

Bisexual women and their relationship(s)

**A case study on the negotiation of sexual orientation
and relational wishes in the public and private sphere**

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Introduction

In the publication *Niet te ver uit de kast* (not too far out of the closet) (Keuzekamp et al.), presented on March 21st 2012 by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP), for the first time in Dutch sociological research a separate chapter is devoted to bisexuality. Thus far, in sociological projects, bisexuality was not offered much attention. Often, bisexuality has been ranged under the header of homosexuality, while Keuzekamp et al. explain that “bisexuals experience specific affairs and problems that are different from or non-applicable to homosexual men and lesbian women” (78). International publications about bisexuality have been published, with Fritz Klein's *The Bisexual Option* (1993) as one of the leading titles, but these publications have mostly been in the field of psychology. *Niet te ver uit de kast* offers the results of a first quantitative sociological research focused on the experiences of bisexuals in the Netherlands. The specific topics Keuzekamp et al. pay attention to are the acceptance of sexuality, sexual identity, the relation bisexuals have towards homosexual communities, and how monogamy and polyamory are experienced by bisexuals (81-83). Keuzekamp et al. also research the attitude towards bisexuality in the Netherlands (83-85).

As a Dutch bisexual woman involved in a polyamorous relationship with a man and a woman, I have experienced the publication of *Niet te ver uit de kast* as an affirmation and a catalyst. Between the date of publication (March 21st 2012) and the moment of writing (June and July 2012), I noticed a raised awareness of bisexuality by both Dutch and international students in my own academic environment. I have participated in two interviews, one on the representation of bisexuality in pornography and one about how I experience my bisexual identity. A call for bisexuals over the age of 30 was made by Lizzie Kroeze, master's student in sociology at the

University of Amsterdam, on www.lnbi.nl, the Dutch national platform for bisexuals. She is studying the social position of bisexuals in Dutch society.

I was motivated to contribute wherever I could, but noticed that in all these projects, the topic of bisexuality is taken as a phenomenon in society, not like something more personal as persons having intimate relationships with other individuals. In the interviews I participated in, and in the research of Lizzie Kroeze, the bisexual individual is seen as a person connected with other persons and with his/her environment. However, in the Dutch context no in-depth attention has yet been paid solely to bisexuals and their partners. Thus far, in publications bisexuals have mostly been labeled as being a member of the group of homosexuals and lesbians. This, while Keuzekamp et al. point out that the experiences of bisexuals and homosexuals differ, also on the topic of relationships (78). It could therefore be argued that they should be researched as an autonomous group.

Research on the relationships of bisexuals is necessary for several reasons. The only article accessible to me about bisexuals and their relationships, by Paula C. Rust, shows us that extra attention to bisexuals is necessary. In her article “Monogamy and Polyamory: Relationship Issues for Bisexuals”, published online in 2003, she focuses on bisexuals asking for mental health care.

If they desire monogamy, their efforts to build monogamous relationships are often frustrated by partners or potential partners who equate bisexuality with nonmonogamy and promiscuity, and by their own internalization of the same stereotypes. If they desire polyamorous relationships, they find little social and no legal support for establishing and maintaining such relationships. This lack of support comes from others who perceive polyamory as failed monogamy and the evidence that the stereotypes of bisexuals are true (sic) (493).

These stereotypes can be tackled by emphasising that bisexuality is an autonomous and stable sexual identity, and researching it as such helps to open up the discussion on bisexuality. Eventually this may give us tools to overcome prejudices that link bisexuality to promiscuity or (non)monogamy. Important in the research on bisexuality is taking into account the partners of bisexuals. As Rust already shows in the quote above, how partners think and speak about bisexuality influences how bisexuals experience themselves and how they arrange their intimate lives. In order to add to the discourse on bisexuality, I will construct how bisexual women and their partners experience bisexual identity and (non)monogamy in their relationship, by analysing

interviews I conducted with them.

I wanted to speak to bisexuals and their partners, in order to gather information on how they speak about bisexuality in general and how they speak about (non-)monogamy. When shaping and refining my research and while searching for respondents, it became clear that finding bisexual representatives of both genders was problematic. Via social media, I called for bisexual individuals in a/more relationship(s) several times. I had the hope that I would be able to extend my field of research when more people would share my call: I would then be able to reach a wider range of individuals. Many bisexual women (or their partners) replied to my call. Bisexual men, however, lagged behind: I received one message from someone who knew a bisexual man in a relationship and after I made contact with him, it appeared that he was not able to function as a respondent. Keuzekamp et al. discuss the methodological problem of convenience samples in quantitative research. When bisexual people are recruited through 'pink' platforms and media, these individuals will probably be active in homosexual environments and they are not representative for bisexuals in general. Many bisexuals, men and women, are not active in LGBT¹ communities (79). I did not search for respondents on these specific platforms, so my selection is not based on whether or not someone is active in the gay scene. My selection is, however, based on the scope of my (digitally extended) network. It is no coincidence that my bisexual respondents are all white, ethnically Dutch women in their twenties, holding an academic degree with a specialisation in the field of Gender Studies. These characteristics are similar to my own. I had to adjust my research question, to refer to this group specifically. Having a group so clearly defined, makes my findings more valid when speaking of this specific group. It is obvious, though, that this is not a representative group of Dutch bisexuals. In this thesis, I refer to my participants in an anonymised way, using the letters A and B, C and D, E and F for the three couples. They all live in urban area's in the Netherlands, but to ensure their privacy, no further information about their locations is mentioned. In the interviews, I refer to myself as R.

I decided to conduct in-depth interviews and not expand my interest to other ethnicities, levels of education, age groups and professional work. I chose to narrow down my research and focus mainly on bisexual women. The main question I asked myself is: how do white, ethnically Dutch female bisexuals in their twenties, who hold a academic degree in Gender Studies, and their partners, shape their relationships around their sexual orientations? In order to answer this question, I interviewed three couples in a setting they indicated as safe and comfortable (such as their own

¹ LGBT is an abbreviation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

house or a park bench). I interviewed each bisexual and the monosexual partner separate from each other. I interviewed them about how the bisexual identity of one partner is discussed by both partners. I also asked them about the restrictions that mark their relationship, specifically when it comes to romantic and sexual contact with others outside the relationship. I concluded with a short conversation among the three of us, to see how they would interact when I would ask them about their relationship once again.

The angle I used in my interviews derives from Karin Willemse, a Dutch anthropologist who did research on gender and Islam in Darfur. Willemse is inspired by the concept “against the grain” and by theories formulated by feminists of colour. She explains: “The claim by these scholars that their analyses are based on their own experiences makes their writing not only theoretically innovative, but also profoundly personal and political” (26). She values how these feminists speak from their own position, and take a critical stance toward white, patriarchal, heteronormative, middle-class, and dominant discourse. Willemse speaks of how she wants to avoid to depict the low-class market women in her anthropological research as just victims or heroines, powerful or powerless, oppressors or oppressed, and how she prefers an alternative subject position for these women, avoiding such dichotomies. This can only be done when taking into account both the narratives of the women she interviewed and the narratives of reigning forces (in Willemse's case: the local government) (ibidem).

Taking this approach as a start, I asked my respondents how their relationship was when it started and how they experienced it at the time of the interview, to see how their situation evolved and to become familiar with the story of their relationship. I did not structure my interviews strictly: of course I wanted to speak about certain topics, but had no need to structure this according to a certain scheme. This way, we were able to speak without constraints. When my respondents spoke about sexuality and relations, they apparently felt secure enough to tell me about things they experienced in their private lives. The fact that I positioned myself actively towards them (they all knew about my background in academia and they were all aware of my relational situation), was of value: often they would actively distance themselves from my situations, sometimes they would actively refer to it in order to explain their own experiences.

I asked all my interviewees how they felt bisexuality and monosexuality had a place in their relationship. Trying to unveil the discursive spaces and their boundaries present in the relationship, I noticed friction between speaking about sexual orientation (and especially bisexuality), in the private sphere and discussing this theme in a more public environment with friends or family. In all

my interviews I noticed that speaking about bisexuality in both spheres is something my respondents add value to, but experience difficulty with. I decided to take this as a subquestion: how do partners speak about bisexuality in the public sphere and in the private sphere?

In romantic relationships sexuality, and with that, sexual exclusivity, plays a role. Thinking about the quote of Rust about bisexuals in monogamous and polyamorous relationships, I am interested in the possible contradictions bisexual women inherit. In my interviews, I noticed that my respondents speak about (non-)monogamy in contradictory ways: they are both very interested in it and say keep far from it. Therefore, I asked myself the second subquestion: how do bisexual women speak about polyamory?

