

Bisexuality: Making One's Way Beyond the Binary

I once came across a Tik Tok video by the user @kat1981, where Kat compares bisexual attraction to that of straight and lesbian women. In the video, the straight woman says, "I'm attracted to men; girls are pretty though." The lesbian woman says, "I'm attracted to women; guys are chill though." Lastly, the bisexual woman passionately describes her attraction to other women, and when asked if she also likes men, she pretends to vomit and admits so reluctantly. Although the video is meant for comedic purposes, I had never seen a piece of media before that accurately illustrated the way I feel towards my identity as a bisexual woman. Why does the bisexual community feel ashamed of expressing their attraction to the opposite sex? Our heteronormative society invalidates bisexuality. However, the gay and lesbian communities do so as well. Isn't LGBTQIA+ culture affiliated with the notion of affirming all sexual and gender identities? This question is one of many I have regarding bisexual discrimination. In an attempt to answer these questions, I conducted research on biphobia and its correlation with popular Western ideologies. Eventually, I came to a conclusion about how people, regardless of their sexuality, can enable a bisexual person's internalized biphobia. Because binary opposition undermines bisexuality, bi-erasure exists in both the straight and queer communities. Society can challenge biphobia by accepting bisexuality as a sexual orientation separate from straight or queerness and recognizing how bisexual discrimination affects the quality of a bisexual person's wellbeing. Bisexuals will become more accepting of their identity when they, along with their allies, embrace spectrum thinking.

Biphobia's dichotomic roots trace back to an outdated view of sexuality. Peter Elbow attempts to define binary thinking, also commonly referred to as binary opposition, and how the term weakens one's scope as a writer in the 1993 article, "The Uses of Binary Thinking."

Despite his work focusing on binary thinking's impact on writers, the commonplace system of binary opposition influences nearly every aspect of life, including sexuality. According to Elbow, binary thinking frames "issues in terms of opposites such as sun/moon or reason/passion" (22). Categorizing things into pairs is the most popular way to process ideas. One of the earliest documents of binary opposition in the Western world was introduced in Ancient Greece. The Ionian philosopher, Pythagoras, established his Table of Opposites consisting of ten different word pairs he concluded have opposite meanings. Every day, people digest loads of new information; thus, it makes sense to narrow concepts down to a pair of mutually exclusive ideas rather than consider every possible scenario. Binary opposition invalidates bisexuality because the term perpetuates the belief that bisexuals are, by definition, only attracted to men and women. However, bisexuality simply means that a person is attracted to more than one gender. Therefore, binary thinking omits the possibility of bisexual attraction including men and women, as well as non-binary and genderqueer individuals. We threaten our chances of establishing an accountable society when we perceive bisexuality based off a set of untrue statements. Part of this misconception might come from the fact that the terms binary and bisexual share the prefix "bi-," meaning two. In an attempt to discourage society's limitations of bisexual attraction, some bisexuals have begun to identify themselves using the more inclusive term, "bi+". Most bisexuals reject the harmful belief that they can't be attracted to more than two genders, yet they still receive ill will from the straight and queer communities. Some people even go so far as to accuse bisexuals of using their identity to discriminate against transgender, intersex, and non-binary individuals. However, because gender exists on a spectrum, so does bisexuality.

Elbow exposes how society struggles to venture away from binary thinking. We can observe its relevancy today in American politics to understand the role binary thinking plays in

Western society. The two-party system consisting of Democrats and Republicans dominates U.S. politics, despite the existence of third parties like Libertarians and the Green Party. It is hardly a surprise to any American voter when a third-party candidate loses the general election. Binary thinking is at the heart of electoral politics; it doesn't help that each day Americans become more polarized towards the radical left or right due in part to the lack of nonpartisan news sources from which they should gather information. Autumn Elizabeth's work, "Challenging the Binary: Sexual Identity That is Not Duality," argues that "Western society operates in a traditionally binary thought system... bisexuality has broken some of these dichotomies... [but my] article notes the lag between theory on emerging sexual identities and community discourses surrounding those identities." Elizabeth's article suggests that biphobia is a less prominent topic of conversation in the queer community, despite the existence of some academic discourse on the subject. Shedding light on the issue is important both in and outside of the academic world if society is to become more inclusive. Although it may seem as though Western society will not adapt to more politically correct ideologies, bisexuality proves that change is possible. Contradicting dichotomy, bisexuals demonstrate that not all individuals bind their sexuality by one or two distinct alternatives.

