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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 917153563]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Bisexuality

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306887>

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Breanne Fahs^a

^a Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ, USA

Online publication date: 25 November 2009

To cite this Article Fahs, Breanne(2009) 'Compulsory Bisexuality?: The Challenges of Modern Sexual Fluidity', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9: 3, 431 – 449

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15299710903316661

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15299710903316661>

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COMPULSORY BISEXUALITY?: THE CHALLENGES OF MODERN SEXUAL FLUIDITY

Breanne Fahs

Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ, USA

Although Adrienne Rich once posited that “compulsory heterosexuality” required women to identify as heterosexual to comply with implicit social norms, this study examined the possibility of compulsory bisexuality in light of increasing reports of heterosexual-identified women engaging in homoerotic behavior with other women, usually in front of men and in social settings like fraternity parties, bars and clubs. Forty qualitative interviews were conducted with women of diverse backgrounds to explore women’s narratives about performative bisexuality. Although younger women reported more performative bisexual experiences in public, older women reported more pressure to perform as bisexual in private (e.g., pressure for group sex). Further, experiences with performative bisexuality did not consistently predict political attitudes that supported full civil rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ) community, indicating a disconnect between behavior and attitudes. Implications of performative bisexuality as “compulsory,” as well as considerations about whether performative bisexuality indicates acceptance of bisexuality for women and/or exploitation of women’s same-sex desires were explored.

Keywords: female bisexuality, performance, political attitudes, normative pressures, LGBTQ rights

INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich, in her classic and highly-influential 1980 article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence,” argued that

Address correspondence to Breanne Fahs, Arizona State University, Mail Code: 2151, 4701 W. Thunderbird Road, Glendale, AZ 85306, USA (E-mail: Breanne.fahs@asu.edu).

heterosexuality is not a choice, but rather, something that we do because of the strong normative pressures to identify as heterosexual. She stated,

[E]nforced submission and the use of cruelty, if played out in the heterosexual pairing, is “normal,” while sensuality between women, including erotic mutuality and respect, is “queer,” “sick,” and either pornographic in itself or not very exciting compared with the sexuality of whips and bondage... [I]t widens the range of behavior considered acceptable from men in heterosexual intercourse—behavior which reiteratively strips women of their autonomy, dignity, and sexual potential, including the potential of loving and being loved by women in mutuality and integrity. (p. 234)

Extending Rich’s argument about the ways in which heterosexuality is not a choice per se, but rather something enforced as the natural, normal and socially-acceptable choice, the current study considers the relatively new and rapidly proliferating phenomenon of heterosexual-identified women reporting that they engage in “performative bisexuality” in an effort to conform to social norms. Unlike other forms of bisexual erotic behavior, performative bisexuality is defined primarily as engaging in homoerotic acts with other women, usually in front of men and most often in the context of social settings like fraternity parties, bars, clubs and other crowded sexualized spaces (though private “performances” may also have this quality). The current study explores the implications of such behavior and the way in which many women report that performances of bisexual behavior feel compulsory or required to garner sexual-validation within their heterosexual relationships or the heteronormative culture at large.

Research on bisexuality reveals its contentious and often ambiguous qualities. Jennifer Baumgardner (2007) argued,

In a sex obsessed world, it appeared that no one wanted to know about bisexual sex. Why? Well, because it’s not a “real” sexual orientation somehow. Reading about it is confusing because bisexuals themselves are just confused. Besides it’s just a phase. Did I mention that bi is code for gay? And, you know, it’s just a trendy way for straight girls to fit in with other radical and oppressed folks. (p. 8)

As Plante (2006) argued, interpretations of what “counts” as bisexual vary widely across groups, as some identify bisexuals as those who have ever had sexual encounters with the same sex, whereas others point to bisexuality as a chosen political and social identity that does not require

sexual contact with the same sex. Others argue that bisexuality serves as a vehicle through which women decide whether to be gay or heterosexual, whereas still others claim that bisexuality is a legitimate and permanent identity category. Some point to the chic and hip qualities of bisexual identity, whereas others question whether bisexuals should be included in the gay rights movement. Still others claim that *bisexuality* is a transitory phase and not a real identity; constructs like “lesbian until graduation” and “bisexual until graduation” speak to this assumption. The popular *New York Times* article, “Straight, Gay, or Lying?: Bisexuality Revisited” (Carey, 2005) touched upon the reluctance on the part of mainstream media to accept bisexuality as a real sexual identity. This confusion is of course compounded by the increasing emergence of performative bisexuality (Levy, 2005), where women often deny the significance of same-sex encounters even while engaging in them, thus further challenging the meaning of bisexuality as a permanent or meaningful identity.

