

Between fixed and fluid: exploring sexual identities



Process Work diploma project

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary, especially Western, world is characterised by constant change and lack of stability in many aspects. Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist and philosopher introduced the idea of “liquid modernity” referring to current times, when the individuals face constant changes – changing places, jobs, relationships, values and identities (Bauman, 2000). At the same time, people who live in this fluid world, still have a strong need for stability, knowing, being sure and being able to describe things in a definite way. Bauman (2000) observes that in fluid modernism traditional patterns of life and traditional networks of support are replaced by self-chosen ones. This both frees the individual from previous restrictions and burdens them with uncertainty.

I have experienced what is it like to find oneself between fluid experience and familiar patterns when I started questioning my own identity. In my early 30s, I set out on a quest to find out “who I really was” in terms of my sexual orientation. In my life, I went from being a heterosexual young woman who had (in hindsight) suppressed any signals that might indicate otherwise, to a lesbian who built serious relationships with women. I found myself, however, confused by my attractions towards men – that did not fit in the category I put myself in after I had come out in my mid-twenties. I found another category – bisexual, that reflected my experience a bit better. Something still did not feel right and I have finally realised that the problem lay in the need for a label itself. I wanted to pinpoint what was “true” by finding an accurate category, but in the process I had lost touch with my actual experience and feelings. The realisation that I do not have to label myself was liberating.

Still, the world expects us to be declared, stable and, in consequence, predictable. I had to listen to other people’s ideas about who I “really” am or to explain “what is the deal with me”. The world is also reflected in our psyche, so we can end up with quite a conundrum to deal with, internally and externally. It does not help that still in many parts of the world any kind of deviation from the heterosexual norm is a serious problem in itself.

The aim of this work is to explore the nature of the conflict between fixed and fluid stance on sexuality, sexual attractions, identity and orientation, using Process Work paradigm and methods.

In chapter 1 I present Process Work and its main ideas which constitute a framework I relate to later on. Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of past and current understandings of sexual identity, orientation, bisexuality and sexual fluidity. I refer to classical theories and current research to put my exploration in a wider context. Chapter 4 presents an application of Process Work ideas to better understand what prevents from having a more fluid approach towards human sexuality and its categorisation, on an individual and cultural level.

CHAPTER 1: SELECTED PROCESS WORK CONCEPTS

Process Work (PW in short, also known as process oriented psychology or POP) is a framework applied to work with individuals, families and organisations, created and developed by Arnold Mindell and his colleagues. In the 1970s Mindell, a jungian analyst at the time, noticed parallels and connections between what people experienced in their night-dreams, physical symptoms, relationships and other areas of life. Initially, he called this phenomenon a “dreambody”. His ideas, models and terminology evolved with time, however the fundamental philosophy and approach stays the same. Unlike some other contemporary psychological approaches, PW does not have ideas about what is “normal” or “healthy” nor does it have ready-made protocols what to do to help people feel better. Rather, it assumes that what people perceive as “problems” or “obstacles” carry information about a solution best for given individual or group. That solution can be found by applying awareness to the moment to moment experience and helping unfold it using various techniques of working with dreams, body symptoms, emotions, thoughts and other elements of the experience. Instead of “fixing” problematic states, behaviours or experiences, PW encourages deeper understanding of what is happening, believing in an inherent wisdom and purpose of what may seem “disturbing” - having respect and compassion towards the pain and trouble a “disturbance” causes nonetheless.

Identity: the primary, the secondary and the edge

When talking about sexual orientation, inevitably the concept of identity has to be considered. The basic question of „who am I” is pivotal and often dramatic in the context of non-heterosexuality. I explore this topic in relation to sexual orientation in chapter 2. Here, I present Process Work ideas related to identity.

* With the exception of being a victim of a violent abuse of power (whether in a relationship or in severe cases of inner criticism). As much as therapeutic work with trauma and abuse can eventually lead to growth and empowerment PW’s stand is that violence needs to be stopped and victims protected in the first place.

The concept of primary and secondary process is one that classifies the contents of one's psyche according to whether the individual "identifies" with them or not. Thus, the primary process is what the person accepts as "this is me", "I'm like this", and the secondary is what that person sees as "this is not me". "I am/I am not" is, however, only one of the criteria that helps classify something as primary/secondary. There are the following four dimensions of the identity:

- awareness (do I know about this?)
- intention (am I intentionally behaving like this?)
- identification (does it feel like this is how I am?)
- agency (am I the one doing this or is this happening to me?)

These dimensions are independent, so for example a feeling/behaviour of being attracted to someone might be at the same time non-intentional (*I don't want to do that*), without agency (*this is happening to me*), not identified with (*I am not like that*) but aware of (*I know that this is happening*). In this case, being attracted is a secondary process. In a different example, a person very kind to others, is fully aware of it, is kind intentionally, thinks about herself/himself as being kind, and feels in control of her/his kind actions. This would be a "full" primary identification.

Our identity structure acts as a filter through which we perceive the world, so our primary/secondary configuration will affect how we react to what we encounter in the world. If, for example, being flirtatious is secondary to me, I might have strong feelings towards people which I perceive as such. They might seem "frivolous" or "immoral" to me and I would make comments that it is "stupid" or "too much". On the other hand, I might not see myself as flirtatious, but (secretly or directly) envy others this ability and wish I could be more like them. Either way, the fact that this particular quality/behaviour is secondary to me, makes me pay attention to it, acting like a psychological magnet. It does not, however, automatically imply a negative or positive attitude, it can evoke both attraction or repulsion.

The concept of primary and secondary identification is very useful to see and understand inner constellation of different aspects of the psyche. Even more important

however, is to see how those aspects relate to each other. In his more recent works (Mindell, 2010; Mindell, 2013), Mindell introduced the concept of “u” and “X energy” which shifts the attention to the relational aspect between the identity (the u) and the disturbing quality (X energy). This helps to avoid the pitfall of thinking about the primary process as something lesser (old, useless) than the secondary (something better that needs to be integrated) – or, the other way around. Finding a way to let those two sides communicate and (ideally) find a way for them to co-exist and embrace the marginalised parts.

Tomasz Teodorczyk in his book *Mindell and Jung: Re-editions and Inspirations* describes the opposition between the primary and secondary as “the main structure of human psyche and the main developmental mechanism” (2016, p. 19). He also points out in the same book that:

It defines the foundations of human psychic being – the identity, and gives structure to human experience, marginalising and/or expelling the “not me” experience outside the sphere of acceptable feelings. The person is thus deprived of access to the bigger part of his/her potential. This pattern of human functioning is the biggest problem (from the point of view of the current identity) and the biggest opportunity (from the point of view of growth towards completeness). (p. 19)

What stands in the way of communication between the primary and the secondary is what we call edges. Mindell defines an edge as an experience related to the boundary of awareness, the edge of our identity. So “edge” means being on the edge of what one identifies with. As Mindell explains, “going over an edge is always an immense experience; you feel that your identity is changing, confused, lost or challenged” (1995, p. 71). Edges create a division between primary and secondary processes. Mindell adds: “If you work on your edges, you become, momentarily at least, a fluid person” (1995, p. 71). Edge is what makes it difficult to embrace what is on the other side. It is what makes it hard to accept, be willing to discover and act out that which is secondary.

* This and further translations from this book by Joanna Boj.

One of the questions that inspired me to write this work was about what prevents people from being more open towards sexual fluidity and letting go of labels when it comes to sexual orientation. This question is in fact about personal and socio-cultural edges, and primary and secondary processes – the interplay between individual and collective psychological structures.

At the edge we usually encounter a variety of beliefs or belief systems, norms, dos and don'ts, and warnings, that stem out of personal experiences, family, society and culture. This is why often the configuration of primary-edge-secondary in an individual is a reflection of the macro-structure of the surrounding world/culture/society. We can look at phenomena such as homophobia or racism as macro-scale cultural edges that are an effect of a minority becoming an object of a collective projection of majority's secondary processes. At the same time, all that is present locally in each individual psyche – a holographic structure containing the whole image in each of its parts.

Edge figures are inner personifications of such beliefs, acting as guardians of the status quo. They stand in front of closed doors and have a multitude of reasons to stop one from opening them and exploring something new. The problem is that the edge figures do not always really know what is out there, and they are often limited in their views which they base on assumptions or generalisations.

To be clear, edges and edge figures are not “bad” things. They are a natural feature of the inner world, where it is important that some things are kept constant and/or contained, at least at times. They have a conservative function, preventing change so that the identity is protected. The same goes for cultural norms in general – they play an important role in keeping our everyday world predictable and stable. An edge and its surroundings can be a scary place full of uncomfortable feelings. Thus, it is usually some form of crisis (relational, emotional, physical) that calls for edge work and demands better communication between primary and secondary processes, and a more inclusive inner approach. Edges that are too rigid make dealing with any change that shakes up the primary identity very difficult. Additionally they can potentially create tension between people, leading to marginalisation, discrimination or violence.

State, process and change

Tomasz Teodorczyk explains the centrality of change in the Process Work approach,

[I]t is a psychological approach that deals with change in all its manifestations; facilitates it, i.e. accompanies and supports it in such a way that communication between different parts of the person that have dissimilar attitude to said change happens with the most awareness possible, inclusively and respectfully towards any, even the smallest, part of the system. (2016, p.17)

Human experience is marked by a virtually never ending flow of subjective and objective changes on various levels. Change is also one of the fundamental qualities that define life itself. The universality of change has many implications in Process Work practice. It is recognised that whatever is in this moment can be something else in the next one. Labels that assume a state-oriented view of a person (psychiatric diagnoses, personality traits, etc.) are utilised carefully and are not basic elements of Process Work. Their usefulness is not entirely denied (in certain contexts diagnoses need to be considered) but it is the phenomenological notion of valuing the momentary individual experience (sensory, psychological, emotional, spiritual) that is Process Work's main focus.

In the context of sexuality, this has important implications. Most of the sexual orientation theories define it as something stable. There is a process of discovering, coming to terms with and embracing one's (non-heterosexual) orientation, but once it is accepted, it does not change. The same goes for heterosexuality – if one does not question their orientation, it is assumed they will stay heterosexual forever. There is, however, some research that proves otherwise. Sexuality is not necessarily set in stone. I explore this in detail in chapter 3.

Also, sexuality is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. Who we date, with whom we maintain long-term relationships, who we crush on, about whom we fantasise, who and what we find attractive, who and what grabs our attention while walking down the street and how does that all happen in relation to various life-stages and circumstances - these are all

different aspects of sexuality. This richness of human sexual experience seems too lively to be bound in a state-like description that utilises simple categories such as homo- or heterosexual.

Reality levels

Process Work approach makes an important distinction between different levels of reality, or, in other words, different aspects of our experience and perception.

Consensus reality (CR) relates to that part of the experience which is commonly thought of as “real” (Diamond & Spark Jones, 2004), something that most of the people would agree upon. It is a domain of the objective, things that we can easily discuss among ourselves, having common points of reference. CR is usually measurable in some way, Mindell states that “CR is the world of experimental physics, where you can measure signals and make observations” (2000b, p. 37). We can have different opinions about those measurements, but the reality itself is just what it is at this level. It is important to note that CR “deals with the world of issues, problems, and also rank and power” (Reiss, 2013, p. 49). This is where we talk about the reality of the world around us – inequality, discrimination, abuse, homophobia, etc. This is where it is needed to acknowledge the reality as it is, sometimes very bitter, and to think of ways of coping, protecting oneself and creating tangible change. At this level, there is also a place for data, statistics, and research that reflect an important part of what is being experienced by many.

Non-consensus reality (NCR) is the domain of the subjective experience. From the CR perspective experiences such as dreams, fantasies, feelings, projections, and everything else that creates our inner landscape, are not necessarily “real”. They are thus often marginalised – ignored, not paid attention to, rationalised or even ridiculed. “Perception and awareness are governed by marginalisation. We cannot function if we do not marginalise certain perceptions in favour of others. At the social level, some experiences are viewed as “normal” and included in our everyday identity and world view. Others are pushed aside or rejected as “not me”. Sometimes experiences are marginalised because they are threatening. Sometimes this

happens when experiences are too subtle or unusual for our ordinary awareness to perceive them” (Diamond & Spark Jones, 2004, p. 21-22).

NCR comprises of “dreamland” and “sentient” (also called “essence”) levels.

In dreamland you notice dreams, fantasies, figures and objects while awake or asleep (Mindell, 2000a). It is important to note that dreamland does not mean it relates only to what we experience while asleep. This is a level of our inner stories inhabited with roles, figures, voices, and feelings. If for example, we were to make a decision, but are “of two minds about it”, there are two (or more) inner figures that have different opinions or attitudes towards that decision or expected results. One may be optimistic and eager to do something, other might be reluctant and cautious, creating negative scenarios in one’s head. These inner figures might also appear in night-time dreams, as chasing scary monsters, magical allies, mythical figures or any other possible kinds of people, animals or objects. In dreamland, we tend to concentrate on emotions, needs, attractions, inner conflicts and the way each individual experiences their life. It is here that we deal with internalised oppression, effects of past abuse, but also dreams, hopes, and inner strength.

The last and deepest level is one of the “essence”. “Here you notice deep experiences, normally disregarded feelings and sensations that have not yet expressed themselves in terms of meaningful images, sounds and sensations” (Mindell, 2000a, p. 35-36). This idea comes from a Taoist notion that underneath every polarisation that we experience as the reality of this world, there is a deep level of unity that binds everything together. “The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao” (Lin, 2017), which means that the essence is non-verbal and non-conceptual. Nevertheless, we can make a journey deep inside our feelings to get glimpses of that primary unity where conflict and polarisation don’t (yet) exist, where we can touch on the deepest connections with the rest of the world and people.

Process Work is very practical in approaching the essence level with many techniques helpful in experiencing it. Such experiences can bring fresh perspectives on issues that seem difficult or even impossible to solve on other levels. The sentient level is often a source of inner wisdom and strength supportive in dealing with internal and external conflicts and tensions.

It is important to consider every level of reality when referring to complex issues comprising of social and individual aspects. A common psychological pitfall is to concentrate only on the individual psyche, its mechanisms, “issues”, ways of coping, etc. It is easy then to burden a person with all the responsibility for the difficulties they are having, when in fact, the CR level, the actual social and cultural reality has an undeniable impact. This works the other way round as well. Concentrating only on the social dynamics, or on models, stages, and theories leads to ignoring and marginalising of the individual experience.

Let's consider an example. Ann, a woman who never had a same-sex romantic or sexual experience before, finds herself attracted to another woman. Ann is currently in a heterosexual relationship. She is reluctant to act in any way on her attraction, but her feelings are overwhelming and she cannot think of anything else other than her crush.

At the **consensus reality** level there are questions about:

- Her sexual orientation from a scientific point of view: Was she a closeted lesbian? Is she bisexual? Is it some sort of a phase?
- About her relationship: Is this a reaction to some crisis in the relationship? Are her fantasies cheating already?
- About the current socio-political situation where she lives: If she was to act on her attraction, would that be easily accepted? Would she be discriminated against? Would she be in danger?

At the **dreamland** level, we might encounter inner figures, fantasies, feelings such as:

- Guilt for being attracted to someone outside her monogamous relationship
- Voices of internalised homophobia telling her that her feelings are sinful
- Irresistible fantasies about being sexual with another woman
- Night-time dreams where she acts out her same-sex sexual fantasies and feels a deep bond with a woman
- Fears about her future and security should she decide to pursue her attraction

At the **essence** level she might, for example, have an experience of deep unity with people regardless of their gender, feeling one with nature and all sentient beings, that would lead her to consider questions such as “am I in deep connection with myself and others?”

Her acts and decisions are determined by the constellation of the primary and secondary processes, along with edges in relation to her inner and the outer reality. Levels of reality help us see the different layers that need to be considered and that create the complexity of her situation.

Deep democracy and marginalisation

According to Mindell (2002), there are two main problems with the concept of democracy in our world. Firstly, even though it is based on ideals of freedom and liberty, it is not concerned with individual issues and awareness at all. An average human can be truly democratic only for a while and most of the time, most of us act like tyrants – lacking awareness we tend to take sides, whether we deal with different aspects of ourselves or others. Secondly, democracy is a concept of power (of the people) not of awareness. As a result, democratic procedures let people pursue their interest (according to their values, norms, and needs) and it is usually their number that is most helpful in achieving that. It would be ideal if the majority also considered the interest of those who do not have enough “voting power” to fulfil their needs. In the real world, most often than not, the majority lacks awareness that would enable it to truly consider minority's position. The minority is usually simply “outvoted”.

Deep democracy is a concept that adds awareness to the equation. Building awareness is crucial to being able to empathise with the minority and understand that “having fewer votes” is not a reason good enough to ignore one's needs. Deep democracy recognises that even within the most democratic approach there is a big risk of a minority being marginalised – discriminated, superficially treated, not being fully heard, etc. It focuses on deepening the connection with even the smallest fraction of that which is being different than the

mainstream. It is both a practical approach with its set of tools and, fundamentally, a philosophical stance, that informs the entirety of the Process Work approach.

