may get acted out through anger and rejection of those within or outside of one's group who are perceived as even less acceptable than oneself. One reason for this is the fear that these "marginal people" will give all gays and lesbians an even worse image than that which they already hold in the eyes of those within the dominant culture, further impeding gays' and lesbians' struggle for acceptance.

Where Does Biphobia Overlap With Homophobia?

There is much debate within lesbian/gay communities over the question of where biphobia and homophobia overlap, and where each is unique. I have heard, usually from gay men and lesbians, the argument that there is no such thing as biphobia: that biphobia is really homophobia, because it is the homosexual part of bisexuals that is targeted for oppression. This has been taken even further to conclude that bisexuals are, therefore, not targets of oppression as bisexuals. On the other hand, this same line of reasoning has also been used to conclude that bisexuals' oppression is identical to that of lesbians and gay men. I contend that there is both a considerable overlap between homophobia and biphobia, as well as specific ways in which each is unique. Furthermore, homophobia and biphobia affect men and women differently, both as subject and as object.

It is obvious that bisexual individuals who are being approached by someone intent on perpetrating violence against them as they leave a gay bar are unlikely to have the opportunity to say to the gay basher, "Oh, actually, you see, we're bisexual, not gay, so please only beat us up on one side." Nor would such a plea be likely to dissuade the person from assaulting them. In a similar vein, the bisexual who is about to lose her children in a custody battle with her ex-husband because she

has a woman lover does not lose custody over only half of her children, nor is she granted partial custody over all of them because she is bisexual rather than homosexual. If theories of the "lesser oppression" of bisexuals were to hold true, the bisexual teacher whose sexual orientation has been disclosed would merely be reduced to half-time employment, and the bisexual individual being evicted or denied rental housing because of a homophobic landlord would get to retain half of their apartment. Visible bisexuals, like visible lesbians and gay men, may be targeted for discrimination. Homophobia and biphobia inevitably intersect.

Indeed, political conservatives and the religious right consistently categorize bisexuals together with lesbians and gay men. Most anti-gay ordinances explicitly name bisexuals in their list of people to be denied legal protection from discrimination (the so-called *special rights*). For example, the 1993 videotape produced by the Coalition for Family Values, *Gay Rights, Special Rights*, takes care to include bisexuals both in its language and in its imagery, and the U.S. Armed Forces considers the actuality or presumption of both homosexual *and* bisexual activity grounds for discharge from the military.

Another area of congruence between the experience of biphobia and the experience of homophobia may be with respect to "coming out" issues. A bisexual coming to terms with same-sex attraction is likely to experience shame, ambivalence, and discomfort similar to that experienced by persons who are lesbian or gay. Both homosexuality and bisexuality are denied, and our culture presents distorted self-images to both homosexuals and bisexuals; furthermore, people in the general population lack accurate information about both homosexuality and bisexuality. In fact, these identity groups are actually rather fluid and tend to have considerable overlap. Many bisexuals have in the past considered themselves to be lesbian or gay, and many lesbians and gay men have in the past considered themselves to be bisexual. Ron Fox (1995) found in his study of 835 sexually identified people that 38.3% of women and 33.7% of men had previously identified as lesbian or gay. Paula Rust (1992) posits that there is a high degree of overlap between the actual history and behavior of self-labeled lesbians and bisexual women (R. C. Fox, 1995; Rust, 1992).

In summary, invisibility, isolation, and oppression due to homophobia are experiences shared by bisexual and homosexual people in the United States. Any person may be a target of oppression when visible as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and each suffers internally when forced to remain silent or repress feelings for people of the same sex. Whether the cause of this oppression is called "homophobia" or "biphobia," it hurts everyone.

Biphobia

Only a few essays have been published directly addressing the topic of biphobia (Bennett, 1992; Ochs & Deihl, 1992; Orlando, 1991; Rust, 1992; Udis-Kessler, 1991). However, much can be learned about biphobia by reading the gay and heterosexual press and from anecdotal information. Most of my bisexual friends and bisexuals who have participated in workshops that I have facilitated come laden with painful stories of rejection and hurt, both at the hands of heterosexuals and by lesbians and gay men.⁵ My comments below draw from these sources.

