CHAPTER 7

DISMISSAL, DELEGITIMATION AND RE-APPROPRIATION OF BISEXUALITY

7.1   Introduction

In this chapter I present findings related to how bisexuality is delegitimised as a category of sexual identification as well as how same-sex sexuality is silenced in participants' accounts. I conclude with a discussion of the ways in which participants assert bisexuality as a viable identity, in a discursive context in which bisexuality is rendered illegitimate.

7.2   The unintelligibility of bisexuality

In this section I discuss a number of discourses identified in the text that render bisexuality as unintelligible. Bower et al. (2002) describe the unintelligibility of bisexuality as the inability to comprehend bisexuality as a category of sexual identification. This is due to the dominance of a monosexual binary where heterosexuality and homosexuality are constructed as the only valid categories of sexual identification. In such a discursive structure bisexuality is not considered a valid form of sexual desire – it is not understood or made intelligible in popular discourses because of the dominance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary. In the analysis for this section I was interested in how participants negotiate bisexual identities in such a discursive context.

Participants often referred to the unintelligibility of bisexuality and the dominance of heterosexuality and homosexuality as the only categories of sexual identification. They described how, despite claiming a bisexual identity, they are often still considered by others as either lesbian or straight. In their experience the category bisexual, although increasingly available in popular discourse, is not one into which they are easily or comfortably placed. During the interviews this was often described as it occurs in relation to other people's perceptions of participants' sexual orientation in relation to the gender of the person with whom they are currently involved - if involved with a man it is assumed that they are straight, if involved with a woman it is assumed that they are lesbian. In that way their sexual identities are discursively "forced" to fit into the dominant hetero-homo binary:

> Liné: It is amazing to me how so many people are under the impression that you are only a lesbian or you are only straight…. If I'm in a lesbian relationship I am defined as a lesbian. If I'm in a straight relationship I am defined as straight. So at the end of the day only I really know who I am.

Taryn: If I was with a man, no one would question whether I was bisexual or heterosexual, and when I'm with a woman, no one questions the bisexual aspect either. It's either lesbian or straight.

Sonia: I had a boyfriend recently and my friends would phone me and be like 'oh so are you still straight?' They kind of don't accept that you're bisexual, they see it as if you're dating a guy then you're straight and if you're dating a girl then you're gay, that kind of thing.

Participants also described how it is generally more easily assumed by others that they are homosexual, instead of heterosexual. Despite having had publicly visible relationships with both men and women, many of the participants described how most people would assign them a lesbian identity instead of a straight or bisexual identity. Astrid refers to this when she says "if you've been with a woman once you're pretty much a lesbian according to most people". Taryn goes on to describe this in the following way:

I mean it's weird, everyone I tell that I'm bisexual, after my girlfriend and I have been together for three years now, they go 'okay, but you're with a woman'? And I'm like ja, but I could be with a man, if I wanted to. I'm still attracted to men. But it's like because they see you with a woman, that they think you're gay.

In the section that follows I elaborate on this insistence on positioning participants along a hetero-homo binary, and discuss how three discourses in particular function to position bisexuality as unintelligible within dominant discourse. I first discuss a discourse of an inability to construe sexual desire as "going both ways". This is followed by a discourse of bisexuality as indecision. I conclude this section with a discourse that incites participants to choose between a homosexual or heterosexual orientation.

7.2.1 An inability to construe sexual desire as "going both ways"

The unintelligibility of bisexuality relates to an inability to comprehend sexual desire that could be directed towards both men and women. Sonia describes it as an inability for others to understand that your attraction "can go to both sides". While I indicated in the literature review that sexuality has been increasingly described as fluid (for example by Diamond, 2008), dominant discourse generally still constructs homosexuality and heterosexuality as mutually exclusive categories. Participants spoke about such an inability to construe sexual desire as fluid as rendering bisexuality incomprehensible to others. In such a construction, participants are expected to strongly identify as

either heterosexual or homosexual. Directing their sexual desire to a gender other than what "fits" with the relevant category is construed as incomprehensible:

> Taryn: I don't think a lot of people believe in bisexuality and that it exists. I think people see it as an excuse, kind of. I don't know, I've gotten that feeling a lot, like 'come on, you obviously prefer one or the other', and you're just fucking around if you go the other way or whatever. I think that's a preconception that people have, that bisexuality doesn't really exist.

> Nasiphi: I think most people think bisexuality is not real. They're like 'how could you be bisexual?'

> Jennifer: People don't, they don't understand the bi thing.
> Cara: (Interjects) People don't want to accept that, really like honestly in South Africa, not even just in South Africa, people do not want to accept that someone could be so flexible that they could be with both genders.

Belinda describes how bisexuality is seen by others as a mysterious middle ground of sexuality, one with which they cannot personally identify and therefore cannot understand: "Most people can't really go in this middle ground area, this smoky, hazy area that you don't know which side you're on". Belinda goes on to describe this middle ground as "unsettling for people", as it removes the certainty they attach to the dominant monosexuality binary, where individuals fit neatly into either a heterosexual or homosexual category.

In describing bisexuality as a "flexible" sexuality (Cara), and themselves as able to inhabit this uncertain "middle ground area" of sexuality (Belinda), participants' accounts position them as potentially "more fluid and visionary that other sexual subjects" in that they are transcending the limits of the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Hemmings, 2002, p. 33). However, the middle ground is not properly constructed as a third category located in between heterosexuality and homosexuality, which can be inhabited by participants. Instead it is described as an ambiguous and indistinct borderland - "this smoky, hazy area" (Belinda). When drawn on in this manner, bisexuality seemingly exists as a discrete epistemological and ontological category that is available to subjects, but is in fact construed as a potential for *either* heterosexual *or* homosexual desire to emerge in an individual, not *both* (Hemmings, 2002; James, 1996). Bisexuality as middle ground "explains" why an individual can be attracted to either women or men, but does not support the viability of attraction to both men and women. In this way, bisexuality as middle ground enables and consolidates heterosexuality and homosexuality, while denying the feasibility of an adult bisexual identity

(Hemmings, 2002). It functions as "the potential that structures both object choice and incorporation of the lost and unmournable object" (Hemmings, 2002, p. 115) but not as attraction that "can go to both sides" (Sonia). In being drawn on as an ambiguous "neutral" category of sexual identity, bisexuality "ultimately disappear[s] in order to prop up theories of hetero/homosexual difference" (James, 1996, p. 218).

7.2.2 "Was that a phase?" Bisexuality as indecision

The unintelligibility of bisexuality is also supported by a discourse of bisexuality as indecision or as confusion about one's sexual identity. Participants spoke about this discourse as positioning them in negative and marginalising ways: "People think you can't make up your mind, you're lukewarm, you're two-faced" (Sonia). Laetitia described it in a similar way, stating "a lot of people think if you say you're bisexual then you are two-faced, you can't make a decision". A discourse of bisexuality as indecision reinforces essentialist views of sexual orientation as an inherent and stable characteristic of persons; in such a view variations from a "true" homosexual or heterosexual orientation are dismissed as temporary confusion or curiosity (Diamond, 2003).

This discourse of bisexuality as indecision functions in two different ways in participants' accounts. Firstly, bisexuality is constructed in heteronormative terms as a period of experimentation where the person is "trying out" same-sex sexuality but will eventually return to a heterosexual subject position (similar to the findings described by Bower et al., 2002). Nadia describes how her mother responded to her same-sex relationships saying "'child, you're just going through a phase". Bisexuality is positioned as an immature sexual identity, and once the phase of sexual experimentation has passed one is expected to return to being heterosexual. Such a heteronormative construction considers one to eventually mature and want to be in a heterosexual relationship with the privileges that go along with it. Laetitia refers to this when she describes how others respond to her same-sex relationships stating "it'll probably only be a few years until she will want to grow up or have children". Phindile also describes how others would dismiss her bisexuality stating that she "just needs to find the right guy". Participants describe how a construction of having resolved their phase of sexual experimentation is reinforced when others such as their parents see them in a relationship with a man. Gemma describes this when she says the following:

> I have actually discussed (my sexuality) with my parents. It was five years ago when I had my
> first girlfriend. And it didn't really turn out well, so I never really mentioned it again, and I
> ended up having a boyfriend afterwards. So they were kind of like 'mmm, was that a phase?'.

Such a heteronormative view of bisexuality as a phase can, in a sense, imply that bisexuality functions as a lighter blow compared to coming out as gay, because the person is perceived as still being at a point where they can return to a heterosexual subject position. It can be more easily construed as a phase that will pass, and when dating men again this is strengthened even more. Sonia refers to this when she says "it's easier for my parents to accept (that I am) bi than to accept that I'm gay, because bi leaves open that idea of you still turning out straight". In this manner, drawing on a discourse of bisexuality as indecision might afford participants some sense of protection from social rejection and censure. Nadia's statement (when she describes her mother as saying "child, you're just going through a phase") indicates a dismissal of her same-sex relationships as authentic, or as deserving of the presumably more punitive response a "true" lesbian identification might evoke. A discourse of bisexuality as indecision, as drawn on in this context, potentially minimises the transgressive nature of same-sex sexuality. The dismissal of participants' sexual identification as a period of experimentation might then in fact allow them more space within which to enact their sexuality, precisely because their identification as bisexual is not considered "real".

A second way in which a discourse of bisexuality as indecision functions is through constructing bisexuality as a transitional stage to achieving a more enduring gay identity. Here bisexuality is also regarded as a phase, but in this case as part of a process of coming to terms with being gay - again similar to what Bower et al. (2002) suggest in their findings. As discussed in the literature review, theories of sexual identity formation often regard bisexuality as a stage in the development of a gay identity. While this is often the case for lesbian women, in the interviews it was apparent that this construction functions for participants as a dismissal of bisexuality as a more enduring identity. This was particularly the case when lesbian partners and friends viewed participants' bisexuality through their own experience of achieving a lesbian identity, where bisexuality was only a stage they went through in coming to terms with their homosexuality. Jennifer refers to this when she mentions how a lesbian friend dismissed her bisexuality and described her as lesbian instead: "She said to me 'just get over yourself Jennifer, the way you think you're not straight, you're gay'". Liné also describes how, when she was in a relationship with a lesbian woman, her partner did not acknowledge her bisexuality: "she wanted to think that I am actually a lesbian".

It can be seen that in both instances bisexuality is dismissed as a transient identity – where the person is either going through a phase of sexual experimentation but will eventually return to an enduring heterosexual identity, or where the person is seen as going through a transitional stage of

moving towards an enduring homosexual identity. As Sonia describes it, "it's that idea of bisexuality being a screen or shield - so you're going to turn out gay or you're going to turn out straight, you're not going to be bi forever". A construction of bisexuality as indecision implies that it is not an enduring sexual identity and it is not considered as having the same sense of permanence that a heterosexual or homosexual identity has. Participants are expected to eventually settle into their "real" sexual identity, which is either gay or straight.

7.2.3 The incitement to choose

A consequence of the discourse of bisexuality as indecision is that bisexually-identified individuals are, within such a discourse, incited to "choose a side". Since this discourse does not construct bisexuality as a valid category of sexual identification, participants are positioned as needing to choose between a heterosexual or homosexual identity. Owen (2003) notes:

> [The] heterosexual economy depends upon the orderly progression from 'male or female' to 'boy or girl' to 'man or woman' to 'husband and wife'. Bisexuality, with its refusal to choose, thus poses a challenge to the sex-gender binarism in particular, and monosexuality in general. (p. 34)

Participants spoke about such an incitement to choose in two different ways. Firstly, they described an internalised construction of needing to identify as either gay or straight, with bisexuality not being available as a category of identification. This was discussed in relation to participants' experiences when they were younger where participants indicated that the lack of validation of bisexuality as a category of sexual identification left them feeling as if they had to make a choice between being gay or straight. Since the category bisexuality is not widely acknowledged, they did not feel that they had any reference points for identifying as bisexual at that point in their lives. Participants described how this left them feeling that their same-sex feelings necessarily positioned them as lesbian, despite still being attracted to the opposite sex. Liné spoke about the conflict this created for her when she had her first relationship with a woman:

> Obviously at the beginning you think, 'oh my God, maybe I then am a lesbian, I've been fooling myself'. It's very confusing, at the beginning, to figure out what you are…. Suddenly you're like 'but fuck, now I'm a lesbian'. And then you go through that struggle of 'but can I now never have a man again?' 'Am I never allowed to actually be with a man because I'm a lesbian now?', and then it's even more confusing. And then you go 'but I like men and I like women, am I wrong for doing that?' What's going on in my head? Am I fucked up?

Belinda describes going through a similar process when she was in high school and attempting to make sense of her attraction to both men and women, when she states: "I did wonder, does this mean I'm a lesbian? Does this mean I don't like men?" The dominance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, at the expense of bisexuality being a valid category of sexual identification, means that participants have no reference point for constructing a bisexual identity. Sonia describes this in the following way:

> You just have no reference for it. If you're straight then your parents tell you okay this is what you do, this is how your life is going to go, and this is how your role is going to be in your relationship one day…. (If you're bi) you have to create your own identity because you don't have any reference for it.

Secondly, participants referred to how such an incitement to choose played out in their lives at the point where they now identify as bisexual. They discussed how others had an expectation that they should choose between heterosexuality and homosexuality, despite their own view of having reached a point where they are comfortable with their sexual identity as bisexual:

> Gemma: So my friends would say to me 'Gemma, when are you going to decide, you should start deciding'. And I just think 'why, why must I decide? Why must I decide for you?' So ja, I never really decided…. I'm not going to be closed off to any possibility.

