

We're Here, We're... Queer? On the Enduring Harms of Bisexual Erasure

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Despite comprising a significant portion of the LGBTQ+ community, bi-identified people experience routine erasure,¹ both from within the broader LGBTQ+ community, as well as from outside it. Such erasure is harmful for bi-identifying individuals and the larger bi+ community in numerous ways: bi erasure contributes to a variety of physical harms (e.g., health disparities faced by bi+ communities); erasure plays a role in reinforcing material inequalities and discriminations (e.g., pervasive unemployment and housing discrimination experienced by bi+ folks); and erasure is psychologically damaging, contributing to senses of worthlessness and alienation in many bi-identified people. While all of these types of harm – those which are physical, material, or psychological – are critically important to understand and try to rectify in the interest of pursuing social justice for bi+ people, in this paper I argue that this is another important category of harm that is brought on by pervasive bi-erasure, but which is too often overlooked in discussions of bisexuality and bi-erasure. This is *epistemic harm*, or the harm one experiences in their capacity as a knower.

Epistemic harm results from individuals being denied epistemic authority over their identities and experiences, as well as from being denied the opportunity to transmit such knowledge to others. While epistemic harm is morally damaging for individuals that experience it, and thus worth attending to in its own right, I argue that attention to epistemic harm faced by bi-folks – and the epistemic practices that generate it – is necessary to combat bi-erasure. This is because if bi-identified people are never recognized as credible knowers and authoritative speakers, they will never be able to transmit

¹ By “bi erasure” I mean the process of rendering bi+ identified people and their experiences invisible within discussions of sexuality and LGBTQ+ identities. Discourses on sexuality tend to focus on one of two dichotomous poles (heterosexuality or homosexuality), leaving bisexuality overlooked entirely (see Elia 2014).

their first-personal knowledge about bi+ sexualities to others -- an essential step to eliminating harmful myths and stereotypes about bi+ people that reinforce bias, discrimination, and stigma toward bi+ people. Paying attention to these epistemic phenomena, then, is essential as a matter of justice.

I) *Why “Bi?”: The Pragmatics of Retaining the Category and Label of “Bi”*

Bisexuality, or “bi,” refers, in the broadest and most fluid terms, to a variety of bi-erotic practices, desires, and intimate relationships. While some interpret the term as meaning “attraction to or desire for intimacy with people of *both* genders” (i.e, cis-men and cis-women), the prefix “bi” need not be read this way. Some queer scholars, including Julia Serano (2012) have argued that the “bi” prefix in bisexuality is best interpreted as “attraction to *same* and *non-same* gender.” On this latter reading, bisexuality is understood as an attraction to people of multiple and various genders, alleviating concerns that the category of bisexuality is trans-exclusionary. On this view, bi+ people can and do experience attraction to or desire for people with any and all gender identifications. This is the understanding of bisexuality that I deploy throughout this paper.

One reason to retain the label “bi” is because there is strength (and perhaps a better chance of visibility) in numbers. By some estimates, bi-identified people make up over half of the larger LGBTQ+ community (Gates 2011; Movement Advancement Project 2016), and people ages 18-34 are twice as likely to identify as bi over gay or lesbian, and three times as likely to identify as bi than pansexual (GLAAD 2017). Within that large percentage of bisexual people, there is significant diversity as well. Our best estimates indicate that approximately 25% of trans and non-binary folks identify as bisexual (National LGBTQ Taskforce 2013), and people of colour are more likely than their white counterparts to identify as bisexual (Movement Advancement Project 2016). The bi-community is a beautifully diverse one, comprised of people with various intersecting identities and experiences that make being bi-identified far from a singular or monolithic experience.

However, despite these large and diverse numbers of bi-identified people, bisexuality is still

routinely erased, even within the larger LGBTQ+ community (Serano 2012). While bisexuality and the “B” that represents it is typically understood as falling under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, bisexual people nevertheless face continued marginalization both in society generally, and in queer communities in particular, resulting in unequal representation and diminished community support, especially when compared to monosexual members of the community, namely, gays and lesbians. Outside of the community, there is often confusion, myths, and misinformation about bi people, which often results in their being lumped in with their gay and lesbian counterparts, if they are seen as LGBTQ+ at all. On both counts, bi+ people of all backgrounds routinely have their experiences rendered invisible, incomprehensive, and incoherent. This sort of erasure, or, the failure to have one’s identity recognized, affirmed, or understood, leads to a variety of harmful outcomes, whether physical, material, psychological, or otherwise.

