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INSIDE, OUTSIDE, NOWHERE: BISEXUAL MEN AND WOMEN IN THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY

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This article examines the impact of antibisexual attitudes on 60 self-identified Australian bisexual men and women, in terms of their perceptions of, and participation in, the gay and lesbian community—the broad network of groups and events held by and for gay men and lesbians. The author examines the range of antibisexual attitudes that exist within the gay and lesbian community and then examines how these are understood by bisexuals, and the impacts these have on their participation in the gay and lesbian community. It was discovered that though some participants were active within the Australian gay and lesbian community, many were not, due to the belief that they would be rejected or discriminated against as bisexual. Furthermore, those who did participate in the gay and lesbian community tended to keep their bisexuality hidden, for fear of being made unwelcome. The findings of this research suggest that bisexual men and women have an ambivalent and complex relationship with the gay and lesbian community in Australia. This raises a number of issues about the maintenance of a bisexual identity, including the impact of secrecy and staying closeted on self-esteem and mental health.

Keywords: Bisexuality, gay and lesbian community, Australia, antibisexual attitudes, biphobia

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important elements of living as bisexual is the social and psychological support one receives. This support comes not only from loved ones such as intimate partners, friends, and family, but also from

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associating with like-minded others in the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities. Positive contacts with the gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities work to reduce the stigma individuals attach to being homosexual or bisexual. Moreover, associations with other gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals give socially isolated individuals—particularly those without familial or other support for their sexuality—a chance to meet others with similar experiences and who can help them come to see homosexuality and bisexuality as legitimate sexual identities.

In Australia, there is a small bisexual community, mainly located in urban areas, providing support to bisexual men and women. The much larger gay and lesbian community is also a potential social and supportive space for bisexual men and women. However, bisexuality occupies a difficult position within the gay and lesbian community in Australia. This article begins by examining recent events that highlight the tensions between bisexuals and the gay and lesbian community in Australia and then discusses the antibisexual attitudes and stereotypes highlighted in the research literature and articulated by the participants in this research. It then examines the impact of these attitudes on the connections between bisexual men and women and the Australian gay and lesbian community.

THE SYDNEY GAY AND LESBIAN MARDI GRAS? ONLY IF YOU'RE "GAY" OR "LESBIAN"

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras began as a protest march for gay and lesbian civil rights in Sydney, Australia, in 1976 but has now grown into a month-long annual festival celebrating the many aspects of the gay and lesbian community. It includes a number of artistic and cultural events, but perhaps the most well known is the annual street parade that attracts up to 20,000 spectators. In 1996, in response to increasing episodes of homophobia and homophobic violence at the street parade and its after-parties, the Board of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras voted to adopt new guidelines for membership (Gelber, 1996). Membership of Mardi Gras allows members to purchase a limited number of tickets to the street parade after-parties. New procedures were introduced to include a requirement that potential and renewing members answer questions regarding their sexual identity and “sign a statement supporting the aims and objectives of the organization” (Gelber, 1996, p. 8). It was believed limiting membership to those who were gay, lesbian, or transgender would help overcome these incidents, which were seen to be a result of increased heterosexual presence at the Mardi Gras parade and the after-parties.

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras membership form was consequently modified to include check boxes about sexual identity: the listed

options were gay, lesbian, homosexual, transgender, bisexual, heterosexual, queer, and “choose not to identify.” If applicants ticked the boxes marked “gay,” “lesbian,” “homosexual,” or “transgender,” they were automatically granted membership. However, if applicants ticked the boxes marked “heterosexual,” “bisexual,” “queer,” or “choose not to identify,” they would be required to “provide supplementary information justifying their application” (Gelber, 1996, p. 8), such as evidence of a commitment to the gay and lesbian community, before membership could be granted.

Under this new policy, many bisexual men and women discovered that by ticking the bisexual box on their applications, they were unable to obtain Mardi Gras membership. Even those providing supplementary information to support their application for membership did not fare well—one bisexual man with a significant history of philanthropic work in gay and lesbian, and bisexual, organizations found his membership renewal rejected because the Mardi Gras Board felt he could still diminish the character of Mardi Gras as a gay and lesbian organization (McQuarrie, 1999). At the same time, there were anecdotal reports of people simply ticking the boxes marked “lesbian” or “gay” to be granted automatic membership, regardless of their actual sexual identity. Bisexuals who wished to be honest about their sexual identity believed having to disguise their bisexuality to obtain Mardi Gras membership was not only unfair but discriminatory towards bisexuality as a whole (Roberts, 1999).

