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Bisexual Men's Constructions of Sexuality and Gender: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Tom Carter[a,b], Claudia Zitz[c], Brendan Dunlop[d] and Rebecca Yeates[a]

[a]Institute of Health Sciences, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; [b]Department of Counselling Psychology, York St John University, York, UK; [c]Medical Countermeasures, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; [d]School of Health Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

Bisexuality is often erased within discourse which perpetuates monosexism and hegemonic masculinity. Bisexual men, in particular, are underrepresented in both sexuality and discursive research. This study explores how cisgender and gender-diverse, publicly and privately bisexual men in the United Kingdom constructed their gender and sexual identities through discourse. Sixteen participants completed semi-structured interviews, with eight also taking part in focus groups. Accounts were analyzed using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Five discourses were identified. Dichotomized Sexuality discourse and Gender as Hierarchical discourse reflected dominant monosexism and hegemonic masculinity, constructing bisexuality as divided and unintelligible or subordinate. Neoliberal Authenticity discourse was utilized in attempts to construct resistance to erasure through individualism, without fully addressing the structural conditions shaping erasure and marginalization. Less frequently, Collective Nonconformity discourse, used more by gender-diverse participants, enabled accounts of belonging through shared non-normative positioning, whilst Personal Fluidity discourse allowed more flexible constructions of self. Findings suggest that bisexual men's accounts of themselves are shaped by intersecting regimes of monosexism, hegemonic masculinity, and neoliberalism, where attempts at authentic self-definition may reproduce the conditions of marginalization they seek to challenge

KEYWORDS

Bisexual men; gender; Foucauldian discourse analysis; hegemonic masculinity; neoliberalism

Introduction

It has widely been documented that bisexual experiences are underrepresented in mainstream cultural discourse and academic research (Barker et al., 2012; Davenport-Pleasance, 2024; Stewart, 2021), including relative to gay and lesbian experiences (Brown, 2019; Hayfield, 2020). This underrepresentation persists despite approximately 5% of people globally describing themselves as bi or pansexual in 2021 (Ipsos Group, 2021). It is

CONTACT Tom Carter t.carter@yorksj.ac.uk Institute of Health Sciences, University of Leeds, UK.
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understood that many bisexual people navigate harmful and erasing discourses by never publicly coming out (Narui, 2011), with an estimated quarter of bisexual adults having never disclosed their identity to important people in their lives (Brown, 2019). This not only contributes to under-representation in census data, it also emphasizes the difficult social and psychological experiences experienced by bisexuals in their attempts to be seen within deeply monosexist contexts (Nelson, 2024).

Across psychological, social science, and public health research, bisexual men are rarely treated as distinct from broader populations such as men who have sex with men, specifically limiting the visibility of bisexual men's specific experiences (Young & Meyer, 2005). Although discursive research has examined bisexual erasure, offering an understanding of this phenomenon, it has often conceptualized bisexuals as a single group, obscuring how bisexuality is differentially constructed through gender. For example, Wilkinson (2019) explored bisexual discourse in the media, finding that bisexuality is constructed as less legitimate than monosexuality, though the authors made no reference to gender.

Research which does consider bisexual men as a distinct group has predominantly focused on understanding lived experience and phenomenological accounts, with relatively little attention to how bisexual men actively construct identity through the discourses available to them. This is notwithstanding evidence that gender and sexual identity categories are central to bisexual men's perception of their masculinity and sexual identity (Preston et al., 2025). The present study addresses this gap by examining how a sample of bisexual men in the UK use and negotiate discourse to construct their gender and sexuality. Before examining their accounts, it is useful to consider the literature on how bisexuality and masculinity are understood discursively, and research to date on the effects of this.

Bisexuality as illegitimate

Foucault (1979, 2002) highlights how the production of knowledge and ways of being is shaped through discursive practices that regulate what can be said and which sexualities can be understood as valid and coherent. Taken alongside analyses of bisexual erasure (Monro et al., 2017; Yoshino, 2000), the denial and delegitimization of bisexuality can be understood as a discursive practice through which bisexuality is rendered unintelligible and illegitimate within monosexist systems of meaning.

Bisexual individuals frequently report their experiences of bisexual erasure, a form of minority stress involving the denial and delegitimization of their bisexuality, often by monosexual people (McCole & Anderson, 2026; Roberts et al., 2015). Bisexual erasure is also evident in a lack of bisexual representation in the media. For example, The Gay and Lesbian

Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)'s "Where We Are on TV" annual reports indicate that representations of bisexual characters in the media are consistently low compared to lesbian and gay characters and especially low for bisexual men. In 2023–2024 there were only 98 bisexual characters on TV, with only 28% of them being men (GLAAD, 2024). The report also highlights that the portrayal of bisexual characters is often negative and harmful. For example, portraying bisexuality as a temporary phase, bisexuals as untrustworthy, bisexual relationships as transactional, and bisexual people as secretive. Historically, bisexual individuals have also been portrayed as hypersexual and dangerous (Alexander, 2007) and have been labeled as responsible for HIV transmission (Worth, 2003). When others are asked about bisexuality, the results are strikingly similar. Specifically, that bisexuality is constructed as unfavorable by monosexuals (Herek, 2002). Ault (1994) explored how a sample of lesbian feminists constructed bisexuality as marginal, illegitimate, and deviant, in attempts to legitimize monosexual sexual identity as morally pure (Ault, 1994). Although developed in relation to racialized othering, this discursive process can be read alongside Fanon's Fanon (1963, Fanon, 1967) argument that marginalized groups are constructed by others in ways that serve to normalize and legitimize dominant identities as superior.

