

Wiped Out: Exploring the Prevalence and Consequences of Bisexual Erasure

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INTRODUCTION

Bisexual erasure, or bisexual invisibility, is the tendency for bisexuality to be disregarded, discriminated against, invalidated, or treated as being a fictitious sexual identity (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Yoshino, 2000). Bisexual erasure can occur in a plethora of different ways, inclusive of mis-labeling individuals as either homosexual or heterosexual depending on the gender of ongoing partners, or describing behavior as “unreliable” or “risky” by assuming bisexuality describes excessive sexual drive or polyamory. This is a relatively new and under-researched topic, and what publications do exist regarding the phenomena are predominantly discussion-based as opposed to being research oriented or empirical. We present a review of previous research and literature regarding bisexual erasure and provide a research agenda for the same.

Previous research has focused on such topics as how bisexual individuals are discriminated against in legal settings, how western media tends to avoid or explain away bisexual characters, and how bisexuality as a sexual identity is perceived as being a negative or temporary character trait. For example, bisexual discrimination is often not considered a valid reason to immigrate into LGBTQ-friendly countries when individuals are in “heterosexual relationships” (Marcus, 2018). Bisexuality is often perceived as being a phase for experimentation as opposed to being an actual identity (Kirby et al., 2020). Kirby and his colleagues also indicated that external perceptions of bisexuality lead people to assume the label is an attempt to mitigate stigma that would arise from identifying as gay or lesbian.

While these studies are informative, there is still a need to gather more information. For example, descriptive studies are needed to assess the frequency of discrimination, patterns in behavior, or consistencies in self-perception of bisexual individuals. Experiments could also be designed varying different observable features (e.g., hair length, clothing choice, body build) of targets to assess if participant perceptions vary, or to look at the likelihood of individuals in scenarios being labeled as bisexual based on stated attitudes, behaviors, or clothing.

IMPLICATIONS

Bisexual erasure has been explained away previously as being a result of the bisexual population being small (Yoshino, 2000). This discredits the problem and has been disproven as polls have repeatedly found that a large majority of the LGBTQ community identify as bisexual (Marcus, 2015; Rodriguez, 2016; Yoshino, 2000). Furthermore, research frequently fails to represent important demographics of the bisexual population including BPoC, or Black Person and Person of Color (Ghabrial & Ross, 2018). Based on the minority stress theory, bisexual people are already at an increased risk for mental and physical ailments as well as suicidal ideation, so the lack of consideration for how race influences this leaves bisexuals in a dangerous position (Serpe et al., 2020).

Being openly bisexual also leaves people open to judgement and ridicule in public settings. Bisexuality is associated with negative stigma and labels such as being risky, irresponsible, promiscuous, hypersexual, and adulterous (Rodriguez, 2016; de Barro, 2020; Marcus, 2015; Marcus, 2018). Many people have to come out repeatedly as well when they engage in new relationships with partners of different sexes since their identity is often socially based on the sex of the partner they are with currently (Richter, 2013; Rodriguez, 2016). The act of coming out is an emotionally draining and often traumatic experience, so having to do so repeatedly can cause extreme trauma and pain.

KEY POINTS

Bisexual erasure, the invalidation or refusal to acknowledge bisexuality as a valid sexual identity, is a detrimental phenomenon. Accompanied by an increased risk for poor physical and mental health as well as suicidal ideology according to minority stress theory. Bisexuality requires further descriptive studies and experiments to be conducted.



DISCUSSION

Previous Research

- Bisexual people implicitly identify as more bisexual than gay (Merrity et al., 2020).
- Research into mental health concerns for bisexual BPoC was both underreported and under-representative even though previous work has found that bisexuals are more likely to be BPoC than Caucasian (Ghabrial & Ross, 2018).
- Bisexual women feel mis-portrayed and underrepresented by the media, dehumanized or reduced to being an experiment, and fetishized in their interactions or dating experiences (Serpe et al., 2020).

Media Portrayal

- Bisexual characters, who are predominantly women, are often downplayed through emphasizing their same-sex relationships and not their heterosexual interests, being labeled as “lesbian”, and being used to represent only experimentation (de Barrow, 2020).
- An especially pressing issue is the hypersexualization of bisexual women, especially in pornographic media and for the pleasure of men (Rodriguez, 2016). Characters who display sexual and romantic interest in members of both sexes are rewritten later on as “discovering” their gay or lesbian identity for the sake of plot development (de Barrow, 2020).

Rights and Protections

- Prison segregation based on sexuality has not included bisexuals (Rodriguez, 2016).
- Many legal movements meant to defend the rights of the LGBTQ community do so for gay and straight populations without doing the same for bisexuals (Marcus, 2018). The assumption is that defending the rights of the gay and lesbian community will subsequently result in the same defense for bisexual people being established (Marcus, 2015).
- Bisexuality is used as a reason to deny parental rights due to indications of “instability”, and those seeking immigration status in order to flee their country are denied the opportunity often when they are in same-sex relationships since there is no reason for them to be targeted or in danger (Marcus, 2018).
- During legal proceedings, bisexual people have been exposed to biased and harmful lines of questioning and blatant refusal from members of the legal system to label them as bisexual (Marcus, 2015).

PROPOSALS

Descriptive Studies

- In order to establish what aspects of bisexual erasure still need to be explored, it is important to first create a greater pool of data through interviewing and surveying the bisexual population.
- Gathering information on perceived instances of discrimination, self-perception and self-identity, and behavioral patterns observed throughout the community would be an important place to start.
- It is also necessary to begin exploring perceived representation and frustrations with media portrayals. There should be an emphasis on including BPoC as well to increase the external validity of the results.

Experiments

- Experiments should be designed to explore how other people perceive bisexuals and what characteristics or qualities make someone more likely to be perceived as bisexual.
- Studies should also be designed that involve labeling couples and characters with sexual identities based on their behaviors. Lastly, studies should utilize objectification scales and fetishization of bisexual individuals, especially women.

For more information or for the references, contact me at steelema@oregonstate.edu