Bisexual Identity Development and Obstacles to Coming Out

Abstract
Though increasing amount of media and political attention is focused on the issues addressing LGB people, a relative paucity of research focusing specifically on bisexuals means that this group may have unidentified and unaddressed needs. Bisexual people are at risk for a multitude of problems, such as mental health issues, suicide, and physical health problems which are exacerbated by an avoidance of health and social services due to a history of oppression within these fields. Coming out represents a key factor in achieving better health and mental health for sexual minorities; however, bisexual people face significant obstacles to claiming a bisexual identity and subsequently disclosing it. Bi-invisibility, homophobia and biphobia all contribute to the negative stereotypes that bisexual people must deal with on a daily basis, including the belief that bisexuality does not exist or that they are really gays and lesbians who are trying to “pass” as heterosexual. Bisexual people may internalize the negative stereotypes and attitudes about them and come to believe them, a process which is known as internalized oppression. Even after identifying as bisexual, many bisexual people continue to question the validity and legitimacy of bisexuality. Of further concern when working with sexual minorities is the disclosure imperative, which posits coming out as “good” and not coming out as “bad,” thus placing undue pressure on bisexual people to come out despite living in a society which often does not acknowledge their existence. Social workers in all fields have the ability and the responsibility to actively work to challenge negative attitudes and the systemic oppression of bisexual people, when working with individuals and at all other levels of social work practice.

KEYWORDS: Bisexuality; Coming-out; Identity; Biphobia; Disclosure

Introduction

Recent events have brought attention to the harmful effects of homophobia in Canada. While much of the research on sexual minorities tends to address sexual minorities as a homogeneous group because of the similar challenges they face, there are many differences between these groups and many identities not represented by these labels. Despite much research on the benefits of coming out, bisexual people still face many obstacles to forming a bisexual identity and coming out. An overview of the issues facing bisexual people, the benefits
of coming out, and the obstacles and barriers which bisexual people face with regards to forming an identity and coming out is followed by a discussion of the implications of the present research on social work practice.

**Literature Review**

**Bisexuality Reality Check**

Although research that focuses specifically on bisexuality is scant (Brotman, Ryan, & Cormier, 2003; Oswalt, 2009; Ryan, 2003), there is general consensus among sexual minority researchers that bisexuality is a real and stable sexual orientation (Barbara, Chaim, & Doctor, 2007; McLean, 2007; Ochs, 1996; Oswalt, 2009; PFlag Canada Inc., 2006; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). Nevertheless, it is common for people to deny its existence (Oswalt, 2009) and question whether bisexual people are confused or lying (McLean, 2007; Ochs, 1996). When it is recognized, its stability is questioned and it is often thought of as a “transition” orientation (Oswalt, 2009). The Kinsey studies introduced the concept of a spectrum of sexual behaviour, ranging from absolute heterosexuality to absolute homosexuality, with a majority or respondents reporting sexual experiences with people of both genders (Bradford, 2004). In fact, a recent review of the literature found that “bisexual people exist in significant numbers” and that they “generally do not correspond with stereotypes” (Bradford, 2004, p. 10).

Having established the existence of bisexuality, the second obstacle to discussing it lays in defining it. The literature suggests that the word bisexuality has a multitude of meanings and there does not appear to be “one ‘universally’ correct or normal way to be bisexual” (Bicurious Husbands Online Discussion Group, 2005; McLean, 2007). In fact a vague definition may be
the most accurate reflection of the experiences of bisexual people, despite the ambiguity it creates. McLean states:

[…] for some people who identify as bisexual, it involves both emotional and sexual attractions to both men and women; for others it may be only emotional or sexual attractions to one gender. Bisexuality may involve only sexual experiences with one gender but emotional and sexual experiences and relationships with the other. (2007, p. 155)

In order to capture the diversity of attractions and experiences that bisexual people have (McLean, 2007), for the purpose of this paper, I define bisexuality broadly as the ability to feel sexual and/or emotional attraction for all genders.

Studies show that bisexual people are a greater risk for anxiety, stress and suicidality than are heterosexual, gay and lesbian people, as well as increased risk taking in regards to sexual health (Chamberland, 2010; Meyer, 2003; Oswalt, 2009). These difficulties are believed to be due to exposure to the multiple social stressors related to having a bisexual identity (Meyer, 2003, p. 690). Despite higher levels of mental health issues for bisexual people, “most bisexual individuals using mental health services do not seek services related to their sexual orientation” (Oswalt, 2009, p. 558).

