

Gender outlaws or a slow bending of norms? South African bisexual women's treatment of gender binaries

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Abstract

A monosexual configuration of sexuality assumes that sexual desire is directed at either men or women. Bisexuality resists a choice between oppositional categories and is often theorised as having a transgressive potential to destabilise binary logic, not only in relation to sexuality but also to gender. There is, however, a lack of empirical work exploring how this potential might be realised in the accounts of bisexual individuals. Drawing on interviews with South African bisexual women, we use a narrative-discursive lens to examine the discursive resources employed by participants to trouble or resist hetero-gendered norms. Our findings demonstrate how resistance to the gender binary hinges on citational politics that are fundamentally gendered and linked to sexuality. Instead of entirely destabilising hetero-gendered norms, participants draw on gendered scripts that simultaneously expand norms to accommodate their sexual difference and, through processes of othering, function to reiterate hetero-gendered norms. While complete subversion of gender binaries is not possible in participants' discursive contexts, what does occur is a 'slow bending' of norms. Theorising bisexuality as transgressing oppositional categories closes off opportunities to interrogate the pervasive influence of gender binaries in contexts that remain marked by pervasive heteronormativity and heterosexism. Significantly, it also obscures more modest improvisations of gender scripts that hold potential for destabilising gender binaries.

Keywords

Bisexuality, gender theory, hetero-gendered norms, heteronormativity, LGBTI, narrative-discursive, queer

Introduction

Scholars of gender and sexuality describe bisexuality as ‘a concept with the potential to revolutionise Western culture’s understanding of sex, gender, and sexual orientation’ (Firestein, 1996: xix) due to its ‘destabilisation of categories’ (Owen, 2003: 44). For instance, Hartman notes that the practice of bisexuality appears to refuse binary classification, stating, ‘while it is often difficult to survive in a binary system when one refuses to choose, there is agency in not forcing oneself into a category’ (2005: 66). Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz mention that for bisexually-identified individuals, sexualised and gendered identities are ‘not fixed and dichotomous, but rather fluid, transitory, fragmented [and] episodic’ (2003: 59). A notable contribution to this conversation has been made by critical feminist theorists, and in particular Judith Butler (1990) who has argued that marginal identities, like bisexuality, potentially destabilise the taken-for-granted notion that biological sex produces gender and naturally shapes sexual desire. In this vein, bisexuality is typically theorised as confounding a monosexual configuration of sexuality – where sexual desire is directed at *either* men *or* women – through resisting a choice between these oppositional categories (Däumer, 1992). Of course, bisexuality does not necessarily escape the limitations of other categories of sexual orientation – including heterosexuality and homosexuality – and remains vulnerable to the potential neglect of contextual and temporal aspects of sexual attraction (see: Hemmings, 2002; Epprecht, 2006; and Diamond, 2008, for some of the key debates in relation to bisexuality in the US, UK and African contexts respectively). However, most studies concerned with the accounts of bisexual participants share a common understanding of bisexuality as transgressive of gender and sexuality binaries (see, for example: Däumer, 1992; Ault, 1996; Garber, 2000; Bower et al., 2002; Macalister, 2003; Pallotta-Chiarolli and Lubowitz, 2003; and Hartman, 2005).

The destabilising potential of bisexuality, however, remains insufficiently explored in empirical research, with a dearth of studies engaging more directly with the intersections between gendered performance and sexual identification as expressed in the accounts of bisexual persons (cf. Hemmings, 2002, who examines this in the context of queer communities and social movements). In this article, we present research that responds to this gap by grounding theory in practice. Our empirical exploration of bisexual women’s accounts helps to extend current theorising about the transgressive potential of bisexuality to resist or subvert hetero-gendered norms, through an analysis of interview accounts produced by South African bisexual women. We draw on a narrative-discursive framework to demonstrate how resistance to the gender binary hinges on citational politics that are fundamentally gendered and linked to sexuality. In the sections that follow, we first consider critical feminist theorising of gender, before outlining our narrative-discursive methodology and presenting our findings.

Sex, gender and compulsory heterosexuality

The sex/gender division of second-wave feminism, which posits a distinction between biology and culture, has been strategically useful in allowing feminists to question patriarchal assumptions of biological differences between men and women and overthrow the notion that biology is destiny (Weeks, 1985; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Accordingly, they have been able to explore the meanings of femininity and masculinity as it has varied over time and context, and have been able to illustrate that, since gender is variable, these meanings can be contested and changed (Hird, 2000; Jackson and Scott, 2002). Yet, the initial sex/gender division has later been criticised for not entirely escaping a deterministic conceptualisation of gender, since gender is theorised as following from the biological foundation of sex and is in that sense fixed (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Jackson and Scott, 2002).