A primary manifestation of biphobia is the denial of the very existence of bisexual people. Kathleen Bennett (1992) defines biphobia as "the denigration of bisexuality as a valid life choice" (p. 207). This aspect of biphobia can be attributed to the fact that we live in a culture that thinks in binary categories, with each category having its mutually exclusive opposite. This is powerfully evident in the areas of sex and gender. Male and female are seen as "opposite categories," and transgendered or transsexual persons are subject to a denial-of their existence similar to that faced by many bisexuals. Brownmiller (1984) argues that the purpose of much gender socialization is to emphasize and exaggerate the differences between men and women in order to preserve a clear distinction between the two groups, and thereby their social roles: men are supposed to become larger, stronger, and more active; women smaller, weaker, and more passive.

Other examples of dualisms are self-other, intellect-emotion, subjectivity-objectivity, masculinity-femininity, maleness-femaleness, and heterosexuality-homosexuality. Masculinity, maleness, and heterosexuality would all be positively emphasized categories within this hierarchy. These are the "labels of primary potency" to which Allport refers, attributes magnified out of proportion to their actual relevance by the heterosexist, male-dominant culture in which we live. In such a context, deviations from the dominant culture's norms of gender and sexuality attain exaggerated significance. Orlando (1991) states, "Many anthropologists believe that when one aspect of a culture gains particular prominence or importance people feel an even stronger need to fit into such a scheme and will become uneasy in the face of ambiguities. The 'disorder' resulting from central features of our lives which we cannot fit into dichotomies disturbs us deeply" (pp. 227-228).⁶ Thus, those whose sexual orientation defies simple labeling or those whose sex or gender is ambiguous may make us profoundly uncomfortable. This is one of the major roots of biphobia and the hostility directed toward transgendered persons.

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Thus, bisexuals, who fit neither the prioritized category nor its perceived antithesis, create discomfort and anxiety in others simply by the fact of their existence. There is pressure for those of us who do not fit to remain silent about our deviation, because there is a great deal at stake. Perpetuating the silence of bisexuals allows the dominant culture to exaggerate the differences between heterosexual and homosexual and to ignore the fact that human sexuality exists on a continuum. It is much less threatening to the dominant heterosexual culture to perpetuate the illusion that homosexuals are "that category, way over there," very different from heterosexuals. If "they" are so different, then heterosexuals do not have to confront the possibility of acknowledging same-sex attractions within themselves and the attendant anxiety of possibly "becoming like them." There is considerable anxiety in being forced to acknowledge that the "other" is not quite as different from you as you might like, creating what Udis-Kessler (1991) describes as a "crisis of meaning" for heterosexuals (p. 350).

Also contributing to biphobia is bisexuals' relative invisibility. In a culture that assumes that we are all either gay or straight, the presumed sexuality of an individual bisexual person is usually determined by the person with whom he or she is or has been known to be romantically involved. When bisexuals do not actively speak up and announce their orientation, others may feel deceived when they discover their friend's or lover's sexual orientation at a later time. This is an experience shared by gay men and lesbians but rarely by heterosexuals, as the default assumption in our culture is heterosexuality. Bisexuals frequently experience negativity and shock in reaction to disclosure of their sexual orientation from both heterosexuals and from many lesbians and gay men. In most families, for example, members are presumed to be heterosexual; conversely, at a woman's bar all the women present are presumed lesbians. When a bisexual person does speak up in an attempt to avoid being mislabeled, this act is often seen as stridency, a flaunting of her orientation, or even interpreted as hostility, an experience shared by lesbians and gay men when they speak up in heterosexual contexts.