Regardless of one's upbringing, approximately every person in the Western world has grown up depending on the binary system. Therefore, bi-erasure exists in both the straight and queer communities. Most Americans recognize that their heteronormative society discriminates against the LGBTQIA+ community-- the legalization of same-sex marriage was only a mere five years ago, after the Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015. Additionally, one might assume that all members of the queer community strive to treat each other equally and with respect. Despite this belief, evidence still proves the existence of biphobia in the gay and lesbian

communities. One example of biphobic discourse taking place within the queer community comes from a post on Twitter via the user @2kkdavid, who identifies as a gay male. On October 31, 2020, this user expressed his perceived frustration towards bisexuals who feared losing their rights if Donald Trump was re-elected as president. Furthermore, he explicitly states that despite their worries, bisexuals are “still half straight and [they] still have [somewhat] rights [because they] have that ‘default setting.’” Fortunately, social media users on various platforms came forward to defend the bisexual community against the invidious statement. This tweet highlights how close-minded assumptions affect bisexuals, as user @space.berryy on Tik Tok expressed that this tweet fuels her internalized biphobia because she often questions the validity of her sexual identity while interacting in queer spaces. The initial tweet presents a member of the gay community acting on their bisexual prejudice through binary opposition. The author refers to bisexuals as “half-straight,” thus implying that bisexual attraction is based on an equal attraction to members of the same and opposite sexes. Because binary thinking reduces the scope of bisexual attraction down to a set of two genders or sexualities, people grapple with the possibility of bisexuality existing on a spectrum.

A general misunderstanding of bisexuality is due in part to the continuous bi-erasure taking place in both research and the media. Using an alias for anonymity, I obtained one lesbian woman's perspective on bisexual representation by interviewing my coworker Megan McCartney (she/her). Megan observes a lack of “bi representation in the media... it's typically more gay/lesbian representation.” Although the entire queer community represents a minority, the media especially overlooks bisexuals. People are more likely to find movies, television shows, and books featuring openly gay or lesbian characters than they are to find media with openly bisexual characters. Bi-erasure is also prominent in the research world. Scholars struggle

to explain how and why bisexuals face discrimination because the process of doing so requires academics to dissect binary opposition, an ideology so commonplace that researchers may be unaware of its impact on biphobia. "Invisible No More," the 2017 article written by Ron J. Suresha, elaborates on the struggles bisexuals face as a result of underrepresentation. According to the author, "Rates of drug and alcohol use, smoking, suicide, and intimate-partner violence are all markedly higher for bisexuals" (14). This statistic may enforce an unhealthy idea among bisexuals that their wellness is not a priority. Suresha's article suggests that bisexual representation increases the chances of bisexuals receiving more personalized treatment in psychiatric care. Promoting the equal and accurate representation of bisexuality in research and the media is crucial. Challenging biphobia also requires the disengagement between queer, straight, and bisexual identities.