With the rise of postmodern social theories, feminists came to see sex as equally socially constructed and, like gender, arrived at through the application of socially agreed-upon biological criteria to identify sex as male or female (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The work of Butler (1990) has been most influential in this regard, with her analysis illustrating that sex and bodies are very much cultural products and that it is gender that provides sex with meaning. This occurs through the process of gender performativity: the 'doing' of gender through the repeated enactment of regulatory gender norms, where bodies, genders and desires are naturalised in particular ways. These regulatory norms include 'ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies [and] ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity', and determine what is and what is not considered 'intelligibly human' (Butler, 1990: xxiii). Butler – drawing on Rich's (1980) notion of compulsory heterosexuality – refers to this regulatory function of heterosexuality as the heterosexual matrix, where heterosexuality is constructed as desirable, natural and normal, implicating a 'causal continuity among sex, gender, and desire' (1990: 22).

Butler states that performatives that are particularly successful in their citation (or repetition) of gender are considered so because they '*accumulate the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*' (1993: 227; emphasis in original). Authoritative performatives – such as gender performatives that support the continuity and correspondence between sex, gender and sexuality – obscure their constructed character through appeals to naturalness; they appear to correspond to a 'natural' prior original. A significant implication of such a theorisation of gender is that, because gender is not natural or pre-given, certain practices can trouble authoritative performatives and in that way, show up their constructed character. Marginalised identities trouble the authority of the heteronorm precisely because of the impossibility of normative identities to fully assert an identity that is not reliant on *both* reiteration *and* exclusion; normative identities are dependent on the marginal identities that they

exclude (Butler, 1990). Bisexuality, as a marginalised identity that both inhabits the heterosexuality-homosexuality binary, yet at the same does not fit either category, troubles ‘the sex/gender/desire matrix, for though it will at times be necessarily “opposite” sex related, it makes the once-and-forever nature of heterosexual identity impossible’ (McAvan, 2007: 5). In this manner, it is possible for bisexual identity and practice to have transgressive potential and trouble heterosexual coherence.

Nonetheless, very few scholars have applied these theoretical insights to ‘real life’ scenarios in order to investigate what destabilisation related to bisexual identities might ‘look like’ and how it might occur in bisexual individuals’ accounts. Further to this, the few studies that do exist have predominantly been conducted in what can be considered global North contexts. For example, Pennington (2009), in research exploring gendered performances of bisexual men and women in the US, concludes that while participants expressed a desire for greater equality in relationships, normative heterocentric gender ideologies permeate social interactions and complicate the extent to which existing gender categories can be subverted. Similarly, in Finnish research focused on bisexual women and their partners, Lahti (2015) traces how hetero-gendered norms inform the manner in which an enduring couple narrative is constructed by participants, where male-female relationships in particular remain tied to hierarchical notions of gendered difference. Simula (2012), in her US study exploring bisexuality through the lens of BDSM¹ sexual practices and identities, notes the complex ways in which hetero-gendered norms are reified and resisted. She describes how this occurs through various behavioural practices – ranging from differences in the role assumed by BDSM practitioners in sexual power plays according to the gender of a partner, to rejecting gender as influencing sexual practices or partner selection. While these studies illustrate some of the complexity of navigating conventional gender norms while identifying as bisexual, the practical application of theorising bisexuality as troubling the dichotomous organisation of gender remains under-explored, particularly so in postcolonial, global South contexts.

In this article, we expand current theorising of bisexuality as transgressive of hetero-gendered binaries, through applying a narrative-discursive lens to interview accounts of South African women who self-identify as bisexual. We investigate the extent to which participants’ accounts discursively ‘trouble’ the taken-for-granted ‘naturalness’ of a causal continuity between sex, gender and sexual desire, and the implications thereof for the stability of those hetero-gendered norms that are central to contemporary constructions of sexuality.

Methods

Research participants and context

We identified participants using snowball sampling, recruiting women from our own social networks and through organisations active in lesbian, gay, bisexual,