Examining the research, these tensions become increasingly clear. Even the historical context of bisexuality reveals a fluidity of definition and meaning, as scholars have struggled to situate bisexuality in relationship to heterosexuality and homosexuality for quite some time. As Jeffrey Weeks (1990) argued, we must distinguish “between homosexual behaviour, which is universal, and a homosexual identity, which is historically specific” (p. 3). Thus, though bisexual behavior has existed as a persistent fact of human life, bisexual identity represents a cultural invention that shifts in meaning as concepts like heterosexuality and homosexuality arise as opposites. As Angelides (2001) said, “[T]he elision of bisexuality from the present tense has been one of the primary discursive strategies employed in an effort to avoid a collapse of sexual boundaries—a *crisis of sexual identity*” (p. 17).

Bisexual experiences for women are demonstrably on the rise. A recent study found that 11% of women ages 15–44 reported having had some form of sexual experience with women, and women were 3 times more likely than men to have had male and female partners in the last year. Younger women were significantly more likely than older women to report same-sex encounters (Mosher, Chandra, & Hones, 2005). After studying heterosexual-identified women from three geographic regions in the United States, 30% reported same-sex feelings (Hoburg, Konik, Williams, & Crawford, 2004). This number represents the considerable variability and sexual fluidity among women as compared to men, who are much less likely to report same-sex attractions and feelings (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Further, women’s same-sex encounters occur often in the context of pleasing male partners’ desires for threesomes, as research has shown that men tend to fantasize about group sex, particularly with multiple women (Wilson, 1987). Other research has found that

significant numbers of women have sexual encounters with other women outside of the context of men (Baumgardner, 2007).

Lisa Diamond (2003) found that those women who identified as bisexual or lesbian during their late teens and early 20s mostly did not lose their feelings of attraction to other women when surveyed 5 years later, as 75% still identified as lesbian or bisexual and 12.5% identified as unlabeled. Diamond's, 2008 study found that bisexuality was not a transitional stage that women outgrew, but rather, a label more women adopted over time. These studies did not, however, account for women who engaged in same-sex eroticism but still claimed heterosexuality, as in the case of performative bisexuality.

Conflict about bisexuality as an identity is a common theme in research that addresses the topic. Moore (2005) found that bisexuals were more conflicted about their sexuality than heterosexuals or gay/lesbian individuals. Sexual minority women are increasingly adopting the label "bisexual" and "unlabeled" for their sexual identities rather than lesbian/gay identities, as a descriptor and as a philosophical statement about being noncategorical (Savin-Williams, 2005). Bisexuality has also been adopted more and more by those who want to deconstruct traditional models of sexual identity, as bisexual takes on a more fluid and malleable quality than heterosexual or lesbian identity (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990; Rust, 1992). This is further complicated by the idea that women's sexual desires "are even more situation dependent and less 'category specific' than those of men" (Diamond, 2008, p. 6). Ultimately, bisexual identity challenges us not to imagine a "third" sexual identity, but rather, to destabilize sexual identity itself (Garber, 1995).

When examining popular culture today, increased visibility for bisexuality is apparent, perhaps because, as recent studies have shown, bisexual behavior for women is a turn-on for heterosexual men (Kimmel & Plante, 2002), and because women engage in experimental bisexual behavior, particularly with their female friends, at an increasing rate (Thompson, 2007). Several television shows have begun to explore women's bisexuality, often involving a story arc in which the character explores their bisexual feelings and then ultimately reverts back to identifying as mostly heterosexual. Such characters as Claire on *Six Feet Under*, Samantha on *Sex in the City*, Buffy on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Julia on *Nip/Tuck*, and Marissa on *The O.C.* serve as examples of mainstream television shows testing public acceptance of such sexual identity exploration. Notably, however, none of these women remained bisexual or lesbian for the remainder of the show. Few shows, *L Word* (notably on premium cable) aside, depict heterosexual women choosing bisexuality or lesbian identity in a permanent way. Films that depict these choices most often earn reputations as non-mainstream Indie films. Some examples include *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Election*, *High*

Art, Imagine Me and You, My Summer of Love, Puccini for Beginners, Gia, If These Walls Could Talk 1 and 2, Fire and Kissing Jessica Stein.