A small number of discursive studies have examined how bisexual women articulate tensions with dominant monosexual discourses, constructing their identities in relation to both the constraints of fixed sexual categories and the possibilities of resisting or destabilizing monosexism (Borver et al., 2001; Jen, 2019). However, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding how bisexual men may navigate these same discursive frameworks, and whether they do so in distinct or comparable ways.

Gendered variations in the legitimacy of bisexuality

Whilst research predominantly explores how dominant monosexist discourse delegitimizes bisexuality despite gender, there is some evidence of differences in the constructions of bisexual men and women. Despite some historical evidence of male sexual fluidity (Brickell, 2006), male sexuality is typically more intolerant of ambiguity which does not fit into dichotomous categories of gender and sexuality (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976a, 1976b, 1977; Nutter-Pridgen, 2015), thus is more likely to delegitimise male bisexuality. This is not to say that female bisexuality is not also erased. In practices of bisexual erasure, people often think of bisexual men as closeted homosexuals and bisexual women as heterosexual, which has been linked to patriarchal discourse which presumes sexual relationships with men and delegitimizes them with women (Souto Pereira et al.,

2017). More specifically, heterosexual people are much more likely to label men as homosexual on the basis of a single sexual behavior or emotion, compared to women who require more intimate and repetitive sexual behaviors and emotions to be labeled as homosexual (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976a, 1976b; Swan & Habibi, 2017). This unique experience of male bisexuality being presumed to be homosexuality may be related to the phenomenon labeled "homohysteria," coined by McCormack and Anderson (2014a, 2014b). Homohysteria refers to a cultural climate in which homosexuality is stigmatized, leading men to fear being perceived as gay due to the perceived threat this poses to their acceptability as men. It is arguable that in historical contexts which legitimize homosexuality, reduced homohysteria gives male bisexuality more legibility, perhaps reducing the erasure of male bisexuality (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; McCormack et al., 2014; McCormack & Anderson, 2014a, 2014b). This is reflected in findings that younger bisexual men typically have more rewarding experiences coming out as bisexual than older bisexual men (McCormack et al., 2014) and that heterosexual male athletes are increasingly engaging in physical affection, such as spooning, without being labeled homosexual (Anderson & McCormack, 2015).

Taken together, this literature suggests that bisexual erasure is not simply a consequence of dominant monosexist discourse, it is also shaped by dominant discourses of gender too. Specifically, there is a tendency for bisexual men to be perceived as homosexual, whereas female sexual fluidity is given greater legitimacy whilst their true sexuality is presumed to be heterosexual. This suggests a unique relationship between bisexuality and masculinity, in which bisexuality may pose a particular challenge to dominant expectations of what men can be whilst retaining their masculine legitimacy. Consequently, understanding how bisexual men construct their identities requires consideration not only of discourses of sexuality, but also of the gendered hierarchies through which masculinity is produced and legitimized.

Bisexuality and masculinity

Like sexuality, gender can be conceptualized as a social hierarchy through which certain ways of being are accorded greater discursive legitimacy than others. Butler (1990) conceptualizes gender as performative, produced through the repetition of socially regulated norms. It is well established that masculinity is associated with greater social power than femininity under patriarchy. Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (Connell, 2005) posits that a specific dominant ideal of masculinity is reproduced through discursive and social practices that function to maintain patriarchal power by legitimizing male privilege. This dominant ideal is characterized by

culturally valorized traits such as heterosexuality, authority, emotional restraint, physical toughness, and dominance over women and subordinated masculinities. Notably, the hegemonic masculine ideal has been associated with the dominant sexual pursuit of both women and men (Cosma & Gurevich, 2020; Grazian, 2007; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2017; Sánchez et al., 2009). This suggests that hegemonic masculinity is often constructed less around sexual orientation per se than around demonstrable sexual agency and pursuit.

Biological theories of masculinity construct masculinity as hormonally and biologically determined (van Anders, 2013). However, biological theories of gender may also function as ideological discourses which produce and stabilize gendered power relations. Biological discourses of gender have been criticized for naturalizing socially constructed masculine traits such as dominance, aggression, and heterosexuality, thereby reinforcing the cultural authority of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Philaretou & Allen, 2001). Whilst highly critiqued in the social sciences, biological-difference ideas of masculinity remain a dominant discourse within the public, media, and health research and practice (Persson et al., 2022; Tyler & Williams, 2014).

Interestingly, new discourses appear to be emerging in which a new type of man, defined by more emotional warmth, is idealized (Nijjar, 2019; Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2021). Emergent discourses which value nontraditional masculinities has been linked to a greater acceptability of queer masculinities (Anderson & McCormack, 2016).