As Willemsen explains, it is important to hear different stories on the same topic. In order to understand the public discourse around female bisexuality, I will address in the first chapter how both female and male bisexual behaviour are represented in popular and mainstream media. This will be a visual analysis and will lead to my theoretical framework. Through this analysis, I will explain how and which prejudices around bisexuals circulate in white European culture. I will also explain how the discourse on bisexuality makes it difficult to research bisexual men.

The data I gathered through my interviews will be structured around the two subquestions I mentioned above. In Chapter 2, I will start discussing the findings from my interviews, around the question of how partners speak about the bisexuality of one partner in private and public spheres. Chapter 3 will focus more on how bisexual women speak about polyamory. Emphasis will lie on the discursive contradictions they face. I will conclude by summarising my findings, as well as suggestions for further research.

In order to examine sexual orientation and relationships, clear definitions of terms are necessary, starting with the term bisexuality. This can be read in a problematic sense: a bi-sexual would be someone who likes to engage in sexual activity with both men and women. This definition would imply that a person can only be bisexual when actively having, or at least wanting, sexual contact with both of the two binary genders. It would also imply that someone is interested only in “men” and “women,” not in individuals with a gender not so dichotomously categorisable. Also, the word bisexual in itself says nothing about whom a person loves in an emotional sense, only about whom someone would be attracted to in a sexual sense.

Keuzekamp et al. analyse the research of Kuyper and show that while 16% of the women in this research feels sexual attraction towards men and women, and 12% has had sexual contact with both genders, only 3% self-identifies as bisexual (Keuzekamp et al. 11). In this thesis, I do not want

to discuss whether someone uses the words “bisexual” in an accurate or authentic sense; I use the word bisexual when someone identifies as such. When I speak about bisexuality I mean that someone can feel sexually attracted to, but can also fall in love with, and would want a relationship with, persons of both genders. The word bisexuality here does not indicate whether someone is “gender blind” in their choice of partners, or if someone thinks in binary genders. It also makes no claims about who someone has had sexual interactions with. When I speak about bisexual behaviour, this directs to someone who has (had) romantic and/or sexual contact with both genders. Bisexual desire here means sexual longing for both men and women. My main focus in this research, however, will be on identity. When I do not speak about identity but about bisexual behaviour or desire, I will mention this specifically.

When speaking extensively about bisexuality, it is effective to choose one term to address the wide range of other forms of sexuality that are not bisexual. The term monosexuality covers this group. It refers to individuals who are emotionally and sexually attracted to one gender. Both bisexuality and monosexuality make no claims about the gender of the person identifying as such.

Two terms regarding sexuality and relationships that can be interpreted in different ways, are monogamy and polyamory. Originally, monogamy meant being married to one person, with as an immediate consequence sexual exclusivity. Nowadays, marriage is not taken to be included in this term per se; monogamy now refers to two people having a romantic and sexual relationship with each other, and not engaging in non-monogamous activity outside their relationship. When partners are not monogamous with each other’s consent, I speak of polyamory. Polyamory exists in many different forms and there is no consensus on what counts as “real” polyamory. In this thesis, I include all agreed non-monogamies, such as triads (three people being a “couple”), open relationships (involving sexual engagement, but also emotional and romantic bonding) and swinging (having sexual contact also with other individuals than one’s own partner). When one partner breaks the rules of exclusivity that both partners had agreed upon, I speak about adultery or cheating. Having sex with someone outside the primary relationship is thus not automatically adultery: I consider romantic and erotic behaviour adultery only when both partners agree that it was an act that broke their rules.

I will now start with building my theoretical framework, by analysing images of bisexual behaviour in popular mainstream media.

Chapter 1

Theoretical framework

As I wrote in the introduction, Karin Willemse shows that in order to create a complex subject position, she has to listen to the stories of the women she interviews as well as to the stories of other forces, in her case the government and its representatives (26). In my case, the other force is popular and mainstream media. I will argue that the popular representation of bisexuality presents an image of bisexuality which my interviewees are confronted with in their daily practices. I did not discuss the video-clips I use as a case study with my respondents, but they did refer to the image of bisexual behaviour as portrayed in popular mainstream media.

To make this argument, I will analyse how bisexuality is represented, using examples from video-clips and pop songs. I will use Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, as posed in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1991), to find elements in the video-clips that are important for my analysis with the emphasis on gender and sexuality. Her theory on how women are represented in film will help me to analyse the discourse on bisexuality in the public sphere and create, as Willemse calls it, this complex subject position.

Using Foucauldian concepts such as panopticism and discipline, I will show how this discourse around bisexuality is formed and kept intact through a certain depiction of bisexual behaviour. I use these video-clips as a source to theorise bisexuality for several reasons. The first is their wide accessibility through streaming websites like YouTube, because of which they reach a large audience in the Western world. They are seen by people in their teens and twenties, even

before these young people have information about other forms of sexuality. Because of the lack of influential counter input, the video-clips become part of the general discourse on sexuality. The second reason is that when not using textual language to speak about bisexuality, it is only visible through behaviour. Although I do not necessarily see bisexual identities in these video-clips, I do see bisexual behaviour: women dancing seductively with both men and women, women kissing each other or singing about it while also emphasising that they are romantically involved with men. One of my examples contains an explicit textual expression of bisexual acts (“I kissed a girl and I liked it, I hope my boyfriend don't mind it”). Both the examples I use contain visual expressions of bisexual acts.

Compulsory heterosexuality is very present in this discourse; but where Adrienne Rich speaks about how “lesbian sexuality [...] (usually, and, incorrectly, 'included' under male homosexuality) is seen as requiring explanation” (637), I will focus more on how patriarchal domination forces heterosexuality upon women. Although I do not speak about lesbianism, but about women and men identifying as bisexual, I see how the concept of compulsory heterosexuality is also useful to understand the position of bisexuals. I make a distinction between female and male bisexuals. Keuzekamp et al. have shown that bisexuality is experienced differently by boys and men than by girls and women (80-81). The pressure of masculinity, which can be explained through panopticism and compulsory heterosexuality, will help me explain this discursive difference regarding bisexuality. In this chapter, I will connect this discursive difference to the experiences Keuzekamp et al. describe, explaining why I will not focus on masculine bisexuality in the following chapters.

My goal with this theoretical framework is to provide background information about the prejudices bisexuals often encounter in their everyday life and how these are constructed. I believe that the representation of bisexuality in popular and mainstream media is rooted in prejudice and, in a Foucauldian sense, *reproduces* prejudice. Understanding this mechanism will help me to place the experiences of my interviewees within a context.

I kissed a girl: did I like it?

The videoclip of *Lapdance* by rap formation N.E.R.D shows us slender, scarcely dressed women dancing suggestively with the rappers and each other. We see close-ups of hips, bellies and breasts.

In separate shots, the women also seduce and kiss each other. Their faces are turned towards the camera, the tips of their tongues touching and circling around each other. They are positioned so that their kiss is explicitly visible for the viewers. These shots refer to pornography, where kissing is not visualised as people using their lips and tongues to caress the other, but two tongues scarcely touching so that the camera, meditating the voyeuristic look of the audience, can come close to the action, leaving nothing to guess.

Laura Mulvey writes about how women in film are seen “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (63). In a 2012 setting, the auditorium would not be the dark cinema theatre, but the room in which the computer is placed. This form of scopophilia, gaining erotic pleasure from “looking at another person as object” (61) can become “a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other” (ibidem). When taking this theory to the case of *Lapdance*, the white women serve as erotic objects for both the dark-skinned men on screen as well as for the anonymous black and white audience at home. Feona Attwood has posed: “On popular mainstream porn sites, 'lesbian' porn is almost exclusively girl-on-girl and targeted at a male audience” (157). Women engage in same-sex sexual acts for the audience to view it, not for themselves to enjoy a lesbian sexual orientation. The pornographic acts performed in this porn, I see reoccurring in *Lapdance*.

In the number 1 hit record *I Kissed a Girl*, Katy Perry sings about how kissing a girl is perfectly natural, no big deal, and innocent, but still a little bit wrong, because it is not the way good girls should behave. Also, she emphasises she is not in love with the girl she kissed. Perry and other women in the video-clip hold pillow fights wearing lingerie, high heels, fishnet stockings, and red nail polish. The contrast between the image of the young, innocent girl and the suggestion of her “naughty” behaviour is strong. While dancing in a scenery of pink pillows and an occasional stuffed animal, the women touch each other’s legs and waists as well as their own lips, looking seductively into the lens of the camera. In this clip, the women also are objectified through the male gaze. We follow Perry's hand that strokes her breasts and hips in close-up, which does not seem to have a function in the narrative.

