Coming out Through an Intersectional Perspective: Narratives of Bisexuality and Polyamory in Italy

Beatrice Gusmano

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Coming out Through an Intersectional Perspective: Narratives of Bisexuality and Polyamory in Italy

Beatrice Gusmano [iD]

Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Through an intersectional perspective, the author analyzes what it means to perform a bisexual and polyamorous identity in the Italian familistic welfare regime. Considering the intersections of polyamory and bisexuality, the author employs the Greimas semiotic square to read the process of coming out experienced by people who shared their experiences on polyamory: two interviewees define themselves as bisexual ciswomen, and one self-defines as a transsexual gay man in a primary relationship with a self-defined bisexual cisman. Afterwards, the author explores how they live their intimate lives through compulsory invisibility, coming out, and staying invisible. Finally, the author focuses on how the existence of non-normative communities opens up the possibility of meeting other bisexual people in a context where there are no bisexual communitie, and argues that this process allows people to self-identify as bisexual and polyamorous in the public sphere.

KEYWORDS
bisexuality; coming out; heteronormativity; polyamory

Introduction

Coming out as polyamorous and bisexual[1] constitutes a major challenge in conservative Italy, where there is no legal recognition for partnering outside the monogamous borders of heterosexual marriage and, only recently, of same-sex civil unions. An under-recognized aspect of intimacy lies in these intersections as bisexuality and polyamory[2] are stigmatized by the constant pressure of heteronormativity (Warner, 1991) that establishes the borders of what is acceptable in terms of desire. According to the Italian legal framework, heterosexual people can either get married or register a civil union, whereas homosexual citizens have only the option of contracting a civil union, thus from the outset excluding any recognition of bisexuality. Therefore, Italian law institutionalizes not just monogamy (through the couple norm), but also a fixed and monolithic sexual identity, affirming a society of compulsory monosexuality (Caldwell, 2010). On the one hand, bisexuality

still remains defined as an invisible, excluded, and silent sexuality (Barker & Lang-dridge, 2008) with bisexual people labeled on the basis of their current partner. On the other hand, mononormativity (Pieper & Bauer, 2005) strives to affirm the naturalness of monogamy, thereby rendering invisible the existence of other partners. As Rambukkana (2004) expresses this:

> Both "polyamorous" and "bisexual" are particularly difficult social mantles to take on, partially due to the fact that their liminal nature – their position between conditions that many conceive of as mutually exclusive (i.e., gay/straight, radical/mainstream) – makes them uncomfortable bridges between discourses. (p. 144)

In the following sections, I describe the Italian context in respect to issues of intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003), neoliberalism,[3] and austerity. Afterwards, I frame the analysis within the existing literature concerning coming out, bisexuality and polyamory, here also relying on my interpretation of the Greimas semiotic square (Gusmano, 2008). After presenting the fieldwork, I explore coming out as experienced by interviewees, arguing that intersections between polyamory and bisexuality are fundamental to shaping their identities and intimacies. Finally, I focus on a specific form of empowerment, that is, the existence of non-normative communities that make it possible to meet other bisexual people within a context where there are otherwise no spaces openly dedicated to them.

The Italian context

This article applies empirical data from Italy, a Southern European country clustered in the Mediterranean regime (Ferrera, 2008), where well-being has historically been conceived as a private responsibility under the principle of 'implicit' familialism (Leitner, 2003): the transfer of resources and services are based on solidarity supported by family and kinship (Poggio, 2008), with social policies structured according to this same assumption (Naldini & Jurado, 2013). Given this centrality of family ties, heterosexual marriage still retains much of its institutional strength based on a familialistic approach that erases nonheterosexual support networks.

Moreover, when the financial crisis and austerity set in, the national inertia toward the three pillars of Mediterranean welfare since WWII—universal health and education systems, familialism, social insurance tied to occupational status (Pavolini & Raitano, 2015)—turned into retrenchment (with substantial cuts to specific policies) within neoliberalism (León & Pavolini, 2014): access to services, education, healthcare, and employment thus becoming arenas of private responsibility (Bertone & Gusmano, 2013).

The exceptional character of neoliberalism in Italy loaned continuity to the dismantling of the welfare state that had already been ongoing since the 1990s (Di Feliciantonio, 2016), when the wish to gain admission to the European Monetary Union accelerated modernizing reforms (Ferrera, 2008). Moreover, the 2001

Italian Constitutional reform of local authorities amended the institutional setting of social assistance according to principles of decentralization: this trend – beginning in the mid-1980s—encapsulates an expression of the neoliberalist process based on transferring responsibility from central government to local administrations and on the outsourcing of services, with the consequent undermining of the universalist, public nature of the welfare state (Brenner & Theodore, 2002).

This economic and social shift encapsulates the neoliberal background to the legal situation concerning intimate citizenship over the last 40 years: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) policies moved from a focus on social rights, as a means of fighting inequalities, to merely defending civil and relational rights (Cooper, 2006; Richardson & Monro, 2012) that do not question unequal social structures (nor mainstream mononormative assumptions) (Bertone & Gusmano, 2013; Gusmano, 2017). As a matter of fact, homophobic political discourse remains hegemonic under the repressive tolerance (Mudu, 2002) of Catholic institutions and political parties (Di Feliciantonio, 2015), as demonstrated by the approval of law 76/2016 on same-sex civil unions. After a heated debate that cancelled the provision of stepchild adoption (Gusmano, 2016; Lasio & Serri, 2017), the bill was approved for heterosexual and homosexual couples, thus once again defining a hierarchy between heterosexuality and sexual dissidence: marriage is still only accessible to heterosexual couples with civil unions described merely as "specific social formations." Heteronormative and mononormative prejudices therefore persist, and "debates about same-sex marriage […] have also reinforced the role of monogamy" (McLean, 2011, p. 516). Therefore, the monolithic persistence of the heterosexual couple norm leads to a situation in which bisexual and polyamorous identities are once again stigmatized and delegitimized.