The present study

Taken together, the literature reviewed suggests that bisexual men exist within a complex discursive landscape characterized by competing constructions of bisexuality and masculinity. Whilst bisexuality is frequently rendered illegitimate, unstable, or unintelligible within monosexist discourse, how bisexual men negotiate dominant monosexist discourses remains unclear, despite some exploration of this in populations of bisexual women. Additionally, it is unclear to what extent bisexual men construct their gender according to dominant discourses of hegemonic masculinity, especially in the historical context of emerging discourses which seem to legitimize alternative masculinities. Whilst previous research has examined the consequences of dominant discourses of gender and sexuality in the lives of bisexual men, little is known about how bisexual men themselves construct and negotiate their identities. The present study therefore examines how bisexual men in the United Kingdom draw upon and negotiate discourses of sexuality and masculinity in constructing accounts of themselves and their experiences.

Method

A qualitative design was used to address the research question: "How are discourses of gender and sexuality used to construct bisexual men's experiences of mental distress and wellbeing?". This paper focuses on the discourses of gender and sexuality in particular. Sixteen bisexual men took part in one-to-one interviews and eight participants also took part in one of two focus groups discussing sexuality, gender, mental wellbeing and distress. The focus group was used to explore the extent to which discourses used varied between one-to-one and group contexts. Interviews and focus groups were conducted, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) by the lead researcher, a bisexual cisgender man.

Epistemology

FDA is epistemologically poststructuralist, incorporating ideas from social constructionism and postmodernism (Riley et al., 2021). Poststructuralism highlights that constructions of reality are produced and reinforced by historical and social power (Williams, 2005). A poststructuralist epistemological paradigm attempts to de-construct the influence of time, context, and institutional power on discourse. Poststructuralist epistemology proposes that the way to access knowledge of the world is through examining discourse, starting with language, as discourses regulate what can and cannot be said and felt (Foucault, 2002; Willig, 2013). Poststructuralists do not agree on the extent to which discourse interacts with material reality (Willig, 2013). Specifically, there is a spectrum of positions from those who see power as strictly material and operating through discourse (e.g., Marxist and early feminist poststructuralists), to those who also see power as formed through discursive action (e.g., Judith Butler, Michel Foucault). As FDA provides a framework for analyzing discourse, power, and oppression, it is a good methodology for investigating the ways in which marginalized groups, such as bisexual men, construct their experiences within the context of available discourses (O'Reilly & Lester, 2017; Wiggins, 2017). There is strong evidence that gender and sexuality can be understood as social constructions, resulting from an interaction of personal experience, societal norms, and language (Marecek et al., 2004). Consequently, it was congruent to position this study within a poststructuralist ontological framework, assuming a critical epistemology.

Participants

Sixteen bisexual men resident in the United Kingdom were recruited. As part of recruitment, bisexuality was defined as "sexual and/or romantic

attraction to more than one gender." This definition is consistent with those shared by Stonewall (2022), a recognized UK LGBTQ+ organization. The adoption of this definition facilitated the recruitment of potential participants who also identified with the terms pansexual, plurisexual, m-spec, etc.

Table 1 outlines the study inclusion/exclusion criteria.

This study recruited sixteen participants using opportunity and snowball sampling. Advertisements to take part were posted in community spaces and online platforms, such as LGBT cafe's, Facebook groups for bisexual men, and Grindr, with permission. Participants' ages and public identity (privately or publicly bisexual) varied. However, fourteen participants were White British. Participants ages varied, ranging from 20 to 59 years old. To maintain anonymity, participants were allocated pseudonyms.

Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 2.

Procedures

Three bisexual-identifying men were recruited to take part in a consultation on the research and offered consultation on the research focus, methodology, and results. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Leeds School of Medicine Research Ethics Committee (MREC reference 22 – 074), prior to the commencement of recruitment. Informed consent, including consent to publish, was obtained from participants individually using consent forms prior to participation.

One-to-one interviews and focus groups took place online, recorded on Microsoft Teams. Participants were asked about their sexuality and gender within a semi-structured interview, consistent with previous Foucauldian discourse analyses with queer populations (Semp & Read, 2015; Star, 2021; Zitz et al., 2014). Two follow-up focus groups occurred, with four participants in each. Hosting both one-to-one interviews and focus groups was strongly encouraged by the research consultation with bisexual men. It was advised that participants may feel more psychologically safe within the one-to-one interviews but that shared discussion between bisexual men is equally valuable.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation.

Included	Excluded
• Adults (≥18) • Bisexual+ • Identify predominantly with masculinity, as they define it • UK resident of any ethnicity • Privately bisexual or publicly bisexual (including people who describe themselves as "bicurious," "straight-acting," or "discreet")	• Children (<18) • Monosexual • Do not identify predominantly as a bisexual man • Non-UK resident

Table 2. Participant information.

Pseudonym	Age range	Gender	Sexuality*	Public identification*	Focus group	Ethnicity
David	20–29	Cis-Male	Pansexual	Pansexual		White British
Silas	20–29	Cis-Male/Queer	Queer	Bisexual		White British
Oliver	20–29	Cis-Male	Pansexual	Bisexual		White British
Henry	30–39	Cis-Male	Bi/Pansexual	Bisexual	1	White British
Will	30–39	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Bisexual	1	White British
John	30–39	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Bisexual		White British
Richard	30–39	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Bisexual	2	White British
Freddie	30–39	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Heterosexual	2	White British
Ben	30–39	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Heterosexual		White British
Alaric	40–49	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Bisexual		Black Sudanese-British
Christian	40–49	Non-Binary Male	Bisexual	Bisexual	1	White Brazilian
Scott	40–49	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Heterosexual	2	White British
Miles	40–49	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Heterosexual		White British
Paul	40–49	Cis-Male	Bi/Pansexual/ Queer	Bisexual		White British
Josh	50–59	Cis-Male	Bisexual	Bisexual	1	White British
Forrest	50–59	Demi-Boy/ Agender	Polysexual	Heterosexual	2	White British

*Sexuality related to participant's named sexuality, sometimes private. Public identification related to sexuality as disclosed to others.