Because of binary thinking and bisexuals' categorization by others as heterosexual or homosexual, depending on the sex of one's partner, bisexuality tends to be invisible except as a point of conflict. Given that studies reveal that only a small percentage of bisexuals are simultaneously involved with persons of both genders (Rust, 1992) and that we tend to assume that a person's sexual orientation corresponds to the sex of his or her current partner, it is difficult to make one's bisexuality visible in one's day-to-day living. As a result, we usually hear about bisexuality only in the context of complicated,

uncomfortable situations: a woman leaves her husband for another woman; a closeted married man contracts HIV from sex with another man and his wife contracts the virus; a woman leaves a lesbian relationship for a male lover. Often, when bisexuality is given attention, it is portrayed as a transitional category, an interim stage in an original or subsequent coming-out process, usually from heterosexual to homosexual. This has the effect of associating bisexuality in many people's minds with conflict and impermanence. Those bisexuals whose lives are noncontroversial are the least visible.

The word *bisexual* itself may be seen as a product of binary thinking and, therefore, problematic. As Gibian (1992) states, "Bi" is two, implying a split, two parts and no whole" (p. 5). Many people struggling to understand bisexuality can only imagine the concept of bisexuality as a 50-50 identity. In their minds, if there is to be a third category, then it must fall midway between the other two categories. They struggle to fix bisexuals in the middle of the scale, further assuming that if bisexuality is a 50-50 identity, then there are very few "true" bisexuals, and a bisexual *must* need a lover of each sex to be satisfied. This raises the specter of nonmonogamy, another major source of discomfort to many.

The elements of biphobia described above are commonly found within both gay and lesbian communities and the dominant heterosexual culture, but biphobia may also take differing forms in each of these contexts. The different ways that biphobia manifests in heterosexual communities and in gay and lesbian communities are now addressed separately, with additional attention to some key differences in the reactions of gay men and lesbians emerging from the historical context of each community.

Biphobia From Heterosexual Communities

Much of the fear of bisexuals and bisexuality emanating from heterosexual communities is due to the challenge that bisexuals present, merely by existing, to the hierarchical dualism created by Western binary thinking.

If lesbians and gay men find the otherness of heterosexuals useful in defining themselves, consider how useful the otherness of homosexuals is in maintaining the American collective myth. There is a group upon which to project all of one's fears about being embodied, sexual, mortal, about having physical urges which sometimes seem out of control. (Udis-Kessler, 1991, p. 356)

If the hierarchy topples, not only will some members of the "heterosexual" majority have to grapple with the disowned elements of their own sexual and affectional desires, but they also lose the superior status implied by occupying the valued position within the dualistic hierarchy. Bisexuality "undoes" the hierarchy. The discomfort heterosexuals feel and the behavioral measures used to protect the security of their position within the existing hierarchy in response to these threats may be called biphobia.

Another source of confusion is the tendency to conflate bisexuality with nonmonogamy. In many people's minds bisexuality is (incorrectly) seen as synonymous with nonmonogamy. Bisexuals are most often portrayed or imagined as married men or women having secondary "flings" with people of the same sex. Talk shows, in keeping with their usual superficiality and oversimplification of reality, perpetuate this stereotype. Many shows invite as panelists only bisexuals who have more than one partner, as if the absence of multiple partners invalidates or at least confounds bisexual identity. It is usually the preference of producers that the bisexual individual's primary relationship be a heterosexual marriage, with same-sex lovers "on the side." In dealing with producers of these types of shows, I have been told that monogamous or celibate bisexuals are not interesting or controversial enough, and besides, the viewers wouldn't be able to understand monogamous or celibate bisexuality. As a result, viewers are presented with images that reinforce the illusion that all bisexual people have both male and female lovers, when in fact only a minority of bisexuals actually maintain this lifestyle.

The arrival of HIV and AIDS has added to heterosexuals' discomfort with bisexuality. In the minds of many heterosexual Americans, bisexuality has come to be strongly identified with images of married, dishonest, closeted men sneaking out on their unsuspecting wives, contracting AIDS through unsafe sex with other men, then infecting their innocent wives and children. Again, the media reinforces these stereotypes. Examples of such representation can be found in *Newsweek* (Gelman, 1987), in an article in *Cosmopolitan*, titled "The Risky Business of Bisexual Love" (Gerrard & Halpin, 1989), and an article in *New Woman*, titled "AIDS: Why No Woman Is Safe" (Avery, 1991). The articles cited above portray bisexual men as untrustworthy conduits of the HIV virus from the gay to the straight community, perpetuating a stigma that drives bisexual behavior and identity even further underground and thereby discourages honesty. Destigmatizing and confronting exaggerated stereotypes would ultimately reduce the risks to both bisexual men and their partners by bringing bisexuality out of the closet and into realistic perspective.

