Spring 2020

Bisexuality and Epistemic Injustice

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Abstract

This paper aims to elucidate the intimate connection between bisexual erasure, bi-invisibility, and epistemic injustices. I employ Miranda Fricker and Charlie Crerar's understandings of hermeneutical injustice and testimonial injustice to articulate the harms caused by bisexual erasure and bi-invisibility. Then, I delineate bi-invisibility and four types of bierasure (biased, testimonial, strategic, and constructionist) to show the relationship between bi-invisibility and bierasure and epistemic harms. To do so, I employ the paradigm case method.

1. Introduction

Existing outside of the gay-straight binary places bisexual people in limbo. In the courtroom, it is harder for bisexual individuals to access the legal protections afforded to lesbian and gay individuals because of the strategic erasure of bisexuality from litigation. Briefly, strategic bierasure occurs when bisexuality is excluded from advocacy due to political motivations. For example, in divorce court, a bisexual woman is less likely to get custody of her children than a straight or lesbian woman. She is viewed as unstable, promiscuous, and less fit to be a parent (Marcus, 319). Allowing courts to rule based on stereotypes about bisexuality tangibly harms people, but beyond that, the erasure of bisexuality harms people as knowers. This example of strategic bierasure results from hermeneutical injustice, or the inability of a marginalized group to render their experiences intelligible (Fricker, 151).

Both within the LGBTQIA+ community and as members of general society, bisexual individuals are subject to bierasure and bi-invisibility. Bierasure is the refusal of individuals to acknowledge or legitimize bisexuality. Related to this phenomenon is bi-invisibility, which refers to the failure to recognize bisexuality due to the absence of the concept itself in an individual's mind. The concept of bisexuality itself is invisible, which results in unintentional harms to bisexual people. Bi-invisibility results in the constant need for individuals to explain their sexuality to others, answering questions about if it is the same as being gay, if it is synonymous with polyamory, or if it is simply just experimentation.

In existing literature on bierasure and bi-invisibility, the concepts of bierasure and bi-invisibility are often conflated and rather ambiguous. In this paper, I hope to shed light on the two concepts, clarifying instances of their occurrence and the subsequent harms. I hope to clarify the distinction between bierasure and bi-invisibility, but to also break down the more complex, overly broad category of bierasure into four subcategories: biased, testimonial, strategic, and constructionist bierasure. Bierasure and bi-invisiblity interact with epistemic injustice to erode free and expressive environments, denying bisexual people the ability to have a full understanding of relevant parts of their experiences, marginalizing them epistemically and leading to other harms.

Some members of both the monosexual[1] LGBT and straight communities view bisexuality as a phase. A common experience bisexual people face when coming out is that they are viewed as either "on their way" to coming out as gay or "experimenting" with the same gender. If an individual thinks that bisexuality as a concept is a phase or does not exist, they are engaging in biased bierasure. Alternatively, if a person believes that bisexuality is a real concept but does not think that the specific person coming out to them could be bisexual, they may be engaging in testimonial bierasure or the denial of that particular person's claim of bisexuality.

Bisexual erasure can also come from individuals who take a staunch social construction stance on sexuality. The line of argument posits that a bisexual person may think that they are bisexual, but our frameworks of understanding sexuality are completely socially constructed and could have developed differently. However, while sexuality *is* a social construct and its identity categories could have developed differently, bisexuality is a useful category. Discounting the category all together would be disadvantageous. To do so would be to ignore and minimize the historical wrongs done to bisexual individuals (Haslanger, 322). I call this form of bierasure "constructionist bierasure."

Haslanger argues that there are useful socially constructed categories (322). Part of the way that hermeneutical injustice operates is by denying individuals the conceptual framework to understand relevant parts of their experiences (Fricker, 151). Without the category "bisexual," or really any category relating to sexuality (i.e. gay, lesbian, etc.), individuals are denied a conceptual framework to understand a part of their experience that may be weaponized against them. For this reason, it is important to have a category for individuals who identify as bisexual, as it helps us articulate our experience to others and provides epistemic clarity in our own lives.

[1] Monosexual refers to individuals who are attracted primarily to one gender (i.e. gay, lesbian, or straight people).

Bierasure and bi-invisibility encourage the entrenchment of negative stereotypes surrounding bisexuality in the available cultural understandings of bisexuality. Charges of promiscuity, instability, and acting out become associated with what it means to be bisexual, which subjects bisexual people to bigotry, misinformation, and hypersexualization. For example, on dating apps, many straight couples will engage in “unicorn hunting,” where bisexual “unicorns” are the prize. What this means, is that straight couples are looking for a single bisexual person to join them in their sexual encounters. While there is nothing inherently wrong with group sex, the objectification of bisexual people is problematic. As Anne Vetter writes, “My queerness to them was something racy, scandalous, and exotic. Something to experiment with for the night” (2019). Many unicorn hunters view bisexuality as a means to their own pleasure instead of a valid sexuality in its own right.

I will argue that bierasure and bi-invisibility are intimately related to epistemic injustice. To do so, I will first explain hermeneutical injustice using Miranda Fricker’s framework of epistemic injustice and Charlie Crerar’s expansion of Fricker’s theory of hermeneutical injustice to include taboos. Taboos function as a causal mechanism for some instances of hermeneutical injustice and, I will argue, are part of the causal mechanism for the epistemic injustices caused by bisexual erasure and invisibility. When individuals are subjected to bisexual invisibility and erasure, they are subjected to both epistemic and practical harms that prevent them from expressing their full humanity. Fricker defines these practical harms as “those harms which render the collective hermeneutical impoverishment asymmetrically disadvantageous to the wronged party,” (162). Essentially, the “practical” harms are the harms that create further marginalization ranging from job loss to physical threats.

After delineating the theoretical mechanisms to be used in this paper, I will explain bisexual erasure, distinguishing it from bi-invisibility and arguing that the concepts are related but distinct. In doing this, I will outline four types of bierasure, namely, strategic, testimonial, constructionist, and biased bierasure. After that, I will demonstrate that the different types of bierasure and bi-invisibility interact with hermeneutical and testimonial injustices. I will use the paradigm case method to identify cases of bierasure and bi-invisibility and apply the theoretical frameworks of hermeneutical and testimonial injustices to these cases.[2] Finally, I will entertain objections, respond to them, and conclude.

