South African bisexual women’s accounts of their gendered and sexualised identities:

A feminist poststructuralist analysis

by

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Dedication

For Brigid Niamh Lynch
I would like to express my sincere gratitude towards the following people for their support and encouragement in completing this study:

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Abstract

This feminist poststructuralist study explores discourses of gendered and sexualised subjectivity of South African women who self-identify as bisexual. The discipline of psychology has typically upheld a monosexual binary, where heterosexuality and homosexuality are positioned as the only legitimate categories of sexual identification. Within such a structure bisexuality is not considered a viable sexual identity. In broader public discourses female bisexuality is generally constructed in delegitimising ways, such as through constructions that necessarily equate bisexuality with promiscuity or describe it as an eroticised male fantasy, as a threat to lesbian politics, or as a strategy to retain heterosexual privilege.

Data collection entailed conducting individual interviews with thirteen bisexual women and the transcribed texts were analysed using discourse analysis. The analysis focused on how bisexuality is constructed in the interview texts, how the various constructions of bisexuality function and how gendered subjectivity intersects with participants’ identity as bisexual.

The analysis identifies a number of discourses that impact on, in varied and contradictory ways, participants’ positioning as bisexual. In a post-apartheid context, participants regard fixing their identity along strictly defined lines of difference as oppressive and resist bisexuality as being primary to their identity. Participants challenge the traditional gender binary through unsettling the automatic linking of sex, gender and sexuality in discourses of sexual desire. However, participants also demonstrate the coercive effects of dominant discourse in the gendered positioning of subjects, with heterosexuality in particular functioning as a normative sexual category with implications for participants’ gendered subjectivity. It then appears that parallel to its ability to disrupt the gender binary, bisexual discourse also acts in ways to support it.

The analysis further indicates that in claiming a bisexual identity, participants risk marginalisation in the face of delegitimising discourses that construct them in negative terms of promiscuity, hypersexuality and sexual decadence. Powerful silencing discourses further construct same-sex attraction as un-African and as sinful. The analysis concludes with a discussion of participants’ strategies to normalise bisexuality.

This study contributes to research accounts that explore diversity in sexual identification and creates greater visibility of bisexual women in South African discourses of sexuality. It also contributes to
theories of female sexual identities and adds to theoretical debates around the challenge to dominant gender and sexuality binaries posed by bisexuality.

Key terms: female bisexuality, sexual orientation, same-sex sexuality, women, gender, discourse analysis, feminist theory, poststructuralist theory, social constructionism, South Africa.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication ........................................................................................................................................ i

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... ii

Abstract .......................................................................................................................................... iii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE ........................................................................... 1

1.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 1

1.2 Language and identity ............................................................................................................. 1

1.3 Locating the study ................................................................................................................... 2

1.3.1 The monosexual assumption and bisexual invisibility ....................................................... 2

1.3.2 Bisexual practice and HIV risk: The threat of “bisexual infectors” ................................. 3

1.3.3 Bisexuality in the context of LGBTI psychology and queer studies ............................. 4

1.3.4 The emerging field of bisexuality studies ......................................................................... 5

1.3.5 A note on context: Sexual rights and hate crimes ............................................................. 7

1.3.6 Researching bisexuality: The politics of self-disclosure .................................................. 8

1.4 Aims and objectives of the study ............................................................................................ 10

1.5 Outline of the dissertation ...................................................................................................... 10

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ................................................................................. 12

2.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 12

2.2 Postmodernism and the turn to language .............................................................................. 13

2.2.1 The crisis of representation ............................................................................................. 14

2.2.2 Reality as socially constructed ......................................................................................... 15

2.2.3 Anti-foundationalism ........................................................................................................ 15

2.2.4 Fragmenting the subject .................................................................................................... 16

2.3 Derridean deconstruction ....................................................................................................... 17

2.3.1 Différance .......................................................................................................................... 19

2.3.2 Supplementarity ............................................................................................................... 19

2.3.3 The subversive potential of undecidables ....................................................................... 21

2.4 Foucault’s theory of discourse ............................................................................................... 22

2.4.1 Discourse and power ........................................................................................................ 23

2.4.2 Disciplinary technology .................................................................................................... 24

2.4.2.1 Surveillance and technologies of the self .................................................................. 25

2.4.2.2 Pastoral power ............................................................................................................. 27