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

| Pseudonym | Age | 'Race' | Home language | Occupation |
|-----------|-----|--------|---------------|----------------------|
| Jennifer | 21 | White | English | Postgraduate student |
| Astrid | 25 | White | Afrikaans | Musician |
| Sibongile | 20 | Black | Zulu | Student |
| Liné | 29 | White | Afrikaans | Teacher |
| Phindile | 23 | Black | Swati | Student |
| Sonja | 22 | White | Afrikaans | Postgraduate student |
| Taryn | 29 | White | English | Musician |
| Nadia | 25 | White | Afrikaans | Journalist |
| Cara | 23 | White | Afrikaans | Film-maker |
| Laetitia | 25 | White | Afrikaans | Postgraduate student |
| Gemma | 24 | White | English | Marketing manager |
| Nasiphi | 21 | Black | Pedi | Student |

transgender and intersex communities. We limited participation to women, cognisant of the lack of South African research about female bisexualities in particular and women's gendered and sexual identities in general (Muller and Hughes, 2016). The final group of participants comprised of thirteen women between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine, living in urban and peri-urban areas of the South African province of Gauteng. Three participants identified as black and ten as white; all had either completed a tertiary degree or were in the process of completing one. With the contested nature of sexual categories in mind, and valuing feminist principles of self-determination, we relied on participants' self-identification as bisexual to establish study inclusion. In addition to identifying as bisexual, all participants reported historical relationship experiences with both men and women; at the time of study participation seven of the participants were single, five were partnered in monogamous same-sex relationships and one was partnered in a monogamous opposite-sex relationship. Participants' demographic characteristics are summarised in table 1.

Research focusing on dissident sexualities in South Africa is conducted against a backdrop of stark discrepancies between legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and the lived reality of everyday discrimination and victimisation that many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons face (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Being employed and having access to tertiary education marks participants in this study as privileged relative to the rest of the South African population, where unemployment is high and educational exclusion persists (Leibbrandt et al., 2012). Participants' privilege is, however, tenuous, in that race, place and space intersect with sexual and gendered identities to produce contexts of vulnerability, for black participants in particular

(Lee et al., 2013). During the interviews, white participants often spoke of experiences of ‘mundane’ heterosexism – ranging from verbal taunts to rejection by family members – while black participants additionally spoke of more direct experiences of violence resulting from prejudice regarding their non-conforming sexual identity (Nel and Judge, 2008; Mkhize et al., 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2011). This includes the targeted sexual assault, rape and murder of black lesbian and bisexual women in urban township areas,² that can be understood as attempts to ‘reinforce the current heteronormative social order [and are] compounded by the inherited and continuing apartheid legacy of rampant violence, crime and deep structural inequalities’ (Lee et al., 2013: 8).³ For instance, Sibongile – a black participant – drew attention to the mediating influence of race, class and place when sharing her fear of targeted sexual violence in contexts she experienced as more profoundly heterosexist, specifically, urban township areas where her extended family live:

Sibongile: 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.

Sibongile’s statement points to same-sex attracted women’s shared vulnerability to violence, where lesbian and bisexual women are read through a lens that conflates these identities, and which cannot be separated from spatial marginality. It underscores how bisexual women’s identities are negotiated in relation to particular historical contexts and other axes of socially constituted identities, including the ‘interlocking structural domination of race, class, gender, sexual preference, and spatial marginality’ (Salo et al., 2010: 299). The current study, while foregrounding how gendered scripts are negotiated, is conducted from a perspective that is mindful of this mutually reinforcing and contingent character of identity (Cho et al., 2013).

Generating data

The first author – a white South African queer woman – conducted in-depth interviews lasting between two and four hours, using a semi-structured interview guide to flexibly direct the interviews. The first author’s identification as queer as well as being of similar age likely contributed to participants feeling at ease during the interviews. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants – in coffee shops, participants’ homes and in the case of one interview, in the first author’s home. The interviews focused on three main themes: how participants

construct meaning around bisexuality; how they negotiate their identity as bisexual in relation to others; and how they reflect on their gendered subjectivity in relation to their sexuality. In this article, we report only on instances where participants' talk appealed to notions of gender as it relates to their sexuality. Although participants were linguistically diverse, English is the lingua franca in South Africa and participants were comfortable conversing in English, with the exception of two interviewees who preferred conducting the interviews in Afrikaans. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and noting relevant aspects of non-verbal speech such as laughter, and translated into English where necessary by a research assistant (proficient in both languages). We were mindful of the influence of our own investment in the research, as well as our identities, prior experiences and feminist socio-political commitments in shaping the research (Wilkinson, 1988). We assumed a critical self-reflexive stance in order to note and interrogate this influence throughout the process of conducting the research.