> Jennifer: I told someone in my family 'no, I'm not gay I'm bisexual'. And she said 'have you slept with a man?' And I said 'no', and she said 'have you slept with a woman?' And I said 'no, I've never had <u>sex</u> with a man, or <u>sex</u> technically with a woman, you know that had gone that far with either'. And she said 'well, then you don't know'. She said you can't live on the fence; you have to choose a side…. so she doesn't believe that you can be bisexual.

In this section I focused on discourses that render bisexuality as unintelligible. I presented a discourse of an inability to construe sexual desire as "going both ways", where participants' flexibility in their attraction to both men and women is positioned as incomprehensible. I also discussed a discourse of bisexuality as indecision where participants were positioned as either experimenting with same-sex sexuality but "essentially" being straight, or as being in a process of achieving a more enduring gay identity. Both constructions dismiss bisexuality as an enduring category of sexual identification. I concluded with a discussion of the discursive incitement for participants to choose between either a heterosexual or homosexual category of identification.

These discourses function to render bisexuality as unintelligible as it is dismissed as a viable category of sexual identification. They also reinforce the dominance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, where identifying as gay or straight remain the only options. The heterosexual/homosexual binary functions here to displace bisexual self-identification from the present moment and positions it as an identity that can only be achieved through participants' reflections on past relationships. This last aspect relates to how a bisexual identity, in other's reading of one's sexuality, needs to be continuously asserted and reasserted over time (which, unless participants are in polyamorous relationships with both men and women, is not easily achieved). These discourses, in rendering bisexuality unintelligible, construct it as an identity that is not viable in the current moment.

7.3   Delegitimising discourses

In this section I discuss discourses identified in the text that act to delegitimise bisexuality as a valid option for participants' sexual identification. Several aspects of the discourses I discuss here relate to how bisexuality is constructed in media discourses, referred to by participants during the interviews. In these constructions bisexuality is, in contrast to the previous section of discourses, highly visible. Bisexuality is not unacknowledged or rendered unintelligible, instead it is explicitly named and constructed in highly sexualised ways - often in support of a male heterosexual fantasy. While bisexuality is considered incomprehensible in the previous grouping of discourses, in this section it is acknowledged and popularised, however in mostly negative or marginalising terms. In these discourses, bisexuality is discredited as a valued sexual identity as it is predominantly positioned in relation to its appeal as part of an erotic fantasy or as associated with promiscuity. These constructions of bisexuality in media depictions are also mirrored in participants' interactions on a more personal level, and to this end I discuss how bisexuality is constructed in participants' discussions of how others respond when they disclose their sexual orientation.

The guiding question in the analysis for this section was, similar to the previous section, to explore how bisexuality is constructed as an object in the text. I was also interested in how broader public discourses, such as media depictions of bisexuality, function in participants' constructions of bisexuality. The first discourse that I discuss here is that of bisexuality as an eroticised heterosexual male fantasy. This is followed by a discussion of a discourse of bisexuality as necessarily being equated with promiscuity.

7.3.1 The hot-bi-babe: Bisexuality as an eroticised heterosexual male fantasy

I start the discussion here by first considering how this discourse is drawn on by participants when reflecting on male responses when disclosing their sexual identification as bisexual, followed by a discussion of participants' references to the eroticised depiction of female bisexuality in popular media.

Participants referred to the widely circulating construction of female same-sex sexuality as sensual or erotic, and related this to men's responses to their own bisexuality. As discussed in the literature review, while male same-sex encounters are not typically regarded as erotic, the idea of two women having sex is generally seen as sexually appealing to heterosexual men. Such a male fantasy of female bisexuality consists of men being either observers of intimate acts between female lovers, or being participants in a ménage à trios with two women. In this construction of bisexuality as a heterosexual male fantasy, bisexual women are visible only in relation to male sexual pleasure. Belinda refers to this construction in the following manner:

> Guys actually don't mind [when I tell them I've been with women]. I don't know what that is but there's something weird about guys and lesbians, I don't know why but they seem to like that, the idea of two women together. It turns them on for whatever reason.

While Belinda makes specific reference to the widely circulating construction of lesbian women as erotic, female bisexuality lends itself even more readily to a positioning as a heterosexual male fantasy; bisexual women are attracted to men as well as women and men can therefore more realistically be included in such a fantasy. Laetitia talks about how male partners, knowing that she identifies as bisexual, would anticipate the involvement of another woman in their relationship:

> With guys.... they usually know beforehand that I was gay or have been with girls and that actually intrigues them more. In most cases I think that it's kind of the incentive for them to do anything... (Ingrid: Why do you think that is?) I don't know, I think it's more their idea of 'you were with a girl', they like the whole concept. And the few guys I have been with always played around with the idea of a threesome because they want to use two girls. So it's a very sexual thing for them.

A discourse of bisexuality as a heterosexual male fantasy constructs bisexual women as erotic and sexually adventurous, but also renders women as sexual objects. This is apparent in Laetitia's earlier reference to men wanting to "use two girls". Jennifer, talking about men making sexual advances

towards her and her girlfriend, articulates this objectification succinctly: "It's disgusting because as soon as you say you're bisexual you are more of an object than a woman, and a woman is an object already". In fact, one could argue that a heterosexual fantasy of bisexual women is only erotic if the women in it are objectified. This discourse does not advance a subject position of bisexual women as active sexual agents where women have sexual autonomy. Instead, in this discourse what is considered erotic is bisexual women as their sexuality relates to men. It is a construction of bisexual women's sexuality as being in the service of men, directed towards male pleasure or as props in a male fantasy. Laetitia describes how, despite the eroticisation of bisexuality, women's accepted role is not one that entails active sexual exploration:

> People look like they are much more open to the idea of two girls than they are to two men, like less people are offended by the idea of two girls together than they are by two men. But I think that in general.... a woman has like this role she has to fulfil and it isn't a role of sexual exploration…. I don't feel like we can say 'hey, I like to watch porn' or something like that. It is something that is more male dominant. We are not allowed to explore such things sexually…

Laetitia goes on to say that a woman who does explore her sexuality and exhibit sexual agency is "easily stereotyped as a slut, you know, like a hooker". Women are then not granted the freedom to explore their sexuality lest they be labelled promiscuous. Laetitia's statements emphasise that the apparent acceptance of bisexuality, implied by its eroticisation, is conditional in that it is premised on women being cast as sexual objects in the service of male pleasure.

In positioning bisexual women as sexual objects, this discourse comments on what is considered appropriate and inappropriate sexualities for "proper" or marriageable women. In this discourse bisexual women are not seen as existing inside what she terms the charmed circle of sexuality. Rubin (1984) refers to certain sexualities, such as heterosexual, marital and monogamous, as forming the charmed circle of what is considered socially valued sexuality. "Deviant" sexualities are positioned outside this sexual value system. Within such a view, bisexual women might be eroticised in this discourse, but they are not construed as the "type" of woman that men, existing in a context of normative heterosexuality, would want to be in a long term relationship with or would want to marry. It is in this manner that the eroticisation of female bisexuality does not necessarily indicate the acceptance of female sexual autonomy or exploration but instead says something about what is considered sexually attractive and interesting to men, and how that differs from the type of women to which men would want to commit romantically. This distinction between deviant and normal

sexuality evokes the widely cited sexual dualism of the madonna-whore complex, where women are regarded as sexually attractive when cast as objects in the service of male pleasure (the whore construction), while women who conform to a feminine ideal of sexual passivity and purity are seen as "relationship material" (the virginal madonna construction) (De Beauvoir, 1949/1988).

Some of the complexity of the objectification of bisexual women in this discourse becomes apparent in what Astrid says when she talks about men being threatened by bisexuality when they are confronted with it being more than just a sexual performance in support of a male fantasy:

> It will always be alright for you to make out with a chick in front of a guy, men will always be cool with it. Until they think their girlfriend might be macking[12] you. If it's intellectual or spiritual, they become frightened and threatened and you'll feel it.

What Astrid says here supports what Laetitia refers to earlier – that men are attracted to the sexual aspect of female bisexuality. The notion of women being erotic with each other is accepted within this construction because it is considered sexually appealing to men. However, once it is something that includes a "deeper" connection between women, or something that is "intellectual or spiritual" as described by Astrid, men are no longer the focus of what is occurring between the two women; it is no longer a performance for men's pleasure but is instead seen as a relationship with the full weight of an emotional connection. Men are suddenly positioned as being on the outside and feel threatened by this. Men are accepting of bisexual women when they are cast as sexual objects in an erotic fantasy. However, men become suspicious and antagonistic when bisexual women are regarded as a threat to their heterosexual existence in which they date "normal" heterosexual women.

This discourse of bisexual women as a heterosexual male fantasy of course has implications not only for women's subjectivity, but also for men's. This discourse positions men as overly focused on sex, at the expense of the emotional or intellectual dimensions of a relationship, described by Laetitia in the quote below as "the head stuff". In this discourse men are viewed almost as sexual predators – they view women as sexual objects to be used for their pleasure and are unconcerned with women's desires or needs. While it appears that men are reducing women to sexual objects in this discourse, one could also argue that men are to a large extent also reduced to their sexuality in that they are

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[12] The term macking as it is used here refers to flirting with someone (Urban Dictionary, n.d.).

depicted in a somewhat one-dimensional manner. This was illustrated by Laetitia's earlier comment on men's focus on sexual aspects of female bisexuality:

> And the few guys I have been with always played around with the idea of a threesome because they want to use two girls. So it's a very sexual thing for them.

Laetitia goes on to say:

> To them it isn't <u>at all</u> about how the relationship works or the head stuff…. I have yet to find a guy where it didn't... the reason why I'm not in a long term relationship with a guy is because I haven't found a guy yet who doesn't talk about bisexuality like that…. I don't know, males are just wired differently from us.

By drawing on a discourse of biological differences when talking about men just being "wired differently" from women, a view of men being driven by sexual desire is given even more weight – it is solidified as a universal and inherent characteristic of men. This resonates with Hollway's (1984) "male sexual drive" discourse, which positions men as more sexually motivated than women. In such a discourse, men are regarded as driven by a biological need to be sexually satisfied – a need which they cannot easily supress. By drawing on this discourse, Laetitia minimises men's accountability for sexualising bisexual women – if men are "naturally" more sexually motivated than women, then it follows that they will construct female bisexuality as purely a "sexual thing".

My discussion now turns to how female bisexuality is depicted in media accounts. A construction of bisexual women as a heterosexual male fantasy not only plays out in conversations between men and women, but is also increasingly present in media depictions of bisexuality. There is of course an interplay between media discourses and personal discourses – Diamond (2005) notes that "observing sex between otherwise heterosexual women has long been a staple of male fantasy, but only recently has this fantasy graduated from the shelves of pornographic video stores to mainstream movies and television shows" (p. 105). Diamond (2005) employs the term heteroflexibility, borrowed from Essig (2000), to refer to the increasing occurrence of heterosexual women depicted in the media as experimenting with same-sex sexuality. A recent example of pop artists presenting as bisexual include the much publicised kiss shared first between Madonna and Britney Spears, and then between Madonna and Christina Aguilera during an MTV Video Music Award performance (Moss, 2003). In addition to such instances of public heteroflexibility, self-identified bisexual women are also increasingly visible in media discourses and are generally

presented in highly eroticised ways. Examples of celebrities who have publicly claimed a bisexual identity include Lady Gaga, Fergie, Lindsay Lohan, Jessie J and Drew Barrymore (List of bisexual people, n.d.).

During the interviews, participants referred to the increasing prevalence of female bisexuality as a theme in popular culture. Participants described the manner in which these depictions position bisexuality in different ways. Some participants described such depictions as negative in that the media presents bisexual women as hyper-sexed and as "sluts". Popularising images of female bisexuality are regarded as an extension of the use of sex to sell products or promote artists' appeal:

> Sonia: Like with Lady Gaga and Katy Perry and so on, it's almost like our society has become so hyper-sexed that it's not good enough anymore to be a slut, you now also have to be getting it from girls. I think society has become oversexed, because it is that idea of a bi girl being objectified even more than a straight girl, because now it's two girls, it's like 'double whammy, oh my word it's amazing'…. It's very sad, because we are so used to sex that we need something new. We need to not only see sluts but we also want to see sluts together.

The subversive potential of media depictions of bisexuality is minimised by attributions of these representations to a media strategy to exploit the attention-capturing value of sexual controversy. Instead of spurring on debates around sexual fluidity or greater acceptance of same-sex sexuality, these media depictions are often regarded as ploys by artists to be seen as controversial (Diamond, 2005). That contributes in the delegitimisation of bisexuality as a valid category of sexual identification.

In addition to what can be considered negative constructions of female bisexuality in the media, such images of female bisexuality were also described by participants in positive terms. Participants described the eroticisation of bisexual women as countering what Diamond (2005) refers to as stereotypes of same-sex attracted women as "unattractive, masculine, and hostile" (p. 105). Sonia refers to this when she discusses how bisexual women are depicted in the media:

> I mean there are beautiful, beautiful non-dykes who are together. The idea of lesbians in the past is that of dykes, you know you can't have two feminine women together, and now it's more and more that feminine girls love each other.

As Sonia points out in the above quote, media images of female bisexuality are typically restricted to depictions of women who fit a patriarchal beauty ideal. This perhaps highlights a key feature of this discourse – that it is specifically *feminine* looking bisexual women who are eroticised in this discourse. For participants, the benefit of seeing bisexual women in the media is then that it normalises bisexuality by presenting it in a way that is palatable and even attractive to heterosexual audiences.

