

Exploring Biphobia

**A Report on Participatory
Appraisal Research Workshops
in Glasgow and Edinburgh**

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Acknowledgements

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- Sarah Currier for all your support, information, and advice, for co-facilitating the Glasgow workshop and for introducing me to dark hot chocolate with coconut.
- Allie Cherry for all your support, for co-facilitating the Edinburgh workshop and for organising the Edinburgh side of things at the lovely LGBT Centre for Health and Wellbeing.
- Keith Boyd for organising the advertising for the workshops and for all your support.
- Ruth Henry and Alastair Pringle for all your support.

Background

This is a report on the findings of two qualitative research workshops, which were undertaken by Beyond Barriers and the INCLUSION Project to better understand the experiences of bisexual people in Scotland.

Beyond Barriers is a three-year project aimed at challenging discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people through information, training, research and community development. The Project has been funded by the Community Fund and Northern Rock for three years and will unfortunately be ending in October 2004.

The INCLUSION Project, working for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender (LGBT) Health, was launched in October 2002, a partnership between Stonewall Scotland, representing Scotland's LGBT communities and the Scottish Executive Health Department. Funded by the Health Planning & Equality Division, under the 'Patient Focus Public Involvement' umbrella, INCLUSION's aim is to ensure that the health needs of Scotland's LGBT population are addressed.ⁱ

A gap in available evidence led to Beyond Barriers and the INCLUSION Project undertaking two qualitative research workshops with bisexual people with the aim of trying to ensure specific issues for bisexual people are acknowledged and addressed in Scotland. This report will give full details of the findings of the workshops held in Glasgow and Edinburgh in April 2004.

Process

There was a noticeable lack of any acknowledgement of specific bisexual issues at our Beyond Barriers Linking Scotland Planning Futures LGBT Conference, which was held in Inverness in September 2003. After some discussion with Sarah Currier, a representative from the BI Glasgow Group, and going along to meet with the rest of the group, it became apparent that bisexuality is often tokenistic in an LGBT context and that no resources from LGBT organisations were being targeted towards specific bisexual issues.

Since Beyond Barriers and the INCLUSION Project are committed to addressing these issues within Scotland it was agreed that qualitative research should be undertaken using participatory research methods. This methodology was seen as a useful way of gaining a deeper understanding of the specific needs and experiences of bisexual people in Scotland. Participatory appraisal techniques have been successfully used in a number of health related initiatives, and through its informal but structured style of engagement and creative approach to information gathering, as well as its empowering ethos, was an ideal method to use.

There were some initial planning meetings before agreeing on two afternoon workshops, one in Glasgow and one in Edinburgh, with the offer of accessibility costs being covered to try and include participants who wished to attend from outside of the central belt. The Glasgow workshop was held in the LGBT Centre on Saturday 3rd April 2004, facilitated by Nick Laird and Sarah Currier, and the Edinburgh workshop was held in the LGBT Centre for Health

and Wellbeing on Saturday 17th April 2004, facilitated by Nick Laird and Allie Cherry. Participants were recruited through Bi Scotland, Beyond Barriers extensive mailing lists, adverts in Core magazine and word of mouth. Nineteen people participated in total.

Summary of Findings

There was some initial discussion in both workshops around the term 'bisexual' and some of the language used to describe bi people. This discussion was facilitated by using an exercise called the 'Spider Diagram', which encouraged participants to think of all the words they could think of associated with the term 'bisexual' and not to censor themselves. The purpose of this exercise was to focus on the subject and set the context for exploring biphobia and its effects. During the Spider Diagram exercise participants expressed how language impacts on perception and vice versa and demonstrated how a lot of the language used to describe bi people is based on false assumptions. For example, assumptions that bi people are 'promiscuous', 'greedy' and 'uncommitted' aim to undermine bisexuality as 'a valid identity to be celebrated' by inciting people to take positions of moral superiority that are rooted in our patriarchal, heterosexist society (Spider Diagrams, p.12, p32). Biphobic comments and assumptions reinforce the view that monosexuality is central in our society and marginalizes those who do not fit in. This marginalisation was apparent in the Spider Diagram exercise, which highlighted that there was actually a 'lack of language around bisexuality', reinforcing the myth that bi people are 'non-existent' (Spider Diagrams, p.12, p.32).

A body map exercise was used in both the workshops to gather evidence on how it feels to be a bisexual person, written on the inside of the body, and how society treats / views bisexual people, written on the outside of the body. Participants were then asked to vote on the most significant issues by using sticky dots.

Some of the most significant feelings written in the inside of the body maps included feeling 'invisible', 'normal', 'without role models' and feeling that sexuality is 'fluid' and should have 'no labels' (Body Map, p.13, p.33). Feelings around 'not fitting in' were also noted as significant, including: 'want to be accepted by straight and gay', 'don't fit in a box', 'pressure to justify myself' and 'cutting out part of my identity to fit in' (Body Map, p.13, p.33). These feelings, which were voted as most significant, highlight the exclusion faced by people who do not fit our societies binary model of sexuality and gender expression. Even although the word bisexual 'implies there are only two genders', two types of bodies and two other types of sexuality, the significant feelings show that participant's feelings were not in boxes and not static (Spider Diagram, p.12 , p.32).

Some of the most significant issues written on the outside of the body included: 'We challenge the binary divisions that both gay and straight society find so comfortable. We're a threat not just to their sexuality, but to their whole view of the world'. This statement sums up the discrimination faced by people who do not fit into monosexual categories by giving an explanation that shows it is because people are threatened. This also explains why some of the most

venomous biphobia comes from lesbian and gay people. Lesbian and gay people have, and still do, suffer oppression in our heterosexist society and much of the struggle for lesbian and gay rights was easier if it ignored bisexuality. It is easier for a heterosexist society to accept sexuality that does not threaten the binary model, which is the model central to our society and is reflected in our language and, therefore, everything. Our society depends on keeping people living 'in-between' the binary of sex, gender and sexuality invisible, or else its whole structure would change and the balance of power would be shifted. Visibility of people 'in-between' the binary could lead to valuing the true diversity of sex, gender and sexuality and help alleviate much of the oppression and discrimination many human beings face because they 'don't fit in a box' and could make civil rights more easily attainable for all (Body Map, p.13).