The Benefits of Coming Out

Coming out, or disclosing one’s sexual orientation, is generally seen as a significant and positive process in the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)1 people (Barbara, et al., 2007; Bradford, 2004; Brotman, Ryan, Jalbert, & Rowe, 2002; Meyer, 2003; Ryan & Chervin, 2000). Indeed, the “mental stress, lowered self-esteem and social isolation which result from hiding one’s sexual orientation often lead to increased mental health problems” (Brotman, et al., 2002).

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1 In order to avoid making generalizations about other sexual minorities, such as transsexual and transgendered people, this paper refers only to people with a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity.
Meyer cautions against pathologizing LGB people by perceiving the issues facing them as issues that are inherent to sexual orientation, and rather, emphasizes the “social stress” of being subjected to prejudice and discrimination leading to mental health issues (2003). Hiding one’s sexual orientation may also lead to physical health issues which are exacerbated by avoidance of the health and social services system which has historically seen same-sex attraction as “disordered” (Brotman, et al., 2002). Ryan and Chervin found that “the coming out process appears to be the principal plane on which lie identity, sexual health, gay health and access to health care problems” (Jalbert, 1999, as cited in Ryan & Chervin, 2000, p. 38). It is important to note that coming out is not a one-time event in the lives of sexual minorities but a process; one can be “out” in certain areas of life while simultaneously being “closeted” in other areas (Barbara, et al., 2007).

While coming out has a multitude of positive effects in the life of an individual, research also shows it has wider consequences for society as a whole. Ryan states that “the most important predictor of attitudinal change among ordinary people is to know that they know someone who is gay, lesbian or bisexual” (2003, p. 68). Therefore, in addition to the personal benefits, coming out has implications for reducing discrimination towards sexual minorities.

**Obstacles to Identity Formation and Coming Out for Bisexual People**

Based on the knowledge that the coming out process is of monumental importance in the lives of sexual minorities, it is important for helping professionals to understand the barriers that may prevent people from coming out. The following section reviews six obstacles to coming out for bisexual people.
Bi-Invisibility

Bi-invisibility, the “lack of acknowledgement of the evidence that bisexuality exists” (Oswalt, 2009, p. 558), plays out in two different ways. First, a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy exists in our society in which heterosexuality is framed as “normal” and homosexuality is framed as “other” (Hartman, 2006; Ochs, 1996; Temple, 2005). This dichotomy leads to assumptions about sexual orientation based on the gender of an individual’s partner, making bisexuality invisible in a society which is only willing to apply the gay and straight labels (Ochs, 1996; PFlag Canada Inc., 2006). For example, a study which asked participants to attribute a sexual orientation to characters in a movie found that the majority of straight, gay and lesbian participants “chose to utilize the binary pairings “gay” and “straight” while generally only the self-identified bisexuals and queers were open to considering other identity alternatives for the characters” (Alexander & Yescavage, 2001, p. 126). Bi-invisibility is “taught” in schools by avoidance of the topic altogether, or by only discussing homosexuality and approaching it from a tolerance perspective in textbooks, reinforcing the “otherness” of homosexuality, the dominance of heterosexist ideologies, and the non-existence of anything else (Temple, 2005). In post-secondary education, while homosexuality used to be pathologized, “that discourse has been replaced by almost total silence” (Ryan, 2003, p. 8).

The second way in which bi-invisibility plays out is when bisexuality is acknowledged, but only as a part of a supposedly homogeneous group which includes all sexual minorities (Brotman, et al., 2003; Chamberland, 2010). This is evident in academia and research, where research which purports to be inclusive of bisexuality is actually focused almost entirely on the experiences of gays and lesbians, “reinforcing the marginalized and invisible status of bisexual […] people” (Brotman, et al., 2003, p. 194; Chamberland, 2010). Furthermore, research which
The invisibility of bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation makes identity formation, a critical step before one can come out, more difficult for bisexual people (Bradford, 2004; Oswalt, 2009). Quite simply, “if a person does not know about the bisexual label, he or she cannot self-label as such” (Brown, 2002, p. 82).