My contention is that claiming the “bi” identity helps to increase visibility. When we claim our bi-identities, the numbers of bi+ people become harder to deny or ignore, and thus the better equipped bi+ are to demand support from our community, more research and advocacy around issues facing bi+ people, and more focus on improving various outcomes (e.g., health, employment) for bi+ people.

II) *Oppressive Epistemic Practices and Epistemic Harm to Bi+ People*

While bi+ people are harmed by bi-erasure, and the many practices that contribute to it, in myriad ways, in this section, I want to home in on a particular category of harm that I think bi-identified people often experience, but which is not generally discussed. This is *epistemic harm*, or the harm one suffers in their capacity as a knower. These harms are detrimental to bi-individuals and communities, and as I will argue in the final section, contribute to the problem of bi-erasure and make it more resilient to being overcome. In this section, I describe three harmful epistemic practices that bi+ people are likely to face, *testimonial injustice*, *testimonial smothering*, and *epistemic microaggressions*, and show

how it is that they cause harm that is distinctly epistemic in nature. This will pave the way for the final section, in which I contend that the accumulation of epistemic harm that results from these practices is a key mechanism for perpetuating bi erasure.

The first epistemic practice I want to attend to, *testimonial injustice*, was brought to mainstream philosophical awareness by philosopher Miranda Fricker in her 2007 book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. There, she describes the phenomenon as when a speaker is afforded less credibility than they deserve owing to negative identity-based prejudices held by the hearer about some facet of the speaker's identity. For example, if the hearing party in a testimonial exchange possesses the stereotype that women are overly emotional and thus, irrational, when met with a female speaker in a testimonial exchange, that hearer is likely to make a rapid credibility assessment of the speaker that is unduly deflated. In other words, the presence of the stereotype causes the hearer to assess that the speaker is not owed full credibility when she speaks.² Such assessments of credibility can be immediate and unconscious (read: unintentional) on the part of the hearer, but nevertheless, they cause the speaker to be treated as less than a full (and fully competent) knower.

In a society like ours, in which there are pervasive myths, biases, and stereotypes regarding bisexuality, bi-identified people are likely to experience this sort of unjust credibility deflation when they attempt to give testimony, and especially testimony about their bisexuality. For an example of how this might play out, consider the following: hearer (*H*) exists in a society that tends to deny bisexuality (e.g., assume that bi-identified people are “really” gay or straight, and just haven’t sorted it out yet). This pervasive social stereotype has the following assumption at its core: that people claiming

² Importantly, as Fricker acknowledges, the stereotypes and biases that influence our judgements about others, and in this case, about their epistemic credibility in particular, need not be conscious or explicitly held. In other words, the hearer might not even realize that they hold this stereotype or that it influences their rapid judgments. For more on this, see the vast literature on implicit bias (see for example, Project Implicit at Harvard University and the Implicit Bias and Philosophy Collection, eds. Brennan and Brownstein 2016).

they are bisexual are experiencing a failure of self-knowledge; they don't really know that they are bi, rather, they don't know what their real sexual orientation is yet. Given the prevalence of this stereotype in his society, when *H* meets a bi-identified speaker (*S*), his immediate (and perhaps less than fully conscious) assessment of *S* is that she cannot be trusted – she is not a competent knower. When *S* tries to speak to her experiences with her bisexuality, she is met with immediate doubt.

Fricker argues that such undermining of a speaker's claim to knowledge constitutes a moral harm, insofar as she is undermined in her capacity as a knower – something central to human dignity. However, it is also easy to see how it could lead to a variety of practical harms: if *S* is unable to secure uptake when she speaks about her bisexuality, she is unlikely to get proper medical care or anything else that depends on her sexuality being recognized. The inability to be taken seriously when one speaks can generate a variety of serious and enduring harms, which, insofar as they pertain to her capacity as a knower, are distinctively epistemic in nature.

