

ARTICLE

Special Issue: Canadian Philosophical Association 2021 Prize Winning Papers / Numéro spécial : gagnants des prix de l'essai 2021 de l'Association canadienne de philosophie

This Paper Won a Congress Graduate Merit Award (CGMA) at the 2021 Canadian Philosophical Association Conference

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

Heather Stewart

Department of Philosophy, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA
Corresponding author. E-mail: heather.stewart@okstate.edu

Abstract

This article highlights three epistemic practices, which, taken together, create conditions that worsen the problem of 'bisexual erasure.' Though bisexual people constitute a significant portion of the larger LGBTQ+ community, their identities and experiences are routinely erased — in queer communities and broader society alike. This article argues that we have both an epistemic and a moral obligation to attend to the epistemic conditions created for bisexual people, and to work to make those conditions more just. Specifically, I highlight the detrimental influence of testimonial injustice, testimonial smothering, and epistemic microaggressions on bisexual people's ability to challenge and resist their own erasure.

Résumé

Cet article met en évidence trois pratiques épistémiques qui, prises ensemble, créent des conditions qui aggravent le problème de « l'effacement de la bisexualité ». Bien que les personnes bisexuelles constituent une portion significative de la communauté LGBTQ+, leurs identités et leurs expériences sont régulièrement effacées, autant au sein des communautés queer que dans la société au sens large. Cet article soutient que nous avons une obligation à la fois épistémique et morale de nous préoccuper des conditions épistémiques créées pour les personnes bisexuelles, et de travailler pour rendre ces conditions plus justes. Plus précisément, je souligne l'influence néfaste de l'injustice testimoniale, de l'étouffement testimonial et des micro-agressions épistémiques sur la capacité des personnes bisexuelles à défier et à résister à leur propre effacement.

Keywords: bisexuality; erasure; testimony; testimonial injustice; testimonial smothering; microaggressions

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Canadian Philosophical Association/ Publié par Cambridge University Press au nom de l'Association canadienne de philosophie. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Despite comprising a significant portion of the LGBTQ+ community, bi-identified people experience routine erasure, both from within the broader LGBTQ+ community, as well as from outside it.¹ The phenomenon of ‘bi erasure’ is the process of rendering bi-identified people and their experiences invisible within discussions of LGBTQ+ identities, experiences, and issues. Discourses on sexuality tend to focus on one of two dichotomous poles (heterosexuality or homosexuality), leaving bisexuality overlooked, or ‘erased’ from the conversation (see Elia, 2014). The erasure of bi identity and experience from conversations about LGBTQ+ life is incredibly harmful, both for bi-identified individuals and for the larger bisexual community. It is harmful because erasure contributes to a variety of physical harms (e.g., health disparities faced by bi communities (Human Rights Campaign, 2021)); erasure plays a role in reinforcing material inequalities and discriminations (e.g., pervasive unemployment and housing discrimination experienced by bi folks (Burneson, 2018)); and erasure is psychologically damaging, contributing to a sense of worthlessness and alienation in many bi-identified people. While all of these types of harm — those that are physical, material, or psychological, respectively — are critically important to understand and attend to as we pursue genuine justice for bi people and communities, in this article, I will highlight another distinct type of harm, which I believe is a pernicious consequence of bi erasure, namely, *epistemic harm*, or the harm individuals or communities experience in their capacities as knowing subjects (i.e., as producers and givers of knowledge). I will further argue that this epistemic harm is particularly pernicious, as it impedes the possibility of drawing on the direct and experiential knowledge of bi people and communities to undermine such erasure.

The epistemic harm of bi erasure, I will argue, results from bi individuals being denied epistemic authority over their bi identities and experiences, as well as from being denied the opportunity to successfully transmit knowledge about those identities and experiences to others. While epistemic harm is morally damaging for the individuals who experience it (cf. Fricker, 2007), and thus worth attending to in its own right, I argue that attention to the epistemic harm faced by bi people — and the corrosive epistemic practices that generate it — is necessary to combat bi erasure. This is because if bi-identified people are never recognized as credible knowers and authoritative speakers, they will never be able to transmit their first-personal knowledge about bisexuality to others — an essential step in challenging and eliminating the harmful myths and stereotypes about bisexuality that reinforce bias, discrimination, and stigma toward bi people. Paying attention to these epistemic phenomena, then, is essential as a matter of justice for bisexual people.

