
Bisexuality as a concept in Finland

Signs of cultural change?

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People that have strong bisexual identities tend to separate bisexuality as its own, individual phenomenon and identity. They have quite clear idea about bisexuality as a phenomenon and precise definition for a concept of bisexuality. (Kangasvu 2001.) However, there are people who want to deconstruct all categories. Yet they may label themselves bisexual – sometimes.

I interviewed Finnish, self defined bisexuals about the concept of bisexuality. I asked about their thoughts and experiences concerning bisexuality and tried to find out how Finnish bisexuals define bisexuality. I had a data of 40 interviews, and I concentrated on mostly the informants who did have quite strong bisexual identities; they formed a majority and it was straightforward to study their conceptualization of bisexuality. However, my interest on the people who don't necessarily want to categorize themselves at all – or who change their categorization from time to time – has grown since I finished my research. Some of my informants were people who want to question the categories, also the category of bisexuality, and I want to ponder their conceptualization of bisexuality too.

Self identified bisexuals wanted to point out that bisexuality questions categories by deconstructing the division to homo- and heterosexuality. Some of them even felt that identifying openly as bisexual is a political and revolutionary act. Instead, people who did not want to categorize themselves, said that bisexuality and bisexual identities are just part of the categorization and therefore not deconstructive at all.

Many of the informants said that bisexuality can be seen as revolutionary and emancipatory phenomenon and concept, because it deconstructs both the categories of homo- and heterosexuality and categories of culturally acceptable man and woman. But is it really? Does it reinforce old categories and create a new one?

I'm planning to research dichotomous sexual system and the place of bisexuality in it. I have made a research on Finnish, self identified and identity conscious

bisexuals, but how to study those who defy categories and who may be the essential group when sexual dichotomies are considered?

Definition of dichotomous sexual system

Basically dichotomous sexual system means that sexuality is considered binary. Sexuality is divided to opposite halves: male sexuality and female sexuality, homosexuality and heterosexuality wrong sexuality and right sexuality. Sexual dichotomies limit sexualities to rigid categories, which exist only when opposing each other: male sexuality does not exist without female sexuality, homosexuality not without heterosexuality and the norms of right and wrong sexuality define the borderlines in-between. Dichotomous sexual system itself is very complex and different dichotomies are deeply entwined. Sexual dichotomies deny and marginalize the existence of transgender-identities and bisexuality, but also limit the experiences of those people who actually do fit to the categories.

According to Jeffrey Weeks (1995), western thinking about sexuality derives from the Man-Woman dichotomy. In western thinking sexuality and gender are entwined. Sexuality itself is defined with gender opposities: the Man and the Woman are opposities and sexuality is something that happens between them. Man-Woman dichotomy is explained by reproduction. Reproduction is seen as a reason for existence of sexuality. However, reproduction is not an exhaustive explanation: most of the things defined as sexual have nothing to do with reproduction, for example petting, masturbation, flirting etc. Sexuality is not limited to reproductive actions or between men and women. Seeing reproduction as a function of sexuality is part of the dichotomous sexual system. (Weeks 1995 p. 19-41.)

In western thinking it is usual to emphasize the differences between men and women – not the similarities. Also the sexualities of men and women are divided to two different phenomena. Anatomic differences create an assumption of differences of sexuality, and biological differences are seen as essential and sufficient explanations for sexuality. (Weeks 1995 p. 45-66.)

Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) concept of heterosexual hegemony is useful when dichotomous sexual system is considered. She says that assuming heterosexuality as natural and normal keeps the Man-Woman dichotomy stable. The coherence inside the categories of cultural Man and cultural Woman demands heterosexuality. Institutionalized heterosexuality, heterosexual hegemony or matrix in Butler's terms, both produces gender categories and demands their existence. The gender categories contain a causality from anatomic body to gender and desire and claim that desire describes gender and gender describes desire.

Therefore a baby born with a vagina and ovaries is considered girl, a woman, and woman is considered to desire men. Desire for men is seen to describe womanhood and femininity; to desire women means to question womanhood and femininity. Women who desire women are excluded from the cultural category of the Woman, which is stabilized this way. However, persons desiring both men and women – or questioning the categories altogether – seem to threaten the dichotomous system.