This systemic failure to recognize or take bisexuality seriously leads to the second epistemic phenomenon, namely, *testimonial smothering*. Coined by philosopher Kristie Dotson, the phenomenon of testimonial smothering refers to the “truncating of one's own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (Dotson 2011, 244). In other words, if a speaker (here being a bi-identified person) perceives or anticipates that when they speak, they will not be met with understanding or by a sympathetic audience, they opt to self-silence out of fear of being misunderstood, or worse, having those misunderstandings result in a variety of tangible risks. For example, if one perceives that their would-be hearer is blatantly homophobic, they might anticipate that disclosing their bisexuality will be met with hostility and perhaps even violence. As a result, they may choose to “smother” their own testimony about their bisexuality. Similarly, if a bi-identified speaker recognizes that their would-be hearer is not likely to fully understand the content of their would-be testimony, they may judge that

their testimony might worsen extant stereotypes and biases about bisexuality – a risk that may not, in their determination, be worth it.

Such self-silencing is harmful both to bi-individuals who calculate that their would-be speech is too risky and are coerced into self-silencing as a result, but also to bi+ people as a group, insofar as such self-imposed silence about bisexuality is likely to be widespread. In a largely homophobic society (and in particular, one which does not understand or outright rejects bisexuality), too much of this sort of “smothering” leads to a general and widespread silence around bisexuality, which itself reinforces erasure. If the epistemic context is not one where people can speak about their experiences as bi, it will be increasingly difficult to see and recognize that bi-identified people exist, and to what extent, and furthermore to learn directly from them about what their experiences are actually like, from their firsthand testimony.

A third epistemic phenomena that causes epistemic harm to bi-identified people is the phenomenon that Freeman and Stewart (2018) have called *epistemic microaggressions*. Microaggressions are commonly understood to refer to routine, subtle, and seemingly insignificant comments, gestures, or slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that convey negative or hostile messages to members of marginalized groups. Freeman and Stewart (2018) have developed a new taxonomy for categorizing microaggressions on the basis of the harms they cause to targets. One category of microaggression they describe is epistemic microaggression – a subset of microaggressions which consist in seemingly minor slights that dismiss, ignore, ridicule, or otherwise fail to give uptake to knowledge claims made by speakers on the basis of their membership in a marginalized group (in this case, membership in a marginalized sexual orientation category). Microaggressions are harmful, at least in part, in virtue of the fact that they are routine and frequent, and are often committed by people despite their best intentions, including people close to us: our families, friends, colleagues, partners, or other acquaintances. Their harm lies in their repeat nature, and in this case, their distinctly epistemic harm

lies in the way epistemic microaggressions slowly chip away at epistemic self-confidence and epistemic self-trust.³ They build up over time, causing us to question our very knowledge of ourselves and our experiences.

Bi-identified people routinely experience a variety of microaggressive comments and slights, which call into question their epistemic standing or suggest, albeit subtly, that bi+ people are not to be taken seriously.⁴ Consider a common experience that is likely to register as familiar to bi-identified readers: when a person is out as bi, yet someone close to them refers to them as “bi-curious.” While the person close to them likely doesn’t mean to cause any harm by their comment that their bi-identified friend or family member is “bi-curious” (when they are indeed out as bi), this sort of comment constitutes an epistemic microaggression because it sends the message that the bi person does not know their own experience well enough to know that they are bi. It suggests that they are (still) confused or questioning, even after they have claimed a bi identity. Messages like this get repeated and reinforced, and overtime, can corrode the epistemic self-confidence of the bi-identified person, causing them to doubt what they previously thought they knew, namely, that they are in fact bi and that claiming such an identity is valid. Microaggressions can accumulate to degrade bi-identified peoples’ confidence that they can and do truly understand and know their own identities and experiences. This might be one mechanism for keeping bi people “in the closet.”