2.4.2.3 Bio-power ................................................................................................................... 27
2.4.2. Liberalism ................................................................. 28
2.5 Feminist engagement with poststructuralism ........................................ 29
2.6 Poststructuralism and the possibilities for feminist resistance ....................... 32
2.7 Conclusion ................................................................................ 35

CHAPTER 3: SEX, GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES ........................................... 38
3.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 38
3.2 Essentialist treatment of sex, gender and sexuality ..................................... 38
3.2.1 Sex, gender and the biological imperative ......................................... 38
3.2.2 Fixing sexuality: The creation of sexual “types” .................................... 40
3.2.3 Sexuality or sexualities? Early social constructionist critiques .................... 42
3.3 Deconstructing sex, gender and sexuality ................................................ 44
3.3.1 Butler’s deconstructive critique ......................................................... 45
3.3.2 Butler’s gender-as-performative thesis ............................................... 46
3.3.3 Performativity and regulative discourses ............................................ 47
3.3.4 Butler’s citational politics .................................................................... 48
3.3.5 Distinguishing between performance and performativity ........................ 50
3.4. Theories of sexualities in the context of political activism ............................ 51
3.5 Theorising female sexuality .................................................................... 54
3.6 Sexuality and embodiment ...................................................................... 61
3.7 Conclusion ......................................................................................... 65

CHAPTER 4: CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMALE BISEXUALITY .................................. 68
4.1 Introduction ..................................................................................... 68
4.2 Historical accounts of bisexuality ............................................................ 68
4.2.1 Bisexuality in classical Greece and Rome ............................................ 68
4.2.2 The influence of religious discourses on sexual ethics ............................. 70
4.3 Bisexuality in psychological discourse ..................................................... 74
4.3.1 Psychoanalytical accounts of bisexuality as pathology ........................ 74
4.3.2 The inconceivability of bisexuality ...................................................... 76
4.3.3 Challenges to psycho-medical discourses of bisexuality ......................... 76
4.3.4 Affirmative approaches to bisexuality ................................................. 78
4.4 Constructions of female bisexuality in public discourses ............................. 81
4.4.1 The cultural unintelligibility of bisexuality ......................................... 81
4.4.2 Constructions of bisexual chic ........................................................... 84
4.4.3 Bisexuality as associated with promiscuity ........................................ 85
4.4.4 The eroticisation of female bisexuality ................................................................. 86
4.4.5 Bisexuality as a threat to lesbian politics ............................................................ 87
4.4.6 Bisexuality as a strategy to retain heterosexual privilege ..................................... 89
4.5 Retrieving bisexuality from invisibility and invalidation ........................................ 90
4.5.1 Evoking a queer/non-­queer binary ....................................................................... 91
4.5.2 Evoking a bisexuality/monosexuality binary ......................................................... 93
4.5.3 Reclaiming the deviant and transgressive ............................................................. 94
4.6 The potential of bisexuality to subvert the logic of binaries .................................... 94
4.7 Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 96

CHAPTER 5: THE RESEARCH PROCESS ............................................................................. 99
5.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 99
5.2 The research questions .............................................................................................. 99
5.3 Recruiting participants ............................................................................................. 100
5.3.1 Identifying participants through my social network .............................................. 102
5.3.2 Enlisting LGBTI organisations to identify participants ....................................... 102
5.3.3 Description of the final sample ............................................................................ 104
5.4 Interviewing ............................................................................................................... 105
5.4.1 Power and positioning in interviews ..................................................................... 106
5.4.2 Negotiating insider/outsider positions ................................................................ 107
5.4.3 The interview guide ............................................................................................ 110
5.4.4 The research contexts ......................................................................................... 110
5.4.5 Transcription of the interviews ......................................................................... 112
5.5 The discourse analysis .............................................................................................. 114
5.5.1 A deconstructive discourse analysis .................................................................... 114
5.5.2 “Steps” in the process of analysis ....................................................................... 115
5.5.3 Reflections on the process of analysis ................................................................ 119
5.6 Quality and rigour in discourse analysis .................................................................. 121
5.6.1 Grounding research in existing work ................................................................... 122
5.6.2 Optimising internal coherence .......................................................................... 122
5.6.3 Sensitivity to participants’ interpretations ......................................................... 123
5.6.4 Including aspects of investigator triangulation ............................................... 123
5.6.5 Assuming a reflexive approach ......................................................................... 124
5.6.6 Creating opportunities for reader evaluation ..................................................... 124
5.7 Ethical considerations in the study .......................................................................... 125
CHAPTER 6: NAVIGATING GENDERED DIFFERENCE AND (HETERO)SEXUALISED SUBJECTIVITY