Many bi-theorists have described bisexuality as an essentially deconstructive and revolutionary identity, a challenge to dichotomous sexual system. However, Paula Rust (1996b p. 80-81.) points out that the bisexuality is not a challenge by itself – but the notion of sexual identity as a dynamic process. Dichotomous sexual system and gendered categories are strengthened by the notion of sexual identity as monolithic and stable. Bisexuality may bring the dynamic nature of sexual identity visible. But if bisexual identities are constructed as monolithic and stable they lose their revolutionary aspect. The bisexual identity and bisexuality may lock up as a third category parallel to homo- and heterosexual categories.

The data: interviews of Finnish bisexuals

My data consists of 40 interviews made during summer 1999. I found the informants through an advertisement I had on LGBT-mailing lists, mainstream newspapers and Z-magazine – the only Finnish LGBT-magazine. Usually I interviewed the informant alone, but I had also a possibility to interview four couples, two man-woman-couples and two woman-woman-couples. These interviews were possibly the most detailed and useful I got.

31 of my informants were female and nine male. Ten of them were born in 1950s and 1960s and 30 in 1970s and 1980s. Therefore most of my informants were young women, and my focus is more on them than men or elder people. However, the interviews of young men were quite similar compared with the interviews of young women, so in general my conclusions of Finnish concept of bisexuality apply both young women and men.

The aspect of self identified bisexuals, who have strong bisexual identities, tends to be emphasized in my data. However, one must define oneself as bisexual to some extent to be interviewed about bisexuality. Therefore the majority of my data consists of bisexuals who have strong bisexual identities and who are very identity conscious. Most of these identity conscious interviewees did not expect their sexual identities to change.

The number of informants, who questioned the categories and their bisexuality, was smaller than the number of identity conscious bisexuals – maybe because people denying and fighting categories might regard this kind of research as categorizing and essentially pejorative. I did have some informants who wanted

to question different categories and said that they might not define themselves as bisexuals in every situation, although they did so during the interview. In general, the experiences and ideas of these informants were similar to the experiences and ideas of informants who were very conscious about their bisexual identity. Still their conceptualization of the deconstructive nature of bisexuality differed.

I used cultural model theory as a methodological approach to analyze the interviews. My aim was to find out what Finnish bisexuals think about bisexuality and how they define the concept of bisexuality – and are these thoughts and definitions similar enough to be formed to the cultural model of definition of bisexuality. It appeared that they were.

Many of the experiences and definitions that appeared in my data and ended up to the model have appeared also in other researches made on bisexuals and bisexuality – for example Paula Rust (1996a, 1996b) and Hanna Bertilsdotter (2001) have got similar results in their researches on bisexuality. It may then be that the model can explain the concept of bisexuality also in general western context – Rust made her study in several English-speaking countries and Bertilsdotter in Sweden.

The cultural model of definition of bisexuality

Cultural model theory arised from cognitive anthropology. In cultural model theory culture is seen as a system of shared meanings that appears in a certain community. The parts of the system are called cultural models. A cultural model describes a common, collective concept about a certain thing in a certain culture. Cultural models help us to comprehend the world and to act in cultural context. Cultural model emerges when mental models, the personal concepts and thoughts of the members of a culture, are coherent to some extent. Cultural models can also be ambivalent and overlapping as well as changing and flexible. (Strauss – Quinn 1999 p. 6-7, 122, 48-50; Keesing – Strathern 1998 p. 16-18, 327-330; Hakala 1997 p. 31-45.)

Cultural model consists of schemes. Scheme is a simple, information organizing system which is not complicated enough to form a cultural model. Schemes of a cultural model are tightly interlinked and dependent on each other. Schemes, like cultural models, can be ambivalent, overlapping and flexible. (Hakala 1997 p. 31-45.)

The common definitions and experiences of Finnish bisexuals can be formed to the cultural model of bisexuality, which consists of both definitions of and prejudices against bisexuality. The model has two parts: other consists of the defining schemes of bisexuality and another of the schemes that consider and deconstruct the prejudices of bisexuality.