Significant campaigning by the Australian bisexual community over the next 3 years had little impact on this policy. However, in 2002, the administration of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras collapsed due to financial and administrative mismanagement, resulting in the establishment of a new board to run the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival. Following extensive participation by bisexual men and women in community consultations about the future direction of Mardi Gras, the new board—called “New Mardi Gras”—made a commitment to bisexual inclusion in its membership policy. Furthermore, the membership application form was changed to no longer include a requirement to provide information about one’s sexual identity—just a statement confirming commitment to the objectives of the New Mardi Gras constitution that are inclusive of the gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and queer community. Interestingly, the decision by New Mardi Gras to drop the words “gay and lesbian” from the title of the festival was met with opposition from many members of the Sydney gay and lesbian community, so the decision was reversed, and the title of the festival remains the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

I do not intend to debate the relative arguments about the membership of bisexuals in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras; instead I use this as an example of some of the tensions in the relationship between

bisexual men and women and the gay and lesbian community in Australia. It also, however, taps into broader issues regarding the perceptions about bisexuality in the gay and lesbian community, and indeed, the community at large, and highlights the ways these tensions have a significant impact on bisexual men and women in Australia.

METHOD

This article is based on a PhD research project that examined the issue of living as bisexual in Australia. In-depth, structured interviews were conducted with 40 Australian bisexual women and 20 bisexual men aged between age 21 and 66 years to investigate issues such as self-identity; coming out; relationships with partners, friends, and family; and participation in gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities. Participants were recruited via advertisements in Australian bisexual publications and via websites and mailing lists aimed at Australian bisexual men and women. Most interviews were 1½ to 2 hours long, and all were done by telephone or face-to-face. Interviews were then analyzed thematically with the help of qualitative data analysis software to look for emerging patterns and themes in the data. The participants were mostly Australian born, living in urban, east coast areas of Australia, and were well educated. Because the nature of the research required respondents to volunteer to participate, only those comfortable enough to talk to a stranger about their bisexuality, or passionate about the topic, would have volunteered. Such self-selection bias means that this research may not necessarily reflect the lives of all bisexual men and women living in Australia. As such the sample may be atypical and therefore cannot be generalized to the wider bisexual population.

The following discussion looks first at antibisexual attitudes to bisexuality, especially within the gay and lesbian community, and then examines bisexual men and women's attitudes towards, and participation in, the gay and lesbian community in Australia, highlighting some of the complexities these findings raise in relation to living with, and maintaining, a bisexual identity.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS BISEXUALS IN THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY

Antibisexual attitudes are those attitudes that are particularly negative or judgemental about bisexuals, their lifestyles, and their relationships. These viewpoints influence how bisexuals are perceived by others, in the wider community, as well as in the gay and lesbian community. In this section, I

concentrate on some of the antibisexual attitudes that filter through the gay and lesbian community, as it is often this community that bisexual people turn to for support, especially in Australia where our small population means that the bisexual community is quite small and often confined to urban areas.

The most prevalent antibisexual attitudes within the gay and lesbian community involve judgements about the validity of bisexuality as a sexual orientation, and the trustworthiness of bisexuals as personal and political allies (Israel & Mohr, 2004; Mohr & Rochlen, 1999). These include the belief that bisexuals are in transition to a gay or lesbian identity (Rust, 1995), or in denial about their true sexuality; the belief that bisexuals lack courage to come out as gay or lesbian (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994); that bisexuals are confused or undecided about their sexual orientation; or that bisexuals refuse to come out as gay or lesbian to maintain heterosexual privilege (Israel & Mohr, 2004).

The second category of antibisexual attitudes is related to the loyalty of bisexuals to romantic partners, friends, and the gay and lesbian community. These attitudes construct bisexual romantic partners as untrustworthy not only in terms of their commitment to monogamy, but also in their commitment to a relationship, as it is believed that bisexuals may leave their same-sex partnerships for the benefits and privileges of a heterosexual relationship (Israel & Mohr, 2004). Bisexuals are also constructed as untrustworthy political allies: They are seen to be uncommitted to gay and lesbian community and politics (Israel & Mohr, 2004), especially in the lesbian feminist community where commitment to that community may entail the separation from men as lovers, friends, and allies.