Data analysis

We analysed the transcribed texts using a narrative-discursive framework informed by feminist discursive psychology (see: Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Taylor and Littleton, 2006; Morison and Macleod, 2013). This framework attends to how language is used in interaction to construct particular kinds of identities that are oriented towards different discursive outcomes (Taylor and Littleton, 2006). In addition to this micro-context of situated performances, a narrative-discursive approach also attends to the wider discursive context (Morison and Macleod, 2013). Through exploring the discursive resources speakers draw on, it is possible to illustrate how speakers' accounts are shaped or constrained by the shared meanings available in their broader contexts (Taylor, 2007). Discursive resources – such as gendered scripts (Morison and Macleod, 2013) – provide insight into established social understandings in relation to which speakers negotiate their identities. An example of a widely familiar gendered script is that of heterosexual complementarity, to which we refer again in our presentation of the findings, that constructs men and women as physical and emotional opposites that supplement and complete each other (Butler, 1990). Analysis is concerned with how discursive resources such as gendered scripts 'are taken up or resisted and re-negotiated thereby resourcing the construction of a personal identity' (Taylor and Littleton, 2006: 23). This approach is mindful of complexity in that 'multiple and potentially inconsistent subject positions' are made available to and negotiated by speakers (Wetherell, 1998: 400).

This process of drawing on or resisting different discursive resources is referred to as identity work – often in support of constructing a valued social identity, or avoiding a troubled or 'spoilt' identity (Taylor and Littleton, 2006). Troubled identities are ones that are 'not creditable' (Wetherell, 1998: 398) or are negatively valued, for instance those evoked by stigmatising references to bisexuality as associated with 'promiscuity'. A troubled identity can also emerge in conversation as one which is 'potentially "hearable" and challengeable by others as implausible or

inconsistent with other identities that are claimed', so that the speaker is compelled to engage in rhetorical repair work (Taylor, 2005: 254). A central focus of our analysis is therefore on how speakers navigate troubled identities. The analytical concept of interactional trouble 'resonates with the Butlerian notion of "troubling moments" and provides a way of contextualising and making "gender trouble" visible in real life settings' (Morison and Macleod, 2013: 567).

Finally, repair work of troubled or stigmatised identities can function to challenge dominant normative discourses, or could leave them intact (Morison and Macleod, 2013). Part of the analytic task is to identify if and to what extent certain ways of speaking may function to transform dominant discourses. In a practical sense, our analysis entailed three main iterative processes, drawing on the concepts of discursive resources, interactional trouble and repair: (1) identifying the shared meanings resourcing participants' talk; (2) exploring how these discursive resources are employed in performing identity work; and (3) considering the extent to which hetero-gendered norms are resisted or troubled.

Findings

Our analysis foregrounds how gendered scripts are drawn on and function to both challenge and reiterate established hetero-gendered norms in participants' accounts. We identify three different, and at times conflicting, scripts drawn on by participants: that of romantic androgyny; heterosexual complementarity, and a heterosexual beauty mandate. We show how participants employ these scripts to repair the interactional trouble created by their positioning as bisexual and fashion socially desirable or credible identities. We also illustrate how instances of subversion of established hetero-gendered norms are shaped and constrained by existing citational politics.

In the presentation of findings, we use pseudonyms and indicate participants' own emphasis by using italics.

Romantic androgyny

In this first script, participants draw on a discursive resource of romantic androgyny to position themselves as freely loving across boundaries of gender. Through an attraction to a 'person and not a gender' argument (Kitzinger and Stainton Rogers, 1985: 182), romantic androgyny constructs bisexuality as unbounded attraction that transcends gender categories (Diamond, 2008). In participants' accounts, this script functions to normalise bisexuality as unrestricted in object choice, while heterosexuality and homosexuality are negatively valued through an association with a seemingly rigid preference for only one gender (Ault, 1996):

Extract one:

Astrid: It's quite crazy for me, but I guess it's not like I look down upon gay people, but for me, I also don't get that. I don't get how anyone can say 'I will never love these people,

over here. These people with penises or those people with vaginas'. It's like, wow, is that all you see? There's a mind in that body and there's a soul in that body, you know.

Extract two:

Phindile: I don't think that often people are attracted to a *group*. For instance, it's very rare to find someone who says 'well, I'm attracted to people with long toes', or whatever. I understand why they would locate it in gender, cause it's such an easy thing, if you think of reproduction. But for someone like myself, reproduction plays absolutely no role in choosing who I want to be with. So gender then is a *random* criterion for me.

This script is drawn on to negotiate a troubled identity attributed to participants in relation to negative evaluations of bisexuality in broader discourses, where bisexuality remains stigmatised not only in relation to heterosexism but often also in lesbian and gay contexts (Hartman, 2005; Klesse, 2011). A dominant delegitimising discourse, for instance, associates bisexuality with indecision and incites individuals to commit to either heterosexuality or homosexuality, or as bisexual women in research by Bower et al. describe it, to 'get off the fence' (2002: 36). Such a discourse denies the possibility of bisexuality as an enduring sexual identity and instead positions bisexual individuals as fickle or confused (Ault, 1996; Hartman, 2005). In this manner, identifying as bisexual implies a troubled position that participants avoid through engaging in rhetorical work that counters such negative positioning.