The goals of this paper are three-fold. At its most basic level, this paper aims to identify bisexual erasure and invisibility as harms and deepen our collective understanding of those harms. This overarching goal acts as the backdrop of engaging in the consciousness-raising that is necessary to overcome hermeneutical injustices. This, in turn, helps to elucidate individuals' experiences, rectifying the confusion and misinformation and affirming bisexuality as legitimate. Finally, this paper serves a political purpose. Recognizing and affirming sexuality helps to identify past (and current) wrongdoings, correct them, and move towards a more accepting society.

2. The Epistemological Backdrop

Feminist Epistemologies

Traditional Cartesian epistemology stresses the need for the separation of the body and the mind, faulting knowledge gained through bodily experience for being untrustworthy. Rationalist philosophy, advanced in particular by Descartes, stresses that in order to arrive at certainty, the mind should reason alone, without the influences of corporeal experience (1984). Rationalist philosophers argue that the most reliable source of knowledge is reason stemming from the mind alone, free of bodily distractions. Experiences, emotions, and sensory perceptions are said to cloud reasoning and create bias.

Feminist epistemologists directly challenge this notion utilizing feminist standpoint theory. In contrast to the rationalist philosophers, many feminist epistemologists argue that an individual's particular situation in society is indespensible to creating theories (Longino, 331). This is because each individual's relative position in society, and thus her interactions with power dynamics, colors how she interprets her world. A classic example of standpoint theory has its roots in Marxism and explains the relations between a factory owner and worker. The factory owner, who owns the means of production and thus has more socio-economic power than the worker, views the worker as dispensable and less than fully human. In contrast, the worker views

[2]The paradigm case method entails identifying clear cases of a phenomenon and explaining how each case constitutes an example of the phenomenon in question in order to refute skepticism with regards to the existence of a particular phenomenon.

herself as a full human with valuable needs and wants, including that of living a fulfilling life. She also knows that the factory owner views her as less than fully human, giving her a more complete epistemic understanding of her situation (Longino, 333). If the epistemic authority remains with the factory owner, the theories produced will continue to justify the oppression of the worker, because the owner does not understand her full humanity. Feminist epistemologists build on traditional standpoint theory to account for power dynamics in addition to class, such as gender, race, and sexuality (I. Young, 279).

In feminist standpoint theory, individuals in oppressed or marginalized socioeconomic positions have an epistemic advantage. They see themselves both from their own perspective and how those at the top of the power dynamic view them. This gives them a more holistic view of different situations, allowing them to create more holistic theories. In this way, standpoint theory seeks to "privilege the margins" and grant them epistemic authority (Longino, 338). Since individuals lacking socioeconomic power have more complete epistemic understandings, we should grant authority to their epistemic claims (Longino 338-339). Trying to separate knowledge from experience ignores power dynamics and creates false objectivity. Without the recognition of the full humanity of individuals at the oppressed end of the power dynamic, those at the top of the power dynamic will develop theories of knowledge that reinforce their privilege. Those at the top of the power dynamic have a vested interest in ensuring their power is maintained and either subconsciously or consciously will develop theories that preserve that power. Failing to recognize how their privilege and power affects their ability to know and develop theories allows them to think that they are being objective, but in reality, they are developing theories that end up justifying the oppression of others (Longino, 333).[3]

Epistemic Injustices According to Miranda Fricker

By acknowledging power dynamics, feminist epistemologists are in the position to recognize how exclusion from epistemological resources acts as a weapon of marginalization.

[3] Descartes' own theories are subject to criticism by standpoint theory. For example, in his quest to prove the existence of God in the Meditations, he attempts to reconcile the problem of evil with the "Tapestry Defense." This theory posits that evil happens as a part of God's larger plan that we simply can not understand (Descartes, 1984). For Descartes, a fairly privileged man, this is an incredibly easy claim to make, but it writes off the suffering of those who were less fortunate then he was. Under this view, he could justify atrocities as a part of "God's plan." Standpoint theory would reject this as a legitimate answer to the problem of evil.

Miranda Fricker argues that epistemic injustice presents itself in two forms: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (1). Briefly, testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer discredits a speaker based on her social standing, perceiving her as less credible because of aspects of her identity (Fricker, 27). Hermeneutical injustice, or interpretive injustice, occurs when there is a "conceptual lacuna" in the collective understanding of an experience, that "renders the experience unintelligible" to both the hearer and the speaker (Fricker, 148). Exclusion from knowledge resources marginalizes individuals as knowers, resulting in primary and secondary harms.[4] The primary harm hurts individuals as rational agents, preventing them from utilizing their full capacity as a knower. Since a defining part of the human experience is the engagement with and creation of knowledge, hindering a person's access to epistemic resources undermines their humanity. The secondary harms are the "practical," sociopolitical consequences of this epistemic harm (Fricker, 162).

Testimonial injustice attacks a person's credibility. When an individual is deemed less credible because of their social standing and is therefore discredited by the hearer(s), they are harmed by a testimonial injustice. Frequently, there are examples of testimonial injustice in the courtroom. In sexual assault litigation, white men are more likely to be believed by juries than women, especially women of color (Crenshaw, 11-12). Since women are deemed less credible, they are more likely to be denied legal protections even in cases where the accused is guilty. The primary harm of testimonial injustice stems directly from the credibility deficit assigned to the speaker by the hearer. Testimonial injustice prevents the speaker from being able to explain knowledge to others, denying her the ability to reason (Fricker, 44). The denial of credibility and reasonableness to the speaker leads to secondary harms like the denial of court protections in sexual assault cases.

Although common in court settings, testimonial injustice is not confined to the courtroom. For example, in the medical setting, black women are less likely to be believed when they report pain. Doctors are prone to minimizing their pain or denying its existence. This obviously problematic practice has led to women dying or having illnesses progress much further than they would have had the doctor simply believed the patient ("Is Bias Keeping Female,

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[4] Please note that the terminology "primary" and "secondary" harm is not intended to weigh the severity of harm, but rather to denote the consequential order in which the harms happen.

