"I think that I'm not a relationship person": Bisexual women's accounts of (internalised) binegativity in non-monogamous relationship narratives

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Abstract

This article explores how women (who either had relationships experiences with more than

one gender or broadly defined themselves as bisexual) link their non-monogamous

relationships with their bisexuality and analyses how these accounts could be argued to

reflect these women's (internalised) binegativity. While binegativity is widely researched,

there is a lack of qualitative empirical work on the complexity of bisexual lives in general

and of internalised binegativity in particular. This article contributes to these areas of

research by drawing on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyse nine

qualitative interviews from an ongoing study of bisexual women in Austria. For some of

these women, their experiences of non-monogamous relationship forms were linked to

(internalised) binegativity, expectations of rejection and concealment of one's identity; for

others, they presented a form of agency. The women showed a range of reactions and

strategies related to the positioning of bisexuality and (internalised) binegativity, particularly

regarding unfaithfulness: Adoption of binegative self-attributions, excusing the antibisexual

notions of others, and engaging in additional emotion work to ensure faithfulness to their

partners.

Keywords: biphobia, non-monogamy, bisexuality, minority stress processes, unfaithfulness

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Introduction

This article is the first Austrian qualitative study to be published on bisexuality. The aim is to show how deeply ingrained stereotypes can be, and how (internalised) binegativity is present in women's accounts of unfaithfulness and bisexuality. Unfaithfulness is one of the most common stereotypes bisexual women face (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 2003; Welzer-Lang, 2008). This means that those who seek to explore bisexuality and unfaithfulness are therefore in danger of potentially perpetuating and feeding into problematic existent stereotypes. This work tries to circumvent this risk by setting out that the author takes an affirmative approach to bisexuality and by exploring the complexity and challenges of this topic for bisexual women living in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships.

Individuals from stigmatised social groups are reported to be exposed to additional stressors because of their 'minority' position. Meyer (2003, p.35), takes the view that internalised stigma, expectations of rejection, and concealment of one's identity reflect 'minority stress processes'. These stressors are considered to be one cause of the poor psychological health that many bisexual people have been found to manifest (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christensen, 2002; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010). It is crucial, therefore, to investigate the lives and challenges of those with marginalised sexualities, including bisexual women. Internalised discrimination is defined as the internalisation of societal values and is often understood to be invisible to the persons themselves (Meyer, 2003). The research drew on IPA to engage in making sense of the participants making sense of their worlds (Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997). The author takes a critical realist perspective (e.g., Bhaskar, 2008; 2011), in order to investigate how the interviewed participants make meaning of their bisexual relationship experiences and unfaithfulness, taking into account how those meanings may be shaped by their experiences, environment, expectations and the situations they find themselves in (Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2002). By giving a voice to the experiences of women, this study also draws on a feminist perspective (e.g., Kitzinger, 2006).

Previous work has either dealt with internalised stigma or experienced discrimination of bisexual women, or has examined accounts of bisexual non-monogamous lives (Klesse, 2005; Robinson, 2013). This paper, however, is the first to provide an analysis of the complex interplay between (expected) unfaithfulness and different forms of (internalised)

binegativity in the narratives of bisexual women who live either monogamously or non-monogamously. Some of the examples show how women's perceptions and understandings of bisexuality and unfaithfulness may reflect internalised binegativity. Other examples depict how experiences interplay with self-conceptions and inform coping strategies for (internalised) discrimination. In summary, this work provides a vivid picture of the complexity that constitutes the lives of (non)-monogamous bisexual women.

Defining bisexuality and binegativity

In this article, *bisexual* is used to refer to individuals who feel attracted to more than one gender (Barker et al., 2012). This definition encompasses attraction to men and women and also to those who identify with trans and non-binary identities. The term bisexual has also come to be an umbrella for non-monosexual identities (e.g., people attracted to more than only one gender), as distinct from unidirectional identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, and heterosexual identities) (Gonzalez, Ramirez, & Galupo, 2017). In this paper, the term bisexual is used when referring to the bisexual population in general, and to the participants as a collective group. However, when specifically referring to the identities of individual participants, I use their own words in respect of their self-chosen sexual identities.

The terms biphobia and binegativity refer to negative understandings of bisexuality and associated oppressive practices, which include discrimination, violence, and the erasure of bisexual identities (Klesse 2011). Much of the existing literature uses the term biphobia, which similarly to homophobia, refers to a specific form of minority oppression (Flanders, Robinson, Legge, & Tarasoff, 2016; Hoang, Holloway, & Mendoza, 2011; Ochs, 1996).The term biphobia evokes connotations of oppressive practices being born out of fear. In contrast, binegativity is a more nuanced term than biphobia, and points more broadly to the negative attitudes that bisexual people are confronted with (Eliason, 2001). Therefore, I mostly use binegativity, but draw on the term biphobia when quoting others' publications. A common form that binegativity takes is the belief in, and expression of, negative attitudes towards bisexual people. These binegative notions include the belief that bisexual people have an alleged propensity toward promiscuity, viewing bisexual people as unfaithful and untrustworthy, questioning the very existence of bisexual identities including the notion that bisexuality is just a phase, and suspecting bisexual individuals to be transmitters of STDs (Eisner, 2013; Hertlein, Hartwell, & Munns, 2016; Ochs, 1996).