Participants also referred to how media depictions of female bisexuality are often framed in ways that emphasise bisexual women's availability to men. Diamond (2005, p. 105), referring to media depictions of female bisexuality, states that these depictions typically "take pains to clarify that the participants are *not*, in fact, lesbians" so as not to disrupt the fantasy of the male viewer as participant. She continues to state that such images:

> … implicitly convey that the most desirable and acceptable form of female-female sexuality is that which pleases *and* plays to the heterosexual male gaze, titillating male viewers while reassuring them that the participants remain sexually available in the conventional heterosexual marketplace. (Diamond, 2005, p. 105, emphasis in original)

Cara refers to this when she speaks about how bisexual women are increasingly included in media accounts such as films, but that the characters typically revert back to a heterosexual subjectivity at some point in the narrative, emphasising their availability to male partners:

> If you look at media and movies and stuff…. there's a lot of movies that support women who are lesbian or gay, but the bi movies always end up that the girl is confused so now she's with a man again. (Ingrid: Like what kind of movies?). I'm thinking of Kissing Jessica Stein that she, it started out so interestingly, you have this cliché artistic girl who is kind of sick of men and is now going for women and then you have this confused straight girl who kind of almost stumbles into this relationship with a girl and it's all confusing and whatever. And then in the end she ends up with a guy again.

Participants at times articulated positions that resist the objectification of bisexual women in media depictions. Participants challenged highly sexualised images in that they describe their relationships and connections with other women as different from how bisexuality is depicted in popular media. They describe their own same-sex experiences as loving and intimate, but not as solely focused on sex. Sonia refers to this when she says "it's always this very intimate thing, it's never this <u>sex</u> thing….

I find it portrayed in the media very differently from how I ever experience it". The objectification of bisexual women in the media means that bisexual women in this study are reluctant to identify as bisexual when feel they are at risk of being positioned in a similar manner as in dominant media discourses – as hyper-sexed and as sexual objects.

7.3.2 "You've gotta have both": Bisexuality as equated with promiscuity

I now turn to the second discourse identified in this section as contributing to the delegitimisation of bisexuality. Participants often referred to a discourse of bisexuality as necessarily being equated with promiscuity, where it is assumed that if you identify as bisexual you are not able to commit to a monogamous relationship, and crave constant sexual gratification. In this discourse bisexual women are positioned as non-monogamous by "default" based on their attraction to both men and women, in that their attraction to both genders is taken to imply a constant desire for concurrent relationships. In this manner, this discourse invites a construction of bisexual women as hyper-sexed where they are positioned as constantly desiring "both worlds", craving men when they are with a woman and craving women when they are with a man. Mclean (2008) describes this as a construction of bisexuality as "kinky, non-monogamous and sexually depraved" (p. 159). Within this discourse, bisexuality is constructed as uncontained sexual desire through positioning bisexual individuals as having an insatiable desire for both men and women. Participants referred to this discourse in statements such as the following:

> Sonia: Because that's how bisexuality often gets portrayed, [that] these girls can't get enough sex from guys so they get it from girls too, and it's just dildo's as far as the eye can see…. that is the common conception of what it is…. It's like people are not interested in finding out more about bisexuality, they're not interested in asking how it works or anything like that. They're just like 'okay, so you sleep around a lot'.

> Astrid: It's seen as promiscuous, it's like you can't pick a side, you've gotta have both.

Participants' comments indicate that they do not consider this discourse as accurately portraying their realities as bisexual women. A discourse of bisexuality as equated with promiscuity was described by participants as marginalising their sexual identity through fuelling discrimination against bisexual women. Bisexuality, as it is constructed in this discourse, is seen as a particularly deviant form of sexuality through its association with polyamorous sexual decadence. It is almost as if a transgression from the heterosexual ideal in the form of homosexuality can be tolerated, but bisexuality is seen as "taking it too far" with its associations with sexual excess. Liné comments on

this when she describes how people respond to her sexual identification with statements urging her to "make up [her] mind because [she's] being greedy". She is "allowed" to identify as straight or gay, but bisexuality is seen as outside the boundaries of acceptable sexualities, emphasised through descriptions of bisexuality as sexual decadence. In this discourse, bisexuality is constructed as an ultimate transgression of the rules of sexuality, where one's sexual feelings should be contained within either a heterosexual or homosexual category of identification. Flouting these two options is regarded as self-indulgent. Sonia explains this in the following way:

> …and that is why the whole bisexuality thing is so weird because people don't know where to put it, because it's actually in a way now more wrong [than being gay] because you can't make up your mind…. You want your bread buttered on both sides.

This construction of bisexual women as overcome with insatiable desire for both men and women was not the only one highlighted by participants as supporting a discourse of bisexuality as equated with promiscuity. Participants also referred to a construction where gender is deemphasised and pursuing sex is given prominence. In this construction, the focus is not on bisexual women being torn between a desire for both male and female lovers. Instead, the object of sexual satisfaction is regarded as irrelevant. Here, bisexual women are considered as being indiscriminate regarding with whom they have sex. Laetitia refers to this construction when she says "a lot of people think you are just super promiscuous because, you know, you don't really care, it's just about the sex". Cara also refers to this construction when she states the following:

> Ingrid: And as you said about these ideas that, that are circulating about bisexuality-
> Cara: - promiscuous people especially too hey...
> Ingrid: Ja...
> Cara: It is quite a big thing for me too…. a lot of people think [bisexuality] is the kiddies who basically, at the end of the day just want to sleep around... which is for me a bit of a very terrible preconceived idea.

The above statement evokes the commonly cited construction of bisexuals as "sleeping with anything that moves" (Ault, 1996). Such statements depict bisexuality as a dangerous undefined sexuality where the boundaries of "normal" or "natural" sex are ignored. Such a sexuality can seem particularly threatening in societies where sexuality is strictly regulated and entire social systems depend on heterosexuality and (heterosexual) marriage being the normative ideal. It seems as if this view of bisexuality constructs it as a moral threat, where if bisexuality becomes accepted and

normalised it is feared that it will invite a slippery slope of loosening sexual ethics, with an eventual degeneration into sexual and social anarchy. Furthermore, participants indicated that such a construction of bisexuality as an indiscriminate pursuit of sex again serves to negatively position their identification as bisexual women, and resulted in them being reluctant to identify as bisexual when they felt they would be positioned in relation to such a construction. For participants, this construction minimises the contribution of emotional aspects of their relationships through reducing bisexuality to sexual activity.

An obvious consequence of a discourse of bisexuality being equated with promiscuity is that bisexual women are positioned as incapable of being faithful to one partner. Below, Liné refers to her male heterosexual partner being concerned that she will be unfaithful, based on her identification as bisexual:

> Ingrid: And it's a fear people sometimes have [that you will cheat on them]?
> Liné: It definitely is, what my boyfriend said, for example, is 'but now I have double the worries. Because you are looking at men and you are looking at women'.

This discourse of bisexuality as being equated with promiscuity, where bisexual partners are positioned as unable to be monogamous, is reinforced not only by heterosexual male partners, but also by lesbian partners who are suspicious of bisexual women and their ability to be faithful in a relationship. Participants referred to responses by lesbian women who consider bisexual women as untrustworthy partners who cannot commit to a monogamous relationship. Astrid refers to this when she states the following:

> Like I said, there's a lot of discrimination from lesbian women towards bisexuals cause they just think it's promiscuous and fucked up.

As mentioned before, a positioning of bisexual women as necessarily promiscuous was one from which participants generally distanced themselves. During the interviews, participants frequently countered a construction of bisexual women as promiscuous by describing themselves as committed and monogamous in their relationships:

> Liné: But the fact remains, or what most people do not want to accept, is that when you are in a relationship you will be monogamous with that person. If I am with a woman now I won't sleep with men just because I need it.

Ingrid: So is that the idea that people have...

Liné: People's idea of bisexuality is that you are in constant need of both of the worlds. But what it is about, for me, is that if you commit to a person you commit nevertheless.

Nasiphi: For me it's like if I'm with a guy I'm with a guy, and if I'm with a girl I'm with a girl.

It is interesting how Taryn, in the quote below, describes herself as a "faithful bisexual", to emphasise how she distances herself from the widely circulating construction of bisexuality as equated with promiscuity:

I mean it's weird, everyone I tell that I'm bisexual, after my girlfriend and I have been together for three years now, they go 'okay, but you're with a woman'? And I'm like ja, but I could be with a man, if I wanted to. I'm still attracted to men…. I'm just a faithful bisexual, you know.

An implication of this discourse is that it creates a faithful bisexual/promiscuous bisexual dichotomy and in that way marginalises bisexual women who are non-monogamous. Such a dichotomy pressures bisexual women to act in ways that distance them from a construction of the promiscuous bisexual, less they risk being positioned as promiscuous, sexually decadent or hyper-sexed. If bisexuality is equated with promiscuity (in a society that values monogamy, at least as an ideal), identifying as bisexual can compromise participants' subject positions as "normal" or socially valued. It can then be seen that while bisexuality might generally be associated with a more flexible sexual identity, it does not entirely escape the strict regulation of female sexuality in dominant discourse. Within this discourse of bisexuality as promiscuity, bisexual women need to "defend" themselves from being positioned as promiscuous, and need to act in ways that resist such positioning in order to assert bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity. Despite resisting normative constructions of sexual identification, bisexual women are still not free from the restrictions heteronormativity places on female sexuality since the dichotomy created by this discourse serves to regulate and control female sexuality.

In this section I focused on two discourses that function to delegitimise bisexuality as a valid sexual category. Participants' perceived media discourses of bisexuality, in particular, as not providing accurate depictions of their lived realities and their experiences of their sexuality. There was a sense that media discourses portray a popularised image of what female bisexuality entails, and informs how others respond to participants' sexual orientation. These depictions serve to marginalise

bisexual women in that their sexual identity is reduced to constructions of promiscuity, hypersexuality and sexual decadence. Participants generally felt uncomfortable with these depictions and described how it differed from their own subjective experiences. In the following section I focus on how heteronormativity impacts on participants' identification as bisexual.

In the following section I focus on discourses that act to silence participants' expressions of same-sex sexuality.

7.4   Silencing discourses

In this section I focus on a grouping of discourses that work together to suppress same-sex sexuality. I termed these discourses silencing discourses as they do not allow for acknowledgement of participants' same-sex attraction or relationships. I first discuss a discourse that posits same-sex sexuality as un-African, followed by discussion of a discourse of same-sex sexuality as sin. Drawing on notions of culture and religion are two widely circulating strategies employed in advancing prohibitions against same-sex sexuality. Yip (2005) notes that referring to such authoritative discourses is generally very effective in silencing counter-discourses that attempt to normalise same-sex sexuality. Religious texts such as the Bible are taken for granted as a higher authority than any individual opinion (Yip, 2005). Through appealing to religious and cultural prohibitions against same-sex sexuality, the formulation of more sophisticated positions against same-sex sexuality are discouraged as uncritical statements such as "the Bible says so" or "that is not our culture", are generally effective in dismissing and silencing same-sex sexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Yip, 2005).

The two discourses presented here were prominent in the interviews, yet did not name bisexuality explicitly. Instead, the focus in these discourses was on prohibitions against same-sex sexuality, or homosexuality. Perhaps this points out that while in many respects bisexual and lesbian women face different challenges, they also have some shared concerns. By virtue of their attraction to and relationships with women, bisexual women often face the same discrimination and marginalisation directed at lesbian women. Further to this, it is important to note that in not naming bisexuality, it also points to the absence of bisexuality in two discourses that wield a very powerful influence in shaping notions of what constitutes valued or "natural" sexualities.

7.4.1 Same-sex sexuality as un-African

A discourse identified in the literature review that was also drawn on in the interviews is that of same-sex sexuality being regarded as un-African. This discourse refers to notions of same-sex

sexuality as a Western import that was introduced in Africa during colonial occupation. As I discussed in Chapter 4, the view that same-sex sexuality did not occur in African contexts prior to Western influence is inaccurate. However, many historical accounts of African sexualities insist on a construction of what Epprecht (2006) refers to as a misrepresented "'pure' African heterosexual" (p. 188). Contemporary constructions of African sexualities in many instances still uphold this misrepresentation and same-sex sexuality among black South Africans remains commonly regarded as un-African, foreign and unnatural.

Participants referred to this discourse of same-sex sexuality as un-African as a powerful silencing discourse. Phindile equated this discourse with the way in which religious discourses prohibit same-sex sexuality, stating: "It's the same sort of logic that a lot of Christian people apply, where they say 'cause God said so'. Who are you to argue with God! And you're like, okay, then I'll just shut up". Having others refer to same-sex sexuality as un-African serves to close off any discussion of participants' bisexuality. It is such a powerful discourse that it is difficult for participants to challenge it or a find space within it where same-sex sexuality is acknowledged or accepted.

Participants discussed the existence of same-sex practices in Africa prior to colonial occupation, indicating their own disagreement with a view of same-sex sexuality being a Western import. Phindile, for example, referred briefly to research documenting same-sex sexuality in African contexts in pre-colonial periods:

> I was reading a book in the library and it was a book on homosexuality in Africa…. This person wrote an article, citing examples of homosexual, <u>accepted</u> homosexual behaviour in Africa. Like in some parts of Africa it's okay for women to marry women, in other parts of Africa men would marry men…. So, I don't know if it's un-African…. I personally don't think that there's anything un-African about it, obviously (laughs).

Participants were however not concerned with "defending" same-sex sexuality as in fact being African. "Evidence" of same-sex sexuality in pre-colonial times was not drawn on as a strategy to retrieve same-sex sexuality in Africa from discourses that dismissed or silenced it. Instead, participants' focus was on the need to create discursive spaces in which different constructions of African identities are possible. To this end they drew on a construction of identity as located in particular historical and cultural contexts. Participants indicated a desire to have contextualised meanings around what being African denotes, where variability of identity is acknowledged and valued. Sibongile and Phindile describe this in the following way:

Sibongile: There cannot be one definition of what is African. I think if you find yourself say in a tribe in Venda or something, then obviously there's a code of conduct there, the rules that people follow and a standard to which you subscribe and live by. <u>Then</u>, within your context, that is what is African. But I think you need to be mindful and respectful of the fact that not everyone lives the way you do, so their definition will be different.