Minority Patients from Getting Proper Care for Their Pain?," 2019). Testimonial injustice prevents the listener from explaining knowledge to others, which Fricker argues, denies her capacity to reason (44). Testimonial injustice serves as a reinforcement mechanism of social hierarchies. When individuals are systematically denied credibility, their claims of harm are not taken seriously and therefore they remain subordinate to those in power (Manne, 185-186). In the case of women of color being denied proper medical treatment, testimonial injustice serves to reinforce healthcare disparities that deny black women the same quality healthcare as their white counterparts.

The other type of epistemic injustice articulated by Fricker is hermeneutical injustice. "Hermeneutics" is the study of interpretation. Hermeneutical injustice is essentially interpretive injustice. It occurs when an individual lacks the conceptual resources to convey a relevant part of her experience intelligibly to herself and others. To illustrate this phenomenon, Fricker uses the example of Carmita Wood's experience with sexual harassment in the workplace (150). Before societal understandings of sexual harassment existed, women like Ms. Wood were forced into silence, because they could not articulate their experience to themselves, let alone others. Wood knew that she had been violated, but was unable to articulate why, marginalizing and causing her to resign from her job and to be denied unemployment benefits (Fricker, 150).

In the case of hermeneutical injustice, individuals are alleged to be confused about their experiences, even when they may not be. Hermeneutical injustice is characterized by the imposition of the hearer's framework of understanding onto the speaker, even though that understanding is less apt than the speaker's. In the case of Carmita Wood, she knew that a harm had been done to her but was unable to articulate what exactly that harm was. This lacuna in her understanding was caused by the fact that the accepted framework for understanding sexual harassment at the time was that "boys will be boys," or that women should "take the flirting as a compliment." Those in power set the conceptual boundaries for Carmita Wood to use to articulate her experience, which left out and failed to recognize the harm that was being caused (Fricker, 151). The background conditions for Carmita Wood's experience were oppressive, patriarchal power dynamics that prevented her from taking part in the decision-making, concept-developing processes.

The charges of confusion characteristic to hermeneutical injustice are familiar to many bisexuals when they come out. From both the LGBT+ and straight community, bisexuality is a signpost for attention-seeking, instability, and promiscuity. When individuals see you as confused about your own identity, they question your capability and sanity as a knower. Beyond the epistemic harms this causes, it also causes practical harms, or the harms that further an individual's marginalization (Fricker, 162). For example, in immigration law, bisexual individuals are disadvantaged.[5] Bisexual people are less likely to be granted asylum protections that apply to LGBT+ asylum seekers and are more likely to be turned away because one of their relationships or marriages is viewed as a "sham" (Marcus, 317). The idea that bisexual asylum seekers can simply go back and "be straight" endangers their physical well being and patronizes them as knowers, telling them to stop acting out and conform to the mythical norm[6] (Lorde, 1984). Epistemically, charges like these sabotage the autonomy and humanity of bisexual people by imposing accepted norms about sexuality onto bisexual people, preventing them from rendering their experience intelligible to the world.

The primary epistemic harm resulting from epistemic injustices leads to secondary practical harms. Returning to the case of Carmita Wood, not only was Ms. Wood denied the ability to fully understand her experience, forcing her into silence, but she also lost her job and was denied unemployment benefits (Fricker, 150). She experienced the primary epistemic harm of being denied her capacity as a knower, but also the secondary practical harms of job loss and unemployment. Had a societal understanding of sexual harassment already existed, she would have been able to articulate her experience to her supervisor, which (ideally) would have allowed the situation to be properly addressed and she would not have needed to quit. If she still needed

[5] This example brings important notions of intersectionality into the conversation. Not only are the asylum seekers disadvantaged by their immigrant status, but they are also disadvantaged by their status as a bisexual person. These individuals must face biases based on *both* of their identities. Furthermore, their sexuality may impede the protections that they are guaranteed as an asylum seeker. This places bisexual asylum seekers in a situation where they can either violate their identity as bisexual or risk losing their asylum case, an example of a double-bind (Crenshaw, 14-15). For more on intersectionality, please see Kimberle Crenshaw.

[6] A common misconception about bisexuality from some members of monosexual queer communities posits that LGBT+ issues are less important to bisexual people who can simply pass as straight when the rights of LGBT+ people are threatened. Essentially, it is assumed that erasing our own identities is an advantage. The notion that bisexual people have "less skin in the game" has led to bisexual erasure in court cases designed to protect LGBT+ people (despite bisexual advocates asking for their inclusion), limiting the protections available to bisexuals and further entrenching biases (Marcus, 323).

to quit, she would have had more access to legal remedies and unemployment benefits (Fricker, 150). In the case of the bisexual asylum seeker, the individual was denied the capacity to report their own experience as legitimate, but also lost refugee status (Marcus, 317). If bisexuality was protected from discrimination in the same way that homosexuality is, the legal protections afforded to lesbian and gay individuals would have been more likely to be applied to the bisexual asylum seeker; however, since bisexuality was erased from the litigation, it is harder for bisexual people to obtain those same protections.

Although hermeneutical and testimonial injustice are different, the two can interact with each other. If an individual is already deemed less credible by a hearer, it is likely that she will be at an even greater deficit when trying to render her experience intelligible to them. Not only does she have to overcome the credibility deficit, but she also has to struggle to articulate an experience, which with the credibility deficit, will be even harder for her to do. For example, marital rape victims prior to 1970s reforms were not only met with the testimonial injustice of being discredited in their reports of sexual abuse, but they were also met with the hermeneutical injustice of their experience being largely unrecognized by society, the common understanding being that men could not rape their wives. In instances like this, both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are at play. That being said, the two do not always interact.

There are plenty of instances where an individual does not have a credibility deficit, but nevertheless has difficulty articulating her experiences due to a conceptual lacuna. For example, imagine a bisexual person (Joe) coming out to their friend (Sally). Sally believes that Joe is being truthful in his reports of his sexuality, but Sally does not have the conceptual resources to fully understand bisexuality, and she tells Joe that he is just confused. She does not subject Joe to testimonial injustice, but he is still subjected to hermeneutical injustice.