Being surrounded by antibisexual attitudes, either through direct interpersonal interaction or

via societal discourses, can in turn easily lead to bisexual people 'directing negative social values towards the self' (Meyer, 2003, p.14). This 'internalised binegativity' is, therefore, the internalisation of antibisexual societal values (Meyer, 2003; Ochs, 1996). For my own work, I found it useful to keep Meyer's (2003, p.35) concept of 'minority stress' in mind. In his framework social attitudes, so called distal minority stress processes, influence proximal minority stress processes like internalised stigma (e.g., binegativity), expectations of rejection, and concealment. Expecting rejection because of one's identity or experience (Bostwick, 2012; Meyer, 2003) is particularly pertinent to bisexual people, whose experiences of rejection by gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals in general have been documented within the literature (Ault, 1994; Hayfield, Clarke, & Halliwell, 2014; Li, Dobinson, Scheim, & Ross, 2013). Since minority stress processes are hypothesised as one reason for the poor psychological health of some bisexual people (Ross et al., 2010), it is important to investigate how these inform the lives and actions of bisexual people. In this research, I chose to analyse how bisexual participants' understandings of bisexuality and unfaithfulness might reflect internalised binegativity. I use the term *internalised binegativity* to reflect the broad nature of negative societal attitudes toward bisexual people that are internalised and in this way I distinguish the term from internalised biphobia, which is often used to describe the desire to change one's (bisexual) identity (Bostwick, 2012). Additionally, I consider minority stress processes such as the concealment of one's identity or having expectations of rejection because of one's identity or experience (Meyer, 2003).

Research on internalised biphobia

Internalised phobias or negativities play an important role in the psychological well-being of sexual minorities and appropriately are the subject of psychological health research (Jorm et al., 2002; Meyer, 2003; Ross et al., 2010). Generally, the body of empirical literature on internalised biphobia is scarce. Hoang et al., (2011), for instance, describes a positive correlation between internalised biphobia and the unfaithfulness of bisexual women in her quantitative study on intimate relationships. Similar quantitative work, investigating the mental health of bisexual people, focuses instead on the fear of rejection and experiences of stigma and monosexism (Bostwick, 2012; Roberts, Horne, & Hoyt, 2015). Some biphobia research treats *internalised* biphobia as a secondary issue to experiencing the biphobia of others. The work of Flanders et al. (2016, p.158), for example, describes an 'indicative' case of internalised biphobia deriving from one participant's ambivalent feelings towards her own identity. Another case is mentioned in the work of Li et al. (2013), which describes a

participant's negative attitude toward bisexuality stemming from her father's bisexuality. However, none of the existing research focuses on internalised binegativity specifically in relation to the negative stereotype of bisexuality and unfaithfulness. This is therefore the first qualitative study exploring how bisexual women's understandings of unfaithfulness, and the ways in which they position their bisexual relationship experiences, reflect (internalised) binegativity. Furthermore, this research also explores the strategies that bisexual women may develop to cope with their experiences of binegativity around unfaithfulness in relation to their relationship experiences.

Research on bisexual people and non-monogamy

Unfaithfulness has long been one of the most prominent antibisexual stereotypes (Eisner, 2013; Hertlein et al., 2016; Ochs, 1996). This is a result of conceptualising bisexuality as a mixture of homosexuality and heterosexuality and thereby conflating multiple attraction with a "need" to engage in behaviour with multiple partners. Therefore, bisexual people are understood to only be satisfied when having sex with men and women (or, more recently, with other multiple genders), which positions them as inherently non-monogamous (Rust, 2003). Although consensually non-monogamous and polyamorous ways of living play a positive role in the lives of many bisexual people (Ritchie & Barker, 2007; Robinson, 2013), bisexuality should not be assumed to *necessarily* or always be conflated with polyamory or non-monogamy (Ochs, 1996). Still, bisexual people as well as others who engage in non-monogamous/ polyamorous relationships (or more recently specifically identify with non-monogamous/polyamorous as identities), often face allegations of promiscuity (Klesse, 2005; Mint, 2004). Previous research describing the relationships of people living at the intersection of bisexuality and non-monogamy has focused on specific challenges for bisexual people, ways of negotiating relationships, and relationship forms as 'strategies of sexual expression' (Klesse, 2005; McLean, 2004; Robinson, 2013, p.21). Little research to date has dealt with the intersection of female bisexuality and non-monogamy and the interweaving with minority stress processes such as (internalised) binegativity and expectations of rejection and concealment.

Methods

As outlined in the introduction, this research was conducted from a critical realist perspective (Bhaskar, 2008; 2011). Critical realism acknowledges the materiality of experiences while recognising that people's experiences and interpretations of reality are influenced by culture,

language and politics (Bhaskar, 2011). This perspective provides a metatheory to investigate how people interpret and navigate their lives and how their notions and concepts are related to social practices (Danermark et al., 2002).