Biphobia in Lesbian/Gay Communities

Biphobia directed at bisexuals by gay men and lesbians is complex and has its roots in the dynamics of oppression and the particular historical context affecting the growth and development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities in the United States. Coming out and living in the United States as a gay man or a lesbian is very difficult. Most gay men and lesbians are survivors of a great deal of hurt and rejection. This shared pain is one of the foundations on which the "lesbian and gay" community is based. A result of external oppression may be a sense of not being safe outside one's own community and a strong need to maintain a clear boundary between "us" and "them." Bisexuals are by definition problematic in this regard, as they blur the boundaries between insider and outsider. And there is another blurring that occurs as a result of bisexual visibility within the lesbian and gay community: many gay men and lesbians are forced to call into question the inaccurate assumption that there is a monolithic lesbian and gay community with a single set of standards and values, composed of individuals who all behave similarly. I will address both the commonalities in biphobic attitudes among gay men and lesbians, and then address separately issues concerning biphobia as they exist for lesbians and gay men.

Blasingame (1992) discusses the anger that darker-skinned African Americans have toward lighter-skinned African Americans for being less oppressed. Blasingame goes on to describe the tension that sometimes exists within African American communities regarding the question of who is "really" Black enough and who is not. She points out that the resulting infighting within the African American community replicates the dynamics of external oppression, drawing an analogy between this tension and biphobia within lesbian and gay communities. Blasingame suggests that we consider why we are fighting each other and not the system (pp. 49-50). The danger of this act of blaming is that it shifts the focus of our anger from the oppressor to the target group member who is perceived to be less oppressed. Sometimes, we hold members of our own community to a higher standard of accountability than our heterosexual counterparts.

Lesbians and gay men may also fear that they are unable to compete with the benefits accorded by our culture to those in heterosexual relationships, believing that those who have a choice will ultimately choose heterosexuality. Many lesbians and gay men believe that bisexuals have less commitment to "the community," and that whatever a lesbian or gay man might have to offer to their bisexual partner will not be enough to outweigh the external benefits offered

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to those who are in heterosexual relationships. There is some realistic basis for this fear: Heterosexual relationships are privileged, and many bisexuals, as well as many lesbians and gay men, adopt at least a public front of heterosexuality to avoid family censure, develop their careers, and raise children with societal approval. However, I also believe that there is some internalized homophobia at work in this line of reasoning. Many bisexuals, although having this perceived choice, still choose to be in same-sex relationships. What gets lost in the fear is the fact that same-sex relationships also offer benefits not available in heterosexual relationships: the absence of scripted gender roles, freedom from unwanted pregnancy, the ease of being with someone with a more similar social conditioning, and so on. Most important, the psychic cost of denying one's love for a particular person can be astronomical.

A good deal of the hostility felt by lesbians and gay men toward bisexuals may be best understood in historical context. The lesbian feminist movement that began in the 1970s profoundly changed and politicized the word *lesbian*. Although undoubtedly a large number of self-identified lesbians still saw their identity merely as descriptive of their erotic preference, the lesbian label came to embody the concept of resistance to sexism and patriarchy and indeed to be seen as the very embodiment of feminism. Women, both heterosexual and bisexual, who refused to sever all ties with men were seen by some as colluding with the patriarchy. Authors such as Adrienne Rich discussed the compulsory nature of heterosexuality in our culture, implying that women, due to their socialization, could not freely "choose" to enter into a heterosexual relationship as the element of coercion was ever present. A saying by Ti Grace Atkinson, "feminism is a theory, lesbianism is a practice," was converted to "feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice" (italics added), reflecting the assumption made by many lesbians that lesbianism was the purest, most desirable manifestation of feminism.