The coming-out process through an intersectional perspective

To exit the double delegitimation attributed to bisexuality and polyamory, interviewed people give great value to the coming-out process, a performative act that happens repeatedly and reiterated through performance (Butler, 1993). Coming out has been read as a continuum, not a single event that happens once (Seidman, 2002): a person can come out to some people but not to others (Mosher, 2001), moving along a continuum and not adopting just any one fixed position. For the purpose of this article, I read 'coming out' through an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993), a framework that offers a deeper understanding on how multiple social identities interact with one another. To escape the dichotomy trap, I employ the semiotic square (Greimas, 1970) as a device to interpret how people attribute meaning to coming out (Gusmano, 2008). The semiotic square articulates the semantic structure of signification in terms of binary oppositions as shown in Figure 1.
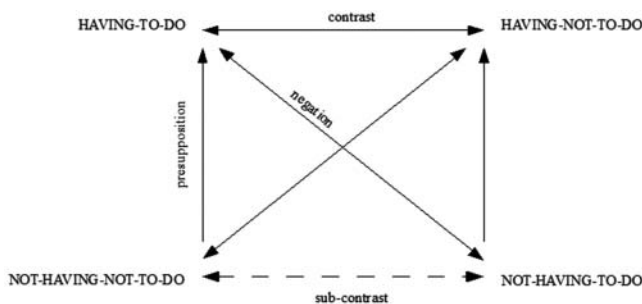
Figure 1. Semiotic square (Greimas, 1970).

By applying the Greimas semiotic square to the coming-out process, we may appreciate the various strategies that open for adoption by people who do not identify with heteronormativity and mononormativity (see Figure 2).

The semiotic square of coming out conveys how there are at least four ways of managing sexual stigma[4] associated with bisexuality and polyamory. The upper part of the semiotic square accounts for practices of agency: participants can decide to declare their sexual/relational identity (coming out), or they can decide to keep it secret (staying invisible). The lower section represents the modality of passivity and incorporates how persons might be rendered visible against their will (outing) or may attempt to be considered as nonheterosexual/nonmonogamous without this being accepted by others, who continue to consider them as heterosexual or monogamous (compulsory invisibility).

Applying the semiotic square of coming out to the intersectional experiences of bisexual and polyamorous people might enable appropriate acknowledgement of the strategies for coping with the typical stereotypes (Callis et al., 2013; McLean, 2008c; Rust, 1996) erasing bisexual and poly experiences. To show how "coming out in a biphobic world can prove to be a challenge" (Knous, 2006, p. 39), I organize the empirical section through the semiotic square of coming out, showing how bisexual and polyamorous people have to (passivity) or can (agency) manage the stigma associated with their identities, feelings, and attractions. Concerning this research, I did not encounter any examples of outing in my interviewee narratives: this may however stem from
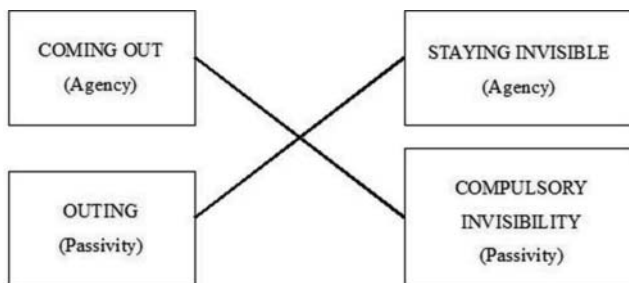

Figure 2. The semiotic square of coming out (Gusmano, 2008).

the form of recruitment as I searched for visible polyamorous LGBT people. Therefore, after presenting the methodological aspects, I explore examples of the other three options set out by the semiotic square through analysis of the common stereotypes shared by polyamory and bisexuality.

Method

Research design

The framework for this article derives from the project Intimate – Citizenship, Care and Choice: the micro-politics of intimacy in Southern Europe.[5] The research aims at rethinking citizenship, care, and choice through the findings of a comparative and qualitative study designed to explore LGBT experiences of partnering (lesbian coupledom and polyamory), parenting (mothers and fathers through assisted reproduction), and friendship (transgender networks of care and living with friends in adult life) in three Southern European countries: Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Overall, we carried out around 60 interviews with experts and 90 interviews with LGBT people concerning their biography.

To contextualize how partnering was experienced in each country, in 2015 we carried out 27 semistructured interviews with gatekeepers and we referred to secondary sources data to complete country-specific legal and social policy analysis.

Concerning in-depth interviews, empirical research was carried out using the biographical narrative interpretive method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001) that encourages the interviewee to speak as freely as possible in response to a single initial question. Concerning the study on polyamory, the question was "as you know, I'm interested in the study of polyamory. Can you tell me the story of your life, all the events and experiences important to you?" Although interviewees knew that they were asked to participate because they were in a nonmonogamous relationship, the focus wasn't explicitly on this but sought to elicit narratives about partnering along the life course. After the response to the initial question (which varied in length between 10 and 67 minutes), the interviewer seeks further details about events and experiences that had been mentioned in the first part of the interview. Interviews lasted between $1\ ^1\!/_2$ hours and $3\ ^1\!/_2$ hours, with a mean length of 2 hours and 40 minutes. In contrast to a traditional semistructured interview, this method allows for much greater space for spontaneous links and associations given by the interviewee.

Recruitment strategies

The sample was selected using a snowball method as well as a call for interviewees on websites of LGBTQ associations, polyamorous groups, institutions and social networks. Inclusion criteria for the study on polyamory required participants to (1) be between ages 25 and 45, (2) live in the capitol city, (3) self-identify as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or trans, (4) be currently engaged in more than one

relationship at the time of the interview, and (5) with the acknowledgement and consent of every person involved. A total of 15 participants were recruited, five of whom were conducted in Rome; three of them are included in the current subset of data.