In extract one, for instance, Astrid draws on a script of romantic androgyny to ward off a troubled identity and instead position herself as tolerant and open-minded. This inverts a negative evaluation of bisexuality as confusion or indecision, and instead constructs a socially desirable identity associated with flexibility, tolerance and acceptance. Through such counter-positioning, this script constructs partner choice as being about more than sexuality; instead, it casts it as part of a resistance to strictly defined categories of identity such as those associated with sex and gender. In extract two, Phindile similarly engages in repair work, resourced by a script of romantic androgyny, to mitigate a troubled identity associated with bisexuality. Using an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), she bolsters her claim about the arbitrary character of the influence of gender in shaping sexual attraction – described by her as similar to differentiating between people based on any other physical characteristic such as the length of their toes – to resist negative positioning as indecisive and instead fashion a positive identity. This is a potentially powerful rhetorical strategy in that it simultaneously casts gendered difference as irrational or absurd, while also appealing to a progressive sensitivity to discrimination based on markers of difference – a compelling argument in neo-liberal democracies such as South Africa. For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa, public discourse is often oriented to speakers distancing themselves from race-based discrimination and instead emphasising accommodation of difference, seen for example in the popular description of the country as a 'rainbow nation'

(Walker, 2005). In this manner, a script of romantic androgyny resources participants' talk towards claiming positive, non-judgemental identities and legitimating sexual attraction not oriented to only one gender.

A consequence of drawing on this script, however, is that it reverts to employing yet another sexual dualism and functions to 'other' monosexual attraction (Ault, 1996; Bower et al., 2002). By collapsing homosexuality and heterosexuality under the category of monosexualities, a script of romantic androgyny denies the specificity of gay, lesbian and heterosexual sexualities, a discursive move that assigns these categories 'to a common margin, establishing the bisexual as legitimate, normal, and central against a newly constructed and now stigmatised collective other, the monosexual' (Ault, 1996: 459).

This script is also limited in the extent to which it challenges the male-female gender binary. While it is possible to see how, through aligning themselves with a script of romantic androgyny, participants reject the notion of limiting attraction to a specific gender, participants' accounts are still oriented to *two* genders – such as in the description in extract one of a naturalised male and female subject, based on sex ('men with penises' and 'women with vaginas'). Similarly, in extract two, Phindile introduces the possibility of troubling the causal continuity among sex, gender and sexuality, when she comments on the 'logic' of compulsory heterosexuality as accounted for by reproductive heterosex. This potential is, however, foreclosed when she states that she does not desire a reproductive partner, thereby preemptively avoiding the discursive decoupling of sex, gender and sexuality. In this manner, she bypasses the gender trouble implied by such a separation, and leaves the normative male-female binary intact.

Heterosexual complementarity

In contrast to the first script, the second script identified in participants' talk – that of heterosexual complementarity – more overtly appeals to familiar notions of normative masculinity and femininity. As discussed earlier, heterosexual complementarity constructs a two-sex system based on gendered difference, in which male and female subjects are constructed as binary opposites – supplementing each other in what the other lacks – and similarities between genders are minimised (Butler, 1990). This script was particularly salient in participants' accounts of relationships with men:

Extract three:

Sonia: With guys, I often also have to be careful . . . It sounds weird but I have to be more feminine. I should sometimes give him a chance to be a man.

Extract four:

Taryn: My previous boyfriend was very chauvinistic. And I was so aware that I was playing into it and changing my own personality to accommodate his insecurities as a man.

Extract five:

Phindile: With guys, I guess it's not just us in the relationship ... Perhaps it's the roles that I have myself associated with girl-guy relationships, that I play into, or I try to resist ... I definitely feel that pressure more with guys, I'm just not sure why.

Such a script of heterosexual complementarity is resourced by normative depictions of masculinity – associated with authority, control and relational assertiveness (Connell, 2002). Normative female subjectivity is constructed, in turn, as passive, acquiescent and responsive to men's needs (Connell, 2002; Carlson, 2011). Several South African studies detail the persistence of such normative constructions of masculinity and femininity in resourcing personal identity and relationship norms, with social sanctions for persons who do not conform (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012; Bhana and Anderson, 2013; Bhana, 2016). In drawing on this script, participants position themselves as relinquishing what might be more gender transgressive relationship scripts, in order to fashion feminine subjectivities that bolster their male partners' competency and authority – described, for instance, as 'giv[ing] him a chance to be a man' (extract three) or 'accomodat[ing] his insecurities as a man' (extract four).

