Spaces with a bisexual appearance: re-conceptualizing bisexual space(s) through a study of bisexual practices in the Netherlands

Emiel Maliepaard

To cite this article: Emiel Maliepaard (2020) Spaces with a bisexual appearance: re-conceptualizing bisexual space(s) through a study of bisexual practices in the Netherlands, Social & Cultural Geography, 21:1, 45-63, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2018.1454979

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2018.1454979

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 22 Mar 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 776

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
Spaces with a bisexual appearance: re-conceptualizing bisexual space(s) through a study of bisexual practices in the Netherlands

Emiel Maliepaard
Department of Human Geography, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
Current understandings of sexualized spaces do not encompass bisexuality. In response, I use Schatzki’s theory of practice to identify bisexual practices and bisexual spaces. On the basis of 31 interviews with bisexual people (18–35 years old) in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, both located in the Netherlands, I contend that creating bisexual displays is difficult for both bisexuals and others as understandings of bisexual doings, behaviour and actions are lacking. Furthermore, bisexual participants find it often not appropriate or relevant to disclose their bisexuality in everyday practices as teleoaffective structures of everyday practices often render sex, sexuality and relationships irrelevant. Nevertheless, people do disclose their bisexuality in conversations when they feel that it is appropriate and serves a purpose and therefore create spaces with a bisexual appearance. This conceptualization of bisexual spaces as based on bisexual appearances emphasizes the temporal and local character of these sexual(ized) spaces.

KEYWORDS
Bisexual spaces; practice theory; Schatzki; bisexual display; Netherlands

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 12 December 2016
Accepted 21 February 2018

CONTACT
Emiel Maliepaard e.maliepaard1@gmail.com, m.maliepaard@fm.ru.nl

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
Espacios con apariencia bisexual: la reconceptualización del espacio(s) bisexual a través de un estudio de prácticas bisexuales en los Países Bajos

RESUMEN
La comprensión actual de los espacios sexualizados no abarca la bisexualidad. En respuesta, se utiliza la teoría de la práctica de Schatzki para identificar prácticas y espacios bisexuales. Sobre la base de 31 entrevistas con personas bisexuales (18–35 años) en Róterdam y Ámsterdam, ambas ubicadas en los Países Bajos, se afirma que la creación de demostraciones bisexuales es difícil tanto para los bisexuales como para otras personas, ya que falta más entendimiento acerca de las actividades, el comportamiento y las acciones bisexuales. Además, los participantes bisexuales encuentran que a menudo no es apropiado ni relevante revelar su bisexualidad en las prácticas cotidianas, ya que las estructuras teleoafectivas de las prácticas cotidianas a menudo hacen que el sexo, la sexualidad y las relaciones sean irrelevantes. Sin embargo, las personas divulgan su bisexualidad en las conversaciones cuando sienten que es apropiado y que cumple un propósito y, por lo tanto, crean espacios con una apariencia bisexual. Esta conceptualización de espacios bisexuales basada en apariencias bisexuales enfatiza el carácter temporal y local de estos espacios sexuales (sexualizados).

Introduction
The identification of bisexual spaces was one of the earliest efforts to prioritize bisexuality on the agenda of social and cultural geographies, and geographies of sexualities in particular. Although Bell (1995) argued that bisexuality does not even occupy a marginal position in the geographies of sexualities, a number of efforts have been made to identify and explore bisexual spaces. In the 1990s, during the rise of the gay and lesbian geographies, Hemmings (1997) concluded that no clear demarcated bisexual spaces exist besides conference spaces and some support groups. More recently, Voss, Browne, and Gupta (2014) characterize these demarcated bi spaces in the UK as equivalent to short-term events because bi bars, clubs, or other more permanent bisexual spaces are lacking (also Hemmings, 2002). Despite the highly temporary nature of these spaces – most of these events last one (BiFests) to three to four days (BiCon) – it has been argued that these spaces contribute in significant ways to create a home and sense of belonging for people who identify as bisexual (Bowes-Catton, Barker, & Richards, 2011; Voss et al., 2014).

These bi spaces, which could be understood as constituting an organized bisexual community, consist of specific cultural and social practices and are characterized by different core values such as mutual aid, embracing the diversity of bisexual identities, and openness to people beyond the gender binary, partners of bisexual people, and allies (see Maliepaard, 2017b; Monro, 2015). Monro argues that these bi spaces are necessary as safe spaces to be bisexual, explore identity issues and connect with others (Monro, 2015). Monro also emphasizes the political dimension of these bisexual spaces as sites that help bisexual people to...
find refuge from oppressive heteronormative and mononormative regimes and provide opportunities for people to make political claims (Monro, 2015; see also Voss et al., 2014).

Because of the absence of permanent bisexual spaces it is concluded that bisexual people live their (invisible) lives in gay, lesbian and straight spaces (Hemmings, 2002). At the same time, however, Hemmings noted that understandings of bisexual space depend on our conceptualization of sexual(ized) space in general. In other words, our general understandings of the sexual coding of spaces and which factors contribute to the sexual coding of spaces, is important to identify bisexual spaces. Hemmings does not elaborate on this point, which is unfortunate given its importance, and this challenges geographers to identify bisexual spaces applying different geographical frameworks. In recent work on bisexual spaces, I argued that two major obstacles need to be challenged before one can truly explore geographies of bisexuality and bisexual spaces: defining bisexuality and the conceptualization of sexualized and gendered spaces (Maliepaard, 2015a). Most work on bisexual spaces resembles existing work on gay, lesbian and queer spaces which assumes a one-to-one connection between the dominance of people from certain fixed identity categories and the sexual coding of space (Maliepaard, 2015b; see also Oswin, 2008). As bisexual people are often invisible, such a conceptualization has significant negative impacts on the identification of bisexual spaces.