Lesbian identity was "aristocratized." The political aspect of lesbian identity came to be, for some women, even more important than its value as a description of their affectional or erotic preferences. Young (1992) writes,

When I came out as a lesbian, I learned from other lesbians that bisexuality was a "cop-out": it was a label used by women who were really lesbians (that is, women who were sleeping with other women) but wanted to maintain "heterosexual privilege," or by women who liked to "experiment" with lesbians but were really straight and, "when push came to

shove" (whatever *that* meant), would run back to men and leave their lesbian sisters in the lurch. . . . The few who had the courage to claim a bisexual identity in our presence were squelched with charges of treason, because we believed that only lesbians had an antipatriarchal sexuality, which meant that only lesbians were working against sexism; we conflated sexual practice and political action and believed that what one did in bed, and with whom, had direct consequences for supporting or dismantling a patriarchal power structure. (p. 80)

During this same period, lesbians were being purged from organizations, such as the National Organization for Women, on the grounds that their visible presence would hinder the struggle for women's rights by frightening off potential recruits to feminism from the general population and would feed into stereotypes of feminists as "man haters." These positions were a source of pain and conflict for many women and exacerbated existing hostility and mistrust between lesbian and heterosexual feminists. This historical dynamic, in turn, contributes to lesbians' current discomfort with bisexual women, particularly among those women who came out as lesbian in the 1970s and 1980s.

An offshoot of the belief that lesbianism was a superior manifestation of feminist politics is the present-day assumption that lesbian identity is a political identity, whereas bisexual identity is merely a statement about who one's sexual partners are. Self-identified lesbians, such as Holly Near and Jan Clausen, who fell in love with men after years of living as lesbians, have stated that they do not see themselves as bisexual but rather as lesbians who have fallen in love with men. Implicit in their thinking is the belief that lesbian and bisexual identities are mutually exclusive. Although I do not question the right of any woman to freely choose her own labels, I believe the negative stereotypes associated with bisexuality to be a powerful factor in the hesitancy of some women to identify as bisexual rather than, or in addition to, identifying as lesbian. In her ongoing study, Paula Rust did find substantial numbers of women identifying as both bisexual and lesbian, using a variety of labels, such as *bi-dyke*, *bisexual lesbian*, and so on, to name their own particular social, sexual, and political realities (see Rust, Chapter 2).

The trivialization by U.S. culture of all kinds of relationships between women has also exacerbated the tension between lesbians and bisexual women. Many images of "lesbianism" in mainstream culture are in fact images of bisexual women, and distorted images at that. Men's pornography is replete with images of two women interacting

sexually with one another and then being joined in bed by a man. Sex between women is portrayed as entirely recreational and not involving commitment or love. The implication is that sexuality between two women is the foreplay and that "real" sex must involve the presence of a man. For example, the September 1994 issue of *Playboy* had a spread titled "A Walk on the Bi Side." All of the pictures contained therein were either of women in lingerie posing alone, of a woman posing with a man, and of threesomes involving two women and a man. In none of these pictures were two women portrayed together without a man.

Finally, the HIV epidemic has also contributed to the negative perception of bisexual women among lesbians. Bisexual women are seen as the conduit by which AIDS is transmitted to lesbians from the heterosexual mainstream. This belief is exacerbated by the inaccurate assumption that all lesbians do not, have not, and will not ever have sex with men. But data from research on lesbian and bisexual women reveal that the truth is otherwise. For example, Rust (1992) found that 90% of self-identified lesbians have, at some point in their lives, had a romantic or sexual relationship with a man; 43% have had a relationship with a man since they first identified as lesbian.

Although gay men do not seem to experience feelings of discomfort and betrayal toward bisexuals to the same degree or in exactly the same way as lesbians, there is no doubt that feelings of discomfort and betrayal exist. Because of the power dynamics associated with a sexist society, the element of "sleeping with the enemy" that exists between lesbians and bisexual women is noticeably absent between gay and bisexual men. There is, however, a pervasive belief among self-identified gay men that self-identified bisexuals are really gay men who are afraid to come out as gay or who are holding on to their heterosexual relationships and identity to obtain heterosexual privilege and avoid rejection by the heterosexual mainstream.