**Homophobia**

It is well documented that bisexuals, gays and lesbians are affected by homophobia, defined as negative attitudes towards *same-sex* attraction and relationships which results in individual prejudice as well as structural oppression (Bradford, 2004; Hartman, 2006; Herek, 1986; Ochs, 1996; Ryan, 2003). Historically, same-sex relations has been criminalized and pathologized in Canada, resulting in the erasure of the histories of sexual minorities, damaging stereotypes of LGB people, discrimination in the areas of employment, health care and social services, higher levels of poverty, violence, as well as inadequate or no training for professionals which leads to the perpetuation of homophobia (Brotman, et al., 2002; Meyer, 2003; Ryan, 2003; Ryan, Brotman, & Malowaniec, 2002). Homophobia has also been seen as the cause of the recent highly publicized suicides of LGB youth. The stigma, shame and genuine safety issues caused by homophobia constitute a significant obstacle to coming out (Saewyc et al., 2007).

**Biphobia**

In addition to being victims of discrimination and oppression because of their *same-sex* attractions, bisexual people also experience discrimination and oppression because of their *dual* attractions; this is known as biphobia (Bradford, 2004; Ochs, 1996; Oswalt, 2009). Thus, bisexual people experience a dual marginalization: from heterosexual communities because of
their same-sex attractions, and from heterosexual and homosexual communities because of their ability to feel attraction to both sexes (Oswalt, 2009). Biphobia is inextricably linked to the binary thinking which leads to bi-invisibility; worse, the existence of biphobia is often denied for the same reasons (Ochs, 1996). People trying to understand bisexuality from within the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy often conceptualize it as a hybrid identity where the person is half heterosexual and half homosexual. The argument that biphobia does not exist goes like this: “biphobia is really homophobia because it is the homosexual part of bisexuals that is targeted for oppression (…) bisexuals are, therefore, not targets of oppression as bisexuals” (Ochs, 1996, p. 7). In effect, biphobia starts with the denial of the existence of bisexual people and of biphobia itself. It manifests through a broad range of stereotypes and is apparent in different forms from heterosexual, gay and lesbian communities.

Stereotypes and myths about bisexuality. Stereotypes about bisexuality abound and are generally linked to a lack of understanding of what bisexuality is and the belief that it does not exist. For example, the most common stereotypes are that people who claim a bisexual identity are confused, undecided, in denial or transitioning into a gay or lesbian identity (Bicurious Husbands Online Discussion Group, 2005; McLean, 2007; Oswalt, 2009; PFlag Canada Inc., 2006; Ryan, 2003). All of these stereotypes are imbued with the assumption that bisexual people are really homosexual or heterosexual and either do not know it or will not admit it. Another common set of stereotypes is that bisexual people are promiscuous and that they spread diseases (McLean, 2007; Ochs, 1996; Oswalt, 2009; PFlag Canada Inc., 2006). Bisexual people are often assumed to be unable to be monogamous (Ochs, 1996; Oswalt, 2009), and many people believe bisexual people must engage with both genders at once to be satisfied (Oswalt, 2009). The
Biphobia from heterosexual communities. Heterosexual privilege relies heavily on the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy which places heterosexuals in a position of superiority over homosexuals (Ochs, 1996). If one understands bisexuality as a hybrid identity, as discussed above, it would follow that by virtues of being “half heterosexual”, bisexuals would be less oppressed than homosexuals. However, this is not the case. In one study, “heterosexuals rated bisexual individuals less favorably [sic] than all other groups assessed (a variety of religious, racial, ethnic, and political groups) except injecting drug users” (Oswalt, 2009, p. 558). Biphobia emanating from heterosexual communities may be understood as a reaction to the challenge that bisexuality presents, by its very existence, to the binary which enable heterosexual privilege (Ochs, 1996). Moreover, by affirming that attraction to both sexes is possible, bisexuality may create anxiety for heterosexuals who have experienced same-sex attractions (Ochs, 1996).