Inspired by Hubbard’s (2008) focus on appearances and Schatzki’s theory of practice, this paper makes an empirical case for a practice-oriented approach to sexual(ized) space in order to explore both bisexual spaces and geographies of bisexuality in contemporary Western societies. I interviewed 31 bisexual people, 21 women and 10 men, to understand how they negotiated their sexual identities in everyday public, semi-public and private spaces (mostly outside the bedroom). Before discussing these expressions of bisexuality, I introduce the theoretical background of the study. Next, I present the empirical analysis, focusing on expressions of bisexuality and the impact of practices on sexual identity negotiations. Finally, in the discussion I build on Hubbard (2008), Browne (2007), and Brown (2007) to argue that bisexual spaces are temporal, local and (often) unplanned. This conceptualization embraces the complexity and fluidity of sexual(ized) space and therefore may also complicate understandings of heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or queer space to provide more accurate understanding of the dynamics in the (re)production of sexual space.

**Practices and (bisexual) space**

Hubbard (2008), who argues that spaces are constituted by practices, proposes to focus on how particular heterosexual acts and rituals provide spaces with a heteronormal appearance. This means a shift from understanding spaces as heterosexual or heteronormative to focusing on how spaces become heterosexualized. A similar proposal can be found in Kath Browne’s work on heterosexualizing practices in restaurants as she concludes that ‘rather than relying solely on given categories of difference or named discriminations, focusing on (re)productive practices could expand our understandings of the complex and power-laden (re)construction of space’ (Browne, 2007, p. 12). Browne identifies several important insights from her focus on subtle practices that often go unnamed and are difficult to recognize for the non-heterosexual subjects; in particular she focuses on how people are stared at, subject to whispering, approached, and finally feel out of place in restaurants (Browne, 2007; see also Doan, 2010).
In earlier work, I proposed an alternative approach to bisexual spaces as current conceptualizations to bisexual spaces do not suit the complex realities of people who identify as bisexual (Maliepaard, 2015a, 2015b). This approach understands spaces as stabilizations of social practices, and bisexual spaces as spatial and temporal stabilizations of bisexual practices (Maliepaard, 2015a). Bisexual practices are conceptualized as ‘attraction to both men and women, sexual behaviour with men and women, and thirdly, sexual fantasies about men and women’ (Maliepaard, 2015a, p. 225). This definition has been broadened to include people who do not identify as man or woman and therefore reads ‘not only men or women’ instead of ‘men and women’ (Maliepaard, 2015b). Next to attraction to, sexual behaviour with, and sexual fantasies about not only men or women, self-identification (and expression) is added as a bisexual practice as sexuality is often confined to private spaces and bisexual doings are rather invisible (Maliepaard, 2015a; see also Hayfield, Clarke, Halliwell, & Malson, 2013).

In a recent analysis of an online forum for bisexual people and their allies I show how practices impact the coding of spaces (Maliepaard, 2017a). This study, informed by Schatzki’s theory of practice, reveals a focus on the doings and, more importantly in this case, sayings that together make up the online forum. Instead of focusing on aforementioned bisexual practices per se, this study analyzed how people’s doings and sayings – mostly bisexual practices articulated via language – gave the online forum the appearance of a bisexual safe space as conceptualized by Eadie (1995). The focus on doings and saying also showed that even such a moderated space is not free from oppressive regimes in the form of heteronormative and mononormative discourses and that these discourses impacted people’s doings, sayings and actions within this online space. As such the analysis does not conceptualize this online forum as a demarcated bisexual space, but embraces the fluidity and dynamics described in recent studies within the field of sexual geographies (e.g. Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Gorman-Murray, 2008a, 2008b; Nash, 2013; Visser, 2008).

Embracing fluidity and dynamics in the sexual coding of spaces is a step forward towards recognizing the complex relations between sexuality and space. Spaces are neither gay nor straight. For instance, several articles discuss how heterosexual people and appearances are present within gay and lesbian venues and spaces (e.g. Bettani, 2015; Holt & Griffin, 2003; Nash, 2013; Skeggs, 1999; Valentine & Skelton, 2003) which results in, amongst other things, increasing heteronormativity in spaces that are often understood as gay or lesbian spaces (Bettani, 2015). Similarly, through homonormalization, a particular group of gay men and lesbian women become more visible in spaces that are understood as heterosexual(ized) (e.g. Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014; Visser, 2008). Nevertheless, these existing studies still focus more on the presence of people with certain sexual identities instead of on how particular sexual practices, expressions and appearances contribute to the sexual coding of spaces. Important exceptions are studies by Brown (2000), Brown (2007, 2008), Browne (2007) and Nash and Bain (2007) who specifically focus on practices and appearances to understand the dynamics of spaces and the troubled sexual coding of space. This article contributes to an understanding of the sexualization of spaces by examining the ways in which everyday practices, including non-sexual practices, strongly contribute to the sexual coding of spaces, governing whether sexual expressions and appearances are appropriate, acceptable and relevant or not. Here, I turn to Schatzki’s theory of practice to explore how practices contribute to the sexual coding of spaces and how the doings, sayings and actions of participants in these
practices give a specific heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual appearance to spaces (see also M. Brown, 2000).

**Practice theory**

Inspired by Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Schatzki contributes to the practice turn in social sciences via his theory of practice that he developed from the late 1990s (Schatzki, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2008, 2010). Practices in practice theory are much more than just manifolds of human actions or activities; these are habitual, normative and routinized bodily activities. According to Reckwitz, a practice is

a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other:

forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (2002, p. 249)

Schatzki has a similar description of a practice as ‘a set of doings and sayings that is organized by a pool of understandings, a set of rules, and something I call a teleaffective structure’ (2001, p. 50).