Participants

The aim was to interview women who had either had sexual and/or romantic relationship experiences with more than one gender, or defined themselves as 'bisexual' or with another non-monosexual identity. Recruitment began with women the researcher knew via Vienna's queer community. Additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling, a commonly utilised recruitment method within sexualities research (Browne, 2005). Interviews took place in Vienna, either in bars or at private apartments. After the interview, the participants were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire to identify participants' social characteristics including their gender identity and sexual self-identifications. All participants had had sexual experiences; seven had additionally had long-term relationships with more than one gender. The relationship experiences of these women could therefore be broadly described as bisexual and sometimes 'bisexual relationship experiences' is used as a short form to summarise their experiences. Of the nine women interviewed[1], five identified themselves as bisexual, two of whom also used the labels 'queer' and 'heterosexual'. One self-defined as 'ecosexual'[2], one used her own concept of 'genderblind' with regards to sexual orientation, one defined herself as 'heterosexual', and one gave no self-identification. At the time of the interviews the women were aged between 19 and 54 (mean age = 34 years) and none of the participants had children. Eight were white (seven with an Austrian background and one identifying as an ethnic minority from Eastern Europe) and one was Black. All were born in Austria, some having grown up in rural parts of the country before moving to Vienna for their studies. They all had been living in Vienna for several years. Seven were able-bodied, one had limited mobility, and another had a long history of operations. All participants were well-educated, and described themselves as feminists. Some were also politically active, though only two had had experiences with bisexual activist groups.

Procedure

Before the interview participants were informed about the aim of the project (to investigate bisexual relationship experiences) and what would be involved before they signed a consent form. They were provided with information which explained that the interview would be

audio recorded and that they could withdraw from the research at any time. The interviews were conducted in German, and extracts presented in this paper are verbatim transcripts, which were translated by the author[3].To protect the privacy of the participants, self-chosen pseudonyms were used and identifiable details (e.g., names and places) were changed. The interview structure was a problem-centered interview (Witzel, 2000), starting with a broadly pre-formulated question that generated their storytelling. The interviewer took notes during this process. When participants finished answering the first question, these notes were consulted to formulate further prompts. The thematic order of the questions followed the sequence offered by the participants and gave more detail to the initial story. In a third step, topics of interest that had not yet been raised were further explored.

Data analysis

Data analysis drew on interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 1997). I started with familiarising myself with the data, reading transcripts, and listening to audio files. Then, the initial coding took place. I was specifically interested in those sections where participants spoke about the connections between their "bisexual relationship experiences" and discrimination. Individual cases were analysed. Analysis aimed to explore the participants' perceptions of their relationship experiences. It also involved an ongoing process of reflexivity, using my own suppositions and knowledge of theoretical frameworks to interpret the participants' accounts. The researcher has an activist background, that is to say an 'insider perspective' that helped to find implicit meanings in the respondents' narratives (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015, p.9). The goal was to capture meaning both at a latent and at surface level. The participants' perceptions were not only influenced by their social interactions, but, additionally, their perceptions could also inform their interactions with others. For each transcript, notes were taken regarding key topics, processes, connections between different aspects of the narrative and initial interpretation. This process was repeated with each narrative and cases were compared with each other. The current paper provides accounts of particular diverse and compelling cases. This approach draws on IPA because it offers the possibility to learn about a particular person in particular situations as well as to work out connections in different aspects of the person's accounts (Smith, 2004). In practice, the analysis investigated how the women gave meaning to their 'bisexual relationship experiences' in light of their previous experiences, self-evaluation, and the socio-cultural milieu. The analysis reports how the participants make meaning of bisexuality and unfaithfulness and how they link them.

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Results

Different binegative concepts were identified throughout the analysis. In this paper, however, I will focus only on "unfaithfulness" as it proved to be the most pertinent and widely occurring in these women's narratives. I show how the participants positioned (their own) unfaithfulness in relation to their attractions to, and behaviours with, more than one gender (termed as bisexuality), and the different strategies they applied to cope with (internalised) stigma. Additionally, I explore how female non-monogamous bisexuality can be theorised as linked to minority stress processes like (internalised) binegativity, expectations of rejection, and concealment of one's identity. The strategies the women adopted to cope with (internalised) binegativity, their reactions to allegations, and the actions that followed their own conclusions were particularly revealing. Therefore, the results report the different strategies the women adopted, ranging from negative self-conceptions to emancipation and agency. To depict the intricacy of the women's experiences I chose to look for latent meanings in their narratives. In practice, I interpreted the underlying, internalised binegativity of statements and actions, taking into account the complex ways the women came to certain conclusions, for example, what other experiences of binegativity they have encountered. Thus, each extract will be discussed in light of additional information from the interviews.

Drawing negative conclusions about oneself: Jac

The first example focuses on one participant whose unfaithfulness is presented as something that happened, and that could be interpreted as internalised binegativity, which in turn contributes to the adoption of a binegative self-conception. Focusing on the negative conclusion Jac draws from her experiences, and her coping strategy, I will discuss what her extract inherently tells us about her self-perception.