Fricker posits that the solution to hermeneutical injustice is consciousness-raising (148). Consciousness-raising requires that individuals develop and publicize new conceptual resources to fill the lacuna in our collective understandings. This requires collaboration and solidarity building. For example, in the Carmita Wood case, Wood gathered with other women who experienced harassment similar to hers and together, they developed and coined the term "sexual harassment," allowing them to convey their experience accurately to others. Essentially, the way to rectify this form of injustice is always retrospective (Fricker, 169). This view contains an unfortunate consequence. It places the burden of explanation on the oppressed group, requiring that group to band together in order to correct the masses. The consciousness raising process can be further complicated for groups that are subject to testimonial injustice as well. If a group of people suffering a credibility deficit is also tasked with defining their experience, they must overcome being met with denial and disbelief in addition to articulating what has happened to them (Crerar, 197). Charlie Crerar's expansion of Fricker's theory provides more of a solution to this problem by arguing that part of the solution is fostering "free and expressive environments."

Taboos: Charlie Crerar's Expansion

Charlie Crerar expands Fricker's theory of hermeneutical injustice to include taboos. He defines taboo as "topics that are deemed inappropriate for discussion in many social contexts" (Crerar, 199). Essentially, if an individual talks about a taboo subject, they are subject to social costs for doing so. These social costs can range from social isolation to rejection by family members to physical violence. The lack of a "free and expressive environment" surrounding the taboo subject stifles conversation on the topic and forces the subject into silence. This silence prevents people from being able to accurately understand their experiences, resulting in hermeneutical injustices (Crerar, 203).

A particularly poignant case of a taboo is the case of menstruation. When young women or trans men experience menstruation, they are typically told not to talk about it, and conversations regarding it are done in private or not at all. People view menstruation as dirty and disgusting, although in reality it is a completely natural phenomenon. Since people view menstruation as disgusting, when young people ask questions about it or try to discuss it with their peers, they are isolated and silenced. Especially with young women and trans men, this perpetuates confusion surrounding the experience and teaches young people that they should feel ashamed of their bodies and bodily functions. The shame and social isolation prevent full understanding of menstruation and harm those experiencing it as knowers, compounding the problem (Crerar, 203).

It is useful to view taboos as partially causally responsible for the conditions that produce conceptual lacunae and lead to hermeneutical injustice. Taboos operate by weaponizing shame against an individual. They stifle conversation regarding a particular topic because of the social costs related to holding that conversation. When a person cannot express her experience, and then upon trying faces rejection and isolation, it further implies that the experience is something for her to be ashamed of without explaining why, creating confusion and misinformation, ultimately resulting in hermeneutical injustice (Crerar, 204). The shame and confusion that the agent feels creates an environment that is not free and expressive. A lack of a free and expressive environment prevents the agent from finding individuals with shared experiences and gaining the vocabulary and community necessary to accurately understand her experience (Crerar, 205). When this compounds from individual to individual, it is impossible to develop an accurate societal understanding of the experience, resulting in a conceptual lacuna that may result in hermeneutical injustice.

Crerar argues that rectifying hermeneutical injustice can be proactive. In "free and expressive environments" or environments where people do not incur social costs for talking about their experience, lacuna are less likely to develop to begin with, and are more easily rectified when they do. This shifts the burden of explanation off of the oppressed group, charging the oppressors with being more empathetic and open to understanding experiences different from their own (Crerar, 197-198).

Taboos and Sexuality

Throughout time, sex and sexuality have remained a particularly taboo subjects. The taboo surrounding sex created a multitude of different conceptual lacunae leading to the staunch binaries, misinformation, and the demonization of sex and sexuality. When it comes to the topics of sex and sexuality, the taboos surrounding these subjects have existed for hundreds of years, eroding the free and expressive environment to talk about sexuality. While this taboo has been improving in recent years with the sexual liberation movement, the LGBTQIA+ movement and similar efforts, it still exists today, and has demonized sexualities that do not fall into the mythical category of "normal" (Lorde, 1984). To illustrate this point, the Pew Research Center reports that 39% of LGBT+ individuals have been rejected by a family member at some point, 58% have been subjected to jokes or slurs, and 30% have been physically attacked or threatened ("A Survey of LGBT Americans," 2018). In the case of being LGBT+, the social cost for coming out and expressing oneself is social rejection from peers and family, degradation in the form of jokes and slurs, and even threats against the physical integrity of one's own body.

The traditional understanding of sexuality labeled individuals as heterosexual or deviant, with little room for anything in between. As the collective understandings developed, society expanded its conceptual bandwidth to change the binary to gay (or lesbian) or straight. What this binary still excludes is bisexuality. The imposition of the gay-straight binary on society leaves bisexual individuals out and makes it more difficult for their concerns to be seen as legitimate because it deems bisexuality as taboo (Erikson-Schroth and Mitchell, 298).

Binaries generally serve to pigeonhole individuals into one of two "neat" categories, even though the world rarely sorts itself out like this. As binaries permeate into our collective understanding, they squeeze out any understandings that do not fit into the accepted categories. This leaves individuals who do not fit into the "mythical norm" generated by the binary without the resources to convey their experiences to others and themselves (Lorde, 116). Binaries are harmful because they serve to generate conceptual lacunae and taboos. When individuals do not fit into the binary, they cannot articulate their experiences without incurring social costs, including vilification. For example, during the AIDS epidemic, bisexual men were labeled "stealth killers." They were said to be gay men who were vengefully trying to infect straight women with HIV/AIDS, rather than being viewed as members of the LGBT+ community who were suffering themselves (S. Young, 51). Since bisexual people do not neatly fit into the binary, they are stigmatized as an outgroup.

This is also a prevelant phenomenon in the discussion of rights for transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (GNC). Transgender individuals transgress the male/female gender binary that has been entrenched in society for hundreds of years. According to a 2019 report from the UCLA School of Law Williams Institute, just 25.9% of people thought that transgender individuals should be allowed to use the bathroom of the sex that they identify with, and only 20% thought that being transgender is a "natural occurance" (Luhur et. al, 6). While public support of bathroom bills is usually reported to be a response to purported dangers of allowing transgender people to go to the bathroom with the gender they identify as, what is really happening is the targeting of a vulnerable group. In reality, it is highly unlikely that a transgender person will assault anyone in the bathroom, but transgender individuals are actually one of the groups most vulnerable to violence (Luhur et. al, 5).