Schatzki understands practices as building blocks of social life, but also sees people as carriers of practices. One of the pillars of practices is the pool of understandings, which should be understood as practical understanding to encompass both doings and sayings. It focuses on know-how, in particular on how to take part in basic acts and how actors sensitize their actions in their understanding of the social world. As such, the pool of understanding refers to learning capacities, in particular to imitation, and the understanding of one’s position and actions. These understandings do not necessarily result in rational decision-making and/or rational doings or sayings. In fact, Schatzki argues that most doings and sayings are reactive in a way that behaviour is spontaneous. He emphasizes, however, that it does not mean that behaviour ‘can’t be thoughtful, intentional and even deliberate, only that its being such does not consist in a process of conscious thinking, or deliberation that precedes or accompanies it’ (Schatzki, 2008, p. 58).

Discussing the prioritization of practices over act(ion)s, Schatzki introduces the concept of teleaffective structures which he defines as a

range of acceptable or correct ends, acceptable or correct tasks to carry out for these ends, acceptable or correct beliefs (etc.) given which specific tasks are carried out for the sake of these ends, and even acceptable or correct emotions out of which to do so. (2001, p. 53)

A teleaffective structure is the contemporary result of ‘recurring and evolving effects of what actors do together’ (Schatzki, 2002, p. 81). Its emphasis on correct or acceptable ends, tasks and actions, reveals that a teleaffective structure is a normative governing pillar. As Schatzki himself suggests in his early work, a teleaffective structure is ‘a normative field of teleoactivity, a field of right and acceptable combinations of teleoactivity-housing conditions of life’ (1997, p. 304). Schatzki notes that ‘practices vary greatly in both the complexity of their teleological structuring and the depth of their affective ordering’ (2002, p. 80), but he seems to prioritize affectivity over rules and teleology in the organization of practices.

Teleoactivity, as a composition of teleology and affectivity, is conceptualized as ‘orientations towards ends and how things matter’ (Schatzki, 1997, p. 302). Schatzki continues by arguing that ‘what a person does is largely dependent on the things for the sake of which she is prepared to act, how she is oriented toward proceeding for them, and how things
Schatzki gives special attention to what he calls conditions of life as these are manifestations of states of beings. Conditions of life, or life conditions, are expressed in human activity and should be seen as appearances of mind. Schatzki argues that life conditions are expressed in bodily doings and sayings and experienced through bodily sensations and feelings. Conditions of life, such as hoping, believing and expecting, are all parts of the mind, i.e. appearances of mind. While some life conditions seem natural, most are developed through interactions with other people and/or non-human bodies. In this sense, the mind is constituted by practices and carried by practices. In essence, as people grow older, they develop a greater understanding of mind, or how things stand and are going on.

Schatzki (2008) identifies four types of life conditions: states of consciousness (what one is explicitly aware of), emotions and moods (one’s sense of how things are going), cognitive/intellectual conditions (one’s stances and attitudes) and actions (what one is doing). Others can become aware of these inner phenomena by understanding the expressive body; someone’s doings and sayings. As such, the human body, as consisting of physical properties and conditions of life, is vital in communicating standings and how things are going. This also provides an answer to criticism of theories of practice that contend these approaches prioritize embodiment and skills over rationality (Gad & Jensen, 2014). This typology of conditions of life is a reminder that embodiment, skills and rationality all are important in how people experience practices and together frame their practical intelligibility. As such, I believe that focusing on the conditions of life offers a useful approach to understanding people’s orientations towards ends and how things matter.

Focusing on people’s ‘orientations towards ends and how things matter’ also helps to acknowledge that practices govern, but do not determine people’s activities, actions, doings and sayings. The empirical section will provide evidence on the fluidity and temporality of bisexual appearances and, thus, bisexual spaces. This is followed by a discussion on reconceptualizing bisexual spaces as based on bisexual appearances in order to stress that bisexual spaces can be found in many spaces, but for short periods of time.

Methods

This paper is part of a study amongst bisexual adults (18–37 years) who live either in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, or direct surrounding areas (see also Maliepaard, 2017b). The primary objective of this study was to investigate how people negotiate and express their (bi)sexual identity in everyday public, semi-public and private spaces. I focus on the perceptions and experiences of the research participants but mostly on their doings and sayings as these might manifest conditions of life which helps us to understand how and why people express or do not express their bisexual identity in everyday practices.

In total I interviewed 31 bisexual people between June and November 2015. Participants were recruited via local social media groups and to a lesser extent, LGBT + organizations, and personal networks. Two interviews were conducted in English while the remaining were conducted in Dutch. Interviews ranged in length from 37 to 100 min, with an average length of about one hour. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using MaxQDA 12.01.

Reflecting upon my own position, I understand that I am both an insider and an outsider to the research population. In this, I follow Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt (2010) to argue that both positions can be risky as well as fruitful to understanding the research
participants. In fact, co-participating in some bisexual practices (as defined by the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid, see Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985) might make me an insider to some participants and an outsider to other participants. For instance, my stance towards bisexuality – which differs in practices and encounters – could be distinct from the stances of the research participants. Moreover, I also have different gendered and/or cultural realities as compared to the majority of the participants.

Most participants identified as bisexual, two as bisexual and pansexual (see for similar observations Flanders, LeBreton, Robinson, Bian, & Caravaca-Morera, 2017; Gonzalez, Ramirez, & Galupo, 2017), and one person identified exclusively as pansexual. Furthermore, 21 participants identified as woman, and 10 as man. This does not mean that every participant is cisgender; three were in the process of a social and/or medical transition from male to female or from female to male. Despite this transition and the presence of the transgender label, people identified in binary terms. About one-third of the research participants were bi-cultural which means that either the participant or at least one of their parents was born outside the Netherlands. A majority of the bi-cultural participants were of Surinamese descent. Only one participant, at the time of the interview, was actively participating in the Dutch organized bisexual community. Most of the participants were living on their own or together with a partner. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Identifying bisexual displays

In this section, I will focus first on the possibilities for people who identify as bisexual to express their sexual identity before focusing on sexual identity negotiations in everyday practices and how these spaces impact the negotiations. Expressing bisexuality has been explored by various bisexual theorists and three important concepts to understand these expressions can be identified: Creating a bisexual display (Hartman, 2013), bisexual marking (Gonzalez et al., 2017) and bisexual appearances (Hayfield et al., 2013). The first concept refers to material, verbal and non-verbal clues to express one’s bisexuality based on current and dominant expectations and norms (Hartman, 2013); it implies that people proactively want to express their bisexuality. Bisexual marking, however, refers to making known that one is not heterosexual, gay and/or lesbian (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Bisexual marking should be understood in the context of fighting bi-erasure and binary thinking regarding sex, gender and sexualities. Bisexual appearances refer to visual expressions of personal, social and cultural identities, in particular dressing in a way to show one’s bisexual identity (Hayfield et al., 2013).