Jac is a 33-year-old woman. She had only had relationships with men until she 'fell in love' with a woman who she repeatedly referred to as her "big love". The five-year relationship ended after Jac cheated on this partner with a man. Even though this break-up had occurred two years prior to the interview, she was still mourning the past relationship. Summarising her relationship experiences, Jac came to the following conclusion:

Jac: Because, unfortunately, I was always the person that cheated —

Interviewer: You said you cheated? I did not quite —

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> Jac: I cheated, yes. Well, that I had the feeling it is not what I want or it is too boring or I need — a kick or something and therefore, I think that I'm not really a relationship person.

Later on, Jac provides more information about her ex-girlfriend and what she thought about the relationship:

> Jac: She prophesised that already from the beginning that I would do that [be unfaithful], because she didn't believe that I am a lesbian […] Well, she never bought it, — I think she bought it only way later how much I really love her, yeah. She just couldn't understand why I thought she was great even if she is a woman. […] And, ehm, she always said, you will definitely cheat on me with a, you will definitely cheat on me and it will for sure be with a man.

At the beginning of the relationship her female ex-partner struggled to accept that Jac could love her. She continuously repeated the prophecy that Jac would cheat on her with a man. After many years, the prophecy 'came true' when Jac had a sexual encounter with a man outside of their assumed monogamous relationship. Consequently, her female partner broke up with Jac, who felt sorry and guilty and did not dare to attend the queer–lesbian community they had both frequented. Multiple times during the interview, she expressed her remorse about what she had done. The above section shows Jac's final conclusion. Generalising about her past ('always') by using the exact wording of her ex-partner's prophecy ('cheat'), she came to the conclusion: 'therefore, I think that I'm not really a relationship person'.

This short extract gives us several hints of Jac's internalised binegativity, which can be understood when taking into account what happened before her self-assessment of not being a relationship person. Before the act of unfaithfulness there was: (a) the repeated vocalisation of an antibisexual stereotype (the prophecy), and years later; (b) the fulfilment of the actual unfaithfulness; Jac's reaction to the break-up was (c) to anticipate stigmatisation from the queer–lesbian community; (d) her withdrawal from this community and, finally; (e) the adoption of a binegative stereotype in her self-assessment.

Looking closer at each of these points, the following can be added. Firstly, the repeatedly vocalised expectation that Jac would eventually cheat on her female partner with a man is a well-described prejudice by lesbians toward bisexual women (Ault, 1994; Lahti, 2015; Rust, 2003). Even the fact that the expectation becomes true can be interpreted within a bisexual

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context. Those bisexual people lacking role models that would otherwise give guidance to the unmasking of and dealing with stereotypes in a self-determined way are more vulnerable to fulfilling these stereotypes (Rust, 2003). Moreover, Jac's strategy of dealing with the break-up resembles a textbook example of a bisexual woman's bad break-up. Jac detailed how the queer–lesbian community where her ex-partner and she used to be part of might have felt about her. While those who cheat may often be positioned as the villain by mutual friends and acquaintances, nonetheless it is clear that Jac clearly expected to be unwelcome specifically within this lesbian community after what she had done, which also lived up to stereotypes of bisexual people. Being afraid of stigmatisation by a lesbian community is a well-known stressor for bisexual people (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Bostwick, 2012; Hayfield et al., 2014). In the end, the fear and guilt were so strong that she decided to withdraw from the queer–lesbian community, a state of affairs that had already lasted for two years at the time of the interview. Finally, Jac's negative assessment of her fitness for relationships ('therefore, I think that I'm not really a relationship person') can also be seen as the adoption of an internalised antibisexual stereotype: that bisexual people are not good at relationships in general (Klesse, 2011).

To sum up, when Jac instantiated a repeatedly vocalised stereotype from the lesbian community (the expectation of bisexual women cheating with men on their lesbian partner) and her relationship subsequently ended, her reaction was on two levels. First, she withdrew from the queer–lesbian community in anticipation of stigmatisation and second, she concluded that she is not a relationship person, thereby self-applying the binegative stereotype of not being good at relationships. Thus, the notion of binegativity is not only expressed by members of the lesbian community, and by her female partner, but also by the bisexual woman herself. Therefore the negative constructions of bisexuality affect everyone involved. The next examples discuss bisexuality in light of monogamous and non-monogamous relationship experiences. The first two examples show the specific challenges of women at the intersection of bisexuality and non-monogamy.

When trying to understand binegativity fuels harmful self-conceptions: Fanny

Women identifying as bisexual and non-monogamous face specific difficulties including being seen as promiscuous and untrustworthy (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005; Robinson, 2013). The example shows which negative attitudes Fanny, a bisexual non-monogamous woman who speaks openly about her sexual experiences, had to deal with. We will see that

Fanny's coping strategy is to excuse the negative attributions of others. My interpretation will also explore the consequences of this strategy for Fanny's self-assessment.