In addition to these categories of antibisexual attitudes, a number of stereotypes about bisexuals may also feed into discourses about bisexuality within the gay and lesbian community. Stereotypes that construct bisexuals as overtly promiscuous, sexually indiscriminate beings who will have sex with “anything that moves,” as needing two lovers at once (a man and a woman) to be “truly” satisfied, or that bisexuals cannot be monogamous (Israel & Mohr, 2004) further reinforce the idea of the untrustworthy bisexual.

There has been much writing about the hostility towards bisexuals in the gay and lesbian community. However, there is far more discussion in the literature of the tensions between bisexual women and lesbians than the role of bisexual men in gay male politics (e.g. Däumer, 1992; Jeffreys, 1999). The development of feminist communities, and later, of lesbian feminist communities, as a resistance to patriarchy helps explain the hostility towards bisexual women from some lesbians (Rust, 1993). The view that sexual and emotional engagement with men is contrary to

the goals of lesbian feminism has made the role of bisexual women in the lesbian community problematic. As Jeffreys (1999) argued, “the choice of woman loving allows lesbian feminists to envision and create an alternative world from the male supremacist, hetero-relational one, based upon lesbian values” (p. 283). Because bisexual women still retain a commitment to men by either having relationships with men, or viewing them as potential partners, they are therefore seen to retain a commitment to patriarchy; and by remaining tied heterosexual men, they are seen to be “sleeping with the enemy” (Israel & Mohr, 2004). Research has demonstrated that lesbians consider bisexual women problematic political allies because of their connections with male energy and power (Rust, 1995); in effect, the refusal by bisexual women to give up their association with men made them, by nature, unable to commit fully to the goals of lesbian politics. Ault (1996) found that antibisexual attitudes feed into lesbian hostility about bisexual women, with her lesbian research participants stereotyping bisexuals as “promiscuous, personally deceived, immature, in denial, perverted, and unable to form stable familial bonds” (p. 314). Some antibisexual discourses also position bisexual women as “political opportunists taking advantage of lesbian political progress, riding on the tails of the proverbial flannel shirt” (Ault, 1994, p. 115).

Although there is much literature on antibisexual attitudes among lesbians, there is less written on how gay men view bisexuality. According to Shokeid (2001), gay men appear to be more tolerant of, or ambivalent towards, bisexual men than lesbians, whereas research by Mohr and Rochlen (1999) found that gay men felt that female bisexuality was more stable than male bisexuality. Nevertheless, there is an understanding, especially among bisexuals themselves, that bisexuality is considered among gay men and lesbians as a less legitimate sexual orientation than homosexuality.

Antibisexual attitudes feed into discourses about sexual identity politics, in particular, around gay and lesbian community organizing, with a focus on ethnic models of sexuality. This model has been effective in the ways lesbians and gay men have worked towards gaining civil rights, particularly in the United States. Using an “ethnicity model” of homosexuality as a fixed and innate sexual identity enabled gay rights activists in the 1970s to organize effectively to make significant claims for equal rights and protection against discrimination (Epstein, 1987). Shokeid (2001) stated that bisexuality threatens this ethnic model in as far as it “undermines the very basis of the ethnic model built upon an assumption of the immutability of homosexual attractions” (p. 64). Bisexual politics is seen to weaken the power of gay and lesbian organizing, with its emphasis on the fluidity of sexuality and challenges to “sexual-object choice as a master category of sexual and social identity” (Seidman, 1993, p. 123). Indeed, Jeffreys

(1999) articulated this threat when she claimed that aspects of bisexual politics threaten the gains so hard won by lesbians, and that forms of bisexuality that view lesbianism as an add-on to heterosexuality, or simply as a sexual practice or a fad, threaten the visibility of a committed lesbian feminism.