[Interviewer]: What is bi behaviour?

[Participant]: Yeah, I don’t think there is stereotypical bi behaviour (Ben, Rotterdam)

Inspired by Hartman’s (2013) concept of creating a bisexual display, one of the first questions I asked participants was meant to capture the different verbal, non-verbal and material clues they used to express their bisexuality. Ben’s short answer to that question is exemplary for people’s understanding of bisexual practices; there is no pool of understandings from which to express their bisexuality via bodily doings, behaviours, or actions to use Schatzki’s words. In 2013, Hartman explored the sexual identity negotiations and expressions of bisexual women outside the bedroom and likewise concluded that there are no specific scripts for bisexual behaviour and/or bisexual expressions. Doing bisexuality is, unlike doing gender, impossible (Hartman, 2013).
And I have none [no boyfriend] so that makes a difference. People, by default, think that you are straight. And if there are any signs that you are not straight, they assume you’re lesbian. (Julia, Rotterdam)

Julia, a bisexual woman from Rotterdam, also discusses the difficulty for bisexual people to express their sexual identity. She argues that it is even more difficult for bisexual people who are not involved in a relationship, or multiple relationships, to express their bisexuality. Julia refers to ontic reasons why expressing bisexuality is difficult or even impossible. People are understood in binary ways and heterosexuality is naturalized as the primary sexual identity. As long as people do not receive any verbal, non-verbal, or material clues that manifest non-heterosexuality, one is understood as heterosexual. When people deploy signs that do not align with heterosexuality, they are understood as gay or lesbian (Maliepaard, 2017b). By ‘signs’ I mean all kinds of doings and sayings that express same-sex attraction, desire, or emotional and/or romantic attachments to someone of the same sex. This observation challenges Hemmings (2002) argument that bisexual difference or uniqueness disappears as bisexual practices (and locations) are often similar to gay and lesbian practices (and locations); through the absence of particular bisexual practices people are considered as heterosexual until they express same-sex attraction or desire and are therefore are read as gay or lesbian.

Because I am so much part of the gay scene I don’t feel like explaining it to people. So I know they think by default that I am gay. (…) Funny enough, straight people also think by default that you’re straight. That’s how it is, it is the norm. And in the gay scene, with gay people, if you hang out with them they will see you as gay. That’s the norm. So I don’t get any questions. I will never say ‘guys before we can be friends, I need to tell you I’m bisexual.’ That would be awkward. (Grant, Amsterdam)

This excerpt not only confirms Julia’s, and other participants ideas that people are often understood as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian, it also shows that people need to express their sexuality via verbal clues to challenge the heteronormative discourse. Before discussing verbal clues used to express bisexuality, I look further at the importance of the mononormative discourse which is based on two assumptions; people have fixed sexual identities and these sexual identities are directly linked with the sex/gender of one’s partner (e.g. Ault, 1996). This definition thus differs from Wilkinson (2013) who uses mononormativity and compulsory coupledom interchangeably. In the above excerpt, Grant discusses how specific norms, which can be conceptualized as part of the mononormative discourse, impact how one is read. His participation in the gay scene, together with his boyfriend, results in people seeing him as a gay man. He also indicates that people who do not participate in the gay scene see him as a heterosexual man. Having a partner of a particular sex/gender results in being read by others as either gay or straight; at the same time participating in particular communities or scenes also impacts how one is read by others.

I had a relationship with a man, so I came across as straight. Then she [her then boyfriend] said ‘I am now [woman’s name]’ and I suddenly had a relationship with a woman. And I instantly came across as lesbian for the outside world. (Freke, Rotterdam)

Freke’s experience might at first glance appear extraordinary, but it offers insight into how one’s perceived sexual identity is closely tied to the sex/gender of one’s partner. Toft and Yip (2018) refer to compulsory monogamy to explain how people understand relationships. Compulsory monogamy, or compulsory coupledom, is a dominant norm that foregrounds a committed and faithful relationships between two people (Toft & Yip, 2018) and
therefore excludes (consensual) non-monogamies and polyamory. Understanding relationships as a commitment between two people means that it would be easy to continue linking Freke’s sexual identity with the changed sex and gender of her partner.

It becomes clear that expressing bisexuality in doings is not easy for most of the participants as there is no agreement on what bisexual doings are: people cannot make sense of, or relate to, bisexual doings, behaviour and actions (e.g. Popova, 2017). This highlights one of the main problems for people who identify as bisexual: the absence of bisexual scripts or practical understandings of non-sexual bisexual practices. Negotiations and expressions of sexual identity are complicated by a society that has no understanding of bisexual behaviour and doings outside the bedroom. In all interviews it becomes clear that people predominantly express their bisexual identity through sayings or ‘verbal clues’ to use Hartman’s (2013) words.