Participants

To convey how intersectionality forges the experiences of bisexual and poly-amorous people in Italy, I rely on the fieldwork on polyamory conducted in Rome during Spring 2015: this research comprised narratives shared by five able-bodied, economically precarious (with low economic capital and high levels of cultural and social capital), white Italian LGBT people (aged 27–35) living in Rome. Bisexuality was not the original focus of the research, though two out of five interviewees turned out to self-define as bisexual, whereas another one was in a bisexual relationship—meaning that he was cohabiting with his boyfriend and his boyfriend's girlfriend. Given the lack of sociological studies on bisexuality in Italy (Breveglieri, 2008), I decided to focus on their specific experiences of coming out as bisexual and polyamorous. Therefore, I focus on the biographical data provided by the following three interviewees aged in their thirties:

- Morgana, a bisexual ciswoman in a cohabitation relationship with Alberto, a monogamous heterosexual cisman; she started to explore polyamory when she fell in love with Marta, a monogamous lesbian ciswoman. Morgana holds an international MA degree and does multiple jobs in the administrative sector.
- Nadia, a ciswoman who started to explore pansexuality through polyamorous events; she highly values her polyfamily, has a relationship with Daniele (a monogamous heterosexual cisman) and is starting a relationship with Marianne (a ciswoman involved in two other heterosexual relationships). She dropped out of university and currently works in temporary jobs in the education sector.
- Rudy, a gay transman in a 10-year relationship with Cristian, a self-defined bisexual cisman; Cristian's girlfriend has recently moved in with them. Rudy holds a diploma and is currently working in an institutional department on a short-term contract.

Data analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect participants' privacy, all interviews have been anonymized. Afterwards, they were analyzed through the NVivo version 11 software whose nodes were organized in 19 macrothemes chosen by the research team and linked with sociological literature on intimate citizenship, care, choice, and sexuality, with a specific focus on partnering.

Results

Coming out

According to the literature (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Bauer, 2014; Klesse, 2007), polyamory is common among bisexual people. Morgana claims that, "Bisexuality is something that already leads you to wonder more about exclusivity, basically. And so this not a causal link but rather a driver."

Making the choice to come out is a performative act of agency against the stereotype of assuming that "bisexual people are a small community." Simultaneously, the intersection of polyamory and bisexuality might open up a breach in heteronormativity and mononormativity:

> For women in same-sex relationships, polyamory—whether practiced or simply claimed as an identity—may provide a buffer against bisexual erasure […]. In choosing polyamorous relationships bisexual women may be increasing their visibility as bisexual […], enabling women with male partners to signal their bisexuality to others. (Robinson, 2013, p. 27)

Concerning how interviewed people experience coming out, Rudy's strategy to exit invisibility was defined as easy, because in his community of reference, the BDSM community where he and his partner are well known, everybody knows that he is trans, coupled with Cristian, and that they are not monogamous:

> I meet people either in the BDSM or in the polyamorous field, so at least one part (laughing) is taken for granted [:] trying to relate to a person who is really outside all these topics.… It didn't happen anymore. (Rudy)

Being poly and belonging to the BDSM community is what define Rudy's identity: this is congruent with other findings according to which BDSM is the main sexual preference, over-riding gender, or where shifts in gender identity may imply changes in sexual orientation, most notably with Females to Males (FtMs) who go from lesbian to gay male identified (Bauer, 2014), "Homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual are labels that you put on. That is, I also had experiences with girls but, as a man, I define myself gay because I'm mainly attracted to boys" (Rudy).

Concerning Morgana and Nadia, they started to explore bisexuality through fantasies and then through sexual encounters with women they had just met. Nadia took advantage of her Erasmus year in Spain to explore her bisexuality that she defined as "dormant probably due to my family's education":

> There was freedom, you could breathe it.… It is nevertheless true that the environment, the energy of people and society comes to you.… You get it at a passive level, as well; that is, maybe you're not there thinking all the time: "Ah, now I can hit on women." However, you feel it: you see groups of women going out, women traveling alone. I had never seen it before. (Nadia)

These experiences resonate with the literature, where there is a great amount of testimonies about the intersections between being abroad (or far away from home)

and performing a nonheterosexual identity (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Gorman-Murray, 2007). In Spain, not only did she have her first sexual experience with a woman but she also experienced a threesome with a male:

> In three because, anyway, I was a bit afraid, right? Since my sexual horizon was heterosexual, I used to say: "What should I tell to a woman?" […]. Bisexuality was much easier in three, without affections, that is, without a love affair going on. (Nadia)

For Morgana as well, her bisexuality arose during her university days when she started experiencing sex and intimacy with female friends while having a stable heterosexual relationship. At university, Morgana came out about bisexuality and open relationships:

> Since I had my first sexual encounter with a woman when I was 22, I've always had open relationships.… Mostly with men and, during these important relationships, I had various female friends with whom I became intimate, and my partner knew about it. (Morgana)

In her discovery of bisexuality, Morgana received great help from her previous boyfriend, who was aware of her attraction to women, and they started to play with this idea during sex:

> He made me imagine a lot of things while we were making love […] and it was nice that this part of me was included in our relationship. And when it happened, he was happy [:] he never said that he wanted to do a threesome, or disrespectfully that he wanted to be part of something that was mine, and I appreciated it. (Morgana)

According to these quotes, at the beginning of exploring desire, sexual encounters with unknown partners seem easier than entering into a love relationship with them: easier to share, easier to experience. However, I also gathered narratives of intimate same-sex commitment: I now focus on what happens when love comes around, and how this blurs the boundaries of intimacy. For Morgana, falling in love with a woman was an unexpected trigger event that allowed her to pass from open relationships to polyamory. After the first moment of harshness in accommodating the new configuration, Alberto supported Morgana's relationship with Marta and, when it ended, he took great care of Morgana:

> My boyfriend Alberto was very sad when Marta and I broke up […]. It was amazing, although I was sad, to go back home… torn by tears, desperate because I had just broken up, and to find him comforting me. (Morgana)

As a closing remark, I would like to give voice to Morgana who clarifies how she enjoys bisexuality and polyamory as a form of reaching beyond duality:

> I like the feeling of … multiple things, multiple feelings that come from many directions, right? And … harmony between more than two people […]. Duality is very powerful, indeed. And many things are based on duality; however, being in more than two also has … I think it has a charm of complexity and collective emotions … that are very nice. (Morgana)

As explained also by Nadia, bisexuality disputes the existence of a dichotomy in the definition of desire and sexual/intimate attraction. Notwithstanding the fact that Nadia could easily be read as heterosexual due to her long-lasting heterosexual relationship, she proudly states her pansexuality even if the relationship has not yet occurred:

> I do not rule it out, even though I have never tried, to be in a romantic, emotional or sexual relationship with people who are, let's say, fluid in their definition of being men, women or transgender, or in transition. (Nadia)

Regarding Morgana, she explains how coming out as bisexual was helpful in the poly community not only to meet other bisexual people but also in getting closer to her siblings, as expressed by her coming out to her brother:

> It is great because… I feel, yes, to keep crossing the threshold of intimacy with people. [My brother] told me that basically his girlfriend confessed to him that, when she masturbates, she has fantasies about both men and women. Then he told her about me and my story, especially about my… my bisexuality. So, she was intrigued and wanted to ask me a lot of questions. (Morgana)

Morgana is visible in her sexual identity, regarding bisexuality and polyamory: she has a long-lasting heterosexual relationship and talks freely about her female girlfriends or crushes. This openness turns Morgana into an expert whose advice is sought by those wanting some guidance in a mononormative and heteronormative world.

To conclude, coming out may prove handy in strengthening kin networks on the basis of trust and displaying availability within communities as bisexuality gets easily erased by the presence of just one partner.

Compulsory invisibility

What I have called 'compulsory invisibility' is in this case the attempt to be considered bisexual and polyamorous without getting to be recognized as such:

> I want to ask her [a close friend] if I put her in a difficult position because sometimes she changes subject or says something superficial just to cut it short. When I realize it… I self-censure myself […]. It's like she doesn't want to deepen certain topics. (Morgana)

Compulsory invisibility "is reinforced by many people's inclination to actively 'forget' a non-partnered or monogamous bisexual person's claim to a bisexual identity" (Klesse, 2011, p. 232) and stems from the Western tradition of organizing the world into dichotomies (Klesse, 2005; Yoshino, 2000): bisexual people can therefore only be authentic when they simultaneously live heterosexual and homosexual relationships (McLean, 2008c). Given cisheteronormativity, attractions to more than two genders shouldn't be taken for granted: in the following quote, Rudy talks about the redefinition of his boyfriend's sexual orientation after Rudy

decided to go through gender transition, while his other partner, Mirko, was unable to cope with it:

> Cristian has tackled this thing with himself; in fact, he defines himself as bisexual, while Mirko did not [...]. It's bad to talk about homophobia, but he could not cope with the fact of having a relationship with a man [...]. For a guy who has always been heterosexual, it is harder to relate to a transgender guy. (Rudy)

Rudy talks shyly about homophobia, referring to his ex-partner's fear of thinking about his own bisexuality. Rudy does not talk explicitly about transphobia or biphobia potentially because his focus is on Mirko's fear of defining himself as homosexual. As researchers, we should read between the lines and unveil the level of biphobia and transphobia inscribed in Mirko's refusal. At the same time, we should keep the focus on Rudy's attempt to pass from a heterosexual relationship to a homosexual relationship, affirming the possibility of bisexuality, while he received a firm negative response. In their BDSM scenes, Rudy was already playing his male identity in a safe context where it was easier to exit his female appearance, and everybody was aware of it:

> It was ... pretty obvious [:] I've never had feminine attitudes... before my decision, I don't know how many times rumours were saying that I was a gay man [...]. I use the term "Sir" [...] that represents me a lot as a master and as a man, and I refer to gay imaginaries during play. (Rudy)

Of course the point is the intersection between gender identity and bisexuality, but what happened was the end of a polyamorous relationship due to biphobia. The role played by the intersections between sexual orientation and gender identity constitutes a central topic in every interview: the gender issue also proves central when considering that "bisexual stigma is in many cases gender specific" (Wandrey, Mosack, & Moore, 2015, p. 205). This means that compulsory invisibility could be translated into an invisibility that aims at leading back everybody to mononormativity and monosexuality. In practice, gender still structures male-female intimate and sexual lives on the bisexual scene: women are presumed to engage in sexual but not romantic relationships with other women; with female bisexuality perceived as in the service of men's pleasure, belittling any same-sex relationships; moreover, bisexual men are invisibilized due to the persistence of homophobia and biphobia (Klesse, 2005). These assumptions lead to three forms of bisexual erasure: heteroflexibility and bisexuality are conflated; women's relationships with women get side-lined; bi men are invisible since they are presumed gay (Brown, 2016; Callis et al., 2013), "I thought he was bisexual [...], but it was not the case [...]. There is a lot of voyeurism coming from men" (Nadia).

According to Nadia, the male gaze still exploits female bisexuality as its sexual fantasy, stealing the agency of coming out as bisexual and reading it as a simple play for men's pleasure. This widespread attitude contributes to erasing bisexuality as a proper choice driving conclusions that somehow either "bisexual people don't

exist" (they are either heterosexual or homosexual) or that "bisexual people are just going through a phase": they will make their mind up sooner or later. It is important to acknowledge that "the casting of bisexuality as temporary state of choosing ("just a phase") is actually an attempt to erase bisexuality itself" (Mint, 2004, p. 69).

Staying invisible

Some people may decide to stay invisible due to the stereotypes magnified by the intersections between polyamory and bisexuality, both of which are considered "stigmatized, 'dirty' identit[ies] that enforces the sexual binary" (Callis et al., 2013, p. 84). At the same time, these identities mess with the monogamy taboo (Horncastle, 2008) and cheat the system:

> They purposefully break the rules of attraction and try to get away with it. Bisexuals cheat the rules of a single gender attraction. Poly people cheat the rules of sexual and emotional exclusivity […]. Polyamory and bisexuality are facing off against the same conceptual opposition, specifically the monogamy/cheating duality and the myth of the one true love. (Mint, 2004, pp. 70–71)

Visibility is a complex issue for bisexual and polyamorous people who have to cope with the myth of one true love according to which you have to choose just one gender and just one lover, such as the following stereotypes: bisexual people are sexually greedy, spread HIV, are cheaters, are scared of commitment, live for threesomes (Callis et al., 2013; Cruz, 2014). Due to stigma, people may then prefer to stay in the closet as often happens when it comes to the family of origin. Due to the centrality of family ties, as well as the cuts to welfare resources, usually people "test the waters" before performing a selective disclosure (McLean, 2007).