Transcripts from the one-to-one interviews and focus groups were analyzed following Willig's Willig (2013) six-stage framework for discursive analysis. The first stage, discursive constructions, involved examining how gender and sexuality were represented within participants' accounts. The second stage focused on identifying the specific discourses that were drawn upon in these constructions. The third stage, action orientation, considered the rhetorical and interactional functions of these discourses and what purposes they served within the talk. The fourth stage involved analyzing subject positions, or the identities made available to participants within each discourse. The fifth stage examined the associated practices, or what could be said, justified, or enacted from within these discursive positions. Finally, the analysis considered subjectivity, focusing on the emotional, cognitive, and experiential possibilities made available to participants through these discursive frameworks.

One-to-one interviews and focus groups were analyzed separately. However, the results indicated consistency in discourses identified and discursive practice across both one-to-one interviews and focus groups. Consequently, they are presented and discussed together.

Research reflexivity

The data collection and analysis were informed by the perspectives and experiences of the research team, including a diverse range of gender and sexual identity. I (the first author) identify as a cisgender bisexual man

and approached this research from a poststructuralist, social constructionist perspective. The bisexual research consultants also identified as cisgender bisexual men. Subsequent authors were only involved in the research in a supervisory capacity, so I will focus on my own reflexivity here. My own experiences of existing outside dominant discourses of gender and sexuality contributed to my interest in exploring bisexual men's experiences and informed my sensitivity to issues of invisibility, marginalization, and power.

At the same time, my experiences represent only one version of bisexual male experience and are shaped by positions of both privilege and disadvantage. As a White British, able-bodied man with access to higher education and professional training, I recognize that participants' experiences and access to a range of discourses may differ substantially from my own. Throughout the research process, I sought to remain attentive to both resonance and difference, drawing on shared experiences where appropriate while remaining reflexive about assumptions and interpretations. Ongoing reflexive engagement with the data and regular supervisory discussions with the coauthors and bisexual consultants throughout supported us to reflect on how our experiences informed what became visible, and obscured, in our analysis and interpretation.

Results

The research identified five discourses in relation to male bisexuality and gender. These were: Dichotomized Sexuality, Neoliberal Authenticity, Collective Nonconformity, Gender as Hierarchical, and Personal Fluidity. See Table 3 for a summary of how participants constructed their sexuality and gender according to these discourses.

The following section describes each discourse according to how participants positioned themselves and constructed practices and subjectivity.

Dichotomized sexuality discourse

Participants constructed their bisexuality as invisible, orienting the conversation around experiences of being categorized and unseen by others. For example, Forest described, "I think the, the problem with being bi I think is, is is that, um, is that people will make an assumption that you are either straight or gay." Forrest constructs heterosexual and homosexual as the only available sexualities which people are assumed into. All participants positioned themselves as erased and/or hidden in this way at times through practices of being restricted by dichotomized sexuality. Subsequently, all participants at times used Dichotomous Sexuality to

Table 3. Discursive constructions and their associated discourses.

Discursive object	Constructed As	Identified discourse
Bisexuality	• Invisible • Divided	• Dichotomized Sexuality
	• Authentic • Consuming • Free • Responsible	• Neoliberal Authenticity
	• Nonconformity • Connecting	• Collective Nonconformity
Gender	• Hierarchical • Threatening • Threatened • Dominant heterosexual masculinity • Subordinate queer masculinity / femininity	• Gender as Hierarchical
	• Socially Constructed • Fluid • Personal	• Personal Fluidity

orient the conversation around their attempts to unsuccessfully resist others' categorization of them as monosexual. For example, John stated, "if, you tell them that you're bi, it sort of, it just doesn't get in their head as a real thing." John positions himself as unable, in practices of unsuccessful resistance. This was supported by Paul and others: "Whether I define it as that is not, is, is, is not the point." Reliance on this discourse constructed a subjectively hopeless participant.

When orienting around constructions of self, fourteen participants constructed their bisexuality as dichotomous. For example, Josh stated, "we've got a gay side, we've got a straight side." His language divides the self, split according to dichotomized monosexual identities. Henry said, "I've spent most of my life being a heterosexual." His use of "being" constructs heterosexuality as something which Henry was, for a fixed period of time. Within this discourse participants were unable to construct bisexuality as coherently unified, instead constructing "sides" and an experience of sexuality as divided.