Taken together, these three epistemic phenomena render bi-identified people unable to speak or to speak effectively, that is, to be taken seriously, to not be dismissed or rebuffed when making claims (and particularly claims about their bisexuality), and to be understood appropriately when they do so.

III) *How the Inability to Speak and Be Heard Worsens the Problem of Bisexual Erasure*

³ For more on self-trust see Zagzebski 2012. For more on how self-trust is constructed and maintained socially, see Jones 2012.

⁴ Some of this discussion can be found in Stewart 2019.

The epistemic practices outlined above render bi-identified people as less than full epistemic agents. Consequently, they are treated as less than full knowers, and less able to convey information when they speak. In this section, I intend to show how this rendering of bi-identified people as less than full epistemic agents compromises their ability to undermine their own erasure. It does so by undermining the first personal authority of bi-identified people, thereby perpetuating pernicious social ignorance around bisexuality and bi-identified people – a gap in collective social knowledge which bi-identified people are rendered unable to fill.

Talia Mae Bettcher (2009) has argued that trans people ought to be afforded “first person authority” (or, FPA) over their gender identities, and that this granting of FPA is an ethical (in addition to epistemic) phenomenon (101). When one makes an avowal of their gender they are, on Bettcher’s account, making what amounts to a confession, insofar as they are sharing information which is generally private or concealed. In publicly avowing one’s gender identity (or, on my view, their sexual orientation), they are staking a social claim – they are authorizing how they want to be seen and treated in the social domain. This, Bettcher contends, is closely related to their autonomy (i.e., one can decide if, and when, and how, to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation, and it is solely their choice to do so; for someone else to determine or disclose this for them would constitute a violation). I contend that Bettcher’s view of FPA over gender identification extends to sexual orientation, and that it is an ethical matter that bi-identified people and others have the ability to determine and disclose (or not) their sexual orientation. Being denied this constitutes a violation in a morally significant way, insofar as it amounts to a violation of autonomy, and also a violation of their ability to determine how their sexuality will be understood in the social realm.

Failures to recognize the first-person authority of bi-identified people is closely linked to the problem of *pernicious ignorance*, as described by Kristie Dotson (2011). Dotson describes pernicious ignorance as a reliable ignorance that, in a particular social context, harms another person or set of

persons. This ignorance is reliable to the extent that it is consistent in that social domain, most often because it follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources – that is, a gap in the collective social understanding. Pernicious ignorance is morally problematic when it leads to harmful practices of silencing – that is, when the ignorance makes it difficult, if not impossible, for would-be hearers to understand speakers, and thus, leads to linguistic conditions in which would-be speakers opt to remain silent on a particular matter. This silence worsens the particular epistemic gap, allowing the ignorance around a particular matter to remain.⁵

My contention is that the epistemic practices described above are morally problematic insofar as they contribute to the denial of first-person authority to bi-identified folks, and thus, insofar as they contribute to a morally problematic pernicious ignorance – bi experience is fundamentally not understood in the social domain, and the very people who have the relevant experience to bridge those epistemic gaps are not granted the requisite epistemic authority to do so.

In sum, when bi+ people are unable to be taken seriously when they speak, or when they are rendered unable to speak at all, they lose the power that speech has, that is, to *speak one's truth*, and to have one's experiences rendered visible. As such, each of these three harmful speech phenomena contribute to bi experience being unheard or invisible, and thus easier to ignore. This contributes to all of the harmful dimensions that result from having one's experiences left out of view (e.g., health disparities, income inequality, housing discrimination, and so on). For this reason, that is, in the interest of ending bi-erasure and pursuing justice for bi-identified people, we need to pay greater attention to the epistemic norms and epistemic practices of our linguistic communities, and work to create epistemic conditions and contexts in which bi-identified people can speak clearly *and be heard*.

⁵ For more on the problem of actively constructed social ignorance, see the vast literature on what has come to be known as “epistemologies of ignorance.” This literature explores the persistence of certain social gaps in knowledge, and seeks to explain why it is that they are so resistant to change. See for example Sullivan and Tuana 2007.

It is their voices – and their voices alone – which contain the resources required for undermining the pervasive ignorances around bi+ experience and resisting bi-erasure.

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