> Polyamory is a big fight with my parents: I keep bisexuality to myself, until I am forced to talk about it […]. I tried, […], and [my mom] was scared, bewildered. And there, I had to lie because she was [overcome] with sorrow, fear, anger […] and concern. (Nadia)

For example, Nadia declared that talking about bisexuality with parents was harder than talking about polyamory: Nadia thus expresses how she tried to come out as bisexual but backed off and decided to keep her bisexuality invisible with her parents in order not to overly upset her mother, who owns Nadia's house and lives in the same family building: "Do you want my polyfamily to help you? In my polyfamily, there is somebody who can fix your Internet problems. Do you accept polyamory or do you deny it?" (Nadia).

Concerning polyamory, Nadia often tries to ironically convince her mother to accept her polyfamily and the advantages she gets through such an extended network of care:

> Polyfamily is a group of people linked through different relationships […]: there are lovers, friends, ex-lovers, people who make love and people who stopped making love. In the last months, I realized that they are becoming a family […]: when you talk about friends, they are considered the least important people of your life. That's why I talk about family

[…]. In the end, it is a form of mutual assistance: not just emotional, but material and practical as well. (Nadia)

Even though her mother continuously pushes her back into the closet (an attempt to relegate her into compulsory invisibility), she keeps explaining how important her polyfamily is to her life.

Morgana provides another example of this complex intertwined process of in/visibility in the specific context of neoliberalism and familialism in a Mediterranean regime by explaining how she denied her bisexuality to her parents while she was out as bisexual at the university:

When my father realized that I was hanging out with a girl, he reacted very badly [:] "If your life is taking this road, I do not want to be part of your life anymore". He screamed and threw the tablecloth to the floor as usually happens in movies. Therefore, I … started screaming that it was not true. (Morgana)

According to the literature, "many women discussed how they choose to pass as straight until in a serious relationship with a woman […] because they saw high cost and little benefit to coming out otherwise" (Wandrey, Mosack, & Moore, 2015, p. 216). Indeed, Morgana chose to stay invisible due to her father's reaction: she was then working in the family firm and still dependent on her parents' help to finish her studies. In the above examples, this high cost is represented by dependence on the families of origin, a common feature in Mediterranean countries. The active strategy of staying invisible proves worthwhile to satisfy material needs such as housing and income.

Non-Normative communities

An empowering dimension at the intersection of bisexuality and polyamory emerges from the importance of involvement in non-normative communities (McLean, 2008a): in fact, none of the people interviewed entered into the path of maintaining alternatives to mononormativity and heteronormativity without first sharing their experiences within a collective space. According to Knous (2006), "the most influential factor in achieving identity acceptance for bisexual-identified individuals is having an adequate support network" also able to help in managing stigma (p. 42). Therefore, when discussing the normative oppression of monogamy, interviewees greatly value their collective dimension. In so doing, they challenge the individualistic turn proposed by mainstream self-help books on polyamory that almost exclusively focus on free personal choice.

The encounter with a nonconformist community that collectively understands what it means to build non-monogamous relationships in a mononormative world appears as a central topic in each interview. Nadia simultaneously discovered the poly community and the BDSM scene as "they have common grounds: consent, freedom, honesty," as she stated during the interview, upholding what the literature defined as key shared topics between these two communities: consent, mutual

trust, tolerance of a wide range of sexual diversity and gender variance (Monro, 2015). Nadia talks about how she got to know the poly community: her first boyfriend attended a poly event before she did and told her about men kissing each other on the lips, offering an alternative scenario that simultaneously challenged heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, she recalls when she first went to a poly event and was fascinated by a woman feeling overtly comfortable with her curvy body:

> And then I met this girl, [she was kissing two bears] and she was not afraid of showing her curves, and I thought: "I wish I were so brave". Now I am, and I'm a naturist, I don't care anymore. I have my frailties, but they are mine: not society's. (Nadia)

Between the lines, we may read the empowerment concerning sexual identity and body outlook fostered by this non-normative community. Moreover, it demonstrates how "a bisexual subject is capable of producing knowledge that is at odds with dominant and community formations of sexuality and gender" (Hemmings, 2002, p. 196), opening up the scope for strategic alliances between communities. In the next excerpt, Morgana underlines the importance of the polyamory community in nurturing a bisexual space that otherwise does not at all exist in Italy:

> And it was, I mean, a total revelation because for the first time I met people that had more than one relationship at the same time and […] it had never happened to me to … to find so many [bisexual men] all together: I felt like I was really at home. (Morgana)

Morgana expresses what George (1999) already stated many years ago: "once forms of sexuality are named, then people find that their longings, which had previously been lonely, unspeakable, perhaps unformed, have a home" (p. 101).

Living in a polyamorous and bisexual environment also allowed for threesomes where bisexuality arose in its physical intensity. What Nadia and Morgana enjoy the most is having a love relationship with a woman and becoming a friend with her male metamour.

> It was very nice… when I kissed her, and then she kissed him […]. And we shared… between me and him through her in some way, but also between me and him, cuddling and caressing each other [:] she […] felt she was in the middle of this thing, and it's nice […] to see a satisfied woman, a happy woman, a woman… who is alive. It's beautiful, just to look at her. (Morgana)

Regarding Morgana, she recalls the night when she entered in a couple relationship for the first time, explaining that she was not attracted to her partner's male partner but did enjoy exchanging cuddles and intimacy with him. From what I could gather from interviews and participant observation, primary heterosexual relationships predominate within the poly community and the BDSM scene. Despite the evidently dominant female-male model of bisexual primary relationships (Monro, 2015; Wandrey, Mosack, & Moore, 2015; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 2006), other sexualities were also registered: "In Rome, I found another

fundamental aspect, which is the community, the connection with the BDSM community: thanks to that, I grew so much […], particularly as a person" (Rudy).

For example, Rudy met his bisexual partner Cristian through the BDSM community before his decision to make the transition. This encounter was key to his self-discovery: Rudy found in Cristian a competent advisor concerning his master role on the BDSM scene and his path as transman, because Cristian had already had a relationship with a transman and thus positioned to provide many pieces of advice concerning the transition. Moreover, the BDSM scene itself allowed Rudy to explore and perform his gay identity through role-plays before he finally decided to make the transition.