Bisexuality is considered by many gay men and lesbians as a stage, or a “stepping stone” towards developing a gay or lesbian identity, therefore many bisexuals in the gay and lesbian community may be regarded with suspicion until they make a full commitment to a gay or lesbian identity. The belief that bisexuality is a “stepping stone” identity is supported by the numbers of gay men and lesbians who have previously identified as bisexual before identifying as gay or lesbian. In Rust’s (1993) study of lesbians, 40% of the participants in her research had identified themselves as bisexual in the past, whereas in Mohr and Rochlen’s (1999) studies on attitudes towards bisexuality, 55% of one gay and lesbian sample had previously identified as bisexual. Therefore, though identifying as bisexual is acknowledged as a “stage” in coming out as gay and lesbian, to claim it as a permanent social or political identity is not acceptable at all:

A woman who has recently begun to come out is allowed to call herself bisexual because she is assumed to be in transition to a lesbian identity. If she fails to adopt a lesbian identity within a reasonable period of time, she will begin to attract criticism (Ponse, 1980) from lesbians who suspect she is selling out, that is, denying her true self and her political obligation to the lesbian community to avoid stigmas and reserve her privileged position in a heterosexist society (Rust, 1993, p. 216).

Antibisexual attitudes create suspicion about bisexuality among some gay men and lesbians, resulting in the exclusion, suppression, or marginalization of bisexuality in the gay and lesbian community. Rust (1993) confirmed that negative beliefs about bisexual women “represent widespread subcultural attitudes about bisexuality” (p. 225). Although these attitudes are not necessarily held by all gay men and lesbians, there is an understanding among many bisexuals that bisexuality occupies a problematic position within the gay and lesbian community—and that the gay and lesbian community is a place that can be unfriendly, and unwelcoming, to bisexual men and women.

BISEXUAL MEN AND WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY

Bisexual men and women have always been a part of the gay and lesbian community. Participation in the gay and lesbian community allows many bisexual men and women to make contact with other people who are

attracted to the same sex and provides an avenue in which to make contact with other bisexuals. It also provides bisexual men and women with a means of support for their same-sex attractions, particularly in light of continuing homophobia and heterosexism within the wider community.

Although the participants in my research generally had mixed feelings about the gay and lesbian community, as I discuss below, many of them were still involved in it. Participation in the gay and lesbian community was articulated by many as going to gay and lesbian nightclubs and social events—in other words, going out on the “scene.” Like many of the participants, Nina and Sharon were mostly involved in attending gay and lesbian venues and events:

The gay and lesbian community is my main source of social contact—the parties and bars I go to, the literature I read, the events I go to. (Nina, age 24)

I have limited contact with the gay and lesbian community. I go and watch Pride March and I’ve been to a gay and lesbian dance party. (Sharon, age 31)

For many of these participants, going out to social or cultural events was their only contact with the gay and lesbian community. This reflects research by Weinberg et al. (1994) that identified the ambivalence of bisexual men and women towards gay and lesbian communities in the United States. Only about 10% of the research participants in this study participated in more organizational forms of the gay and lesbian community, often by doing volunteer work for groups providing philanthropic services to the gay and lesbian community. Stephanie had a long association with the gay and lesbian community, and said:

I volunteer at the AIDS Council, and I’m a member of another gay and lesbian organization as well. I go to gay/lesbian events, like rallies and marches. I have been quite actively involved in the community but live further away from the city now. I used to do women’s education for women coming to terms with their sexuality. (Stephanie, age 37)

Joe, too, had spent considerable time working with the gay and lesbian community, as well as the bisexual community, and was involved in a number of organizations for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people:

I work for a gay and lesbian counselling service, I’m a member of a couple of gay and lesbian organizations, and I’m on a committee

involved in reform of Mardi Gras. The groups I join tend to have a political or educational aspect to them. (Joe, age 36)

Jacinta, who was in a same-sex relationship at the time of being interviewed, was heavily involved in the lesbian community but was also active in the bisexual community and the wider gay and lesbian community:

I do a lot of volunteer work in the gay and lesbian community. I do some work with a group for female partners of bisexual men, and also do some work on safe sex and health promotion within the GLBT community. (Jacinta, age 27)

It appears that those participants who were active within the bisexual community were not only more active within the gay and lesbian community, but were also more able to manage challenges to their bisexuality from members of the gay and lesbian community. Marie (age 24), who was heavily involved in the bisexual community, including establishing several support groups and events, commented about her place in the gay and lesbian community: "I am out and very loud as bi, it's very important to me to acknowledge that everywhere I am. I helped the gay and lesbian group at uni change its name to be more inclusive of bisexuals." Jacinta (age 27) claimed that most of her experiences of the gay and lesbian community had been positive, but that "I challenge people on the issues when I can, and try to get stuff into people's heads. I try to inform the groups I am working for about bi issues." However, active participation in the bisexual community was low for my sample, which may go some of the way to explain why they were less likely to challenge any negative experiences within the gay and lesbian community when they did occur.