In both clips, references are made to bisexuality. Women engage in sexual acts with both men and women, or a reference to sexual acts with both men and women is made in the lyrics. These two examples show us how the phenomenon of bisexuality is fairly visible in popular

mainstream media. However, it is a very specific type of bisexuality: it is girl-on-girl, pornography-inspired, objectifying bisexual behaviour. Through the male gaze of the camera the audience follows the tilt examining a woman's curves, holding the shot at her breasts, then zooming in on her lips. Laura Mulvey sees how in film a woman is the one looked at, with the man as bearer of the look (62). The examples of *Lapdance* and *I Kissed a Girl* go a step further. Not only does the male gaze direct the view of the audience, the women on screen know that they are being watched and actively play with this gaze through their glances, appearance and gestures. Rich sees the representation of such women as humiliating:

even so-called soft-core pornography and advertising depict women as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality: essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males. (So-called lesbian pornography, created for the male voyeuristic eye, is equally devoid of emotional context or individual personality) (641).

The camera works here as the guard in Foucault's panopticon prison. Foucault describes how in the panopticon prison, the prisoner can always be seen, but is never certain when. The uncertainty of being seen will result in normative behaviour; there is always a chance that an agent of the system is watching and may discipline the prisoner for possibly incorrect behaviour. Knowing to be seen is to feel the pressure to behave, or as Foucault puts it: "Visibility is a trap" (200). Through this ever present pressure, the prisoner will internalise the norms to avoid punishment. When women have completely internalised the norm of performing same-sex sexual acts for an audience, they have become part of the system themselves: they are subject and object. Following the mechanism of the panopticon, the women have internalized the norms that they once had to adjust to. Under the pressure of this normative discourse, they will discipline others performing non-normative behaviour and encourage others to behave like them, while they themselves continue to discipline their own behaviour in order to meet the norm. I apply Foucault's theory about panopticism to bisexual sexual acts in mainstream popular media, because it shows how a distinct type of sexuality is, and keeps on being, produced.

Following from this analysis of the panoptic prison of mediated female same-sex sexual activity for an audience, the male gaze is thus not a linear, one way message, forcing women in a certain template as passive objects. The male gaze is part of an interactive institution that keeps women from developing a sexuality that starts from women's own desires and mutual respect. Rich

emphasizes that sexually loaded mediated expressions

widen the range of behavior considered acceptable from men in heterosexual intercourse-behavior which reiteratively strips women of their autonomy, dignity, and sexual potential, including the potential of loving and being loved by women in mutuality and integrity (641).

This makes the bisexual acts by women in video-clips not only an oppression of female sexuality, but even more an extension of male sexuality. Women's bodies and acts serve the male audience, and women do not even seem to feel degraded or harassed by it: they actively participate in the production of these video-clips. The object-position of women engaging in female same-sex sexual acts to pleasure men seems to be not felt by them as a sexual service, but it seems to be experienced by them as an autonomous, liberating act out of free will.

This view on bisexuality ranges wider than only the men and women appearing on screen. Men and women in Western countries stream video-clips on an everyday basis, being exposed to these video-clips showing female bisexual behaviour. Adolescents view this specific performance of supposed normal sexual behaviour not, as Judith Butler describes performativity, as “a singular act or event, but [as] a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint” (95). The audience sees the videoclips as a part of what is considered normal sexual behaviour for a woman. I see the women in *I Kissed a Girl* and *Lapdance* not as a passive audience of their own being oppressed. Butler describes how individuals are also not subjects performing: they become subjects through performing rituals, constrained repetitions of norms (ibidem). Women are thus seen as women only when they act in a certain manner; they become subjects through their being objectified, so their subjecthood is always under the surveillance of the male, panoptic gaze.

A part of this construct is the following situation, described by Ariel Levy in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*: women make out in clubs in front of their male (boy)friends, who take out their smart phones and immediately put the photo's and video's on Facebook and YouTube, for everyone to see. In other words, female bisexual behaviour as an extension of male sexuality is also reproduced by the male gaze. An event is staged for the male audience, in real life. The men appearing in a video, who are supposed to enjoy, consume, and gaze at female beauty, are now again the ones filming and distributing.

The process of panopticism and disciplining is ongoing. Not performing, not carrying out the norm of same-sex exhibitionist sexual acts, deprives women from her subject position. A

woman's sexuality is only existent when defined by male sexuality. Her agency exists only by affirmation of the male spectator. When women do not guide their sexuality along the lines of the male gaze, they do not exist as sexual subjects. Although Foucault claims that panopticism is democratic, since it is produced by individuals themselves and they can choose not to discipline themselves and others (197, 207), not behaving according to this norm will lead to punishment: in this case, the denial of a woman's subject position as a sexual being. However, women are not solely victims of this system. Within the borders that are set for them through the panoptic male gaze, they can experience their own, seemingly autonomous sexuality.

As is said earlier, Rich's theory lays emphasis mostly on lesbian women, but her argument can be applied to bisexuality as well. Women's autonomous sexuality is being oppressed through men's. The imagery I analysed adds to the discourse of the everyday life my respondents find themselves in. In the following chapters I will elaborate on this further, but first I will take a sidetrack, in order to declare my methodological problem with finding bisexual men to participate in my research.

I kissed a boy: may I like it?

For men, there is not such a clear visual example of bisexual behaviour. Where the examples of *Lapdance* and *I Kissed a Girl* are countless viewed video-clips, easily accessible via streaming websites such as YouTube, there seems to be no male equivalent of bisexual behaviour in popular mainstream media. Men are not caught in bisexual behaviour on screen. This invisibility of bisexual behaviour in video-clips is similar to the invisibility of men being open about their bisexual identity. Keuzekamp et al. describe how bisexual men are less open about their sexual orientation: half the number of these men are not open about it to anyone at all (97). In *Niet te ver uit de kast*, a reference to Felten et al. is made. They have found that Dutch young people cannot imagine a man being bisexual, since men can be either “a real man”, or homosexual (81). Keuzekamp et al. see how in a culture, in which heterosexuality and homosexuality are the dominant sexual categories, bisexual feelings can lead to insecurity among men (ibidem).

These findings provide a start to think about the reasons why there are no visual expressions of men engaging in sexual acts with both men and women, in mainstream media. Although claiming a bisexual identity is also hard for women, as Keuzekamp et al. point out, flirting with bisexuality is

acceptable for girls (*ibidem*). For men, bisexual behaviour is apparently not done in any sense. Rust explains in her article that male bisexuality in the U.S. has a negative connotation, since it is connected with the spreading of HIV/AIDS. Bisexual men would be the sexual link between homosexual HIV-positive men and heterosexual non-infected women (477). This stigma of promiscuity and unfaithfulness can stick to male bisexuality, also in the Netherlands.

The denial of male bisexuality by young people (whose sexual identity Keuzekamp et al. do not mention) and the non-appearance of men showing sexual acts with both men and women, can also be explained through the mechanisms I have described in the previous section. What I have found there can be connected to Feona Attwood's argument regarding online pornographic videos. She states:

Videos featuring two women and no men might be listed as “girl on girl” or categorized in relation to particular sex acts, such as “oral”, but gay male porn is always “gay”. Framed this way, “lesbian” sex is incorporated as “girl-on-girl” action for straight audience, gay male sex is presented as marginalised “Other”, while queer sex is almost always absent (156).

Attwood shows here that female sexuality is objectified and not as something connected to a sexual identity. For men, this works differently. Although male homosexual acts are marginalised, they are recognised and acknowledged. It shows how men, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual, have a sexual identity that is valid and they can, therefore, rely on.

Homosexuality can be theorised as problematic. I showed how women's sexuality can become an extension of male sexuality, leaving the male spectator as the autonomous subject, steering the male gaze and objectifying its view. When the male gaze would not be directed to a woman's body but to a man's, this could result in a different power dynamics. The man looked at would be objectified, but would still keep his sexual autonomy. Although he is gazed at as an object, his male body provides him the position of a sexual subject. The man could also have been the one viewing, whereas a woman in the same position would not have the power providing her with a female gaze to claim her own subject position through objectifying others. In short, although homosexual men can become the object of the male gaze, the compulsory heterosexual norm of oppression of the man's object does never apply to them.

The panoptic pressure makes men continuously emphasise their subject position. Women are only women when they are objectified, viewed by a male gaze. Men are only real men when they

have an object to view. What happens to bisexual men in this mechanism? When they stay in the closet, as 50% of the bisexual men do according to Keuzekamp et al. (97), they will pass as either homosexual or heterosexual. When openly identifying as bisexual, something interesting happens. Both categories of homosexual and heterosexual are very fixed: the manhood that comes with both terms is a limited one. Although Keuzekamp et al. show that there is the choice between being a real man or homosexual, they are both options to choose from when wanting to be recognised as male. (I am, however, very aware that they are not equally valued. Felten et al. show that young people imagine that a boy can be “a man, or gay” [qtd. In Keuzekamp et al. 81]). They are, then, the only two options. Because of the continuous need to emphasise manhood through objectification of someone else, there needs to be a clear object with a distinct gender. The fragility of this masculinity shows itself through the denial of bisexual men. Since bisexual men do not limit their romantic and/or erotic appreciation to one gender, they do not have one clear object from which to derive a subject position. I see how this makes them a threat to both heterosexual and homosexual men: bisexual men blur the boundaries that are so necessary to keep up the framework which they derive their subject position from. By discriminating bisexual men through the denial of their existence, monosexual men keep their subject position.