The importance of these quotes regarding encounters with non-normative communities resides in the fact that they challenge the depoliticizing and neoliberal stream within polyamory that stresses agency and individual choice against structural constraints. The social context in which we live molds our possibilities, and it is precisely the existence of non-normative communities that opens up space for nonconformist ways of bonding.

Concluding remarks

The findings described above shed light on how the polyamorous people included in the current study experience bisexuality in their non-monogamous relationships. The intersection between bisexuality and polyamory enables people to extend beyond the prescriptive duality of heterosexuality and monogamy as if crossing the line of one normative role in society might allow for exploring all kinds of available sexual scripts (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Bisexual and polyamorous people face the multifaceted violence of heteronormativity, an implicit norm that posits heterosexuality and the couple imperative at the centre of any legitimate sexual identity.

Given the Italian familialistic welfare regime within austerity and neoliberalism (León & Pavolini, 2014), I analyzed how this regime worsens the conditions of people living outside heteronormativity and mononormativity, thus calling into question the intimate citizenship of people who identify with bisexuality and polyamory. Welfare is central in discussions about citizenship, especially in Mediterranean countries where State expectations that care will be provided within families persist (Naldini & Jurado, 2013; Pavolini & Raitano, 2015). Regarding stigma management within families of origin (Baiocco et al., 2015; Pistella, Salvati, Ioverno, Laghi, & Baiocco, 2016), I discussed how bisexual and polyamorous people decide to manage their visibility with their families of origins, revealing how the intersection of their identities leads to different options over stigma, depending on the level of economic independence from parents. In a context where family and kinship are central, networks of friends are also deemed a great source of well-being for subjects allocated outside the safety net of familialistic welfare, as identified by Nadia's polyfamily.

In this article, I employed the Greimas semiotic square to read coming out and invisibility performed by bisexual and polyamorous people in Italy: interviews testify to how this doesn't exclusively concern sexual identity. On the contrary, taking into consideration different relational styles, one can see that this process contains more layers than can be efficaciously unveiled by applying the semiotic square to coming out. Exiting essentialist dichotomies, this encapsulates the empowerment of both strategies (coming out or staying invisible), ensuring the possibility to hide more stigmatized identities in specific contexts while proudly affirming them in others. This proved efficacious especially for interviewees still depending on their families for material needs such as income and housing, as often happens in Southern Europe (Poggio, 2008). Moreover, through the analysis of gendered stereotypes, I convey how bisexual and polyamorous people counteract the erasure of bisexuality (Knous, 2006; McLean, 2008b) through the different options offered by the semiotic square. Usually, they get pushed back into the closet (compulsory invisibility) due to mononormative and heteronormative assumptions but, at the same time, they resist through the choice of coming out or staying invisible. This finding is in line with previous research that shows how the disclosure imperative may not apply to bisexual people (McLean, 2007): understanding that coming out is not just a matter of doing it or not (Mosher, 2001), the semiotic square of coming out proves incisive to reading identity from an intersectional perspective, reiterating that coming out depends on the context in which we are allowed to perform our sexual and/or relational identity.

Furthermore, in a national context where there is no bisexual community (Breveglieri, 2008), polyamorous and kinky spaces are considered welcoming environments that allow for the exploration of sexuality (Bauer, 2014), especially bearing in mind the high percentage of transphobia and homophobia across all levels of the Italian society (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2015; The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association Europe, 2016). In these non-normative communities, it seems easier to put into words desires concerning relational styles, sexual orientation and sexual practices: the existence of a poly community makes it possible for women to identify as bisexual in the public sphere and to meet bisexual men; at the same time, these non-normative communities support people in expressing their gender identity and their non-normative bodies. Therefore, they provide a safe haven and promote empowerment.

Following the deep analysis taken forward by Aviram and Leachman (2015) on legal recognition for marriages between more than two consenting adults in the United States, further research is needed now that Italy has approved same-sex civil unions: will the legitimation of nonheterosexual relationships increase their incidence at the social level? Will this legal innovation also foster polyamorous rights? How will these changes affect Southern European familialism?

Finally, regarding intersections between gender identity, sexuality, and relational styles, as researchers, we should further investigate the different forms of biphobia, transphobia and polyphobia experienced by people in our communities to cope

with the widespread hate that affects our life. Indeed, valuing intersections between different forms of discrimination renders it possible to build alliances between different subjectivities. Therefore, practices of intimacies that emerge from these intersections foster a deeper understanding of sexual citizenship: sexual orientation, gender identity, relational status, coming out practices and non-normative sexual communities need reading within the framework of the Mediterranean regime in order to grasp the contextualized development of Southern identities and intimacies within the scope of austerity and neoliberalism.

Notes

1. "The term 'bisexual' is generally used in minority Western cultures to refer to an individual who experiences sexual attraction to more than one gender" (Bowes-Catton & Hayfield, 2015, p. 42).
2. "[Polyamory] means having multiple loving, often committed, relationships at the same time by mutual agreement, with honesty and clarity" (Veaux & Rickert, 2014, pp. 7–8).
3. "Neoliberalism rejects [social] rights. It argues that citizens have their own responsibility to ensure themselves against social risk […]. It has attempted to break down the relation between social and political citizenship" (Lister et al., 2007, p. 52).
4. Given the qualitative and sociological approach of this research, please refer to Baiocco et al. (2015), Lingiardi et al. (2016), and Pistella et al. (2016) for quantitative and psychological data on coming out and sexual stigma in Italy.
5. BDSM is an acronym that stands for bondage/discipline; dominance/submission; sadism/masochism. It "is the umbrella term used to describe a set of consensual practices that usually involve an eroticized exchange of power" (Turvey & Butt, 2016, p. 24).