Overall, about two thirds of the participants in my research took part in the gay and lesbian community in some way, mostly by socializing in the gay and lesbian social "scene," participating in cultural festivals and street marches, and sometimes doing volunteer work for gay and lesbian organizations. However, for the most part, they demonstrated some indifference towards, and lack of participation in, more organizational elements of the gay and lesbian community.

Over one third, however, did not have any contact with the gay and lesbian community at all. Several reasons were given for this, the most popular being participants' perceptions of the gay and lesbian community itself as being exclusionary towards bisexuals. Ellen (age 29), an active member of the bisexual community in her home town, commented that "I've never participated, mainly because I don't like the exclusiveness of it—I wouldn't feel accepted. The last person I should have to defend myself

to is people used to defending themselves.” Alison (age 24), also active in a local bisexual community group, said, “I was warned to stay away from lesbian groups because of their attitudes to bi women so I’ve stayed away.” Ryan (age 22) also reflected on the potential prejudices he might face as a bisexual man: “I’m not involved in anything but would like to be—but I’m worried some groups might be prejudiced against people who are not gay.”

These participants questioned their own role in the gay and lesbian community and had internalized the belief that bisexuals are not accepted as part of the gay and lesbian community. As a result, they felt they could not be a part of it themselves. In a sense, they felt they did not have a right to participate in the gay and lesbian community, simply because of their bisexuality.

ATTITUDES OF BISEXUAL MEN AND WOMEN TOWARD THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY

For the most part, the bisexual men and women I interviewed were wary or suspicious about bisexual inclusion in the gay and lesbian community and were fully aware of the tenuous relationship bisexuals had in the gay and lesbian community, mostly due to the range of antibisexual attitudes and stereotypes that they believed existed within it. This made some participants very angry, while others were more ambivalent about the gay and lesbian community itself. One participant remarked that “Most people in the gay and lesbian community find bisexuality noncomprehensible—they just don’t get it. There’s no hatred, just ignorance and the inability to understand” (Wendy, age 26). Two participants expressed frustration when speaking about the different attitudes they had come across in the gay and lesbian community. Lisa (age 29) said, “Attitudes seem to range from “make up your mind” to only a few who are okay with bisexuality. Most believe you are killing time or sitting on the fence,” while Sam (age 30) commented: “Some say ‘Oh yeah, we’re fighting for you too’ or ‘Bisexuality’s not a real sexuality.’ Many have assumed it is a phase and want people to choose [to be straight or gay]. Some have been completely accepting too but not very often.” As these quotes demonstrate, the awareness of antibisexual attitudes in the gay and lesbian community often leads to bisexuals feeling oppressed by gay men and lesbians (Rust, 1995) or discriminated against on the basis of their bisexuality. Highleyman (1995) stated that the failure of gay men and lesbians to include bisexuals feels like exclusion or expulsion to many bisexuals. Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor (1994) also found that many bisexual men and women saw the gay and lesbian community as an “avenue of rejection” (p. 117).

Shokeid (2001), in his study of a bisexual support group in the United States, found that participants were well aware of their marginal status among lesbians and gay men, with one participant claiming “We are the marginals’ marginals” (p. 75). Similarly, the participants in my research demonstrated considerable awareness of the potential exclusion and isolation of bisexuals in the gay and lesbian community. One female participant commented that: “Community to me is about bringing people together, but there seems to be lot of isolation of bisexuals in the gay and lesbian community. I’ve had some conversations with lesbians about bisexuality not existing, bisexuality as dangerous to the lesbian community—some of them are very anti-bi” (Georgia, age 26). Others expressed feelings of isolation and exclusion. Louise (age 27) said, “I’d say most of the time it’s been fairly positive but I’ve also felt a sense of not really belonging – of being a bit of a fraud or compromising the community in terms of its politics,” whereas Aaron (age 23), who was quite active in the gay and lesbian social scene in the wider world and on campus, said, “My experiences have been mixed—some have been amazing, like Mardi Gras, but at times I’ve also felt excluded, like I can’t bring all of myself.”