In contrast to these often thoughtful portrayals of sexual identity exploration, the past several years have also ushered in a dramatic increase in the number of television shows that rely upon performative bisexuality as a form of entertainment. In line with the highly publicized kiss between Britney Spears and Madonna at the 2003 Video Music Awards, shows like *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila, Flavor of Love, Next, The Real World, Parental Control, Rock of Love* and *Elimidate* represent the exploitation of women's same-sex eroticism, as women kiss, engage in sexual banter, and sometimes compete for each other typically in front of men, either literally or virtually. Movies like *American Pie 2* and *Cruel Intentions* also map onto these trends. The proliferation of *Girls Gone Wild* videos—in which women show their breasts, hook up with other women on camera, and sometimes show their genitals or masturbate on camera—reveals the changing landscape of bisexual acceptance, particularly forms of bisexuality that can be appropriated into the male gaze. Central to every *Girls Gone Wild* video is the display of “friends” who kiss, fondle and sometimes perform oral sex on each other.

Hand in hand with such pseudoacceptance of bisexual expression, however, is the potential for exploitation and manipulation of women's sexual identity fluctuations. For example, Baumeister (2000) found that women's sexualities tend to be more easily shaped by sociocultural and situational factors, regardless of sexual orientation. Women's sexuality shifts in response to changing social trends and pressures more readily than men's sexuality, which can be particularly dangerous in a patriarchal climate. On the positive side, such “plasticity” may mean that women

adapt to changing *cultural* scripts and expectations, along with making adaptations in the context of particular partners. Women may benefit by being more open to trying new things that partners suggest, seeking and taking advice about sex, and developing their sexual selves. But the detriment is that women may be more susceptible to pressure and coercion and more prone to confusion and discontinuity in their sexual lives. (Plante, 2006, p. 223)

Such plasticity may make (temporary or transient) bisexual identification possible, as women internalize messages that it is okay for them to experiment sexually with other women. At the same time, such plasticity may construct women as having the potential to be easily manipulated by the changing whims of the culture.

In the case of *Girls Gone Wild*, the films exploit for profit the normative pressures women experience that tell them to behave as bisexual in front of men. Notably, women do not receive payment for their participation in these films (though they sometimes, ironically, receive t-shirts), and viewers are led to believe that women “want” to engage in these behaviors on and off camera. Levy (2005) asked, “And how is imitating a stripper or a porn star—a woman whose *job* is to imitate arousal in the first place—going to render us sexually liberated?” (p. 5). Implicit in this question is the suggestion that real acceptance of bisexuality is not inherent to its proliferation in the mainstream media. Just because women perform as bisexual, it does not suggest that they necessarily want to do these things; rather, it may indicate that this represents the newest form of selling women empowerment via exploitation. She went on to argue,

A tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular. What we once regarded as a *kind* of female sexual expression we now view *as* sexuality. . . “Raunchy” and “liberated” are not synonyms. It is worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world of boobs and gams we have resurrected reflects how far we’ve come, or how far we have left to go. (p. 5)

Levy’s (2005) analysis of *Girls Gone Wild* included a variety of interviews with women who performed sexual acts with other women on camera. One woman she interviewed said, “I’m not at all bisexual . . . not that I have anything against that. But when you think about it, I’d never do that *really*. It’s more for show. A polite way of putting it is it’s like a reflex” (p. 11). Such comments raise questions that this study will address: Would women “do that *really*” outside of these circumstances? What would women’s desire for other women look like if it was not co-opted in the name of empowerment, marketed to men, made profitable for men, and exploited as something “hot” to do for the men watching? This study asks questions about sexual practices independently of whether they produce pleasure; rather than judging women’s sexual behavior and categorizing it as “right” or “wrong,” I interrogate the conditions within which women experience their sexuality. Thus, though women may consider this behavior fun or pleasurable, and may in fact claim agency in doing it, we must nevertheless examine the cultural demand for performative bisexuality.