Biphobia in lesbian and gay communities. While it seems counter-intuitive for gays and lesbians who have fought so hard for their rights to reject bisexuals for claiming the very same rights, biphobia also exists among gays and lesbians (Alexander & Yescavage, 2001; Brown, 2002; Hartman, 2006; McLean, 2007; Ochs, 1996; Oswalt, 2009; Ryan, 2003). The reasons for biphobia are different for gay men than they are for lesbian women and are rooted in these communities own experiences of oppression (Ochs, 1996). However, both groups accuse bisexuals of trying to cling to heterosexual privilege, or trying to “pass” as heterosexual (McLean, 2007; Miller, 2006); this will be addressed further down.
Studies have shown that biphobia is more prominent among lesbians than among gay men and straight men and women (Hartman, 2006; Oswalt, 2009). In a survey of lesbians and bisexual women, it was found that 74 percent of lesbians would avoid dating a bisexual woman, and 96 percent would prefer to date a lesbian than a bisexual woman (Hartman, 2006). These statistics alone provide a good explanation for why bisexual women who want to date women might hide their bisexual identity and pass as lesbians. The higher degree of biphobia in lesbian communities may also be tied to lesbian-feminist ideology and the belief that “lesbianism was a superior manifestation of feminist politics” (Ochs, 1996, p. 18). Thus a bisexual woman who dates a man may be perceived by lesbian feminists as (and may feel like) a political sell-out (Brown, 2002), or as though she is “sleeping with the enemy” (Ochs, 1996, p. 19). In addition, a bisexual woman who dates a man may also be perceived by lesbians as having “reverted back to heterosexuality,” an example of bisexuality denial (Hartman, 2006).

Biphobia is less prominent in gay communities than among lesbians; however, there is still a strong belief that bisexual men are truly gay but afraid to come out (Ochs, 1996). Moreover, bisexuality may be perceived as a threat to gay men who feel some attraction towards women but who have already gone through the difficult and painful process of coming out as gay, and who are not willing to go through it again (Ochs, 1996).

“Passing”

Bisexual people are often accused of concealing their bisexuality and same-sex attraction in order to “pass” as heterosexual and gain privilege; on the other hand, bisexuals who pass as homosexuals in gay and lesbian communities are accused of dishonesty (McLean, 2007; Miller, 2006; Ochs, 1996). Research on passing confirms that “very few [bisexuals challenge] assumptions about heterosexuality or homosexuality in these situations” (McLean, 2007, p. 163).
However, this is not done in order to gain heterosexual privilege, but to avoid the risk of having their identity misunderstood or denied. Moreover, rather than actively trying to pass as heterosexual, bisexual people are attributed a sexual orientation (gay or straight) by others because their actual sexual orientation is “not socially recognized.” The heterosexual privilege they are accused of taking when they are perceived as straight is not “taken”, but conferred upon them (Miller, 2006). Therefore, the accusation of passing is yet another manifestation of biphobia and bi-invisibility. It also undermines bisexuals’ true identity and either forces them to disclose their bisexuality whether or not it is safe for them to do so (Miller, 2006), or maintain a fragmented self with “up to three distinct ‘personas’ depending on the context: a heterosexual one, a bisexual one (…) and, sometimes, a gay or lesbian one” (McLean, 2007, p. 163).

Research also shows that bisexual people do not tend to consider passing as straight to be a privileged position because of the psychological and emotional costs of having their true identity consistently ignored and denied (Miller, 2006). Even when no one was able to accuse them of passing (because their bisexual identity was unknown), Miller’s bisexual research participants reported feeling like impostors when their identity was mistaken by others. Thus, “the notion of passing has connotations […] that hardly suggest liberation.

Contrary to popular belief, rather than denying their same-sex attractions, many of Miller’s informants preferred passing as “anything but straight”, because passing as heterosexual stripped away their queer (non-heterosexual) identity altogether (Miller, 2006). Moreover, the notion of passing minimizes bisexual people’s “success at achieving a distinct, viable bisexual identity” (Miller, 2006, pp. 18-19).
Internalized Oppression

Research on oppression shows that oppression does not only function as an external force but that the dominant ideology and values are absorbed by oppressed people and come to be seen as true (Mullaly, 2010a). Therefore, negative stereotypes are internalized by oppressed people which results in shame, self-hatred, inferiority, “mutual distrust and hostility,” and behaviors “that are self-harming and contribute to one’s own oppression” (Mullaly, 2010a, pp. 161, 162). Bisexuals are particularly vulnerable to internalizing both homophobic and biphobic attitudes (Meyer, 2003; Ochs, 1996; Ryan, 2003).

The shame and uncertainty that are associated with internalized biphobia may result in pressure, internal and external, to choose between a gay or straight identity (Ochs, 1996). Moreover, for those involved in gay, lesbian or heterosexual communities, “feelings of guilt or shame at having ‘betrayed’ [their] friends and community” may arise if their “partner is not of the ‘correct’ sex” (Ochs, 1996, p. 21). Identifying as bisexual while in a monogamous relationship with either sex may lead to a feeling of betrayal or lack of commitment for both partners (Ochs, 1996). The powerful feelings of shame and guilt that come from internalized oppression represent a major obstacle to claiming and disclosing a bisexual identity.