Phindile: My idea of African is, I'm positive, like 100% completely different from a rural boy's perception of what it means to be African.

Participants argued for the recognition of the variable construction of identity across such contexts where same-sex sexuality may or may not be included in what is considered African. Phindile refers to this by stating "if Africans today feel that it (same-sex sexuality) is not of them, for whatever reason, I don't want to take away their ability to say 'this is not us'". For participants, if the variability of African identity is acknowledged, it will allow for the emergence of differing constructions of what is considered an African identity. In that way a construction of same-sex sexuality as un-African could coexist with a view that regards it as African. Sibongile argued for opening up the dialogue of how African sexualities are defined by stating "there cannot be one definition of things where certain things are African and others are un-African". Opening up discussions about what African sexualities encompass is regarded by participants as countering the silencing mechanism of a discourse of same-sex sexuality being un-African. For participants, such an approach creates conversations instead of closing them off and in that way creates spaces for different constructions of African identities and sexualities to become available.

Participants spoke of a discourse of same-sex sexuality as un-African as functioning in two main ways. Firstly, they regard it as serving a political function in that it creates a valued African identity that is separate from Western influence. In post-colonial political discourse many African leaders have drawn on a construction of an African identity that is culturally proud and resistant to interference by the West (Hoad, 2007). Rejecting same-sex sexuality as a Western influence and a threat to African cultural identity is then a commonly used strategy by political leaders to affirm a shared African identity (Hoad, 2007). It serves to bolster a construction of a preferred African identity – one that values traditional African structures and resists Western interference. Sibongile comments on how the current focus on defining an African identity in particular ways (through amongst others shunning same-sex sexuality) is seen as being part of a post-colonial reclaiming of identity:

I think perhaps people [consider same-sex sexuality as un-African] because it's a… by being able to claim something as your own, be it land, a name, a monument or whatever, you are in a position of power. And I found that a lot of black people have used that to almost emancipate themselves in their minds from apartheid and slavery, to feel empowered in a sense…. So I think it's a way of empowering yourself as an individual. And some people need that to heal, you need to feel as though you're above the white man, suddenly. To feel like a person…. So they deem whatever doesn't fit with their ideas as wrong, and they are self-righteous and they know what's right.… Hence they shun homosexuals and call it wrong and blasphemous and all of that.

A discourse of same-sex sexuality as un-African then functions here to privilege a certain construction of African identity in post-Apartheid South Africa.

A second way in which a construction of same-sex sexuality as un-African functions is through supporting a patriarchal construction of female sexuality. Sibongile comments on the selective use or appropriation of cultural discourses, particularly so by powerful individuals such as Jacob Zuma and other political figures, to reinforce notions of accepted male sexuality (and unaccepted female sexuality). Sibongile describes how Jacob Zuma's sexuality is seen by many as a culturally valued sexuality. She goes on to note that in many instances cultural norms are reinterpreted by powerful male figures to protect male privilege and patriarchy, through appeals to norms that are not necessarily practiced according to their historical use but are instead adapted to continue to serve male interest[13]. While norms around male sexuality are protected by a marked flexibility in the interpretation of cultural values, female sexuality is not afforded the same privilege. An active

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[13] Jacob Zuma's performance of his masculinity has been described as a reassertion of patriarchal traditionalism where he calls on a traditional Zulu identity in support of his views on polygamy and female sexuality (Hunter, 2011; Robins, 2006). While his polygamous marriages are legally recognised and culturally sanctioned in South Africa, his own practice does not strictly conform to historical Zulu cultural prescriptions of polygamy. For example, he has publicly admitted to having sexual relationships with women outside of his formally recognised marriages, such as during his rape trial where he stated that he had consensual sex with his accuser (Evans & Wolmarans, 2006). Non-marital sex was not allowed in pre-colonial Zulu contexts and in some instances could even lead to punishment by death (Delius & Glaser, 2004). Similarly, when in a polygamous marriage having non-marital sex was also frowned upon. Current debates that draw on cultural practices to validate polygamous marriages point to a selective use of culture, in that notions of culture are drawn on in flexible ways to justify and maintain male privilege.

female sexuality (through the defiance of heteronormativity)[14] is not approved of and is regarded un-African, as it threatens patriarchal cultural configurations of sexuality:

> Sibongile: There are a number of things that are un-African, within the definition of what most people use for what is African. For example, I just think of Zuma and all these marriages, and a number of things, they are un-African, in that traditional sense. But it's accepted because well, he's a <u>man</u> and all of that.

A patriarchal orientation towards women as subservient to men is so entrenched that in many African communities female same-sex sexuality is not only seen in light of it being "deviant" sexually but is also regarded as a transgression of a woman's gendered position in communities. Women are expected to submit to men and assume a passive role - being involved with another woman is then often regarded as desiring to be like a man. The extent to which female same-sex sexuality is regarded as a threat to women's gendered position is apparent in the phenomenon of some men practicing corrective rape. Corrective rape is where lesbian women are targeted in sexual assaults where the perpetrator has the aim of using rape to "cure" their victim of their same-sex orientation (Actionaid, n.d.; Britton, 2006; Muholi, 2004). Victims often report that during the attack their perpetrators tell them that they are being "taught a lesson" and being "shown how to be real women" (Actionaid, n.d., p. 12). While media reports focus on lesbian women as the victims of corrective rape, bisexual women are of course also at risk as any indication of involvement with a woman makes them vulnerable, regardless of whether they identify as lesbian or bisexual. Sibongile refers to her awareness of such risk of physical violence or even death when she states that if you are seen with another woman "you're putting your life in danger really". Corrective rape is fuelled by strong sanctions against women's transgression of their prescribed gendered role, and therefore also relates to gender non-conformity, and not only deviation from heterosexuality (Currier, 2011).

Participants contrasted their experience and expression of their sexuality in terms of how white and black bisexual women share common ground, but also face different challenges. While white South African women also risk various forms of marginalisation and victimisation when coming out as bisexual or lesbian, the phenomenon of corrective rape is generally restricted to rural and semi-rural

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[14] Male same-sex sexuality is also considered un-African by many, but the point I am making here is that it is male *heterosexual* privilege that is protected by a selective interpretation of culture, while female sexuality is not afforded the same malleability in terms of the interpretation of cultural practices and values.

black communities[15]. Sibongile spoke about how her awareness of this influences the extent to which she can freely express her sexuality:

> I've never heard of a white lesbian being killed by a community. So just thinking about that, and in that frame of mind it is then different you know, to be a black lesbian, bisexual, whatever, because your reality is just a little different. Because we form part of larger communities. I'm not always here at varsity, I'm not always back home in my little suburb, I'm not always there. We form part of a larger community, when there are funerals or our families live in townships or things like that. So when we have to go there, you're gonna meet people who think they can straighten a woman by raping them. And I do think about that, that's why you do need to be discerning if I am seeing someone, for example, we cannot walk around holding hands, or kiss in public, or things like that.

A discourse of same-sex sexuality as un-African then also functions as a mechanism to regulate female sexuality. Engaging in same-sex relationships is regarded as a challenge to patriarchal arrangements of femininity and female sexuality, while male (hetero)sexuality enjoys relative protection from cultural sanctions through greater flexibility in the application of what is considered African.

7.4.2 Same-sex sexuality as sin

Another powerful discourse that was present in the text in instances where same-sex sexuality was condemned, was a discourse of same-sex sexuality as sin. All the participants indicated that they grew up in homes where Christian teachings informed their upbringing and their views of sexuality. In addition to this, as noted in the literature review in Chapter 4, most South Africans were exposed to Christian doctrine during apartheid, not only in religious contexts but also on the level of political ideology, pedagogy and socialisation. South African schools, for example, followed a curriculum based on a system of Christian National Education, where Christianity explicitly and implicitly informed education and socialisation in schools (Chidester, 2003). Religious discourse, and in particular Christianity, has then played an influential role in shaping participants' views of sexuality and also contributed to how sexuality is viewed by the communities of which they form part.

Participants commented on the manner in which Christianity is integrated into institutions and regulates social life on various levels, with the implication that religious constructions of what is

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[15] Research by the Triangle Project found that 86% of black lesbians in South Africa report that they fear being victims of sexual violence, compared to 44% of white lesbians reporting the same (Rich, 2006).

considered a valued and "normal" sexuality are very influential and circulate widely. Taryn refers to this when she states:

> I don't have a problem with Christianity but the fact that it's not separated from society, in that people run their businesses based on Christian principles and things like that, people have one mind set and it's sort of imposed on you.

She continues to relate it to a religious disapproval of same-sex sexuality permeating social institutions, stating "it's the same with sexuality. It's even worse, because of the huge Christian aspect, where homosexuality is not cool".

In this discussion I first focus on the various ways in which religious discourse constructs same-sex sexuality, before considering how these constructions impact on participants' own view of their sexuality as well as how they negotiate disclosure of their sexual identification with their families. I conclude with a discussion of counter-discourses offered by participants where their sexuality is not in conflict with their religious or spiritual beliefs.

During the interviews, religious discourse was generally described as disapproving of same-sex sexuality. While public discourses around same-sex sexuality might be evolving to be more accepting, "rhetoric around homosexuality as 'sinful', 'morally wrong', 'sick', 'unnatural' or 'deviant' is well established in both psychological and public discourse" and such rhetoric is still drawn on in efforts to undermine the legitimacy of same-sex sexuality (Ellis & Kitzinger, 2000, p. 171). Many of the participants referred to how they have been exposed to such a discourse of same-sex sexuality as sinful and unnatural, based on Biblical interpretations of same-sex sexuality. They described how they were exposed to this discourse from a young age and that it was never questioned. Sonia refers to this when she says "my parents were very, you know, staunch church-going people, and you know 'the Bible says homosexuality is wrong' and things like that. So we were raised in a certain way". Sonia goes on to relate the Christian discourse to which she was exposed whilst growing up with the dominance of heterosexuality:

> It's not okay to be gay or bisexual and it's an abomination in God's eyes... so I want to almost say that it's the whole Christianity thing that made everyone believe that there really is only one option for you, which is to be straight.

Belinda spoke about how when she was young a discourse of same-sex sexuality being sinful was also reinforced at school:

> In the primary school assembly they gave a sermon around how wrong homosexuality is. But to like small kids, and basically telling the kids about how gay people were going to burn in hell, and all of that. So this little girl started crying, and was so upset because now she thought that her uncle who was gay was going to be tortured and burned in hell because of being gay.

In addition to constructing same-sex sexuality as sinful, this discourse also constructs it as an unnatural sexuality that is equated with a harmful lifestyle. Sonia refers to this when she speaks about how homosexuality is presented in current interpretations of the Bible in the same light as bestiality and sexual orgies: "You know they make it this uber destructive hellish kind of sex lust thing, and that's not what it is at all, but that's how people interpret it". Jacobs (1993) refers to this as "scourge rhetoric", where notions of immorality are used to depict same-sex sexuality as a "moral disease" (p. 729). This construction draws on Biblical references to homosexuality in the context of Levitical defilement laws. As discussed in Chapter 4, the focus in these verses was on possible defilement during male-male intercourse; however the condemnation of male homosexuality in these ancient laws as well as in Paul's letters to the Romans is commonly extended to female same-sex sexuality. Sonia goes on to refer to how homosexuality has been equated with destructive behaviour where it is linked to sexual violence in Biblical verses:

> I think it might be in the New Testament already, I'm not sure, where one of the disciples or someone's son gets sodomised in the street, it's a very nasty terrible thing, and from there onwards it becomes this thing of you will not be homosexual.

In such a construction same-sex sexuality is associated with sexual violence, destruction and moral decay.

Such a construction of same-sex sexuality as sinful and harmful compels certain social actions, in that religious discourse positions individuals who identify as lesbian or bisexual as requiring religious intervention. In such a discourse, the assumption is that "sexual orientation is a matter of individual choice and that gays should be encouraged to make 'better' choices" and helped to "change their 'lifestyles'" (Green, 2000, p. 125). Phindile refers to the frequent response to her bisexuality by Christian friends: "Their response has been sort of 'you need help, come speak to my pastor at

church', or something along the lines of 'we'll pray for you'". In this manner same-sex sexuality is regarded as a sin that can be overcome, as Belinda comments on the view others hold when they state "it is wrong, but you know, Christianity can help you". Other participants spoke of experiences where religious interventions were used to exorcise an individual's homosexuality:

> Sonia: A friend of mine was kicked out of the house when she was 16 (when she disclosed her sexuality); her parents literally told her that they're sorry but they can't accept it, but not to worry because they will pray for her. They kept her in the house for a week to do exorcisms on her.

Participants recounted their personal struggle with making sense of their bisexuality due to their internalisation of religious discourse constructing same-sex sexuality as sinful and destructive. They described feeling guilty and conflicted as many of them identified with Christian teachings but could not reconcile them with their feelings of same-sex attraction. Nadia refers to this when she says:

> If you're raised in a Christian home everyone moves in that direction (of disapproving of same-sex sexuality), and those social constructs make you feel guilty because they tell you from a young age that if you sin you will be punished.

Sonia and Liné also refer to the conflict they felt in making sense of their sexuality in relation to their Christian upbringing:

> Liné: So for me, that was also obviously a struggle, the religious background of it. What do you now suddenly say to God about it all? Because the Bible says homosexuality is wrong.

> Sonia: I started to become very conflicted with things like Christianity versus being who I am, and who will accept me and you know that whole story of... ah there are so many struggles you have to go through just to get to a place where you're okay and you accept that who you are is who you are.