Along these lines, feminist theorists have consistently argued that women shape their sexual desires to please patriarchal fantasies about women, directly (as they assume their male partner’s fantasies) and indirectly (as they assume cultural fantasies about women more broadly). If men’s patriarchal fantasies dominate the landscape of sexuality,

and men's fantasies become normative and widespread, this results in women internalizing men's fantasies to feel accepted, loved and, perhaps, objectified and sexualized (Willis, 1983). French feminist Luce Irigaray (1985) explained this by stating:

Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of male fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man. Not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will "take" her as his "object" when he seeks his own pleasure. Thus she will not say what she herself wants; moreover, she does not know, or no longer knows, what she wants. (p. 25)

As such, women's assertions of whether they want to engage in performative acts of same-sex behavior are rendered less important than the fact that many heterosexual men fantasize about their female partners engaging in bisexual behavior while including them in the act. Can women actually have desire, given these problems? Is there a cultural space for authentic female sexuality outside of patriarchal fantasy? Although sex positive theorists (e.g., Nagle, 1997; Sprinkle, 2006) have long posited that women's ability to assert sexual choices represents a kind of liberation, others, like Irigaray (1985), have argued that women's desire cannot exist entirely as "authentic" and "their own" within a patriarchal culture. Such questions point to the complexities of studying and analyzing women's descriptions of their bisexual encounters, particularly in performative spaces where men are literally watching, analyzing, and perhaps getting turned on.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Because of the increasing proliferation of performative bisexuality in popular culture materials aimed at younger women (ages 18–38), I hypothesized that younger women would report more public performative bisexuality though, because these normative pressures exist in many long-term relationships, older women (ages 39–59) would report more private performative bisexuality (e.g., partner's demand for groups sex). I also hypothesized that, because of the exploitative context of performative bisexuality, women who either experienced or witnessed performative bisexuality would not consistently report political solidarity with or support for full civil rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ) community.

In addition, a more exploratory set of questions guided this research, including: Does performative bisexuality represent a trend of increasing acceptance toward bisexuality for women? Or, is performative bisexuality a symbol of ever-increasing efforts to control and manipulate women's sexuality for the purpose of serving male pleasure? What does it mean if it represents both of these positions? Does performative bisexuality allow more reserved women to preserve a sense of sexual conformity while indulging in what they construct as sexual taboo? Is performative bisexuality indeed (as Adrienne Rich, 1992, suggested about heterosexuality) "compulsory," and if so, how does that translate into women's sexual consciousness?

METHOD

The current study utilized two waves of qualitative data from a sample of 40 women recruited over the span of 3 years (2005–2007). Half of these participants (Wave 1) were interviewed in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the other half (Wave 2) of these participants were interviewed in Phoenix, Arizona. Participants in Wave 1 were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings ($N = 20$) distributed free to the community of Ann Arbor. Participants in Wave 2 were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings ($n = 12$) distributed free to the Phoenix community as well as the volunteers section on the Phoenix online section of Craigslist (<http://phoenix.craigslist.org>) ($n = 8$). Participants were asked to participate in a 1.5- to 2-hour face-to-face semistructured interview with the author about their sexual histories, sexual practices and feelings and attitudes about sexuality. Participants were screened only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity and age; no other prescreening questions were asked. Sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were oversampled, and a diverse range of ages was represented in the sample. Participants were paid US\$20 for participating, and they were asked to give consent to have their interviews audiotaped. All interviews were fully transcribed, identifying data was removed and each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

The study included 58% heterosexual women ($n = 23$), 18% lesbian women ($n = 7$) and 24% bisexual women ($n = 10$). Notably, 69% of the heterosexual-identified women ($n = 16$) reported some same-sex experiences or same-sex attraction. Only 31% ($n = 7$) of the heterosexual-identified women reported no same-sex experiences or attraction. Sixty-five percent identified as white ($n = 26$), whereas 35% identified as women of color ($n = 14$). Participants' racial/ethnic backgrounds included White ($n = 26$), Korean American ($n = 1$), Chinese American ($n = 2$), African

American ($n = 3$), Indian American ($n = 2$), Chicana/Latina ($n = 3$), Native American ($n = 1$) and biracial women ($n = 2$). Further, a diverse group of ages was represented in the sample, including 52% ages 18–30 ($n = 21$), 28% ages 35–46 ($n = 11$) and 20% ages 46–59 ($n = 8$). Participants reported a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational backgrounds, employment histories, presence/absence of children and relationship statuses. There were no significant demographic differences between Wave 1 and Wave 2 with regard to any key demographic features.