People should view bisexuality as separate from being straight, gay, or lesbian-identifying because they each have different experiences with coming out. One simple way to differentiate bisexuality from being gay or lesbian involves analyzing statistics. The 2015 article by Kim Parker, "Among LGBT Americans, bisexuals stand out when it comes to identity acceptance," cites a research survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2013 that concluded "Bisexuals are also much less likely than gay men or lesbians to have 'come out' to the important people in their life. Only 28%..." (2). There are many reasons why a bisexual, or any queer individual, chooses not to come out. Specifically, being openly bisexual in straight or queer spaces can feel alienating because one can relate with those around them, but only to a certain degree. This feeling discourages me from coming out to certain people. While I can only account for my experiences as a cisgender, bisexual woman, I hope there are bisexuals that may identify with my story. I fear the day one of my homophobic family members asks me who I am

dating because I wouldn't want them to criticize me if I happened to be in a relationship with a woman. I'm also afraid of being praised or tokenized by tolerant family members for my sexuality. My internalized biphobia encourages me not to come out because I live in a heteronormative society. As a bisexual woman who has dated men, I've reaped the benefits of being perceived as straight in public with former boyfriends. Furthermore, I recognize that my bisexuality prevents me from fully understanding and relating to specific struggles that lesbian women face. I often wonder if my efforts to affirm the gay and lesbian experience are reciprocated. I feel alienated and judged when I date men or express my attraction to men with others in the queer community. I've had my gay and lesbian peers make fun of me for dating a man, calling me "straight for the time being" or "not gay enough." Although my peers were joking, I've internalized these comments. The same discomfort and alienation remain when I'm around straight people and express my attraction to women or non-binary individuals. "The Biphobia Scale a Decade Later: Reflections and Additions," a 2011 article by Patrick Mulick and Lester Wright Jr., defines the experience I described of feeling ingenuine as "double discrimination... discrimination from both the heterosexual and homosexual communities." Double discrimination is unique to the bisexual experience. Identifying and embracing their distinct struggles inhibits bisexuals from downplaying the challenges they face as a community.

Curtailing biphobia involves recognizing what practices count as bisexual discrimination. Discrimination can be subjective when observed from person-to-person. However, certain evidence proves that bi-erasure affects the community as a whole. The 2016 article by Gretchen Rachel Hammond, "Bisexual battles: MAP report shows shocking disparities in the bisexual community," defines the inequalities bisexuals face in and outside of the queer community. The author references how bisexuals "have been a part of the LGBTQ acronym since the 1990s, yet

they are rarely found marching within the ranks of a Pride Parade,” (2). This is an example of bi-erasure; bisexuals are underrepresented in queer spaces despite people acknowledging them as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. True allyship involves affirming and celebrating the bisexual experience. These inequalities affect bisexuals' physical and emotional wellbeing. The 2019 report, “Perceived discrimination, health and wellbeing among middle-aged and older lesbian, gay and bisexual people: A prospective study,” suggests the connection between bisexual discrimination and their physical health. The document concludes that people who have faced bisexual discrimination likely experience more “long-standing illness, depressive symptoms, [poor] quality of life, [low] life satisfaction and loneliness,” (Jackson, Hackett, Grabovac, Smith, Steptoe). Bi-erasure is discrimination, and it has dangerous long-term effects on the community. Biphobia is complex as it ranges from distasteful comments among peers to misinformation spread within research-based fields. Complacency is a driving factor behind misunderstanding bisexuality. One might assume as long as they are not explicitly biphobic, they can identify as allies to the bisexual community. However, practicing solidarity means actively advocating for the fair treatment of any marginalized group.

Internalized biphobia is rampant within the bisexual community. Internalized biphobia is the process of discriminating against oneself for their bisexuality. I reached out to my friend Bailey Powell (she/they) to observe how biphobia affects the community. Bailey admitted to me that they hold a certain amount of bias towards the bisexual community, despite identifying as bisexual. She states that she often feels invalidated by people who tell her that “being bisexual is just a stepping stool for coming out as gay... for some it may be, but there is no reason to tell bisexual people that. That is something they can figure out in their own time.” Comments like the one Bailey described aren't typically meant to cause harm, but discrimination is often more

