

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

A feminist poststructuralist analysis

by

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Dedication

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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.

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