Participants were interviewed by the author using a semistructured interview protocol. Interviews lasted for approximately 1.5 to 2 hours, and participants were asked 26 questions about their sexual histories, practices and beliefs. For example, participants were asked, “Many women report that their feelings about their own bodies greatly affect their experience of sex. How do you feel your body image affects your sexual experiences?” Institutional Review Board approval was provided by the University of Michigan (Wave 1) and Arizona State University (Wave 2) for the duration of the study.

RESULTS

Experiencing Performative Bisexuality

As predicted, younger women were overrepresented in the group of women that reported feeling the specific pressure to perform as bisexual in front of male partners or groups of men in public. Women frequently reported that they felt pressure to accommodate their male partner’s sexual fantasies that they engage sexually with other women; further, all of the young women reported that they were aware of, and had witnessed, some form of performative bisexuality either on television or in person. Pressure to perform as bisexual appeared for heterosexual-identified women and for bisexual and lesbian-identified women, though heterosexual women reported more pressure from their sexual partners whereas bisexual and lesbian women reported feeling pressure from men who were strangers and/or nonpartners. For example, heterosexual-identified Sally said,

I have kissed girls before. I made out with girls before but it was mostly because I was drunk at a party and they’re my very close friends... The one girl, she’s my best friend and I felt like, well we both felt like kissing each other was completely a platonic thing, um mostly because of attention you know. [My boyfriend] would say, “Oh look, let me see you guys make out” but I didn’t feel, we didn’t feel anything towards the other person other than you’re my best friend and that’s how it’s

going to be... You know, you're at a party and you're drinking a lot and here's all these guys and you know, "Oh you guys should kiss" and you know, we do... It was just because I was drunk. I would not make out with any of my friends if I was sober. It was like a mutual agreement, I guess, between me and the other girl and we felt perfectly fine about it... We laughed about it, we had a good time. It was just a fun experience.

When I later asked Sally about whether she witnessed this happening for her friends and others she knew, she said,

Oh yeah. Oh, I'm sure, absolutely. I think that every time that I do go to a club, you know, there's [sic] always some girls kissing. The girls are dancing close together, things like that, then there's the men behind them like, "Yeah, Yeah," drinking their beers and things like that. I think it's just a way to know you're turning someone else on, knowing that you're getting attention from it. I think it sometimes can feel good to a woman, knowing that you're the cause of their arousal.

Other women reported similar experiences including Ciara, who said, "I've done things with women in front of men and I didn't have a problem with it. She was kind of crazy, and she had a friend of ours take pictures and she took my skirt off and performed oral sex on me and then she had me do the same to her."

Bisexual and lesbian women also reported feeling pressured to engage in performative bisexuality, as others (primarily men) recognized these women's sexual identity as something they could exploit for their own sexual arousal. For example, Julie said,

I get [asked to perform as bisexual] a lot because when people hear that you're bisexual, they automatically assume. Some people automatically assume that you do it for men's pleasure, but really, a lot of my sex with women has not even included men at all, but some of it has. I've definitely felt pressure to indulge in fantasies about men watching women together... I just don't want to be pegged as just for men's pleasure because I'm bisexual, because that can happen sometimes.

Lucy reported having similar experiences, telling me,

There's [sic] times you know when I was in college and I was with girls, and maybe I would be dating a guy that didn't mind if I was with a girl. I had two friends that we'd go out dancing and we'd bump and

grind and kiss each other, so I have done little things like that in front of guys. Most of the time we were out drinking and you kind of forget, "Oh, I came with that guy."

Several lesbian and bisexual women indicated resistance to being appropriated into male fantasy scenarios, shifting the paradigm to encourage men to consider eroticism with each other, such as Leigh, who said:

Well, like I have these guys, these neighbors down the hall that like, the other night they kind of know that me and my roommate are more than just friends. They keep saying to us, "Come on, make out," like that kind of thing. I've had people do that to me before, and I'm just always like, there are two guys here and two girls here so if you want us to make out, you go first. Then they won't of course. I'm like, if I want to, I will and if I don't want to, I won't.