P: I just tell people, very easy …
I: Just like.. ‘I am bi’
P: Yeah, yeah, I seldom tell it straight away. At a certain moment, when I know someone, after we met up a couple of times … but also that I just tell someone ‘Oh that person is really handsome bla bla bla’. I am not going to say (with a solemn voice) ‘ehm people, I need to tell you something, I am also attracted to girls, you know. Because I don’t think it’s necessary. I find that … how should I say
I: Like you are different?
P: Yeah, like I need to emphasize that ‘oh guys, I need to tell you something so you can deal with it’ (Laura, Rotterdam)

Laura’s statements capture many research participants’ attitudes towards coming out and disclosing one’s bisexuality. It would be wrong to suggest that none of the participants had come out to their family, parents or partners, but they nevertheless do not agree with the coming out practice. Coming out refers to a personal speech-act to position oneself on the sexuality spectrum (see also Brown, 2000; Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003; Ward & Winstanley, 2005) and therefore is understood as a confession of being different; it makes one’s sexual identity a big deal. Coming out is not about just communicating one’s sexual identity (but see Orne, 2011 who actually uses this definition). The research participants understand it as a practice set within a dominant governing teleoffective structure: it embodies the norm that heterosexuality is natural and that others need to explicitly reveal, or confess, their deviant sexual desires, attraction and/or identities towards heterosexual people.

Making one’s bisexuality a ‘big deal’ does not match the position of bisexuality in participants’ daily lives and how they approach it: it is part of their being, but not all encompassing. In fact, Laura explains that she prefers to spontaneously disclose her bisexuality via verbal clues. Interestingly, she refers to attraction and desire when disclosing her bisexuality instead of referring to bisexuality as a sexual identity category or as a sense of belonging. Bisexual practices such as attraction to, desire for and fantasies about not only men or women that are invisible in doings become visible in explicit and more subtle verbal clues. On the basis of these interviews, I believe that bisexual practices such as desiring, being attracted to, and fantasizing about not only men or women (see Klein et al., 1985; Maliepaard, 2015a) become visible in sayings. It is, thus, fair to conclude that sayings predominantly constitute bisexual practices and are the most successful way of creating a bisexual display.
Expressing bisexuality in practices

P: Yeah, the porn industry is very easy. I don't need to hide anything, they are very happy with bisexual people. Because a lot of actors and actresses are only into straight sex … And I can do much more than that. I can do lesbian sex, or straight sex, but can also combine it. So they can use me for many scenarios. They are only happy with it [her bisexuality]. (Kim, Rotterdam)

This section shifts from general understandings (i.e. heteronormativity, mononormativity and compulsory monogamy) and the difficulty of identifying bisexual practices to consider how practices, and in particular the teleoaffective structure, govern people's sexual identity negotiations, expressions and experiences. It is important to understand how bisexual people act in certain situations and why they act in these ways as this may shed light on how sexuality is governed in our daily lives (Maliepaard, 2015b). It will become clear in this section that focusing on these practices and the governing teleoaffective structures is important to understand why people express or do not express their bisexuality at work, at home, or in other spaces.

The excerpt above shows how general understandings and practices interact and together provide numerous opportunities for one of the research participants to express her bisexuality in doings, sayings and actions. Kim works in multiple occupations, including as a nude model, porn actress and sex worker in a local sex club. This quote clearly shows how being bisexual and expressing bisexuality is nearly always relevant for Kim and that she can disclose her bisexuality in many different ways: she can act in lesbian sex scenes as well as in heterosexual sex scenes and everything in between. It is no problem at all for Kim to create a bisexual display by participating in sexual activities with men and women.

Kim is the only participant who proactively creates a bisexual display through verbal, non-verbal and material clues. She promotes herself, on her website, as a horny bi(sexual) girl. As a hypersexualized sexual identity (e.g. Monro, 2015), bisexuality occupies a privileged position in the porn industry, bisexual women occupy a high status position in the hierarchy of the porn industry and Kim makes use of this normativity. She believes that it is an enormous advantage to be bisexual, as a woman, as it helps her to get more shoots, bookings and clients. Thus, her doings, sayings and actions, which together create a bisexual display are not out of place but, in fact, are always relevant, appropriate and acceptable in order to reach certain ends, most importantly being successful at her job.

Of course, the porn industry, and the adult entertainment industry more generally, are distinct working practices in which explicit sex and sexuality are important features. Kim's experiences are rather different from the experiences of other participants; in most other working practices discussions of sex, desire and sexuality are often out of place. Lewis (2012) has argued that coming out is embedded in the journeys of gay men; these journeys can trigger people's coming out or not coming out (see also Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2011). Similarly, this section shows that practices can trigger bisexual disclosures or non-disclosure. Triggering does not mean that it determines what people do, but that practices govern people's sexual identity negotiations.

P: It is not something that I would like to hide for people or certain groups of people. The thing is that people you don't know really well, they don't know about it. And at my work … Just because it is not the setting to have that kind of conversations [about sexuality and relationships] or to just talk about it. (Julia, Rotterdam)
Julia is one of the few participants who thinks and feels that it is important to express her bisexuality in order to contribute to the visibility of bisexuality in a heteronormative and mononormative society. However, she does not feel comfortable disclosing her bisexuality at the workplace because that is not the correct setting for conversations about sexuality and relationships. She works in healthcare and feels that it is not appropriate or acceptable to create a bisexual display or even mention her bisexuality to clients or colleagues. Julia is not the only research participant who works in healthcare. Another bisexual woman, Anita, echoes Julia's concerns that it is not appropriate to discuss sexuality in her workplace with either colleagues or clients. This emphasis on inappropriate and unacceptable actions reveals that separating work professionalism and one's sexual life is the norm or the common sense, to use Browne's (2007) words, in these working practices.