Fanny, a 25-year-old actor and student, has had relationships mainly with men and one long-term relationship with a woman. Having had multiple sexual relationships prior to her current relationship is part of her identity of having been a 'sexually active' person. At the time of the interview she was in a long-term relationship with a man who was 13 years older than her. In the following extract, Fanny outlines the way her lesbian friends thought of her during her previous relationship with a female partner:

> Fanny: How it was during the relationship? (…) I would even claim that many of my real *lesbian* lesbian friends never took it really seriously at that time. Not because they don't take people seriously that are bi but because I, I think because I am so open with my emotional life and my sexuality.

Later Fanny went on to explain:

> Fanny: I was just with many more men than women, proportionally, well, both in relationships and otherwise, interpersonal encounters in the broadest sense — with me it was never taken quite seriously, even after one-and-a-half years of relationship it was just the one girlfriend.

In another part of the interview she analyses her own identity with reference to her current relationship:

> Fanny: There is a reason why I also refer to myself jokingly as hobby lesbian, who is now in a conservative, hetero, monogamous relationship. It's also this outsider's view that I've meanwhile totally internalised.

We can use her reassessment to understand how she gives meaning to her relationships and how the assessment of others may have informed her own framing of her relationships. In accordance with participants of other studies (Klesse, 2011), Fanny felt that her intentions for relationships were not regarded seriously. In another part of the interview, Fanny also reports one friend as saying: 'You are not bi. You just take everything that comes along'. Thus, her friends also hypersexualized her for being a sexually active woman, a fact that has repeatedly been described for bisexual, non-monogamous women (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005; Robinson, 2013). It is also clear that her friends' comments were significant enough for

Fanny to be able to recall and report this incident during her interview. Since Fanny was open about her (bi)sexuality and about living in non-monogamous relationships, both negative attitudes can be interpreted as binegative attributions of untrustworthiness and promiscuity (or sluttiness).

Additionally, a revealing part of the passage is Fanny's reaction to these attitudes. She is not dismissing her friends' comments; nor is she blaming her friends for not taking her seriously. On the contrary, she tries to explain to the interviewer why her friends reacted like that. It could be argued that when Fanny tried to understand her friends she was undermining her own self-conception. In the extract above, she singled herself out as a special case ('Not because they don't take people seriously that are bi but because I…'). Additionally, she blamed herself: she was too open about her sexual experiences and had had a lot more experiences with men. Fanny reasoned the following way when she explained her lesbian friends' reaction: firstly, her friends knew about her bisexual experiences and; secondly, they also knew she had been with more men than women. Additionally, she provides information that her relationships up to that time had mostly been non-monogamous. Based on her remark 'because I am so open with my emotional life and my sexuality', I contend that her friends would most probably have known about her relationships being non-monogamous. Based on the allegation 'You are not bi. You just take everything that comes along', I also assume that they attributed hypersexuality to Fanny.

The interpretation of the above-mentioned points reveals that the main point in Fanny's case is the combination of her identifying as a bisexual, non-monogamous, and sexually active woman. It is this particular combination that made it hard for her friends to take the long-term relationship with her partner seriously. Additionally, in trying to understand the allegations of her lesbian friends and not challenging them, she in fact worked against herself. I contend that her strategy of excusing others for not taking seriously her intentions for her same-sex relationship might be an indicator of internalised binegativity: being regarded as slutty and untrustworthy. The last extract may support this line of thinking as it shows that Fanny also reflects that she had internalised views from others regarding her own identity or framing of intimate relationships.

In summary it can be argued that Fanny's interview provides evidence that bisexual, non-monogamous women talking openly about their sexual experiences are likely to face binegative notions of promiscuity and sluttiness. Additionally, their intentions for

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relationships may not be regarded seriously. Regarding coping strategies, we can conclude that excusing the binegative attitudes of others may also reflect internalised binegativity.

Expectations of binegativity and rejection leading to concealment: Johanna

The next example depicts how antibisexual discourses around promiscuity may play into expectations of rejection because of one's identity and/or sexual experience. Johanna has had relationships with different genders (including one trans woman) and was single at the time of the interview. She describes her then recent dating experience with a woman:

> Johanna: Also, I never told Julia that I date a man because I somehow have the feeling it would hurt her somehow double, because they have the feeling I only would have played with them and actually wanted a guy or I don't know what and then. It was consecutively like that, like, that I actually concealed the sex [of her partners] and maybe they had their own thoughts on that matter. However, up to today I really don't know what to do about it.

In the interview, Johanna added that this was the first time in her life that she had tried to date both men and women at the same time. She would have liked to be open about it. However, with women she was more reticent than with men. She expected women to be unaccepting of her openness to more than one gender at the same time. She anticipated the binegative reaction that her date would assume she actually preferred men, which makes sense in a society where heterosexuality is seen as the default, compulsory, and naturalised sexuality (Butler, 1990). Johanna's reaction may have been intensified by the fact she was also considering non-monogamous relationships which also fall outside of mononormativity and normative relationship practices. A similar prejudice that played out in Jac's case (the stereotype that bisexual women prefer men) is here expressed as anticipated binegativity. The main topic, however, is being afraid of rejection because of one's non-monogamous bisexual identity.