¹ Given the subject matter of this article, I take it as important to situate myself in relation to its content. I approach this topic as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and more specifically, as a bisexual person. That said, though I approach this topic through a direct connection and relevant lived experiences, I also recognize the limits of my positionality — I am a white, cis-ish person, and therefore I have relative privilege within the larger LGBTQ+ community. My intention is not to speak for other members of the community, especially those who are more vulnerable within the community. Rather, I aim to highlight one issue — among many — within queer communities, and one that interacts with other aspects of vulnerability within LGBTQ+ communities, rendering some members of those communities even more vulnerable, and subjected to even more harm.

This article will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will explain how I understand the label 'bi' and the identity of bisexuality, and I will respond to concerns that bisexuality is inherently or necessarily trans-exclusive. I will offer reasons in favour of maintaining connection to the bi identity. In Section 3, I will overview three epistemic practices that bi people are prone to experience, and I will explain how they bring about certain sorts of epistemic harm. In Section 4, I articulate my central concern about these harmful epistemic practices, namely, that they have the perverse effect of worsening the problem of bi erasure, and thereby the variety of harmful consequences that bi erasure contributes to for bi people and communities. I thus conclude that justice for bi people — social, economic, and health related — requires serious attention to our epistemic and linguistic practices, however subtle they may appear at first glance.

2. Why 'Bi?': The Pragmatics of Retaining the Category and Label of 'Bi'

Bisexuality, or 'bi,' refers, in the broadest and most fluid terms, to a variety of bi-erotic practices, desires, and intimate relationships. While in the minds of some, the term is taken to refer to 'attraction to or desire for intimacy with people of *both* genders' (i.e., cis-men and cis-women), the prefix 'bi' need not be understood this way, or viewed as inherently or necessarily binary in this way. Some queer scholars, including Julia Serano (2012), have argued that the 'bi' prefix in bisexuality is best interpreted as 'attraction to *same* and *non-same* gender.' Understood in this way, bisexuality is taken to refer to attraction to people of multiple and various genders, thereby alleviating concerns that the category of bisexuality is trans-exclusionary or that it problematically reinforces the gender binary. Understood in this way, the concept of bisexuality is more open and fluid — it accounts for the fact that many bi people can and do experience attraction to or desire for people with any and all gender identifications. This is the understanding of bisexuality that I employ throughout this article, as well as the way that I think bisexuality should be understood in general.

Before moving away from this point, it is worth pausing on a point made only in passing above. That point is the following: even if there are good reasons to understand bisexuality in the way that I have indicated — that is, as attraction to same and non-same genders — the reality is that, in practice, the common or lay understanding and use of 'bisexuality' is of the problematically binary sort of which I, too, am critical. I take this seriously, and though I believe that there are good reasons to work against that more limited and limiting understanding of bisexuality and advocate for what I take to be the superior (i.e., trans-inclusive, gender fluid) understanding of the term, to get this sense of bisexuality to be the dominant one, and to get it into common parlance, will require substantial efforts at education and conceptual engineering, that is, a widespread effort to get our common social use of the concept to be the one that serves our moral and social ends and reflects the world as we hope it to be. I am committed to this project of conceptual engineering, and do my best effort to educate and advocate for this revisionary sense of bisexuality. However, these efforts must be far more widespread, and taken up by all bi people who aim to be robustly trans- and non-binary inclusive, as well as others who educate about LGBTQ+ issues in a fully gender inclusive way.