Marginalisation and exclusion have two aspects – external and internal. External marginalisation refers to groups of people being excluded by the majority. This can happen overtly (racial segregation, gay marriage not being legal, gay relationships being criminalised) or in subtle ways (“glass ceiling”, erasure from public discourse, microaggression). There is systemic discrimination on big scale (racial profiling, criminalisation of same-sex relationships or lack of marriage equality), but it also can happen on a very local, small scale (a group of friends looks for a place to go out and the more well-off do not consider those among them who cannot afford to go to a certain place). Depending on the context, certain people are being ignored, not heard, not considered, explicitly or implicitly denied their rights, erased from the public discourse, belittled, dismissed or threatened and endangered.

Inner marginalisation is a similar phenomenon that happens in our inner psychological worlds. There are parts of our self that are not being treated equally and with respect by other parts. If my main tendency is to be always agreeable, I ignore my anger or individuality. If I see myself as someone strong and independent, I might be marginalising my vulnerability. Mindell (2002) describes what usually happens:

Instead of enacting the democratic principle that the people or parts should all be represented, there is usually only one prevailing viewpoint – that of the everyday self. This 'dictatorial' viewpoint makes sure that we do not listen to the various parts of ourselves, our feelings, longings, desires, fears, and powers. (p. 10)

Inner and outer marginalisation are not separate things, they are more like two sides of the same coin. Inner marginalisation eventually leads to outer – it is difficult to accept something outside if it is not being accepted inside. Often, lack of acceptance of a certain behaviour or quality is a direct reflection (a projection) of not being able to include that quality in one's own psyche. How we see the world and how we react to it is a direct consequence of the way one's self/identity is organised.

The issue of parts/people being excluded is both ethical and practical. Ethical, since being recognised, respected and included is a fundamental human need. Thus, respect for anything that arises becomes a principle to be practically applied. Excluded parts/groups one way or another might cause trouble, so noticing them may solve conflicts or prevent violence. What is also important is that being marginalised has a deep negative emotional impact and can lead to depression, lack of self-worth and even suicide. So, fundamentally, the deep democracy principle is about the basic freedom to exist and be free from unnecessary suffering.

Deep democracy is then both an ideal worth striving for and a very practical path of working with people and ourselves. It is often challenging, as we meet people and groups in the social environment that we do not necessarily agree with or like, we might find similarly “unlikeable” parts in ourselves. Ideally, we should not push them away, ignore or slight, but attend to with kindness and respect. This requires almost constant awareness and skills to “orchestrate” all that we deal with.

Process Work as a framework provides concepts and tools valuable in the exploration of issues related to sexual identity. Deep democracy provides an attitude of openness and curiosity towards every kind of human experience, towards every role and every inner part of a person. This brings in respect and understanding into a very sensitive domain. Inclusion of the three levels of reality help to see a big picture and relations between social, emotional/psychological and spiritual aspects of sexuality. The concept of primary and secondary process give a better understanding of the complexity of identity, where do inner conflicts come from and how to approach them.

The following chapter explores the concept of sexual orientation and identity in-depth, drawing from various scientific fields, theories and research. It highlights the main concepts and issues of that domain, to give a foundation for further exploration of the topic.

CHAPTER 2: SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND IDENTITY

Identity

How do we get to be who we are?

In the Western highly individualised world, “who am I?” is one of the fundamental questions a person can ask. Some long for very specific answers. Pinning down and describing their identity in terms of labels and categories becomes a basis of relating with oneself and the world. Others feel that a label is only an idea that never truly reflects the complexity of being, or rather, the process of constant becoming.

We all have our own responses (implicit or explicit) to the “who are you?/who am I?” question and that is the simplest definition of identity (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011), which in itself is quite a complex construct theorised and researched by scholars from various disciplines; psychologists, sociologists and cultural theorists being the most prominent ones. Identity has four levels or aspects (Schwartz et al., 2011). The *individual* level includes such elements as beliefs, goals, values, self-esteem, one’s “life story”. The *collective* one refers to membership of social groups and categories. *Relational* identity reflects one’s roles in relation to other people, such as child, parent, spouse, co-worker, etc. Finally, people also treat personal possessions and significant places as part of their identity, thus they have *material* identities.

At the same time, identity categories can be treated as entities of their own; ways of thinking independent of the perspective of any one individual, created in particular social and historical contexts (Schwartz et al., 2011). What it means is that instead of seeing an identity from an individual’s perspective (for example: a Spanish lesbian woman, an emphatic psychotherapist, and an activist), identities such as “woman”, “lesbian”, “psychotherapist” or “activist” have their meanings that are constructed in a Western European society in the late 2010s (but they could be different in a different time and place). The aforementioned authors argue that these two perspectives are two sides of the same coin. We can create and explore our own meanings of identities (What does it mean *to me* to be a woman or to be Polish?), but

we cannot entirely escape the meanings that are created within the culture and identities that are available in a given context.

This is very relevant to discussions about sexual identity, choices people make identifying or not with certain sexual minority groups, and meanings that are ascribed to them. In a contemporary Western society such as the United Kingdom (where I currently live) we might take for granted that identities such as gay, lesbian or bisexual are available. However, the idea that “homosexual” is a possible identity, *something* someone *is*, is a relatively new concept having its roots in the late nineteenth century (Esterberg, 1997). On the other hand, same-sex relations, acts and relationships are ahistorical, in the way that they are common in the whole natural world.

In the 1970s and 1980s there had been a long and heated, but currently rather extinguished, debate among scholars researching sexuality related to whether one inherently *is* homosexual (“homosexuality as the distinguishing characteristic of a particular kind of person” (Weeks, 1981 quoted in Kitzinger, 1995, p. 139)) or if “homosexuality” is an idea constructed in a given cultural context and time. In other words, essentialists thought that, for example, a person can be a lesbian in her essence; that it is an objective and culture-independent, inherent fact, e.g. biological. Social constructionists posited that it is impossible to use such categories without inquiring into the nature of the categories themselves, and that there is no basic, fundamental human sexual nature. They also made a point of differentiating same-sex sexual activities and homosexual identities (Kitzinger, 1995).

In many cultures and historical periods same-sex act was not seen as a proof of a variance in orientation, and was not at all incompatible with heterosexual marriage and identification. Essentialists, on the other hand, would argue that different cultures have different ways of interpreting and governing expression of sexuality, but that doesn't imply that sexual orientation is merely a cultural construct (Diamond, 2008).

As it usually happens with most polarised debates, the bigger tendency on either side to radicalise the view, the less it is actually capable to be aligned with the complexity of reality. The decades long debate in psychology “nature versus nurture” turns out to be futile in the light of complex processes that govern the interaction between genes and the environment. Similarly here, as Diamond points out, essentialists are blind to important

cultural, social and political factors in identity formation and expression, but on the other hand, constructionists can quite stubbornly dismiss the importance of body and biological processes in sexual experience. She advocates for a more integrative approach, in which sexual feelings and experiences are simultaneously embedded in both physical-biological and sociocultural contexts (2008b).

With the rise of postmodernism in philosophy and social sciences at the end of the twentieth century, strongly influenced by feminism, queer theory became another framework for understanding sexual identity. It draws from social constructionism and proposes that sex, gender and sexual orientation are socially constructed in a binary way (man/woman, male/female, homosexual/heterosexual). This perspective sees people's identities as created through internalisation of the normative (heterosexual and binary) view of the world, which renders non-heterosexual identities marginalised (Katz-Wise, 2012).

Before we get deeper into exploration of concepts such as *sexual identity* or *sexual orientation*, this is a good moment to talk about definitions. The use of these terms in scientific literature is far from uniform. Sometimes they are used interchangeably, sometimes sexual orientation includes sexual identity, other times they are conceptualised as independent. Different researchers include different elements in them. For the sake of clarity, I will shortly present my understanding and usage of them in this work.

Dillon, Worthington, and Moradi (2011) define *sexual orientation* as a concept referring to an individual's patterns of sexual, romantic, and affectional arousal and desire (attraction) for other persons based on those persons' gender and characteristics (p. 652) – and this is my basic understanding of this concept. Further in this chapter I explore it more in-depth.

Savin-Williams (2011) defines sexual identity as “Sexual identity is the name and meaning individuals assign to themselves based on the most salient sexual aspects of their life – such as sexual attractions, fantasies, desires, and behaviours. Sexual identities usually fall within existing social categories, such as straight, bisexual, or lesbian/gay, and are historically and culturally specific” (p. 671). In my usage, sexual identity will refer the individual's conscious acknowledgement and internalisation of sexual orientation but not necessarily to their sexual practices or social affiliations with certain communities, as they are sometimes included in sexual identity as a larger construct.

To give a simplified example: a woman's sexual relations with other women might be referred to as a reflection of her homosexual (or bisexual) *orientation*, but her sexual *identity* might or might *not* be lesbian (bisexual, queer). If she does identify as lesbian it can (but doesn't have to) also mean that she feels part of the lesbian community. She may *not* label herself a lesbian but for example say she is a woman loving women, because she doesn't identify with the lesbian community or doesn't wish to have a label assigned.

Sexual orientation

How many orientations are there and what does sexual orientation orient?

In the early days of sexology, an individual's sexuality was not defined by the gender (same, opposite or both) of the people one is attracted to but rather by the gender of the desiring subject her/himself. 'Feminine' men would be attracted to other men and 'masculine' women would be attracted to other women. Someone attracted to both genders would be what was termed a 'psychic hermaphrodite'. Karl Ulrichs was a nineteenth-century pioneering sexologist and activist, thought of one of the founders of the modern study of homosexuality and bisexuality. He proposed one of the earliest sexual orientation classifications, theorising that at the embryonic stage of the development people divide into (heterosexual) men, (heterosexual) women and a (homosexual) third sex: females trapped in male bodies and males trapped in female bodies (Bowes-Catton, Hayfield, 2015, p. 43). He later on recognised and included bisexuality within the 'third sex' category.

Theories of Sigmund Freud influenced strongly the concepts of sexuality. Initially, he also believed in 'psychic hermaphroditism' and thought that bisexuality was the root of all sexualities. In the absence of any pathology, a healthy individual would evolve from the primordial bisexual state and become heterosexual. With time sexologists shifted their focus from sexual inversion (masculine, feminine) and homosexual behaviour, in effect, the concept of sexual identities emerged.

In the early twentieth century, Freud developed his complex theory of psychosexual development, a process psychological rather than biological and related to child's relationships with parents. Bisexuality and homosexuality were failures in psychosexual

development (Bowes-Catton, Hayfield, 2015), but despite a widespread belief, as Riggs (2015) argues, early sexologists and psychiatrists did not view homosexual intimacy as pathology. It was rather seen as a biological anomaly or even a part of natural human variation. It was, however, pathologised and seen as deviant by many psychiatrists throughout mid-twentieth century, in part drawing upon misinterpretation of Freud's work.

In the late 1940s one of the most famous researchers of human sexuality, a zoologist Alfred Kinsey shocked the American public with the results of his investigation into human sexuality. His team's study based on interviews with over 20.000 participants found that a third of American males and 13 percent of females claimed to have had at least one same-sex orgasmic experience by age 45. Kinsey also questioned rigid categorisations of sexual orientation. In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948, quoted in Richards & Barker, 2015), he famously wrote:

The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black not all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and convey one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex. (p. 46)

Kinsey has developed a seven point scale to rate human sexuality. At one end of the continuum lies "exclusively heterosexual" (0) and at the other "exclusively homosexual" (7) with 5 points in between. Seven points instead of just two or three possibilities (with bisexuality having little recognition at that time) was a big step forward, however not widely pursued or developed among Kinsey's contemporaries and not picked up for many decades to come.

Kinsey's scale has some limitations. The problem is that people with the same "Kinsey number" may not have the same sexualities (van Anders, 2015) and we do not really know what is the experience of someone with a given number (Klein, 1993). Numbers on a scale become vague categorisations. It is worth noting, that originally Kinsey's scale was intended to index behaviour, but it is often used to measure sexual identity. Also, the scale has been

criticised because of its one dimensionality. Increasing desire for one sex represents reduced desire for the other sex, which in reality may not always be the case (Dillon et al., 2011, p. 652). In fact, it has been proposed to see same-sex attractions and other-sex attractions as two relatively independent dimensions and may not be mutually exclusive (Diamond, 2008b; Pereira et al., 2017).

Fritz Klein, an American psychiatrist and sexologist and a pioneer of bisexuality study, drew from Kinsey's model and developed a more complex one. He proposed seven distinct variables that sexual orientation consists of: (1) Sexual attraction, (2) sexual behaviour, (3) sexual fantasies, (4) emotional preference, (5) social preference, (6) heterosexual – homosexual lifestyle, (7) self-identification, and proposed that the 7 point scale is applied to every one of them (1993, p. 16).

Klein argued that only then can we have a full, complex and authentic image of one's sexual orientation. The elements mentioned above are independent from each other, so they can but not necessarily have to be synchronised. For example, someone can self-identify as 1 (predominantly heterosexual), but have same-sex fantasies, attractions or even behaviours. Someone else might be sexually attracted to the whole gender spectrum, but get emotionally involved only with one sex. On top of that, Klein added three temporal categories: past, present and ideal that introduce the element of change in human sexuality. He emphasised that “The concept of an ongoing, dynamic process must be included if we are to understand a person's orientation” (1993, p. 19).

Van Anders (2015) points out another facet of complexity regarding sexual orientation: “Since understandings of sexual orientation generally revolve around gender, this means that gender is de facto foundation for categorising sexuality” (p. 1177). This raises an interesting question whether we really know if it is gender (socialised, cultural features related to masculinity, femininity, and gender diversity) or sex (biological, evolved, physical features related to femaleness, maleness, and sex diversity) that actually underlies sexual orientation and how are they related. In other words, what are we attracted to if we are for example attracted to women? Is it their vaginas and breasts, their emotionality, their social identities, the way they interact and relate? What about masculine women or feminine men? What about men and women that are well connected with both their femininity and masculinity? All the

in-betweens? As van Anders puts it, “the concept of sexual orientation bulldozes these distinctions in ways that are neither scientifically useful nor reflective of lived experiences” (p. 1178).

Van Anders (2015) proposes a Sexual Configuration Theory (SCT) as a way to address the complexities of actual people's sexualities. Sexuality is much more than just one's sex/gender and their partner's sex/gender. According to SCT each person has a sexual configuration that is composed of locations in multiple sexual dimensions, such as gender, sex, partner number, nurturance (feelings of care and love), and eroticism. A rich diversity is included in each of the dimensions, so they do not generate rigid categories. Also, behaviour (what people do), identity (how people label themselves) and orientation (people's attractions) are treated as simultaneously related and distinct. Within this model, change is seen as potentially central, rather than peripheral or deviant. SCT brings forth a detailed map of human sexuality much broader than classical concepts of “sexual orientation”. It strives to be as inclusive as possible and reflecting actual human experience.

Van Anders' work is an example of recent developments in studies of human sexuality. There are other interesting ideas that strive towards better inclusion of diverse experiences and result in complex models that potentially reflect human sexuality better than the classical models. Also, still most studies base on the heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual categories, but it is currently more frequent for researchers to include more varied identity categories (such as predominantly hetero/homosexual, pansexual, queer, etc.) and go beyond a one-dimensional understanding of sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation and identity formation

How does one find out about being gay?

Homosexuality used to be connected with trauma, abuse, “troubled” relationships or improper parenting that effected in faulty psychological development, but evidence shows that is not the case. Having a non-heterosexual orientation is just another developmental trajectory - not a faulty one. A growing body of research focuses on biological factors. Three main areas are considered important: genes, prenatal hormones and brain structure. Most

scientists believe it is an interplay of these factors that influences/determines sexual orientation. As the American Academy of Pediatrics states (Frankowski, 2004):

The mechanisms for the development of a particular sexual orientation remain unclear, but the current literature and most scholars in the field state that one's sexual orientation is not a choice; that is, individuals do not choose to be homosexual or heterosexual. A variety of theories about the influences on sexual orientation have been proposed. Sexual orientation probably is not determined by any one factor but by a combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences. Current knowledge suggests that sexual orientation is usually established during early childhood.

Lisa Diamond lists the most commonly assessed milestones in early sexual development: (a) childhood feelings of differentness that may or may not be associated with sexual issues; (b) gender atypical behaviour, appearance, or interests; (c) fascination with or sexual attraction to the same sex, perhaps manifested in friendship choices, fantasies, dreams, or sex play; (d) disappointment or lack of interest in the other sex; (e) gradual realisation of sexual as well as romantic feelings toward the same sex; and (f) conscious questioning of one's sexual identity (2008b, p. 47).