Other issues that are extremely significant for LGBT organisations included: 'LGBT organisation workers who allow biphobia to go unchallenged' and 'funding for LGBT pays their salary but they ignore us' (Body Map, p.13, p.33). There are now attempts being made to address these issues in Scotland and many LGBT organisations are actively making progress to make sure the 'B' in LGBT is not just tokenistic.

After recording the feelings and issues around bisexuality participants were asked to write down solutions to the issues raised. Some of the solutions included: 'awareness-raising by LGBT organisations which include bi input'; 'make more "proud" promotional / identity materials without making ourselves a static category'; 'funded organisations should do outreach to us to find out

our issues – we shouldn't be automatically expected to take their volunteer initiative' and 'LGBT workers should be aware that bisexual confidence can be fragile and challenge biphobia when it occurs – or, better, make clear from the outset that it won't be tolerated' (Body Map, p.13, p.33).

Recommendations

The purpose of this report is to record the experiences of bi people in Scotland with the aim of providing evidence that must be used to address the issues raised. The participants in both workshops freely gave their time and energy to sharing their in-depth, knowledge and experience of bi issues with the belief that the information they provided will be taken seriously and will be used to tackle the discrimination faced by bi people. There are committed bi activists challenging biphobia in Scotland. They should not be expected to do this alone when there are LGBT groups and organisations funded to work with bi people. 'Many biphobic stereotypes result in bisexuals' not being taken seriously. If bisexuality as an identity is not taken seriously, then it is unlikely that bisexuals' claims of facing discrimination will be taken seriously. Such claims are unlikely to be seen as valid.'ⁱⁱ It is necessary that organisations with a remit that includes bisexuals' value bisexuality as an identity and make a commitment to working with bi people on taking forward the suggestions by the workshop participants for providing solutions to biphobia.

A few of the suggestions, which can be taken forward, include:

- Making positive statements that biphobia is unacceptable. If biphobic comments go unchallenged people will never understand that it is damaging and will go on making people feel excluded.
- More research into specific bisexual issues, particularly around health and well-being, should be carried out. It is already known that social exclusion impacts on people's health and well-being and it is necessary to make sure bisexuality is not ignored in research.
- Articles in magazines, and resources that celebrate bisexuality should be available.
- Education in schools / open and honest discussion about the true diversity of sex, gender and sexuality.

The full list of solutions and ideas for challenging biphobia, which were suggested by the workshop participants, are in the Full Record of Glasgow /Edinburgh Workshops (p.10, p.31). It is recommended that these suggestions are considered in the planning of work for / with bi people / groups.

Full Record of Glasgow Workshop – 03/04/04

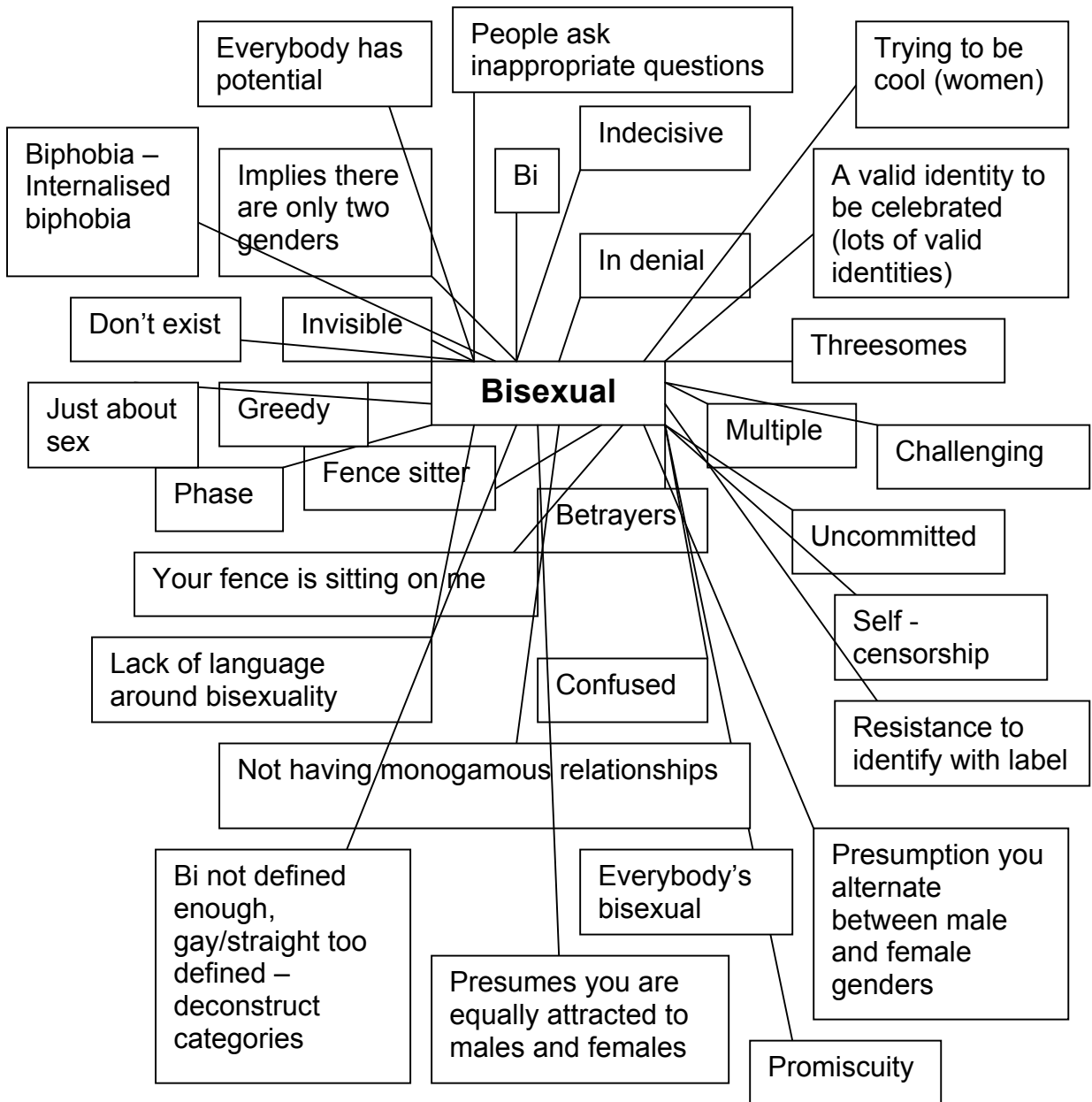
Fourteen people took part in the workshop held in Glasgow, which ran from 12.30pm to 4.30pm. Lunch was provided and travelling expenses paid to those who requested them.

