

Summary and conclusion of the study

Not in one box: Experiences and well-being of bi+ persons in the Netherlands

Bi+ Netherlands commissioned the Bi+ Research Consortium to conduct a nationwide survey and qualitative research among people with bi+ feelings and experiences. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has made this research financially possible.

This document is an English translation of the final chapter Summary and Conclusion of the survey research report. The report on the qualitative research section will be published in the autumn of 2021.

Research design

An online survey was conducted among a group of approximately 3,000 bi+ persons aged 16-55 at the end of 2020. Bi+ persons have relationships with persons of varying genders, are attracted to persons of multiple genders, or label themselves bisexual, pansexual, heteroflex, bi+ or queer. The survey asked about sexual attraction, identity, experiences, gender, the bi+ and LGBTQ communities, perceived social support, and experiences with the monosexual norm, mental health, and substance use. The survey was intended to shed a new light on the experiences of bi+ persons in the Netherlands, identify group differences, and examine relevant associations between experiences with the monosexual norm, mental health and substance use. The sample consisted largely of women (60.0%), and despite attempts to include older bi+ persons, the majority of the sample (65.8%) was between the ages of 16 and 25. The majority of the sample had a secondary (vocational) education or a low level of education. This, in conjunction with the relatively young sample, suggests that a significant portion of the sample is still completing an education.

Diversity

The findings reveal an enormous diversity of experiences and identities among bi+ individuals. Both in terms of their own experience of sexuality, as well as their interpretation of (sexual) relationships and experiences with the monosexual norm. Bi+ persons differ from each other when it comes to the labels they do or do not use to describe both their sexuality and the labels they do or do not describe their gender identity. In addition, there was considerable variation among the bi+ respondents in regard to sexual and romantic attraction. These findings suggest that the use of labels and "boxes" can feel limiting for many bi+ individuals.

Relationship experiences

The diversity in relationship orientations make it complicated to compare different relationship orientation groups. For example, in this study about half of the bi+ persons have one (47.4%) or several (4.2%) steady partners. They have made agreements in different ways about the openness of the relationship: the majority indicates being in a monogamous relationship (64.8%), but polyamorous (6.4%) and open relationships (9.5%) are also reported. Most often the partner is supportive of the sexual orientation and bi+ persons are given the space to express it. However, a significant proportion of bi+ persons report that they would like to express their sexual orientation more (32.2%). Bi+ women most often report being in a monogamous relationship (70.9%), men most often report being in an open relationship (15.0%), and non-binary/genderfluid individuals most often report a being in polyamorous relationships (14.1%). Shorter relationships of less than one year are reported most often by women (32.9%) and non-binary/genderfluid individuals (32.6%), which may be explained by the relatively young age of these two groups. In general, the partners of men seem to be somewhat less likely to know about their sexual orientation and bi+ men also receive less understanding and support, and less space to express their sexual orientation. In this study,

expressing one's sexual orientation was not specifically outlined or defined. Though this might involve participating in the bi+ community or talking openly about a sexual orientation, or about the need for sexual contact outside of the relationship.

Additionally, bi+ persons demonstrate having sexual experiences outside of the relationship with their regular partner(s), such as dating or sex, and about one in five bi+ persons occasionally invite an additional sex partner into their relationship. About half of bi+ persons who have never invited an additional sex partner report wanting to do so at some point. When it comes to experiences outside of the relationship, men primarily seek out other men, while women are open to men, women, and to a lesser extent non-binary/genderfluid individuals. Non-binary/genderfluid persons show great diversity in the persons with whom they have experiences inside and outside the relationship. The latter group especially feels the need to have experiences with women and other non-binary/genderfluid persons.

Openness about sexual orientation

The bi+ individuals in this study were relatively open about their sexual orientation, but 4% of participants have not been open about their sexual orientation with anyone. Sexual orientation was particularly disclosed to friends, while sexual orientation was disclosed much less with family, neighbors, and at work. Noteworthy is the relative concealment of sexual orientation among the bi+ individuals who report (mainly) heterosexual attraction. Findings show they are on average less likely to disclose their sexual orientation with others. Men also report being less open about their sexual orientation as compared to women and non-binary/genderfluid persons. Especially among family members (44.4%), siblings (39.6%), colleagues (42.1%) and in sports clubs (49.0%) they have often not yet disclosed their sexual orientation with anyone. This might be explained by the stricter norms for bi+ men than for bi+ women. Considering that concealment of sexual orientation is seen as an important minority stressor and is associated with decreased well-being; these findings suggest that bi+ men and bi+ persons with (predominantly) heterosexual attraction are an at-risk group.