Phindile spoke about feeling as if she cannot consider herself a Christian and at the same time identify as gay or bisexual:

> [When I was younger] I started these Bible classes, and I decided, because you know religion says you have to be straight, basically. So I was like, okay cool, then I'm straight. You know I can't be... I can't remember if at that time I defined myself as gay or bi, but I wasn't straight.

> But while I attended these classes I wasn't gay, I was straight. And I was so unhappy, it was hard so I decided no, actually I'm not. I'm attracted to girls and so then I'm not Christian. So I would reject one or the other.

For participants the impact of religious discourse's disapproval of same-sex sexuality was strongly felt in their interactions with their families. Firstly, they describe how it functions as one of the main deterrents in disclosing their sexual identification to their families, particularly so when their families are very religious. Secondly, participants often spoke about religious proscriptions against same-sex sexuality being one of the main reasons for their parents not accepting them after disclosure:

> Sonia: And the religion thing also troubled my mother for very long, so she's religious, she's a Christian yes. She said a while back, we had a huge fight, it was when I had my last girlfriend and I was on my way to her again and we just had this enormous fight and my mother said to me, but she was screaming at me, and we never have scream fights, understand my family is actually very peaceful, there are no things like that. And she screamed at me 'I can't accept it, how can you expect me to accept it?'

While religious disapproval of same-sex sexuality functions as a powerful discourse in participants' lives, they also indicated that they were able to formulate a counter-discourse through challenging contemporary interpretations of religious discourse. Despite generally identifying with religious teachings and valuing aspects of their Christian upbringing, most of the participants indicated that at some point they started a process of questioning rigidly interpreted religious discourse. This occurred in a number of ways. Firstly, participants grew disillusioned with organised religion as it has, historically, supported oppressive systems such as apartheid. Astrid spoke about the involvement of the Dutch Reformed church in apartheid and how her increasing awareness of religious complicity in racial oppression during that time in South African history caused her to question her own religious position: "The fact that the church would support apartheid just pissed me off, and I basically denounced the church when I started realising what was going on". Phindile also spoke about historical interpretations of the Bible having contributed to oppression based on race, and how her awareness thereof has made her assume a more critical approach towards religion: "Like if I was living in the fourteen hundreds I wouldn't go to heaven because I'm black. If I'm living today I'm not going to heaven because I date girls".

Secondly, participants indicated that Biblical interpretations that have contributed to women's oppression have also caused them to become critical of Christianity, in that Biblical texts have been

used to justify women's subordination to men. Phindile refers to this when she says "I've had quite a few struggles with my religion, not just with sexuality but also with the treatment of women". Lastly, participants' critical approach to religious discourse is also informed by their views of the damage participants believe religious discourse has done to gay and bisexual identified individuals. Sonia spoke about how religious positioning of gay and bisexual identified individuals as sinful and deviant is "hurtful and destructive". This has led them to assume positions that challenge the construction in religious discourse of same-sex sexuality as sinful.

Participants described going through a process of questioning and rearticulating the religious teachings to which they were exposed during their upbringing, to the point that they all described themselves as now being comfortable with their sexuality as it relates to their faith or spirituality. Some participants described themselves as Christian, while other participants distanced themselves from a Christian position and rejected organised religion. In those cases they described themselves as being spiritual instead of religious. However, all of the participants spoke about feeling comfortable with their sexuality in relation to religious or spiritual beliefs:

> Astrid: I will still say that I'm spiritual, I won't say that I'm NG[16] Christian <u>at all</u>, but I feel completely guilt free and I feel that I'm cool with God and God is cool with me, whoever that might be. And my girlfriend and myself are actually both very spiritual, and we're spiritual in our relationship. So, that makes it alright for me, you know.

> Nadia: God is so much bigger than people standing in a church. So that's pretty much my view on religion, and I don't think for a moment that Jesus will be angry at me if I'm a lesbian (laughs).

> Sonia: I can say with full comfort and certainty that the Christianity/gay thing doesn't bother me anymore at all.

Participants' main point of resistance to religious discourse's disapproval of same-sex sexuality is their disagreement with the construction of same-sex sexuality as destructive. Participants referred to the previously discussed interpretations of Biblical verses equating same-sex sexuality with sexual violence and moral decay. Participants offered a counter-discourse where their same-sex relationships are constructed as loving and respectful. In this counter-discourse, a same-sex relationship cannot be seen as going against Biblical instruction if it is based on love and a desire to

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[16] NG refers to the *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* or the Dutch Reformed Church.

avoid harm. Laetitia describes this in the following way: "how can a God of love ever reject you or send you to hell for just loving? I mean, you're not doing <u>anyone</u> any harm". Liné and Sonia also emphasised their resistance to a construction of same-sex relationships as destructive, according to religious discourse:

> Liné: How can you say that (same-sex sexuality) is necessarily wrong, if it's something that's beautiful and pure, in your mind? And all you want to do is have the best for that person and be with them, and love them and cherish them, and all they want to do is do that same thing for you? How can you say that is wrong? Because God is love, God is nothing else.

> Sonia: At the end of the day I feel like I am a good person, you know I do as much good as I can to be a good person in terms of not living destructively and not harming people, you know, things like that, to as far as possible limit pain, and that's part of it. By being gay or bisexual I am not being destructive in <u>any way</u>….

This section focused on two silencing discourses that function to close off conversations about same-sex sexuality. It can be highlighted again that participants seldom explicitly named bisexuality when discussing these two discourses, instead focusing on same-sex sexuality. It is possible that bisexuality not being explicitly named in these discourses relates to participants' general tendency in the interviews to focus not on their relationships and connections with men, but on their relationships with women. Therefore it might also be that in the statements included in this section of the analysis, that participants' focus was more on what is seen as "abnormal" by society (their relationships with women) and therefore they focused their discussion on same-sex sexuality. It is also possible that this is related to the absence of the word bisexuality in religious texts such as the Bible, which would explain why religious discourse more generally focuses on homosexuality and not bisexuality. Similarly, despite the fact that black participants in this study identified as bisexual, it is not a term that is widely available in black communities[17] and might therefore also not be highly visible in discourses around African identity.

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[17] I indicated in the literature review that in many African contexts the terms "gay" and "lesbian" have received increasing attention. However "bisexual" is not often used by black Africans and South Africans when describing their sexual identification, and authors writing about African sexualities also generally neglect using the term.

7.5   Normalising discourses

The discourses presented thus far generally act to dismiss bisexuality as a category of sexual identification and marginalise women who claim such an identity. In this section I discuss two normalising discourses drawn on by participants in efforts to retrieve bisexuality from a discursive space where it is rendered unintelligible, delegitimised and silenced.

I first discuss a discourse of a universal bisexual potential that constructs bisexuality as normal and natural. I then discuss a discourse of bisexuality not being a choice in that it is biologically predetermined, where participants draw on this discourse to validate their identity as bisexual.

7.5.1 "A little bit of bisexuality exists in all of us": Claiming a universal bisexual potential

This discourse was drawn on by participants in support of a construction of bisexuality as normal and natural. In this discourse bisexuality is constructed as a universal potential for attraction to both sexes that most, if not all, people share. Taryn describes this potential when she states "I feel that bisexuality is something that a lot of us share and that only a few of us acknowledge and explore". Taryn goes on to explain this further:

> I feel like very few people are at either extreme where they are completely heterosexual or completely gay, and can be sure of the fact that they are at either extreme. So I guess a little bit of bisexuality exists in all of us…. I just can't understand how it's not a normal state of being, bisexuality.

A discourse of a universal bisexual potential supports a view of sexuality as fluid. Within this discourse sexual desire and romantic love are viewed as being able to flow in more than one direction (Pell, 2002). An inherent bisexual potential implies that it is possible for someone, regardless of their self-conscious sexual orientation, to experience variation in the direction of their sexual feelings (Diamond, 2008). Taryn refers to this when she describes how she has experienced attraction to and love for men and women:

> Having been with both sexes, it's totally possible to love a man or to love a woman. And it's totally possible to be sexual with a man or with a woman. For me sex has always been an extension of my love for someone, and whether they are male or female, sex can be great either way, if you love that person. So I have no doubt that it's possible to love either gender…. It really, to me it seems quite normal.

This discourse normalises bisexuality by positing that fluid attraction is more common than most people would consider it to be. It counters the notion of bisexuality as pathological or deviant through constructing it as something that exists in everybody. The suppression of one's bisexual potential is instead what is considered pathological or harmful – Taryn refers to this in the following statement: "So many people will go there in their mind, and never for whatever reason, I think usually because of social judgment, don't really ever explore it. And might actually end up being happier if they had". Laetitia refers to the "insanities" caused by being forced to commit to either a heterosexual or homosexual orientation. In drawing on this normalising discourse, participants invert the dominant construction of bisexuality as pathological and instead position themselves as normal, healthy and fulfilled.

This construction echoes aspects of a Freudian view of bisexual potential, or polymorphous sexuality, where individuals are considered to be born with an innate undifferentiated bisexuality, which is only directed towards exclusive heterosexuality or homosexuality during the psychosexual maturation that occurs during puberty (Freud, 1937/1963). However, participants describe this differentiation into a heterosexual or homosexual identity as the result of societal pressure to conform to one of the two socially recognised categories of sexuality, and not due to a Freudian explanation of a developmental path to a "mature" sexuality. A universal bisexual potential is constructed by participants as a natural propensity to be attracted to and love either men or women, but this propensity is stifled during socialisation and through the dominance of a heterosexual/homosexual binary. Laetitia describes this in the following way:

> I really think that in people, both sides exist. But I think that one gets raised with... I mean you really get trained from a young age to be a certain thing. You get raised as a girl and girls like boys, or you get raised as a boy and boys do this, and you get a list of criteria. But I think that in essence both sides exist in all of us. I think it is just your nurturing that determines what you will then eventually do…. Some people have been conditioned so badly that they won't even consider it.

Authors such as Pell (2002) have pointed out that a view of bisexuality as innate risks exposing bisexuality to the same essentialising treatment that many bisexually-identified women are in fact attempting to resist. Appealing to a universal bisexual potential that is inherent to everyone, positions bisexuality as a core identity that exists prior to the effects of discourse on shaping sexuality. By naturalising bisexuality and pathologising the repression of it, a view of bisexuality as essential and innate is perpetuated (Pell, 2002). However, participants' accounts emphasised a

construction of such a universal bisexual potential as creating *options* for sexual identification, where it does not imply that bisexuality should be the only category of identification. Instead the potential for sexual fluidity is regarded as allowing for variation in how people express their sexuality. Bisexual potential is constructed as a general openness to experience that extends beyond sexuality and such an openness allows participants to choose to act on feelings of attraction, instead of limiting themselves to an exclusive heterosexual or homosexual orientation. This was illustrated by Sonia when we discussed, during the interview, how children who are raised to be flexible about their sexuality can eventually have greater freedom in their expression of sexual variation as adults:

> Ingrid: I think that it can become a choice in that sense...
>
> Sonia: Ja if we're all raised bisexual.
>
> Ingrid: If you can feel free from a young age that you can express yourself...
>
> Sonia: Ja and to just explore, if you don't like it (bisexuality) then fine, just be open to it because you can just be so much happier if you give yourself a chance, because we limit ourselves and that's the sickest thing you can do. Limit yourself, really? The idea is that you will give yourself as much space as possible to grow in and we choose to limit ourselves and it's almost like a paradox, it's almost masochistic in a way. So I agree with you fully, either way I will raise my children to make a choice about it.

In this sense a discourse of a universal bisexual potential constructs sexual orientation as a choice where an inherent bisexual predisposition allows individuals to vary the direction of their sexual desire and affection throughout their lives. Sonia refers to this when she equates bisexuality with not "limiting yourself". Astrid refers to this when she states "for me it's a decision". She goes on to say that despite having had some negative experiences with men, she decided not to be "anti-men" and instead chose to remain open to an attraction to both men or women.

7.5.2 "I don't think it's a choice": Bisexuality as biologically predetermined

A second normalising discourse that was drawn on by participants is that of bisexuality not being a choice, in that sexual orientation is regarded as biologically predetermined and fixed. This discourse resists the position advanced in the previous discourse of a universal bisexual potential, where sexual orientation is constructed as a choice that individuals make. As indicated in the literature review, competing explanations for the development of sexual orientation exist where a nature/nurture dichotomy is often drawn on – biological explanations regard sexual orientation as pre-determined and not based on personal choice ("nature"), while cultural explanations regard it as more malleable and open to intervention ("nurture"), through for example psychological therapies.

In the latter construction sexual orientation is then seen, at least to some extent, as a choice (Sedgwick, 1993). The current discourse challenges such a view and constructs sexual orientation as not based on individual choice.

Participants mostly drew on such a discourse, of bisexuality as biologically predetermined, in the context of reflecting on challenges to their identification as bisexual. During the interviews participants recounted being confronted by the idea that they can change their sexual orientation and that they could "become straight" if they tried hard enough. Sonia describes how her parents constructed her attraction to women as a choice she had made and that therefore she could change her sexual orientation by resisting that choice:

> When my parents found out (about my girlfriend), I hit this enormous depression because they refused to accept me and took away my phone and my dad refused to pay for my sport and I didn't get pocket money and all these things to kind of force me into being straight…. And my dad came to me and he said 'how can't you change this?' and he told me how he knew I could change it and he started crying and it was the first time that I saw my dad crying. But you know he felt so intensely that I could change this thing and I was just like 'no! I <u>can't</u>! I have been trying for the past how many years, I <u>can't</u>!'

Sonia illustrates here how a discourse of bisexuality as biologically predetermined functions to resist challenges to participants' sexual identification, particularly in response to an attribution of blame for identifying with a non-normative sexuality. Sonia emphasises this when she refers to being "punished" for being in a same-sex relationship in an attempt to "force (her) into being straight". Nasiphi echoes this when she says:

> I don't think you choose to be bisexual…. I think it's something that's in you; it's just something that you feel and you can't try to hide from it or try to change it. I don't think it's a choice at all.