Significant, however, is that this script also points to instances of resistance. Participants' self-aware reflections demonstrate an ability to critically interrogate the gendered positionings assumed in male-female relationships. This is powerfully illustrated in references to the tension associated with 'playing into' (extracts four and five) or 'try[ing] to resist' the 'pressure' of normative hetero-gendered positioning (extract five). Participants' statements illustrate the complexity of navigating (hetero)gendered power relations that cannot be reduced to a simplistic understanding of oppression and subordination, nor easily disrupted through bisexual women's dissidence from heterosexuality. Instead, in participants' accounts, male power is *both* pervasive *and* 'simultaneously contested and negotiated in ways which afford women a measure of agency' (Allen, 2003: 235).

Despite these instances of agentic interrogation in order to challenge and stretch hetero-gendered norms, this script does, however, largely reinforce the traditional gender binary and demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of compulsory heterosexuality in shaping female subjectivity in male-female couple relationships (Rich, 1980; Jackson, 2006). Indeed, participants' accounts construct possibilities for transforming gendered relationship norms as only realised *outside* of male-female relationships, in their interactions with other women. Talk about relationships with women was resourced by a common idealised construction of lesbian partnerships as necessarily entailing 'freedom from patriarchal power relationships', egalitarian norms and the absence of oppressive practices (Riggle et al., 2008: 241; Barnes, 2011). Drawing on such a construction, relationship norms between women are described as more malleable, liberating and

as allowing for articulation of counter-normative gendered scripts that reject hetero-gendered norms (Barnes, 2011; Lahti, 2015):

Extract six:

Sibongile: I think most of the time you find that straight guys are generally in that mind-set. You know what I mean, like this is *my* role and, so I don't know. I don't think . . . I don't want to do that. I'm not a rigid person in that sense, I just like free-styling as I go on. And I think it's easier to free-style with a woman because there aren't any set ways of doing things, you know [. . .] I just think settling with a guy comes with all these boxes almost, because of how things *should* be. With a woman there's nothing to break down. Between the two of you, you just establish how you guys are gonna make things work and how you relate.

Extract seven:

Astrid: With women, it's just easier because there aren't pre-defined roles. I usually tell people that it's more fun. It's more fun for me to figure out who's good at what.

This counter-normative script describes greater possibilities of expanding gendered norms, framed in relation to a sense of novelty in same-sex relationships that allows for establishing new patterns of interaction (Riggle et al., 2008). It positions female partners on equal footing, allowing for the negotiation of relationship norms that are egalitarian (shaped 'between the two of you', Sibongile), flexible and 'fun' (Astrid).

The persistence of a script of heterosexual complementarity, however, points to the influence of the wider discursive context in prescribing what is culturally intelligible or possible (Butler, 1993). Despite their sexual dissidence (in claiming a bisexual identity), participants' ability to imagine and fashion gender transgressive identities in male-female relationships is restricted by the familiar regulatory ideals available in what remains a predominantly patriarchal, heterosexist socio-cultural context. Drawing on asymmetrical gender positioning of normative masculinity and femininity in talk about male-female relationships, and limiting the possibility for transformed relationship norms to same-sex relationships, means that the gendered norms that underpin heterosexual complementarity remain largely intact.

The heterosexual beauty mandate

The final script identified in participants' talk is that of a heterosexual beauty mandate (Meyers et al., 1999; Jackson and Vares, 2013). This script is intimately interlinked with the heterosexual complementarity script that constructs female and male bodies as categorically different, incites gendered appearance norms that reiterate such difference in support of heterosexual coherence and confines sexual desire within the gender binary (Butler, 1990; Bordo, 1993). Within this

script, bodies become intelligible within the limits of a naturalised male/female gender binary so that gender-deviant bodies are cast as ‘unnatural’ or as existing outside of the ‘regulatory grids of intelligibility’ (Butler, 1990: 166). Bartky (1988), for instance, describes how the disciplinary practices that constitute normative femininity work towards creating an ideal socially credible identity. These normative practices, such as exhibiting an appropriate feminine posture or making use of the correct beauty technologies, construct a ‘practiced and subjected’ body (Bartky, 1988: 100). Women who are unwilling or unable to enact such appropriately embodied femininities face disciplinary techniques, such as the sense of deficiency and shame attributed to non-conforming bodies (Foucault, 1976; Bartky, 1988).