In order to create a safe and comfortable environment for participants and facilitators a group agreement was created and agreed upon by the group.

After the group agreement was created there was an ice-breaker exercise to get to know each other better. Everyone was given a piece of flip chart paper and asked to write their name in the middle, split the sheet into four sections and draw 'something I am good at', 'something I enjoy', 'a memorable day' and 'something I would like to learn'. Each participant and the facilitators then fed back to the whole group. The exercise took about half an hour and this time was very valuable for creating a comfortable atmosphere to carry out the exercises.

Spider Diagram

The purpose of the spider diagram exercise was to look at the term 'bisexual', and some of the language used to describe bisexuals, to get a picture of how language impacts on perception and vice versa. Some of the terms were viewed by participants as positive and some as derogatory. This report is a record of the terms participants said on the day and will not attempt to categorise them.



Body Map

This exercise involved joining six pieces of flip chart paper together and drawing a life size body, which was done by drawing around one of the participants. This was done twice and the whole group was split into two smaller groups to make sure everyone had enough space to write on the Body Map. Each participant was given a marker pen and asked to write down, in the inside of the body, what it feels like to be bisexual. The participants were then asked to write down their experiences, on the outside of the body, of how they have been treated, or perceived by society. For the next part of the process participants were given sticky dots and asked to vote for what they felt were the most significant issues, both internal and external. Each participant had twelve dots to vote with, six each for internal and external issues.

The following is a list of the internal issues that participants voted as most significant:

9 points – Invisible

3 points – No labels

3 Points – Relief

3 points – Closer to Andy (my partner) because he helped me come out to myself

3 points – Dishonest / Honest

3 points – Difficult to talk about for no good reason

3 points – Daren't tell family - even though they're easy going I don't think they would understand

3 points – Want to be accepted by straight and gays

2 points – Don't fit in a box

2 points – Answering stupid questions

2 points – Lack of access to supportive bi community

2 points – Being treated differently

2 points – Being seen as sexually promiscuous

2 points – Great to be able to reassess and 'validate' lots of feelings and experiences from the past once I'd admitted being bi to myself

2 points – Good to tell people – feel like I can be myself. Good to joke about etc.

1 point – Feel very alone sometimes

1 point – Your fence is sitting on me

1 point – Penis thoughts

1 point – Scared of people's reactions (especially my dad and brothers!)

1 point – Not straight, not gay, not fitting in either category

1 point – Still scared to tell my mum (even though we are, in other ways, quite close) ☹

1 point – Unsure of how serious / committed relationship will work

The following is a list of all the other feelings that were written on the inside of the body:

- Sex- positive
- Ignored
- Punk Rock
- Communication
- Frustrated *2
- Confused *2
- Boxed-in
- Feminist
- Friendship
- Indecisive
- Radical *2
- Love
- Critical
- Questioning
- In denial
- Curious
- Educating
- Still practising
- Desire
- Sexy
- Fun
- Outsider

- Hard to pull women who think you are gay
- Dismantling fences
- Bi's are the best lovers
- That look of surprise on their faces
- Cool secret – they assume one thing, I know another
- Empowering
- Coming home – I am not alone
- Liberating *2
- Scared to say what I am
- Silences from lesbians – is funny and grim
- Bi's are so creative
- Excluded
- Hurt
- Tears
- Left out
- Ostracised
- Pain
- Can't tell my mother – she took long enough to cope with my partner being a woman (shame that I'm still lying to her)
- Versatile
- Enjoy being more interesting than the monosexuals
- Longer to come to terms with than being gay would be
- Having to remind people who I'm out to
- That look of disgust on their faces stays with me
- Bi-spirituality – we are boundary riders + Liminal Livers

- The best laugh ever
- We're the coolest
- Empathy
- I can't be gay, I like boys
- Sexual anarchy
- Really I'm not gay
- Being taken
- Girls clothes
- Fluid sexuality
- Don't want to hurt anyone and I'm not
- Is it because men have been cruel to me?
- Finally I can be myself
- Attracted to creative people
- Isolated
- Emotional attraction to women, physical attraction to men
- Scared *2
- Anxious
- Kinky *2
- Strong capacity to love people and not the gender
- Internalised authoritarian feminism
- Not fitting in to L&G community
- Burnt out
- Exhausted
- Assume nothing
- No I am bisexual, your confused birthday bi babe

- Bi's know what bi's like
- Unsure
- Insecure
- Fear of unknown
- Excited at the potential
- Relieved
- Me!
- Wanting to tell people (thinking I should) – none of their business
- I found I could just let my belly relax... psychosexual
- Can't express myself
- Amazed at how many of my friends turned out to be bi themselves once I'd come out to them 😊
- Mentally comparing the attractiveness of one gender over another (how 'gay' am I?)
- Don't know what I should say – whether people are interested
- My assumption of other people's lack of understanding (some were very understanding, though I'd assumed they wouldn't be)
- Tacky space filler!
- Shy
- Stressful
- A fraud

The following is a list of the external issues that were voted most significant for the participants:

7 points – People don't agree on what the label means. 'Bisexual' means different things to different people

6 points – "You're really gay"

5 points – People thinking they have a right to hear about my sexual experiences (like I'm so promiscuous, I'm forcing it into the public realm – pish!)