P: My previous job, a lot of friends just knew it … I didn't hide it. And now … [the previous job] was a university. My current job is somewhat different. I think that some colleagues know about it, just because we had some drunk conversations, the ones you have at work drinks. (Bart, Amsterdam)

Bart used to work at a university in Amsterdam before changing his career; he currently works at a research/consultancy company in the same city. He did not hide his bisexual desire and experiences in his previous work environment, which he described as an open-minded bubble; interestingly, Bart also identified his colleagues as friends suggesting something more than just a professional relationship. By contrast, Bart understands his current workplace as outside this academic and open-minded bubble and does not discuss his sexual desires, behaviour, or identity with his colleagues. For him it is not appropriate or relevant to discuss his sexuality at his new workplace, at least not during working hours.

The last sentence is important as he speculates that some people could know about his bisexuality because of conversations over drinks after work. Bart characterizes these conversations – ‘the ones you have at work drinks’ – as the usual drunken talk at work drinks. In this context, he wants to disclose his same-sex desire and activities in provocative ways in order to establish his masculinity. Thus, aided by alcohol and a masculine atmosphere he expresses his bisexuality but also in ways that are acceptable: not too serious or vulnerable, but provocative and manifesting self-confidence.

Although the participants find it difficult to actually grasp the teleoaffective structure of their working practices, they also seem to have a certain common sense regarding sexual identity expressions. The teleoaffective structures of these working practices hierarchize the doings, sayings and actions of the workplace to ensure professionalism and limit doings or conversations that seems to belong to private realms, in particular when it comes to sexuality. Rodó-De-Zárate's (2017) discussion of affective inequalities – the deprivation of love, care and solidarity – comes to mind when discussing how people feel less comfortable discussing their sexuality without really understanding where this discomfort comes from. I argue, however, that people are not trying to avoid discrimination, but that they think it is not relevant in these particular practices. For Bart, the after-work drink is one of the rare occasions to discuss sexuality, however, only because these conversations provide space for chitchat. However, people have their own action intelligibility or orientations towards ends and how things matter. These may align or not align with the teleoaffective structures that are at play.

P: Yeah, at my workplace I don't feel that need to … if someone would ask me, I think I would say that I am bisexual, but they don't ask. I think so now because I am in a mood like 'I don't give a damn about anything.' (Brian, Rotterdam)
Brian works in the banking sector and understands his work as heteronormative and masculine. He stated that he would not discuss his sexuality with his colleagues, both because he does not feel the need to discuss it and because of this heteronormative and masculine atmosphere. Brian tells me, however, that he would, at this moment, disclose his sexuality if people were to ask him. This willingness to disclose his bisexuality manifests particular conditions of life, i.e. emotions and stances. First, he was in a euphoric mood during the interview because he had recently conquered his own uncertainties by actually approaching a girl in a nightclub, making out with her on the dancefloor and making out with both this girl and her boyfriend as he also arrived on the dancefloor. This state of being is of vital importance to understand his disclosures. Second, and related, Brian’s stance towards his sexual desire and bisexuality had just changed. He had recently come to accept his bisexuality after years of doubt and struggle and he currently feels very confident about his sexual desires and identity. Brian recalls a meeting with a girl in a local bar where he openly talked about giving blowjobs; his bisexual desire and identity are currently very important and this is manifested in his conversations with friends and others. There is no rationality to be observed in his willingness to disclose his sexuality towards colleagues at work, only emotions, moods and stances.

P: And that one night in the queer club, I just bought tickets today for the next edition in September by the way, but the queer club is a beautiful metaphor for my stance towards it [bisexuality]. So I went there, identifying myself as straight … I did not take ecstasy but 4-FMP, which is similar but less strong (…) Then we [participant with a girl he met] started to dance and kiss. That was … if it was me, it was the best evening of my year. It could have stopped here. Because I finally dared to approach such a beautiful girl. So then, her boyfriend joined.. and that’s how I go with men, I accepted it. I didn’t look for it, but it was okay that he joined. (Brian, Rotterdam)

This extensive quote provides more insight into how conditions of life are manifested in people’s actions. Brian explains that 4-FMP makes him much more relaxed and cuddly, but also improves his self-confidence. In fact, using 4-FMP has an important impact on his moods, consciousness and personality and therefore on his actions. His experience of what is acceptable changes for this moment, but also impacts his doings and sayings in other practices. This encounter manifests a new phase in his sexual and social life in which Brian embraces his bisexuality, his stance towards his sexual desires, and his personality: it manifests his boosted self-confidence.

This section focused on practices, in particular working practices, to understand why people often do not disclose their bisexuality and/or pansexuality. It becomes clear that people often do not find it relevant to discuss their sexuality in these particular practices or understand sexual identity disclosures as inappropriate. Unlike the young lesbian women in Rodó-De-Zárate’s (2017) study, most of the research participants do not have particular rational strategies when it comes to disclosing one’s bisexuality. Their orientations towards ends and how things matter is important to understanding the ways in which people negotiate the teleaffective structures of practices to disclose, or not disclose, their bisexuality. On most occasions, people’s disclosures manifest their wish and will to be open towards friends and others with whom they have a social connection, preferably a strong social connection, to be valued as a honest person by their social connections, and ultimately accepted for who they are. These experiences also resonate with Lewis (2012) argument that linear models of coming out/disclosure are overly simplistic and do not take into account how particular may trigger people to disclose or not disclose their sexuality.
**Bisexual and bicultural**

As elaborated on in the method section, one-third of the participants were bi-cultural, which means that either they or at least one of their parents was born outside the Netherlands. Most bi-cultural participants were of Surinamese descent, but born in the Netherlands. It is important to not only focus on sexual desire or identity, but also on other socially constructed categories such as gender and cultural background in order to understand how these intersect with each other (e.g. Monro, 2015; Oswin, 2008; Valentine, 2007).

I: So that [sexuality] is not something to be discussed in the family?

P: No, not at all

I: Does that make it difficult to discover that and express it?