This construction of masculinity can be used to declare my methodological problem: finding male respondents for my research. First of all, as I mentioned already, only half of the number of bisexual men are open about their sexual preference. This fact contributes to my difficulty of finding them and convincing them to take part in the interviews. Second, they may suffer from the image of masculinity society presses on them. It is very likely that they have internalised this image of masculinity, partially denying their own bisexual desires. When allowing these desires, they may discipline themselves with feelings of shame and guilt. Participating in my interview could trigger these uncomfortable feelings, by speaking of their bisexual feelings. By coming out in public (although their audience is only me and their responses are treated confidentially), they would ignore the monosexual norm, thus risking punishment: critical questions and possibly disapproval. Their fear of denial of their masculinity keeps them from showing themselves.

This panoptic circle of discipline and internalisation shows us the problematics of men openly coming out as bisexual. Following from this, it is understandable why men engaging in bisexual sexual acts are not visually represented in mainstream and popular media. It would diminish their respectability as masculine sexual subjects, with the immediate punishment of both social and sexual disinterest from both men and women. For women, the mechanism works exactly

the other way around: by engaging in bisexual sexual acts, their sexual existence as a woman is ensured.

The situations I described about both women and men, can be seen as typically Western. In other continents, bisexuality may be seen and defined in completely different ways. For instance, Gloria Wekker has done research in Afro-Surinamese working-class women's sexual culture. In this culture, women engage in relationships with women, but often also with men, alongside each other. The *mati work*, as the sexual and social bonding between women is called, is viewed not as an identity, but as “one particularly strong, masculine instance of the multiplicitous 'I', who loves to lie down with women” (173). By these women, sexuality is seen not as problematic, forbidden and promiscuous, but they “consider sexual activity as healthy, joyful, and necessary” (119). The *mati work* is considered a valid choice, not carrying negative value judgements (187). It goes too far to make an analysis here of the *mati work* in Surinam and bisexual women in a European setting and compare how they relate to sex and sexuality with both men and women. With this example, I would like to emphasise the geographical and cultural locality of this discourse on bisexuality.

Now that I have elaborated on my methodological problem of finding bisexual men to participate in my interviews, I will go on with the analysis of the interviews I held with three couples, consisting of one bisexual and one monosexual partner.

Chapter 2

Discussing bisexuality in the public and private sphere

The topic of this chapter, discussing bisexuality in the public and private sphere, has been inspired by a specific interview I conducted. I spoke with A, a bisexual woman, and her husband B, thus far describing himself as heterosexual. A started defining herself as bisexual when she had been in a relationship with B for several years. When I spoke with B about this, we had the following conversation:

B: At first I thought of it as... I felt: “don't you feel the need to explore [bisexuality]?” and “what does this say about me?”. But I don't think it has anything to do with me. I don't feel... Cheated, by it. So yes... I gave it a place, you learn how to accept such things, and I am not sure about myself either whether I am only heterosexual. So yes.

R: How come you do not know that?

B: Well, because... Well, I don't know. Because I have never explored that part, so to say, and I am not homophobic. I can see how men are pretty or ugly. I don't really see myself in a relationship with a man, but I also don't see it *never* happen.

R: You said: “I am not certain because I have not explored it”. *A* does know it for sure.

B: Yes. I don't know why that is.

B claims to have fully accepted the fact that A is bisexual and through the interview, he states that A's bisexuality is not something he is very occupied with. As we can see in the fragment above, his partner being bisexual caused him to start reflecting on himself, but he concluded by thinking that her sexual orientation had nothing to do with him. It was not something he thought about on a regular basis. For him, A's bisexuality would become something to think of only when it would threaten their monogamous relationship. Besides that, his own sexual orientation was not something he was particularly interested in, while on the contrary, for A, her sexual orientation became more and more of an issue. After her recent graduation, A experienced how in the business world, sexual orientation is something rarely discussed. This appeared to be more difficult to her than she had expected:

R: Would you want that? Bring your sexual identity more to the front?

A: I noticed that in Gender Studies, there was a lot of space for this, and now that my student time is over, I notice that the space for this topic shrinks, for instance in my workspace. I feel the urge to keep on talking about it. And as soon as you don't mention it, it [bisexuality] seems no possibility, something like that. Like when you...

B: You did discuss it at work, didn't you?

A: No.

B: But you said something about the fact that they still didn't notice it.

A: Yes. So apparently I have the urge to talk about it. But that's hard for me, you know. During my study, sexuality could be discussed at any moment, while in a business-context it is questionable when, and even *if* this is appropriate, so I have to search for a balance there. But yeah, it would be very pleasant for me to speak about it, but well...

A experienced a struggle finding a way when and how to speak about her sexual orientation, since she felt the need to discuss this more often with friends and colleagues, while for B the topic of sexual orientation, including hers, was not a topic at all.

What I see in this example is that the monosexual partner has a very different experience of

speaking about sexuality than the bisexual partner. Also, there seems to be a tension between the public and the private sphere. I want to find out the following: how do partners discuss bisexuality in the public and private sphere?

I will briefly discuss Jürgen Habermas's theory on the public and private sphere. Then I will elaborate on how bisexuals and their partners speak about bisexuality in their private and in the public sphere, working from examples of what my interviews provided me with. These examples I will connect to the theoretical framework I built in chapter 1, showing how sexuality displayed in mainstream popular media has its imprint on discussing bisexuality in both the public and the private sphere. With this, I will show how the experiences of bisexual women are influenced by the discourse used in mainstream popular media in the public sphere, but also how they seem to be able to work their way around these influences and/or how they accept and internalise these influences.

The public sphere and the private sphere

In his article “Women, the Public Sphere, and the Persistence of Salons” (2002), Steven Kale gives an overview of the themes that were discussed after Jürgen Habermas introduced his concept of the public sphere. Habermas describes how in the 17th and 18th century, bourgeois men in France gathered in salons to discuss current political affairs. These discussions took place with reason as most important fundament. Discussing out of emotion was not assented to (Kale 116). Important for me in Kale's article is the discussion on gender and the public sphere. Habermas originally spoke about bourgeois men. He did not mention the gender division that excluded women from the public debate. At the end of the 18th century, an official prohibition was accepted which made political gathering of women punishable (128). Women were thus explicitly removed from the public debate. Nevertheless, also before prohibition, the salons were mostly men's domains, so women rarely took part in the discussions taking place. Women's domain would be the private sphere: the house, in which she could take care of the children and the household and in which she could serve her husband (127). The public sphere was not a place where women could mingle with men and also, as becomes clear by the example of the prohibition, not a place where they were supposed to gather as critical thinkers.

This theory on public and private sphere shows how gender plays an important role in the themes that can be discussed in specific environments. Although the phrase “the personal is

political” has been overtly used by feminists in the 20th and 21st century, in the theory by Habermas there is a clear distinction between the two. Women were not supposed to gather in a tea house or another space to discuss politics in a space open to all people interested: the public sphere, with its rational discussions, was reserved for men. In this sphere, topics that would be part of the private sphere, were not to be discussed. The personal and the political are separate from each other. In the public, masculine sphere, the topics discussed would be political in a non-personal sense. Discussions would take place around ethics, and how these must be integrated in the political issues of that moment. What happened behind the front door would be every man's own business. The topics discussed in the private, feminine sphere would lie more on a personal level. Discussing topics like sex and sexuality, emotions and feelings, care taking and child rearing, would take place in the home.

When I conducted my interviews, I noticed that some of my participants make a distinction between a safe, private sphere in which their own sexuality is more easily discussed, and a public sphere in which sexuality is hardly discussed at all, especially not on a personal level. These two spheres do not necessarily match the spaces described by Habermas. The public sphere is not necessarily in a public space such as a café or a university, and the private sphere is not necessarily domestic. An example of this is found in a quote by A. She clearly makes a distinction between discussing bisexuality with B (of which she states: “I tell him everything”), and discussing it in a setting with common friends:

A: I tend to think: at the moment I label myself as [bisexual], how will people see him? And will people start asking questions to him then? (...) When we have a conversation with our coupled friends, on such terribly wrong double dates so to say, I don't feel the need to speak about it, because I think: “he will get questions about it”.

R: What do you mean, getting questions about it?

A: Well, let's say we have dinner with the four of us and I say “I am bisexual”, or it would come up in some conversation, then he will be addressed with the question: “how does this feel for you?”. And I don't feel that he... Yes... I don't know. To a certain degree I think I just want to feel safe at the moment I say that. That I am sure that the situation is secure, and I don't feel that way very often.