One difference that I see between gay men and lesbians is that lesbians are more possessive about their label. Bisexual women who also identify as lesbian face a greater degree of community hostility than bisexual men who also identify as gay. It is my experience that for men there is a great deal of fluidity between the labels *gay* and *bisexual*; I know a number of gay men who will freely admit that they are attracted to or involved with women. Many men who feel that their erotic desire is bisexual choose to identify themselves publicly as gay rather than as bisexual because they feel that it is easier than trying to explain that they are bisexual, or to affiliate themselves politically with the gay community.

An example of both label fluidity and community hostility is the experience of Tom Robinson, a British political rock musician who

penned the song "Glad to Be Gay." His lover of several years is a woman and they have a child together. He says that, despite his current relationship, he does not label himself bisexual. He says, "I don't think it's helpful to start drawing lines around it and say that actually I'm bisexual. We fracture ourselves into more and more factions, when what we really need is more and more unity" (Hoffman, 1994, p. 16). Nonetheless, even he has become the target of biphobic rhetoric. Despite his public openness about his sexuality and his years of gay activism, his decision to enter into an opposite-sex relationship has been met with negative response in the press. Hoffman (1994) writes, "Though the mainstream papers tried to make a sex scandal out of his new relationship, the gay press was far more vicious, labeling Robinson a traitor, a hypocrite, an enemy of the community" (p. 16).

Finally, there is one other explanation for biphobia that has been given by participants in my workshops, one stated only by men and never by women. When I have asked gay men to explain their fears about bisexuality and bisexual people, one theme has repeatedly arisen. As one gay man put it, "Coming out as gay was the hardest and most painful thing I have ever done in my life. Now I'm finally at a place where I have a solid identity, a community, a place to call home. Bisexuals make me uncomfortable because their existence raises for me the possibility that I might be bisexual myself. And coming to terms with my identity was so hard for me the first time around, I cringe at the thought of having to go through such a long, hard, painful process a second time."⁷

Internalized Biphobia

But biphobia does not come only from the outside. Internalized biphobia can be powerful, sometimes overpowering, and the experience of isolation, illegitimacy, shame, and confusion felt by many bisexuals can be disempowering, even disabling. What contributes to internalized biphobia, and how does internalized biphobia manifest?

Even today, with modest improvements in this area, there are few role models available to bisexual individuals. An individual coming to terms with a bisexual identity is likely to feel a powerful sense of isolation. Bisexuals are rarely mentioned or represented in mainstream or lesbian and gay media. In most parts of the United States, there are no organized groups for bisexual people. Except in the largest cities, one cannot walk into a neighborhood bookstore and find resources on bisexuality. Due to bisexual invisibility and the paucity of bisexual role models or bisexual community, most bisexuals develop and maintain their bisexual identities in isolation.

Most bisexuals spend a majority of their time in the community that corresponds with the sex of their romantic partner. This can result in a sense of discontinuity if we change partners and our next partner is of a different sex or if we shift back and forth between two differing communities over time. Other bisexuals have a strong social affiliation with either a heterosexual, lesbian, or gay community. This can result in another set of conflicts: a feeling that if our partner is not of the "correct" sex, then we are in some way doing a disservice to our community, with resulting feelings of guilt or shame at having "betrayed" our friends and community. Several of the contributors to anthologies of writings by bisexuals discuss the isolation, confusion, fear, shame, and denial that they experienced on discovering their attraction to people of the "wrong" sex (e.g., Aranow, 1991; Blasina-game, 1992; Bryant, 1991; A. Fox, 1991; LeGrant, 1991; Ochs, 1991, 1992; Utz, 1991; Young, 1992).