During the interviews this discourse of bisexuality as biologically predetermined was drawn on in two ways. Firstly, participants attempted to trace the "origins" of their same-sex feelings, and secondly they drew on biological explanations of the development of sexual orientation. In tracing the origins of their feelings of same-sex attraction, participants engaged in a process of retrospectively looking for "evidence" of their bisexuality in their younger selves. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995, p. 101) refer to such a process of "retrospective accounting" where participants in

their study, who initially identified as heterosexual but later transitioned to a lesbian identity, engaged in a "reconstruction of a past that offers a sense of continuity with the present", through recollections of previously forgotten or dismissed same-sex attraction and experiences. Participants in the current study similarly recounted moments where they experienced their first feelings of same-sex attraction as "signs" of their inherent bisexuality. Laetitia refers to this when she says "if I look back now I'm like 'whoa!' because then I can clearly see the signs from long ago". Sibongile describes her feelings of attraction to men and women as always having been part of her when she says "it was always there". Liné recounts her first awareness of same-sex feelings when she was younger:

> And so I started looking back and I had a best friend in school, and we were incredibly close…. And I would think of us getting dressed in the room - I would sit and watch her. At that stage I didn't realise why I was watching, but now that I look back I realise, oh my God, but you were appreciating her nudity, but you wouldn't admit it to yourself at that stage. So yes, it's half… Then one starts to realise it's actually always been there, but you just never recognised it.

Sonia also describes her attempts to trace the origins of her same-sex feelings and concludes that she has always felt different from others, based on her attraction to women as well as men:

> In primary school I dated boys too... But I knew that there was something different from grade one, I mean in grade one I fell in love with my standard five prefect and I remember watching their revue video over and over and over just to see her and I was just like 'but why doesn't anyone else feel like that'? You know?…. Why do I like my best girl friend more than most other people like their best girl friends?

By tracing the origins of their bisexuality, participants reconstruct their pasts and normalise their sexuality through positing it as something that has always been part of them. By describing their bisexuality as "always having been there" it is constructed as something that is inherent to participants, that has always existed in them but that they could only articulate once they were older and had a frame of reference for understanding it. Drawing on this essentialist discourse serves to minimise societal blame for participants' "deviant" sexuality, in that if bisexuality has always existed within them, it is not something they chose. Here a construction of inherent bisexuality is drawn on very differently compared to how it functioned in the previous discourse of a universal bisexual potential. The emphasis here is on participants' perception of bisexuality as something that formed part of them even before their awareness of it, and therefore as something that they did not choose.

A second way in which participants' sexual identification is normalised in this discourse of bisexuality as predetermined, is through appealing to biological explanations for the development of same-sex feelings. Many arguments have been put forward in support of a biological basis for sexual orientation, where sexual orientation is seen as biologically predisposed and fixed across one's lifespan (Hegarty, 2002). These arguments draw on studies that report on the influence of pre-natal hormones (Ehrhardt et al., 1985), genetic contributions (Hamer, Hu, Magnuson, Hu, & Pattatucci, 1993) and differences in brain structures (LeVay, 1991), amongst others. For participants, biological explanations for the development of sexual orientation function to normalise and destigmatise bisexuality. If their sexual orientation is the result of their biology, then they cannot be blamed or judged for it. Bisexuality is then not a choice and it is not something that is under their personal control. Taryn refers to such biological explanations when she states the following:

> There are so many facets, I mean things like if you are exposed to too much testosterone in the womb you might end up being gay. How do you have any control over something like that?

Taryn goes on to say:

> [If it] was a choice maybe it would be different, but it's not a choice. To hate people because of something that is not even of their own choosing is just wrong man.

Sonia speaks of her own experience of discovering that pre-natal hormonal influences could have affected the development of her sexual orientation, and her emotional response of relief at the possibility that she did not "choose" her sexual orientation:

> My mom told me one day.... that her first pregnancy miscarried and when she fell pregnant again the doctor gave her hormones so that she could keep me. And I don't know if it had an influence at all, but I think it may have gotten through to her that it could have perhaps... And for me it was a huge relief, because for me it was that thing of 'thank you, it's not my fault, I really can't help it'. Because I thought about it many times to just fight it one more time, just one more time and then I try and I become this deeply unhappy person. So when that came out I just thought 'ah, thank you'. Just this one thing that made it not my fault...

In this account, Sonia illustrates how a discourse of bisexuality as biologically predetermined can function to absolve blame (when she states "it's not my fault") and normalise her sexual identification. Participants, however, also assumed resistant positions in relation to biological

explanations for the development of sexual orientation. The heteronormative lens frequently employed in studies researching the development of sexual orientation has the consequence that such studies typically approach same-sex orientations in terms of an "'excess', 'deficiency' or 'imbalance'" in relation to the accepted norm of heterosexual development (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 79). This was also seen in participants' statements such as Taryn's reference to exposure to "too much testosterone" being linked to same-sex sexuality. Sedgwick (1993) presents a well-articulated response to the negative terms in which same-sex development is constructed in many biological explanations:

> If I had ever, in any medium, seen any researcher or populariser refer even once to any supposed gay-producing circumstance as the *proper* hormone balance, or the *conducive* endocrine environment, for gay generation, I would be less chilled by the breezes of all this technological confidence. (p. 79, emphasis in original)

Participants were critical of biological explanations of sexual orientation being used to further discriminate against same-sex orientations. They referred to scientific discourses that propose genetic manipulation to eliminate "undesirable" sexual orientations, similar to what some geneticists predicted when speculating about the existence of a "gay gene" (Sedgwick, 1993). Astrid refers to this when she states that in this approach there is a possibility of people responding in the following way: "it's like 'your foetus is going to be gay, let's kill it'. I mean it's an extreme way of saying it but that's what could happen if you fucking go there, so like don't go there".

Participants also resisted an over reliance on biological explanations where it was seen as simplifying sexual orientation by reducing it to biologically predetermined influences. In such a construction individual agency is removed. Astrid and Taryn refer to this when they state the following:

> Taryn: I just don't think it's that straightforward. You can't just say it's a genetic thing, you know.
> Astrid: I would hate if they fucking said that. I'd be like 'fuck you, I can't think for myself'?

Participants highlight here how biological explanations can frame sexual orientation in a deterministic manner, where individual choice is erased.

In this section I focused on normalising discourses, where I explored the strategies used by participants to retrieve bisexuality from a discursive space of invalidation and delegitimisation. To

this end I first discussed a discourse of universal bisexual potential that posits that a propensity for attraction to both men and women exists in everyone. This discourse constructs sexual orientation as fluid and as changing over the course of one's life. It normalises bisexuality through constructing it as more common than is generally acknowledged. It also normalises bisexuality through depicting monosexuality as pathological, in that it requires of individuals to limit themselves to either a heterosexual or homosexual orientation.

I also discussed a discourse of bisexuality as biologically predetermined. This discourse constructs bisexuality as not being a choice and serves to normalise bisexuality in that it removes personal blame for sexual orientations that deviate from the heterosexual norm. In this manner many of the participants described that biological explanations for the development of sexual orientation served to destigmatise their own identification as bisexual, as they are not regarded as responsible for their sexual identification if it is biologically predetermined. However, a discourse of bisexuality as predetermined also contributes to an essentialist view of sexual orientation in that it posits sexuality as a fixed and inherent characteristic that is unchanging over an individual's life span. Finally, it can be noted that a discourse of bisexuality as biologically predetermined is in contrast with the position drawn on by participants when discussing the discourse of a universal bisexual potential, which described sexual orientation as a choice individuals make.

7.6   Conclusion

This chapter concluded the presentation and discussion of the findings of the discourse analysis, where I discussed eight groupings of discourses that in various ways impact on participants' positioning as bisexual. From the discussion of these discourses it becomes clear that claiming a bisexual identity requires careful discursive manoeuvring. Participants have to negotiate dominant discourses of valued or privileged subjectivities in an attempt to legitimise and validate their own position in discourse. Claiming a bisexual identity is at times complicated and risks marginalisation in the face of delegitimising discourses that construct participants in negative terms of promiscuity and hypersexuality. Claiming such an identity is further complicated by the relative invisibility of bisexuality in relation to a heterosexual/homosexual binary. As a result participants are faced with asserting the legitimacy of their sexual identification and creating bisexual visibility, while at the same time resisting negative positioning in relation to dominant discourses.

The Derridean notion of undecidables becomes useful in considering participants' positioning in relation to dominant discourses of sex, gender and sexuality. It is possible that the discursive anxiety

caused by bisexuality's challenge to dominant discourses may contribute to its delegitimisation and unintelligibility, where bisexuality is not considered a viable category of sexual identification and bisexual individuals are assigned as either gay or straight to avoid the confusion of oppositional categories. Collins (2005) notes that the threat to oppositional categories posed by undecidables compels a need to re-establish order. In reference to the zombie motif as an undecidable, he states that the "troubling element" has to be eliminated by killing it. He continues:

> [But] zombies are already dead (while alive). You can't kill a zombie, you have to resolve it. It has to be 'killed' categorically, by removing its undecidability…. Returning it to one side of the opposition or the other. It has to become a proper corpse or a true living being. (Collins, 2005, p. 23)

Similarly, bisexuality might compel a discursive correction through assigning individuals as either gay or straight, in the face of its challenge to dominant discourses. Such discursive correction was evident in the sections of the analysis that dealt with the unintelligibility of bisexuality, notably in the sections on discourses that position bisexuality in terms of confusion or indecision, and the accompanying incitement to "choose a side". Participants' engagement with normalising discourses can perhaps be interpreted as a response to such correction, where they endeavour to retrieve their identification as bisexual from illegitimacy. From the analysis it then appears that the potential for bisexuality to act as an undecidable is frustrated when bisexuality is "forced" to one or the other side of the opposition, through the discursive "correction" of troubling instances.

I take up this debate again in the following and final chapter, where I consider the potential for bisexuality to subvert binary categories.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

8.1   Introduction

In this final chapter I first provide a brief summary of the findings of the present study, before revisiting the research questions that this study aimed to address. In particular, I consider a central problematic of the study – that of the potential for bisexuality to challenge dominant discourses of sex, gender and sexuality. Finally, I comment on the limitations of the study and provide suggestions for future research focused on female bisexuality and related areas of study.

8.2   Summary of the findings

In presenting the findings of the discourse analysis, I made use of a framework that organises the findings into eight groupings of discourses related to how participants account for their gendered and sexualised subjectivity in the interview texts. In this section I briefly summarise these eight groupings.

8.2.1   Sexuality as identity

This section was concerned with participants' engagement with a discourse of sexuality as identity. While participants negotiate their identity in a discursive context where sexuality is regarded as defining subjectivity and as creating different "types" of people, they resisted the manner in which such a discursive context posits bisexuality as being primary to their identity. Drawing on a counter discourse that emphasises the intersectionality of identity, they were able to enact various strategies that downplay the significance of their identification as bisexual in their descriptions of themselves. In this manner participants challenged the salience of sexuality in constructions of identity.

I also discussed how participants make sense of their identities in a context of post-apartheid South Africa and a resistance to identity politics. Participants' resistance to fixing their identity along strictly defined categories of identity was partly informed by a view of such categories as oppressive. In this context, participants were critical of rigidly constructed lines of difference, such as the boundaries around race and sexuality. Their reluctance to privilege certain aspects of identity, such as their identification as bisexual, was constructed in relation to such a political resistance of reified categories of identity.

8.2.2   Discourses of gendered difference

In this section I focused on participants' engagement with discourses of gendered difference. Participants drew on a discourse that rejects gendered difference, in this way constructing the notion of gender as informing differentiation between people as arbitrary. Further to this, they drew on a discourse of romantic androgyny to define their attraction to others as removed from male/female categories. In this sense participants challenged the automatic linking of sex, gender and sexual desire. However, participants also demonstrated the pervasive effects of dominant discourse in the gendered positioning of subjects. This was illustrated in a construction of relationships with men along a traditional male/female binary, positioning participants as passive feminine subjects in relation to their male partners. In contrast to this, relationships with women were regarded as sites of resistance to the traditional gender binary in that participants are able to blur the strict allocation of gendered roles when in a same-sex relationship.

8.2.3   Bisexuality and a butch/femme dichotomy

This section was concerned with participants' treatment of notions of femininity when reflecting on their own gendered identities as bisexual women. Participants drew on traditional beauty ideals in constructing a "femme" identity, associated with bisexual identities, and evoked a construction of a "butch dyke", associated with lesbian identities. The butch dyke was considered as troubling the "natural" gender order and threatening participants' precarious position in discourse, where they themselves are sexual "others". Through ascribing to a femme bisexual identity, as opposed to what they construct as a marginalised and othered butch lesbian identity, participants' accounts indicate an attempt to preserve their relative protection in dominant discourse.

8.2.4   Heteronormativity and bisexuality

In this section I focused on how heteronormativity, as a powerful societal discourse in participants' contexts, intersects with their identification as bisexual. Participants drew on a discourse of (hetero)sexual marriage and children as a socially valued discourse that creates privileged subjectivities. They described how identifying as bisexual complicates this discourse as they cannot conform to the idealised construction of marriage and having children within the context of a heterosexual relationship, depicted in this discourse. Despite the powerful influence of this discourse on shaping participants' notions of relationships and family, participants also assumed positions where they resisted and rearticulated this discourse. Participants challenged the authority of this discourse as exclusively heterosexual in attempts to accommodate their own sexual identification, but did so mostly in relation to having a relationship with a woman. They did not

articulate a visibly bisexual resistance to the heteronormative construction of marriage and family discourse.