This quote shows us some remarkable things. The first is that a situation with friends in a domestic setting can feel insecure or uncomfortable, too public to discuss sexual orientation. The public sphere is thus a place in which emotions, feelings and vulnerability are not appropriate to discuss. The second is the situation A creates for B by coming out as bisexual. She feels responsible about her own sexuality deviating from the heterosexual image which also reflects on the two of them as a (sexual) couple. In a conversation I had with the two of them, A asked B straightaway:

A: Would you find it bothersome if we would be in a social setting and I would profile myself as such [bisexual]? Because it's something I don't do now.

B: I can imagine having difficulties with that, yes.

This stands in contrast to the quote with which I started this chapter. B explained there how he had learned to accept the sexual orientation of A, while in this last quote, he confirms that A speaking about her bisexuality in the public sphere is something he has difficulty with it. To the question why he finds it difficult, he gives evasive answers. When I interviewed him before alone, without A, we had the following conversation:

R: In the relation you have now... As you described, monogamous, you live together in this house, you are married, you both have a job. How is the fact that A is bisexual embedded in this?

B: Yes... Well... That is something that does not occupy her on a daily basis (laughs).

R: No, I can imagine. But does it occupy you on a daily basis?

B: No, hardly ever, actually. Only when she says something about it, or when we walk down the street and we see a billboard, or we see someone: "Wow, a pretty woman", "Yes, definitely a pretty woman". Then you think about it for a moment, but not even really. For me, it's not a current topic that I have difficulty with.

Apparently, he experiences a difference between his acceptance of A's bisexuality, and B's environment accepting A and B as a monogamous and heterosexual couple. It is remarkable how A feels the responsibility to keep up this image of heterosexuality: it is not something that she does for

herself, but for him.

Something similar I see in the interviews I had with C and D, two women in a monogamous relationship. I asked C if she thought her being bisexual mattered to D, or that it would be more accepted by D if C would identify herself as a lesbian.

C: Yes, I think so. I think that she... Well... I think this is harder for her then when I would be lesbian and I also think that she... She once said that I, but always as a joke, portray her as lesbian and myself as non-lesbian. And I never mean it that way and yes, I did make such an comment once, but I was really joking! (...) But well, I find it hard to keep on emphasising: "I am bisexual", because to D, that also feels kind of... Not as a rejection, but it could be a painful issue. If I would keep on emphasising that I am bisexual, she might think...

C did not finish her sentence, but in the interview it became clear that D might start thinking that C's intentions about the relationship might be not as serious as D's intentions. I asked D about how C's bisexuality plays a role in the way they plan their future, and D said:

D: If it would play a role, I would feel very strange about it. For me C's bisexuality is connected with her past, and when she's in a relationship with me, she's homosexual. When she's with me, she's lesbian. I mean, of course.

R: But if she would now say: "o, that guy is so sexy", would she still be bisexual then?

D: I mean, yeah, of course she is bisexual, but it depends on what we are speaking about.

D did make the distinction between behaviour and identity, thus acknowledging a difference between the two, but also in this example, it is clear that the image of the lesbian, monogamous relationship has to be kept up.

Both the situation of A and B, and the situation of C and D can be connected to Rich's compulsory heterosexuality, although the concept needs to be adjusted to the situation. As I already quoted in Chapter 2, Rich describes women are depicted as "objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context" (641). This appears to be something both B and D shudder from: they both have explained to me in their interviews how they want their female partners to be their equals, not

subjects who come to existence through objectifications. It is not the compulsory heterosexuality that is problematic here, but compulsory monosexuality.

Monosexuality and objectification in the public sphere

Monosexuality, as I explained in my introduction, is the attraction of a person to only one gender, and can be seen as opposite to bisexuality. Where Rich very much argues against the norm where women are forced to be heterosexual, I think that in the decades that lie between her publication and the writing of this thesis, emancipatory steps have been made for women who love women. Both partners C and D responded that they had never encountered any negativity towards their being together in the Dutch public sphere.

The monosexual norm serves as an answer to bisexual behaviour as portrayed in popular mainstream media. The images of women engaging in bisexual sexual acts are seen and shared by many, and are one of the only overtly obvious depictions of bisexuality. The norm in Dutch society is still monogamy and monosexuality, and the women in these video-clips transgress both of these normative boundaries. With that, they are both the object of desire and the object of mockery. They become existent as sexual subjects through their behaviour, but not empowered ones, as I argued in Chapter 1. They are only subject through being objectified. The women in the video-clips embody what is forbidden (namely promiscuity with no clear gender preference) and are therefore the ones wanted and the ones looked down upon.

My bisexual respondents have to relate to this paradigm regarding bisexuality. Since the images I analysed on bisexual behaviour are the only images circulating in popular mainstream media, the behaviour of the women in these clips sticks as a prejudice to women who identify as bisexual. Two of my three bisexual respondents say to have had difficulty in speaking about their bisexuality in public, because of the prejudices of non-monogamy and promiscuity that come with bisexuality. This contrasts with the fact that all my respondents are in a monogamous relationships and are unanimous that this will not change in the near future. For instance, respondent A does not speak about her bisexuality in public spheres as she fears social rejection: people frowning upon her, questioning her relationship and her being professional when it comes to business matters. The Foucauldian fear of this punishment restricts her in the topics she discusses in her office, but also with friends and family, as they are also a public sphere to her. The norm of being monosexual is

forced upon her through the images of bisexual same sex acts.

These images are strengthened by the monogamous marriage A is involved in. When her partner B is seen by others as a man (assumed heterosexual) who is with a bisexual woman, the prejudices reflect on him as well. The thought that people will ask him about how he experiences A's bisexuality is already disturbing to him:

B: It has to do with the fact that you don't know how people will react on such a thing. And of course, you don't want to bring yourself and others in an uncomfortable position during a nice supper.

The discrepancy between B's feelings about the public and private sphere have become very clear through this and through previous quotes. He says to accept A for who she is, but has difficulty with others knowing about her sexual orientation. Fear of rejection is the cornerstones upon which his reaction is based, the same as for A. He might be looked down on, for being with a possibly promiscuous woman. As a partner, B also suffers from the depiction of bisexual behaviour in popular mainstream media. He himself would benefit from a monosexual cover. As mentioned earlier, A feels responsible for this. Since B has no experience thus far with having a non-normative sexual orientation himself, he might be afraid of not knowing what prejudices he may be subjected to once A is out and proud. It is A who has a non-normative sexual orientation, so it is she who has to deal with the possible social and professional difficulties that come with it.

Discussing bisexuality in the public sphere can also work out positive for the image of the monosexual partner. E gave the example of how F's new fellow students responded to hearing E was bisexual:

E: He said: "yeah, they asked about you and then I told them you were bisexual and everyone was like: 'wooo threesome!', you know, (...) and then I explained to them that no, it does not automatically imply...". He took it very seriously and I think that's just incredibly sweet.

F faced the other side of the objectification of female bisexuality; the thought that the presumed promiscuity could possibly work out in his advantage. F's friends assume that his girlfriend E being bisexual would give him easy access to a threesome with her and another woman. As can be seen in the video-clip *Lapdance*, having sexual access to many women can be read as a symbol of status

and power. The relationship between E and F has a sexual connotation for F's friends because of E's bisexuality. In the quote, we see that F does not deny E's bisexuality, but defends the monosexual relationship they have. Although the connotations of his friends work out in a way that is not negative for his image, he himself does not want E to be seen as a promiscuous woman and keeps up the image of the monosexual couple.

A question that arises from both these examples, is: what do people in the public sphere have to do with other people's romantic and sex lives, something that is considered to belong to the private sphere? As seen in the example of F's fellow students, when the topic comes to sexual orientation, this is immediately reduced to speaking about sex and sexual experiences. In the example of B being afraid of social reaction of him and his wife, B only wants to protect his feeling of sexual safety and privacy. He explained in the interview that he finds it hard to speak about sex on a personal level and would rather avoid this. Aware of the objectifying discourse on bisexuality, he would rather prevent A from speaking about her bisexuality. This objectification is similar to what happens in the video-clips *Lapdance* and *I Kissed a Girl*. Expression of emotions, for both the women and the audience, are not part of the ritual of women becoming intelligible as sexual semi-subjects.

If a woman is bisexual but does not engage in polyamory, she has to find new ways of discussing this in the public sphere. This can already be seen in the previous quote, but becomes more explicit in the following. Respondent E has her own tactics of discussing bisexuality in a public sphere:

E: When I say “I am bisexual”, I try to explain what it means *to me*. On the one hand there are a lot of stereotypes and cliché's about it, but on the other hand I don't want to claim that they are not applicable to some bisexuals. (...) I do not want to emphasise them, but I can imagine that... I meet the annoying stereotype that because I am bisexual, I supposedly can not be monogamous. I heard this quite often. And then I just say: “for some, bisexuality would mean that if you have one thing, you miss the other, and in such case someone would want to be with more than one person, but *for me*, it doesn't work like that”. And with that, all is said about it and people accept it. It works when you speak only about yourself, in stead of a whole group.