Catherine and Danielle’s experiences of the gay and lesbian community were mostly confined to the social scene or networks of gay and lesbian friends and acquaintances. This did not, however, diminish the feelings of exclusion they experienced within these contexts:

My experiences have been mixed. They range from completely accepting to nonchalant to condescending and patronising. I’ve had comments like I’m just confused, it’s just a phase, come back when you’ve sorted yourself out. (Catherine, age 25)

A gay guy recently said to me that he’d dated a straight man, and I said, “Perhaps he was bisexual.” He said he didn’t believe in bisexuality so I challenged him on it. I think my experiences in the gay and lesbian community would be a lot more positive if I was a lesbian. (Danielle, age 23)

Marie, who as noted above was active within the bisexual and gay and lesbian communities, commented on her experiences within the gay and lesbian community, especially at university:

I only realized bisexuals were not as accepted when I made my first foray into the gay and lesbian community. The gay and lesbian group at uni is quite biphobic and there is some resentment towards me. My experiences have been quite mixed—it depends on individuals and

context and also my own perception of biphobia and sexism, whether I notice it or not. (Marie, age 24)

These quotes highlight the complex and often painful feelings many bisexual men and women endure about their place in the gay and lesbian community. For the bisexual men and women in my research, negative experiences were confusing and made them feel like they could never be “complete” members of the gay and lesbian community.

In Australia, many groups within the wider gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community still advertise themselves as catering exclusively to gay men and/or lesbians, and many social venues and events are heavily marketed as “gay and lesbian.” Therefore it is hardly surprising that Australian bisexual men and women feel excluded from such groups. One participant commented about the possible exclusion of bisexuals from gay and lesbian venues:

When I was discussing with some gay friends about an opposite-sex couple that were thrown out of a gay nightclub, I said, “What if they were bisexual?” and that was seen to be even worse than the possibility of that couple being straight. I ended up in tears I was so frustrated. I disagree with barring gay-friendly straight people from gay clubs but I also don’t understand why bisexuals are worse. It’s infuriating and disappointing when you see prejudice being reversed. (Bree, age 23)

Moreover, the absence of the word bisexual in the names of support or social groups within the wider GLBT community is a powerful message to bisexual men and women that they are not welcome in that community (Eadie, 1993).

As can be seen by these quotes, the experiences of bisexual men and women demonstrate that antibisexual attitudes and wider suspicions of bisexuals exist within the gay and lesbian community in Australia. These negative experiences, of course, do not reflect the beliefs about bisexuality of the whole gay and lesbian community. For these participants, however, the antibisexual attitudes within parts of the gay and lesbian community, combined with specific experiences of discrimination against bisexuals, were disappointing and hurtful and confirmed wider concerns about the inclusion and role of bisexuals in the gay and lesbian community.

The participants in my research went to events in the gay and lesbian community such as Pride marches, Mardi Gras, and in Melbourne, the annual Midsumma Festival, or participated by socializing in gay and lesbian clubs and bars. They were less likely to become politically active within the gay and lesbian community, or to undertake volunteer or community

work within gay and lesbian organizations. This limited involvement with the gay and lesbian community may speak to an ambivalence or fear about participating in the gay and lesbian community on more than a social level—especially when involvement in voluntary or political organizations may entail a more personal connection with others in the group—and may lead to more questions about one’s sexual orientation. As such, the bisexual men and women I interviewed participated at levels where they could be “undetected” as bisexual. Given the knowledge of the antibisexual attitudes discussed above, to reveal one’s bisexuality in a more intimate context, then, is a risk if it means being labelled with one or more of a number of stereotypes about bisexuals.

The limited participation of bisexuals within the gay and lesbian community raises issues about the impact of antibisexual stereotypes and the ways in which these stereotypes are internalized and understood by bisexuals themselves, often resulting in changes in behavior, and, as I discuss below, the preference of many participants to “blend” into the gay and lesbian community, rather than being “out” and known as bisexual.