The arrows between the two parts of the model depict the connection between the definition of bisexuality made by bisexuals and the prejudices they must confront in Finnish society.

A.

The defining schemes of bisexuality

1. The scheme of core definition
2. The scheme of questioning the gender division
3. The scheme of ambiguity
4. The scheme of realizing and accepting
5. The scheme of freedom

B.

The schemes considering and deconstructing prejudices

1. The scheme of prejudice of nonexistence
 - bisexuality as a passing phase
 - bisexuality as a trend
2. The scheme of prejudice of hypersexuality
 - bisexuality as non-monogamous
 - bisexuality as promiscuous.

The cultural model of the definition of bisexuality.

The part A has five schemes. The scheme of core definition defines bisexuals as people who can feel emotional, romantic and sexual feelings towards people of different genders or people regardless of gender. The definition was simplified by saying that bisexuals can *love* people of different genders or regardless of gender. This definition to bisexuality was given by virtually all of my interviewees. The interviewees might emphasize different sides of the definition, especially the sexual feelings, but in general the definition was common to all of my interviewees.

The scheme of questioning the gender division defines bisexuality as a phenomenon that challenges the sexual dichotomy and gender division. Most of my informants emphasized that bisexuality challenged sexual and gender categories. The informants told about their experiences of crossing gender lines. Many of the interviewees described themselves as androgynous and free to express their masculinity and femininity despite their gender.

The scheme of ambiguity defines bisexuality as ambiguous, multifaceted and fluid concept. Informants said that these are essentially characteristic to bisexuals and bisexuality. The informants wanted to stress that there is no whole truth on bisexuality, no neat generalization, but a phenomenon that is ambiguous itself. Most of the informants were satisfied with this situation, even embraced the

plasticity of bisexuality - but there were some that found ambiguity as stressing and threatening.

The two above described schemes represent the notion of bisexuality as a decategorizing phenomenon.

The scheme of realizing and accepting defines bisexuality as a trait that a person must realize and accept to be bisexual and to have a bisexual identity. The informants said that it is difficult to recognize bisexuality and to construct bisexual identity in dichotomised culture. According to the informants the milestone of identity constructing process was to realize one's bisexuality. Some of the informants told about difficulties in accepting their bisexuality – they said that the most important milestone was accepting the bisexuality and stopping fluctuating between homo- and heterosexuality.

The scheme of freedom tells about idealistic thoughts linked to bisexuality. Bisexuality was described as freedom of gender categories, freedom to love, freedom of thought and mind. It is significant that the word freedom was linked to bisexuality so often. The informants had certain idealistic thoughts about bisexuality, but undefined – or underdefined – 'freedom' was the most commonly used word. In this aspect bisexuality can be seen as a part of a postmodern ideology and lifestyle that emphasizes individuality and freedom of choice.

Part B consists of two schemes, the scheme of prejudice of nonexistence of bisexuality and the scheme of prejudice of hypersexuality of bisexuals. These key prejudices had many forms.

The first scheme is manifested in prejudices of bisexuality as a passing phase and as a trend. The most common way to claim that bisexuality does not exist was to say that bisexuality is just a passing phase. This was very common prejudice that bisexuals had to confront both in gay and lesbian community and in heterosexist society. Another way to claim nonexistence of bisexuality was to say that bisexuality is just a trend, that people are bisexual to be fashionable or for the sake of originality. Some of the informants said that bisexuality as a trend is actually not just a prejudice but a fact. Bisexuality and bisexual iconography is used in advertising, fashion and popular culture and in this context it can be said that bisexuality is trendy. Most of the informants defied the prejudices and said that their bisexuality is not a passing phase or part of some trend.

The scheme of hypersexuality consists of prejudices of bisexuality as non-monogamous and promiscuous. Almost all of my interviewees rejected these prejudices – they said that bisexuals can have different sexual practices and that they can arrange their lives in nonconformist way, but that does not mean that prejudices can be generalised to every bisexual. There were some who considered the prejudice of hypersexuality actually positive: society calls bisexuals

hypersexual because society itself is overprudent and therefore society is sick somehow.