3. Bierasure & Bi-invisibility

While often conflated, the concepts of bierasure and bi-invisibility are distinct. Bi-invisibility can often look like bierasure, but they are not the same thing. As a reminder, bierasure is the failure to acknowledge and legitimize bisexuality. This can take many forms, from re-writing bisexual historical figures as gay or lesbian to outwardly denying bisexuality's existence ("Erasure of Bisexuality," 2014). Bi-invisibility is the lack of a conceptual resource to acknowledge bisexuality. The relevant difference between bierasure and bi-invisibility is that individuals engaging in bierasure possess a conceptualization of bisexuality and aim to deny its existence, whereas individuals engaging in bi-invisibility lack a conceptual understanding of bisexuality. In this section, I will outline bi-invisibility and four types of bierasure: biased, testimonial, strategic, and constructionist, arguing that each is a component of epistemic injustice.

Bi-Invisibility

Bi-invisibility stems directly from a conceptual lacuna surrounding bisexuality. It happens when individuals, even though they may be well-meaning, uphold the gay-straight binary and fail to understand the existence of bisexuality. Bi-invisibility happens when the very *concept* of bisexuality is invisible to an individual.

Think of a scenario where a woman, Sara, shows up to a work party with her girlfriend, Tara. In the past, Sara's boss had met her boyfriend, but they broke up, and he has not seen her with a girlfriend. When Sara and Tara arrive, Sara's boss, knowing that Sara has just recently started dating again after breaking up with her boyfriend, tries to introduce Sara and her "friend" to two of his single (male) friends at the party. Sara and Tara now out themselves to her boss, but everyone feels uncomfortable. In this instance, it is not the case that Sara's boss had a conceptual framework of what bisexuality is and chose to ignore it. Instead, it is the case that he was unable to even register bisexuality as a possible category for his friend Sara.

While this scenario is fairly lighthearted, it still illustrates a common problem for bisexual individuals; the need to constantly explain (and often defend) their sexuality. Vanessa

Dillon, a bisexual woman from Austrailia says, “If I were marrying a woman, it would be obvious that I was queer, but because I’m holding hands with a man instead of a woman, everyone assumes I’m hetero. People think that if you settle down with a bloke, you’re all of the sudden straight again” (Krueger, 2019). Individuals assume that bisexual people are either gay or straight depending on their partner. Bisexual individuals are defined in terms of other people, instead of being trusted to define their identity on their own. In social settings, this places bisexual people in the position to remain invisible or to have to repeatedly out themselves, forcing them to choose between two suboptimal and potentially harmful situations. In the first situation, Vanessa remains invisible, denying her identity because of the lack of a free and expressive environment to express her full truth. In the second situation, Vanessa subjects herself to potential social costs related to coming out as bisexual. If she reveals this aspect about her life, she is subjected to the social costs of confusion and promiscuity.

In everyday interactions, on surveys, and in the media there is an absence of bisexual representation. Failing to accurately represent bisexuality prevents the concept of bisexual from existing in the minds of everyday people, like Sara’s boss. If Sara’s boss had never met someone who was out as bisexual, had never served in a professional setting with a bisexual person, had never seen a bisexual character on television, it makes sense that he would assume Sara to be straight (or in other cases, gay). The failure to recognize and represent bisexuality pushes bisexual people further into the shadows, making bisexuality seem more elusive than it actually is. This is in part due to assumptions of sexuality that align neatly with the gay-straight binary.

Although bisexuals make up around 50% of the LGBT+ population, they are underrepresented (Human Right Campaign, 2020). On the 2020 Census, for example, individuals are asked to identify if they are married to someone of the same sex. While it could be argued that this is actually an *inclusive* measure to bisexuals because the census is not asking people to state their sexuality, it actually may be another instance of bi-invisibility due to the permeation of the gay-straight binary. Unless the Census Bureau has a shocking amount of bisexual individuals interpreting the census, it is unlikely that interpreters will consider that some of the individuals in both the same-sex and different-sex categories of the question are bisexual.[7] Those people will

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[7] Using a standpoint theorist perspective, it is unlikely that an individual who is straight would recognize the possibility that bisexuality is underrepresented by the survey. This is in part due to the fact that people who have not

remain invisible to the interpreters, and therefore, invisible to the resource allocation and representation that the census provides. Since the census will reinforce the notions that people can only be gay **or** straight, it reinforces the idea that bisexuality does not really exist, resulting in situations like that articulated by Nancy C. Marcus, where bisexuals are forgotten (or omitted) from court cases, and denied basic legal protections (314-315). This instance helps to show that failing to recognize bisexuality results in the continuation of harms to bisexual individuals. Taking the Haslangarian approach, "bisexual" is, therefore, a useful social category, because its recognition leads to the correction of past and pervasive harms against bisexual individuals.

In part due to the invisibility of bisexuality, bisexual individuals are denied the conceptual resources to understand their own experience, leaving them out of the concept-development process. Additionally, they are rendered invisible to monosexual individuals due to a lack of representation. Bisexual people are forced to understand their experiences operating within the framework of the gay-straight binary, which inherently squeezes them out. In order to combat that imposition, bisexual people need to work towards conciousness-raising as prescribed by Fricker. That being said, consciousness-raising becomes more difficult in the context of taboos and misinformation, which may be part of the reason these efforts are met with bierasure.

Bierasure

Bierasure, or the denial of legitimacy or acknowledgement to bisexuality as a sexual orientation, can happen at both the interpersonal and more broad societal level. Bierasure does not stem from a lack of understanding of what bisexuality is, but rather it is an active rejection of it, despite comprehension. There are four different types of bierasure. Biased bierasure is characterized by an acknowledgement of bisexuality but rejects its legitimacy. Testimonial bierasure occurs when individuals recognize the category "bisexual," but they reject that the person reporting their own bisexuality is actually bisexual. Strategic bierasure occurs when bisexual people are intentionally removed from political movements, typically LGBTQIA+ movements, marches, litigation, etc. so that the movement seems more sympathetic to outsiders. Finally, constructionist bierasure comes specifically from individuals who reject "bisexual" as a

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been cast into the shadows are less attuned to see it happening because of their privilege and situation in the societal power dynamic.

category, because it is socially constructed and could have developed differently. Each instance of bierasure results in an epistemic injustice.