Her tactics to avoid to speak of a whole group and use her voice for herself only, shows her audience the diversity of bisexuality. E does not “stand on the barricades”, as she states, but through

her personal approach of discussing her sexual orientation, she actively makes room for herself as a bisexual woman. She removes the objectification imposed on her and distances herself from it, simply by not striving to embody everything that can be associated with bisexuality.

I have argued here how monosexuality has to be kept up in the public sphere, because the social position of the monosexual partner, as well as the bisexual partner, is at stake. However, the influence of the image of bisexuality as sketched in popular mainstream media, does not limit itself to the public sphere.

Monosexuality in the private sphere

In the private sphere, which I have defined as the social space in which feelings, personal issues and personal sexuality can be discussed, all respondents say to be able to discuss everything with their partner. These general, politically correct and socially desirable claims seem to be made easily, because when speaking more in depth about this, discussing bisexuality has sometimes been difficult to discuss for both partners. An example of my respondents C and D show how compulsory monosexuality leaves marks on the communication between the two partners.

C: I would find it very interesting to have sex with both D and a guy. (...) I would find it interesting because I know she has never done that before. That excites me.

R: What would she think of that?

C: I think she absolutely would never want that, she will find it unacceptable I think! No, absolutely not...

(both laugh)

R: Is she at all not attracted to men? (...)

C: I think she has never been with a man and that she has seen herself as lesbian from early on and that this identity is also very important to her. I also think that she rarely finds men attractive, although, sometimes she says: "that guy, that's a man I do find attractive".

In the conversation that followed, it became clear that C did not tell D about her fantasy, being sure that D would be offended by it. Important to note here is that D has her roots in Eastern Europe. D describes the situation her homeland explicitly as homophobic and she listed several prejudices about homosexuals, such as them being pedophilic, promiscuous and mentally ill. I asked her how this relates to bisexuality:

R: Is bisexuality seen as people who are not fully dedicated to lesbianism?

D: Yeah, it is, kind of. In [my homeland] homosexuals are the margin, but as a bisexual, you just always pretend to be heterosexual. That is the easiest way to live. Bisexuality is something you do in the undergrounds, at night, while during the day you live your heterosexual life. So yeah. This is a big thing that is very different [in the Netherlands].

It has been important for D to claim a solid counter-identity against the forcing heterosexual, Roman Catholic norm in her country, but with that, a repetition of compulsory monosexuality takes place. She has seen bisexuality as a sexuality not to be taken seriously, for a long time. I think this can be compared to the situation in the Netherlands. Keuzekamp et al. describe how religion is influential when it comes to parents accepting the non-heterosexuality of their child: "Homosexuals that are raised religiously experience less acceptance from both their father and mother" (25). Also, two percent of the homosexuals does not experience any acceptance from their parents. I do acknowledge that there are great cultural differences between the Netherlands and Eastern Europe, also with regard to the acceptance of homosexuality. The numbers shown by Keuzekamp et al. indicate that also in the Netherlands, there are homosexual people that encounter conservative, maybe even homophobic stances towards their sexual orientation. I would like to argue that the homophobic situation D has found herself in in her homeland, is not exclusive for Eastern European countries. A situation similar to hers could possibly occur in the Netherlands as well.

Although D's parents are supportive, she still has had to fight heteronormative homophobia expressed by her friends and colleagues in her homeland. This makes her lesbian identity not only personal, but also very political. The monosexual feelings of D and pressure to be dedicated to lesbianism, can create a challenge for C to talk about bisexual feelings, such as her fantasies of her engaging in a threesome with her girlfriend and another man. C did not discuss this with D and is reluctant to do so in the future, because she fears the negative reaction of D. They discuss bisexuality as a theoretical concept and as part of C's history, but not as a currently present issue,

though for C it clearly is. The negative view D has on bisexuality does not solely originate from the imagery seen in popular mainstream media, but these images also do not contradict the prejudices D has had. D has been offered a counter discourse on sexuality through her stay in the Netherlands and her academic studies, as she explained. She did not mention how the media expressions here would be different from the ones in her homeland.

How E and F discuss bisexuality is rather different, but definitely connected to the theoretical framework I built in chapter 1. E explained to me how she and F speak about attractive women they meet:

E: We do like to check out other women, when we're out together. And in this bar next door works this beautiful waitress. Sometimes we make a competition out of it, to see whose flirting she will respond to first, all in good fun, it's very innocent and we don't do anything with it. Yeah. So that's how it goes. And we also did discuss... Because I like girls, we have spoken about a threesome, but... Honestly... Yeah... We joke about it, if we see a pretty girl: "Shall we ask her to come home with us?", but I couldn't handle it, how much I would like the situation for myself. I can't see him with someone else... That's just so painful.

The sentence "it's very innocent" is typical: just as in Katy Perry's *I Kissed a Girl*, E and F speak about these women in a purely sexual, objectifying way. They enjoy their appearance and are interested in having sex with them, but do not specifically care about her sexual orientation or her wishes. E and F both enjoy to share this with each other and are happy with their way of speaking about women and bisexuality, it is problematic when it comes to the function of E's sexuality. The way they together speak about these women seems similar to the way F appears to think about E's sexuality. For F, E's bisexuality seems something that is tolerable as long as there is a benefit for him. When I ask him about threesomes, he explains:

F: Yes, I am open to it, of course, but I don't think it's up to me to initiate it.

R: Why not?

F: Well, because... Ehh... Yeah well... [long silence] I think... Yes. I think because I wouldn't have any trouble with it, for one or another reason, which can be traced back to [...] that I find men more threatening than women. I wouldn't find a threesome with a woman threatening, in the sense: "She [E] might find the other girl more attractive than

me, who knows what will happen later on”, and I think that E has... She does have that feeling.

Here, also the “innocence” is important: E and F and another woman engaging in a threesome only becomes problematic when there are feelings involved that are not purely based on sexual lust. As soon as serious romantic feelings come around, when the “innocence” of the “good fun” is gone, and when E's bisexuality becomes more than something purely sexual and turns into something threatening to F. Taking into account compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory monosexuality, E's sexual subjecthood does not serve F's needs or wishes anymore, but comes from her own interest. If she would fall in love with a woman and would want to express this romantically and sexually, and would thus claim her own sexual subjecthood, F would not appreciate this. It would change her from a desirable sexual object to an illegitimate self-conscious sexual subject. For him, as he explained, their relationship would most likely be over then. However, when the focus stays on sexual behaviour, he is not insecure about their relationship and its future. As long as there is the possibility of a threesome, E's bisexuality is considered a benefit. Through this, E's bisexuality serves F's heterosexuality.

In this example, the boundaries of compulsory monosexuality are stretched. Sexual engagement with a same sex partner would be tolerable, but romantic engagement would not. In the private sphere of E and F, I see the traces of how bisexuality is portrayed in popular mainstream media. The objectifying manner of depicting women (in both images and speech) seems a discourse largely borrowed from the video-clips that show bisexual sexual behaviour. Both E and the women E and F watch when they go out, are under the pressure of objectification.

I started this chapter by explaining the concepts of the public and the private sphere, as introduced by Habermas. I modified the concepts to fit the form of how my participants experience the spheres. These new definitions are not so much based on geographical spaces, but more on social spaces and the conventions that come with these. After this, I first analysed how my participants speak about bisexuality in the public sphere. This has provided me with examples that I have connected to the bisexual behaviour from the video-clips. I have made an adaptation of Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory monosexuality makes the lesbian partner an ally of the heterosexual partner. The prejudice that bisexuals are promiscuous and will always miss something in a monogamous relationship, appears to be the foundation of this force. The monosexual partners do

not want to lose their face in front of an audience; their partner being bisexual may make the sexual orientation of the monosexual partner questionable, as well as the general solidity of their relationship. One of my respondents strategically tried to counter compulsory monosexuality, through emphasising the diversity of the group bisexuals and how her bisexuality is typical for her, and not other bisexuals per se.

The taboo on bisexuality and the general acceptance of the objectification of women stretches to the private sphere. Speaking about fantasies that involve both the partner and someone from the other gender appear to be hard to discuss for some. For others, this is not the case; they discuss sexual fantasies more easily. What happens here, is that very soon, the objectification of female sexuality shows itself. It leaves both the bisexual partner, as the third (female) party in a possible threesome, a subject through objectification by the heterosexual male partner. If bisexuality does not serve the monosexual partner, it is suppressed through compulsory monosexuality.