Neoliberal authenticity discourse

Whilst participants defined unsuccessful resistance at times, fifteen participants also constructed bisexuality as their authentic self, orienting the conversation around their individuality to convey practices of desiring or actualizing authenticity. For example, Richard, a publicly bisexual man described, "When I'm able to kind of express myself fully, I feel good." Neoliberal Authenticity discourse oriented around talk about taking responsibility for oneself, constructing positions of personal freedom available to publicly bisexual men. For example, Will described, "the internal dialogue I have in my head. Is, do I walk into a room and go, hi, I'm Will

and I'm bi" Here, he positions himself as free and responsible for practices of taking responsibility for choosing to display his bisexuality, or not. In another example, John stated, "I think it's important to be visibly bisexual," whilst Silas described, "[sexuality is] politicized without my consent all the time. And I feel like putting a, any label on it is, and part of, oh I don't like sitting back and doing nothing so, the best way I feel like I can do something about that is to an extent identify with the label bisexual because it does describe me." This discourse can be read as positioning bisexual men as personally responsibility for their acceptance through practices of bisexual visibility, despite simultaneously emphasizing barriers to this. This was particularly complex for two participants, Forrest and Silas, who did not identify as cisgender men, did not personally identify with fixed and dichotomized concepts of sexuality and gender, which Silas constructed as imposed on him. Silas described his motivation for and his practice of labeling his sexuality in an attempt to be seen and accepted as authentic, despite simultaneously resisting categorization.

This discourse also drew on neoliberal ideals of consumerism to further construct the position of authenticity. For example, Will also described, "blue, pink and purple stickers and stuff in my office. That was. It's like a manifestation of like, this is me […] helps me become, you know. Be happier who I am." Here, Will positions himself as a consumer shopping in a market of self-expression. He constructs practices of purchasing and wearing goods to express authenticity, manifesting in subjective feelings of personal pride and wellbeing. In others' accounts of similar practices, Henry said, "you can wear things that are super camp," whilst Freddie, a publicly heterosexual man said, "sometimes I would like to be a bit more out there and like, you know, get your eyebrows done and that sort of thing." Unlike Will, Freddie positions himself as desiring authenticity, rather than realizing it. Others constructed people as commodities for consumption in practices of authenticity, for example Paul said, "I just gotta fuck a man and see, you know, and and and I'll I'll figure it out." Paul's comment positions himself as a consumer, in a position of power over people through practices of realizing authenticity through sexual consumption. Paul's quote in particular constructs a confident and casual subjectivity.

Collective nonconformity discourse

On rarer occasions, four participants, including all three gender-diverse men, constructed their nonconforming sexuality as connecting, orienting the conversation around discussions of self and community. For example, Christian described, "when I accept myself, I start to try to, build new relationships. And for example, uh, when I start to, some friends accept

me without problems, and then I try to gather these friends always with me, and talk about, and I, I feel, I feel really free to discuss and, be myself, with these people." Christian positions himself as accepted by friends. Additionally, Forest described, "I've got two very, very good, um, er, bi friends, who, well, are, on the non-binary spectrum somewhere. And, er, it's been really interesting having them as friends because they're the, you know, one of the first set of friends that I've had where they don't treat me in that kind of we're expecting this of you. They treat me as if in a in a kind of, er, but yeah, I suppose if you, they, they're not mothering. They're not mothering me, which is, could, could be another alternative. So and, and, and it, and so it's a, it's a, it's a relationship which I've kind of not come across before where there's just this neutrality in, in, in the way that we deal with each other." Forrest constructs his "bi friends" as a distinct, nonconforming group. He positions himself as supported by these friends, compared to normative groups. He uses describes his bi friends as "not mothering" to compare his experience as different to relationships where he is molded into others' expectations of him, likely referring to monosexism. Forest constructs practices of liberation or transcendence from the norms of gender and sexuality through community. He seems to be constructing a subjective experience of safety resulting from these practices.

Gender as hierarchical discourse

All participants constructed masculinity as hierarchical at the majority of times, orienting conversations around threats to their masculinity. They first constructed assumed hegemonic masculinity. For example, "a masculine man is obviously bulkier, bigger, muscular," said Ben. His use of "obviously" essentialises and emphasizes assumed knowledge that men need to be larger in order to be masculine. Participants used this discourse to compare themselves negatively against this ideal, positioning themselves as subordinate. To do this, they constructed queer masculinity, which drew on ideas of feminine and homosexual behaviors, as inferior, unacceptable and compromising to their masculinity. For example, Richard and John stated "[it's] not acceptable to be gay, not acceptable to be bisexual," "if you're, a man, and you, and you do that. Then, you, you're not really a man" respectively.

Four out of five publicly heterosexual men positioned themselves as complicit with practices consistent with the hegemonic ideal. For example, "my group of friends are, like all sports guys, football that that kind of group kind of demographic. So, and uh, you hear all the comments they make, and you laugh along with it, but internally you're like, well, better not say anything so that, that kind of thing. And it's a, it's a shame at

this big old age of thirty-one, that that's still the case for me anyway." (Freddie). In constructing a social order of masculinity, he positions dominant men as sporty, threatening, and subjugating, consistent with a hegemonic ideal. Freddie's use of the adjective "cliché" constructs this type of man group as stereotypical. In describing "comments they make," without explicitly naming what they say, Freddie implies and assumes shared understanding, indicating the pervasiveness of practices in which hegemonic men are antagonistic toward subordinated others. In an evasion of explicitly naming hegemonic antagonism, Freddie positions himself as subordinate and constructs a subjective experience of anxiety. His use of "laughing along with it" further constructs practices of complicity. He constructs subjective dissonance, i.e., as a bisexual man within a group intolerant of bisexuality, which he is privately critical of. For example, his use of the word "shame" constructs his subjective discomfort and wish that something was different.