Johanna's case is a good example of the challenges that arise for an identity at the intersection of bisexuality and non-monogamy, specifically during the start of an intimate relationship. She shows what Bostwick (2012, p.8) calls 'stigma consciousness'. In the end, she chose the strategy of concealment. It is clear that she anticipated having to manage binegative attitudes. Her ambivalence about "coming out" is well-attested in the literature describing the struggles of bisexual's coming out in a society full of antibisexual discourses

and practices (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Flanders et al., 2016; Fra, 2014; Li et al., 2013; Spalt, 2017). Furthermore, dealing with a twofold outing, as a bisexual and as a person preferring non-monogamous relationships, increases the challenges at the start of an intimate relationship.

Monogamy and the bisexual desire that could strike at any moment: Lia

The following example demonstrates how a bisexual identity can also be unsettling in a monogamous relationship because of the associated stereotypes. At the time of the interview, Lia was in a long-term relationship with a man. In the following extract, she explains the transition from her previous relationships with women to her current relationship:

> Lia: And I am very, well I got into it really well I have to say. I don't have the feeling that I miss a woman. I am just very in love with this person and I like him from tip to toe and I think he smells good and does everything, does everything right but I miss, now thinking. I don't have at the back of my mind, that I miss the soft breasts of a woman or so. I don't have that. Fortunately.

Lia's statement seems positive when looked at a superficial level, particularly initially. She illustrates how much she desires her current partner and what she likes about him. However, the analysis also identified some potential inherent meaning; that as a bisexual woman Lia thought she could not be so sure about her own desires. Lia had predominantly been attracted to women and was afraid that it could be something she would miss while being with a man. Her saying could be interpreted as if the desire for a woman could strike at any moment. Therefore, she added that she had to be grateful for only desiring her male partner ('I don't have that. Fortunately'). Underlying these perceptions is the well-described notion that 'a bisexual always needs more than one gender' and can only be happy when this is fulfilled (Rust, 2003). This extract was followed by Lia's description of how much she has had to assure her partner that she really loves him and that she wanted nobody else but him. This means she had to engage in additional emotion work for her relationship to reach a stable place (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993). She also made clear that monogamy was very important to both of them. She knew her monogamous relationship would not allow her to pursue potential attractions toward women. Several points can be made with regard to Lia's case. Her perception of romantic and sexual desires may reflect internalised views on the limited options around what constitutes a bisexual, that is, a person that may have sudden attractions to different genders. Her story shows how monogamy can add additional

challenges in situations where such attractions cannot be pursued. It not only forces one to stick to a single partner but also to the gender of the partner for the course of the relationship. Also, Lia has to especially reassure her partner of her love for him precisely because she is bisexual. Thus, this case also provides further evidence that in a society where bisexuality and non-monogamy are often conflated and bisexual women are hypersexualised (Eisner, 2013; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 2003), monogamously-living bisexual women also have to assure their partners of their continued faithfulness.

Non-monogamy as strategy for emancipation: Kalypso and Asha

Not all the women made meaning of bisexuality and unfaithfulness in a negative way. The next two examples show how some women frame their experiences of unfaithfulness with greater agency. Similar to descriptions by others, some women may embrace consensual non-monogamous or polyamorous relationship forms or identities as emancipatory possibilities (Gustavson, 2009; Klesse, 2005; Robinson, 2013). The next two examples exhibit a spectrum from challenging compulsory monogamy to claiming polyamory for oneself and adopting it as an inspiring relational identity.

Kalypso works in the arts; she has been in relationships with men and also had romantic and sexual encounters with women. In the following extract, she describes how important these encounters have been to her:

> Kalypso: Something I didn't wanna miss. Anyway, I was in monogamous
> relationships and I just was unfaithful and I kept it to myself because I didn't want
> it to be destroyed. It was, it was selfish decisions that I took because I just wanted
> to give room to these women, well these encounters and I didn't want to accept
> why that shouldn't work out. And when I realised that, ok people are hurt, I
> thought, "shit I don't want them to be hurt, that's not what it's all about". So, I just
> don't tell them.

For Kalypso, non-consensual non-monogamy was a way for her to "live out" her sexuality. In the above extract, she expresses her conflicting thoughts of wanting to have sexual encounters with women while being in supposedly monogamous relationships with men at the same time as not wanting to 'miss out' or hurt anyone. Considering her narration of other relationship experiences, a progression can be seen from non-consensual non-monogamous relationships in the past to a consensual, open, and honest relationship with her current

partner. Similar to the women presented in studies by Li et al. (2013) and Robinson (2013), Kalypso thought of her bisexuality as the reason why she wanted to engage in an open relationship. The quoted passage shows that she does not blame herself as much as Jac does (Kalypso's "It was, it was selfish decisions that I took" versus Jac's "Because unfortunately, I was always the person that cheated"). Also, she did not draw negative conclusions about herself from her experiences. She only stated that she acted egotistically. However, she was pretty clear that she too wanted to have sexual/romantic encounters with women ('because I just wanted to give room to these women, well these encounters and I didn't want to accept why that shouldn't work out'). It is something she did not want to give up under any circumstances. In Kalypso's case, my interpretation did not find a link between internalised binegativity and unfaithfulness. This shows also how diverse the experiences (and subsequent interpretations) of the participants were and how problematic sweeping generalisations (e.g. in the form of stereotypes) about bisexual people are.