Before noting a few additional reasons that I think it is important to retain connection to bisexuality, I do want to make one observation. I believe that it is deeply problematic that the concerns about trans and non-binary exclusion appear to be reserved for bisexual people (e.g., appearing trans-exclusionary is seen as a risk of identifying as bisexual, but not of identifying as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). Regrettably, there are trans-exclusionary and transphobic people of all sexual orientations. Think, for example, of TERF-lesbians who explicitly deny the premise that trans women are women, and thus exclude trans women from the category of people ('women') to whom they are inclined to be attracted to. This can also happen with gay men, and certainly heterosexual people. To single out bisexuality — and bisexual people — for the charge of trans-exclusion is itself bi-phobic, and runs the risk of reproducing damaging myths and stereotypes about bisexuality and bi people. Bisexual people can be trans-inclusive (I am one such bisexual!) or, unfortunately, trans-exclusive, but this is not unique to bisexuality; all people of all sexual orientations have the potential to be exclusionary in just this very way. This is why I urge us to move toward a concept of bisexuality that allows for recognition of bisexuality that is trans and non-binary inclusive. I believe there is deep moral value in shifting more uniformly toward such a conception.

That said, in addition to the moral value of adopting the understanding of 'bisexuality' that is more trans and non-binary inclusive (and more gender fluid overall), I think there are additional, pragmatic reasons not to abandon our connection to the identity of bisexuality (e.g., in favour of something like pansexual).²

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

However, despite these large and diverse numbers of bi-identified people, bisexuality is still routinely erased, even within the larger LGBTQ+ community (Serano, 2012). While bisexuality and the 'B' that represents it is typically understood as falling under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, bisexual people nevertheless face continued marginalization

² In making this point, I want to be very clear that I am not suggesting that people should not identify as pansexual if this is the label and identity marker which makes the most sense for them. Rather, I am suggesting that people should not abandon bisexuality (e.g., in favour of some other label) for this particular reason, that is, the assumption that bisexuality is problematically binary and/or exclusive of trans and non-binary people. I of course believe that all people should use the identity label that they believe best maps onto their experiences. However, I also believe that it is important to interrogate and challenge myths, misinformation, and stereotypes that might bias individuals against identification with bisexuality. This latter point is the one I hope to make.

both in society generally, and in queer communities in particular, resulting in unequal representation and diminished community support, especially when compared to mono-sexual members of the community, namely, gays and lesbians. Outside of the community, there is often confusion, myths, and misinformation about bi people, which often results in bisexual people being lumped in with their gay and lesbian counterparts, if they are seen as LGBTQ+ at all. On both counts, bi people of all backgrounds routinely have their experiences rendered invisible, incomprehensible, and incoherent. This sort of erasure — or, the failure to have one's identity recognized, affirmed, or understood — leads to a variety of harmful outcomes, whether physical, material, psychological, or otherwise.

My contention is that claiming the 'bi' identity helps to increase the visibility of bisexual people and communities. When we outwardly and openly claim our bi-identities, the numbers of bi people become harder to deny, dismiss, or ignore. This makes it easier for bi people and communities to gain recognition (legal, social, etc.) and to demand greater support from the larger LGBTQ+ community. It makes it easier to generate more research on the specific needs facing bisexual people and communities, and to generate sustained interest around the issues bisexual people face. Most importantly, it heightens the urgency to focus on improving various outcomes, because it becomes evidence that negative outcomes (e.g., health disparities, unemployment, and housing inequalities) affect more people than we might have previously thought. There are thus good reasons to name ourselves as 'bi' — to join together to help get the spotlight on bisexual people, communities, and our unique experiences and needs.

Finally, I believe that it is valuable to retain connection to bisexuality, given the long history of bisexuality and the role of bisexual people in LGBTQ+ activism and advocacy. Understanding our shared history is important for knowing, celebrating, and connecting to our queer elders and continuing legacies. The recognition that bi people have always been an important piece of the LGBTQ+ community is vital for achieving a strong sense of belonging.

3. Oppressive Epistemic Practices and Epistemic Harm to Bi People

While bi people are harmed by bi erasure and the many practices that contribute to it, in a myriad of ways, in this section, I want to home in on a particular category of harm that I think bi-identified people often experience, but that is not generally discussed. This is *epistemic harm*, or the harm one suffers in one's capacity as a knower. These harms are detrimental to bi individuals and communities, and as I will argue in the final section, they contribute to the problem of bi erasure and make it more difficult to be overcome. In this section, I describe three harmful epistemic practices that bi people are likely to face, *testimonial injustice*, *testimonial smothering*, and *epistemic microaggressions*, and I show how it is that they cause harm that is distinctly epistemic in nature. This will pave the way for the final section, in which I contend that the accumulation of epistemic harm that results from these practices is a key mechanism for perpetuating bi erasure.