P: Ehmm.. discovering not ... Ehmm ... but talking about it yes. It would have never come up to me to talk with my family about sex. People make jokes about it, for instance my cousins. When I was young, I had a cousin, we are not in touch anymore, but back in those days we could talk about sex, but not with my friends. But we DID talk about sex, he [the cousin] was talking like 'I had sex with this girl, and then I cheated on her with that girl.' So that was a big thing. But I never talked about it with, for example, my brother, my mother, or father. (Kendis, Rotterdam)

As Lewis (2016) concludes, a contextual understanding of the lives of bi-cultural people, in particular in relation to their everyday social milieus, is necessary in order to understand how their lives differ from native people (in this study ethnic Dutch people). Kendis is a Dutch woman of Surinamese descent and belongs to the Hindustani ethnic group which is one of the largest ethnic groups in Surinam. During the interview it becomes clear that she does not spontaneously disclose her bisexual identity to her family members for two reasons: fear of negativity and, secondly, disclosing her bisexuality would be inappropriate. As serious conversations about sex or sexuality are not part of the family routines or practices it becomes difficult for Kendis to start a conversation about her own sexuality, identity, or relationship(s). Most bi-cultural participants, not only the ones of Surinamese descent, find it difficult to express their bisexuality because sexuality is a taboo topic within their ethnic communities: They believe that it would be inappropriate and unacceptable to initiate a conversation about their bisexuality. Another participant of Surinamese descent, who also co-organized erotic parties for bisexual women, had similar experiences. She did not want to come out to family members and talk about her own sexuality and sex life as it is not a subject for everyday conversations and interactions. This woman, however, was able to express her bisexuality by sharing advertisements for the erotic parties on her social media account. This way of disclosing her bisexuality was less personal and direct towards her family members and therefore less disruptive of family practices.

It would be wrong, however, to only focus on the issue of whether disclosure of one’s sexual identity and desire is understood as acceptable or appropriate. Fear, particularly the fear of being rejected by parents or other family members, was also experienced by most bi-cultural participants. People not only find it uncomfortable to discuss their sexuality, they can easily pinpoint the reasons why they do not feel at ease to disclose their attraction, desire, and/or fantasies about people of the same-sex or gender to members of their families: the risk or fear of rejection as a non-heterosexual son, daughter, sibling or cousin. Kendis, for instance, is scared that her parents would not accept her having a girlfriend. As Kendis reveals, it would be really difficult the moment she has a ‘sustainable relationship’ with
another woman and may want to disclose her bisexuality towards her parents. Two other bi-cultural participants had been rejected by their parents after coming out and are not in touch with them anymore.

This fear of rejection is not only manifested in people not disclosing their bisexuality to family members, but also in not expressing bisexuality in everyday practices in which they may encounter friends or acquaintances of family members. Irina is a young bisexual woman of North African descent living with her parents in Rotterdam. Even her own bedroom in her parental house is experienced as unsafe as both Irina and her girlfriend are afraid of being caught by Irina’s parents, in particular by her father. As such, they do not engage in doings, sayings, or actions that manifest intimacy as these are not appropriate or acceptable in the house. Irina also does not feel safe to walk hand-in-hand with her girlfriend in Rotterdam as relatives and acquaintances are ‘everywhere’ in this city. She, therefore, continuously and consciously tries to visit other cities with her girlfriend to escape her family members and their acquaintances (see also Lewis, 2012 who makes the point that such escapes in which people emancipate themselves through place are rare). This manifests Irina’s desire, willingness and energy to express her love for her girlfriend, hold hands and kiss her girlfriend, but also her understanding that they must travel to other cities, in the Netherlands and abroad, in order to actualize this desire. Finally, her experiences also make clear that although people often do not reveal their sexuality within their families or towards members of the same ethnic group, they do have opportunities to disclose their bisexuality outside their ethnic communities and/or in more private environments with people they trust. Irina, for instance, has the chance to visit a number of queer friends in Rotterdam and express her love for her girlfriend in their homes.

Discussion & conclusion: bisexual spaces?

P: I am not going to Central Station and scream ‘I am bisexual.’ I mean, not everyone needs to know it. (…) You know, it was different when I came out as transgender. I just came out of the closet and told nearly everyone that I am trans, without getting any questions from them. I came out as transgender without a reason, even on my CV and motivation letters. But this gave me a headache. I am just too exhausted to tell everyone. If they have any questions, ask me. That’s the same when it comes to my bisexuality. They can come up with questions and I answer them. I can’t lie. But.. I am not going to say ‘I am this, or I am that.’ (Kelly, Amsterdam)

This paper has shown that people find it difficult to disclose their bisexuality. Participants find it difficult, if not impossible, to create a bisexual display as there is no practical understanding of what bisexual behaviour is and what bisexual doings are; mononormativity, heteronormativity and compulsory monogamy are three general understandings that render bisexuality invisible in Dutch society. These general understandings prevent people from constituting, learning about, understanding and imitating bisexual practices outside the bedroom. Bisexual people only seem to be able to express their bisexuality using verbal clues (sayings) in which they articulate bisexual practices such as desiring people of more-than-one gender or being attracted to people of more-than-one gender. The question is, however, whether people want to disclose their bisexual identity and/or desire.

The excerpt from Kelly, a bi-cultural woman from Amsterdam, provides a good summary of the stances of the participants towards disclosing their bisexuality and the importance of teleoaffectivity in people’s everyday lives. The phrase ‘not everyone needs to know it’
suggests that Kelly does not find it relevant to scream her bisexuality from the rooftops. Kelly has also learned from previous experiences in which she continuously came out and expressed her transgender identity. She ended up being exhausted, but until that point it was relevant for her to do so. Nowadays she does not proactively come out or express her gender identity and social and medical transition but only talks about it when it comes up. Similar, her bisexuality is not relevant in large parts of her everyday life; she does not want to make it a big deal. It only is important for Kelly to disclose her bisexuality when people ask about her sexual attraction and identity. Not because her bisexuality itself is important – it is not an end to disclose her sexual identity or attraction – but because she just does not want to lie to other people. In the end, Kelly’s expressions of bisexuality are a means to reach certain ends; these expressions manifest the need to be honest and the wish to be valued as an honest and authentic person.