Notes on contributor

Beatrice Gusmano is a research fellow in the project INTIMATE— Citizenship, Care and Choice: The Micropolitics of Intimacy in Southern Europe (2014–2019), funded by the European Research Council. Within this research project, she focuses on LGBTQ polyamory, lesbian/bisexual mothers accessing ARTs (Artificial Reproductive Techniques), and friendship between LGBTQ people who decide to cohabit in adult life. She defended her PhD dissertation at the University of Trento (Italy) in 2009, with a thesis on the construction and management of nonheterosexual identities at work. Her main research interests are Queer intimacies and kinship, consensual/ethical nonmonogamies, LGBT local public policies in Europe and in Italy, bullying, and gender education. She is currently member of the Board of the ESA Research Network on Sexualities.

Funding

ORCID

Beatrice Gusmano http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1645-1044

References

Act 20 Law no. 76. (2016). Regulations on Civil Unions between same Sex Persons and Discipline of Cohabitation.

Aviram, H., & Leachman, G. M. (2015). The future of polyamorous marriage: Lessons from the marriage equality struggle. *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender*, *38*, 1–69.

Baiocco, R., Fontanesi, L., Santamaria, F., Ioverno, S., Marasco, B., Baumgartner, E., & Laghi, F. (2015). Negative parental responses to coming out and family functioning in a sample of lesbian and gay young adults. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *24*(5), 1490–1500. doi:10.1007/s10826-014-9954-z

Barker, M.-J., & Langdridge, D. (2008). Bisexuality: Working with a silenced sexuality. *Feminism and Psychology*, *18*(3), 389–394. doi:10.1177/0959353508092093

Barker, M.-J., & Langdridge, D. (2010). Whatever happened to non-monogamies? Critical reflections on recent research and theory. *Sexualities*, *13*(6), 748–772. doi:10.1177/1363460710384645

Bauer, R. (2014). *Queer BDSM intimacies: Critical consent and pushing boundaries*. New York, NY and Oxon, England: Routledge.

Bell, D., & Valentine, G. (1995). (Eds.). *Mapping desire. Geographies of sexuality*. London, England and New York, NY: Routledge.

Bertone, C., & Gusmano, B. (2013). Queerying the public administration in Italy: Local challenges to a national standstill. In Y. Taylor & M. Addison (Eds.), *Queer presences and absences* (pp. 260–278). London, England: Palgrave and Macmillan.

Bowes-Catton, H., & Hayfield, N. (2015). Bisexuality. In C. Richards & M.-J. Barker (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of the psychology of sexuality and gender* (pp. 42–59). London, England: Palgrave.

Brenner, N., & Theodore, N. (2002). Building "Euro-regions": Locational politics and the political geography of neoliberalism in post-unification Germany. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, *7*(4), 317–343. doi:10.1177/096977640000700403

Breveglieri, M. (2008). *Sexuality, liminality and "borderwork": the case study of bisexual experience* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Department of Sociology, University of Padua. http://paduaresearch.cab.unipd.it/958/1/TesiBreveglieri.pdf

Brown, G. (2016). *Bi erasure in the polyamorous community totally happens – here's how*. Retrieved from http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/bi-erasure-in-polyamory/

Butler, J. (1993). Critically queer. *GLQ*, *1*, 19–32. doi:10.1215/10642684-1-1-17

Caldwell, K. (2010). We exist: Intersectional in/visibility in bisexuality & disability. *DSQ Disability Studies Quarterly*, *30*(3/4), Retrieved from http://dsq-sds.org/ article/view/1273/1303#top

Callis, A. S., Blackwood, E., Anderson, M., Decker, A., Gruenbaum, E., Scarlette, E., & Mcguire, S. (2013). The black sheep of the pink flock: Labels, stigma, and bisexual identity. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *13*(1), 82–105. doi:10.1080/15299716.2013.755730

Cooper, D. (2006). Active citizenship and the governmentality of local lesbian and gay politics. *Political Geography*, *25*(8), 921–943. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.08.009

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist policies. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1), 139–167. Available at: https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Crenshaw, K. (1993). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299. doi:10.2307/1229039

Cruz, E. (2014). *13 lies we have to stop telling about bisexual people*. Retrieved from http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/10/13-lies-about-bisexuals/

Di Feliciantonio, C. (2015). The sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity in an "exceptional" Country: Italy. *Acme: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *14*(4), 1008–1031.

Di Feliciantonio, C. (2016). Subjectification in Times of indebtedness and neoliberal/austerity urbanism. *Antipode*, *48*(5), 1206–1227. doi:10.1111/anti.12243

Ferrera, M. (2008). *Welfare state reform in Southern Europe: Fighting poverty and social exclusion in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece*. London, England: Routledge.

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2015). *Protection against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity and sex characteristics in the EU: Comparative legal analysis Update 2015*. Available at: http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2015/lgbti-comparative-legalupdate-2015

Gagnon, J. H., & Simon, W. (1973). *Sexual conduct: The social sources of human sexuality*. Illinois, New Brunswick: Aldine.

George, S. (1999). Extracts from "Women and Bisexuality." In M. Storr (Ed.), *Bisexuality: A critical reader* (pp. 100–106). London, England and New York, NY: Routledge.

Gorman-Murray, A. (2007). Rethinking queer migration through the body. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *8*(1), 105–121. doi:10.1080/14649360701251858

Greimas, A. J. (1970). *On meaning*. Paris, France: Éditions du Seuil.

Gusmano, B. (2008). Coming out or not? How nonheterosexual people manage their sexual identity at work. *Journal of Workplace Rights*, *13*(4), 473–496. doi:10.2190/WR.13.4.g

Gusmano, B. (2016, September 1). *For whose best interest? The Italian debate on lesbian and gay parenting*. Paper presented at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society Conference, London, England.

Gusmano, B. (2017). Uncomfortable bargains? Networking between local authorities and LGBT associations in the context of Neoliberalism. In A. King, A. C. Santos, & I. Crowhurst (Eds.), *Sexualities research, critical interjections, diverse methodologies, and practical applications* (pp. 153–166). New York, NY: Routledge.