Chapter 3

(non-)Monogamy

In Chapter 2, I described how bisexual women and their partners are influenced by the normative objectifying discourse on female bisexuality and how this returns in the way they speak about bisexuality in both the public and the private sphere. When I spoke about threesomes and of partners falling in love with people outside their relationship, I already touched upon topics such as promiscuity and polyamory. I want to find out how non-monogamy, or polyamory, is discussed by bisexual women in the public sphere. I will build further on the examples and discussion in the previous chapter. The focus in this chapter will lie on consensual non-monogamy, or polyamory. In my introduction, I mentioned a quote by Paula Rust, in which she explains that because bisexuals often encounter prejudices about them not being able to be monogamous, it is harder for bisexuals to successfully engage in polyamorous relationships. Instead of a fully conscious relational choice, it is often seen as failed monogamy, making it seem as if prejudices about bisexuals being not able to maintain a relationship are true (493).

I will connect my findings to the image that is sketched about bisexual women in popular mainstream media, as described in Chapter 1. Also, I will relate my findings to Chapter 2, in which I discussed how bisexual women and their partners speak about bisexuality. I will show which contradictions I found in the responses my interviewees gave on questions about monogamy and polyamory. My goal is to show that they find themselves trapped between several norms that contradict each other.

Sexual adventure and homely steadiness

When asking E about the rules of her relationship with F, we came to speak about monogamy and polyamory, and about seeing other women, next to her relationship with F, she said the following:

E: I would be able to have a part of my life in which I do things with other people and another part in which I say: “this is the one I love, the one I am in love with and whom I share my life with”. And besides that, just sleep with other people. No problem. But the thought of him doing the same, that is the tough part (laughs).

As became clear in our conversation, E differentiates between sexual, and emotional and social engagement. For her, her daily life is connected to her relationship with F. She likes to be with him, do things together with him and speak with him about what is on her mind. They are connected through their private sphere. When it comes to sex, she would not have any difficulty to have more partners besides F. However, when I asked more about the possibility of F having sex with other women, E got slightly uncomfortable. She looked away and hesitated while answering the question why F sleeping with another person was such a horrible thought to her:

E: I don't know. It may sound fussy, but it is still one of the foundations of your relationship, that you share that with each other. And maybe I have a jealous nature? I don't know... I don't want to say that that is the difference between... Yes... I just don't know... I'm just... I cannot explain. It feels strange, you asking this, because it seems so common sense: of course you don't want him to sleep with other people. It is normalised behaviour, I think. But no, I could not take it. I don't know why.

Sexual exclusivity appeared to be an important part of what makes a relationship different from another intimate relationship (such as friends or family). This stands in contrast to what E herself feels when she would have sex with others outside her relationship: the most important thing would then be E and F's steady daily life. This contrast I have seen in the other interviews as well. All respondents defined their relationship through the daily life the partners spend together and the common interests they share. They all explained how they just like to be around each other. Sex with each other was important for all respondents, but was not the most important thing when I

asked them about how they would describe their relationship. However, as soon as we came to speak about polyamory, they all thought of sex as the most important incentive of such a life style and relational choice. They did not consider the possibility of having multiple relationships in which sharing (a part of) the daily life could be a valuable component of a polyamorous relationship. Something similar I noticed when I spoke with C about her intentions about staying in a relationship with D:

C: Friends asked me this: “Yeah but, don't you feel that it is weird, if you would be with D forever from now on, and you never would have sex again with a man?” and I thought about it and figured: “Yes, that seems a strange idea to me, but on the other hand, being together forever is a strange idea as well.” (...) And then I asked myself: why would it be weirder that I would never have sex with a man ever again, than never having sex with anybody else in general ever again?

She did not mention falling in love again or having a relationship with someone else again, but her focus lies on whether or not she would have sex with someone else again.

Independently of one another, E and F both told me that when E would kiss with another girl and F would watch, that would not put their relationship under severe pressure. When she would kiss with a woman when F is not around, or if she would kiss with a man in any situation, it definitely would. In this example, I very much see how female sexuality works as an extension of male sexuality. Although they both see monogamy as the norm they want to live by, an exception is made when it comes to E and another girl. Their sexuality exists only through the panoptic, male gaze of the male spectator, in this case F. When I asked E why she would feel guilty when she would kiss with a girl while F would approve of it, she found it difficult to find words that described her feelings:

E: Yes. No. I don't know... It is something that comes from within, something I... I want to keep this exclusivity, also from my side. And why I would want this exclusivity, well... I don't know... I think some people are naturally more monogamous and others less.

R: Yes. And let's say, it would all be okay and you actually would kiss a girl when you're in a café and F is also around, would you have the feeling that the floodgates opened?

E: That is exactly the phrasing that comes to my mind, yes. I sometimes think so... [...] Yes, maybe it is indeed something that possibly plays a role as well, that keeps me from doing it. Yes, because then you want more, of course.

R: So it's easier to have nothing than to have a little.

E: Yes. I usually don't think about it that way, but I think that's true.

Although E would like her relationship to be more open towards other women, she is very occupied with the idea of sexual exclusivity. The fear of liking an open relationship prevents her from establishing one.

The contrast between the view on monogamy as a basic foundation and the view on polyamory as a sexual adventure can be connected to the imagery as seen in popular mainstream media. When viewing the video-clip *Lapdance*, the references to non-monogamy are very visible. The women engaging in bisexual sexual acts with both men and women, emphasising how they are sexual subjects, and through this objectification, they are seen as these subjects (as I explained in more detail in Chapter 2). In *I Kissed a Girl*, Katy Perry sings about how she hopes her boyfriend does not mind that she has kissed a girl. She elaborates on how women are so sexually attractive, “too good to deny it”, but also on the idea that “it's no big deal; it's innocent”. In these examples, non-monogamous behaviour is both the norm, as it is necessary for women to be seen as sexual subjects, but it is also the inordinate. It is both very wrong and very right. This imagery, which is a part of mainstream popular discourse, shows us the double-bind these women find themselves in: they need to engage in same-sex sexual behaviour in front of a male audience in order to be seen as sexual subjects, while being promiscuous is non-normative.

The idea of promiscuous behaviour being forbidden but accessible seems to have a certain attractive aura around it, making it both desirable and disgusting. This connects to the processes Foucault describes when speaking about panopticism: “The panoptic mechanism is [...] a way of making power relations function in a function, and of making a function function through these power relations” (207). The system as such functions, because it is maintained by the inhabitants of the system. When applied to my case here, it could be stated: monogamy and monosexuality function, because these norms are maintained by the individuals that work with and through these notions.

The non-monogamous bisexual behaviour as is shown in the clips, lies outside the norm and

is therefore desirable as such. Distancing oneself from this behaviour, and therefore emphasising how this non-normative behaviour is excessive and morally wrong, can be seen in the following example. After the interview took place, I was having an informal conversation with E and she told me that when she heard I have both a man and a woman as partners, she was disappointed and frustrated. She talked about how I embody the prejudice she often has to counter; that a bisexual would have the need to be with both a man and a woman and not being able to be monogamous. She explained how she at first thought that I make things difficult for her. Before I could reply, she quickly said: “But oh well, I soon realised that we are just different. My bisexuality is different from yours and that is okay. I am not you”. This stands in contrast to what E had just said in the interview, namely that she would like to have the possibility to have sex with other women outside her relationship with F. This situation can be interpreted as an example of E making room for her own way to be bisexual. However, by distancing herself from peers, emphasising that I make her life difficult through my choices, she becomes an agent of the discursive monogamous monosexual norm. She punished me by saying I was different from her and, through that, distancing herself from me. As a bisexual, having polyamorous desires, she manages to stay an accountable member of the norm, and not act upon her desires that are wrong according to it. Therefore, she has the position to discipline others who do not live up to these norms.

Rust has explained how bisexuals have difficulty with engaging in polyamorous relationships successfully, because this is seen as failed monogamy. This punishing view does not only come from the heterosexual monogamous majority, but this example of E distancing herself from me, shows that peers confront each other with the same prejudices they encounter themselves. Bisexual women can be said to suffer from the norm: they do not want to be seen as promiscuous, let alone be involved in promiscuous acts, because they are frequently confronted that their bisexuality carries the stigma of promiscuity. They have to prove themselves as monogamous and monosexual. On the other hand, however, bisexuals do not necessarily always show mercy or understanding towards peers who meet the same prejudices and have to prove themselves to the same norm. They reproduce the norms they also face.

Through this discourse on bisexual polyamorous behaviour, my interviewees do not seem to think in concepts that research the possibilities of polyamorous relationships. The discourse on bisexuality and promiscuity, created through clips such as *Lapdance* and *I Kissed a Girl*, gives my respondents words for a certain type of sex and sexuality, and the boundaries of exclusivity, but not for non-exclusive romances and emotions. The air of promiscuity, and with that the negative

connotations, that still flow around the concept of bisexuality, are thus reproduced by both the clips and by bisexuals themselves.