All participants used Gender as Hierarchical, to construct a position of compromised masculinity. For example Ben, a publicly heterosexual man describes, "they [groups of men] they're sorts of looking at you not as the, you know, I'm a bloke I go out and get girls, blah blah, blah and there's, you let somebody do that you.." Here, men are positioned as the sexually assertive, dominating gender (e.g., "I'm a bloke I go out and get girls"). They are positioned as able and expected to objectify others in practices of sex which reinforce hegemonic and patriarchal dominance. People who are objectified by men in this way are thus positioned as disempowered according to the gendered hierarchy and dichotomized sexuality. Ben's quote uses the gender hierarchy to construct that being bisexual compromises the extent to which he is seen as a man by groups of men, with him being repositioned, like a woman, an object who men "go out and get." This positions him as having lost status and respect through practices of being an object of male sexual assertion. His use of "let" constructs him as responsible for choosing to be positioned as either dominant or subordinate, defined by whether he performs dominant masculinity or positions himself as less male through alternative practices. This also positions him as autonomous. These uses of Gender as Hierarchical construct a shameful, oppressive subjectivity.

Personal fluidity discourse

On rarer occasions, three participants constructed their gender as socially constructed, fluid, and personal, orienting the conversation around expressions of self as flexible and free. For example Richard said "[discussing gender] so now maybe what it means to be this or what it means to be that is just so much more, fluid because, everybody's got their own idea

about what that might mean." Some participants drew on Personal Fluidity to adopt a position and practices of freedom and choice. For example, "maybe I can express my gender, in different ways that I like it." (Christian, age 40's, publicly bisexual, one-to-one interview). Here, Christian's use of "maybe I can" constructs a position of personal choice in which he can practice various gendered expressions. Alaric constructed such fluidity as "fundamental to my well-being in a, in a way," highlighting how this discourse constructs subjective wellbeing.

Discussion

Adopting a bisexual identity can be understood as an act of resistance to monosexism and the gender binary (Borver et al., 2001; Maree & Lynch, 2018). Consequently, bisexuality is of relevance to post-structuralist epistemology and queer theory in its attempts to conceptualize sexuality and gender as effects of discourse and power rather than stable identity categories (Butler, 1990; Callis, 2009; Foucault, 1979).

Despite growing attention to bisexuality within queer theory, bisexual men remain a relatively under-examined group, particularly in relation to how masculinity intersects with bisexual identity construction. This is significant because bisexual men occupy a structurally unique position within hegemonic masculinity and monosexism, which renders their bisexuality unintelligible or suspect. As a result, bisexual men provide a particularly useful site for examining how dominant discourses of sexuality and gender are negotiated, reproduced, and the conditions under which they may be resisted within discursive constraints.

This study therefore explored the discourse used by bisexual men constructing their sexuality and gender, focusing on how these intersect with broader ideological systems including monosexism, hegemonic masculinity, and neoliberalism. Five main discourses were interpreted in participants' constructions of gender and sexuality: Dichotomized Sexuality, Neoliberal Authenticity, Collective Nonconformity, Gender as Hierarchical, and Personal Fluidity.

Monosexism, hegemonic masculinity, and discursive subjugation of male bisexuals

Bisexual men predominantly drew upon Dichotomized Sexuality and Gender as Hierarchical discourses, reflecting the continued dominance of monosexism and hegemonic masculinity in their constructions of sexuality and gender. As anticipated, constructions of sexuality and gender were frequently interwoven in participants' accounts due to their discursive co-constitution (Butler, 1990), shared hegemonic structures (Bollas, 2023), and the gendered prejudices associated with bisexual marginalization (Gordon & Meyer, 2007).

Constructing their bisexuality as divided or internally conflicted, participants frequently relied on Dichotomized Sexuality discourse. This aligns with established evidence of internalized binegativity and identity invalidation among bisexual people (Feinstein et al., 2019; Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2021; Pollitt & Roberts, 2021).

Gender as Hierarchical was similarly used to construct accounts of masculinity that reinforced hegemonic gender relations. The persistence of monosexism (Hayfield et al., 2014; McLean, 2018; Roberts et al., 2015), particularly toward bisexual men (Baumeister, 2000; Manalastas et al., 2025), the continued dominance of hegemonic masculinity (Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2024; Nadirova & Mukhambetova, 2026), and the association of these ideologies with shame among bisexual men (del Pino et al., 2022; Elder et al., 2015) provide an important context for interpreting these findings. A key contribution of this study is to suggest that these ideological systems are not only experienced as external forms of stigma but also shape the discursive resources available to bisexual men constructing their own gender, sexuality, and subjectivity.

Privately bisexual, publicly heterosexual participants' accounts of compliance with hegemonic masculine ideals highlight one way in which subordinate masculinities may reproduce the very structures that marginalize them. This aligns with Connell's Connell (2005) concept of hegemonic complicity, whereby subordinated men may still benefit from patriarchal dividends despite their marginalization. The present study highlights the subjective dimensions accompanying hegemonic complicity, including guilt, anxiety, and constraint, which are less fully explored in earlier formulations of hegemonic masculinity (Buschmeyer & Lengersdorf, 2016). Further exploration of the relationship between subordinate and complicit masculinities is needed to understand the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Wojnicka, 2021), including among bisexual men.