Hemmings, C. (2002). *Bisexual spaces: A geography of sexuality and gender*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Horncastle, J. (2008). Queer bisexuality: Perceptions of bisexual existence, distinctions, and challenges. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *8*(1/2), 25–49. doi:10.1080/15299710802142192

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association Europe. (2016). *Annual review of the human rights situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people in Europe: Italy*. Brussels, Belgium: Retrieved from https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/annual_review_2016-for_web.pdf

Klesse, C. (2005). Bisexual women, non-monogamy and differentialist anti-promiscuity discourses. *Sexualities*, *8*(4), 445–464. doi:10.1177/1363460705056620

Klesse, C. (2007). *The spectre of promiscuity. Gay male and bisexual non-monogamies and polyamories*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.

Klesse, C. (2011). Shady characters, untrustworthy partners, and promiscuous sluts: Creating bisexual intimacies in the face of heteronormativity and biphobia. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *11*(2/3), 227–244. doi:10.1080/15299716.2011.571987

Knous, H. M. (2006). The coming out experience for bisexuals. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *5*(4), 37–59. doi:10.1300/J159v05n04_05

Lasio, D., & Serri, F. (2017). The Italian public debate on same-sex civil unions and gay and lesbian parenting. *Sexualities*, forthcoming. http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1363460717713386#articleCitationDownloadContainer

Leitner, S. (2003). Varieties of familialism: The caring function of the family in comparative perspective. *European Societies European Societies*, *5*(4), 353–375. doi:10.1080/1461669032000127642

León, M., & Pavolini, E. (2014). "Social investment" or back to "familism": The impact of the economic crisis on family and care policies in Italy and Spain. *South European Society & Politics*, *19*(3), 353–369. doi:10.1080/13608746.2014.948603

Lingiardi, V., Nardelli, N., Ioverno, S., Falanga, S., Di Chiacchio, C., Tanzilli, A., & Baiocco, R. (2016). Homonegativity in Italy. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *13*(2), 95–108. doi:10.1007/s13178-015-0197-6

McLean, K. (2007). Hiding in the closet? *Journal of Sociology*, *43*(2), 151–166. doi:10.1177/1440783307076893

McLean, K. (2008a). Inside, outside, nowhere. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *8*(1/2), 63–80. doi:10.1080/15299710802143174

McLean, K. (2008b). Inside, outside, nowhere: Bisexual men and women in the gay and lesbian community. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *8*(1/2), 63–80. doi:10.1080/15299710802143174

McLean, K. (2008c). Silences and stereotypes: The impact of (mis)constructions of bisexuality on Australian bisexual men and women. *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review*, *4*(3), 158–165. http://doi.org/1833-4512

McLean, K. (2011). Bisexuality and nonmonogamy: A reflection. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *11*(4), 513–517. doi:10.1080/15299716.2011.620857

Mint, P. (2004). The power dynamics of cheating: Effects on polyamory and bisexuality. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *4*(3/4), 55–76. doi:10.1300/J159v04n03_04

Monro, S. (2015). *Bisexuality. Identities, politics, and theories*. London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mosher, C. M. (2001). The social implications of sexual identity formation and the coming-out process: A review of the theoretical and empirical literature. *Family Journal*, *9*(2), 164–173. doi:10.1177/1066480701092011

Mudu, P. (2002). Repressive tolerance: The gay movement and the Vatican in Rome. *GeoJournal*, *58*(2/3), 189–196. doi:10.1023/B:GEJO.0000010838.88923.86

Naldini, M., & Jurado, T. (2013). Family and welfare state reorientation in Spain and Inertia in Italy from a European perspective. *Population Review*, *52*(1), 43–61. doi:10.1353/prv.2013.0003

Pavolini, E., & Raitano, M. (2015). Southern Europe between Social Rights and the Economic Crisis: The Welfare States in Time of Austerity. *Meridiana*, *2*(83), 9–30.

Pieper, M., & Bauer, R. (2005). Polyamory und mono-normativität. In L. Méritt, T. Bührmann, & N. Schefzig (Eds.), *More than one love: polyamorous relationships* (pp. 59–69). Berlin, Germany: Orlanda.

Pistella, J., Salvati, M., Ioverno, S., Laghi, F., & Baiocco, R. (2016). Coming-out to family members and internalized sexual stigma in bisexual, lesbian and gay people. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *25*(12), 3694–3701. doi:10.1007/s10826-016-0528-0

Plummer, K. (2003). *Intimate citizenship*. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Poggio, T. (2008). *The housing pillar of the Mediterranean welfare regime: Family, state and market in the social production of home ownership in Italy*. Paper presented at the ENHR Working Group - Home Ownership and Globalisation Conference: Building on Home Ownership: Housing Policies and Social Strategies, OTB Research Institute for Housing, Urban and Mobility Studies, Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands.

Rambukkana, N. P. (2004). Uncomfortable bridges. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *4*(3/4), 141–154. doi:10.1300/J159v04n03_11

Richardson, D., & Monro, S. (2012). *Sexuality, equality and diversity*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Robinson, M. (2013). Polyamory and monogamy as strategic identities. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *13*(1), 21–38. doi:10.1080/15299716.2013.755731

Rust, P. C. (1996). Monogamy and polyamory: Relationship issues for bisexuals. In B. Firestein (Ed.), *Bisexuality: The psychology and politics of an invisible minority* (pp. 127–148). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Seidman, S. (2002). *Beyond the closet: The transformation of gay and lesbian life*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Turvey, E., & Butt, T. (2016). BDSM - Bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; sadism and masochism, In C. Richards & M.-J. Barker (Eds.). *The Palgrave handbook of the psychology of sexuality and gender* (pp. 24–41). London, England: Palgrave.

Veaux, F., & Rickert, E. (2014). *More than two: A practical guide to ethical polyamory*. Portland, OR, Thorntree.

Wandrey, R. L., Mosack, K. E., & Moore, E. M. (2015). Coming out to family and friends as bisexually identified young adult women: A discussion of homophobia, biphobia, and heteronormativity. *Journal of Bisexuality*, *15*(2), 204–229. doi:10.1080/15299716.2015.1018657

Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a queer planet. *Social Text*, *29*(29), 3–17. doi:10.2307/466295

Weinberg, M. S., Williams, C. J., & Pryor, D. W. (2006). *Dual attraction: Understanding bisexuality*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yoshino, K. (2000). The epistemic contract of bisexual erasure. *Stanford Law Review*, *52*(2), 353–461. doi:10.2307/1229482