8.2.5   The unintelligibility of bisexuality

In this section I presented discourses that function together to render bisexuality as unintelligible. Participants constructed their identities in relation to a dominant heterosexual/homosexual binary, where bisexuality is not considered a valid category of identification. The unintelligibility of bisexuality was discussed in relation to an inability to construe sexual desire as being fluid or as "going both ways". I also discussed a discourse of bisexuality as indecision. This discourse functioned to dismiss bisexuality as a more enduring category of sexual identification and positioned participants as undergoing a transitional stage towards either a heterosexual or a homosexual identity. A consequence of such a discourse of bisexuality as indecision, is an incitement for participants to "choose a side". Within this construction bisexuality is not available as a category of sexual identification and participants are expected to eventually decide between identifying as heterosexual or homosexual. The discourses discussed in this section serve to reinforce the dominance of a heterosexual/homosexual binary and dismiss bisexuality as a viable category of identification.

8.2.6   Delegitimising discourses

This section stands in contrast with the previous grouping of discourses, where bisexuality was rendered unintelligible and dismissed as a "real" category of sexual identification. In this section bisexuality was acknowledged and constructed as highly visible in public discourses. It was however positioned in delegitimising ways through two discourses in particular. Firstly, a discourse of bisexuality as an eroticised heterosexual male fantasy posited a sexualised view of female bisexuality as it relates to male desire. It constructed bisexual women not as active and autonomous sexual agents, but instead as sexual objects in the service of male pleasure. Participants also commented on this discourse as it plays out in media discourses that depict bisexual women as hypersexual and as sexual objects.

A second delegitimising discourse is one that equates bisexuality with promiscuity. This discourse constructed bisexual women as sexually insatiable and as constantly craving sexual gratification from both men and women. In this way it positioned bisexual women as incapable of monogamy and further extended a view of bisexual women as hypersexual. The two discourses discussed here were drawn on in ways that marginalise bisexual women and contribute to participants' reluctance to

identify as bisexual in contexts where they will be positioned as hypersexual, promiscuous and sexually decadent.

8.2.7 Silencing discourses

In this section I considered a grouping of discourses where bisexuality was rarely named – instead, the focus was on how same-sex sexuality was constructed in relation to dominant discourses. These discourses functioned as silencing discourses as they do not allow for discussion or recognition of participants' same-sex attraction or relationships. The first discourse drawn on in this section is that of same-sex sexuality as un-African. Within this discourse, same-sex sexuality was constructed as a Western import introduced to African contexts during colonisation. This discourse served to bolster a construction of a valued African identity separate from Western influence or interference. It was also shown to contribute to a patriarchal construction of female sexuality through regulating aspects of female sexuality that do not support normalised male heterosexuality.

The second discourse discussed here was a religious discourse of same-sex sexuality as sinful, unnatural and destructive. Participants spoke of the influence of such religious prohibition of same-sex sexuality on their ability to disclose their sexual identification to their families – for many participants this discourse was drawn on in their families' negative responses to their sexuality.

Both the discourses discussed here function as powerful silencing discourses in that participants find it difficult to construct counter-discourses in response to the invalidation of same-sex sexuality. However, as the findings also indicated, there were instances in which participants formulated positions that resisted these dominant discourses.

8.2.8 Normalising discourses

In this final section I discussed two discourses that are drawn on by participants as strategies to validate and normalise bisexuality. The first discourse is one of a universal bisexual potential, where bisexuality was constructed as a normal state existing in everyone. This discourse constructed sexual attraction as fluid in that individuals have an inherent potential to be attracted to both men and women. It challenged a view of bisexuality as pathological and instead regarded the suppression of bisexuality through committing to an exclusive heterosexual or homosexual orientation as harmful to individuals.

A second normalising discourse was that of bisexuality as biologically predetermined and fixed. In this discourse bisexuality was regarded as an inborn predisposition that cannot be changed. In drawing on this discourse participants were exempted from societal blame for their sexual orientation, as it was something that they did not choose. In this manner bisexuality was destigmatised as it was constructed as not being under participants' personal control.

Having provided a broad overview of the main findings of the study, I now consider in more detail the subversive potential of participants' accounts, as evidenced in their treatment of dominant discourses of sex, gender and sexuality.

8.3   Troubling the norm? Bisexuality's challenge to binary categories

In this section I provide further reflection on the findings of the study, particularly in light of one of the central research questions of the study. In Chapter 5 I described the research questions that informed the study as being centred on how participants account for their gendered and sexualised subjectivity. For ease of reference, I repeat the research questions below:

Question 1:	How is bisexuality constructed as a discursive object in the talk of participants when accounting for their gendered and sexualised identities?
Question 2:	How is gender constructed as a discursive object in such talk of participants?
Question 3:	What are the implications of discourses of bisexuality for participants' ways-of-being in the world? In other words, how is subjective experience shaped by the manner in which these discourses position participants?
Question 4:	How do participants position themselves in relation to dominant discourses of sex, gender and sexuality available in society? What are the ways in which these dominant discourses are supported, resisted or subverted in the talk of participants?
Question 5:	Moving beyond the context of the research interview, what is the relationship between the discourses produced (and drawn on) by participants during the interviews and the institutions (such as social, political and material structures) encountered in participants' context?

While the presentation of the findings in Chapter 6 and 7 largely addressed these research questions, some additional discussion of the potential for bisexuality to subvert dominant discourses of sex, gender and sexuality is warranted. To this end, I focus on the fourth research question and consider the ways in which participants' interview accounts support, resist or subvert dominant discourses. This is particularly pertinent considering the lack of empirical research exploring the

potential for the accounts of self-identified bisexual individuals to subvert gender and sexuality binaries. I reviewed theories of bisexuality that emphasise its transgressive character in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, where I noted that constructions in academic texts of bisexuality as an "unpigeonholed sexual identity" (Garber, 2000, p. 18) describe a radical sexuality - one which has a revolutionary potential to destabilise "Western culture's understanding of sex, gender, and sexual orientation" (Firestein, 1996, p. xix). However, as I argued in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, despite the prominence of such a construction of bisexuality there is a silence in academic texts where this potential is not explicitly explored in the accounts of bisexual women. In response to this silence, I first consider the subversive potential of bisexuality in relation to the heterosexual/homosexual binary, with a particular focus on bisexual erasure. This is followed by a discussion of bisexuality's potential to challenge the male/female gender binary.

8.3.1   Bisexual erasure in support of the heterosexual/homosexual binary

In this section I consider how bisexual erasure, a concept touched on in Chapter 6, hinders the subversive potential of bisexuality described in academic texts.

A discursive erasure of bisexuality can be identified at several points throughout the findings, but particularly in participants' accounts of a heteronormative marriage and family discourse. Several theorists have referred to the notion of bisexual erasure in dominant discourses of sexuality (e.g., Du Plessis, 1996; Yoshino, 2000). Bisexual erasure is not simply the omission of bisexuality from discourses but refers to various strategies employed by heterosexual and homosexual discourses that serve to delegitimise bisexuality (Yoshino, 2000). Du Plessis (1996, p. 22) notes that bisexual erasure is reflected in the "ideologically bound inability to imagine bisexuality concretely", an aspect which is evident in an array of theories - from Freudian theory to contemporary queer, gay and lesbian theories. From the findings discussed in Chapter 6, it appears that such bisexual erasure is also reflected in the accounts of participants in this study.

MacDowall (2009) describes bisexual erasure as the "ways in which bisexuality as a mature form of desire is deferred, elided, or made invisible" (p. 4). This description is reflected in participants' accounts, where bisexuality is *deferred* when participants refer to constructions of bisexuality as an identity that is not viable in the present moment. This was evident in participants' accounts of bisexuality as an identity that attains visibility only in reflection on past relationships, where the heterosexual/homosexual binary displaces it from the present moment. Bisexuality is also *elided*, where participants take recourse to either same-sex or heterosexual relationship models - but not a

bisexual model - in engaging with marriage and family discourse. Lastly, bisexuality is made *invisible*, through a lack of language to articulate long-term unions and notions of family that make specific reference to self-aware bisexual identities. In this manner, bisexuality is "always *before*, *after*, or *outside* (rather than alongside) the imposition of cultural order" (Du Plessis, 1996, p. 29, emphasis in original).

Yoshino (2000) refers to the erasure of bisexuality from dominant discourse as functioning on a structural level, arguing that bisexual erasure is linked to the manner in which heterosexual and homosexual discourses function to preserve "overlapping political interests" (p. 353). One such shared interest is the stabilisation of exclusive sexual orientation categories (Yoshino, 2000). Through excluding bisexuality, homosexuality polices its own boundaries and remains a seemingly homogenous identity around which individuals can cohere and politically mobilise (Namaste, 1994; Yoshino, 2000). In this sense, bisexual erasure serves the interest of gay and lesbian identity politics. Heterosexuality, as a predominantly normative sexual category, similarly maintains a homogenous (and in most contexts a privileged) identity through eliding and delegitimising bisexuality. While heterosexuality, defined as being in opposition to homosexuality, depends on homosexuality for its meaning, it does not rely on bisexuality in the same manner. Bisexuality is then regarded as a threat as it blurs the boundaries between these two historically distinct categories (Yoshino, 2000).

In homosexual discourse, two particular functions of bisexual erasure can be further elaborated on. Firstly, discursive formulations of lesbian family configurations as assimilationist require strict boundary policing in order to maintain some measure of social privilege in heteronormative societies. Same-sex families are in this instance "tolerated" in heteronormative contexts only because they are contained in a lesbian relationship model that mirrors heterosexual relationship ideals. Clarke (2003) refers to the normalisation of lesbian and gay marriage as the view that "in fighting for the right to marry, lesbians and gay men are essentially fighting for the right to conform and assimilate, to be 'just like' heterosexuals" (p. 520). In this sense, bisexuality is a threat to lesbian family configurations since it risks destabilising the normalising logic at work here. Here, bisexuality is (imagined as) being *too visible*, in that associations of bisexual women with non-monogamy threaten more "sanitised" versions of same-sex families depicted in lesbian assimilationist discourse. Bisexual erasure functions to secure the normalising lesbian family model, and bisexual women in same-sex relationships are positioned (or visually read) as lesbian to maintain this.

A second function of bisexual erasure, as it relates to lesbian family configurations specifically, is to protect the radical potential of lesbian challenges to heteronormativity. As pointed out above, lesbian family configurations have been described as assimilationist in that they model heterosexual configurations. However, it is also possible for lesbian family configurations to trouble heteronormativity and in that way be transgressive. Making reference to a poststructuralist performativity framework of identity, Hemmings (2002) argues that:

> …gender subversion lies in the closeness, the mirroring of heterosexuality, and at the same time in the underwriting of difference from heterosexuality. If just the former is in place, the result is not parody but approximation; if just the latter, an overdetermination of the boundary between normative and subversive. If both are in place, that difference from heterosexuality *must be visible* in order to be recognised by all parties in the scene. (p. 115, emphasis added)

In a same-sex family configuration, the assumed naturalness of heterosexual roles can be revealed as artificial and learned. However, the success of such a challenge to heteronormativity lies in the ultimate reading of the relationship as lesbian, and not as bisexual. Bisexual women cannot attain the same transgressive signification as homosexuality, since a relationship with a woman is visually read as lesbian, and a relationship with a man as heterosexual. Bisexuality is then regarded as minimising this transgressive potential of lesbian discourse, since bisexual women's opposite sex relationships can be visually read as heterosexual, and in that way minimise the political impact of lesbian families, who wish to assert their legitimacy as different from the norm. Here, bisexuality's engagement with marriage and family discourse is not visible *enough*, and therefore cannot be as transgressive as lesbian family configurations.

To conclude this argument, participants' engagement with marriage and family discourse indicates a structural erasure of bisexuality in that bisexuality is at times either deferred, elided, or made invisible. In this manner bisexual erasure functions to support the stability of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, in that heterosexuality remains intact as normative and homosexuality remains intact as either assimilationist or as transgressive.

I now turn to a discussion of the potential for bisexuality to subvert the dominant male/female binary.

8.3.2 Gender rebels or gender troublemakers? The slow bending of norms

Similar to its defiance of the heterosexual/homosexual binary described in the previous section, bisexuality has also been posited as confounding the oppositional organisation of the gender binary. To this end, Nagle (1995) argues for the radical potential of bisexuality to eliminate gender hierarchies and ultimately achieve a "multiply gendered society" (p. 313). In refusing to orient to one gender only, bisexuality is constructed as confusing the gender binary and creating opportunities for differently gendered selves (Däumer, 1992). In the following section I examine such a description of bisexuality as slipping across categories, and in that way undermining oppositional categories of gender. I argue that such a description of bisexuality acts as a veiling mechanism for the pervasive influence of binaries, rendering it ineffective in truly interrogating binary logic. What is instead possible, I propose, is a "slow bending" of citational practices that ultimately contribute to the transformation of gendered discourses (Van Lenning, 2004).

What is striking in participants' accounts is that in many instances their engagement with discourses of gendered difference did not challenge the binary, but in fact often functioned to bolster it. This was particularly evident in their use of a butch/femme dichotomy, where a direct naturalisation of the gender binary was evident. Participants' evocation of a butch/femme dichotomy was described as privileging bisexuality (through an association with a femme gender identity) and marginalising lesbian identity (through an association with a non-traditional butch gender identity). The analysis indicated how the butch dyke construction is regarded as a threat to the normalised female script and participants distanced themselves from such a construction. Further to this, participants drew on discourses of natural differences between men and women to construct the butch dyke as going "against nature" in disavowing "natural" femininity. While participants' reification of a naturalised female identity and their othering of the butch dyke function to protect their precarious position in heteronormative discourse, such a discursive strategy also functions as a clear reification of the male/female gender binary.