The first epistemic practice to which I want to attend — *testimonial injustice* — was brought to mainstream philosophical awareness by Miranda Fricker in her 2007 book *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. There, Fricker

describes the phenomenon of testimonial injustice as occurring when a speaker is afforded less credibility than they deserve owing to negative identity-based prejudices held by the hearer about some facet of the speaker's identity. For example, if the hearing party in a testimonial exchange possesses the stereotype that women are overly emotional and thus irrational, when met with a female speaker in a testimonial exchange, that hearer is likely to make a rapid credibility assessment of the speaker that is unduly deflated. In other words, the presence of the stereotype causes the hearer to assess that the speaker is not owed full credibility when she speaks.³ Such assessments of credibility can be immediate and unconscious (read: unintentional) on the part of the hearer, but nevertheless, they cause the speaker to be treated as less than a full (and fully competent) knower.

In a society like ours — in which there are pervasive myths, biases, and stereotypes regarding bisexuality — bi-identified people are likely to experience this sort of unjust credibility deflation when they attempt to give testimony, and especially testimony about their bisexuality. For an example of how this might play out, consider the following: hearer (*H*) exists in a society that tends to deny bisexuality (i.e., assume that bi-identified people are 'really' gay or straight, and just haven't sorted it out yet). This pervasive social stereotype has the following assumption at its core: people claiming they are bisexual are experiencing a failure of self-knowledge; they don't really know that they are bi, rather, they don't know what their real sexual orientation is yet. Given the prevalence of this stereotype in his society, when *H* meets a bi-identified speaker (*S*), his immediate (and perhaps less than fully conscious) assessment of *S* is that she cannot be trusted — she is not a competent knower. When *S* tries to speak to her experiences with her bisexuality, she is met with immediate doubt.

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

This systemic failure to recognize or take bisexuality seriously leads to the second epistemic phenomenon, namely, *testimonial smothering*. Coined by philosopher Kristie Dotson, the phenomenon of testimonial smothering refers to the "truncating of one's own testimony in order to ensure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence" (Dotson, 2011, p. 244). In other words, if a speaker (here being a bi-identified person) perceives or anticipates that when they speak, they will not be met with understanding or by a sympathetic audience, they opt to self-silence out of fear of being misunderstood,

³ Importantly, as Fricker acknowledges, the stereotypes and biases that influence our judgements about others, and in this case, about their epistemic credibility in particular, need not be conscious or explicitly held. In other words, the hearer might not even realize that they hold this stereotype or that it influences their rapid judgements. For more on this, see the vast literature on implicit bias (see, for example, Project Implicit, n.d., at Harvard University, and Brennan and Brownstein's *Implicit Bias and Philosophy* collection (2016)).

or worse, having those misunderstandings result in a variety of tangible risks. For example, if one perceives that their would-be hearer is blatantly homophobic, they might anticipate that disclosing their bisexuality will be met with hostility and perhaps even violence. As a result, they may choose to ‘smother’ their own testimony about their bisexuality. Similarly, if a bi-identified speaker recognizes that their would-be hearer is not likely to fully understand the content of their would-be testimony, they may judge that their testimony might worsen extant stereotypes and biases about bisexuality — a risk that may not, in their determination, be worth it.

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

A third epistemic phenomenon that causes epistemic harm to bi-identified people is the phenomenon that Lauren Freeman and I have called *epistemic microaggressions* (Freeman & Stewart, 2018). Microaggressions are commonly understood to refer to routine, subtle, and seemingly insignificant comments, gestures, or slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that convey negative or hostile messages to members of marginalized groups. Freeman and Stewart (2018) have developed a new taxonomy for categorizing microaggressions on the basis of the harms they cause to targets.⁴ One category of microaggression we describe is epistemic microaggression — a subset of microaggressions that consist in seemingly minor slights that dismiss, ignore, ridicule, or otherwise fail to give uptake to knowledge claims made by speakers on the basis of their membership in a marginalized group (in this case, membership in a marginalized sexual orientation category).⁵ Microaggressions are harmful, at least in part, in virtue of the fact that they are routine and frequent, and are often

