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### Bisexuality and Youth: Introduction to the Special Issue

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## **Bisexuality and Youth: Introduction to the Special Issue**

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*Bisexual youth constitute a population characterized in existing literature as increasingly visible and vulnerable to safety and health risks. This article introduces a special issue on bisexuality and youth that highlights three perspectives on bisexual youth: cultural context, psychological experiences, and school policy. The articles that make up the special issue explore the experiences of bisexual youth in the United States from a range of disciplines. Future directions for scholarship, policy, and practice are identified.*

**KEYWORDS** *bisexuality, youth, adolescent, risk, protective factors, intervention, policy*

### **BISEXUAL YOUTH AS A UNIQUE POPULATION**

Bisexual individuals, including youth, are increasingly visible in the United States (Cassell, 2007). One indication of this trend is the emergence of bisexual characters on mainstream television shows aimed at a youth audience (Meyer, this issue). Furthermore, it is common for population-based studies of youth to report greater numbers of bisexual than lesbian/gay identified participants (e.g., Ciro et al., 2005; Saewyc et al., 2009). At this time of heightened visibility of bisexual youth, it is useful to reflect on what we know about this population to guide future research, as well as identify and meet the needs of this population.

Entrup and Firestein (2007) described some unique characteristics of bisexuals in what they termed “the next generation,” those born 1969 to 1993, the younger half of whom would at this time still be considered youth

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or emerging adults. These characteristics include reluctance to label sexual orientation identity, comfort with sexual fluidity, experimentation with polyamory, and the integration of sexuality and spirituality.

In contrast to Entrup and Firestein's (2007) positive conceptualization, empirical studies have tended to focus on safety and health risks associated with bisexual youth. Whether bisexuality is defined in terms of identity, attraction, or behavior, bisexual youth demonstrate particularly high-risk factors. According to one study, high school students who engage in sex with women and men reported more suicide attempts, serious harassment, engagement in violence, alcohol and other drug use, and unhealthy weight control practices compared to nonbisexual high school students (Robin et al., 2002). These adolescents made up the highest risk category for cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, illegal drug use, selling sex for drugs or money, and delinquency; and the females in this group were at highest risk for suicidality, depression, and victimization (Urduy & Chantala, 2002). In fact, the researchers stated, "girls with both-sex partners are consistently the highest-risk group for all risk variables examined" (Urduy & Chantala, 2002, p. 30).

Similar results were evident in a study of urban adolescents, primarily from low-income minority households, which found that, compared to lesbian/gay, heterosexual, and questioning peers, bisexual youth were the most sexually active, scored highest on all indicators of substance abuse risk exposure, and had the highest risk regarding safety, including being a victim of violence and experiencing forced sex (Ciro et al., 2005). Despite these safety concerns, bisexual youth felt safer than lesbian/gay or questioning youth, and this denial of risk may create challenges for effective intervention. One study compared adolescents based on sexual attraction and found that students attracted to both sexes were similar to students attracted only to members of the same sex in terms of a lower sense of school belonging and self-esteem than participants attracted only to the other sex; however, students attracted to both sexes stood out as having significantly lower self-esteem and higher rates of depression among suburban females than students attracted only to the other sex (Galliher, Rotosky, & Hughes, 2004).

In addition to the prevalence of risk factors, bisexual youth lack characteristics that serve as protective factors for other youth. For example, bisexual adolescents have lower levels of connection to family and school than nonbisexual peers (Saewyc et al., 2009). It is notable that these researchers found disparities in protective factors were greater for girls than for boys.

Studies that position bisexual youth as an at-risk group present compelling evidence of challenges faced by these individuals, but they do not capture the whole story about the lived experience of bisexual youth. To understand this population, there is a need for scholarship from a range of disciplines that can describe, conceptualize, and investigate the diverse perspectives and experiences of bisexual youth. Interventions are needed

to address risks, and theoretical models can advance the conceptualization of complex experiences and identities. Although what is needed cannot be accomplished fully within the boundaries of these pages, it is my hope that this volume moves scholars, practitioners, and policy makers toward greater understanding and increased ability to respond effectively and sensitively to the circumstances and needs of bisexual youth.

## ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue is organized to highlight three aspects of bisexuality among youth: cultural context, psychological experiences, and school policy. This organization suggests a pattern for policy approaches to bisexual youth that accounts for context in exploring psychology and bases action on the understanding derived from these investigations.

The first two articles (Meyer, this issue; Crowley, this issue) investigate cultural contexts that shape and reflect the environments in which bisexual youth operate. Meyer's analysis of bisexual characters on television shows aimed at youth markets paints a picture of a cultural context for bisexual youth in which bisexuality is depicted as unstable and typically assigned to female characters of color. Crowley's close analysis of bisexual women's participation in popular MySpace forums provides readers insights into a range of ways that young bisexual women identify sexually and points to divisive issues within bisexual youth culture.

The second theme moves from cultural context to psychological experiences. Brewster and Moradi (this issue) and Chun and Singh (this issue) provide empirical and conceptual insight into the psychological experiences of bisexual youth. Brewster and Moradi present the results of a survey of 576 bisexual individuals in the United States, comparing emerging adults with other age cohorts to identify the unique characteristics of each group in terms of personal, relational, and community aspects. Chun and Singh identify gaps in existing models of identity development that do not attend to intersections of bisexuality with other social identities and experiences. They then present an ecological model appropriate for conceptualizing bisexual youth of color for whom sexual orientation, ethnicity, and gender are particularly salient.

The third theme of school policy is particularly crucial due to the challenges bisexual youth face within school environments (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Elia (this issue) and Kennedy and Fisher (this issue) identify curricular and policy recommendations for shaping the school environments in which bisexual youth operate. Elia conceptualizes schools as a microcosm of societal attitudes regarding bisexuality. He critiques elementary to high school curricula with respect to bisexuality and ways in which the curricula can transform attitudes and knowledge regarding bisexuality, and in

turn improve the school environment for bisexual students. Kennedy and Fisher describe the challenges facing bisexual youth in school contexts and identify numerous ways schools can respond to the unique needs and risks of this population.

Taken as a whole, this special issue is intended to provide insight into internal and external experiences and ways of supporting bisexual youth. The gaps, intersections, and insights contained in this volume also point to directions for future scholarship, policy, and practice.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

Future scholarship on bisexual youth must grapple with the basic question of defining the population to guide research, policy, and practice. Given discrepancies among adolescent sexual attraction, behavior, and identity (Igartua, Thombs, Burgos, & Montoro, 2009), what do we mean by *bisexual youth*? It is worthwhile to investigate definitions, meanings, and contextualized behavior of this population so that their experiences are fully and accurately articulated. What distinctions are there among youth with attractions to more than one sex, youth who engage in sexual behavior with more than one sex, and youth who self-identify as bisexual? How do youth make meaning of bisexual attractions, behaviors, and identities? How might these meanings and actions differ based on age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and degree of peer and family support?

Capturing the experiences and perspectives of youth presents a challenge due to rapidly changing youth culture and language, difficulty gaining access to research participants, and the absence of public outlets for voices of youth. Although efforts to solicit narratives from bisexual youth to include in this volume were unsuccessful, Crowley's analysis of MySpace provides some insight into youths' cultural perceptions, language, and communication styles. I encourage academics to create space for voices of youth through the inclusion of narratives in research reports and the encouragement of youth to publish narratives, responses, and cocreated research in professional outlets.

Numerous questions remain concerning the critical issue of risk factors for bisexual youth. It is clear that this population, whether defined by identity or behavior, is at considerable risk for a range of safety and health concerns. To what can we attribute these high rates of risk for bisexual youth? How does increasing visibility of bisexuality among youth affect mental health risks? What interventions might be effective in reducing risk and promoting protective factors for bisexual youth? How can bisexual youth be involved in designing and sustaining interventions and services?