IMPACTS OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS BISEXUAL MEN AND WOMEN IN THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY: PASSING, DENIAL, AND INVISIBILITY

Knowledge of the exclusion of bisexual men and women within the gay and lesbian community has a significant impact on bisexual men and women who look to this community for support. Many of the participants in my research were well aware that bisexuality was not seen favorably by some members of the gay and lesbian community, and though they participated in parts of the community, they were well aware that revealing their bisexuality could be a problem in certain spaces. Several participants who participated in the gay and lesbian community acknowledged the difficulties of telling some gay men and lesbians they were bisexual, and said they often hid their bisexuality and let others assume they were lesbian or gay. Barbara (age 54) admitted to letting assumptions that she was a lesbian slide for fear of exclusion: “I wouldn’t dare deny people’s assumptions that I am a lesbian, because I’d be alienated. I just want to blend in.” Fiona (age 26) was more explicit, telling people she was lesbian rather than bisexual: “I say I’m a lesbian, but I’m not really proud of that at all. I feel it’s about how I’m positioning myself at the time, and I’m going there because I like girls, not because I like guys. But it could backfire one day.” Aaron (age 23) preferred the rather ambiguous term of *queer* in some contexts: “If it’s the campus group, I identify first as queer and second as bisexual. Sometimes

people assume I'm gay and it's not an issue. I don't correct them anymore, although I used to."

Several of these participants acknowledged that passing as gay or lesbian compromised their sense of identity as bisexual but felt it was necessary to avoid being ostracised from the gay and lesbian community altogether. Nathan (age 22) expressed this well when he said: "I feel a lot of the time I have to hide my bisexuality to be a part of the community. I guess I'm not really being honest about who I am. I find a lot of gay men are really misogynistic, which makes me uncomfortable—and less likely to come out as bi to them." Hiding one's bisexuality when participating in the gay or lesbian communities is nothing new; in their research conducted in the 1970s, Blumstein and Schwartz (1976a, b) found that bisexual men and women often reacted to hostility from the homosexual community by suppressing their bisexuality, or at the very least their interests in the opposite sex. Recent research argues that being aware of negative stereotypes of bisexual people sometimes discouraged bisexual women from self-identifying as bisexual for fear of loss of legitimacy and efficacy, fear of shame, and fear of negative consequences. This in turn sustains the invisibility and "cultural anonymity" of bisexual women (Ault, 1996, p. 318).

Some of the participants in my research preferred to "blend in" with the gay and lesbian community by passing as gay or lesbian, or let assumptions of being gay or lesbian slide without challenging the truthfulness of these assumptions. However, others stated that if they were asked, they would identify themselves as bisexual. For example, one female participant said: "Normally I would let people make their own decisions about me and I wouldn't hide my male partner, but I wouldn't volunteer that I have one straight away" (Sharon, age 31). Few of the participants in my research who were involved in the gay and lesbian community openly identified as bisexual within the gay and lesbian community or challenged assumptions that they were gay or lesbian. Instead, maintaining a gay or lesbian persona was seen as necessary to protect oneself from judgement, discrimination, and conflict with others in the gay and lesbian community.

Not being truthful about one's bisexuality, however, creates significant issues for bisexual men and women. Having different personas, often with conflicting values and ideas, and having to act in different ways in different contexts, does little to help maintain a healthy bisexual identity (McLean, 2001). Furthermore, dishonesty or secrecy about "key areas of one's life create a distance from other people, preventing potentially enriching experiences" (George, 1993, p. 104). This is an issue of some concern in light of recent Australian research by Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, and Christensen (2002) that found that bisexuals overall have a lower level of mental health as compared with homosexuals and heterosexuals. The

researchers inferred that feelings of stigma or experiences of discrimination, which were not measured, may play a part in this.