Continued Uncertainty

The last stage of many bisexuality identity formation theories, called continued uncertainty or identity maintenance, explains the periodic (or continual) uncertainty that bisexual people feel in regards to their identity after having found and applied the bisexual label (Bradford, 2004; Brown, 2002; McLean, 2007).

This stage is closely intertwined with biphobia and internalized biphobia and the idea that bisexuality is not a “real” sexual orientation. Faced with external and internal attitudes which
put the validity of bisexuality into doubt, many bisexual people put off coming out until they are “sure” of their bisexuality (Ochs, 1996), a state which may not be reached by many people who privately identify as bisexual (Brown, 2002). However, Bradford found that bisexual research participants who took social action and leadership roles in the bisexual community did achieve certainty despite “ongoing struggles with cultural prejudice” (2004, p. 21).

**The Disclosure Imperative**

Coming out has many benefits for LGB people. However, there are also some significant risks associated with coming out, such as making oneself vulnerable to “social rejection, criticism, violence, disapproval, shock and the threat of non-confidentiality” (Barbara, et al., 2007, p. 21). A group of researchers have criticized what is referred to as the “disclosure imperative” (McLean, 2007; Rasmussen, 2004; Snider, 1996). McLean criticized traditional sexual identity development models which posit coming out as the final stage “before one settles, happily, on a homosexual or bisexual identity” (2007, p. 151). The “problem” lays not in coming out itself, but in the discourse that surrounds coming out and offers “no moral alternative BUT to come out” (Rasmussen, 2004). While empowering those who do come out, this discourse leaves LGB people who do not disclose their sexual orientation feeling “dishonest” or “lacking” (McLean, 2007; Rasmussen, 2004). The coming out imperative ignores that powerful forces other than homophobia “[affect] the manner in which one’s coming out is imparted and received, [thus] the pressure to speak out that currently prevails risks becoming and oppressive force” (Snider, 1996, p. 297). Instead of necessarily being internalized oppression (Snider, 1996), not disclosing a bisexual identity is also a reflection of how misunderstood bisexuality is in our society, and constitutes a form of self-protection against stigma (McLean, 2007).
The discourse that surrounds coming out also inadvertently shifts “the weight of responsibility for social oppression […] from society to the individual” (Meyer, 2003, p. 691). The emphasis on self-determination and empowerment that is ubiquitous in the coming out discourse turns the “failure” to come out into a personal rather than a societal failure.

While the benefits of coming out are unmistakably positive, the discourse which surrounds the coming out process is problematic because it creates a dichotomy where coming out is “good” and not coming out is “bad.” The dichotomy gives “closeted” individuals an additional layer of shame and anxiety and ignores the complexities involved in making a decision to come out (Meyer, 2003; Rasmussen, 2004; Snider, 1996). For bisexual people, selective disclosure may be a more realistic choice because of the social climate which “leaves little room for the articulation of a bisexual identity” (McLean, 2007, p. 160). While not ideal, the choice to come out selectively must be understood as a reflection of society’s unwillingness to accept bisexuality rather than as a personal failure.

Implications for Social Work Practice

The overview of the literature on obstacles to identity formation and coming out for bisexual people shows that much work still needs to be done to enable bisexual people’s ability to claim, disclose and be comfortable and confident with their sexual orientation. Social workers have the ability and the responsibility to affect changes at all levels of practice, from policy, research and education, to direct clinical work with individuals.

Macro-Level Implications

First and foremost, social worker in all fields of practice must work to increase the visibility of bisexual people and actively oppose biphobia. The Canadian Association of Social
Workers’ Code of Ethics places the pursuit of social justice at the core of social work practice (2005). From an anti-oppressive perspective, systemic change is necessary and it is important to avoid building hierarchies of oppression and work towards eliminating all forms of oppression (Mullaly, 2010b). Ignoring these principles may lead to fights between oppressed groups and divert energy away from fighting structural oppression.

**LGBT Organizations**

Social workers can work within lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) organizations to ensure they are truly inclusive of bisexuals and other queer people. Many bisexual people feel that even though there is biphobia in gay and lesbian communities, this is primarily due to a lack of information and education about bisexuality (Hartman, 2006). Therefore, popular education workshops and information sessions within these organizations may be helpful, as well as displaying pamphlets and other information mediums in public spaces. Social workers and other staff, volunteers and members of these organizations must be properly informed about bisexuality and actively oppose biphobia within these settings. Discussion on safe spaces and anti-oppression should be incorporated into the everyday activities inside LGBT organizations. Biphobic comments and behaviours can be seen as intervention opportunities and should not be left unaddressed.