An important part of sexual identity development is the process of "coming out", which relates to gaining awareness of and coming to terms with one's orientation. There are over twenty models of sexual identity development, however they all assume that this is a linear process that occurs in stages. They can be summarised as descriptions of what is occurring at the stage of pre-awareness (not knowing about one's same-sex attractions), awareness and post-awareness (disclosure to others). The problem is that in actual people's experience "well-defined and universal starting and ending points in the search for sexual identity seldom exist" (Savin-Williams, 2011, p. 674).

Diamond calls this "the master narrative" known to scholars and laypeople alike, widely popularised not only in academic literature but in popular culture and public "coming out stories". It is characteristic for this narrative to depict the development of sexual orientation as stable over time, that is once discovered, the attractions stay the same across the lifetime. Also, different areas (sexual desire, romantic feelings and fantasies) are typically consistent,

for example having same-sex sexual attractions towards women automatically implies having romantic feelings and a desire to build relationships.

There are several defects of the stage models. They all assume that sexual identity is somehow “built-in, biologically determined, and it is developed “once” (and for good). The developmental stages lead to discovering and accepting who one “really” is. Any shift in identity (for example from lesbian to bisexual) would be seen as a deviation from the “normal” path, a proof that the identity was not yet formed (as in going from straight to gay) or at best are not theorised at all by stage models (Esterberg, 1997). Also, the stage models assume that there is a universal pathway of identity development that applies to all lesbian/gay/bisexual individuals. It was once thought that the emergence of same-sex attractions happens universally before adolescence, but as researchers gathered more data on diversity in developmental experiences, we now know that it is not always the case (Diamond, 2008).

This “master narrative” seems common sense in our culture and it impacts how people perceive sexuality in themselves and others. Stage models imply an assumption that the developmental process finishes with arriving at a point where the orientation is “developed” and one is sexually “mature”. Any kind of change, fluidity, especially in adult life, brings about a notion of lack of maturity, “not knowing what one wants” and many other beliefs damaging to people who experience such fluidity. I think it is crucial to emphasise developmental diversity, so that people who do not “fit” in the “master narrative” do not feel like their path isn't somehow “right”. Every person's experience is shaped in an individual way, even though similarities can be found as well. Factors that account for the uniqueness of each person's developmental path include: the environment (urban vs rural, different levels of homophobia in different countries), ethnicity (some cultures stigmatise same-sex sexuality more than others), gender (e.g. women show greater variability than men in the age at which they become aware of their same-sex attractions or consciously pursue same-sex sexual contact). Also, some researchers argue that women may not experience identity development in a linear fashion and may perceive it as continuous and circular (Brown, 2002).

Tom Brown (2002) gives an exhaustive review of sexual identity formation models. Most of them follow the stages pattern, however already in the 80s and 90s some researchers

started to notice that (especially in regard to female experience) sexuality is a dynamic process rather than a linear one. Brown summarises the themes emerging from his review:

Sexual identity development is complex, convoluted, and somewhat idiosyncratic. Individuals progress along their own path, at their own pace, and find their own meanings. In all of the models of sexual identity development reviewed here, two themes consistently emerged which appeared to apply to most individuals. The first theme was that of processing one's inner experience. This process included becoming aware of feeling different, self-acknowledging one's same-sex attraction, and applying meaning to one's experiences. (...) The second theme that emerged among the various identity development models was the importance of seeking interpersonal opportunities. Interpersonal opportunities included group affiliation/identification, sexual contact, and romantic relationships. (p. 9)

Savin-Williams (2011) argues that empirical base for sexual identity stage models is scant and people appear to be forced into stages rather than the models being an appropriate reflection of people's lives. Thus, current researchers are trying to create alternative models that would be a better fit for diverse and ever-changing lives of contemporary teens.

One of the more interesting contemporary models of sexual orientation development that takes into account more diversity in individual developmental paths is the Facilitative Environments Model (FEM) by Sabra Katz-Wise and Janet Hyde (2017). FEM posits that the factors that influence sexual orientation development and change occur on three converging levels: individual, interpersonal, and societal. It also includes the fairly recent concept of sexual fluidity (which I explore more in-depth in chapter 4), that is, the occurrence of changes in one's sexual orientation (in one or more of its components: attractions, behaviour and self-identification) in adulthood. It acknowledges that all versions of sexual fluidity represent processes of development.

FEM proposes that sexual orientation development and subsequent sexual fluidity are influenced by the following factors: (1) individual cognitive and affective factors, such as awareness or self-realization; (2) factors in an individual's immediate environment, such as

meeting a sexual minority person or learning about a specific sexual orientation identity label; and (3) factors in the larger societal environment, such as heteronormativity, racial/ethnic cultural influences, or the availability of particular categories and labels (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2017, p. 21).

The authors emphasise that interactions between an individual experience and these factors account for different developmental trajectories among sexual minority individuals who experience sexual fluidity. For example someone may become aware of their same-sex attractions, but take on a lesbian or gay identity only when becoming a part of an accepting and open environment. Someone else might have a strong gay identity and be part of gay community. Only upon experiencing very strong and “undeniable” romantic and/or sexual feelings towards an other-sex person they might consider a change in identity. Maybe the gay/lesbian community was very tight and same-sex exclusivity was as its identity core so much, that any momentary attractions and/or flirts were readily dismissed. Maybe a more general societal assumption that sexual orientation is stable over time once developed prevented that individual from opening up to other possibilities. Or maybe other-sex attractions were simply not present up to that point. The process of sexual orientation formation is a complex one, with various factors at play. Even though these factors can be determined, it is unique for every person.

To sum up, the development of sexual orientation is a unique process that sometimes follows the “master narrative” pattern, but it can also take a different trajectory. It is not solely an intrapsychic process. It happens in a context: from a very local one (family, school, peers, encounters) to a broader one (social norms, expectations, beliefs, mainstream, LGBT+^{*} communities, media). It also potentially is a continuous process, with changes occurring as a result of interactions with the world, personal experiences, changes related to age, personal growth and many more. Thus, it is neither accurate nor necessary to talk about endpoints or maturity in this context.

* In the past years the LGBT acronym is sometimes being expanded in order to be more inclusive, adding for example Q for queer, I for intersex, and A for asexual. There are many more diverse identities that should be noticed, appreciated and protected. I have arbitrarily chosen to use the LGBT+ acronym to reflect this (unless talking about the LGBT movement in a historical context), at the same time being aware of the complexities of this subject that are beyond the scope of this work.

Marginalisation of the non-heterosexual

Are we becoming more inclusive?

The general social and political climate for the LGBT+ community has been improving in many parts of the world. Marriage equality has been attained most recently in Australia, same-sex marriage or same-sex civil unions are legal in most of the EU countries, some countries in Latin America; in the US, Canada and New Zealand. There are still many places in the world where not adhering to the heterosexual norm is criminalised and penalised. International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association reports (2016) that in a total of 74 countries, same-sex sexual contact is a criminal offence and in 12 it is punishable by death. In 17 countries, bans are in place to prohibit 'propaganda' interpreted as promoting LGBT+ communities or identities and a total of 40 countries retain a 'gay panic' clause which enables people to use as a defence for committing crimes such as assault or murder that they were provoked because the person was gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Even in countries where being gay is legal, being part of the sexual minority is related to higher risk of mental health issues, self-harming, risky behaviours (such as excessive drinking), and suicide. It is the effect of being marginalised, not, as anti-gay campaigners try to persuade, of having non-mainstream sexuality itself. Many LGBT+ adults and youth face family rejection (to varying degrees, from their sexuality being a constant issue to abandonment and being told to leave the family home), harassment and bullying at school, workplace, and on social media. Many also experience physical violence. There is also systemic discrimination and lack of proper protection by law. This range of experiences contributes to anxiety related to constant vigilance and manoeuvring in the society, and has a negative impact on the general well-being and health of individuals and society.

There is a constant global clash between inclusion and exclusion. Same-sex marriage laws and anti-discrimination measure are adopted in more and more countries. The stigma against LGBT+ communities is lessening in many places. At the same time, discriminating laws are being introduced and political climate shifts unfavourably in various others. As a member of the LGBT+ community I feel joy whenever a new pro-diversity measure is being introduced or some kind of social or political action wins but at the same time immense anxiety,

frustration and sadness arise whenever I realise nothing can assure constant progress in this area. In countries such as in Poland, where some small steps had been made in the past two decades, but currently, due to a rise in the right and far-right support and power, a certain regress can be observed. Same-sex marriage laws can be inverted, currently (as of 2017) far-right radicalism is gaining strength all around Europe and in the US, and as a society we're always in danger of taking a step backwards. Since conservative and nationalist powers are on the rise globally, it is important to constantly increase awareness around these issues. LGBT+ rights are not only a matter of politics and law, it is also how much diversity we, as individuals, allow, how we relate to each other and to any kind of "otherness" in ourselves.

The closet

Why "how did you spend holiday" often is one of the most dreaded questions for non-heterosexual people?

I have already introduced the models of sexual orientation development that included the process of coming out. I would like to add to that, by presenting the phenomenon of the closet and coming out, as it is an important part of the sexual minority experience, also in the context of marginalisation.

"To be in the closet" means not being open about one's sexuality, towards oneself and the outer world. Of course there is no such thing as a heterosexual closet - you may not talk about your relationships openly, yet still it is assumed that you are heterosexual. You don't have to "discover" or "announce" that you are heterosexual, as you don't need to hide the fact that you have heterosexual attractions (have you ever noticed that there's also no such thing as heterosexual "tendencies", only homosexual ones?).

Coming out to oneself is related to recognising and acknowledging one's same-sex attractions. For some people it requires dealing with internalised anti-gay beliefs and/or fear of how they will be accepted in the world. Sometimes it takes some time and soul searching to come to terms with one's attractions and desires. For some, it is not a linear process and takes longer, for others it is pretty straightforward. At some point a person takes on an identity reflecting her orientation, but it can also be subject to fluctuations and changes later on.

Coming out in the world is about letting others know about one's sexuality. It is a perpetual process. Each and every new relationship, acquaintance, meeting, even the most fleeting connection might invite, require or impose a coming out. Since one's sexual orientation is not visible (one may or may not "appear" gay, it may or may not be a conscious choice, however sexual orientation itself is not usually obvious), being gay is "a thing" to be (or not) to be said. Not all context require that of course, but relationships are such an important part of most people's lives that it is difficult to avoid it in many situations. Someone might not want to announce their sexuality at work for example, but workplace chit-chat often is about people's wives, husbands, partners, and children, mentioned in the most casual way. The innocent question "so, who did you go with on your holiday" might be problematic for a non-heterosexual person. Even if the question is not asked in a direct way, for many sexual minority people, a conversation about holidays involves an assessment: am I safe enough to say I am with a same-sex partner, would it impact my situation at work, will I be stereotyped if people know, who in the room knows about me and who doesn't, will there be gossip, will people change how they see me and relate to me, etc.

There is the phenomenon of heteronormativity on the other hand. It is a widely held assumption that if someone doesn't explicitly say they are gay, it means they are straight. This assumption is not something conscious, it is just something people see as obvious and do not usually give it much thought. If a woman talks about her holiday in Spain, someone might ask "so, did you go with your boyfriend?" and she went with her girlfriend that she hadn't told anyone about, it puts her in a place where she has to immediately decide whether she wants to tell the truth and come out, avoid a straight answer ("I went with my partner" - which is not possible in languages that have gendered nouns) or lie to protect herself. For me, in an ideal world, one's sexual orientation would not be something to "admit", "reveal" or "announce". One would just casually say they went on holidays with Anna or John, without missing a beat, without anyone sending double signals, without fear, without hesitation. Just as casually as one would say they had porridge for breakfast. And not because one would not give a damn what other people say, but because other people would not give a damn whether it was Anna or John, as long as they treated you well.

Internalised oppression

How can gay people have anti-gay thoughts and feelings?

People who experience continuous oppression and/or abuse have a tendency to internalise the abusive system. That means that they are not only oppressed by forces outside of them, but also at some point their psyche begins to reflect the oppressor. A voice or an inner figure inside says similar things and acts in a similar way as the abusive other(s). For example, a person who is a member of a sexual minority, as a result holds negative beliefs about herself/himself and non-heterosexual sexuality. This can potentially escalate to the point of self-hatred, self-harm or suicide.

It can also be quite subtle – I remember being already fairly comfortable with myself and my sexuality, aware of the whole oppressive anti-gay rhetoric and generally a rather conscious person (subjectively), and still discovering within myself beliefs, thoughts, and feelings that were somewhat homo- and biphobic. Not in an overt way, not with raging hatred, but well rooted and cunningly resistant. I didn't not agree with these thoughts, but at the same time, they were deep inside me, they were a part of me. I felt like an oppressor and a victim at the same time.

This surely is a feeling familiar to many who experienced some level of abuse and/or oppression. It is confusing, disempowering and with a potentially detrimental impact on one's mental health. Internalised oppression makes it difficult to stand up for oneself, defend one's rights and feel good and at peace with who one is. The battle to be fought doubles, and the actual battle with the outer oppression gets increasingly difficult. It is not easy to fight for your rights if a part of yourself actually agrees with the oppressive narrative. Internalised oppression is one of the reasons why people who belong to discriminated groups suffer from depression and have heightened risk of suicide. Part of them believes what the oppressive figures say about them.

It is also worth pointing out that internalised oppression is not only experienced by people outside the mainstream (minorities). For example, there is a common oppressive stereotype that men are and have to be tough. Most men believe that and suppress their sensitivity and other “un-manly” qualities, criticising themselves for their smallest display.

Another one is that men need to deal with all their problems on their own. When it turns out to be impossible, they see themselves as weak and attack themselves for it – sometimes to the point of suicide.

Examples of internalised homophobia may include someone who identifies as a gay man and says “I’m proud to be gay, but I hate those effeminate faggots” - which is, in fact, a projection of a marginalised experience of being in touch with one’s feminine side (a lot of homophobia revolves around gay men not being “true men”). I have also heard a lot of gay men and lesbians saying things such as “I do not want all that pride thing happening, we do not need to stand out” which might be an expression of an inner figure saying “you shouldn’t stand out with who you are”. In a way, the inner oppressor is in alliance with the outer one, the one that says “I do not mind people being gay, but I’d rather they did what they do in the confinement of their own homes and not throw their lifestyle at us”.

This makes psychological work crucial when dealing with marginalisation and exclusion. Process work approach perceives internalised oppression as a very important issue to be worked on. The first step is to recognise both the inner oppressor and the inner victim. It is important to differentiate between the two, see how the relationship between them plays out, connect with all the feelings it evokes. Usually, first comes the empowerment of the victim and some sort of confrontation. Then, a better, more conscious access to the oppressor’s energy becomes possible, so that it ceases to be abusive and can be intentionally used when needed.

Changes in the consensus reality are very much needed, but it is difficult if not impossible, to separate what is social/political and what is psychological. It is only a matter of scale after all. The changes need to happen in our inner worlds so that they can emanate to the outside world as well. Also, it is quite difficult to change the world, if we have an inner conflict going on – it is two battles at once. Having access to the inner dynamics of oppression also helps us to be in touch with our wholeness, finding the strength to confront the (inner) abuser and finally, gaining access to the energy fuelling the oppressor – it can then be used in a conscious rather than self-harming way.

Intersections and a cultural framing of sexual identities

What shapes the uniqueness of our experiences?

People with non-heterosexual identities are not just gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers, etc. They simultaneously have other identities such as gender, ethnicity, cultural background, class, relationship status and many more. Intersection is thus a point where for a given individual various identities and statuses converge into a unique experience of self. The politics of LGBT+ movement produced a side-effect of gay people being perceived as uniform with their sexual identity being most prominent. In reality, a gay man can be a black middle-class, well-educated, living in a big city man or a white working-class, living in a big city but brought up in a rural area. A bisexual woman can be one working in IT surrounded by men, having a chronic but invisible illness, married to a man. Or, a second-generation East Asian psychology student in a relationship with a woman. Every one of these people experience privileges and disadvantages related to their various identities. Clarke et. al (2010) warn to be cautious of an “additive” approach, a calculation of privileges and advantages (e.g. woman + married to a man = less oppressed; woman + in a relationship with a woman = more oppressed), but rather to see the uniqueness and complexities of experiences produced by all of the intersecting identities simultaneously.

It is also important to note that culture shapes our understanding of sexuality, sexual orientation, gender, labels, freedom, choice, relationships and many more. Even such thing as romantic kissing that might seem universal to most of us (and for a long time Western researchers were convinced that it was a universal effect of evolutionary adaptation) turns out to be present in only over a half of the 168 cultures studied (Jankowiak, Volshe, & Garcia, 2015 as quoted in Lehmilller, 2017). Most, if not all, of the research I am citing is biased towards a Western understanding as is my personal perception of these matters. Also, a lot of the research, especially in psychology, is notorious for its lack of diversity in population sampling. The majority of study participants are white, middle-class, well-educated Americans. This tendency seems to be shifting in the recent years, but it is still important to be aware of this bias.

Finally, edges and the content of what is primary and secondary in the domain of sexuality and sexual identities differ depending on the cultural background, as the following excerpt from the “Getting Bi” (Ochs & Rowley, 2009) anthology illustrates:

Labels are limiting. The need to pigeon-hole identities can be as confining as a total lack of suitable labels. This is especially true in terms of sexual identity and orientation. (...)