Biased Bierasure

A blatant example of bierasure was articulated by Laura Erickson-Schroth and Jennifer Mitchell in their article *Queering Queer Theory, or Why Bisexuality Matters* (2009). Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell cite an example of bierasure published in the New York Times, where an article entitled *Straight, Gay or Lying*[8], had been published. The research highlighted by this article *set out* to "prove" that bisexuality, particularly in males, is a myth. The "scientific" procedures that the researchers used were incredibly invasive, and included measuring penile circumference to see just how aroused men were when exposed to gay or straight pornography (Erikson-Schroth and Mitchell, 298). This study took aim at bisexuality *despite* comprehending it. This act of bias set out to erase it, fueling the taboo by assigning a social cost to bisexuals, namely, that they are indecisive, promiscuous liars. Bisexual people may be viewed as less trustworthy, credible, and even sane. Biased bierasure reinforces taboos that prevent there from being free and expressive environments. When individuals cannot talk about their experience without incurring social costs for doing so, they are forced into silence, generating misinformation and confusion about their own experience.

One prevalent piece of misinformation perpetuated by biased bierasure is that bisexuality is just a phase. This is common in both the LGBTQIA+ and straight communities. For example, imagine a bisexual woman (Katie) who comes out to her friend Natalie. When Katie tells Natalie about her sexuality, Natalie responds by laughing and saying, "You'll pick a side soon." Again, in this instance, Natalie disregards Katie's sexuality by pointing out that bisexuality itself is not what she views as a legitimate category. In this moment, even though she probably did not intend to harm Katie, Natalie imposes her understanding of bisexuality as a phase onto Katie, who attempts to render her experience intelligible to her friend. Natalie's rejection and judgment of Katie's sexuality implicitly questions Katie's ability to comprehend and rationalize her own experience. This rejection and judgment is a social cost associated with the taboo surrounding bisexuality. Since Natalie imposes her understanding of bisexuality onto Katie, she commits a

[8] https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/05/health/straight-gay-or-lying-bisexuality-revisited.html

hermeneutical injustice by preventing Katie from articulating her experience in a free and expressive environment, free from taboos and Natalie's negative associations with bisexuality.

Biased bierasure operates by rejecting bisexuality. Biased bierasers understand conceptually what bisexuality is, but instead of legitimizing it, they reject bisexuality. Biased bierasure serves to reinforce negative taboos surrounding bisexuality, like the taboos that bisexual people are unstable, lying, or navigating through a phase of confusion. When biased bierasers impose their framework for understanding bisexuality on the experience of bisexual people, they create hermeneutical injustice by preventing bisexual people from expressing their identity in a free and expressive environment. In the case of biased bierasure, the bierasers are reinforcing (or sometimes creating) the social costs assigned to individuals who talk about their bisexuality. Since bisexual people cannot express themselves freely to biased bierasers, they incur social costs for talking about their sexuality, namely charges of confusion, untrustworthiness, and instability.

Testimonial Bierasure

Testimonial bierasure occurs when individuals deny that the individual person reporting their sexuality is actually bisexual, but not that bisexuality exists at large. This is different from biased bierasure because of the recognition of bisexuality as a category. Take, for example, the dialogue between Freddie Mercury and his (then) wife Mary from the recent biopic Bohemian Rhapsody:

> "I've been thinking about it long. Mary, I think I'm a bisexual."
> "No Freddie, you're gay. I've known for a while now, I just didn't want to admit it," (2018).

In this example, Mary does not reject the possibility of bisexuality as a category but rather denies that Freddie is accurately reporting his own experience (Singer, Bohemian Rhapsody, 2018). In testimonial bierasure, individuals like Freddie are subject to testimonial injustice. Since reports of bisexuality are often met with charges of confusion, in testimonial bierasure, those charges lead to the speaker (Freddie) being assigned a credibility deficit. The speaker is not trusted to report their own experience. In the case of Freddie Mercury, he was denied the ability to rationalize his sexuality, which marginalized him as a knower. In addition to the epistemic harm caused by the testimonial injustice, Mary and Freddie suffered irreparable damage to their marriage, resulting in their divorce.

Testimonial bierasure is an example of an interaction between hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. The lack of conceptual resources surrounding bisexuality results in social costs for individuals who try to articulate their experiences. In the case of testimonial bierasure, the social cost is a credibility deficit that leads to a testimonial injustice. The negative associations surrounding bisexuality may predispose the hearer to reject the speaker's claim of bisexuality. The hearer acknowledges bisexuality as a whole, but operates under the assumption that the speaker could not be bisexual, which in many cases is partially caused by negative feelings towards bisexuality.

Testimonial bierasure is highly dependent on context. Depending on the nature of the case, it is possible that someone could deny their friend's bisexuality in a way that would not count as testimonial bierasure. For example, imagine a scenario where a man, Joe, comes out as bisexual to his close friend Sam. Joe, however, is under immense pressure to be attracted to women by heteronormative, patriarchal norms. Sam, Joe's most trusted confidant, has valid reasons to believe that Joe is gay, but claiming bisexuality in order to appear that he is still attracted to women in an attempt to feel closer to the mythical norm (Lorde, 116). When Joe confides his sexuality to Sam, Sam responds by saying, "You know, Joe, it is okay if you are gay too." Sam subtly denies Joe's report of bisexuality but does so in order to encourage Joe to accept his own sexuality, no matter what it is. In this instance, it does not appear that Sam has committed testimonial injustice. The difference is that Sam seeks to validate Joe by questioning his bisexuality, and his questioning does not come from a place of distrusting Joe's credibility.

Spotting testimonial bierasure requires nuance. It is a highly situational case of bierasure, but in cases where it does happen, it subjects the bisexual person to testimonial injustice. Testimonial bierasure assigns a credibility deficit to the bisexual person, questioning their ability to know and report on their own sexuality. This undermines their epistemic faculties by undermining their ability to rationalize, a key component of what it means to be human (Fricker, 44-45).

Strategic Bierasure

Taboos that generate negative steryotypes surrounding bisexuality, bi-invisibility, and bierasure's reinforcement of the taboos surrounding bisexuality result in a third phenomenon that I call strategic bierasure. This form of bierasure occurs because of political motivations and happens when bisexual individuals are erased from political discourse, protections, and litigation, which usually results in bisexuals being cast out of the LGBT+ movement and community. The stigmatization and silencing of bisexual individuals resulting from other forms of bierasure render bisexuality as a percieved threat to LGBT+ rights advocacy. Strategic bierasure forces would-be advocates to settle for excluding bisexuals to secure the rights of the monosexual queer community.