**Research**

There is a paucity of research that focuses specifically on bisexuality. More research on the specific needs of bisexual people must be done independently from research on gays and lesbians in order to identify any unmet needs bisexual people have, especially in health and social services. Moreover, more research on bisexual people who have been able to claim, disclose and feel certain of their bisexual identity may go a long way to helping other bisexual
people achieve self-acceptance. While today’s bisexual identity formation theories reflect the current realities of bisexual people, these theories must be flexible and must change as the realities for bisexual people change. Given the role of activism in achieving certainty, participatory-action research is particularly relevant in this case.

**Education**

Bi-invisibility (and the invisibility of sexual minorities in general) is a problem at all levels of education. In post-secondary education, especially for the helping professions, information about all sexual minorities must be fully incorporated into curricula. While courses that focus specifically on LGB people are an excellent start, ideally these courses should not be the only spaces where sexual minorities are discussed. In social work, family intervention theories and texts still rely heavily on the heterosexual-married model of family, despite evidence that these families are a minority in North America (eg. Nichol, 2008). Integration of LGB material in all courses is necessary to deconstruct the binary thinking which confers heterosexual privilege and “others” homosexuality, while rendering all other sexual orientations invisible.

Age-appropriate discussions and exposure to sexual minorities, including bisexuality, should also be incorporated into school curricula from a young age. Arguments that children should not learn about sexual minorities before a given age only reinforce heterosexual privilege and contribute to “other-ing” of sexual minorities. If it is acceptable to discuss heterosexual relationships from a young age then it should also be acceptable to discuss non hetero-normative relationships. As in LGBT organizations, negative comments or behaviours towards bisexuality can be seen as educational opportunities and should always be addressed, as should be assumptions about relationships, gender and sexuality.
Micro-Level Implications

The present research on obstacles to identity formation and coming out for bisexual people also has implications for clinical social workers who work in therapy and counselling. This is true for social workers in all settings, especially because the obstacles to coming out may mean we work with clients who identify as bisexual but have not disclosed this. Social workers should clearly understand biphobia and bi-invisibility. Regardless of personal values and beliefs, social workers must ensure they create safe, non-judgmental spaces for their clients. In order to avoid assumptions and convey acceptance, questions about sexual orientation and gender identity should be made part of all initial intake interviews (Barbara, et al., 2007).

Working with Bisexual Clients

The literature clearly indicates that “one of the most important treatment/counselling issues [...] is to resolve internalized oppression and shame related to sexual orientation or gender identity” (Barbara, et al., 2007, p. 24). Social workers whose clients are facing issues pertaining to identity formation or coming out should be supportive and validating, and must be aware that psycho-education about bisexuality, biphobia, homophobia and bi-invisibility may be necessary. Connecting with other bisexual people can help alleviate isolation (Ochs, 1996). Clinical social workers should know about community resources for bisexual people and ensure that the resources they give are, in fact, inclusive of bisexuality (Oswalt, 2009).

As mentioned in the section on macro-level implications, it is also important to be aware of the disclosure imperative when working directly with bisexual clients. Feelings of guilt and shame about not coming out should be addressed and the complexities involved in coming out must be acknowledged. Social workers must be sure not to put pressure on clients who identify as bisexual to come out, but let them decide if it is safe for them to do so.
Finally, social workers who are working with bisexual clients must be aware that their sexual orientation may not be the reason they are seeking treatment (Oswalt, 2009). Therefore, while a client’s sexual orientation is relevant information, it must not overshadow the client’s presenting problem or the client’s goals in counselling.

**Conclusion**

Bisexuality is still very much a misunderstood and stigmatized identity in this society. Bisexual people are at risk for a multitude of problems, such as mental health issues, suicide, and physical health problems which are exacerbated by an avoidance of health and social services due to a history of oppression within these fields. Although coming out represents a key factor in achieving a better quality of life for LGB people; bisexual people face several obstacles to finding and applying a bisexual label, feeling confident and comfortable with their identity, and coming out. Furthermore, because of the current social climate, coming out may not be desirable or safe for many bisexual people. Social workers in all fields have the ability and the responsibility to actively challenge negative attitudes and the systemic oppression of bisexual people at all levels of social work practice.
References


Coming Out Bisexual