Importantly, Nelson (2024) cautions against interpreting bisexual invisibility as uncomplicated complicity, as such accounts risk obscuring the structural constraints shaping bisexual visibility. In light of the findings of this study, this shifts analytical attention from stigma as an external force to constraints on discursive intelligibility and identity formation (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1979), further emphasizing the need for alternative discourses which legitimize bisexuality and queer masculinities (Preston et al., 2025).

Resisting bisexual erasure and hegemonic masculinity

A major contribution of this study is the identification of Neoliberal Authenticity as a dominant discourse through which bisexual men attempted to resist monosexism and hegemonic masculinity. Whilst previous research

has documented bisexual men's struggles for authenticity (Anders et al., 2023), less attention has been paid to the discursive mechanisms through which authenticity itself is constructed. Participants frequently framed authenticity as individual potential achieved through self-expression, consumption, and self-actualization, drawing upon neoliberal understandings of freedom and responsibility that located solutions to marginalization within individuals rather than broader social structures. Whilst Dichotomized Sexuality and Gender as Hierarchical positioned bisexuality as invalid and subordinate, Neoliberal Authenticity positioned bisexual men as authentic and liberated through individual acts of self-expression and consumerism. However, despite accounts of monosexism and hegemonic masculinity as structural barriers, Neoliberal Authenticity positioned the pursuit of legitimacy as a personal responsibility, thereby shifting attention away from the social norms and institutions that produce marginalization. Sa'ar (2016) argues that neoliberal discourses paradoxically promise acceptance through individualism whilst facilitating social division, whilst Varga (2011) highlights how discourses of authenticity can reproduce the very barriers they claim to overcome. Additionally, previous research demonstrates that non-heterosexual identities are often legitimized when they demonstrate compatibility with heterosexual and patriarchal norms (Croce, 2015; de Oliveira et al., 2013; Duggan, 2002). Consequently, Neoliberal Authenticity may facilitate bisexual visibility and personal legitimacy, whilst simultaneously limiting bisexuality's capacity to challenge monosexism, hegemonic masculinity, and the broader structures through which marginalization is maintained.

The prominence of Neoliberal Authenticity may also reflect the relative absence of collective resources available to many bisexual men. Previous research has documented bisexual people's experiences of social isolation and limited community belonging (Anders et al., 2023; Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Doan Van et al., 2019; McCann et al., 2021), alongside structural invisibility within dominant sexual identity categories (Brown, 2019; Steinman, 2000). In contexts where collective identities and support structures are less available, Neoliberal Authenticity may function as a culturally intelligible resource through which bisexual men construct legitimacy and worth. Its appeal may therefore not necessarily reflect ideological alignment with neoliberalism, but rather its availability as a route to personal recognition where collective alternatives are constrained. However, by positioning legitimacy as an individual achievement, this discourse may simultaneously reinforce an individualism that contributes to bisexual isolation.

In contrast, a small number of participants drew upon Collective Nonconformity to construct experiences of community and belonging. The

minority stress model (Meyer, 1995, 2003) emphasizes the importance of collective resources in promoting resilience through interpersonal support (Flanders et al., 2017). Whilst engagement in broader LGBT communities has been associated with reductions in internalized bi-negativity among some bisexual individuals (Pollitt & Roberts, 2021), bisexual people frequently report exclusion from lesbian and gay communities alongside a lack of bisexual-specific spaces (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Doan Van et al., 2019; McCann et al., 2021; Sarno et al., 2020). Within this context, Collective Nonconformity enabled participants to construct connection and shared understanding with others positioned outside normative gender expectations. Belonging was therefore grounded less in bisexual identity itself than in broader forms of gender and sexual nonconformity, representing an alternative mode of bisexual masculinity that did not rely upon neoliberal individualism. Nonetheless, Collective Nonconformity remained a subjugated discourse, appearing in only a minority of accounts.

Interestingly, gender-diverse men drew upon Collective Nonconformity more frequently than cisgender participants, although it was also present within the account of at least one cisgender participant. For these participants, this discourse provided a means of constructing safety, wellbeing, and legitimacy in relation to both bisexuality and gender expression. This is consistent with literature suggesting that transgender and gender-diverse individuals may experience distinct forms of minority stress whilst also developing resilience through community connectedness and collective affirmation (Bockting et al., 2013; Kidd et al., 2023; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; Wilson et al., 2024). The relative absence of Collective Nonconformity among cisgender participants may be understood through the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity privileges autonomy, control, and individual status whilst subordinating identities perceived as relational, dependent, or feminized (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Schippers, 2007). Masculinity is therefore often experienced as a precarious social status requiring continual defence (Vandello et al., 2008; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Collective Nonconformity may be less available to cisgender men because it requires a partial decentering of masculine status in favor of relational identification. This tension is intensified by gender policing and homohysteria, whereby men regulate their behavior to avoid being perceived as gay or insufficiently masculine (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; McCormack & Anderson, 2014). Consequently, cisgender bisexual men may encounter greater constraints in adopting discourses that foreground collective identification, particularly where masculine legitimacy remains tied to autonomy and distinction from femininity or homosexuality.