Strategic bierasure is itself a social cost generated by taboos surrounding bisexuality. Since bisexual individuals can not articulate their experience in a free and expressive environment, negative steryotypes develop which makes bisexuality seem to be a threat to would-be advocates. For example, strategic bierasure formalizes the erasure of bisexuals from discourse and legal settings, leading to more practical harms. This form of bierasure occurs usually from within the LGBT+ community as a result of living in a society whose bandwidth is wide enough to comprehend gay and straight, but not bisexual. An example of this type of bierasure can be seen in recent LGBT+ litigation, specifically *Obergefell v. Hodges,* the landmark Supreme Court Case that deemed same-sex marriage legal. In *Obergefell,* bisexuality is not mentioned once, despite bisexual legal advocates asking for the inclusion of bisexuals in this important protection (Marcus, 323). *Obergefell* is not the exception: most recent LGBT+ rights litigation completely excludes talk of bisexuality.[9]

It is likely that the intent of the litigators that left out "bisexual" from this case did so to ensure support for the cause of same-sex marriage by presenting it as a simple issue. That being said, excluding bisexuals from LG***B***T+ litigation fails to protect a large group within the LGBT+ community. Bisexual individuals are less likely to be seen as sympathetic plaintiffs by the court due to perceptions of promiscuity and instability. Without legal protections, this can have tangible harms for bisexual individuals. Nancy Marcus argues that it is because of this exclusion

[9]Marcus also mentions the following cases for their exclusion of bisexuality; *Bowers v. Hardwick, Rowland v. Mad River Local School District, Romer v. Evans, Hollingsworth v. Perry,* and *US v. Windsor (311).*

from legal discourse and stigma that bisexual individuals are less likely to be granted custody of their children and are less likely to be granted asylum when fleeing anti-LGBT+ countries (318-319). The perception that bisexual individuals do not need protection because they can simply "be straight" is a dangerous one.

Strategic bierasure results from taboos surrounding bisexuality. It is in a way a harm caused by other types of bierasure and bi-invisibility. In a truly free and expressive environment, strategic bierasure would not need to happen, because bisexual people would be able to appear as sympathetic plaintiffs in court cases, and LGBT+ advocates would not be placed in the position where they must decide between excluding bisexuals or potentially losing important rights securing litigation for the monosexual LGBT+ community. The harms directly associated with strategic bierasure are the consequences of a lack of representation in LGBT+ rights policies, litigation, and broader societal acceptance.

Constructionist Bierasure

Constructionist bierasure claims that because sexual identity categories are socially constructed and could have developed differently, bisexual individuals are clinging to an identity category that is irrelevant, and that we would be better off getting rid of. Constructionist bierasers argue that having the category "bisexuality" upholds heteronormative, patriarchal understandings of sexuality, and it would be better if we did not force people to claim their sexuality at all, instead taking the approach of people loving whoever they love without labels.

It is the case that sexual identity categories are socially constructed and could have developed differently. That being said, it is irresponsible to cast something aside simply because it is socially constructed, because in doing so, the constructionist bieraser fails to rectify the historical and ongoing harms inflicted upon an individual because of her identity (Haslanger, 313-314). The claim of the constructionist bieraser is that bisexuality is not a useful social category. In taking a Haslangarian approach to the social construction of bisexuality, I argue that "bisexual" is a useful socially constructed category in our current sociopolitical context. If we were to reject the the category "bisexual," we would deny bisexual people with the conceptual resource to articulate a part of their experience that has historically been weaponized against them. This would be to commit a hermeneutical injustice against bisexual individuals (Fricker, 149). Denying bisexual people the ability to articulate their experience would not be helpful to society as a whole. On the contrary, it would further marginalize bisexual individuals and deplete conceptual resources further.

Combating constructionist bierasure implies the importance of bi-visability. Increasing the visibility of bisexuals helps to break down pervasive, harmful taboos regarding bisexuality, and allows for the consciousness raising necessary to correct hermeneutical injustice to happen (Crerar, 197-198). Bi-visibility also provides people navigating their sexuality with an additional resource to articulate their own experiences, preventing others from weaponizing that part of their identity against them.

Combating Bierasure and Bi-Invisibility

Bierasure and bi-invisibility are complex problems that will inevitably need complex solutions. However, combatting the taboo surrounding bisexuality is a necessary step to dismantling these structures.[10] Dismantling the taboo requires the cultivation of free and expressive environments as prescribed by Crerar (197-198) as well as consciousness raising as prescribed by Fricker (148). According to the Human Rights Campaign, bisexual people make up approximately 50% of the LGBT+ community (2020). Even though bisexuality is a prominent phenomenon, it is underrepresented in discourse and media. A consciousness-raising effort to increase bi-visibility would help to dismantle taboos. Calling attention to issues of bierasure and bi-invisibility illuminates a previously hidden problem to members of other communities. That being said, as Crerar calls attention to, this does place a burden on individuals of the oppressed community to rectify their own oppression (197).

In order to reduce the burden placed on bisexual people to do their own consciousness-raising, it is important that non-community members work towards cultivating free and expressive environments. In free and expressive environments, individuals can talk about their experiences without being subject to social costs for doing so. One way to encourage environments like these is to encourage individuals to be empathetic towards others. Empathetic people are able to understand the experiences of others while reserving judgment. In order to

[10] An interesting area for further research would include looking into other operative components of bierasure and bi-invisibility, as well as biphobia, to determine other necessary steps in creating greater acceptance of bisexual people.

maintain and create free and expressive environments, people must work on being empathetic learners. By this, I mean that people should put in an effort to keep an open mind and be willing to understand new experiences that are not their own. This is not to say that individuals who do not belong to the bisexual community should be expected to perfectly understand bisexuality, bierasure, and bi-invisibility on their own, but that when confronted with a new concept to do so while reserving judgment. Obviously, cultivating this empathy will be a process, and encouraging bi-visibility may help to get there because as people become more familiar with bisexuality and bisexual individuals in their own lives, it seems less threatening.