Asha is another example of a woman dealing with one's sexuality in an emancipatory way. Her way of adopting polyamory as an inspiring concept for her identity and love life is one step further toward self-determined agency. In the following extract, she discusses what discovering the concept of polyamory meant for her:

> Asha: It was like a revelation[4] when I realised I'm no arsehole. I'm no arsehole that always wants to play around. I am just in the wrong relationship concept, because I always thought there is just one. And that was such an *aha* experience for me; that was really cool.

Asha did not give us her personal conclusion on her sexual history like the previously-mentioned women did. She just echoed the outside view of her ex-partners who she told us did not have a positive opinion of her. It is not clear if she ever thought them to be right about their assessment or if it hurt her. The interesting part, however, is that she did not blame herself—that she was a bad person—because she followed her sexual attractions. On the contrary, when she learned about the concept of polyamory from one of Vienna's bisexual support groups, it was "like a revelation" to her. She frames the concept of polyamory as something that she had always actually had inside herself; like other essentialised identities, it just needed to be revealed. I argue that in Asha's case, the adoption of a polyamorous identity is an act of empowerment. Others have also found that bisexual women adopt non-monogamous or polyamorous relationship concepts as an act of agency (Klesse, 2005;

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Robinson, 2013). Moreover, Asha was able to distance herself from the insults of others. Like Kalypso, in Asha's account there was seemingly no link between internalised binegativity and unfaithfulness that could be identified in the analysis. Thus, both examples provide evidence that women experiencing the emancipatory potential of non-monogamy are less likely to link bisexuality and unfaithfulness in a way that reflects internalised binegativity.

This work shows how bisexual women make meaning of unfaithfulness in relation to bisexuality. It also provides evidence about how these accounts may reflect (internalised) binegativity. The study outlines the following reactions of bisexual women to their understandings of unfaithfulness and bisexuality: coming to the negative conclusion of not being 'a relationship person' and emancipating oneself through non-consensual and consensual forms of non-monogamous relationships. Additionally, the following minority stress processes could be identified in bisexual non-monogamously living women: binegativity coming from others, being internalised or anticipated, expectation of rejection and concealment of one's identity. In monogamous relationships a bisexual identity may necessitate additional emotional work to assure one's faithfulness.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper focused on how bisexual women make meaning of unfaithfulness in relation to bisexuality. It adds to the current body of research on bisexual women by illustrating the complex interplay between (expected) unfaithfulness and different forms of binegativity (anticipated, internalised or coming from others). It also vividly portrays the conclusions the women draw for themselves and their surroundings and the reactions and strategies they develop. Additionally, it gives an account of bisexual non-monogamously living women and their experiences with minority stress processes such as (internalised) binegativity, expectations of rejection and concealment.

There are particular challenges in capturing different forms of internalised antibisexual attitudes that underlie the statements of the participants. From a superficial point of view one could jump to simple conclusions, such as that the extracts are accounts of the connection between promiscuity and bisexuality. However, this would over simplify the complexity of bisexual lives. To show the intricacy of the women's experiences, I chose to look for latent meanings in their narratives: seeing the statements of the women in light of their actions, conclusions, and lived experiences. For the analysis it proved to be helpful to have Meyer's framework of minority stress processes in mind (Meyer, 2003). Looking at known stress

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processes like discrimination (internalised binegativity, or other people's negative attitudes), expectations of rejection, and concealment was crucial when taking into account the following points: (a) how the participants' understandings and positioning of unfaithfulness may not just highlight a reaction to one's own real or expected unfaithfulness; (b) how these understandings are connected to experienced or anticipated binegativity, and; (c) how they are intertwined with internalised binegativity. In addition, the strategies the women adopted to cope with their internalised binegativity, their reactions to allegations, and the actions that followed their own conclusions were particularly revealing. The form the reactions took provided additional evidence, for example, in which ways binegativity has been internalised or challenged. The strategies of the women ranged from negative self-concepts to emancipation and agency. However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges in capturing internalised binegativity between the lines of the participants' narrations. Thus, the interpretation provided in the analysis is not the only possible one. Norms and attitudes surrounding (bisexual) women, their sexuality, and their relationships are manifold. Many parts of the interviews could also be interpreted as accounts of other norms around sexuality, sexual identity, and relationships like compulsory monogamy, heteronormativity, and so on.

Predominant antibisexual attitudes presented here were that bisexual people are slutty and untrustworthy, and that their relationships are lacking in seriousness. These allegations are a result of the hypersexualisation of bisexual women together with the idea that bisexual people can only be satisfied when engaging sexually/romantically with more than one gender at the same time (Rust, 2003). All participants in some way had to position themselves against allegations of non-monogamy. However, the challenges faced were different for women choosing to live monogamously to those living non-monogamously. Women living monogamously had to deal with the additional emotional work required to reassure their partners that they would be the only ones they loved. Women failing to live in a monogamous way were in danger of falling into a complex array of anticipated stigmas and internalised binegative attitudes. However, choosing to live at the intersection of bisexuality and non-monogamy also proved to be challenging. Nevertheless, some women experienced non-monogamous relationship forms as empowering. Interestingly, these emancipatory narratives did not link unfaithfulness and bisexuality as reflecting any internalised binegativity.