6.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 127
6.2 The participants ......................................................................................................................................... 127
6.3 The discourse analysis ............................................................................................................................. 132
6.4 Sexuality as identity ................................................................................................................................. 135
   6.4.1 “And then the last thing is that you’re bi”: The intersectionality of identity .................. 136
   6.4.2 Post-apartheid South Africa and a resistance to identity politics ......................... 139
6.5 Discourses of gendered difference ......................................................................................................... 141
   6.5.1 “Gender is a random criterion for me”: Rejecting gendered difference .............. 142
   6.5.2 Romantic androgyny: Attraction to a person, not a gender ..................................... 145
   6.5.3 “I have to give him a chance to be a man”: Relationships with men as gendered ...... 147
   6.5.4 “It’s easier to free-style with a woman”: Relationships with women as sites of resistance .................................................................................................................................................. 148
6.6 Bisexuality and a butch/femme dichotomy ............................................................................................. 150
   6.6.1 Heterosexism and the traditional female beauty ideal .............................................. 150
   6.6.2 The constitutive outside: Evoking the butch dyke ...................................................... 151
   6.6.3 “People will judge you”: Policing the boundaries around butch and femme .......... 153
6.7 Heteronormativity and bisexuality .......................................................................................................... 154
   6.7.1 “You have this image ready-made”: Marriage and family discourse as familiar ...... 155
   6.7.2 “You’re always up against a husband and children”: Bisexuality as competing with marriage and family discourse .................................................................................................................................................. 157
   6.7.3 “It isn’t any kind of option for having a good life”: Bisexuality as incompatible with marriage and family discourse .................................................................................................................................................. 158
   6.7.4 “Family is important to me”: Rearticulating marriage and family discourse .......... 160
6.8 Summary .................................................................................................................................................. 163

CHAPTER 7: DISMISSAL, DELEGITIMATION AND RE-APPROPRIATION OF BISEXUALITY ............................................. 164

7.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 164
7.2 The unintelligibility of bisexuality .......................................................................................................... 164
   7.2.1 An inability to construe sexual desire as “going both ways” ......................................... 165
   7.2.2 “Was that a phase?” Bisexuality as indecision .............................................................. 167
   7.2.3 The incitement to choose ......................................................................................................... 169
7.3 Delegitimising discourses ...................................................................................................................... 171
   7.3.1 The hot-bi-babe: Bisexuality as an eroticised heterosexual male fantasy ................. 172
7.3.2 “You’ve gotta have both”: Bisexuality as equated with promiscuity..............178
7.4 Silencing discourses......................................................................................182
7.4.1 Same-sex sexuality as un-African ..............................................................182
7.4.2 Same-sex sexuality as sin............................................................................187
7.5 Normalising discourses..................................................................................194
7.5.1 “A little bit of bisexuality exists in all of us”: Claiming a universal bisexual potential...194
7.5.2 “I don’t think it’s a choice”: Bisexuality as biologically predetermined............196
7.6 Conclusion......................................................................................................201

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUDING DISCUSSION........................................................................203
8.1 Introduction......................................................................................................203
8.2 Summary of the findings .................................................................................203
8.2.1 Sexuality as identity ....................................................................................203
8.2.2 Discourses of gendered difference ..............................................................204
8.2.3 Bisexuality and a butch/femme dichotomy................................................204
8.2.4 Heteronormativity and bisexuality ..............................................................204
8.2.5 The unintelligibility of bisexuality ..............................................................205
8.2.6 Delegitimising discourses ..........................................................................205
8.2.7 Silencing discourses....................................................................................206
8.2.8 Normalising discourses................................................................................206
8.3 Troubling the norm? Bisexuality’s challenge to binary categories....................207
8.3.1 Bisexual erasure in support of the heterosexual/homosexual binary...........208
8.3.2 Gender rebels or gender troublemakers? The slow bending of norms ..........211
8.4 Limits of the study and suggestions for future research ..................................214
8.5 Conclusion......................................................................................................217

REFERENCES..........................................................................................................219

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE.............................................................................251
APPENDIX B: BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE..................................................252
APPENDIX C: MATERIALS USED TO ADVERTISE THE STUDY AND INVITE PARTICIPATION..........................253
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM..............................................................254
TABLE 1: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS..........................104
TABLE 2: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK......................................................................134