This is not a comprehensive solution to the marginalization of bisexual individuals, but it is a necessary goal in order to achieve acceptance of the bisexual community. It is also not a simple solution. In order to cultivate the free and expressive environment, individuals will need to confront their own biases against bisexual people (and other sexual minorities). This can cause people to feel shame, which may cause individuals to become defensive and initially reject progress. That being said, although the cultivation of a free and expressive environment will inevitably be met with growing pains, it needs to be done in order to move towards acceptance of bisexual people.

4. Objections Considered

Occam's Razor

A potential objection to this research is that breaking down bierasure into four categories violates Occam's Razor, introducing unnecessary concepts in an attempt to explain a phenomenon. The objectioner would argue that since I suggest that taboos are operative in the bierasure it would be more apt to collapse these categories, as the shared solution has to do primarily with breaking down harmful taboos. The differences between the bierasures are nuanced, and distinguishing between each type seems less useful in light of a shared solution. Instead of overcomplicating the theoretical framework of bierasure by introducing more categories, the objectioner would argue that I should instead focus on defining bierasure as one category in light of the operation of the taboo. The delineation of categories overcomplicates the discussion in an unnecessary way. What is necessary for understanding bierasure is not understanding each individual instance of it, but rather its interaction with the taboo surrounding bisexuality.

Although bierasure is heavily influenced by taboos, it is not the case that delineating the four categories introduces unnecessary concepts. In each case, the taboo operates differently, and constructionist bierasure is caused by a difference in strategies for overcoming oppression rather than a taboo. Unlike testimonial and strategic bierasure, biased bierasure denies the existence of bisexuality as a category. It promotes the idea that people who claim to be bisexual are promiscuous liars and seeks to actively assign social costs to bisexual people by reinforcing negative stereotypes. In contrast, strategic bierasure is an example of one of the social costs that bisexual people face. The omission of bisexuality from litigation and political movements occurs because of the negative feelings towards bisexuality that permeate our collective understanding.

The cases of testimonial and constructionist bierasure are even more distinct than the cases of biased and strategic. Constructionist bierasure operates differently than the other three types in that it has to do with strategy more so than an operative taboo. What I mean by this is that constructionist bierasure recognizes the marginalization that sexual discrimination causes as a legitimate problem, but their approach to overcoming it differs. Instead of consciousness-raising, the constructionist bieraser seeks to eliminate the category completely. Testimonial bierasure occurs when a credibility deficit is assigned to the speaker. The hearer believes in bisexuality at large, but not that the particular individual talking to them is “actually” bisexual. It is a case of testimonial injustice that occurs in the background conditions of a collective lack of understanding of bisexuality.

This is to say that the differences between the types of bierasure may be subtle, but they are relevant. Understanding the differences between the bierasures allows us to recognize the different ways that the taboo interacts with bisexuality in different contexts. While eliminating the taboo would help to relieve most of the forms of bierasure, there is still value in fully understanding how it operates in each case because doing so grants us insight into the nuance of the problem, and how the deconstruction of the taboo will have to be nuanced as well.

Political Expediency

From a pragmatic perspective, it could be argued that the expansion of bierasure and bi-invisibility that I offer actually undermines the political goal of consciousness-raising. The objector would argue that the introduction of context-dependent categories of bierasure is a rhetorically ineffective way to garner political support. The objection asserts that the introduction of more categories alienates would-be allies by taking already confusing concepts, bierasure and bi-invisibility, and making them more confusing. In doing so, this work actually subverts consciousness raising efforts by making the concepts of bierasure and bi-invisibility more nuanced and abstract. Instead, in order to garner more widespread support for bisexual acceptance, a more rhetorically focused definition is needed. This would allow for bisexual individuals to mobilize more people and generate a more effective consciousness-raising movement.

In responding to this objection, it is important to reiterate that part of my goal in this work is to offer complete definitions of bierasure and bi-invisibility. The consciousness-raising required to correct bierasure and bi-invisibility is not undermined by offering a more complete definition of bierasure. Hermeneutical injustices, like the injustices caused by bierasure and bi-invisibility, occur when there are holes in the conceptual resources available for understanding a phenomenon, like bisexuality. Introducing the four categories of bierasure provides necessary conceptual resources for articulating the harms caused to bisexual individuals by bierasers. Without a precise, complete definition bisexual people are left without the tools needed to articulate the harms caused by bierasure, which makes consciousness raising impossible.

Moral Reasonability

The “moral reasonability” objection is related to the political expediency objection. It calls into question if it is reasonable to expect every individual to understand and work towards rectifying bierasure and bi-invisibility. The objector, in this case, would argue that it is impossible to expect individuals, who may never have come into contact with someone who is openly bisexual and may be completely unaware of bierasure and bi-invisibility, to work towards rectifying the injustices caused by bierasure and bi-invisibility. Since part of rectifying bierasure and bi-invisibility requires awareness of the phenomenon, expecting people who do not have this awareness to help rectify the hermeneutical injustices caused it not a reasonable charge.

While a lack of understanding is a legitimate obstacle that bisexual advocates need to overcome, it is reasonable to expect that overcoming this lack of understanding is possible. It would be misguided for bisexual advocates to expect that people already comprehend bierasure and bi-invisibility, especially people who have not come into contact with these phenomena before. That is part of the reason that consciousness-raising is necessary: to explain the experience of bisexual individuals to non-community members and elucidate the harms caused by marginalization. That being said, it is not an unreasonable expectation for non-community members to foster free and expressive environments and to be empathetic learners. Bisexual advocates and their allies do need to participate in consciousness raising in order for their concerns to be heard, but the moral accountability of non-community members rests in their ability to reserve judgment, be empathetic, and approach learning about experiences different from theirs from an open-minded perspective.

5. Conclusion

Epistemic injustice, particularly hermeneutical and testimonial injustices can help us understand the harms created by bi-invisibility and bierasure, allowing us to work towards rectifying them. In order to fully understand how bierasure and bi-invisibility operate, we must recognize them as tools of epistemic marginalization that lead to secondary political and practical harms. Bierasure and bi-invisibility help to generate and uphold taboos surrounding bisexuality, preventing a free and expressive environment from forming.

In order to rectify the harms caused by bierasure and bi-invisibility, it is important to instead encourage bi-visability. The visibility of bisexuals will help provide people with conceptual resources for understanding their own sexuality, break down the harmful taboos surrounding bisexuality as a whole, and help to encourage the free and expressive environments that make us better knowers.

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