⁴ Microaggressions are standardly understood and classified in a way that Lauren Freeman and I have called “act-based,” (Freeman & Stewart, 2018, p. 414) following the work of psychologist Derald Wing Sue (2010). On such a view, microaggressions are broken down into microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. In other words, they are understood and classified according to the type of action an agent has committed. We have instead argued for an alternative understanding of microaggression that is harm-based, categorizing microaggressions on the basis of the unique types of harms they bring about for those on the receiving end (Freeman & Stewart, 2018). There are many reasons for this shift in perspective: it reflects a commitment to the idea that theories of oppressive phenomena should be understood from the perspectives of those most directly impacted, it takes seriously the idea that oppressed people are better positioned (epistemically and phenomenologically) to understand their oppression, it takes seriously a moral commitment to centre the voices of the oppressed in our theorizing about oppression, and on account of all of these, is better able to explain and reflect the moral seriousness of microaggressions.

⁵ Bisexual people are marginalized within queer communities, and within broader society. In broader society, bisexual people experience routine biphobia and queerphobia; within LGBTQ+ communities and beyond, there is still a pervasive assumption of monosexuality (e.g., that one is either gay or straight). Both lead to many assumptions, biases, and stereotypes about bi people.

committed by people despite their best intentions, including people close to them: their families, friends, colleagues, partners, and other acquaintances. Their harm lies in their repeat nature, and in this case, their distinctly epistemic harm lies in the way epistemic microaggressions slowly chip away at epistemic self-confidence and epistemic self-trust.⁶ They build up over time, causing people to question their very knowledge of themselves and their experiences.

Bi-identified people routinely experience a variety of microaggressive comments and slights, which call into question their epistemic standing or suggest, albeit subtly, that bi people are not to be taken seriously.⁷ Consider a common experience that is likely to register as familiar to bi-identified readers: when a person is out as bi, yet someone close to them refers to them as ‘bi-curious.’ While the person close to them likely doesn’t mean to cause any harm by the comment that their bi-identified friend or family member is ‘bi-curious’ (when they are indeed out as bi), this sort of comment constitutes an epistemic microaggression because it sends the message that the bi person does not know their own experience well enough to know that they are bi. It suggests that they are (still) confused or questioning, even after they have claimed a bi identity. Messages like this get repeated and reinforced, and over time, can corrode the epistemic self-confidence of the bi-identified person, causing them to doubt what they previously thought they knew, namely, that they are in fact bi and that claiming such an identity is valid. Microaggressions can accumulate to degrade bi-identified peoples’ confidence that they can and do truly understand and know their own identities and experiences. This might be one mechanism for keeping bi people ‘in the closet.’

There are many other examples of microaggressions that target one’s bisexual identity. Some of these come in the form of verbal comments that people make to bisexual people directly. For example, ‘You don’t know that you are bisexual, you simply haven’t met the right person’ or ‘This club is actually for gay people.’ Other microaggressions come in the form of how we use language, and other sorts of erasure — for example, non-inclusive language such as ‘This is a club for gays and lesbians’ or ‘gay marriage is legal now.’ Or, referring to a bisexual person as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian,’ based on who they are dating. For example, ‘Heather has been dating a woman for a while. I think she is a lesbian now.’ All of these comments can, over time and cumulatively, cause harm to bisexual people: they deny the experience of bisexuality, and they contribute to ongoing erasure.

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

⁶ For more on self-trust, see Zagzebski, 2012. For more on how self-trust is constructed and maintained socially, see Jones, 2012.

⁷ Some of this discussion can be found in my co-authored chapter with Lauren Freeman (Freeman & Stewart, 2019).