Participants drew on such a heterosexual beauty mandate to construct subjectivities that conform to dominant notions of credible and socially valued femininities (in particular, centred on ‘femme’-presenting lesbian and bisexual identities) (Meyers et al., 1999; Taub, 1999, 2003; Clarke and Turner, 2007). Jennifer explains this when she states, ‘I wear a dress, I have long hair, I wear makeup, and you know, I have long nails’. Such ‘femme’ identities are contrasted in participants’ accounts with ‘butch’ lesbian identities, considered as transgressive of the traditional female beauty ideal through practices such as dressing and walking ‘like a man’, having short hair, having piercings and presenting an ‘unkempt’ image (Eves, 2004; Levitt and Hiestand, 2005). Participants drew on a script of a heterosexual beauty mandate to distance themselves from such a stereotypical butch lesbian identity, considered as a deliberate ‘defeminising’:

Extract eight:

Sonia: Like, my mom is afraid that I will become this terribly butch dyke who is going to [...] shave my hair off and you know ... like get hundreds of thousands of piercings and walk like I have testicles and things like that. And that’s not what it is, you know, they have this warped idea of ‘oh hell, I will have to be ashamed of walking with you soon’.

Extract nine:

Sibongile: I love the aspects of my femininity. I don’t want to be a man, I’m not a man. I’m *just* a woman who *happens to be* attracted to other women. Yes, I like the femininity, the softness, the curves, the breasts and all of those things.

The above extracts are oriented towards the potential gender trouble generated by participants’ identification as bisexual, in that their divergence from compulsory heterosexuality threatens their adherence to a normalised female script, where feminine women desire and are desired by masculine men. Sonia refers to this in extract eight when she describes how her sexual dissidence elicits concerns about her non-compliance to a respectable female subjectivity, which could result in others being ‘ashamed’ of her. Sibongile, in turn, downplays such concerns through the use of a

minimising rhetorical strategy, with the words ‘just’ and ‘happens to be’, signalling the unimportance of her deviation from the binary logic of heterosexual complementarity. Any remaining trouble in participants’ talk is repaired through creating a deviant sexual ‘Other’ – the ‘butch dyke’ – against which participants’ alignment with a femme identity is contrasted. Such a butch lesbian identity is described through humour and extreme case formulations (for instance, in Sonia’s reference to ‘hundreds of thousands of piercings’) to cast such gender deviance as ridiculous, and emphasise it as entirely distinct from femininity (as aspiring ‘to be a man’, Sibongile). In this manner, participants simultaneously stretch the boundaries of heterosexual complementarity by positing that ‘real’ women can inhabit a desiring position in relation to other women, and affirm it by casting butch lesbians as aspiring to be like the men posited in such a binary.

Evoking such a butch/femme dichotomy, participants are largely able to avoid inhabiting a troubled identity as gender non-conforming. This resonates with existing South African research: Tucker describes how gay men inhabiting discredited identities (in relation to heterosexism) may draw on categories of exclusion available in their wider discursive context to ‘frame, justify and even normalise new variants of exclusion’ (2009: 194). Similarly, another South African study also focused on gay men notes that for participants, their ‘sexual dissidence is less troubling [...] than deviating from gendered markers of hegemonic masculinity [pointing] to ways in which marginalised men might have an interest in maintaining the dominant gendered order’ (Lynch and Clayton, 2017: 279). Adams et al., in their US-based research with female athletes, describe how deviance from traditional markers of ‘successful’ heterosexual femininity may be compensated for by investment in exaggerated femininity through assuming ‘traditional feminine markers (e.g. long hair, makeup, frilly dresses)’ (2005: 20–21). As mentioned earlier, gender non-conformity may have more severe consequences for persons made vulnerable in postcolonial contexts of interlocking oppressions – particularly those based on race and class – where gender deviance by black lesbian and bisexual women is often met with targeted sexual violence. Such contexts of marginalisation and vulnerability contribute to a ‘redoubling of [...] efforts to assert respectable personhood’ associated with hetero-gendered norms and practices (Salo et al., 2010: 301). By drawing on a heterosexual beauty mandate, participants are able to distance themselves from being positioned as ‘gender deviants’ and assert their own gendered identity as credible and socially valued.

Discussion

In analysing the gendered scripts of South African bisexual women, we were interested in how participants negotiate hetero-gendered norms and practices in their accounts of claiming a bisexual identity. Nagle argues for the radical potential of bisexuality to eliminate gender hierarchies and ultimately achieve a ‘multiply gendered society’ (1995: 313). As discussed in our introduction, by refusing to orient to one gender only, bisexuality is often constructed as subverting the gender binary

and creating opportunities for differently gendered selves (Däumer, 1992). In examining this transgressive potential for bisexuality, we identified three gendered scripts drawn on in participants' accounts: that of romantic androgyny; heterosexual complementarity; and a closely related script of a heterosexual beauty mandate. We were able to demonstrate how participants' talk was in many instances oriented to normalising bisexuality as a legitimate sexual identity, in relation to the discursive trouble caused by their identification as such. This, however, occurred largely through othering strategies that create new binaries of exclusion and curtail the transformative potential of such talk.