Many people privately identify as bisexual but, to avoid conflict and preserve their ties to a treasured community, choose to label themselves publicly as lesbian, gay, or straight, further contributing to bisexual invisibility. These women and men feel terror at the thought of being cast out or ostracized from the community from which they derive their support, nourishment, and sense of self. Especially among lesbian- and gay-identified bisexuals, this feeling that claiming a bisexual identity is not acceptable can be very powerful, leading bisexuals to feel like impostors, outsiders, or second-class citizens in both lesbian/gay and heterosexual communities. Bisexuals frequently experience themselves as existing in two different worlds and not fully fitting in either, what Shuster (1991) has termed "a feeling of political and personal homelessness" (p. 267).

Therefore, it is not surprising that some bisexuals feel that their bisexual desire is more a burden than a gift in their life. They may feel a pressure or a wish to make a choice between heterosexuality and homosexuality to make their lives easier and avoid internal and external conflict. Many desire the ease they imagine would come with having one clear, fixed, socially acceptable identity. As one woman said, "Being bisexual is a major conflict in my life. It involves more pain than pleasure. . . . I would prefer to be one or the other. I don't care which. I would just like one clear identity. That would be a lot simpler" (quoted in Zipkin, 1992, p. 59).

Clearly, issues of shame pervade the difficulties bisexuals face in attempting to form a positive, well-integrated bisexual identity. Because an individual member of an oppressed group is frequently seen as representative of all the members of that group, a bisexual-identified person may feel a sense of shame when any bisexual person

behaves in such a way as to reinforce negative stereotypes of bisexual people. Furthermore, a bisexual individual may feel a profound sense of shame when her own behavior happens to mirror one of the existing stereotypes of bisexual. For example, a woman leaving a relationship with a woman who subsequently gets involved with a man might feel a strong sense of guilt that she is reinforcing the negative stereotypes held about bisexuals in general. In a comparable manner, a man who is nonmonogamous in his relationships might feel a compounded sense of guilt, both because mainstream culture looks negatively on individuals of *any* sexual orientation who choose to live a polyamorous lifestyle and because his personal actions feed an existing stereotype of bisexuals. Individuals in such situations may feel that they are in some way betraying their entire identity group. Although some bisexual people do behave in ways that conform to negative stereotypes about bisexuals, it is actually the dynamics of prejudice that cause others to use such actions to justify their stereotyping and prejudicial behavior.

Ironically, bisexual individuals in monogamous relationships may also experience difficulties, feeling that their maintenance of a bisexual identity constitutes a double betrayal of both their community of primary identification (whether heterosexual or homosexual) and of their partner. Alternatively, the partner of the bisexual person may feel that a bisexual person's decision to continue to identify as bisexual, despite the fact of being in a monogamous relationship, is somehow a withholding of full commitment to the relationship. The bisexual person may be perceived as holding onto the possibility of other relationships by maintaining a bisexual identity and, therefore, not fully committed to the current relationship. This overlooks the fact that one's identity is, in actuality, separate from particular choices made about relationship involvement or monogamy. For example, a heterosexual's ability to establish and maintain a committed relationship with one person is not assumed to falter, even though the person retains a sexual identity as "heterosexual" and may even admit to feeling attractions to other people despite her or his committed status.

This pressure can come not only from one's lover but also from parents or other interested parties who want the bisexual partner to stop "holding out" or feel that the bisexual person is making much ado about nothing by holding onto his or her bisexual identity. A bisexual in this position may feel a great deal of guilt and self-doubt that can manifest as identity "flip-flopping." A woman may say, "If I am in love with a man, then perhaps I am really straight." If, some years later, she is involved with a woman, she may then say, "If I am in love with a woman, I must really be a lesbian" (e.g., A. Fox, 1991;

Ochs, 1991). The road to a positive, affirming bisexual identity is a long and arduous journey. Our conditioning, invisibility, and the negative images that surround us make it extremely difficult to feel an unqualified sense of pride in our sexuality.