5 points – Not being treated differently by friends and family

5 points – No good bi characters in media – always evil / criminal / mad etc.

5 points – Lesbian / gay lobbying groups reinforce the boxes

5 points – Hatred from L&G especially

4 points – Help others become more comfortable with their desires so they are not so uncomfortable with mine

4 points – We are damaging to the cause of gay rights

3 points – Asking very personal questions about my sexual and relationship history so they can pigeonhole me after all

3 points – Assumption that I'm lesbian because my partner is

3 points – Funding for 'LGBT' pays their salary but they ignore us

3 points – Not really a feminist (yes I am)

3 points – Bi girls rejected by lesbians

3 points – Buckfast (picture of Buckfast bottle. Idea that 'bi-curious' people show bisexuality as a result of alcoholic intoxication)

3 points – Men think it's for their benefit! – trying to get women to kiss each other etc.

3 points – Lets build a world without borders – sexual or otherwise

2 points – Assume I'm non-monogamous

2 points – L&G aping of straight (i.e. anti gay) prejudice

2 points – Positive role models

2 points – Not understood by straight & gays (how can you fancy both genders?)

2 points – Bisexuality is a choice (can choose to be straight or gay)

2 points – Have to choose one person of one gender to settle down with

2 points – My sexuality is a long story – don't label me

1 point – Rigid gay / straight divisions are oppressive

1 point – Explaining to health professionals (particularly sexual health specialists)

1 point – We'll tolerate you in our community as long as you keep quiet about being bi (from L&G)

1 point – Tokenism from LG 'B' 'T' community groups

1 point – What's it like then? (Meaning sleeping with / having oral sex with someone of the same sex as me)

1 point – Strength of some friendships reinforced by their positive reactions

1 point – Very sexually proficient

1 point – Curious

1 point – Bi guys built like horses

The following is a list of all the other issues that were written on the outside of the body:

- Thinking that 'cos I was bisexual my partner must be too
- Friends thinking it was 'great', but that still felt negative 'cos they were really seeing me as "exotic or out of the mould", which just reinforces heterosexual norms
- One of my friends saying it was "disgusting" and continually saying "you're not really are you?"
- Women know what women like
- Guys know what guys like
- Bi girls more accepted than bi guys in straight community
- Bisexual women seen as "cool" and sexy by straight men
- Image fascism
- No representation
- LGBT oppression to please straights
- Invisible (LGBT)
- Assumptions (LGBT)
- Inside mirrors the outside
- Unreliable (LGBT)
- People wouldn't understand – have to explain everything
- Friends never mention it – don't know how to react
- Shock value of coming out
- Being outed by a good friend

- Pressures!
- Unsure how to see us
- Not high profile
- Tutted at for holding same sex partners hand!
- Seen as immoral (by some family rights / christian)
- Accepted by new age movements
- Seen as sexually promiscuous / good in bed
- Treated as a curiosity / exotic
- She'll use you and dump you
- Ignorance about what bisexuality is – confusion with TV/TS
- Linked with swinging / wife swapping
- “I've never met a bisexual” – yes you have, none of them want to come out to you
- Same sex partnerships – lesbian and gay in the media
- Admiration
- Not being recognised in the media, except for “three in a bed romps”
- But we're all bi really aren't we? (NO!)
- “You can't be monogamous if you're bi”
- Tokenism sucks
- “It's a phase you're going through”
- “You're not welcome in our gay club – we can't have people blurring the boundaries”
- “Slut!” shouted by young gay men in George Square
- Can't find a partner – I'm too out and too proud
- Fear

- “How does that work?”
- Bike
- Disgust
- Straight men leering – looking for hot bi babe for a threesome
- Media portrayals = 90% invisible. 10% evil, betrayer bisexuals, 0% “normal” or positive
- Alliance with transgender community
- Bisexuals go with bisexuals
- Into threesomes *2
- Rejected
- Bisexual mentally ill
- Lesbian
- I’ve gone straight now I’m with a boy
- Told I think you need to choose
- Taboo subject
- Told I love women
- Invisible
- Double the chance of not getting a date on a Friday night
- You’re greedy
- You want your cake and eat it
- Fitting into labels pressure
- Silencing behaviour “shut up bi’s”
- Media tend to sensationalise and not say bi only gay
- Shagging everybody
- Alone in a world of ignorance

- Governments and corporations depend on boxes. Freedom is escaping and avoiding being boxed in
- Heterosexuality is hard too – it's not just a privilege
- CH5 documentary 'bi curious girls' – example of sensationalising
- No one's born bisexual
- Can't choose
- Can tell by looking at you
- They call us: "Designer Gays"
- Emotions and relationships don't fit in boxes without a lot of pushing – don't push me!
- I hate people assuming I'm gay because my partner is male
- Anti – heterosexuality attitudes in LGBT groups affects anyone in mixed sex relationships
- Rigid gender categories make life harder
- Feminist anti hetero / lesbian centrism is not helpful – it produces new forms of domination
- If you haven't got a simple label, you can't just 'come out' – it's about sharing stories – not just labels
- Anti – Bi talk overheard in the Women's Library
- Just curious
- "Why don't you just settle down with a nice man"
- Just trying it out
- Sitting on the fence
- Fashion statement
- Don't exist

- Bisexual = sex with two genders
- Wants to put a label on us
- Promiscuous
- Not ready to come out
- You'll grow out of it
- Dirty nymphomaniac
- Just a phase
- PHWOARR!
- "When are you going to come out?" – I am out
- "What's the point in calling yourself bi? Your partner is same sex"
- We understand other monosexuals...you're just weird / insatiable / kinky / greedy / attention seeking
- You can be straight when the going gets tough
- AC-DC
- "Great we're all in with a chance" said by a straight man of woman he thought was lesbian
- Blank looks
- "I thought you were gay?"
- "I thought you'd grown out of that"
- Trendy part-timers nicking L&G space and resources

Using post-it notes participants were asked to write down solutions to the problems they had written down on the body map. The following is a list of those solutions:

- Awareness-raising by LGBT organisations which includes bi input
- Make more “proud” promotional / identity materials without making ourselves a static category
- Training for sexual health professionals
- Publish bi fiction
- Regular bi articles / columns in papers /mags
- More research! Specifically bi – we are different (and the same)
- Discussion on being bisexual and monogamous
- If you’re not intelligent don’t ask
- Community support
- Representation
- More media coverage about ‘bi’ in its various forms; more people (all sorts of people in all sorts of relationships) coming out as bi
- How to tackle monosexuality and the legal and scientific, essentialist juggernaut which prioritises the two categories of gay and straight
- Bisexual marketing! Target bisexuals with products and services – also pubs, clubs and strip joints!
- Stuff for bi women!!
- Don’t assume that all bisexuals are promiscuous
- Government can only control, it cannot give freedom. Lobbying is not an answer

- Education / awareness raising / community building
- Gay rights minimising bi rights.
- You only need 'rights' if there is someone limiting your freedom.
Organise for sexual freedom – not rights
- L&G community to be more open-minded
- Encourage lesbian and gay people to talk and think about the complexity of their own desires so they are less anxious, hateful
- Subscriptions to BCN for Scottish organisations
- Funded bi awareness workshops for employees of LGBT and straight orgs
- Funding for development and promotion of bi groups
- More visibility (and support for visibility)
- There are many genders. Don't assume anything
- Frustrated – join Bi Glasgow
- Is anyone born with a predetermined sexuality? Sexuality develops at least to some extent
- Denial is not a river in Egypt
- Try to promote more openness in general about sexuality – in the media, educational, etc
- Promote more open, comfortable and honest discussion about emotions, relationships, desires and sex. Sex ed, thought provoking images, public meetings, leaflets, etc
- Encourage people to think about the dangers of labelling, as well as the pleasures
- Bi's come out en masse!

- Relaxation and meditation
- Collect stories of bi lives separately and publish / perform
- Support for bisexuals to be more open
- All bisexuals are different so don't make assumptions
- Lesbian and gay lobbying groups should recognise bisexuality more and include it
- Question the idea that anyone is 'really' anything. We all change. We need to learn to accept that and relax
- Education about monogamous bisexuals, including positive portrayals in the media, but also raising the point that being non-monogamous is OK!!
- Have more than one bi rep on committees, but pay expenses
- Pay your bi volunteers for their input – overcome tokenism
- A paid bisexual role somewhere. E.g. Equality Network
- Publicity, awareness raising
- Lobbying from bi representative groups and readers / viewers / listeners
- Bi Con in Scotland one year!
- Funded bi network for rural Scotland – News letter / email / meetings
- More open discussion about monogamy and the alternatives
- Help people realise the problem is not with individuals who are ill, it's with an unhealthy society
- We all need to be free to choose, and to change our minds
- More commitment from LGBT groups who are funded to the Bs + Ts – sets examples – challenges lazy habitual thinking

- LGBT community groups to recognise biphobia, transphobia – consult and educate
- Always use bi specific examples in official LGBT documents
- Self knowledge as a shield from fear
- Challenging biphobic comments and language
- Get bi awareness onto school curriculum – educate people out of ignorance and tell bi's they're not alone
- Make friends with bisexuals – get to know us
- Make our own media
- Campaign of complaints against news / media portrayals
- Bi art exhibition
- Fight for social acceptance and celebration of all 'non-traditional' relationships, bi or otherwise. This would maybe stop the stereotyping that it's only bi's who act this way too
- I always use positive bi people in my writings
- Raising profile of bi identity and issues via good portrayals in the media will help with other problems (lack of understanding etc)
- Publications for other to learn how to cope with bi's coming out
- Challenge beliefs of church
- Increase spiritual awareness among bisexuals
- Questioning (in general) where society's morality comes from???
- Get LGBT organisations to justify their unwillingness to include bisexuals
- Once one person is known as bi, it seems easier for others to come out

- Christians should read more than Leviticus. Where are their beaten wives and slaves?
- Set boundaries – accept some people will think is wrong – choose to have in life or not
- I don't understand how gay / straight people can only fancy one gender, but I accept who they are
- Point out how everyone is different. We all fancy different people – get over gender
- Improve communication and networking between bi people – especially younger people who may be confused and scared
- Remove bi-stigma and you remove inhibitions
- Challenge oppressive behaviour – build up self-assertiveness of bi's to do this
- Greater understanding should lead to greater acceptance
- Improve self worth of bisexuals and lesbians and gays
- Create good, convincing bisexual characters in mainstream fiction
- Resources should stress that only you can define your identity. Nobody else has the answers or can tell you you're wrong
- Point out they aren't reliable either!
- LGBT organisations to be forced to justify bisexual exclusion
- Discuss with people the fact that this is a pattern from wider society (marginalised oppressed groups going on to marginalise, oppress other). Maybe make them think?

- Being seen as sexually promiscuous is seen as bad. Old ideas given a new lease because of AIDS phobia. Take away stigma of promiscuity. Bisexuals no more promiscuous than others
- L&G oppression – demonstrate their own internalised homophobia
- Challenge stuff in the media about bisexuality being trendy to try one if you're a woman / girl – by letter writing
- Better role models