[O]n a spectrum of sexual orientation where one is a homosexual and ten a heterosexual, I am probably an eight or a nine. Yet in America I cannot define myself on a spectrum. I have to be homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual; nothing in between. As a happily married woman, any acknowledgement on my part that I sometimes find women attractive necessarily places me in the only available category: that of bisexual. “But ‘bisexual’ is a powerful term, and I don’t think that my mild attractions quite warrant that label. (...)

In India, and perhaps most of South Asia, the situation is just the opposite. When I say that I find someone attractive or beautiful, my statement is considered an “objective” remark on the particular individual’s physical beauty or compelling nature. (...) I am allowed to be on my spectrum without the spectrum ever being acknowledged. This lack of acknowledgement, however, proves a serious problem for my friends who have embraced the labels of homosexual or bisexual. For them, the total lack of labels within their religion or cultural background makes them pariahs in their own homes and communities. For the majority of their community, their label makes their identities mutant.

- Rachana Umashankar (p. 101)

CHAPTER 3: BEYOND MONOSEXUALITY

BISEXUALITY

Bisexuality is defined as “having attraction to more than one gender” (Barker et al., 2012), however, the concept turns out to be much more complicated and problematic when it comes to definitions (Morrison, Gruenhage, & Pedersen, 2016). It seems that it ultimately comes down to problems with defining sexual orientation (already mentioned in chapter 2) and a paucity of models that encompass its complexity.

Bisexual identification can include a variety of elements: romantic attractions regardless of gender, a belief that sexual orientation is fluid over the course of one’s life, predominant attractions to one gender but not exclusively, and recognition that gender is fluid and non-binary (Barker et al., 2012). Also, people understand bisexuality in a variety of ways, so their self-identifications also vary. For example, having one same-sex relationship in an otherwise heterosexual life is going to be enough for some to identify as a bisexual. Others will not change their identity, for reasons such as “common prejudices against bisexuality, different cultural understandings of sexuality or a desire to fit in with lesbian, gay or heterosexual communities” (Barker et al., 2012, p. 3). Some people identify as “queer”, an umbrella term for gender and sexual minorities – one that challenges fixed notions of identity and binary (male-female) models of gender. Even though “bisexuality” in its linguistic core relates to a gender binary, awareness seems to increase and many bisexuals embrace the notion of gender fluidity as well.

All the above elements of understanding what bisexuality is also have an impact on determining how many bisexual people are out there. The number of people who self-identify as bisexual (and check appropriate boxes when asked in surveys and censuses) in some reports is relatively low (0,5% in the UK census), in other reports it turns out to be the largest population within the broader group of LGB people (3-5% bisexual, 1-3% gay/lesbian) (Barker et al. 2012, p. 13; see the report for a broader commentary on these measurements).

Invisible bisexuality

Is it just a phase?

Bisexuality is referred to as an invisible orientation, as it is often ignored in many contexts due to prejudice and myths that surround people identifying as bisexual. This, in turn, leads to bisexual people further hiding their orientation and contributes to the fact that they receive less support and face much higher rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-harm, and suicidal tendencies than either gay or straight populations (Barker et al., 2012).

One of the common ways in which the bisexual existence is erased is raising doubt over the very existence of bisexuality. This includes scientific research, popular texts, student textbooks and mainstream media.

In comparison to gay/lesbian studies, the research on the bisexual experience is scarce. This has been changing in the recent years and bisexuality is gaining recognition and interest. The studies already conducted show that bisexual experience differs from the gay/lesbian one in many aspects. These differences call for a better inclusion of bisexuality, for example within models of sexual orientation, development, and coming out (see for example Tom Brown's (2002) model for identity development for bisexual persons).

One of the reasons for the relative lack of interest in bisexuality as a distinct orientation might be a notion of bisexuality being a "primitive" form of sexuality. It can be traced back to Sigmund Freud, who saw human beings as being born in an immature, undifferentiated condition of psychological bisexuality (an analogy to physiological bisexuality in early embryonic stages). In the course of psychosexual development, a preference for other-sex or same-sex partners is formed. This idea permeated psychoanalytic thinking about bisexuality (Rapoport, 2010) and seemingly influenced how bisexuality was denied a status of a mature, valid sexual orientation (Klesse, 2011) in therapeutic and scientific circles.

This is related to one of the most prevailing myths: that bisexuality is a transitional phase that inevitably leads either to a "full" coming out as gay/lesbian or forgetting about the same-sex whims and becoming a "stable" heterosexual. Bisexuals are often referred to as "fence-sitters" who should finally decide what they want, often implying lack of maturity and

“wanting to have it all”. It is also a common depiction of bisexuals in the media, films, and television (Barker et al., 2012). It is true that for some people relationships with partners of more than one gender make up part of their personal journey, that later includes taking on a gay, lesbian or straight identity. That does not render bisexuality an invalid one. Longitudinal studies show that for many people bisexuality is a stable identity. The problem, however, lies in using the opposition unstable versus stable (and the accompanying judgement), when in fact, sexual orientation or sexual attractions can be fluid and it has nothing to do with maturity.

Bisexuality is also invisible in the public realm. Magrath et al. (2017) analysed the process of bisexual erasure in British media using as an example the coming out of a British Olympic diver Tom Daley. Despite the fact that Daley himself announced that he started dating a man but was still attracted to women, the British media while supportive of this coming out, consistently labelled him as gay – rather than bisexual. There are many similar examples when public figures are depicted as either gay or straight even if it is known that they engage in romantic and/or sexual relationships with multiple genders, or sometimes despite their explicit public identification as bisexual. Also, historical figures are being depicted as lesbian or gay when in fact they were bisexual, which in turn makes it difficult for bisexual people to find figures they can identify with in their process of sexual orientation development.

Even though the “B” is part of the LGBT+ community, it also is often ignored in LGBT+ groups, anti-discrimination policy making, etc. It is reported (Barker et al., 2012) that there are few policies that refer directly to bisexual discrimination and issues. Quite often, bisexual topics are included in official documents only to fulfil diversity requirements and in reality, they are ignored. Discrimination towards bisexual people among the LGBT+ community creates the phenomenon of “double discrimination” – a topic I will explore further in this chapter.

Not surprisingly, bisexual erasure as a legitimate identity and life-long lifestyle was found also among people who themselves had bisexual experiences, desires and/or feelings (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013) – a phenomenon that can be attributed to processes of internalisation of binegative attitudes.

Bisexuality is also prone to erasure because one's sexual orientation is usually deducted from the gender of the current partner. Julie Hartman (2013) explores the ways in which bisexually identified people “display and perform” bisexuality in order to counteract the bisexual erasure and to be visible outside of explicitly sexual behaviour – which still would be an indicator only in non-monogamous encounters.

Biphobia

Is it an actual fear?

Biphobia/binegativity refers to negative attitudes, behaviours and structures specifically directed towards anyone who is attracted to more than one gender. Bisexual people can be subject to homophobia (for their same-sex attractions or when they are perceived as gay), heterosexism (marginalisation of non-heterosexual relationships) and heteronormativity (an assumption that heterosexuality is the 'normal' way of being) (Barker et al., 2012). Klesse (2011) summarises how binegativity operates:

‘Binegativity’ works through a broad set of oppressive practices, which include forms of violence (interpersonal, legal, institutional), discrimination (social, cultural, legal), as well as epistemic erasure and denigration through negative representations. The operation of stereotypes is part and parcel of the last strategy. (p. 234)

Some contemporary scholars advocate for the use of terms such as “heterosexism” and “homonegativity” instead of “homophobia”, and “monosexism” and “binegativity” instead of “biphobia” (e.g. Weiss, 2003). The rationale is that the term “phobia” conveys an idea of an irrational fear and a “psychological problem”, thus medicalising the issue and implying that a person has little control over the symptoms, whereas the core of the problem is prejudice. As Jillian Weiss puts it “When a significant portion of the population starts to have the same ‘psychological problem’, it is time to call out the sociologists” (2003, p. 28).

In his essay “Deconstructing biphobia”, Miguel Obradors-Campos emphasises that biphobia is a form of structural oppression rooted in “gender binarism”. Gender binarism is an

underlying belief (“an ontological position”), usually unconscious and permeating the culture, that people are divided into men and women, genders that are opposite and complementary. It is a lens through which the world is viewed, “an invisible collective cognitive net” that is a basis for understanding whatever we are confronted with and one that also contributes to the fact that “bisexuals make people uncomfortable” (Obradors-Campos, 2012, p. 208-209).

At the same time, it is impossible to make a clear-cut division between what's socio-cultural and what is individual psychology. These two different levels are intertwined and influence each other. Is bi or homophobia a “phobia”? Not in contemporary psychiatric terms, surely, but I believe that there is an element of fear that leads to discriminatory beliefs and behaviours. A fear of “the other”, a fear of the unknown, fear of confronting one's sexuality and realising that maybe not everything about it is neat and sure. These fears are split off and projected onto minorities. Ontological positions influence what people think and how they react, and in turn, their thoughts and beliefs reinforce the structures of rigid societal oppression.

Double marginalisation

Why more inclusion can be a source of fear in both straight and gay?

One of the widely stressed factors that contribute to an especially difficult struggle with discrimination amongst bisexually identified people is the fact that they are often discriminated against both by heterosexuals and gay people (Barker et al., 2012; Meyer, 2003).

Even though it seems that straight people report higher biphobia and more negative attitudes about bisexuality than gays, lesbians and bisexuals (e.g. Hertlein, Hartwell, & Munns, 2016), biphobia is still a serious issue in the LGBT+ community. Considering it is supposed to be a safe haven for all minorities, including bisexually identified people, and that sexual minority communities' support plays a big role in reducing negative impact of discrimination and prejudice, it is especially painful to experience rejection also there. This leads to decreased sense of belonging and higher self-stigma among bisexuals.

There are historical and political reasons why the LGBT+ community is far from monolithic, but also as Weiss puts it: “It is frequently thought that gays and lesbians are

natural allies with bisexuals because all share victimisation from a narrow view of sexuality. Some gays and lesbians, however, have a narrow view of sexuality themselves, along with the rest of society.” (2003, p. 30). She also suggests that gays and lesbians who discriminate against bisexuals and transgendered people are reacting to political and social pressures, not psychological ones. Hertlein et al. (2016) analysed studies about the attitudes of gays and lesbians towards bisexual men and women. They found that the relationships between lesbians and bisexual women are much more tense than those of gay and bisexual men. One of the explanations is that bisexual women are seen through the lens of their social privilege to marry a man and ability to “pass” as straight in the society, whereas bisexual men are seen as just not yet “fully” gay by gay men.

Common myths about bisexuality

How did the bisexual become the evil one?

Bisexual erasure comes in the form of various myths and misconceptions, in both straight and gay populations. Most commonly bisexuality is ignored, depicted as temporary, and devalued (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013).

One of the most striking examples of straightforward denial of existence is a persistent notion that “there is no such thing as a bisexual male”. Even though there are men who feel and identify as bisexual, it somehow has to be “scientifically proven” that they exist. And science can be limited in its understanding of sexuality as well. An infamous study by Rieger, Chievers and Bailey (2005) aimed at finding bisexual arousal patterns in bisexually identified men (by measuring penile response to various sexual stimuli) failed to do so. This induced a deluge of revelations in the media: that bisexual men don't exist and probably they are “really” just gay (“*Straight, gay or lying*” assured one of the titles) – since that's what their penises were telling the world. Six years later the same team conducted another study (Rieger, Chievers, & Bailey, 2011) and physiological patterns were finally found. Phew, bisexual men were “proven” to exist. There is something deeply unsettling about ones feelings and experiences being validated or not in studies such as these.

Bisexuality is often associated with indecisiveness, being young and not wanting to settle down, and bisexual people are seen as those who are unsure about what they want in life, thus alternating between men and women (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). What is called a “bisexual performance” has recently become common in some social environments as a form of rite of passage in adolescence among young women, unrelated to their actual attractions. They are expected to kiss other women even if they do not feel attracted to them – usually to entertain and please men, and to reassert their heterosexuality (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Fahs, 2009). It does not happen to young men, as bisexual acts would be immediately read as homosexual ones. This phenomenon seems to be a product of a heterosexist, patriarchal culture.

Another common stereotype about bisexuals conveys a notion of them being dangerous in relationships: they are less likely to be monogamous and are risky in sexual behaviour (Spalding & Peplau, 1997), they “*always sleep around*”, can't resist temptations (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013, p. 207), and it is “innately impossible for them to be faithful” (Pereira et al., 2017, p. 360). The stigma associated with being a bisexual man is even greater. As one bisexual man reveals: “if gay men are considered promiscuous, bisexual men are just animalistic, hedonistic, fuck fest in every forest around every corner” (Scherrer, 2002, p.6).

And while it is true that some bisexuals choose a non-monogamous way of life in form of open or polyamorous relationships, some surely also cheat and lie. The reasons might be related or unrelated to their sexual orientation, but it is definitely not because bisexual people are inherently morally inferior. Some bisexual men interviewed by Pereira (2017) talk about being married to a woman and exploring their sexual desires with men outside of this relationship – this sometimes being negotiated and accepted by the wife, sometimes hidden. It all happens in a mainstream context of homophobia, biphobia, heterosexism, and norms of monogamy that fuel repression and make it difficult to explore one's sexuality in a free and open way.

The fear of bisexuals being unfaithful and/or unstable in relationships is also a direct effect of not seeing bisexuality as a valid orientation. If a bisexual is “really” gay, he or she will eventually cheat or leave for a partner of their own gender (Spalding & Peplau, 1997). At the same time, if bisexuality is just an experimentation phase, the phase will eventually end and

they will go back to “normal”. Either way, it is always dangerous to trust them. Lesbians have an especially tense relationship with bisexual women, who are seen as playing with women before settling down in a socially acceptable relationship with a man. And is being in a relationship with a man easier for a woman? Socially it most definitely is. Is it easier for men to be with a woman than with another man? Of course it is. Is it surprising then that some surveys show (e.g. Pew Research Center, 2013) that a majority of bisexually identified people are in other-sex relationships?’

Miguel Obradors-Campos (2011) points out that many of the assumptions about bisexual people that feed binegativity are a consequence of confusing sexual orientation (and gender being its core concept) with sexual practices (what people do in bed and relationships, regardless of their orientation). In case of bisexuality, these assumptions are related to fidelity, promiscuity, and non-monogamy.

Coming out as bi

Who are you, really?

All of the mentioned stereotypes and misconceptions make it difficult to come out as bisexual. Sometimes, when people come out as gay/lesbian first, another “revelation” seems too much for their family and friends. What’s more, this revelation means things are shaken and unstable again, especially for those, who struggled with accepting same-sex sexuality. Often the question of who one “really” is is being asked. Usually, it’s not expressed with bad intent, rather with little knowledge and awareness. For some, it can be a relief to see things “normal again” even for the most open and liberal (straight) people who intend well – we all live in a heterosexist world after all. This can be illustrated with what some of my friends told me when I started dating men after quite a long period of being in a same-sex relationship. They said: *You know, our mutual friend X is a real lesbian and we always knew it and accepted it. And you were never a real lesbian, it did show. We always knew that you needed a man. The*

* To be precise, I found conflicting data regarding the ratio of same vs other-sex relationships amongst bisexual people. It goes back to the complexity of bisexual identification and might be partly related to bisexual people adjusting their identities when in long-term relationships.

bisexual experience is not seen as continuous and fluid, but it is split into something true and untrue.

Coming out as bisexual to one's gay/lesbian friends is not easy too. It is often taken as a betrayal of the community and suddenly the person is seen as dangerous and untrustworthy. All stereotypes are applied.

People who had lived straight lives and come out as bisexual are met with the already mentioned “maybe you're just gay”, “it's a phase”, or another way of diminishing the possibility of someone actually, really, truly being attracted to more than just one sex.

Another issue is that many bisexual people feel that the bisexual community is not as strong as the gay and lesbian one. A lot depends on the geographical region, for example there is a growing bi community in the UK and the USA with bi organisations, conferences, convents, publications, etc.” In many countries though, it is virtually non-existent or just a small add-on to the lesbian and gay activities. Again, bisexual people can struggle with lack of belonging.

As a result, a lot of people either don't come out as bisexual or carefully manage how their identity is presented in the world. Sometimes it is easier and safer to present oneself in accordance with the current relationship, and to not mention previous or current “inconsistencies” in attractions. Bisexual erasure is then self-inflicted and perpetuated.