The health effects described above are only one possible consequence of repressing one's bisexual identity. Israel and Mohr (2004) argued that antibisexual attitudes themselves can have negative impacts on bisexuals:

Negative attitudes create a context of hostility for bisexual men and women than can affect many areas of their lives. . . . Such experiences with negative attitudes may adversely affect mental health and well-being of bisexual individuals. . . . Internalization of such negative attitudes by bisexual individuals may create a barrier to developing a positive bisexual identity. (p. 119)

Research on antibisexual attitudes towards bisexual women argues that these “cast doubt on the existence of authentic bisexual experience and identity by providing alternative explanations for apparent bisexuality” (Rust, 1993, p. 226). These doubts can also be internalised by bisexual men and women via what Weinberg et al. (1994) called “continued uncertainty” that can persist even after accepting that one is bisexual. According to Weinberg et al., this “continued uncertainty” is expressed in the frequent questioning of the validity of one's bisexual identity and continual doubts about whether one is “really” bisexual. Furthermore, support and understanding are crucial to the development and maintenance of a healthy bisexual identity. Allowing people to assume one is heterosexual, gay, or lesbian rather than bisexual means that one cannot begin to find the support, acceptance, and validation necessary to develop a fully integrated sexual identity. Without this, many bisexual men and women continue to feel uncertain, embarrassed, ashamed, or guilty about their emotional and/or sexual attractions to men and women.

CONCLUSION

Although participants in my research were more likely to go to community events and gay and lesbian nightclubs than get involved in gay and lesbian groups, there are also large numbers of gay men and lesbians who do not actively participate in the gay and lesbian community. The reason for such low levels of participation by Australian bisexual men and women in the Australian gay and lesbian community, however, could be attributed to the antibisexual attitudes that were considered, by many participants, to exist in the gay and lesbian community. It could be suggested that participants' ambivalence towards the gay and lesbian community may have come from a perception that they would be excluded or discriminated against

because they were bisexual, not merely because of a lack of interest in participation.

Bisexual men and women are therefore less likely to participate in a space where it is known that others have experienced rejection, or where they envisage they may be unwelcome. When participants did get involved in the gay and lesbian community, their experiences were mixed, and participants held considerable fears and suspicions about the attitudes of members of the Australian gay and lesbian community towards bisexuality as a whole. As a result, few had direct contact with gay men and lesbians in organizational or community group settings with which to experience positive reinforcement or acceptance of their bisexuality.

The belief that bisexuality is not accepted within the Australian gay and lesbian community also explains why many participants in my research preferred to “blend” into the gay and lesbian community; when attending events and festivals, or going out on the gay and lesbian scene, participants were assumed to be lesbian or gay (or sometimes, heterosexual), and few challenged these assumptions. Participants felt that openly identifying as bisexual among gay men and lesbians would lead to them being ostracized, or denied a space in which to express their same-sex desires in a safe and supportive environment. The risk of losing access to that space was seen as far greater than any risks associated with suppressing and hiding their bisexuality. As a consequence, the tendency for bisexual men and women to suppress their identity to fully participate in the gay and lesbian community reinforces the idea that bisexuality does not exist in the first place—therefore confirming the illegitimacy of bisexual identity as a whole. This significantly contributes to the invisibility of bisexuality on the sexual landscape and also has a number of implications, beyond the scope of this article, on the ability for bisexual men and women to activate for greater inclusion within the gay and lesbian community.

Overall, the participants in my research had a complex relationship with the Australian gay and lesbian community. By participating in the gay and lesbian community either by “passing” as gay or lesbian or letting assumptions of homosexuality slide, they were able to gain “insider” status in that community by being seen to identify in the same way as other members of this group. However, a revelation of their bisexuality within this context was seen to put this “insider” status at risk, and therefore participants were often involved in the gay and lesbian community without being completely honest about their bisexuality, as well as other elements of their lives such as their relationships. As a result, participants also played the role of “outsider,” making it difficult for them to feel a real sense of belonging in the gay and lesbian community. The “catch-22” of these tensions is that by believing they would not be fully accepted by the gay and lesbian community, many of the bisexual men and women interviewed

were reluctant to participate in this community in the first place, at least on more than a social level, and many harbored rather ambivalent feelings about the gay and lesbian community itself—thus reinforcing their status as “outsiders” to the gay and lesbian community.

Although there are certainly many areas within the Australia gay and lesbian community where being bisexual is no longer an issue—for example, New Mardi Gras, and the various Pride marches held around Australia that are inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people—the bisexual men and women I interviewed believed they were never really able to become fully fledged members of this community. Instead, they felt they needed to compromise their identity to participate fully, and that if they refused to hide their bisexuality, they would face potential discrimination or rejection. The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras may no longer exclude bisexuals from membership, but it appears that there is still much work to be done to overcome the attitudes towards, and the subsequent participation of, bisexual men and women in the gay and lesbian community in Australia.

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