Full Record of Edinburgh Workshop – 17/04/04

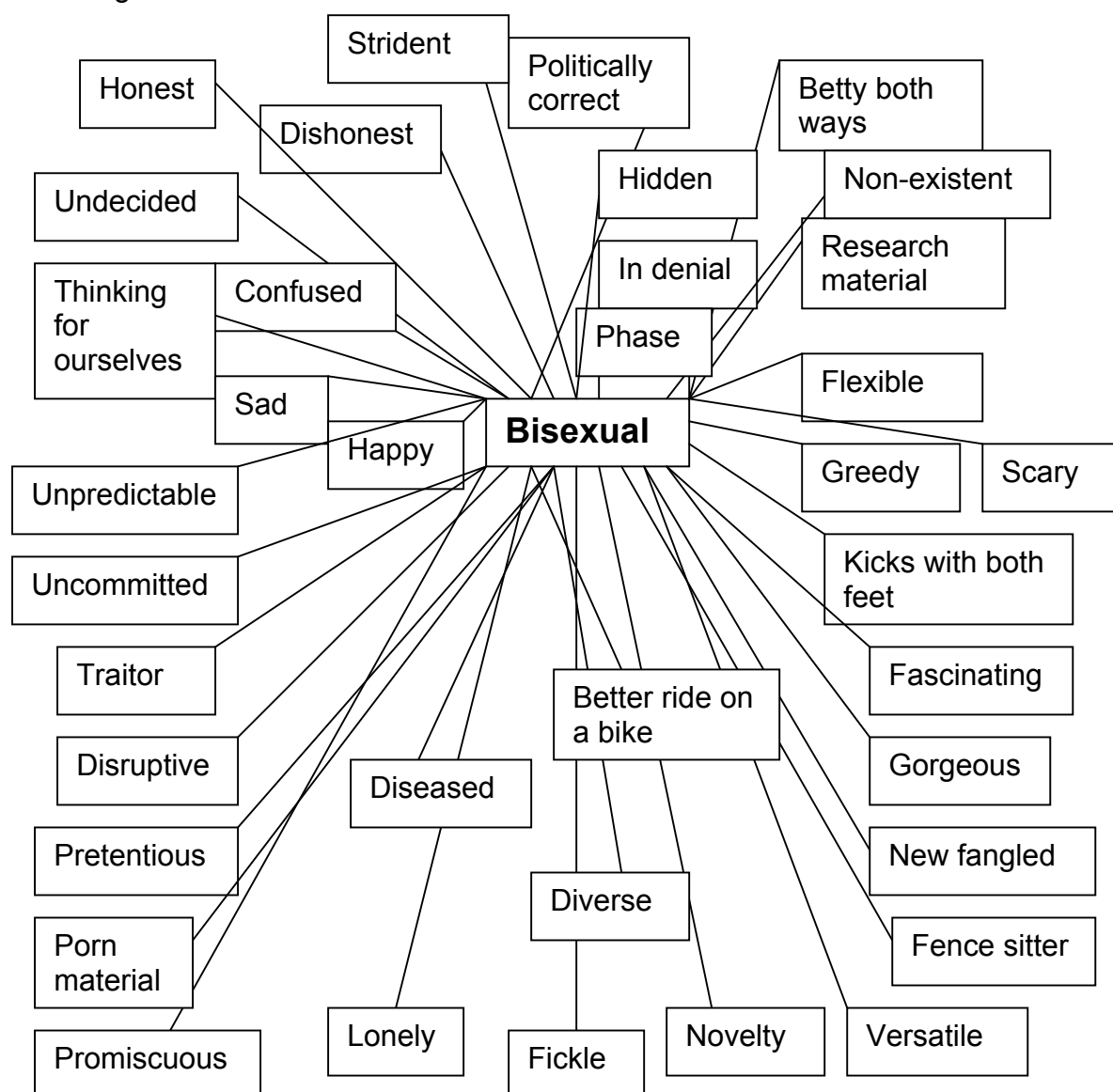
Five people took part in the workshop held in Edinburgh, which ran from 12.30pm to 4.30pm. Lunch was provided and travelling expenses offered to participants.

In order to create a safe and comfortable environment for participants and facilitators a group agreement was created and agreed upon by the group.

After the group agreement was created there was an ice-breaker exercise to get to know each other better. Everyone was given a piece of flip chart paper and asked to write their name in the middle, split the sheet into four sections and draw 'something I am good at', 'something I enjoy', 'a memorable day' and 'something I would like to learn'. Each participant and the facilitators then fed back to the whole group. The exercise took about half an hour and this time was very valuable for creating a comfortable atmosphere to carry out the exercises.

Spider Diagram

The purpose of the spider diagram exercise was to look at the term 'bisexual', and some of the language used to describe bisexuals, to get a picture of how language impacts on perception and vice versa. Some of the terms were viewed by participants as positive and some as derogatory. This report is a record of the terms participants said on the day and will not attempt to categorise them.



Body Map

This exercise involved joining six pieces of flip chart paper together and drawing a life size body, which was done by drawing around one of the participants. Each participant was given a marker pen and asked to write down, in the inside of the body, what it feels like to be bisexual. The participants were then asked to write down their experiences, on the outside of the body, of how they have been treated, or perceived by society. For the next part of the process participants were given sticky dots and asked to vote for what they felt were the most significant issues, both internal and external. Each participant had twelve dots to vote with, six each for internal and external issues.

The following is a list of the internal issues that participants voted as most significant:

6 points – Normal

4 points – Without role models

3 points – Fluid

3 points – Pressure to justify myself

2 points – Cutting out part of my identity to fit in

1 point – Natural

1 point – Mind opening

1 point – Feel responsible for providing a good bi role model to non-bisexuals

1 point – Invisible

1 point – It makes sense. Wouldn't want to be any different

1 point – Frustration – don't want to always have to be the token bi representative

The following is a list of all the other feelings that were written on the inside of the body:

- Unsupported*2
- On the fringe
- Robust
- OK
- Unfettered
- Not straight forward
- Poorly understood
- Defensive*2
- Confident inside but always waiting to be shattered from outside
- Sure + unsure
- Isolated*2
- Normal
- The only one
- Wishing it were easier
- A minority in every situation
- Disjointed
- A token
- Out of sync
- Offended

- Flawed
- Pressure to decide
- Confused*2 / confusing
- A fraud
- Don't fit in
- Frustrating*2
- Makes perfect sense
- Happy
- Peaceful
- Non-conforming
- Secretive
- Sense of freedom
- Alone
- Feeling pressure to maintain an equal quota
- Defensive – unsure where I'm welcome
- Exciting and freeing to come out & open
- Secret – something to deal with after moving away
- Not mentioning the fact that I like boys if I'm in a gay space: cunning survival plan
- Stroppy
- Tired of explaining, of defending, of being told to make up my mind
- Good way to meet interesting people
- How do I come out as 'bi' if I'm not in a relationship – will I be believed?
- Fun*2
- Boring