SEXUAL FLUIDITY

Changing identities

When a label does not fit any more

To gain more insight into whether bisexuality is a transitional stage, a separate sexual orientation or heightened capacity for sexual fluidity, Lisa Diamond conducted an influential longitudinal study on 79 self-identified sexual minority women recruited as young adults. The results showed that across 10-year period “2/3 of women changed the identity labels they had claimed at the beginning of the study, and 1/3 changed labels 2 or more times” (Diamond,

** See for example: binetusa.org, bi.org, bicon.org.uk.

2008a, p. 5). The transitional model was not confirmed, as more women adopted bisexual/unlabelled identities than abandoned them and few bisexual/unlabelled women ended up identifying as lesbian or heterosexual. Also, bisexual/unlabelled women experienced more fluctuations in attractions during the study period than lesbian women did (Diamond 2008a).

This unique in terms of length study busts the “just a phase” myth, adding to the evidence that bisexuality is a mature third orientation. The concept of sexual fluidity had been mentioned and theorised before (e.g. Baumeister, 2000), but not widely accepted nor studied in-depth. It has gained in popularity and interest since Diamond's study publication, both in the academic world and in the popular media. In its basic definition, sexual fluidity refers to “situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness” (Katz-Wise, 2014, p. 2), which means a fluidity in romantic and/or sexual attractions and behaviours over time, that can potentially affect one's sexual identity. For example, a woman identifies as heterosexual and has relationships with men, but at some point in her life falls in love with another woman. This may, but does not have to, impact how she identifies herself in terms of sexual orientation. Sexual fluidity also occurs in the other direction - someone with same-gender attractions might start having other-gender ones as well.

Sexual fluidity is not a label or an orientation in itself, rather, it is a phenomenon of human sexuality, one that goes beyond the stability of what is classically understood as sexual orientation. This concept embraces the flexibility and potential for change in the human experience of attractions, sex, and love. Diamond (2008b) includes four elements in her understanding of sexual fluidity:

- 1) Women have a general sexual orientation (lesbian, straight or bisexual).
- 2) In addition to orientation women also possess a capacity for fluidity – a sensitivity to situations and relationships that might facilitate erotic feelings (both same and other-sex oriented).
- 3) The attractions triggered by fluidity may be temporary or long-lasting.
- 4) Not all women are equally fluid. (p. 84-85)

Sexual fluidity relates to a capacity for change in erotic responsiveness, which might be potential (never expressed) or rare and often also surprising and/or confusing; whereas bisexuality is a stable sexual predisposition (Diamond, 2016). Some women in Diamond's (2008b) study reported being generally oriented toward one sex, but once in a while they would experience unexpected desires towards people who they encountered in their lives. They would not identify as bisexual, as these patterns would not seem regular; "sexual fluidity represents a context-dependent capacity for change in attractions, whereas bisexuality represents a pattern of mixed attractions" (Diamond, 2016, p. 250). Diamond points out the importance of raising awareness that sexual fluidity is a common phenomenon, so that women are not embarrassed or confused with their experiences and that they don't see fluidity as atypical and threatening to their identity.

What is interesting in Diamond's study is the inclusion of unlabelled women. In a classical approach, people refusing to label themselves straight/gay/bisexual and reporting changes in their attractions simply would not be recruited or would be eliminated from a research sample by researchers who were "unsure whether they were repressed lesbians or 'dabbling', misguided heterosexuals" (Diamond 2008b, p. 87). When a no-label option was included, a greater insight into the complexity of women's desires was made. And the most commonly adopted identity among the participants over the 10-year span was "unlabelled".

The potential for fluidity

Are only sexual minority women sexually fluid?

Most of the studies about sexual fluidity include only sexual minority participants. Longitudinal studies (e.g. Mock & Eibach, 2012) show that in fact, heterosexual identity is most stable over time for both men and women, and bisexual (among men and women) and lesbian the least. This led many researchers to exclude heterosexual participants from their sexual fluidity studies. Clear results can be then achieved and sexual minority samples are the ones in which sexual fluidity can be observed better. But even if changes in sexual identity among heterosexuals are less common, they do exist and deserve the attention of the scientific community. Heterosexuality might be more stable because of its normativity and if

sexual fluidity becomes less stigmatised, more people might feel free to notice, accept and reveal fluctuations in their experience.

Research might be lacking, but personal stories and accounts from straight people are available. For example “Dear John, I love Jane” (Walsh & Andre, 2010) is a collection of personal histories by women who at some point in their adult lives fell in love with a woman despite being in heterosexual relationships with men. One could argue that they simply might have been closeted lesbians or women who were not in touch with their “real” sexuality, “late bloomers” as it is sometimes called. Well, it definitely could be a case for some of them – we still live in a world where there is a lot of space for improvement in terms of same-sex relationships acceptance. We still live in a world, where the mainstream attitude towards relationships is heterosexist, where the popular culture is saturated with quite uniform ideas about what a family looks like, what brings happiness, etc. Women are pressurised into relationship choices that conform to the norms and at the same time, are not taught as girls to be in touch with their bodies, feelings, and sexuality. On the other hand, probably some of these stories are instances of sexual fluidity, where circumstances, emotional closeness, fascination and attraction yielded love “unaligned” with identity.

What about men? They are also pressured by rigid ideas about masculinity inextricably connected with heterosexuality. They find themselves in a maze of social expectations and any kind of same-sex attractions jeopardise their position in society. Despite that, some men do come out at a later stage of life, sometimes because they finally feel that they can be true to who they are. But are all of them gays that struggled to get out of the closet or can men be fluid as well?

Diamond conducted her research on women only, arguing that women’s desires are more situation dependent and less “category specific” than those of men (Diamond, 2008a, p. 6). Contrarily, men have a fixed, biologically-determined sex drive that is relatively insensitive to context (see also Baumeister, 2000). Men and women seem to experience their sexuality and arousal in a different way, but it is quite hard to separate biological factors from cultural ones and there is little consensus on what mechanisms are exactly at play. Studies that examined sexual fluidity usually showed much less fluidity among men compared to women, which was easily explained within the classical paradigm that male sexual orientation

emerges at an early age and remains stable over time. Thus, an assumption that women are more sexually fluid than men became common, but there is little research directly comparing men and women.

Katz-Wise (2014) developed a study to further investigate Diamond's findings and address the question of gender differences. The participants were young sexual minority (either self-identified as gay/lesbian/queer/unlabelled or having had same-sex attractions) American adults, men and women. Fifty-two percent of men reported fluidity in attractions and one-third of them a subsequent fluidity in sexual identity. Among women, it was 64% and 50%, accordingly. The prevalence of sexual fluidity seems to be similar among men and women, at least in the sexual minority group. Why?

First of all, the participants were recruited at a time (in 2011) when awareness of sexual fluidity model had grown substantially thanks to the impact of Diamond's study. Articles in mainstream media, public figures talking about their sexuality and fluidity in attractions, the topic of gender fluidity gaining more public interest – all that creates a social climate that is conducive to opening up to experiences that might be outside of traditional models of sexuality. What could have also been helpful is the availability of more options to identify with such as bisexual, pansexual, queer or unlabelled. Instead of rigid categories that lead to marginalisation of any experience that goes beyond their definition, it is currently easier to be more inclusive and find more inclusive identities or categories. Additionally, negative attitudes towards bisexuality are slowly but visibly lessening; an increase in public appearances of bisexually identified people and bisexuals speaking out in media being some of the factors. This would mean that men are not really that different in their potential for fluidity, it is just that cultural rigidity that binds them to be “stable over time” (decisiveness and stability are stereotypically male traits after all) is easing, at least in American culture. It is still impossible to make conclusions regarding the general population due to the lack of broader research, but I am sure that as openness towards fluidity grows, more and more men and women, regardless of their sexual identity, will be able to embrace the aliveness and flow of their attractions.

The phenomenon of giving up labels altogether

Does everyone need a category?

Identifying as unlabelled is a fascinating phenomenon that is often a result of experiencing fluctuations in one's attractions or their complexity. Diamond (2008b) comments on the results of her study in this respect:

We might expect women who wanted to acknowledge the potential of unexpected patterns of attraction and behaviour with both women and men to simply adopt bisexual identities. (...) Although approximately one-third of identity changes involved the adoption of the bisexual label, a slightly larger number involved the eschewal of lesbian or bisexual labels altogether in favour of an "unlabelled" identity. Moreover, if we include the women who considered themselves unlabelled at the beginning of the study, over two-thirds of women in the sample have considered themselves unlabelled for some period of time in the past ten years. The unlabelled category is thus the single most popular identity in the study! (p. 75)

The women who chose to give up identity labels altogether did so because they felt that the ones available did not reflect their sexuality accurately and that the nature of sexual categorisations was rigid and arbitrary. Why did they chose 'unlabelled' and not simply 'bisexual', which might seem quite encompassing? They gave several explanations:

1. Some unlabelled women felt that the term 'bisexual' would imply more attraction to men than they actually felt. They were women previously identified as lesbians, but who experienced attraction towards men. The adoption of the unlabelled identity was "a compromise between the poor fit of the lesbian identity (which presumes exclusive same-sex attractions and behaviour) and the bisexual identity (which presumes a significant degree of sexual interest in both men and women)" (Diamond, 2008b, p. 76).

2. The discrepancy between physical and emotional attractions. “[W]omen with significant gaps between their emotional and physical feelings often faced challenges in selecting a comfortable identity label. They had to decide whether their sexuality was better categorised by patterns of “love” or patterns of “lust”, and they had to forecast what sort of relationships they might desire in the future” (Diamond, 2008b, p. 77). Traditional models of sexuality do not include such discrepancies nor does the cultural ideal of sex going hand in hand with emotional involvement. These women would, for example, feel sexual attraction towards men but fall in love and form emotional bonds with women. They felt that existing categories would not match their experience.

It is worth noting that the Western culture conflates love and sex, with its dominant message that people should have sex with people they love and love the people they have sex with. Sex without emotional involvement is often stigmatised, with a layer of sexism on top of it: men can get away with it as having detached sex is seen more “in their nature”, women are usually simply slut-shamed. According to the cultural romantic ideal, men and women should be in monogamous relationships that are both loving and filled with sex. This is a cultural construct that is not valid in many other cultures and is also quite recent in the Western world as well*. This can be limiting to the individual's sexual expression that might not necessarily include romantic feelings and cause confusion or disappointment when a person's romantic and sexual feelings are not convergent.

3. For some sexual-minority women, unlabelling was “part of a larger process of questioning or rejecting the very notion of sexual categorisation, often directly in response to greater awareness of sexual fluidity” (Diamond, 2008b, p. 79).

* See for example “Sex at Dawn” by C. Ryan & C. Jetha (2011) for analysis of different cultural understandings of relationships, love and sex.

Looking for freedom

Is it possible to get away from definitions?

There is a common thread in the accounts of people who either take on a bisexual identity or reject traditional labels altogether: a need to free oneself from rigid ideas about sexuality and to be able to embrace the ever-changing nature of human interactions, attractions, lust, desire, intimacy, love. Some unlabelled and bisexual women are less accepting of a biological, fixed view of sexual orientation and believe that it is “person, not the gender” that fuels attractions (Brooks & Quina, 2008). Some bi-identified people are attracted to gender, but to more than just one. Esterberg notes that for many bisexual women bisexuality entails a freedom from identity, “an ability to be much more fluid about sexuality and freedom to define themselves and live their lives as they please” (1997, p. 157). Both bisexual men and women say that the positive aspects of bisexual identity include freedom from labels, roles and social “rules”, freedom to live honestly and authentically, embracing all the aspects of one’s identity, freedom to explore diverse relationships and experiences (Rostosky, Riggle, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010).

Not knowing, not having a “defined and fixed” identity can be a confusing and a scary thing too. Labels and identities can be helpful in many ways: they give support, make it easier to find and be part of a community bound by an identity, the world seems more orderly, predictable and known. One of the contributors to the “Getting bi” anthology (Ochs & Rowley, 2008) points out the importance of being able to communicate using common ideas:

It is very common –at least here in Germany—for people to resist labels or categorisation. I know people who, because they do not like the word bi say they are not (though they sleep with both sexes). Political activists tell me everyone has a right to define themselves. I disagree here. We have to agree on some definitions, otherwise, we cannot communicate. If I say white and for you the colour is grey or beige, we will have problems speaking with each other. (p. 180)

This need to be sure, to know and to have common definitions is understandable, but it also marginalises subtleties in experience and forces people to “define” themselves even when simple definitions fail. If knowledge about fluid aspects of life and specifically sexuality becomes more common, it might make it easier to find an understanding and a language to communicate about diverse experiences.

There are other reasons why fluidity and unlabelling might be difficult to accept. In the next chapter, I explore some of them.

CHAPTER 4: BETWEEN FIXED AND FLUID

PROCESS WORK APPROACH TO FLUIDITY RELATED EDGES

I have heard on numerous occasions women of different ages say that they feel like they lost something by not exploring their potential fluidity or possible bisexuality earlier on. Some of them did experience same-sex attractions, but the social climate was not accepting of lesbian relationships yet; their awareness was much lower; they pursued heterosexual relationships because they were brought up this way, etc. Today they feel as if there is a loss to mourn; that a part of them, even if small, was dismissed and ignored, there was no space for it to flourish, not even to consider it as a real possibility. Their mourning is a call to see, welcome and cherish this kind of inner diversity.

What needs to be done to prevent this dismissal from happening, amongst both men and women? Knowledge, education, positive images in the media play an important role and it is very uplifting to see how ideas about sexual fluidity and gender fluidity are slowly but steadily seeping into the mainstream. At the same time, there seems to be a global backlash, a strong conservative energy that protects the status quo and might endanger what has already been done in terms of LGBT+ rights. This means that there are big cultural edges still to be confronted and powerful figures in the social field that need addressing. Various forms of activism and work at the social level are needed in order to address and deal with these boiling conflicts, but at the same time, similar patterns are embedded in our individual inner worlds as well. This means that any person can also do a little bit of work to enhance awareness, to open up to less known aspects of their experience and psyche, in turn becoming more accepting towards diversity out in the world.

One of the positive aspects of bisexual identity that I haven't mentioned in the previous chapter is a heightened ability to accept and appreciate others' differences. Bisexually identified people noted that their acceptance of their own unique identities helped them to be less judgemental and more open and emphatic towards others. They were also aware that their identity challenged people around them and some welcomed this as an

opportunity to change stereotypes (Rostosky et al., 2010). I believe that if we all find more acceptance towards all the different parts of ourselves and try to understand even the difficult ones, this will also happen.

In this chapter, I examine these issues from the process work perspective, exploring further edges around sexual fluidity, labels and the lack of them, and present some ideas on how to work with these issues using the process work approach.

Protecting the identity

Sexuality, like all behavior and experience, is a fluid and unpredictable process. Too often we freeze sexual experience. Not only do we freeze into a sexual identity, but we freeze out spontaneous experience and changing elements in our relationships. We find what is comfortable and we stay there. We split off sexual fantasies and experiences that seem strange, and we keep all kinds of unknown experiences in our relationships at bay. We become settled; we create a relationship culture, a way of being, interacting, living and loving. (Menken, 2001, p. 74)

What Dawn Menken refers to as “relationship culture” is what makes us comfortable and helps feel that things are predictable in the ever-changing world. It becomes our own private mainstream, setting boundaries of what is acceptable and what is seen as strange. We need this comfort, the feeling of being home, of relating to things that are known. We also need a sense of identity that helps us ground in the world; a self that is an important point of reference when navigating the social world. We keep forgetting though, that seeing the world as changing and unstable and our self as an island of predictability is not real, as we change too. Maintaining this illusion and protecting our sense of identity comes at a price since in reality, our experience is not stable, our personality changes, and we experience things that are beyond our identifications.

Since our identities feel so precious, we often try to shut off anything that might disturb or endanger them. It is, however, impossible to shut off all that we experience, especially if strong emotions are evoked. In process work, we refer to “signals” of the

secondary process that try to get through to the primary identity. For example, I might identify as a heterosexual woman and at some point, I meet a woman that makes an extraordinary impression on me. A signal would be a dream with that woman (in that dream we could be in a romantic and/or erotic relationship), a strange sensation in my body whenever I see her or think about her or hearing my friends talk about her all the time. There are strategies that can be implemented to protect the identity, for example: ignoring the experience (not paying attention to the signals); minimising the importance of the experience (it's just a stupid dream); accepting the reality of the experience but creating a separate "pocket" in the identity for it (for example, I admit that I have a crush on that woman, but say that it is an exception and has no impact on my sexual identity). Notice that when the protection of the identity is central, the experience itself and its meaning become easy to overlook.

There are identities that feel more important than others. If I see myself as a "dog person", but suddenly develop a liking for a certain cat, this may not be such a big deal to me, but probably because I would put the friendly cat in the "exception" category right away. Which identities are more important than others depends on the individual, but social norms have a significant influence. Topics such as sexuality or gender and identities related to them are very important at the cultural level. Sex, relationships, family, and norms related to those are crucial elements of how societies are built and regulated.

Our identities are in part created by how we perceive ourselves in relation to various social categories and groups. This creates a social identity which gives us a sense of belonging to our "own" group (in consequence making it difficult to connect with members of the "other" group). This is a powerful phenomenon rooted back in the prehistoric times when belonging to a tribe and protecting it was the way to stay alive. Times have changed in terms of objective safety and likelihood of survival, however these dynamics can still play out quite dramatically. Us vs them mentality is often at the core of many conflicts and rejection of certain groups.