Participants' construction of relationships with men as traditionally gendered also served to reinforce the male/female binary. Participants described a sense of being "trapped" in their gendered positioning (and self-positioning) in relation to their male partner. This gendered positioning was constructed by participants as modelled on the heterosexual organisation of the gender binary, which posits a passive, helpless femininity in contradistinction to an active, competent masculinity. Similar to their treatment of gender in evoking a butch/femme dichotomy, these instances indicate a reification of the traditional male/female binary.

There were, however, instances in which participants' accounts challenged dominant discourses of gender. One such instance can be identified in their use of a discourse of romantic androgyny, where participants rejected the influence of biological sex on their attraction to others. I indicated in Chapter 6 how such a rejection of biological sex unsettled the automatic linking of sex, gender and sexuality, but also argued that it did not necessarily disrupt the male/female binary. This was evident in the manner in which participants' accounts remained orientated to *two* genders (even in disregarding the effects of these genders) and in that way still drew on a male/female binary. This was typified in one participants' statement that she cannot reduce her attraction to others to a distinction between "penises and vaginas". From this, it appears that participants' use of a discourse of romantic androgyny challenges the *effects* of the binary in rejecting biological sex as informing their romantic attraction, but does not disrupt the binary itself.

Nentwich (2008) provides a useful differentiation between "gender rebels" and "gender troublemakers" in the subversion of gender norms. Gender rebels are described as blurring the distinction between supposedly distinct gender categories in questioning their effects, but not as disrupting the very categories themselves (Nentwich, 2008). To produce more subversive accounts that truly trouble gender norms, it is necessary to trouble not only the content of the gender binary but also the ontological status of male and female (Delphy, 1993; Nentwich, 2008). While participants' rejection of biological sex can be regarded as positioning them as gender rebels, the assumed naturalness of the traditional gender binary remains taken for granted and is not significantly troubled when they draw on a discourse of romantic androgyny. Participants change the way in which they draw on the gender binary (in that they regard it as not limiting their sexual attraction) but they still reify it through evoking only two gendered categories.

A more subversive position was indicated in participants' construction of their gendered interaction in their relationships with women. Participants constructed their same-sex relationships as free from gender-specific roles and as playful and egalitarian, a construction often cited by lesbian women when reflecting on their same-sex relationships (Riggle et al., 2008). In blurring the well-developed gendered scripts implied by the heterosexual normative relationship model, participants trouble the traditional organisation of the gender binary.

From participants' engagement with discourses of gendered difference it becomes apparent that while subversive positions such as claiming a bisexual identity and rejecting the impact of biological sex might resist *aspects* of the male-female binary, the binary largely remains in place and in this

sense supports Hird's (2000) contention that "*all* modern expressions of sex and gender identity depend on the current two-sex system for their expression" (p. 359, emphasis in original). It is not possible to entirely step outside of discourse in order to challenge binary logic (Derrida, 1976). Hemmings (1999), in reflecting on descriptions of bisexuality as different from oppositional categories, states that "those 'dreadful binaries' are scarcely somewhere 'out there', they inform and produce my identity as much as anyone else's" (p. 197).

Further to this, I want to argue that descriptions of bisexuality that posit it as defying the gender binary act as "veiling terms", to borrow Van Lenning's (2004) phrasing, and risk depicting a false sense of emancipation. Referring to the subversive potential of cross-dressing and sexual ambiguity, Van Lenning (2004) states that radical descriptions of such practices "imply a sex-transcending character, which, on closer inspection, fundamentally retraces the conceptual opposition between man and woman" (p. 42). Hemmings (2002) echoes this when she states that "abstract claims of transferable transcendence or merging obscure more than they reveal. They are unhelpful precisely because they reproduce as distinct the opposites that they then proclaim are reunited, and rely on that middle ground as unifying and static" (p. 118-119). Participants' accounts illustrate the persuasive power of the gender binary – while they resist dominant discourses of biological sex as informing sexual attraction and challenge gendered discourses in certain instances, their accounts indicate that they cannot entirely transcend the gender binary since gender saturates their positioning in discourse. Theorising bisexuality as outside of oppositional categories closes off opportunities to interrogate this pervasive influence of the gender and sexuality binaries.

Finally, while it appears that bisexuality's "radical potential" to subvert dominant binaries is not entirely realised in participants' accounts, it does not necessarily follow that the political value of bisexuality in challenging such binaries is invalidated. Participants' accounts indicate that while complete subversion of gender binaries is not possible in their discursive contexts, what does occur is a "slow bending" of norms (Van Lenning, 2004). According to Butlerian theory such (perhaps less dramatic) changes in norms indicate that resistance is not necessarily enacted through "entirely novel ways of understanding gender, but rather arise[s] as variations or improvisations of existing gender scripts" (Morison, 2011, p. 270). Over-enthusiastic claims of the subversive potential of bisexuality can obscure these smaller ruptures in gendered norms.

Morison (2011, p. 113) notes that "people may have an interest in adhering more or less closely to the various gendered scripts according to what is interactively useful at the time", where citing

"correct" gendered positions might form part of a cultural survival strategy to maintain one's identity as socially viable. This was illustrated in the findings where possibilities for creating gender trouble through "incorrect" repetition of gendered norms associated with a female identity, as it relates to a butch/femme dichotomy, threatened participants' precarious position in heteronormative discourse. In other instances, greater deviation from gender norms might be possible where participants might be able to assume more resistant positions. This was evident where participants were able to construct their relationships with women as sites of resistance and in that way stretch the boundaries of gendered identity and interaction. In a sense, maintaining their viability in discourse plays out as a balancing act, where participants negotiate different measures of risk involved in "correct" and "incorrect" citation of gender norms. While certainly not due to an essential or universally authoritative nature, participants' accounts demonstrate the "enormous force and impact" of gender and sexuality binaries and in this sense their discursive stretching of the boundaries of these categories might be more effective than efforts to subvert them entirely (Van Lenning, 2004, p. 43).

8.4   Limits of the study and suggestions for future research

Some limits of the present study can be identified. The first of these relates to the manner in which the research focus of the current study was defined. In reflecting on the findings I wonder if the sexualisation of bisexuality in dominant discourse influenced my own approach to the study, shaping the manner in which I defined its boundaries of investigation. From the inception of this study the focus of my research was on how bisexual women negotiate their identity as bisexual, and not on how they construct sexual practice or sexual desire. Although many of the interviews included talking about sex, I did not formulate a specific research focus or any interview questions specifically related to sexual practice. My motivation for this was partly because of the current nature of the research landscape as it relates to bisexuality in Africa and South Africa. As discussed in Chapter 1, local research focuses almost exclusively on male bisexuality with a specific interest in how male bisexual practice contributes to HIV risk. This is of course a valuable area of investigation, but my intention with the present study was to contribute to the lack of research exploring bisexual identity construction, instead of sexual practice, and especially to address the lack of female representation in such research.

However, upon further reflection, I do believe that my motivation for focusing on identity was also informed by my desire to avoid contributing to the further sexualisation of bisexual women that is common in dominant discourse, through a direct focus on aspects of their sexual practice. In

maintaining a focus on identity, I was hoping to avoid contributing to a construction of bisexual women as hypersexual and eroticised. There is certainly also value in conducting research that includes a focus on bisexual women's sexual practice and future studies can productively explore this.

Similarly, my framing of the study as focused on bisexuality as a category of identification that differs from the norm, might have shaped the findings. Throughout the presentation of the analysis, I highlighted instances during the interviews where participants focused on their relationships with women and other aspects related to same-sex sexuality, instead of also commenting on their relationships with men or drawing on references to bisexuality. This tendency was likely informed by participants' orientation towards the interviews – considering that my research focus was on participants' difference (in that their identification as bisexual challenges dominant discourse) it is possible they viewed their relationships with men as "normal" and therefore not worth commenting on, while their relationships with women were regarded as requiring clarification and explanation due to the positioning of such relationships as "abnormal". Perhaps ironically then, the study's focus on bisexuality translated to some extent into a silencing of discussions of participants' attraction to and relationships with *both* men *and* women, resulting, at times, in a more general focus on same-sex sexuality instead of bisexuality.

It is also valuable to comment on the narrow focus assumed in this study, which had the aim of exploring some of the oversights in South African and international research related to bisexuality. The study's clearly defined focus allowed for a rich and in-depth study of how a particular group – South African women actively claiming an identity as bisexual – account for their gendered and sexualised identities. However, this narrow focus had the implication that the full diversity of bisexual experience could not be attended to. The sample of the current study is largely homogenous in terms of age, social class and geographical context and is by no means representative of the rich and diverse experiences of South African bisexual women.

The study's particular focus, in only including participants who self-identify as bisexual, also had the consequence that the experiences of individuals who do *not* choose to label themselves in that manner were excluded from this study. It might be that some individuals privately consider themselves as attracted to both men and women but reject the label bisexual, possibly due to the stigma attached to it in certain contexts, or perhaps due to a resistance to defining their identity in

terms of their sexual orientation. Future research could explore such individuals' experiences by also including participants who do not self-identify as bisexual but who regard their sexuality as fluid.

An additional methodological limit of the study is its reliance on individual interviews in collecting data at the expense of methods that capitalise on how meanings are constructed in relation to others, such as during focus group discussions. I found that conducting joint interviews in addition to individual interviews was valuable as it extended the relational context in which data were constructed. However, focus group discussions optimise the social character of constructing meaning and provide knowledge that is created in active discussion, allowing for statements to be "challenged, extended, developed, undermined or qualified in ways that generate rich data for the researcher" (Willig, 2008, p. 31). This complements the theoretical approach underscoring the study, as poststructuralist theory, as well as discourse analysis, is concerned with how meaning is constructed among people through language. Wilkinson (1998) argues that focus group discussions are appropriate when conducting research using a feminist approach as it locates the individual in a social setting.

Although focus groups have considerable advantages, they do not necessarily provide privileged access to participants' realities (Wilkinson, 1998). Some participants might be concerned about confidentiality in a group context, which could impact on how comfortable they feel during the discussions and could limit the extent of their participation. It might also be that certain marginal discourses are silenced during the focus group discussions. Shefer (1999) provides an example from her research on constructions of heterosexuality, where a participant initiated the focus group discussion by drawing on a religious discourse when proclaiming her opposition to premarital sex. In the remaining discussion the religious discourse served to silence other participants by prohibiting any discussion of knowledge of or experience with premarital sex. It might then be that discourses that are silenced in a group context can be drawn on more freely in the context of an individual interview. Despite these limitations of focus groups, research exploring this topic can benefit from the inclusion of data collection methods such as focus groups and joint interviews, in order to support a feminist aim of exploring women's realities in context (Wilkinson, 1998).

Based on the limits of the current study discussed in this section, the following suggestions for future research are proposed:

- Future research can benefit from exploring more diverse aspects of bisexual women's experience by including the voices of participants from a broader range of subject positions. Specifically, future research will benefit from including participants from varied socio-economic positions, age groupings as well as bisexual women living in rural areas.

- Studies that explore the realities of individuals who do not self-identify as bisexual but who regard their sexuality as fluid can contribute to diverse representations of sexuality in South African research.

- Research that makes use of focus group discussions can add valuable insights into the relational contexts in which meaning around bisexuality is constructed.

Some additional suggestions include the following:

- Considering the lack of research exploring bisexual men's subjectivities (as opposed to research focusing more narrowly on bisexual men's sexual practice and HIV risk), it will be valuable to conduct research with an explicit focus on how bisexual men negotiate their identities.

- Almost conversely, there is a lack of research with a focus on bisexual women's sexual practice and sexual desire. Research conducted in this area should be mindful of not contributing to the sexualisation of bisexual women in dominant discourse.

- There is a need for research exploring how bisexuality is constructed in LGBTI organisations in South Africa. This could include investigating bisexual visibility in such organisations as well as exploring the differences and similarities in the challenges faced by bisexual and lesbian women.

8.5   Conclusion

Through this study I hope to contribute to the visibility of bisexual women in South African discourses around sexuality and to stimulate further research that will have positive effects in the lives of the participants and other bisexually-identified women. As part of a feminist project I hope that this study (and future research in this area) will open up different possibilities for sexual identification and contribute to a discursive context in which variations in sexual identification are not only tolerated but welcomed. Bisexuality is one of many potential forms of resistance to the coercive force of heteronormativity and demonstrates the potential for discourses around sex, gender and sexuality to create new positions outside of what we imagine to be possible.

The findings of this study however also demonstrated that despite this potential for bisexuality to challenge dominant discourses, the binary logic of gender and sexuality remains extraordinarily influential and constrains the available positions that bisexual women are able to assume. Further to this, in many instances participants' accounts indicated their inadvertent participation in maintaining such a binary logic. A continuing feminist project of challenging dominant discourses will then entail careful navigation of naming bisexuality in order to create bisexual visibility, and resisting an essentialist treatment of bisexuality as a reified category of identity. During the interviews a participant, Phindile, commented on this dilemma by stating that there is value in claiming a bisexual identity, in that in order to do away with sexual and gendered hierarchies it may be necessary to at first risk a measure of essentialist treatment in order to create visibility around bisexuality. She elaborated on this with the following metaphor:

> Phindile: To get rid of dust in a mat, you need to shake it out; you need to bring it to the surface, in order for it to no longer be there. I think if you sweep it under the rug it's always going to be there.

I found that Phindile's argument resonates with a poststructuralist view of strategically deploying categories of identity. Similar to other aspects of identity politics, naming bisexuality is part of a process where bisexuality is made visible to increase awareness of sexual variation, through "bringing the dust to the surface". At the same time such strategic essentialism entails working towards an ideal of reaching a point where sexual identification is no longer assigned such importance.