- Friendly
- Needs to be explained all the time
- Fluid
- Tiring
- Not reflected outside
- Complicated*2
- Independent
- Unguided
- Differed
- Disapproved of
- Something not talked about
- Forced into being political
- Don't understand how non-bisexuality works
- Sometimes I do wish I was either gay or straight and not 'in between'
- Angry
- Honest
- Putting energy into bi activism that I shouldn't need to do + could be putting into being personally happier
- Feel self-conscious when I have to speak up to remind people I exist – expect they'll just think I'm a nuisance
- Misunderstood
- Uncertain
- Stereotyped
- Internal / external world impact on identity and self worth
- Something self fulfilling

- Probing – re: psychoanalysis of sexuality
- Reorientation of existence of sexuality - range of
- Challenging
- Scary
- Rewarding
- Creative
- “Oh no!”
- “If only”
- “either / or”
- Not wanting to be bi, wishing I was either lesbian or straight
- Mentally tiring
- Right + fitting....natural
- It is honest, easy, straight forward for me now
- Defiant
- Special
- Different
- Provocative
- Nowhere to fit in
- Isolating
- My sexuality is part of what makes me me! – holistic: not separate
- Still feels odd to define my sexuality by gender of people I am attracted to
- When I’m celibate / single, do I have a sexual identity or am I assumed to be straight?

The following is a list of the external issues that were voted most significant for the participants:

8 points – We challenge the binary divisions that both gay and straight society find so comfortable. We're a threat not just to sexuality, but to their whole view of the world.

7 points – I can only have "gay" or "straight" relationships. Why can't I be a (bi) man in a relationship with a woman or a man? I get lost as people try to slot +label me in a way familiar to them but ignorant of me.

3 points – Difficulty in maintaining your bisexual identity when you are in a relationship – the gender of your partner effaces your sexuality, whereas it affirms the sexuality of straights and gays

3 points – LGBT organisation workers who allow biphobia to go unchallenged

1 point – "Just don't mention you are bi; say you're a dyke or straight to fit in"

1 point – Bisexuals will always leave their straight / gay partners – like no-one's ever dumped us! (or dumped them before)

1 point – Hierarchy of victim status – lesbians and gays often assume we can use 'heterosexual privilege' (and closet gays don't?) and we see the lack of power we have in LGBT organisations – creates conflict when our issues are different & we could be working together

The following is a list of all the other issues that were written on the outside of the body:

- “You’re emotionally / psychologically immature”
- “You’re not political or committed enough”
- “You bring STDs into the lesbian community”
- “Sleeping with the enemy”
- “ It’s part of your mental illness” – Counsellor / nurse
- “Are you sexually active?” Yes!?” “ And not using contraception?!!”
- “You want to come along to lesbian space when it suits you + then run off to being straight when it suits you”
- “We need to know WHAT you are so we can decide what to do with you”
- “You’re just perverts, sex mad, a danger to children”
- Do you always have threesomes?
- You’re just greedy
- Why can’t you just admit you’re gay?
- You spread disease
- Why can’t you make up your mind?
- If I marry you, you’ll just cheat Vs If I go out with you, you’ll leave me for a woman because she can give you children
- In gay community – not ok to have a fluid sexuality – fear / loss of own identity – grave stereotyping. Bisexuals actively excluded from groups / orgs as a means of securing own identity (hard to accept as psychologically v.painful)

- Ignorance of sexuality is prevalent through media / society / school / education / literature
- Counsellors who don't get it – “so you like to shout it from the rooftops?” or, when I've made casual reference to exes. “Are you trying to tell me something?”
- I came out in my first year at uni. It wasn't bad but it didn't help that some people wrote me off as trying to be trendy. It would be worse to deal with serious homophobia, but it still shouldn't have been a problem
- The 'hetero until proven queer' thing
- On the scene: language is usually GAY. Is this my space or not?
- Bi people are just trying to be cool
- Patronising assumptions
- The 20 questions thing I always get at parties (sometimes from the unlikeliest people)
- Parents' first worry was that I might get AIDS. They never mentioned it when I was only seeing boys
- Being interviewed for a lesbian mag: suddenly I had to justify my inclusion by saying that yes I go out on the scene. Mt bi identity was not included in the final piece
- Bisexuality is too difficult to understand!
- Bisexual = non-monogamous / untrustworthy / bound to be unfaithful
- Bi is a fetish
- Treated with suspicion by gay + straight alike

- I could never go out with a bisexual – they’re too unpredictable (political candidate overheard at a party)
- You want the best of both worlds
- Bisexuals are AIDS spreaders
- If you’re bi you’ll shag anything that moves
- Too many incorrect assumptions
- Manchester City Council refuse to include bisexuals in their equality policy unless they are in a same-sex relationship and therefore really gay
- Invisible
- “No bisexuals” door policy at gay clubs (straight guests welcome). Threatened by bouncer when 6 bis refused to say they were gay or straight
- Trade union representation or lack of – lesbian & gay sections within refuse to allow bi members, or will not represent bi members unless they are in same-sex relationships – no support for someone discriminated against just for being out as bi
- Lesbian to bi woman friend – “I’d never sleep with a bi woman, but I’ll snog you...” (and you’ll be grateful!) (Oh no she won’t...)
- Sex is the main part of bisexuality. No equivalent term to gay + straight, which implies cultural values etc. instead of just sex
- Gay society steals our role models!
- Once you’ve gone to the “other side” there’s “no going back”
- As a bi –male in a relationship with a woman – “I’m confused”, but when I’m in a relationship with a man – I’m “gay”