4. How the Inability to Speak and Be Heard Worsens the Problem of Bisexual Erasure

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

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

Failures to recognize the FPA of bi-identified people is closely linked to the problem of *pernicious ignorance*, as described by Dotson (2011). Dotson describes pernicious ignorance as a reliable ignorance that, in a particular social context, harms another person or set of persons. This ignorance is reliable to the extent that it is consistent in that social domain, most often because it follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources — that is, a gap in the collective social understanding. Pernicious ignorance is morally problematic when it leads to harmful practices of silencing — that is, when the ignorance makes it difficult, if not impossible, for would-be hearers to understand speakers, and thus, leads to linguistic conditions in which would-be speakers opt to remain silent on a particular matter. This silence worsens the particular epistemic gap, allowing the ignorance around a particular matter to remain.⁸

My contention is that the epistemic practices described above are morally problematic insofar as they contribute to the denial of FPA to bi-identified folks, and thus, insofar as they contribute to a morally problematic pernicious ignorance, bi

⁸ For more on the problem of actively constructed social ignorance, see the vast literature on what has come to be known as ‘epistemologies of ignorance.’ This literature explores the persistence of certain social gaps in knowledge, and seeks to explain why it is that they are so resistant to change. See, for example, Sullivan and Tuana, 2007.

experience is fundamentally misunderstood in the social domain, and the very people who have the relevant experience to bridge these epistemic gaps are not granted the requisite epistemic authority to do so. Put another way, when we allow these harmful epistemic practices to continue, we create conditions in which the very people best epistemically suited to closing gaps in knowledge about bisexuality have that very possibility blocked or denied in advance. This worsens erasure, which then drives ongoing myths, misinformation, and stereotypes, which worsens the very epistemic practices that worsen erasure. It is a vicious cycle.

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

References

- Bettcher, T. M. (2009). Trans identities and first-person authority. In L. Shrage (Ed.), *You've changed: Sex reassignment and personal identity* (pp. 98–120). Oxford University Press.
- Brennan, S., & Brownstein, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Implicit bias and philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- Burneson, E. C. (2018). The invisible minority: Discrimination against bisexuals in the workplace. *University of Richmond Law Review*, 52. <https://lawreview.richmond.edu/2018/01/28/the-invisible-minority-discrimination-against-bisexuals-in-the-workplace/>
- Dotson, K. (2011). Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia*, 26(2), 236–257.
- Elia, J. P. (2014). Bisexuality and schooling: Erasure and implications for health. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 14(1), 36–52.
- Freeman, L., & Stewart, H. (2018). Microaggressions in clinical medicine. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 28(4), 411–449. DOI: 10.1353/ken.2018.0024
- Freeman, L., & Stewart, H. (2019). Epistemic microaggressions and epistemic injustices in clinical medicine. In B. Sherman & S. Goguen (Eds.), *Overcoming epistemic injustice: Social and psychological perspectives* (pp. 121–137). Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Fricke, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Gates, G. J. (2011, April). How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender? *The Williams Institute*. <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>
- GLAAD. (2017). Accelerating Acceptance 2017. http://www.glaad.org/files/aa/2017_GLAAD_Accelerating-Acceptance.pdf
- Human Rights Campaign, Health Disparities Among Bisexual People. (2021). <https://www.hrc.org/resources/health-disparities-among-bisexual-people>.
- Jones, K. (2012). The politics of intellectual self-trust. *Social Epistemology*, 26(2), 237–251.
- Movement Advancement Project. (2016). Invisible majority: The disparities facing bisexual people and how to remedy them. <https://www.lgbtmap.org/file/invisible-majority.pdf>
- National LGBTQ+ Task Force. (2013, June 5). Trans people and sexual orientation. Retrieved March 1, 2019 from <https://thetaskforceblog.org/2013/06/05/wonky-wednesday-trans-people-sexual-orientation/>

- Project Implicit. (n.d.). Harvard University. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/takeatest.html>
- Serano, J. (2012, November 19). Bisexuality and binaries revisited. <http://juliaserano.blogspot.com/2012/11/bisexuality-and-binaries-revisited.html>
- Stewart, H. (2019, March 23). Bisexual microaggressions in medical contexts. *Bisexual Resource Center Blog*. <http://biresource.org/bisexual-microaggressions-in-medical-contexts/>
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life*. Wiley.
- Sullivan, S., & Tuana, N. (2007). *Race and epistemologies of ignorance*. State University of New York Press.
- Zagezebski, L. (2012). *Epistemic authority: A theory of trust, authority, and autonomy in belief*. Oxford University Press.

Cite this article: Stewart, H. (2021). We're Here, We're ... Queer? On the Enduring Harms of Bisexual Erasure. *Dialogue* 60(3), 423–433. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217321000287>