Further to this, in relation to our interest in challenges to hetero-gendered norms, our findings demonstrate how participants' talk generally does not function to transgress the gender binary, but in fact in many instances draws on and reiterates hetero-gendered norms. While subversive positions associated with claiming a dissident sexuality (such as bisexuality) might resist *aspects* of the male-female binary, the binary largely remains intact and in this sense, supports Hird's contention that all contemporary manifestations of sex and gender 'depend on the current two-sex system for their expression' (2000: 359). Indeed, a description of bisexuality as radically transgressive may function as a veiling mechanism for the pervasive influence of binaries, rendering it ineffective in truly interrogating binary logic. This risks depicting a false sense of emancipation. Referring to the subversive potential of cross-dressing and sexual ambiguity, Van Lenning 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' (2004: 42). Participants' accounts support this contention by illustrating the persuasive power of the gender binary. Theorising bisexuality as existing outside of oppositional categories potentially closes off opportunities to interrogate this pervasive influence of gender binaries.

Does this mean that the political value of bisexuality, as a sexual identity that unsettles hetero-gendered norms, becomes invalidated? While it appears that bisexuality's radical potential to subvert dominant binaries is not entirely realised in participants' accounts, our findings also do not support the conclusion that claiming such an identity holds *no* challenge to gender binaries. 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). Such shifts in norms indicate that resistance is not necessarily enacted through fundamentally different ways of understanding gender, 'but rather arise[s] as variations or improvisations of existing gender scripts' (Morison and Macleod, 2013: 575). Examples of such 'boundary stretching' in our findings include participants' self-aware reflections on the coercive influence of hetero-gendered norms in their relationships with men, and their discomfort with the implications of these for female subjectivity. Similarly, a slow bending of hetero-gendered norms is also evident in participants' accounts of their relationships with women, depicted conversely as sites of resistance to and expansion of hetero-gendered relationship norms, as well as in participants' challenge to

heterosexual complementarity through self-positioning as *feminine* women desiring other women. These instances of dissent across the dataset show how, despite reliance on (and reiteration of) established gendered meanings, participants' accounts also offer opportunities for an incremental stretching of dominant norms (Morison and Macleod, 2013).

Finally, our findings demonstrate the value of examining challenges to the gender binary in relation to the discursive possibilities for inhabiting transgressive subject positions, particularly so when resistant subjects may risk being 'unacknowledged' within societal citizenship norms (Sanger, 2008: 50). In a sense, maintaining their viability in discourse plays out as a balancing act, where bisexual women negotiate different manifestations of trouble involved in 'correct' and 'incorrect' citation of gender norms. The extent to which subjects adhere to gendered scripts is predicated on the interactive utility such scripts hold in particular localised contexts, where citing 'correct' gendered positions might form part of a cultural survival strategy to maintain one's identity as socially viable – perhaps even more so in contexts marked by intense heterosexism (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Morison and Macleod, 2013). Analyses from postcolonial contexts – with their particular exclusions and tensions created by intersecting oppressions based on gender, sexuality, class and race – provide powerful insights into the manner in which broader socio-cultural contexts may constrain or enable bisexual women's challenges to normative constructions of gender. While certainly not due to an essential or universally authoritative nature, participants' accounts demonstrate the 'enormous force and impact' of gendered 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: 43). By being cognisant of the material and structural constraints on bisexual-identified persons' ability to challenge the gender binary, it becomes possible to see how instances of talk can function to slowly and incrementally bend hetero-gendered norms to contribute in modest ways to the undoing of gender.

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Notes

1. BDSM is an overlapping acronym referring to bondage and discipline (BD), dominance and submission (DS) and sadomasochism (SM) (Barker, 2013).

2. Townships are overcrowded living areas on the outskirts of urban centres, formerly designated for black occupation by apartheid legislation and with such race-based segregation violently enforced through forced removals of black persons and families from urban and suburban areas. Despite the democratic transition in 1994, townships are still predominantly comprised of black inhabitants, and remain under-developed and lacking basic services. Residents contend with high levels of poverty, deprivation, violence and crime (Kynoch, 2016). Many residents commute to urban centres for employment and education opportunities.
3. Also problematically termed 'corrective rape' (see Hames, 2011), such targeted violence is increasingly also documented in peri-urban and rural areas and recognised as also being committed against black transgender persons and gay men (Lee et al., 2013).

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