Suggestions for Change

Given the myriad obstacles, both internal and external, discussed above, how can a bisexual person come to a positive bisexual identity? According to therapist A. Fox (1991), the necessary ingredients are "permission, recognition, validation, support, and (ideally) community acceptance" (p. 34). These factors must come primarily from inside oneself, but external acceptance and validation are also extremely important. Having the opportunity to make a connection with other bisexual people is usually a pivotal event for individuals struggling to come to terms with their bisexual identity. Such contact helps people by contradicting their feelings of isolation and imparting a vital sense of empowerment. One way this may be accomplished is by involvement in a bisexual or bi-supportive organization (Ambrosino, 1991; Arnesen, 1991; Brown, 1991; Nelson, 1991; Ochs, 1991; Schneider, 1991; Woodard, 1991; Zipkin, 1992). For those who live in areas that have existing organizations, this is relatively easy to accomplish. Those who live in isolated areas are not, however, without resources. There are now bisexual newsletters and publications, such as the *Bisexual Resource Guide*, electronic mail lists for bisexuals, and several books presenting the experiences of bisexuals, such as *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*, edited by Hutchins and Ka'ahunanu (1991), and *Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism*, edited by Weise (1992). Validation and support can also come from friends, therapists, and other service providers who are able to affirm and fully validate a bisexual person's identity, relationships, and choices.

Silence kills. I encourage bisexual people to come out as bisexual to the maximum extent that they can do so safely. Life in the closet takes an enormous toll on our emotional well-being. Bisexuals must remember that neither bisexuals nor gays and lesbians created heterosexism and that as bisexuals, we are its victims as well as potential beneficiaries. Although we must be aware of when we, as bisexuals, sometimes have privileges that have been denied to gays, lesbians, and transgendered persons of any orientation, this simply calls for us to make thoughtful decisions about how to live our lives. We did not create the inequities, and we must not feel guilty for who we are; we need only be responsible for what we do.

All of us, bisexual, lesbian, gay, and transgendered, must resist getting lost in the "divide and conquer" strategy that we are invited to participate in by the dominant culture. There is no long-term benefit in creating a hierarchy of oppressions. Bisexuals, along with lesbians, gay men, and supportive heterosexuals, can gain only by opening up our minds and hearts to celebrate the true diversity that exists among us. Our movement must not limit itself to constructing a space of acceptance for homosexual relationships only when they are an exact mirror image of traditional heterosexual relationships; rather, its potential strength lies in creating a space where the full spectrum of our relationships is respected and valued, including those that are unlike our own and those that we do not personally understand and would not choose for ourselves. We must remember how unique each person is and also how much we share in common. Labels can unite us, but they can also stifle us and constrict our thinking when we forget that they are merely tools. Human beings are complex, and labels will never be adequate to the task of accurately representing us. It is impossible to reduce a lifetime of experience to a single word.

If biphobia and homophobia are not allowed to blind us, then we can move beyond our fears and learn to value our differences as well as our similarities. Pretending to be other than we really are or trying to force others to pretend to be other than who they really are will not, in the long term, make any of us safer.

Notes

1. Keynote speech at In Query, In Theory, In Deed, 6th North American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies Conference, Iowa City, IA, November 17, 1994.
2. Speech during the Final Plenary Session at In Query, In Theory, In Deed, 6th North American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies Conference, Iowa City, IA, November 19, 1994.
3. Discussion group at September 1983 meeting of the Boston Bisexual Women's Network, Cambridge, MA, facilitated by author.
4. There has been discussion regarding the use of the word *homophobia* as opposed to, for example, *heterosexism*. Heterosexism is defined by Blumenfeld and Raymond (1988) as "the system by which heterosexuality is assumed to be the only acceptable and viable life option" (p. 226). Heterosexism renders lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals invisible, making it a great deal harder to arrive at a positive self-identity. Each word is useful in its scope. I use the word *homophobia* in this chapter to refer to both homophobia and heterosexism.

5. Since 1985, I have facilitated more than 200 workshops at college, university, and community groups on topics such as "Unlearning Biphobia," "Bisexuality 101," "Bisexuality: Myths and Realities," and "Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals: A Dialogue Across Difference."

6. Orlando (1991) develops this argument, drawing on ideas developed by Schwartz (1981) in his book, *Vertical Classification: A Study in Structuralism and the Sociology of Knowledge*.

7. Statement by a 38-year-old male workshop participant at the "Unlearning Biphobia" workshop facilitated by author, Fall of 1993.

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