Nora expressed resistance to the appropriation and commodification of her bisexuality as well:

I've been asked to on multiple occasions, even by guys who are totally homophobic toward gay men. It's so ego-centered and male-centered. It's like dude, if you're going to celebrate sexuality, celebrate everyone's sexuality, not just these two women. Of course we know that women turn you on, but I find that most men can't handle two women because they want to get, well they want to have their big penis waving around somewhere to affirm themselves. I think they really like it but at the same time I think they're still uncomfortable because I think they recognize that if women were self-sufficient like that, men would be totally useless. I think they have secret fears about it that they're not letting on. So I think if it's like only specifically for them, and for their pleasure, they can accept that. I think it's a huge hoax.

As predicted, younger women reported much more performative bisexuality that occurred in public, social settings, whereas older women reported more pressure in their private lives to engage in group sex and other bisexual behavior with their sexual partners. The demand for conformity to performative bisexuality was striking, in that even those women who did not engage in this behavior in public did report experiencing it in private. Many of the older women discussed their partners' requests for group sex in a critical manner, often saying that they rejected or questioned these demands for them to perform as bisexual. For example, Dawn said,

I have been asked to have sex with another woman in front of men and I've declined. You know, there's a situation where the guys or the husbands or the partners are like, "Wow, this is my fantasy to see my girlfriend getting it on with another girl." You know, sorry buddy, and there've been times where I have engaged in sexual situations with another woman where the husband has been there. It was more like an ego thing for him, or a notch on his belt or whatever. It didn't feel like I was being honored as a person.

Similarly, Esther reacted to the pressure she felt in a critical and uneasy way. She said,

I've been asked to [perform as bisexual], yes. As a matter of fact, this one guy asked me to join he and his girlfriend and it ended the relationship... I think that is again for the man's benefit and it is not necessarily for the women's benefit. It is coercion. They basically want it for their own pleasure.

When I asked her how it felt to hear such a request, she responded,

I felt pressured and embarrassed because we did not talk about it. That was not something that was agreed upon. I was afraid that I would go to his house and he would have someone there waiting for me, and I would have to figure out how to get out of that situation because I'm not going to do that and it's not what I want. In my younger life, I may have been that, but not now.

Witnessing Performative Bisexuality

Notably, even those women who did not engage in this behavior did indeed witness it, either in person or via the media. When asked what they thought about women engaging in bisexual behavior in front of men, some women expressed tentative approval of the behavior based on it being consensual and noncoerced. For example, Edie said,

Upon the premise that they're pressured to and don't want to, I think it's terrible. If they want to just like be freaky for performance sake and reaction sake, I mean I think it's good when people want to do something abnormal to feel something. But, however, it's becoming normal to do that and if it makes them feel horrible or if the result is feeling bad about themselves, then I'm against it. If the result is feeling empowered, then I suppose I'm for it though I'd never encourage it

in an actual situation. If they do it to please men, then it doesn't seem right to me.

Analyzing this scenario from a generational perspective, Ophelia added,

What I've noticed is that when I've been out at a place with all young people, that seems to be the popular thing to do. Like all the girls are kissing each other and holding each other and not doing that with the guys at all. The way I think about it is just that it's popular and both people are consenting and having fun. I'm sure there were things that we did in my generation that were popular at the time too but I can't remember.

In addition to the issue of consent, some women raised questions about the implications for gay rights and/or actual lesbian identification. For example, queer-identified Dawn said,

If you're not wholly into it, then please don't do it, or please don't do it again. Maybe you can learn from that and set a bigger boundary. . . . The other thing too is that it shows there's a little more freedom in our society. It's interesting how it's okay for two women to make out at a party but it wouldn't be okay for two men to make out at a party. These are the same groups of people. That makes me sad, very sad, 'cause we're in a hetero-male dominated situation, and it's a lot of hetero males, hetero acting, wanting to appear hetero males fantasy.

Niko added,

I feel that it's disrespect to real lesbians, 'cause if you're doing it for other people to watch, it's bad, but I find it arousing if they really love each other, if they really like each other or find each other attractive. But if it's just a pure act, I find it kind of disgusting.

Lesbian-identified Maria expressed similar sentiments, saying, "I feel constantly made into a fetish by men. They think it's hot that I'm a lesbian. I tell them to get the fuck away from me. It's insulting and painful." Susan added, "I think that the bisexual woman fantasy is very much in reaction to a man's fantasy, and my desire is to respond to a man's fantasy." Mitra expressed a similar sentiment, saying,

It's about pleasing some male fantasy. It's like, maybe that's the other thing too, that our culture has become so oversexed but I still feel like

it's the male version of what sex is. I don't feel like there's a female voice in defining what's sexy in our culture.