Also, our identities are a result of long-term narratives, which are stories that we tell ourselves (and others) about who we are. They comprise of actual events, but everyone has a specific way of telling their story, so they are not just bare facts, but our own interpretations of them. We get very attached to these stories, as they make us feel whole and help make sense

of situations we encounter, decisions we make, our emotions, reactions and behaviours. A shift in identity means that we would have to amend the story and often there isn't an easy way to do it. It is also not something that is commonly done in the Western culture because these stories are socially reinforced and expected to be strong and long-lasting (as opposed to Eastern philosophies, for example in Buddhism is it advised to recognise and let go of one's personal story and identity to attain inner freedom).

Menken (2001) points out that:

It is dangerous and frightening for many of us to consider that our sexual identities are not as solid as we had hoped. Generally, any attempt to discover what is unknown is a threat to our identity. In matters of sexuality, this fear seems to be doubly amplified. (p. 76)

As a result, we censor our momentary experiences often afraid what it would mean for our identity to open up to them. We need more freedom in letting go of the identities, or at least to temporarily put them aside to be able to be with the experience and unfold it in its rawness. When we are on an edge, we tend to focus on the fear of the unknown, on our need to protect who we are, on the possible dangers, on the discomfort of change. But it is impossible to know what really lies beyond the edge if we have no experience of it or if we see it only from the edge perspective.

What lies beyond the edge

An experience that does not fit one's primary process is seen as a disturbance and can be very upsetting. From process work perspective, the "disturber" is potentially a great source of knowledge about one's path of development. For example, a man self-identified as gay might one day find a certain woman attractive. If his edge on other-sex attractions is big, he might not even notice that fleeting flirt*. He might notice his attraction, but try to minimise it, thinking "I'm 100% gay and it's nothing". He might get scared of his reaction to that woman

* A flirt in process work is something that attracts our attention, but often almost at the periphery of our awareness.

and think “Oh my, does that mean I might be bisexual?”. He focuses on his identity and what that experience may imply in that regard, however he still does not know everything about being attracted to a woman. What is he attracted to? How does it feel? What does that feeling remind him of? What part of him is moved by this feeling? What quality in that woman evoked those feelings? Does he have access to such qualities in himself? What would it mean to challenge the norms he had been following so far?

These are just some of the questions he could explore with his concerns about identity (temporarily) set aside. Of course, it might turn out that he eventually wants to try being with a woman romantically and/or sexually. It might also help him access something previously unknown or suppressed within himself, without the need to pursue a closer relationship with that woman. Or that experience could teach him an appreciation of women (or something specific about them), or an appreciation of human beauty in general, or many other things.

Edges in the domain of sexuality and sexual orientation can also be explicitly about sex and bodies as well; Menken (2001) notes:

Much of the hoopla and controversy around gay sexuality has little to do with same sex relationships; rather, is it a reflection of mainstream culture trying to get along with being sexual. We have a problem with sex, which is reflected in how we split off aspects of our sexuality and project them onto marginalised groups. (p. 69)

As a Western society, we have a paradoxical relationship with sex. Simultaneously, our culture is overly sexualised and there is not much freedom in open exploration of our sexuality. The sexualisation of culture usually comes down to objectification of women and sex being the go-to way to create a connection, but without being able to create an emotional or a non-erotic physical one (this is especially true for many men). On the other hand, there are rules, norms, and expectations that govern what is and what is not acceptable when it comes to sex and relationships. In many countries, religion influences attitudes towards sex and body, engraving people's minds with shame and guilt in relation to their needs and desires.

One of my clients, a heterosexual man brought up as a Catholic, at some point in his adult life started to have desires and fantasies that were beyond what he would regularly do. We explored them and tried to find what these fantasies meant to him. The first important moment was when he noticed that being able to freely discuss them, with no judgement, without quickly concluding what they mean, or what does he need to do was new and valuable. He felt seen and heard as a whole, which greatly reduced his anxiety related to the changes he was going through. Secondly, at some point, we touched upon a part of his fantasies that included other men in a sexual context. He was torn between an attraction and a repulsion towards that idea. When he said he might be questioning his sexual orientation (“Maybe I am bisexual?”). I gently suggested to explore the fantasy and the concept of being with a man first, before we get to any kind of conclusions and labels. We explored his associations and ideas about other men and their bodies, and he realised that he felt that his own male body is something dirty and repulsive. We traced that belief back to his Catholic upbringing, the taboo of masturbation, the lack of positive attitudes towards sex (unless marital and procreative, functional), the human body and in consequence – his own body. That deeply engrained negative attitude spilled onto all male bodies and fed an internal homophobic part (not very prominent consciously, as he was generally accepting of gay men). His fantasies brought him to his need to love and accept his male body. Does that mean his process led him to pursue homoerotic experiences? Maybe, maybe not – as it turned out, at that point, that was not the main issue.

Often, one of the edges is the fear that examining one's fantasies, desires, and attractions will immediately mean acting on them. Exploring certain qualities and attitudes and introducing them into one's life does not necessarily mean playing out one's fantasies verbatim. That might eventually lead to doing things in new ways, but sex and sexuality are about so much more than just the physical act itself. For some people though, acting out their fantasies to experience their sexuality fully, freely, without guilt and obeying the mainstream norms is what they need.

To be able to explore the secondary process it is often necessary to work with the edge itself. The following section is a study of such edges.

Roles and figures at the edge

A process work concept of a “role” is used to address various aspects of experience that are not just personal; beliefs, feelings or experiences common to more people in a social context. Referring to “inner figures” is a way of accessing parts of individual psyche – sometimes a person identifies more with one of them and others are marginalised. Roles express ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that are present in a certain social field. One person can “play out” various roles (consciously or not) and a role can be played out by more than one person. This makes a role somewhat impersonal, but it is often filled with personal content. “Ghost roles” are roles that are being talked about or referred to but are not explicitly represented.

I would like to present some of the roles and figures that I have come across by working with my clients and workshop participants, facilitating a group process, reading and hearing about various experiences and finally, by doing my own therapeutic and inner work. I call it a “survey of the field” in the context of bisexuality, sexual fluidity, and taking on or relinquishing sexual orientation labels. These roles are present both on the social and intrapsychic level. We may encounter people who directly represent one (or more) of them, but they can also be found in our inner worlds as dream figures.

In the part that follows, these roles/figures speak for themselves in the first person. Chapters 2 and 3 present a consensus reality “current state of affairs”, which I believe creates a base of knowledge helpful in further work. Here I attend to the “dream level” where subjective sensations, feelings, and views are important. My aim was to understand the various forms of stereotypes and misconceptions related to bisexuality/fluidity better. There is some quantitative and qualitative research available that provides us with a lot of information about what people think about bisexual people (see for example Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Callis, 2013; Spalding & Peplau, 1997). What these studies reveal is the opinions and stereotypes that lead to negative sentiment (for example, that bisexuals cheat, so they are not desired partners), but I feel that the question of what underlies such opinions has not been

addressed sufficiently (if at all). What do people who have negative attitudes towards bisexuality and sexual fluidity feel and experience? What emotions do they have, why do they react the way they do? What kind of inner figures are opposed to accepting sexual fluidity and what are their motives?

Having in mind the pain and suffering homophobia, biphobia and other forms of marginalisation and oppression have caused and continue to do so, I want to state clearly: this is not to excuse any perpetrator nor to dismiss any pain inflicted. It is to be able to understand better, to work with our own internalised oppression, and to try and transform damaging behaviour into a dialogue, if possible. It is crucial though to remember that people identifying with sexual minorities need to be able to acknowledge their hurt first, to speak up about the abuse, and to stand strong in support of themselves. Only then is it possible to open up to a dialogue.

When presenting each figure I also add a short commentary or reflection about possible (in no way exhaustive) ways of approaching, interacting with, and exploring a given figure.

FIGURES AT THE EDGE TO ACCEPTING A MORE FLUID SEXUALITY

The One Whose Whole World Is Based On Stable Assumptions

My whole world is built upon fixed assumptions about gender, sex, relationships. A binary and categorised world is clear and easy to understand. By questioning it, you are shaking the foundations, I literally feel like you are pulling the rug from under me. How am I supposed to react? You are telling me about tolerance and acceptance, but I have no idea how to function in a world based on something else. That scares me. Life is unpredictable enough for it to have lack of clarity when it comes to things as fundamental as what people are.

This role is truly scared of the world coming apart without clear categories and boundaries. It is understandable, this is a perfectly human need. Learning to accept that the world is not always stable and predictable is part of growing and can be a lifelong process, so

it is not a matter of just deciding to think different. We need to ask this role why is it so important for the world to be predictable, to unfold its beliefs and stories that may have founded them. What makes it so important that the world feels safe and predictable?

Sometimes it is a matter of core beliefs about the world, the people in it and oneself. Some of them stem from the way someone was brought up, each family has a set of their own rules and beliefs that impact on how people perceive things later on. For example, this role might have developed in a home where things were only done in a certain way, new ideas were not praised nor encouraged and people who did things and thought in a different way were treated with suspicion or contempt. Often, as a consequence, acceptance and love is conditional in such families, as it is given only when children think and behave the way their parents do or expect. Since acceptance is tied to a certain way of being, it often hinders the freedom to experiment with ideas, changes, new things, etc. This makes it difficult to navigate in a world that is so much more varied than just that one specific world view used to tell.

Sometimes, a more painful story lurks in the background. Many forms of childhood abuse, physical or emotional, shake the foundations of inner safety or even make it impossible to develop. Living in a home where things are shaky, because for example there is an alcoholic or mentally unstable parent are often reasons why a person develops a strong need to protect a sense of control and predictability. Holding on to a firm but stiff world view becomes a lifeline that helps survive the chaos and pain of abuse. It is the abuse that needs to be addressed in the first place, to rebuild a sense of safety. Appreciation for the figure acting as a protector in otherwise unbearable circumstances can be helpful too. Often, this appreciation is a first step to transformation into a protector that is maybe a little bit more flexible and a little bit more in the present reality. The person is not a helpless child any more and has resources that can be used when needed instead of only relying on rigid ideas that create an illusion of stability.

Another important aspect is how to find new, more all-encompassing ways to feel secure and supported. Basic physical and emotional stability and safety is essential for general well-being. However, unlike a false sense of safety given by rigid norms and beliefs, internally sourced safety is more sustainable, gives more freedom and makes it easier to cope with change and a level of unpredictability. This safety is related to, for example, some degree

of self-love and self-compassion, trust in one's abilities, being able to embrace and respect various elements of one's psyche or being free from harsh inner criticism. For many people a spiritual dimension of life – being able to rely on a connection with something bigger and all-embracing – gives that sense of safety. Deep connection with nature, meditation, and other practices can be supportive in finding a different, maybe broader perspective that often helps accept the changeability and unpredictability as a natural part of life.

The One Who Feels Threatened In A Relationship

As a lesbian woman (or a straight woman/straight guy/gay guy) I'm less sure of you in a relationship knowing you could be also interested in a man (woman). How am I even supposed to compete with a guy (girl)? It makes me feel inadequate. What if I'm not enough for you and I can't make you happy because I'm the wrong gender? What if being with someone else is going to be easier for you and you will want to have a stable, socially acceptable life with someone of the "accepted" gender? Are you with me because it is easier and you will end up wanting to be true to yourself and choose someone of a gender different than mine? It all comes down to that I am not sure if I am enough for you, it is confusing and scary. That's why I want you to just decide what you prefer and not keep me in the dark in this unpredictability.

I want you to tell me how you label yourself so that we are on the same page when we communicate about relationships, attractions, etc. What do you mean when you say "it is changing and beyond rigid categories"? I don't feel safe when things are not clear and I don't know what to expect. It makes me tense. I like the world to be understandable and there are so many things that change, I don't know how to deal with that. I feel like I need to be prepared and alert all the time, to be able to react and I feel safer when I know what to expect.

Again, a need to be safe is prominent here. This figure needs to feel self-assured in a relationship, which is understandable. Honesty, clarity, and courage to express oneself are valid expectations in a relationship and good communication is key. However, it seems that it is the partner, seen as "unstable" that gets burdened with the task to make this role feel adequate and good enough. This is not a realistic expectation and this figure might be rooted

in a personal history that created a deficit of self-worth and self-love that needs to be addressed.

On the other hand, having enough self-worth to feel secure and at ease in a relationship is a privilege that some people do not have. A difference in sense of security between partners creates an imbalance of psychological power that needs to be noticed and addressed. The reasons why someone needs extra reassurance might include lack of adequate emotional safety in childhood, history of abuse, difficult relationship experiences that weakened one's self-worth or trust, to name a few. Psychologists that specialise in attachment theory, a framework that explains how early bonds shape future relationship, emphasise the importance of "feeding" the need for safety. It means that the person in the relationship who did not have safe bonds in the past needs more reassurance and understanding from the partner than someone who forms safe attachments. A safe attachment is when you do not constantly fear that something might go wrong, you will be rejected or the partner will disappear for some reason. A sense of safety and stability in the relationship is conducive to strengthening a safe attachment.

Another aspect of this issue is the innate feeling of self-worth. Having a stable self-esteem gives a high psychological rank and someone with a lower one is simply more vulnerable. Sometimes this role needs to hear: *yes, I get it that it is sometimes difficult for you to feel worthy or adequate. I cannot change that for you, but I can and will support you the best I can.*

The One Who Has Been Hurt By A Bisexual

You know what, this whole deal with bisexuals is bullshit. They just play around with you and then leave you heartbroken. That happened to me and not once but twice. That wound is still inside me. I don't think I'll ever trust a bisexual. They cannot commit because, in the end, they always want something else.

I have heard and read many iterations of this story. It is the previous fear coming true. The first thing to do is to acknowledge the hurt. *"Yes, I can hear you. It is so awful to be*

heartbroken and disappointed. It is also very human.” Does this figure need support in going through the heartbreak? In connecting with the vulnerable and sensitive part of themselves? Sometimes when something hinders embracing the feelings and loss, people fixate on the perpetrator and their fault. After that is dealt with, it might be good to expand the perspective, since deep wounds tend to narrow it down and personal experiences are generalised as universal truths. Were you hurt because someone was bisexual or is there a more personalised story back there? Is it sexual orientation that makes people act in a hurtful way or is there something more? You can say, he/she did it because he/she was confused about their sexuality, they didn't know what they wanted. Fair enough, maybe that particular person was confused, wasn't able to truly connect to what they want, chickened out from a non-mainstream relationship or reversely, decided to free from conformity and chose their truth. You got hurt in the process, that is not fair. But at the same time, not everyone that is bisexual or sexually fluid is confused. Maybe it is good to talk about these things, maybe for all of us, it would be better to have a more open climate for exploration. When things are out there in the open, probability of getting hurt by lack of awareness dramatically decreases.

Charles Pulliam-Moore in his essay “The Beef With Bisexuals” (2014) tells a story how his heart got broken by a bisexual guy who was interested in sex with men, but wanted emotional relationships with women (bis-sexual but hetero-amorous, as the author puts it). The author admits that even though the man told him that point blank, he “like a fool, pretended to know better”. That led him to aim his bitterness at bisexual men as a whole. But he also points out that in general things would have been easier, especially on the line between gay and bisexual men, if more bisexual men were ready to be upfront about “what it is they want and who they want it from”. He also states that “bisexuals get a bad rap for not being able to explain their emotional actions that seem so incongruous with their sexual proclivities”. Lack of clarity leads to false expectations and that in turn to the “beef with bisexuals”. I think this is a valid point. Openness and honesty, being able to communicate expectations directly, it all helps reduce potential resentment that in turn fuels stereotypes. I would just add that both “sides” need to be able to open up, talk and listen to each other.

The One That Does Not Want To Hurt Anyone

If I pursue my fantasies or my “wants”, or even admit that I have them, I might hurt people I care about. I might hurt my girlfriend if I tell her I am attracted to men too, how is she supposed to understand that? What if she feels threatened or rejected? What if she can't cope with that idea? What about my family? They went through a lot to accept my homosexuality, am I supposed to confuse them further, saying that it actually is more complicated? Putting my needs first seems inconsiderate. I am not alone and I cannot only think about myself and what I want.

This is a role that puts others and their well-being first and only then thinks about herself/himself. Our contemporary Western societies are generally leaning towards an individualistic set of values. It is reflected for example in the flourishing self-help industry that usually puts focus on the individual well-being. Even practices that are inspired by Western philosophy, which is more collectivistic in nature (i.e. emphasise the importance of the social group and interpersonal ties instead of the individual), are often used to support the growth of the individual. Thus, this role might be misunderstood when approached only from the individualistic stand-point.