The cultural model of bisexuality creates quite uniform picture on Finnish bisexuals and bisexuality. The experiences and opinions of Finnish bisexuals were quite similar, and the model does depict actual ideas and thoughts of bisexuality among Finnish bisexuals. However, this is not the whole picture. There were some informants, who defied categories strongly – but still they had common experiences with other informants.

Cracks and ruptures

Paula Rust has made a research on English-speaking bisexuals (1996b p. 74-77; Rust 1996a p. 127-145). She describes people, who are not satisfied with current sexual and gendered categories but create new categories and labels. They might label themselves e.g. queer-bi, bi-dyke or pansensual. Or they might defy categorizing altogether. Rust quotes one of her informants, who claims that she has no sexual preference at all, but a preference to certain person. These people felt new kinds of labeling and categorizing also as a political act.

Most of the people whom I interviewed defined themselves simply as bisexuals. Most of them also emphasized that bisexuality – and sexuality all in all – is fluid. They did not see bisexuality as a monolithic system, but more like plastic, redefinable and ambiguous. However, the way to define bisexuality seemed to be quite similar among my interviewees – similar enough for me to form a model on those concepts.

But there were some informants that did not want to define themselves as bisexuals forever but emphasized that their self definition can change or that they want to question the categories altogether. They did come to be interviewed about bisexuality, yes, but still they questioned the category of bisexuality during the interview. For example Mira problematized the concept of bisexuality:

In my opinion the word bisexuality is a wrong word, because the bi-word implies that there are two genders, but I think that there is a larger scale of people. I don't know what Greek word should be used [laughs] maybe polysexuality or some other monstrous word [...] ideally we should pursue diversity and get rid of dichotomy...(Mira 1976)

Sari told that she chooses a label 'bisexual', if she has to choose a label, but she does it reluctantly.

I don't feel myself lesbian, or heterosexual either, I'd rather leave all labels out... I say I'm bisexual but I don't like labeling, because I don't really know what I am... (Sari 1972)

The interviewees who identified very strongly as bisexuals and who wanted to label themselves as bisexuals, said that it is important – even necessary – to get more visibility for bisexuality. Some of them were or had been active in gay and lesbian communities and Seta (Sexual Equality – Finnish LGBT-organisation). Some of the informants said that they had working to get more visibility for bisexuality in Seta and even managed to get the word “bisexual” mentioned in official papers and brochures of Seta. But are bisexuals creating a category of bisexuality for themselves? It seems that they actually are – self-identified bisexuals define bisexuality, deny a large set of prejudices and want to tell the world what bisexuality is. However, most of them also said that their thoughts on bisexuality cannot be generalized to other bisexuals. Despite this, there is a tendency to define bisexuality by bisexuals and also get visibility for bisexuality. Also those informants that were not active in Seta said that they would want bisexuality to be more visible, for example in media.

Those people who don't categorize themselves seem to be even more invisible than bisexuals – because they don't have any label they don't exist in discourses concerning sexuality and sexual identities. The dichotomous sexual culture and society don't give space for defying categories. Some of these people label themselves bisexual when asked about some label, but still question the category and label. They may say, that all right, they label themselves bisexual now in lack of better word, but in ideal situation any labels would not be needed. Their sexual identity is in constant motion.

Elisa tries to find new concepts, and calls herself sexual, without any prefix. However, she calls herself bisexual also, because it is common concept for attraction towards people regardless of gender.

I don't want to categorize myself, I'd rather say that I'm sexual... I want to have sex with people... and also, the word sexual refers to sexuality only, the intercourse, but in bisexuality there are lot's of other feelings too [...] although I don't like the word bisexual, but ... I don't know any other definitions or names for it ... (Elisa 1979)

Elisa's choice of label 'sexual' tells about breaking the limits of categories. The category of 'sexual' can be common to anyone, hetero-, homo- or bisexual, asexual, male, female, transgender. The category of 'sexual' is so vast that it encompasses all categories. Possibly the people who don't accept categorizing, who create new labels and change their categorization are signs of a culture change that will erase the categories?

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40 interviews of Finnish, self identified bisexuals, born 1955-1981.

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