Political Perspectives

Although most of the women I interviewed reported that they supported full civil rights for the LGBTQ community, including gay marriage and antidiscrimination laws, many of the heterosexual women I interviewed that reported experiences with performative bisexuality did not report political views that matched up with their behaviors, attitudes and beliefs about same-sex sexuality. Of the 23 heterosexual women, 69% ($n = 16$) reported same-sex attractions or experiences, and a full 37% of those women ($n = 6$) reported homophobic views about the LGBTQ community. For example, when asked about her political beliefs about homosexuality, Ruth, a self-described Evangelical who reported same-sex attraction toward her best friend, said,

Religiously, I'd rather see families of heterosexual couples, though I see that they are just as much of a person and should be as loved as anybody . . . I pretty much take things on a case-by-case basis, but I do not like the political agendas and the strength the groups have. It's almost like they have a chip on their shoulder of "because I'm gay, because I'm this, you should, we should this." I am not against rights, but I don't like the idea of marriage, of it being called marriage, 'cause to me that's between a man and a woman.

Esther, who reported same-sex attraction and same-sex behavior, including performative bisexuality, said when asked about her political beliefs on homosexuality:

I really don't like the idea of two men being together, and that's mostly because of what I've been taught. . . . It goes back to the Old Testament in the Bible, you know, that's something that God says. Men should not lay with men and women should not lay with women, and men should not lay with beast and man should not be with his daughter, so that kind of makes it hard. I mean I feel the same way about women, but for some reason society has made that a little bit more acceptable than having two men together. So to me, and I know that's kind of weird in my mind, it feels more wrong for two men than for two women.

Self-described conservative Courtney, who described experiences with performative bisexuality, initially told me,

I've always been attracted to guys, and that's pretty much just been that. Well, sometimes me and my girlfriends will like give each other a kiss or something when we've been really drunk but we've never taken it farther. That was more like teasing the guys that we were dating, just teasing them because they were like "Oh my God, they kissed." It's not that big of a deal. I like to tease them. They thought it was funny.

In response to the question of whether gay marriage should be legalized, she said:

[Homosexuality] must be so sad for the person. I mean, I don't want to marry a gay guy and then find out five years later, because that would make life horrible for me. People should choose what they are and stick with that. I have real problems with people who lie... . It's a religious issue, and I think it's okay to ban them from your church so God can't bless them but I'm not sure that this is the role of the United States government to uphold these sacred ideas. I'm okay with the church doing that though. Maybe it's better if we didn't have gay people there.

These passages collectively reveal the disconnect that can occur between behavior and attitudes, as openness toward same-sex attraction or behavior did not consistently translate into private expressions of bisexuality or, more importantly, an antihomophobic worldview.

DISCUSSION

When asking the crucial question of what performative sexuality, and the findings here, actually mean in a discursive and cultural sense, several points come to light: First, compulsory heterosexuality, however challenged by increasing acceptance of, and performance of, bisexual behavior, is still alive and well. This fact is notable in women's descriptions of minimizing the significance of their same-sex feelings, attractions, behaviors, and experiences, and it exists when describing the ways in which same-sex eroticism often requires the literal and figurative presence of men in the sexual exchange. Women may engage in same-sex sexual behavior, but this often occurs in the presence of men, with men's approval, and for men's sexual arousal. Women are classically heterosexual even while performing as bisexual.

Second, the enormous potential for exploitation of women's same-sex desires and behaviors becomes evident when examining popular culture and the possible way that popular culture affects women's sexual consciousness. Women kissing women or having sex with women becomes

a form of entertainment most prominently, whereas “authentic” expressions of same-sex eroticism become further obscured. *Girls Gone Wild* features girl-on-girl action but tightly regulates the kind of women who appear in the films (e.g., young, thin, blond, “feminine” in appearance, etc.) and always imposes the male gaze onto the action. Television shows like *Elimidate*, *Next*, *The Real World*, *A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila* and the like require women’s same-sex eroticism to boost the show’s ratings and prove that women are “open” to male-dominated, male-controlled, male-observed group sex encounters. Mainstream pornography, similarly, has mandated “lesbian” sex only within the narrow confines of particular bodies, particular actions, and particular audiences. Butch women, for example, rarely appear in mainstream pornography. These representations seemed to translate into women’s comments about the relative lack of authentic female bisexuality present in today’s media-saturated culture. It may also contribute to the way in which women discussed other women’s sexual choices along a spectrum of judgmental to nonjudgmental, often reifying the “virgin–whore” dichotomy.