A small number of cisgender and gender-diverse bisexual men also drew upon Personal Fluidity when constructing their gender identities. This finding aligns with research suggesting that gender fluidity and non-binary masculinities can create opportunities to rework dominant gender expectations (Butler, 1990; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hyde et al., 2019). Both monosexism and hegemonic masculinity are underpinned by assumptions of binary gender, in which masculinity and femininity are constructed as mutually exclusive and hierarchically organized categories (West & Zimmerman, 1987). These binary logics also support wider social arrangements, including heteronormative relationship forms and the privileging of the nuclear family (Yoshino, 2000), whilst aligning with capitalist systems that rely upon stable social roles and identities (Nguyen, 2023). Within this context, Personal Fluidity functioned as a discursive resource through which participants could position themselves beyond the constraints of hegemonic masculinity and binary gender. This finding resonates with arguments that nonconforming masculinities can unsettle assumptions of fixed, hierarchical, and binary masculinity (Strayer, 2018). Through Personal Fluidity, participants constructed masculinity as flexible, self-defined, and open to reinterpretation.

Although they were only available to some participants, Collective Nonconformity and Personal Fluidity were theoretically significant discourses because they demonstrated that bisexual men are not exclusively constrained by dominant essentialist binaries. Specifically, alternative discursive possibilities can become available when bisexuality is constructed alongside more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality, enabling participants to construct themselves as less constrained by the assumptions of binary gender and monosexism. However, the limited uptake of these discourses suggests that such subject positions remain unevenly available and may depend upon specific social, cultural, and intersectional conditions. Further research is therefore needed to examine how alternative gender and sexuality discourses may become accessible to bisexual men, including cisgender bisexual men, and whether they can function as resources for resisting monosexism and hegemonic masculinity.

Strengths and limitations

This study has several strengths. The use of Foucauldian discourse analysis enabled a detailed examination of how bisexual men actively construct sexuality and masculinity within broader ideological systems and discourses. Whilst many of the results supported existing literature, the exploration of Neoliberal Authenticity as a discourse utilized by bisexual men was a particularly novel finding. The inclusion of gender-diverse men and both publicly and privately bisexual men offered unique insights. The use

of both one-to-one interviews and focus groups enhanced the robustness of the identified discourses, which were consistent across different interactional contexts. Additionally, the diverse positionality of the research team, including the use of bisexual research consultants, offered a range of insider and outsider perspectives throughout all stages of research, providing strong reflexivity (Hayfield & Huxley, 2015).

However, several limitations should also be considered. The sample was predominantly White British and recruited through opportunity and snowball sampling, which limits the transferability of findings to more diverse populations of bisexual men. Additionally, the relative imbalance in the uptake of certain discourses means that some interpretations necessarily reflect a limited number of participants, particularly in relation to Collective Nonconformity and Personal Fluidity.

Finally, a limitation of FDA is that it does not seek to produce a single, definitive interpretation of the data, but instead generates contextually situated readings of how meaning is constructed through discourse and power relations (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). As such, alternative readings of the data remain possible. It also does not provide a detailed exploration of participants' internal experiences, and therefore findings cannot be interpreted as direct accounts of psychological states, and others may have different, valuable reflections on the analysis. Importantly, critical research itself is not immune from reproducing power relations. As Cosgrove (2000), drawing on Lather (1991, p. 16), observes, "research that examines the complex relationship between gender, power, meaning and emotional distress must be grounded in the recognition that our efforts to liberate can perpetuate relations of dominance." Consistent with this caution, the discourses identified in this study should not be understood as definitive descriptions of bisexual men's experiences but as one interpretation of how a particular group of participants constructed sexuality and gender within a specific social and historical context.

Conclusion

This study explored how bisexual men constructed their sexuality and gender through discourse, demonstrating that their accounts were shaped by intersecting systems of monosexism, hegemonic masculinity, and neoliberalism. This highlights how bisexual marginalization is sustained through the constrained discursive resources available to bisexual men when constructing their own gender and sexuality. The identification of Neoliberal Authenticity demonstrates how attempts to resist bisexual erasure may reinforce individualized understandings of recognition while simultaneously leaving broader social structures unchallenged. However, Collective Nonconformity and Personal Fluidity offered some participants

alternative possibilities for challenging the broader assumptions through which bisexuality and masculinity are regulated. These findings suggest that expanding the discursive resources available to bisexual men, particularly those that support collective belonging and more fluid constructions of gender and sexuality, may be important for challenging monosexism and hegemonic masculinity. In addition, future research should examine how alternative discourses may become available across diverse social and cultural contexts, particularly the conditions under which collective and fluid forms of male bisexuality and queer masculinity can function as resources for legitimizing bisexuality and diverse masculinities.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Tom Carter**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Claudia Zitz**: Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Brendan Dunlop**: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Rebecca Yeates**: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of generative AI use

The authors report generative AI was not used in their research or preparation of this manuscript.

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Notes on contributors

Tom Carter is a bisexual man and a clinical psychologist and lecturer at York St John university. He qualified from the University of Leeds where he completed his studies exploring discourse and bisexual men.

Claudia Zitz is a clinical psychologist and researcher at the University of Birmingham. They specialize in discursive research and gender identity.

Brendan Dunlop is a clinical psychologist and researcher at the University of Manchester. He specializes in bisexual research.

Rebecca Yeates is a clinical psychologist and researcher at the University of Leeds. She oversees all aspects of research on the clinical psychology programme. Her research interests fall within the area of how an individual's identity relates to their mental health.

ORCID

Tom Carter http://orcid.org/0009-0007-3664-1343

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