As crucial as it is to address the risk factors, I suggest we need scholarship that seeks to understand the strengths of bisexual youth. Given the safety and health risks associated with bisexual youth, research that identifies

strengths and resilience of this population can provide guidance for policy and practice. In this volume, Crowley detects qualities of flexibility and inclusivity among young bi women, and she demonstrates their ability to navigate spaces in which they encounter binegativity. Such scholarship can point to protective factors that are unique to bisexual youth, which may be missed in research that investigates this population only in the context of protective factors that operate for youth across sexual orientation categories (Saewyc et al., 2009).

Scholars may also benefit from attending to several issues that emerged across the articles included in this volume. Meyer (this issue) notes a pattern of media representations of bisexuality focusing particularly on women of color. Chun and Singh (this issue) present a model of identity development for bisexual youth of color. Both of these articles address intersectional identities and frameworks for analyzing them, and this is a fruitful area for future research in the respective disciplines of the authors. Understanding derived from these articles representing cultural analysis and psychology provides fodder for questions of how these media representations of bisexual women of color affect bisexual youth of color, especially those who are female. For example, does this increasing visibility create a context in which youth feel more comfortable being open about their bisexuality? Does the stigmatized nature of media representations influence the internalization of negative messages about bisexuality? Clearly, these complexities provide ample opportunities for future scholarship.

Also notable across studies were the gendered experiences of bisexuality for youth. Brewster and Moradi (this issue) found gender differences in terms of proportion of women and men who identify as bisexual, level of outness, relationship status, sexual attraction, and sexual behavior. Crowley (this issue) offers insight into the world of young bisexual women, as well as the attitudes of young lesbians toward bisexuals, through their conversations in MySpace chat groups. As mentioned above, Meyer (this issue) found gendered patterns in representations of bisexuality in television programs. Chun and Singh's (this issue) model addresses issues of gender identity and expression as well as gender, illustrating the multiple facets of gender that come into play for bisexual youth. Cross-gender comparisons, single-gender descriptions and narratives, and conceptualizations related to gender identity and expression offer a step toward understanding the gendered experiences of bisexuality. Future work in this area could explore the how sexual experiences, relational power, and peer acceptance operate for female and male bisexual youth, as well as how these variables might shift depending on the sex of the partner.

Given the risk factors identified among bisexual youth, interventions at multiple sites are essential. Included in this volume are articles that describe interventions and policies to support bisexual youth in the schools (Elia, this issue; Kennedy & Fisher, this issue). In addition to school settings, there

is great potential for developing interventions in therapeutic, family, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community contexts.

Entrup and Firestein (2007) provide some suggestions for therapeutic techniques to help bisexual youth work with issues related to complexities of bisexuality, negative societal messages, and need for mentoring. Articulation of models of therapeutic interventions and studies that evaluate these interventions will move the field toward evidence-based practice with young bisexual clients. In addition to individual interventions, it will be useful to describe ways of working with bisexual youth in group therapy contexts, especially given pervasive negative attitudes regarding bisexuality among their peers (Israel & Mohr, 2004). Families are another key site for intervention, and it would be beneficial for practitioners to have guidance regarding youth concerns about coming out to family members as bisexual, parental responses to bisexuality, and effective psychoeducation for families regarding bisexuality.

LGBT communities can provide support for bisexual youth. When planning community events, organizations can keep in mind that youth may have limited transportation options and select locations accordingly. Furthermore, bars and clubs are a common way for LGBT individuals to connect with each other, but these venues are typically inaccessible to people younger than age 21 years.

Bisexual youth constitute a unique population requiring specialized attention in scholarship, policy, and practice. To understand this population fully and with respect to the complexities of its members, theory and research from a range of disciplines are needed. In particular, scholarship that identifies strengths, investigates gendered experiences, takes into account intersections of social identities, and articulates interventions will move the field toward accurate knowledge and effective policy and practice for bisexual youth.

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