

Bi men by women—lifting the stigma of mixed-orientation relationships

August 23 2016, by Mandi O'garretty

Deakin University research has given a voice to the mostly unspoken experiences of Australian women who are in relationships with bisexual men.

Dr Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, a Senior Lecturer with Deakin's School of Health and Social Development, worked with Sara Lubowitz, who ran the Women With Bi Partners Network in Sydney, to gain an insight into the lives, intimacies, relationships and families of these women. The results of the research form the basis of a new book *Women In Relationships with Bisexual Men – Bi Men By Women* (Lexington Books).

"These mixed-orientation relationships or what I call MOREs, sit outside the boundaries of what many may consider a 'normal' relationship, whether it's straight or gay. What the research has shown is that they are very real and valid and deserve our attention, support and understanding. It's just that they're something 'more' than most people expect or accept," Dr Pallotta-Chiarolli explained.

"They are also often confused or included in the category of women in relationships with gay men, but the [bisexual men](#) in MOREs are sexually and emotionally interested in women and wish to either have a monogamous relationship with a woman or sometimes simultaneously with another man.

"Through this research and book it is my hope that we can stop

presenting only the stereotypical story about MOREs: that all bisexual men are untrustworthy and have secret affairs; that all bisexual men transmit HIV and STI to women; that all bisexual men are abusive to their women partners.

"While we found these issues are certainly out there and we don't shy away from discussing them, we need to lift the stigma for the women who choose to be in relationships with bisexual men and indeed say that bisexual men make better lovers and fathers. We hope this research broadens, interrogates and adds to the ongoing debates and activism regarding sexual diversity, relationship diversity and family diversity in Australia."

The research involved semi-structured interviews with 78 culturally, sexually and geographically diverse Australian women, aged 19—65 years. The women were, or had been, in monogamous, open and polyamorous marital and de-facto relationships with bisexual men. Some of the women were mothers and grandmothers, some identified as bisexual and lesbian, some heterosexual, while others didn't categorise their own sexualities.

"We met with women in their homes, workplaces, parks and cafes and listened to their sometimes distressing, sometimes exhilarating, and sometimes very sexy stories," Dr Pallotta-Chiarolli said.

"Many Australian women say they feel overwhelmingly isolated, invisible, misrepresented and deliberately ignored, sometimes by their own male partners, often by families, friends, health services and more broadly in Australian media, popular culture and research."

The research revealed a wide diversity in the makeup of the women and their experiences along with some common themes, including:

- Some entered the relationships knowing their partners were bisexual, while others never imagined their partners would 'come out' or be 'found out' to be bisexual;
- For some, their MOREs meant navigating a route with sometimes converging and sometimes conflicting communities such as straight friendships, gay communities and ethnic and religious communities. Some women experienced discrimination from both 'heteroworld' and 'homoworld' as their relationships were considered 'wrong' in both straight and gay communities;
- Anger and grief were expressed by some women over having their lives turned upside down by the betrayal and deception of their husbands, while others adamantly stated that they would never be in a relationship with a heterosexual man after having experienced greater emotional depth, sexual intimacy and equitable gender relations with their bisexual men;
- The way their partners expressed their sexuality didn't worry some women, rather it was the way they performed their masculinity if it was in traditional patriarchal or misogynist ways that determined if they were satisfied with their relationships: "The problem's not that he's bisexual, it's that he's a man" as one woman said;
- Some women found their own sexualities and femininities shutting down or being repressed and dismissed, while others found their sexualities and femininities flourishing and freed to explore and expand;
- Some women found themselves dealing with STIs and HIV/AIDS, and/or a range of mental and emotional health issues, and subsequent mostly problematic associations with a range of health and counselling services. As one woman said, "Where do you go when your relationship isn't recognised by relationship counselling". Other women were already living with chronic illnesses and disabilities;
- There were some women who described themselves as

physically, emotionally and mentally healthy and happy with their lives and relationships.

"A common element among all the women in healthy and happy relationships was open communication with their partners as they designed, negotiated and maintained the ground rules and boundaries of their relationships," Dr Pallotta-Chiarolli said.

"Ultimately the [women](#) all wanted equal acknowledgement and affirmation of their relationships alongside other relationships and family structures in [health services](#), government policies, workplaces, their children's schools, with families and friends, and to have more positive representations in the media."

Provided by Deakin University

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