- Need to justify your sexuality by sexual experience instead of sexual attraction – you can be bisexual and celibate!
- Vulnerability of the bi community – we could benefit from some official support
- People assume I'm straight or gay depending on which aspect of my life (e.g. ex-boyfriend / girlfriend) they hear about first. Always need to be prepared for their look of confusion later on & the grilling that may follow
- Being a novelty. Did I mention this enough yet?
- Going to a “straight” place with a girlfriend & being leered at by straight men...which still feels easier than taking a boyfriend to a gay place. Don't expect my presence to be appreciated whether they think I'm bi or straight
- People being told I'm bi and then expressing surprise on hearing I like boys
- People being told I'm bi and then expressing surprise when I sleep with a girl
- Partners feeling threatened by my identity
- Some gay people identify as bi for a while. Then they accuse us of being dishonest when we use that label and stick with it
- My sister wanted to tell me all her boyfriend issues but she didn't want to discuss the girls in my life because “it's gross & disgusting”. As a result I have never since volunteered any information about my love life to her. Hate the double standard

- Difficulties with mixed sexuality relationships – the bisexual partner is usually the one perceived as the threat / problem
- Stonewall etc. Who will not politicise bisexuality in case it dilutes the lesbian and gay message
- From a gay boyfriend – “ bi men are married men who sleep with men on the side” – I want to be in a monogamous relationship with him (he wants to be in an open relationship with me) therefore I’m not really bi at all – just dishonest gay
- Jackie Clune – “just don’t call me bisexual”
- Julie Burchill – “bisexuals just need to grow up & choose one or the other”
- Photograph of a bi woman put up in the loos of a gay club with caption “ anyone anytime”
- Accusations of genocide of lesbian by bi women posted on bi mailing list
- We’re making a fuss about nothing
- We don’t exist
- We can’t be trusted
- Posters for bi events / groups regularly torn down within a day
- At work I’ve always been out when lesbian and gay colleagues aren’t – fair enough – their decision – but feel if I wasn’t out I’d be accused of claiming heterosexual privilege
- Token bi – see how diverse we are

- “Oh you’re bi, then you can give me advice on how to deal with....”
Anything that’s not straight – assumption that I am an expert on LGBT issues, STDs, sex problems, etc.
- Sex mad – pressure to isolate / deny sexuality when it is integral part of me
- Bisexuals in films have an unlimited supply of ice picks to match their murderous neuroses
- Channel 5 Bi Girls “documentaries” – Kleenex material for straight men
- Sometimes it’s been easier to lie about my identity if someone’s sleazing on me – “I’m bisexual & I’m not attracted to you” doesn’t seem to put them off somehow
- Tokenism in LGBT organisations – no/very little attempt to understand bi issues or represent the bi community
- Automatic assumption that only “the gay side” of bisexuality should be covered by LGBT organisations
- Overload on bi activists – all volunteers who have lives / jobs to deal with
- Difficulty in being taken seriously by professional LGBT workers
- Liberal assumption that some people are genuinely, exclusively gay and therefore can’t help it, so it is ok for them (Archbishop of Canterbury!) – We of course can choose and therefore a same-sex choice is sinful
- Assumption that a one-partner monogamous relationship is the only option – no room ever for discussion of alternatives

- Assumption that no bisexuals ever turn up for LGBT events – you can't tell us just by looking!
- Need to justify your sexuality when you need help – rang a helpline when banned from parental home when I came out and had to spend most of the conversation arguing that I wasn't scared I might just be gay
- Media who make us invisible at every turn (gay + straight)

Using post-it notes participants were asked to write down solutions to the problems they had written down on the body map. The following is a list of those solutions:

- Education – sex education should be about sexuality in general, not straight with a bit of L+G + then a smaller bit of Bi + only vaguest mention of T if at all
- Research – social not biological – into realities of people's sexuality and gender identities
- Ignore Stonewall if they ignore us – support truly inclusive LGBT organisations
- Challenging all myths and prejudice in a mature and productive way
- Bi people to join LG groups and assert our presence and our commitment to work together on homophobia, biphobia and injustice
- Re: Julie Burchill – Angry letters to the Guardian
- Re: Jackie Clune – Boycott her shows!

- Make access to the bi community more visible (not easy when posters are usually torn down within a day)
- Get stroppy – advise funders that these organisations (LGBT) are not filling their brief!
- Funded organisations should do the outreach to us to find out our issues – we shouldn't be automatically expected to take their volunteer initiative
- LGBT workers should be aware that bisexual confidence can be fragile and challenge biphobia when it occurs – or, better, make clear from the outset that it won't be tolerated
- Bi media watch and feedback
- Training in sensitivity, inclusivity etc for helpline volunteers, counsellors and so on
- Health + Social work etc – Bisexuality to be part of diversity awareness training and not seen as pathological or illness
- LGBT Centre here (Centre for Health & Wellbeing) feels more bi friendly than anywhere else I've been – model of good practice – share it with other agencies etc. you work with
- Challenge biphobic comments
- Bi people to take proactive responsibility to be out and provide role models to younger people + to get LGBT + mainstream groups to take us seriously
- Research + education + awareness training to be provided by bisexual people
- Bi lists in books and on the web

- Bi role models listed / pictured in LGBT Centres!
- Accept you can't do everything and occasionally take stock of your successes
- Bisexual people to seek out bi friendly agencies, individuals and work with them, not just focus on –ve stuff
- LGBT organisations must challenge negative assumptions about bisexuality in the media and proactively promote positive ones
- All those involved politically in LGBT if LG or T must be taught to identify bi issues and stand up for them in the absence of a bi rep
- Recognise politically that there is a spectrum of human sexualities – while labels are convenient, vocabulary used must allow expression of the spectrum
- Teach and promote concept that an individual happy in a healthy relationship is a benefit to society. LGBT organisations must promote this concept in adult places – clubs, bars and places of higher education.
- LGBT organisations should promote this concept in schools, religious institution, and other places where the young are formulating their world outlook

Resources

ⁱ Pringle A (2003) Towards A Healthier LGBT Scotland, INCLUSION Project

ⁱⁱ Roen K (2002) Bisexuality Report for ILGA-Europe

1. Bi Irish (2002) Bisexuality: A survey of Attitudes, Needs and Definitions Amongst the Irish Queer Community
2. Moore J (1996 & 2000) bi-education pack; www.uncharted-worlds.org