In particular, these results suggest that the exploitation of women’s same-sex eroticism may lead to negative consequences for those women who are forging bisexual and lesbian identities in a more sustained sense. Again and again, men asked or demanded that bisexual and lesbian women transform their genuine attraction for each other into a spectacle for men’s viewing pleasure. As seen in their responses, many women reported feeling angered and frustrated by this direct exploitation of their genuine feelings, desires and sexualities. When same-sex eroticism becomes fetishized and appropriated into the male gaze, this leaves little room for explorations of same-sex desire in a multifaceted way. The blurring of lines between “real life” and pornography becomes evident in this construction, as women struggled to define sexuality on their own terms. More research is needed to determine whether performative bisexuality might, in a longitudinal sense, predict women’s private expressions of homoeroticism later in life, particularly that which exists outside of the male gaze.

Yet, as in everything that exploits and manipulates women, perhaps there is some subversive potential that arises in the context of performative bisexuality. If bisexuality is becoming compulsory or required, this may open up more opportunities for women who traditionally never discussed or explored same-sex desire to indeed think about, talk about, or even experiment with this desire. This seemed particularly true for traditionally-conservative women or women who had grown up in more traditional times, where married heterosexual exchanges were the only kind of sexual exchanges deemed erotic within a patriarchal system. Conversations about attractions to female friends indicated some degree of openness to bisexual and lesbian sexuality. However exploited or taken advantage of, perhaps it is

never a bad thing when women explore new avenues of desire, particularly with each other.

Still, if women's sexuality is indeed more "plastic" compared to men's—that is, more subject to the changing social norms of the time—openness to same-sex attraction may be just another way in which women's sexuality accommodates to changing social norms. The rebellious or subversive potential of such eroticism is diminished by its allegiance to male, patriarchal constructions of pleasure. The central problem becomes whether performative versions of same-sex eroticism signify a shift in consciousness or not. Although arguments can be made for its subversive potential, particularly in the way that performative bisexuality at least presents different options for women, the seeming lack of a consistent shift in political sensibilities presents a more frighteningly conservative picture. If women's feelings toward the political context of same-sex eroticism do not consistently change as a result of participating in performative bisexuality, this suggests that it fails to politicize women. In other words, if bisexuality is compulsory, it loses some of its power to enact social justice.

One would hope, ideally, that women's mutual eroticism would lay a foundation of mutual respect for each other and, more importantly, social justice for women of all sexual identities. As evident in these descriptions of women's political beliefs, this hope is only partially realized. Although some women argued for full civil rights for bisexual and lesbian women—perhaps as a result of their same-sex experiences—many women still felt justified in retaining homophobic worldviews despite their same-sex attractions, actions or experiences. This suggests that women's same-sex eroticism does not always translate into a shift in political consciousness, a finding that should concern those of us trying to read performative bisexuality as subversive or as having the potential of expanding women's sociopolitical consciousness. I attribute this unevenness in political views directly to the patriarchal, sexist, and homophobic context in which women's same-sex eroticism often currently exists. Indeed, exploitation breeds exploitation, and bigotry breeds bigotry. Our culture of masculinity demands only the narrowest vision for how men and women must behave sexually. Anything that does not accommodate the male gaze must be demeaned and diminished; anything that does not support male dominance must be rendered insignificant. The near-extreme denial of men's same-sex desire, for example, reveals to us the limitations of our acceptance for anything other than (compulsory) heterosexuality. For women, the rules are clear: either choose a man for a sexual partner, or choose a woman with a man's approval. What other vision(s) can we imagine? Surely, one need not "go wild" to experience the power of same-sex eroticism; the more that we, as a culture, encourage such performative displays, the further away

we become from truly subverting the compulsory demands placed upon women's sexuality today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the Foundation for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, the Women's Studies program at Arizona State University at the West campus, and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan for their generous support of this research.

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