frustrating and hurtful when it's unintended. Bailey's statement encourages bisexuals to reclaim their sexuality. Biphobia is customary enough that I am easily able to find and interview various people and highlight how their experiences support claims made by established authors researching bisexuality. Heron Greenesmith, author of the 2018 article, "We Know Biphobia is Harmful. But Do We Know What's Behind It?," proposes that downsizing bi-erasure is a lengthy process. Greenesmith interviews the author of another queer publication, and this author states that "I don't know if I'll ever be as comfortable with B as I am with G, but in this brave new LGBTQ world of sexual fluidity, maybe there's still hope for me." Greenesmith's interviewee mentions a shift in the queer community towards a more fluid definition of sexuality; this change may help bisexuals validate their identity. Nevertheless, internalized biphobia can't be acquitted without mindfully identifying one's biases toward bisexuality and its role in the queer community.

As a solution to bisexual discrimination, society should embrace principles of spectrum thinking. Spectrum thinking is the antithesis of binary opposition. While binary thinking dictates the mind to classify things between two opposing alternatives, spectrum thinking recognizes the possibilities that exist between those alternatives- all of which are valid. "Does thinking about things 'on a spectrum' make us more enlightened?" is an article by Adrienne Matei that defines the pros and cons of spectrum thinking and concludes that "Despite their limitations, spectrums can encourage greater flexibility in our understanding of the world." People most commonly use spectrum thinking to define autism. This instance of spectrum thinking at work limits opportunities for autistic bias and prejudice to occur. Despite this, I don't believe spectrum thinking should be used to classify everything. There are many instances where it is more appropriate to have distinct options, especially when working with children. Very young children



can become easily overwhelmed by choice when they have too many options to decide from. In fact, it would go against the very principles of spectrum thinking to argue that one can only use spectrum thinking or binary thinking to categorize all information. Moreover, spectrum thinking gives bisexuals the opportunity to let their feelings guide the way they identify themselves. As Jessa Lingel states in the 2009 article, "Adjusting The Borders: Bisexual Passing And Queer Theory," spectrum thinking is lacking in the queer community. The author closes their research with the statement that "feminist and queer theory... have frequently failed to recognize the subjectivity and psychological complexity of bisexual bodies," (16). Bisexuals should not have to wonder how much of their identity is part straight or queer; they should be able to accept themselves as fully bisexual and recognize how that means something different to every member of the community.

Before writing this inquiry-based research essay, I harbored deep insecurity towards my sexuality and didn't understand why bi-erasure was so common among the straight and queer communities. I felt alienated in my attraction towards men, women, and non-binary individuals. While researching and reflecting on the experiences shared by queer people, I learned that it isn't plausible to believe that biphobia stems from a genuine scorn for bisexuality, especially when navigating biphobia in the LGBTQIA+ community. Biphobia is a consequence of the definitive role binary opposition plays in our society. A bisexual in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex is just as valid as gays and lesbians in the queer community. However, there are certain struggles and fears that gay and lesbian people may experience that a bisexual person cannot identify with. There is privilege in being able to pass as straight in our heteronormative society. Despite this truth, bisexuals are not "half-straight and half-gay," they are fully bisexual and entirely responsible for navigating their attraction, even if other people aren't comfortable

with the idea that bisexuality exists on a spectrum. Binary opposition strongly influences the way people view sexuality; sexual identity is typically boiled down to someone being either straight or gay. I believe this causes tension between the bisexual, gay, and lesbian communities because they are forced to assimilate, thus overlooking the unique challenges each group endures. Fortunately, it is possible to shift towards the more inclusive ideology of spectrum thinking. Spectrum thinking allows people to express their sexuality freely without invalidating the experiences of someone with a different sexual identity. It is essential for people of all backgrounds to understand the concepts of binary and spectrum thinking and how they affect one's view of sexuality. Although it is difficult to abandon the status quo, any thought process can be altered when we recognize which harmful beliefs are a direct result of our thinking patterns and take the initiative to reframe our views.

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