This panoptic circle shows how E, and also other bisexual women, meet different norms and forces they all have to respond to. They have to prove to be a trustworthy partner, while the contrary is assumed by their environment. On the other hand, they have to relate to the possibility to engage in same sex sexual acts in front of their boyfriend, in order to be seen as a sexual subject. When wanting to sexually engage with other people out of their own movement, both their partners and they themselves restrict this.

All my respondents balanced this double-bind through choosing for a monogamous script, thus not engaging in any sexual contact outside their partner. However, in all conversations I had with these bisexual women, they showed interest in non-monogamy. A was interested in it on a more platonic level, but also saw how she in the future might cheat on her husband B. She had no idea on whether this would happen with a man or a woman. C saw monogamy as the only threat her relationship would ever face: she had been unfaithful to partners in earlier relationships. E would like to have a life in which she could love women, next to her current heterosexual relationship. All firmly stated that being interested in polyamory would have nothing to do with their bisexuality. Also, they experienced their relationships as happy and satisfying, and did not want them to change in the near future.

It is possible that bisexual women have a tendency to be more interested in multiple sexual partners. C looks at this differently, though, showing here her own tactics to counter prejudices about bisexuals being promiscuous:

C: I think, on the one hand, there is this spectrum of hetero-bi-homosexuality. On the other hand, I think, there is a spectrum of how sexual you are, how much you're interested in sex, how many people you find sexually attractive. I notice how many friends hardly find anyone attractive, and they also seem to have some sort of idealized image of the perfect partner, while I thought: "wow, I meet nice people everywhere!"

She does not claim polyamory as an identity or tries to emphasise how she tries to be monogamous, but gives an alternative way to think about sexuality. The idea of this being a spectrum where a person can position him-/herself creates space for the emancipation of people who are more "sexual", as C calls it. The Klein grid is one of the most known models in which there is space for sexual diversity (Keuzekamp et al. 10; Klein 19). In this grid, seven different dimensions are

distinguished and examined, while taking into account that preferences can change through time. It acknowledges every sexual orientation and leaves space for differences between dimensions. A similar spectrum with regard to sexual interest could be an emancipatory step for bisexuals, since it provided space for all people who would identify as bisexual, in all their different forms, but also to people with any other sexual orientation. Especially people who would find themselves on the ends of the spectrum (being [almost] never sexually attracted to someone or being attracted to most people) are given a place and a name without any judgement.

This spectrum is still very much focused on the sexual aspect of intimacy. An extension of this idea could perhaps show how much someone is interested in other parts of the private sphere as well, such as the sharing of emotions and a feeling of domesticity. This would possibly provide a filling for the discursive gap I found when I spoke with my respondents about polyamory.

In this chapter, I have shown how bisexual women make claims about monogamy and polyamory that contradict each other. On the one hand, they show to be interested in polyamory, but on the other hand, they very much emphasise their loyalty and exclusivity to their partner. These contradictory messages I have connected to the panoptic pressure of monogamous monosexuality. I have found that these women's contradictory desires are fed by the double-bind they have to relate to. Women have to be looked at as sexual subjects through bisexual sexual behaviour, by men, but these women also have to follow the monosexual monogamous norm. There is no positive discourse on serious interest in polyamory for bisexual women. An alternative to this would be a spectrum of how "sexual" a person is; this would leave space for individuals that are interested in polyamory, because they are not judged by the fact that they can place themselves on a scale in the first place.

Conclusion

The main question in this thesis has been: how do white, ethnically Dutch female bisexuals in their twenties, who hold an academic degree in Gender Studies, and their partners, shape their relationship around their sexual orientations? To answer this question, I have shown how popular mainstream media produce and maintain a stereotypical image of bisexual women. This image holds contradictory aspects: it shows how same-sex sexual acts are positively valued, since they emphasise a woman's sexuality and make her visible as a sexual subject. On the other hand, it makes a woman's sexual subject position dependent on whether a male audience is watching. These women, engaging in same-sex sexual acts, are looked down upon for ignoring the monogamous monosexual norm, while at the same time, they are valued for the same reason.

Through this theoretical framework, I have tried to analyse the responses my interviewees have provided me with. The subquestions I have asked, are: how do partners discuss bisexuality in the public and private sphere? And: how is non-monogamy, or polyamory, discussed by bisexual women in the private sphere? I have found that in the every day life of the bisexual women and their partners, the topic of bisexuality is, because of this contradictory discourse, difficult to discuss. In the public sphere bisexuals, and their partners even more, fear negative reactions. They are reluctant to speak about the sexual orientation of the bisexual partner with friends or family, because of the possible consequences this may have: friends and family may ask questions about the solidity of their relationship and they may possibly socially exclude them. Also, the sexual orientation of the monosexual partner may be taken into question by these friends and family. Compulsory monosexuality can be defined as a force that does not allow women, but men even more, to identify as bisexual and speak of bisexual desires, in order to meet the monosexual norm.

In the private spheres of bisexual women and their partners, the discourse produced and maintained in popular mainstream media is still prevalent. When two partners discuss fantasies about other women, they are spoken of as sexual objects, not as self-conscious, balanced individuals. As soon as these women are discussed as sexual subjects and thus become conscious, balanced individuals, they become a threat to the relationship and the compulsory monosexual norm shows itself.

This sexualised, objectifying stance towards women also very much influences how bisexual women speak about polyamory. Their focus is very much on sex and sexuality. I argued that this discursive limitation is linked to the imagery as seen in popular mainstream media. Women have to be both sexually promiscuous and follow the monosexual monogamous norm. A discourse on polyamory that embraces more than only sexual (non-)exclusivity is prevented through the compulsory monosexual norm, since it forces women to think about women (themselves and others) as nothing more than sexual objects.

In other words, the monogamous relationships bisexual women and their partners have are shaped mostly around compulsory monosexuality. This concept has shown to be crucial to understand the discursive difficulties bisexual women face with regards to their sexual orientation. It shapes their space to think about other women, about polyamory and about their own wishes, in a very limiting sense. Compulsory monosexuality reproduces the idea that bisexuality is connected to promiscuity and excessive sexual behaviour as a response to the excessive behaviour that is seen in popular mainstream media. In stead of offering an alternative to both promiscuity and the monogamous monosexual norm and thus creating something new, it only reinforces the norm. This leaves the double-bind of both modesty and sexual excessiveness intact.

As I have said in the introduction: I do not want these women to appear as victims, especially since they do not experience their situations as such. I prefer a complex subject position, which I have showed through the contradictions bisexual women face, but which they also inherit and reproduce. In addition, my respondents have given me two examples of how they would counter prejudices regarding their sexuality. The first is to speak from one's own desires and identity, and not making claims about the whole diverse group of bisexuals. As I have explained in Chapter 3, this is not unproblematic, since it can be an indirect form of disciplining peers. On the other hand, it offers a reply that works to counter prejudices: it shows the diversity of the group bisexuals and creates a space for the specific desires of a specific individual. The other example is to take sexual interest in other people as a spectrum. This creates room for people that have a low sexual interest as well as for people who have a higher sexual interest, without moral judgements

and without medical indication.

Both tactics take as a fundament that desire does not carry any moral value in itself. The value of the desire is attached by an interpreter, not by the tactics of individual positioning and the use of a spectrum to indicate sexual interest themselves. In this, I see how speaking with women holding an academic degree in Gender Studies has influenced the outcomes of my research. These women have thought about sexuality extensively in their academic and personal lives, which comes forward in the analytical and critical way they speak about their own sexual orientation. Would I have interviewed bisexual women with different backgrounds, then the responses could have been less well formulated.

As I have explained in Chapter 1, for men, the situation is rather different. Male bisexual sexual behaviour is not present in popular mainstream media, and I have had difficulty finding bisexual men who wanted to participate in my research. It would serve an immense emancipatory goal if more research on bisexual men would be done, since it would increase their visibility and through that, their acceptance in Western society. Connecting the concept of compulsory monosexuality to bisexual men could be facilitating in such research.

Further research could also broaden its scope by focussing on a less specific group. Differences between bisexual women in a lesbian relationship or in a heterosexual relationship would be interesting to analyse, since it might give us a more nuanced view on the concept of compulsory monosexuality. The experiences of polyamorous bisexual women and monogamous bisexual women could be compared. Bisexual women of different ages could be taken into account. It would close a discourse gap, for bisexual women, but also for Dutch people in general, if more research would be done on polyamory as a relational form. Researching different forms of polyamory as they are lived in Dutch society in current times could stretch up the still limited, sexualised connotations that my respondents, but possibly many other Dutch people, have.

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