One of the ways to unfold the role a bit more would be to search for the origins of these beliefs. Is it a set of values held by someone important (a parent or grandparent), who was caring and mindful of others? Does this role see pursuing its own desires as betraying those values? It would then seem important to appreciate this attitude and see if/how would it be possible to reconcile caring for others and caring for oneself. Especially that, in the long run, not caring for oneself can eventually, unintentionally, hurt others nevertheless. For example, in order to protect someone, the “wrong” desires are suppressed and held secret, but eventually lead to acting on them or start to consume ones psyche making it impossible to be true in a relationship. This results in an erosion of trust or closeness causing in the end real hurt. So, choosing to protect someone by denying one's “wants” can have negative impact on everyone eventually.

Also, this approach may be rooted in not feeling worthy enough to be cared about at all. Maybe in the past the person was not cared about or as a child was caught in a complex

relationship with a parent who, for example made the child responsible for their emotions. In this case, an important step would be to realise the unfairness of such a relationship and to disentangle a little from this emotional binding.

Sometimes being “stuck” is a result of seeing things as “either-or”; it is either mine or someone else's well-being. This mindset is limiting in itself, creating never-ending dilemmas. In taoism, one of the philosophical inspirations for process work, the core idea is that everything that manifests as polarities (black-white, either-or) in its essence stems out from an undivided primary state. Inspiration can be found in nature, where opposing energies co-exist in harmony.

The One Who Is Scared Of Confronting One's Sexuality

So, you are telling me that you are bisexual? I bet you are gay after all. People just can't be a little bit of this and a little bit of that. It confuses me. When things are separate in their categories, you are gay and I am straight, I don't feel threatened. I don't always feel comfortable, but I have learned to tolerate you – you are in your world and I am in mine. But you are saying now that you are also in my world, does it mean that I might be capable of being in yours? That scares me. That my sexuality might be also a bit messier than I thought. I just want to live my life, be happy and know what's coming. I don't want any kind of emotional earthquakes, life is tough the way it is already. Can you imagine what I would have to face if I found that I might like men in a more, you know, sexual way? What would happen to my masculinity? What will my pals say? No, get back to your own world.

This role wants to protect the status quo of people belonging to clear categories to protect itself from heterosexism and/or homophobia in case it finds its own sexuality less rigid. The fear is understandable, but this role should also realise that this fear fuels further negative attitudes, such as biphobia. The oppressor is a ghost role here, most probably a heterosexual and homophobic one. This is what needs to be addressed, along with the traditional notions of masculinity.

* See for example Arnold Mindell's book “Earth-based psychology” for process-work techniques based on this idea.

A fear or disliking directed at homosexuals might also be an effect of having had to split off or suppress a certain quality or energy. Dawn Menken (2001) presents an example of a man who had strong feelings of disgust towards gay men and their sexual practices. She invited him to explore what it was that he was disgusted with, the energy of the “disturbance” (a secondary process), using hand movement. They unfolded a powerful energy present in his enactment of gay sex. It turned out that he was cut off from his own strength, years of living under Russian communism made him feel fearful and powerless. The strong energy got marginalised and then “recognised” in his idea of gay sex, but it felt dangerous and alien. What he needed was to reconnect with that energy within himself – and that in itself had nothing to do with sexual orientation.

The One Who Fears God And Sinful Sex

The things they do those deviants, the animalistic sex, it makes me think about pervert scenarios, they won't get out of my head, so sinful! I want you to disappear and not provoke any of these thoughts. God says it is sinful and will send anyone sinning by homosexual acts to hell.

Here, we have a role of one that fears God, but also a ghost role of the God himself is introduced. The paradox is that people who take on the role of the fearful one, at the same time unconsciously act like the cruel God when they attack gay people. They wield great power, but have no awareness of it and they don't feel very powerful. At the same time, they are also threatened by the God role, an immense power that is being projected outside. Institutionalised religion and, especially, some radical religious leaders perpetuate the image of God as a violent, strict and punitive father rather than a loving and caring figure. When such a great power is split off and projected, a person is unaware of their own strength and that can lead to them becoming abusive. The strict God figure elicits feelings of guilt that can both cause inner emotional damage as well as become directed at the outer “sinful other”.

This relationship needs to be acknowledged as abusive, so that the fearful one can regain its own voice and strength. On a personal level, the restrictive inner figure sometimes has a real life prototype in the form of, for example, a strict family member - addressing this

might be helpful. Often, unconscious identification with a strong figure serves as a defence against feelings of helplessness and vulnerability of an abused child. Getting in touch with those feelings and acknowledging them as a valid response to abuse of power helps to see the cruel reality of the relationship of the God figure and the fearful one. The next step is to reconnect with the personal power, so that the fearful figure can become more empowered and able to make its own choices and decisions.

What is also interesting is to better understand the God figure itself. What is it like to be that figure? What is its perspective? What is the essence of being a powerful God? How does it feel to have such great power? What does the God want and need? When the secondary figure is explored in-depth, and not only viewed and feared from the primary role's perspective, there is often a shift in how it is experienced. For example, someone can access the immense power of the God and use it with awareness and in helpful ways. Find the rage and anger of the God and turn it against one's own oppressors (past or current). Or, as the God is embodied (in body movement and imagination), a completely new point of view might emerge, for example of being able to embrace the whole world, seeing things from a distance or not caring what others say.

The One Who Wants To Be Accepted And Have A Community

I want to be accepted, have a community, and most communities require me to declare what side I'm on. I know this means I'm trading something in, but currently, I need to belong, I need to be validated and accepted by people who know what I experience.

Yes, as a woman I am choosing to be with a man, because I want to have a family and not be harassed, not have my children ridiculed. I want to be respected and welcomed in the society. I am willing to ignore any signals that would not be in line with my straightness.

Yes, as a woman loving women I call myself a lesbian; I want to be proud of my gayness and I want to be fully accepted by the gay community. I am willing to cut off any shades of grey, any in-betweens, to achieve that.

I need my label when I need to assert my identity in a confrontation with the world. It needs to be clear who I am to do that. I want to be able to communicate about my experiences in a common language.

The need to belong, to be accepted and be part of a community is quite universal. People have various levels of it, but we are social animals and need others, even in this highly individualistic Western world. At the same time, there is something deeply wrong with a society where people have to trade being true to themselves for being accepted.

A study by Everett et al. (2016) explored the impact of changes in identity on mental health. One of the findings was that the longer sexual minority women would maintain their identity, the greater toll on the well-being (measured with depressive symptoms) a change in identity (as an effect of attractions/relationships with men) had. This shows how stressful a “betrayal” of the gay community is and how hurtful the stigma around sexual fluidity can be.

As awareness regarding human sexual fluidity grows, bisexuality and sexual fluidity are becoming more popular topics. Presence in the media, in turn, makes them easier to talk about and people with fluid experiences feel less alienated. “I’m not the only one going through something like this” can be extremely relieving. In the recent years, the bisexual community has grown noticeably in some countries. There is hope that belonging will not have to be traded for parts of people's experience.

The following account illustrates the importance of being recognised:

One day at lunchtime my mother told me that I needn't choose between pasta and rice and beans - I could have both. It came to me: Why should I choose? Why should I limit myself? Isn't being gay all about freedom of choice? Liberation? (...) [then he searched online] I remember sitting at 11pm, still at work, reading about myself, exposed to what people had to say about me. Everyone online seemed to understand me, to be writing about my experience, my feelings. I was overloaded. Tears came to my eyes. With an immense sense of relief - completeness - finally I gained my identity.

- Jonathan Daniel Hoffman (Ochs & Rowley, 2009, p. 209)

When the desire to be part of a community is acknowledged, the role can be unfolded further. There might be a history of rejection that left wounds in need of healing. Maybe, for example, this part experienced love that was always conditional, so it now believes that it has to meet certain conditions to be accepted. In that case, exploring and finding the meaning of true, deep worth that is independent from opinions of others is necessary.

Finally, finding a good, loving community, one that will be open to diversity and fluidity, could also be important. Maybe there is a potential for that role to take on the leadership in creating such an environment – in some countries the bisexual community is growing exactly because there were people who felt this need and responded to it by building them.

The One Who Is Protected By A Strong Identity

I need a strong sense of identity to be seen, to have my existence acknowledged. I can't be something fluid and in-between, I feel that I will become unseen or non-important. I am still fighting for my life. My identity is something I hold on to in this fight.

We need to protect the lesbians and gays by asserting “we were born this way”, so that the conservatives won't tell us that we have a choice and our choice is sinful, therefore we should choose a heterosexual life. If we admit that sexual orientation is fluid and changeable, then we lose one of the main arguments against homophobia: it's not a choice, so leave us alone, we can't do anything about it, let us be.

“When you are fighting for your life, you must assert strongly that you exist” (Menken, 2001, p. 77). Menken explains that by limiting the rights or threatening the very existence of the sexual minority community, the mainstream pushes it into having to take a definitive stand regarding its identity. Identities are political, so for years, the gay community has been fighting homophobia by organising around the gay identity as something inborn and natural. As Esterberg (1997, p. 172) points out: “In a perverse parallel to constructionist arguments, religious conservatives argue that sexual identities are flexible and that sexuality can change over the life course”. Gay people are being pushed into a position of creating “an absolute and unmoving identity” because they must fight for that identity on a daily basis (Menken, 2001, p.

77). If they waiver by opening up to fluid and varied possibilities of living and expressing their sexual identities it can be easily taken advantage of to dismiss their existence, to insist that they can change and be “normal”.

The strategy of fighting under the banner of “born this way” can backfire in various ways. The scientific fixation on finding biological underpinnings of bisexuality might have stemmed from the notion that only what is biologically founded is “real”. The long time it took the researchers to finally start seeing sexual orientation as something changeable might have been influenced by the push to have strong identities.

Also, I have heard right-wing radicals embrace the “born this way” idea by saying “Yes, you are born this way, you are then sick, it is an anomaly. There is no reason to celebrate this like you do, do we celebrate other diseases people are born with?”. In this case, hoping to find an argument that will finally make the anti-gay side change their mind seems futile, as everything can be used to further the attack. There is also a risk of conforming with a limiting and dangerous narrative of people’s sexual preferences being sick/healthy and natural/unnatural, in which only belonging to the “right” (healthy, natural) group grants a right to exist.

A more global shift is needed, for example in thinking about identities themselves. Esterberg suggests that we can think of identities provisionally, as something that describes what is true in the moment but not unchangeable. A postmodern identity: “in flux, but real nonetheless” (1997, p. 173).

This role acts as a protector against the “homophobic conservative” ghost role. It might need to really feel and appreciate the ability to protect, and to recognise its own strength. This way, being connected to a source of inner power relieves one from having to always “fight for life”. Also, a need for a strong identity can be unfolded more, a strong, full assertion of one “being this way” may give strength to become open to being in many different ways. Asserting one’s identity stops being a necessity to defend oneself, but a conscious act of standing up for oneself. It can be done with more awareness and consideration for other needs (such as being more fluid). At the same time, having more inner strength allows to more actively point out the oppression, oppose it, and fight it – instead of being in the defense all the time.

The One Who Doesn't Have A Choice

Your choice is a luxury that I am afraid I cannot afford - in the end, heterosexism affects all of us, and I'm afraid to face it, so I don't even want to hear about your freedom to choose. The more I want it and the more I don't feel free, the more I hate you. I don't feel that I'm strong enough to stand up for myself and reach deep inside to see my longings and follow them. I feel bound by social norms. There are moments when I would like to get free, but I don't know how and it's easier to shut down my needs. You remind me of them and I hate it that I can't freely choose.

Again, a ghost role appears here, the oppressive heterosexist (but probably also related to other types of oppression) system that makes this role turn against the ones that want more choice, whereas this one doesn't feel like it has a choice. This role probably needs a lot of space to talk about all the ways in which it was and is restrained in its choices. This would help to realise who the real perpetrator is, where should the negative emotions be directed, and to reach deep down to regain one's own freedom.

Figures at the edge – common themes

To be able to find out what kind of work each of the roles needs, they have to be explored and well understood first. They are not enemies to be fought or eliminated, they are often important parts of the psyche that should be approached with openness and curiosity. Often, what seems problematic on the surface, carries important messages and cues or leads to deeper issues that need resolving. Sometimes, paradoxically, what is problematic, when approached with appreciation, can be used and transformed into a strength.

In process work, we can use an array of techniques to unfold a role and “amplify” certain qualities. The basic one is of course a dialogue about the role, but most importantly, with the role itself. It is fascinating, how these parts of our selves have their own thoughts, motives and are related to specific life-events. A person might not consciously agree with what the role says, but nevertheless, the role is there and can have a strong influence of what that person can and cannot do. What is often helpful to fully unfold and experience the role is

to play it out with an active engagement of the body. Sometimes drawing, creating fairy-tales, role-play with toys and other means of expression help in deepening the experience and understanding. It is important to remember that even though I have identified some common roles in the field, they will unfold in a unique way for every individual.

One of the process work techniques is a group process where various roles can interact with each other. It is a dynamic, live process that happens in a physical space, with people taking on different roles, moving around, expressing their thoughts and emotions. Similarly, an individual can work with inner figures (doing inner work or with a help of a facilitator/therapist) by noticing them, exploring them and their relationships, and having them interact. A partial* resolution usually happens when opposing roles find an emotional common ground and/or gain more understanding of each other. I have presented a static description of the roles, so a real interaction between and with them here is impossible. There are, however, some themes and patterns that are worth noticing and commenting on.

Rank and privilege

Some of the above figures represent edges that in essence relate to the fact that some forms of sexual fluidity** lead to including same-sex attractions in one's behaviour and/or identity. Everett et al. (2016) explored how changes in identity (among women) impact mental well-being over a span of 10 years. Participants who underwent changes in sexual identity experienced more depressive symptoms than those whose identity was stable. Women who shifted towards more same-sex-oriented identities experienced a greater number of depressive symptoms following the changes. Shifts towards other-gender relationships were related to a reduction in depressive symptoms. It is then not just the change in the identity that is difficult but becoming "more gay" is.

The study above does not directly explore the reasons underlying these patterns, however, it has been widely studied and observed clinically that sexual minorities experience stigma-related stress. Same-sex oriented sexuality inevitably makes a person subject to

* The resolution is in most cases partial or temporary because many conflicts are complex and need more than just one interaction between roles/polarities to be resolved.

** In this chapter, unless otherwise stated, I use the term "sexual fluidity" broadly, relating both to changes in sexual responsiveness as well as to bisexual identities (as in: fluidity to relate with more than one gender).

marginalisation and stigmatisation to some extent. This issue is linked to the concept of high and low rank.

Rank in process work is defined as a sum of privileges in a given context. Social rank is related to social categories such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, class, etc. Social structure is built around these elements, so for example in a Western society white heterosexual males have a high rank and black lesbian females have a lower rank.

High social rank may bring substantial gains such as better pay, higher likelihood of getting a good job position, as well as less quantifiable benefits such as being listened to, having a priority in certain contexts, being regarded with respect, being taken into account, etc. This translates into very concrete effects in everyday life and brings advantages on a symbolic level. A straight friend of mine once told me that when she got married she finally felt the power of the status that marriage gives. The fact that she could refer to her former boyfriend as “my husband” in everyday interactions made her feel more included in a traditionalistic Polish society. She also reflected on how gay people are marginalised by not being able to get married (as for 2017, and I deeply hope that one day this information will become obsolete, gay marriage is not legal in Poland) – not only because it is an inequality in itself, but because it denies them this kind of status. Of course, in a society where marriage has such a high rank, heterosexual unmarried and single people are also marginalised. Being heterosexual, however, is a huge rank in itself and places a person in the mainstream of the culture.

Having low social rank on the other hand, especially in an area that is prominent in a society, often makes people feel powerless, helpless, inferior, and not good enough; they doubt themselves, and come off as lacking self-confidence. In the longer term, these feelings might lead to depressive symptoms. The problem with social rank is that one usually cannot do much about it, it is something given, often something one was born with, such as race or gender, but also financial wealth highly correlates with having been born in a rich family. What counteracts low social rank is high psychological and/or spiritual rank. They are related to resilience, life experience, and spiritual connection, and are a source of personal power. I will get back to the topic of personal power later on in this chapter.

Rank regarding one's sexual orientation is related to the concepts of heteronormativity and heterosexism. Heteronormativity refers to “the suite of cultural, legal, and institutional practices that maintain normative assumptions that there are: only two genders, that gender reflects biological sex and that only sexual attraction between these ‘opposite’ genders is natural or acceptable” (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, quoted in Farvid, 2015, p. 98). It structures beliefs, policies, institutional practices, also impacting everyday situations in which heterosexuality is privileged over homo/bisexuality, and taken for granted as normal and natural. Heterosexism is a belief that promotes “heterosexuality as the sole, legitimate expression of sexuality and affection” (Bohan, 1996, quoted in Farvid, 2015, p. 98) and it manifests in assumptions that everyone is heterosexual that occur on every day, social, cultural and structural levels (see for example Farvid, 2015 for an extensive analysis of heteronormativity and heterosexism manifestations).