Kirsten McLean has suggested that most bisexuals do not actively disclose their bisexuality in everyday activities or spaces, and gay and lesbian communities in order to prevent harm (2007, 2008). Similar, McLean (2003) concludes that many bisexual men consciously manage different identities in different spaces. Harm reduction can play a role in people’s not disclosing their bisexuality, but only provides a partial answer to why people do not disclose their bisexual identity. My research suggests that the vast majority of participants do not actively assume membership of a bisexual community or social group (see Maliepaard, 2017b; also Lingel, 2009); often because they understand that it is not acceptable or appropriate to discuss their sex lives in their daily practices; sexuality is often, for instance in most working practices, confined to the private realms. As the previous sections show, teleoaffec-
tivity (i.e. people’s moods, emotions, stances, wishes, needs) plays a crucial role in the sexual identity negotiations of research participants.

These outcomes have an important impact on the identification of bisexual spaces as the sexual coding of spaces relies on verbal, non-verbal and material clues – or appearances to paraphrase Hubbard (2008) – in which sexuality is expressed. As people rarely disclose their bisexuality and/or desire in everyday practices it is difficult to identify bisexual spaces. In fact, none of the objective spaces that I explored in this research, exist as a permanent or even sustained bisexual space. Even the home/household is not a bisexual space for everyone, or a safe space to explore and express ones bisexuality (see Gorman-Murray, 2008a, 2008b; Valentine et al., 2003 for discussions on home and family as complex spaces that might challenge or empower people’s non-heterosexuality) as Irina’s example reveals. It is therefore no surprise that bisexuality and bisexual people remain invisible in most practices (Maliepaard, 2017b). including in working practices, and, thus, workplaces. Bisexual participants, however, now and then disclose their bisexual identity and/or desire at work, school, or while participating in other everyday practices. These disclosures are seldom long conversations, and often not more than just a casual remark, answering a question, or participating in a short discussion or conversation on sexuality or sexual attraction. It means that bisexual spaces, conceptualized as spaces of bisexual appearances, exist as highly temporal and specific spaces.

In their introduction to their 2007 book Geographies of Sexualities, Brown, Browne, and Lim (2007) conclude that sexuality structures or governs our everyday space. This article takes a slightly different approach by arguing that practices, which constitute spaces (in line with Hubbard, 2008), predominantly govern sexuality in space, including the verbal, non-verbal and material clues that express certain sexual identities, desires, attractions and/or norms.
Such a focus is in line with Schatzki’s theory of practice as it means understanding practices as the primary unit of analysis to understand both the lived experiences of sexual subjects and the sexual coding of space. It also means that the spatiality of sexuality is constantly changing in the interactions between the practices – in particular their practical understanding and teleoaffective structure – and individuals’ agency (their teleaffectivity) while participating in practices. I am convinced that this focus on practices, teleoffectivity and appearances aligns with Browne’s (2006) approach to queer geography, which renders categories of sex, gender, sexualities, and space fluid, and Hubbard’s (2008) focus on how sexual norms are maintained and performed in space through appearances.

Focusing on people’s doings and sayings in everyday practices, as well as on the practical understanding, general understandings, and teleoaffective structures of these practices, and connecting these doings and sayings with the sexual coding of spaces offers a next step to analyzing the production and fluidity of sexual(ized) spaces. It is, as this study shows, not only important to focus on sexual practices or on othering practices, i.e. heterosexualization practices (see Browne, 2007; Hubbard, 2008), but also on the organization of working practices, family practices, nightlife practices, and so on to understand how sexual practices and sexuality are governed by these everyday practices. Analyzing the teleoaffective structures may provide more insights into the norms, values and expectations of everyday practices and what is understood as (un)acceptable, (in)appropriate, and (ir)relevant in particular practices (and, thus, spaces). Inspired by Nicolini, who reminds us that ‘practices constitute the unspoken and scarcely noted background of everyday life [and] always need to be drawn to the fore, made visible and turned into an epistemic object in order to enter discourse’ (2009, p. 1382), I believe that thick descriptions of practices and of people’s doings and sayings are necessary to better grasp how sexuality and sexual norms are maintained and performed in practices and to get a more detailed understanding of the complexities and dynamics in the sexual coding of spaces.

To conclude, spaces only get a bisexual appearance when people agree upon bisexual practices and when people recognize these practices as bisexual practices. As Schatzki contends, a practice only becomes a practice when the participants ‘express an array of understandings, rules, and structure’ (2008, p. 106). Only through language people can articulate bisexual practices and give spaces a bisexual appearance. To conceptualize bisexual spaces as spaces of bisexual appearances stresses the temporality, specificity, and spontaneity of these bisexual spaces. It also implies that bisexual spaces are the result of people’s know-how, embodied experiences, skills, and conscious decision-making in everyday practices. As such, this conceptualization of bisexual spaces aligns with recent geographical work that focuses on the fluidity and complexity of sexual spaces and how spaces become sexualized and are experienced as sexualized. Finally, and related, this research has shown that conceptualizing sexual spaces as based on sexual appearances, expressed in doings, sayings, and actions, may provide a more accurate account of the constant dynamics in the (re)production of sexual(ized) space in everyday practices.

**Note**

1. I did not observe fear of rejection by native Dutch participants, however, one man feared negativity from his father and two women experienced denial by their mothers. Several participants argued that discussing their bisexuality with their parents would feel inappropriate
or uncomfortable because they never discussed sexuality or relationships before or do not have ‘that kind of social relation to discuss their sexuality’.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all 31 research participants for their time and willingness to participate in this study. I am very grateful to the three reviewers for their comments, editor Robert Wilton for his extensive feedback, and Roos Pijpers for critically reading earlier versions of this manuscript.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