This work also shows how connected the challenges of bisexual identities and non-monogamously-living people are when it comes to allegations of promiscuity. For some participants, non-monogamy proved to have an emancipatory potential, others may have been

inspired by information explaining how active cultural forces around compulsory monogamy and couple-centrism shape the way we think about ourselves and our surroundings. Therefore, this work reiterates the call for activist synergies between bisexual and non-monogamous or polyamorous communities (Klesse, 2011; Mint, 2004).

Some of the women in the current study talked about having sexual experiences while simultaneously being in relationships that were assumed by their partners to be monogamous. However, this occurrence of unfaithfulness is by no means generalizable to all bisexual or bisexually-living women. There is generally little research on the infidelity of bisexual people (Hoang et al., 2011); similarly few studies deal with the concept of 'cheating' in consensual non-monogamous relationships (Wosick-Correa, 2010). For heterosexual women, it has been described that 50.6% report they have cheated (Brand, Markey, Mills, & Hodges, 2007). So it seems safe to say that unfaithfulness is a widespread practice, irrespective of sexual orientation or relationship form (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014).

Promiscuity allegations were often connected to the lesbian community. Either anticipated by the participants or as vocalised allegations. Ault (1994) described the contentions of some members of lesbian and gay communities seeing bisexual people as traitors of their agenda and further expected them, in the long run, to choose a privileged heterosexual "lifestyle". These allegations have to be contextualised within the wider web of power relations that regulate sexualities (Butler, 1990). In a society where heterosexuality is still the norm and homosexuality is the 'other', it is theorised that lesbian and gay communities have to distance themselves from the heterosexual mainstream and keep their communities free of possible intruders (Ault, 1996; Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). This proves to be especially challenging for bisexual people who often find themselves positioned between the two communities (Borver, Gurevich, & Mathieson, 2001).

Different forms of discrimination, for example, stigmatisation, marginalisation, and internalised discrimination, can lead to psychological distress (Meyer, 2003). This has been described as especially impacting bisexual people, who experience double discrimination by both lesbian/gay communities and the heterosexual mainstream (Jorm et al., 2002; Ross et al., 2010). Thus, it is significant for therapists to have a full understanding of the complex psychological and social structures that influence the lives of bisexual people. Allegations of promiscuity and unfaithfulness are one of the most prominent aspects of binegativity. However, research on how bisexual women make meaning of bisexuality and unfaithfulness

is scarce. Even if unfaithfulness should not be conflated with non-monogamous ways of living, publications on non-monogamy offer an interesting insight into the additional challenges and perks of being bisexual and non-monogamous. Work by Klesse (2005), Robinson (2013), and Gustavson (2009) describes the specific challenges of bisexual non-monogamous women, such as having to deal with promiscuity discourses or being hypersexualised. They also show that engaging in non-monogamous relationships acts as a form of agency for bisexual women. Some of their participants even described it as a "natural way of expressing their bisexuality" (Robinson, 2013, p.28). Conversely, some bisexual people have been reported to see monogamous relationships as a way of resisting expectations that bisexual people will by default live non-monogamously (Gustavson, 2009; Robinson, 2013). Such research provides a vivid picture of the way bisexual people speak about (non)monogamy. However, they do not take into account the complex interplay between bisexuality, (expected) unfaithfulness and minority stress processes. The current study provides a complex analysis of this much discussed but under-researched topic on bisexual women.

The researcher chose a qualitative, interpretative method, which proved to be suitable in finding evidence of (internalised) discrimination manifesting, as latent meanings, between the lines of the participants' narratives. It also allowed space for the complexity of the participants' lives to be considered. Despite its strength, such a time-consuming method has its downsides, such as the limited capacity in analysing a large pool of interviews. Consequently, only nine interviews were analysed. The participants were all women and mostly well-educated, feminists, or politicised. It would of course be interesting to find out about the experiences of bisexual people of other genders, for example, men and those who are trans, genderqueer, and/or non-binary. Additionally, it would be of special interest to adopt an intersectional approach to find out what role other social categories like race/ethnicity, class, ability, and religion play in different forms of internalised discrimination. Future research could also focus on understanding other notions of internalised binegativity. In light of these findings, this paper reinforces the importance to educate therapists about bisexual-specific issues and to raise bisexual awareness within the LGBT+ community and society at large.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Regarding their gender identity, all the participants identified as "female". One used "queer" as gender identity.

[2] The participant reported having been inspired by Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, who coined *ecosexual* as "exploring the eroticism, romance, sensuality/sexuality of nature".

[3] "—" Mid-statement pause; "(...)" pause, points correspond to pause length in seconds; "[…]" omitted text.

[4] In German, Asha uses the word "Klickmoment", the literal translation being a "moment when it clicked".