Since rank is contextual, different factors impact having high/low rank in different communities and those communities have their mainstream as well. In the LGBT community, the LG has a higher rank than the BT (Weiss, 2003) and also a bisexual person attending an LGBT community event will have their identity assumed as gay. On the other hand, one of the explanations of the negative attitudes of lesbians towards bisexual women is that the former see the latter as having higher rank – by being with a man they are able to pass as heterosexual in the heterosexist society.

A rank issue is also present in the role that talks about not feeling like it has freedom when it comes to choosing a different lifestyle or pursuing their deep needs. Being able to go against the mainstream, following one's deep feelings, flirts and signals, having the courage to stand up for one's love and desires – all this is a source of high psychological rank. If someone struggles to openly affirm their sexuality or even to explore their potential attractions, it is worth noting, that it requires certain inner strength to do so and not everyone is equally connected to the source of that strength.

Powerful ghost roles

Heterosexist/heteronormative system and a violent God are two ghost roles that appear on both sides of the polarisation and threaten everyone. Both of them are very powerful and have rules not to be transgressed, in order to keep a certain status quo. At the dreamland level, they are projections of a split-off power, which means they are experienced as something separate and outside the psyche.

There is a popular belief that the most raging homophobes have secret homosexual desires that for some reason they repress and project their self-hate outside. From time to time there are media reports that confirm this belief, here are two recent prominent cases that highlight this issue. The first one is a far-right National Front leader who turned back on his movement and came out as Jewish and gay, saying that many other members of this anti-Semitic and homophobic organisation were gay as well. The second is a conservative State Representative from Ohio, believing in “family values” and committed to upholding “natural marriage” who was caught in the act of having sexual relations with another man in his office. These are just two examples, there is a plethora of gossip, anecdotes and open secrets regarding such situations. There is also some research on this topic. For example, LaSala (2013) cites two studies; in the first one, straight-identified men who scored high on homophobia were more likely to manifest arousal when watching gay sex. In the other, implicit measures were used to assess participants’ “hidden” preferences and there was a link between implicit homosexual orientation and high homophobia. Authors also found a link between being raised by authoritarian and homophobic parents and own homophobia. It surely is not always the case, but living in an oppressive family may lead to having to suppress one’s same-sex attractions to live up to parents’ expectations.

The splitting off a part of the experience to conform with the requirements of the powerful oppressive system can be also found in the phenomenon of gays disliking effeminate men. The cultural Western mainstream promotes a certain form of masculinity that basically stigmatises any elements of behaviour or appearance that might seem feminine. A recent poll conducted by a UK-based gay magazine revealed that 71% gay and bisexual men are turned off by effeminate men, 41% think effeminate gay men give the gay community a

bad image, and 41% think of themselves as “less of a man” because of their orientation (Haigh, 2017).

Fear of homophobia fuels further homo and bi-phobia which makes it a self-perpetuating mechanism. If someone is scared of homosexuality because of the stigma and rejection, they might start rejecting homosexuals, projecting their fears. The oppressive relationship is internal and external. Fear and anger are directed at the scapegoats (easier to target being a minority) than against the powerful, ultimate anti-gay figure (often an Old Testament-like figure of violent God).

By projecting our power and not having personal access to it the pattern persists, so what we need is more access to personal power. One of the ways to gain power and get out of the victim position in relation to the homophobic figures is identification with the oppressor. It's a known pattern, those who were bullied often become bullies themselves. Being bullied in one's psyche can have a similar effect. The need to have access to one's power is fundamental, yet this strategy has obvious, very dangerous side effects. A different source of personal power can be found in psychological and spiritual rank – a sense of strength and resilience that comes from overcoming difficulties, having certain skills, being true to one's values, being connected with something bigger than the personal self, and many more. Another source lies in the oppressive figure itself. The splitting off needs to be reversed and the powerful figure needs to be recognised as part of one's psyche. This enables a person to be more aware of their power and helps to use the strength without abusing it, choosing consciously how to do it.

Relationship fears and wounds in a wider context

Relationships and personal wounds inflicted in the context of sexual fluidity seem to play an important role in maintaining some of the stereotypes. This is where the personal level intertwines with the social one.

A lot of people feel insecure and vulnerable in their relationships, for various reasons they don't feel good enough, their self-worth is conditional, they do not feel worthy of love. Popular culture perpetuates an idea that romantic love is what grants people value, so they

are scared to lose it. Heterosexist beliefs base people's feeling "like a woman" and "like a man" on whether they are partnered up and accepted by a person of the "other" gender.

On top of that, being cheated on and/or left is a painful experience in itself. The emotional vulnerability that it evokes makes a person even more susceptible to culturally ingrained messages that undermine one's self-worth. Some of those messages might make it worse when that "other person" is not of the "right" gender.

Again, the rank system also plays a role here. I have worked with a woman who was cheated on by her female partner with a man. She used to say: "how am I even supposed to compete with a man"? What she meant is that she feels unable to give a woman what a man can, in terms of a relationship that has a high rank in the society. She also sees men as much more powerful than she is. On the other hand, one of the male participants of the Alarie & Gaudet (2013) study bluntly said that competing for a woman with another woman is a "no" (hence why he wouldn't seriously date a bisexual woman, unless it was about having a threesome with another girl). He didn't elaborate on the topic, so I can only speculate, but I suspect one of the reasons may be related with notions of masculinity – being "beaten" by a woman would be a greater blow than if it were a man.

Having considered the social level, it is important to see that it is also a matter of working through one's personal painful experiences to be able to start freeing oneself from the heterosexist belief system. It is a matter of finding one's true worth, one that is independent of the conditions that system sets in place, such as "a woman is only worth something if she has a man", "I need to prove my masculinity by showing my power and hiding my weakness" or "as a woman I am inherently less powerful than a man". By transforming such beliefs on a personal level we become more able to transform them out in the world. Healing inner wounds, finding self-love and acceptance, being self-compassionate and self-caring makes life a better one. In effect, using and perpetuating stereotypes (such as "bisexual people are inherently unfaithful") as a self-defence mechanism or a way to relieve the pain becomes necessary no more.

Owning it

The resentment of the previous figure is directed at another ghost role – the undecided/ cheating/ leaving a non-monosexual person. It is very important to see the difference between a stereotype and personal experiences. A stereotype is making a generalisation that renders a real person invisible, prejudice is relating to a stereotype and not to a unique individual. This means that it is not true that someone's being bisexual makes them unfaithful or undecided somewhat by nature. It is, however, true, that some bisexual or sexually fluid people cheat, are lost, torn, seem undecided and hurt other people in the process. Most of their confusion is rooted in the vicious cycle of biphobia – since it is not widely accepted that a person's attractions might change, that person herself/himself might struggle with what they experience. Cheating often comes from not being able to be true, not knowing how to confront someone or oneself, not having enough personal power, not being in touch with one's needs or not having strength enough to own those needs.

Reconciliation and working through a conflict is possible when both parties own up to at least a fraction of what they are blamed for. The circumstances and reasons why someone acted in a certain way are important, but they become excuses without a degree of taking responsibility.

This is what the accused role might start with to have a healing conversation(s) with the one that was wounded: *“Yes, there was a time when I was confused about who I am and what I want and in effect caused pain. I am sorry for that pain. I was not aware of my needs and acted out without consideration for other people. Yes, today I know that my sexuality is fluid, but I don't want to hurt anyone because of it. I will do my best to be truthful and open about what I want, what I can and cannot give.”*

Of course, the wounded one at some point needs to recognize that their personal pain influenced their contribution to the stereotyping and discriminating. This, in turn, might open a space to share the personal pain on both sides and work through the conflict.

Accessing personal power

I have made references to the concept of personal power on various occasions already. It is a source of inner strength that is independent of external validation and from the context. The power that relies on acceptance from others or on one's social position is much more feeble, as it often can be taken away and it also poses a danger of power abuse. Personal power is something a person can always count on, it counteracts feelings of helplessness, and offsets low social rank. It also protects from projecting one's power to the outside – to strong leaders, figures of authority, systems, and Gods.

Where does personal power come from? Julie Diamond (2016) lists many elements: difficult experiences, even traumatic ones can make a person become resilient and develop their life wisdom that helps face future difficulties. Self-worth based on one's knowledge, skills and experience make it possible to rely on oneself in difficult situations. A belief that one can change and adapt, trust in one's feelings, a spiritual connection with something bigger than the “small self” – all that is a source of personal power.

A sense of power can also come from crossing one's edges and accessing secondary processes. Being able to reconnect with lost parts of the self or finding new qualities and ways of being, gives a sense of inner peace, inner strength, personal growth, a better understanding of oneself, and more freedom. Often it is the secondary processes and a connection with the essence/sentient level that give precise answers where one's personal power lies.

FIGURES THAT STAND FOR A FLUID VIEW ON SEXUALITY

It is time to give some space to the other side of the polarisation: the roles and figures that want and need more fluidity in regard to sexuality. Most of them were signalled in some way so far, this is a summary of what I found in the field. I think it is important to let them speak out freely. Depending on who listens to them, some will be seen as more primary or more secondary to them. Some of them could engage in a dialogue or interaction with some of the edge figures. Many of them represent some sort of a need and/or personal power.

The One That Wants To Be Free

I want to feel and be free with my choices who I love, who I go to bed with, who I form relationships with. I don't want my sexuality to be policed by anyone.

I want to be free to choose who I love and not be restricted by the gender label attached by the society to them.

The One That Looks Beyond The Surface of Labels

"I cannot claim for myself one label or another without lots of interesting modifiers. This fact reminds me that no one issue exists on its own, an island untouched by other matters. Through a bisexual identity, I live and love into collaboration, coalition, union, the space that occupies the void between one pole and the other (i.e, the infinite varieties of bisexuality that fall between Kinsey 0 and Kinsey 6). No one lives at one point on the spectrum all of the time."

- Jen Collins (Ochs & Rowley, 2009, p. 193)

This role appreciates the fact that every person's experience of sexuality is much more complex than just a label. Two people who score the same on a sexuality test still have their own unique ways of living and expressing their sexuality and relationships.

The One That Doesn't Give a Damn About Labels at All

I don't need my labels because I no longer want to be constrained by mental boxes. I want to be free from whatever norms every community, even the most liberal one, has. I want to explore moment to moment experiences as they are, without interpretations that may rob me of the uniqueness of my experience.

The One That Is Attracted To The Person Not Gender

I don't fall in love with genitals but with people. I love their bodies whatever the shape and form, but ultimately for me, it is all about human connection. Sexuality is so much more than just what I do in bed and with whom. It is about relating, communicating, being inspired, being close, striving to understand the other human and much more. I don't want my being to be reduced to the physical act.

“My bi identity is not about who I am having sex with; it is not about the genitals of my past, current or future lovers; it is not about choosing potential partners or excluding partners based on what is between their legs.

It is about potential— the potential to love, to be attracted to, to be intimate with, to share a life with a person because of who they are. I see a person, not a gender.”

- Rifka Reichler (Ochs & Rowley, 2009, p. 189)

The One That Wants To “Have It All”

Yes, I am curious about all the different shapes and forms that sexuality and human beings come in. I want to love men, women, transmen, transwomen, and people who defy any kind of binary categories. I want to have adventures in the realm of sex and love, I want to experience different things, I want to enjoy myself and others, I want to experiment and be thrilled and excited beyond my imagination. I want to be free to enjoy sex and different bodies, and not be called a slut. I want to express myself physically with people I'm curious about. I want to be able to go beyond what is normative in this culture, as long as it is an expression of intimacy and sexual energy that feels right to me and my partner(s). I am being told that I want to “have it all”... yes, I do, I want it all!

The One That Wants To Be Accepted For Who They Are

I want to be accepted as a human being, for who I am and not because who I choose to have sex and relationships with. I need belonging and acceptance but I also need

acknowledgement of the fact that I am changing and dynamic. I want to be seen for what I am and not for what category I belong. My sexuality is an important part of my identity, but not the only one.

The above statements are expressions of roles, so some people might identify more with some more than with others. For some all of these roles will be secondary, for others, certain parts will be interesting, curious, or sound just right. These statements can also become entry points for further exploration of these roles, their qualities and strengths. Most of these roles can potentially become a part of a conversation and interaction with the edge roles. Some of them express needs that are mutual with those of the edge roles, for example wanting to be free or being accepted. Focusing on common needs helps to relate and create a common ground for hearing each other out.

We can also seek a source of personal power by connecting with these roles/inner figures. They all express needs and values and stand up for them in a direct way. Searching for such parts internally, letting them express themselves, getting closer to them, even if only a little bit, helps in crossing the edges.

THE UNFOLDING OF THE SEXUAL FLUIDITY AS A SECONDARY PROCESS

My central focus so far was on the roles that oppose or support the idea of sexuality being fluid rather than set in stone. What also needs further exploration is the sexual fluidity itself. There are definitions created by researchers, based on studies of people's experiences, and this gives us a framework to start with. However, everyone eventually creates their own understanding of this phenomenon. At the consensus reality level* this personal understanding may lead to certain choices or attitudes. But there are also the dreamland and the essence levels that can give an even deeper understanding and a unique experience of the fluidity.

We can then approach sexual fluidity as a secondary process that can be explored and unfolded, leaving conceptual understanding aside. It is about finding sensations and feelings

* See chapter 1 for description of the reality levels.

that express it, to actually experience the essence of being fluid in the moment. This experience might shift and transform, become for example an expression of being fluid in general, not only sexually, or it might be as well a very sexual sensation that invigorates every part of the body. At some point a figure may emerge and have some kind a message to share with the primary process.

There is a figure that I came across when doing my own inner work to unfold the nature of sexual fluidity. I was exploring the changeability of things, starting off with focusing my awareness on body sensations related to the feeling of being fluid and ever-changing. Through working with movement and imagery the following figure emerged.

The Nature

I am nature. I am ever changing, diverse, varied, flowing, cyclical, and all-encompassing. You speak of things being natural and unnatural, but you don't look at me, only at an idea of things being "natural". I am diverse, there are species with multiple genders, that change genders back and forth, that have straight sex, gay sex, and rainbow sex. I am fluid yet I do not lack structure, things work well (unless you meddle) and are stable. Your ideas are limited. See me, feel me, learn from me and free yourself.*

Relating to nature and natural phenomena is helpful in finding new perspectives and overcoming edges. Sometimes the discussion and conflict between different roles seems to perpetually come back to the same arguments, and the pain that has been inflicted makes it hard for them to see and understand each other. One gets stuck at an edge. A form of detachment is at some point beneficial, allowing for a broader, more encompassing and often more compassionate perspective.

This figure is a result of my own inner work, so it is quite personal, but at the same time, being the Nature itself, it can be universal as well. For every individual, however, the unfolding of the fluidity and change will yield a unique experience.

* See for example "Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity Gender & Sexuality In Nature & People" by Joan Roughgarden for an exploration of this topic.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There seems to be a surge in various, sometimes very narrowly defined, sexual orientation identities, as observed for example by Goldhil (2018). Identities such as pansexual (gender-blind attraction to people), omnisexual (attraction to many genders rather than gender being non-important), gynosexual (attraction to women, regardless of subject's gender) or androgynosexual (attraction to people who appear androgynous, regardless of their gender) are a few examples. What most of the new identities have in common is a separation of gender and sexual attraction. Many of the new identities focus only on the object's gender, leaving out the subject's. For example, "lesbian" implies that both object and subject are female, whereas "gynosexual" refers only to attraction to women, without defining what gender the subject is. This distinction became important with the increasing visibility of transgender and gender fluid people.

It also seems that people feel unable to relate their patterns of attraction and how they see themselves to "traditional" sexual orientation labels. There is certainly more awareness around this subject and a need for recognition of diversity in sexual attraction. Robin Dembroff (as quoted in Goldhil, 2018), a feminist theory researcher, says that in Western culture, sex is becoming more about individual bonds and self-expression rather than just a reproductive act, hence why the need to create more specific, individual categories. Language both reflects the changing reality and creates it by making very specific names available. If you can name something, it means it exists.

So far, I have focused mainly on sexual fluidity and letting go of the labels, but both of these phenomena are strongly related to getting out of traditional understanding and limited categories of sexual identities. There is a visible need for more acceptance and openness to various forms of sexuality and sexual identification. My main question in this project was what stands in the way of doing so. I found that there is not a straightforward answer, there is not one reason or one belief that creates an edge to accepting sexual fluidity. It is rather a complex interplay between social norms, ways in which culture shapes our understanding of the world, and individual process related to upbringing, past relationships, access to personal power, self-esteem, and other elements. It seems that myths related to

bisexuality can often be projections and generalisations of personal stories and insecurities. The social level of rank, privilege and discrimination related to sexual orientation also still plays a substantial role in disallowing full acceptance of diversity in sexual identities – as long as there is not full equality regarding sexual orientation, some orientations will be more “preferred” than others.

Awareness is key. If we learn to recognize various voices in us, especially the ones reflecting oppressive reality of the outside world and the ones that long for more freedom, we will be able to transform both internal and external realities. Little by little, I believe that a shift is possible – if not already happening.

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