The bi+ and LGBTQ communities

Bi+ persons indicate feeling reasonably at home in bi+ and LGBTQ communities. Many bi+ persons have friends and acquaintances within the communities and feel a connection to the communities. Results also showed that it was easier for bi+ persons to find a connection with the LGBTQ community than the bi+ community. This is perhaps because the bi+ community is not yet known or accessible to everyone and because there are more LGBTQ venues such as pubs and clubs. There were clear differences between genders. Women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals, on average, have a better connection with both the bi+ and the LGBTQ community. For example, of bi+ men, 31.6% report feeling a part of the bi+ community, compared to 50.0% of women and 55.5% of non-binary/genderfluid individuals. Men also have fewer LGBTQ friends and acquaintances than women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals. When it comes to sexual attraction, people with (primarily) heterosexual attractions, like bi+ men, feel less at home in these communities.

Experiences with the monosexual norm

Bi+ persons were asked about their experiences with the monosexual norm: the idea that sexual orientation should be directed towards men or women exclusively and that other orientations are of less value. This study reveals that bi+ persons are subjected to a variety of negative reactions related to their sexual orientation, that there is still a lot of prejudice about bi+ orientations, and that a bi+ orientations often remain invisible or are rendered invisible. For example, almost one in ten bi+ persons report that they would rather have a different sexual orientation, and four in ten of the bi+ persons in this study experience others perception of their sexual orientation as temporary. In addition, 82.9% of the bi+ persons indicated that they would like their sexual orientation to be taken more seriously, almost half of them experienced harmful jokes about their sexual orientation, and 17.2% were verbally harassed (i.e. name calling) due to their sexual orientation. In particular, the younger bi+ groups (16-33 years) report experiences with external stigma and higher levels of invisibility. The current study highlights the importance of investigating the specific experiences of bi+ persons and the monosexual norm in research.

Certain groups of bi+ persons who are more likely to face the challenges of non-conformity to the monosexual norm can also be identified. For example, bi+ persons with (primarily) heterosexual attraction suffered less from binegativity, invisibility, and external stigma, but instead suffered more from internalized stigma. Bi+ individuals with a partner of the same gender suffered more from external stigma compared to individuals with a partner of a different gender. This may have to do with greater visibility in society. Concerning gender, there are also some relevant differences: bi+ men seem to suffer more from internalized stigma than women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals. In contrast, women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals report being more affected by binegativity. People have a common misconception that women (47.4%) and non-binary/genderfluid individuals (51.2%) are confused about their sexual orientation. Nearly half of women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals experience that their sexual orientation is perceived as temporary. When it comes to invisibility, women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals also seem to be a high-risk group. Among women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals, over 70% would like their sexual orientation to be more visible and over 80% would like their sexual orientation to be taken more seriously. Non-binary/genderfluid persons and bi+ women are also significantly more likely to experience stigma, such as being verbally harassed or called names. Over 30% of non-binary/genderfluid individuals experience this regularly. In addition, over 50% of bi+ women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals regularly face inappropriate questions about their sexual orientation.

Coping with discrimination and stigma

Bi+ individuals were also asked how they react to and navigate unpleasant events related to their sexual orientation. On average, bi+ persons seem very able to seek help (40.6%) and share their concerns with someone (66.7%). They also report seeking distraction (61.4%) or thinking about other things (73.4%). Women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals are more likely to use the coping strategy of seeking support. It is discussed later in this summary that this is an effective strategy associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety symptoms and a lower risk of heavy drinking. About three out of ten bi+ participants do not require much time to recover after experiencing discrimination or stigma. On average, bi+ men seem better able to respond resiliently to these unpleasant events.

Mental health and substance use

Many bi+ individuals regularly experience symptoms of depression and anxiety. For example, over 40% report regularly feeling gloomy and dejected. In addition, bi+ persons display relatively high levels of alcohol and drug use. About one in five bi+ persons meet the criteria for a "heavy drinker." It is possible that bi+ persons have begun to feel more depressed due to the corona crisis and therefore use more substances. Of those with these feelings, 70.2% indicated that these feelings were occasionally, often, or very often related to the current corona crisis. Almost one in four bi+ individuals reported that they had started using more alcohol (23.8%) and drugs (24.9%) during the corona crisis than before. It is important to reiterate with these general findings that young bi+ individuals were overrepresented in this study. The findings show that young bi+ individuals in particular have high levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, and are also more likely to report substance use.

There were significant gender differences for mental health and substance use. In line with previous research among the general population (Boyd et al., 2015), women and non-binary/genderfluid individuals report more depressive and anxiety symptoms on average. When it comes to general substance use, there were no clear-cut differences, but for specific drugs patterns emerged. Men use weed or hash less often (54.5%) than women (70.5%), while they use XTC (31%), GHB (29.5%) and cocaine (18.2%) more often in the past year. This is a strikingly different finding compared to the national population, where men are actually more likely than women to report the use of soft drugs (and other drugs) (Trimbos Institute, 2020).

Experiences with the monosexual norm and mental health and substance use

Finally, it was examined whether experiences with the monosexual norm were also associated with well-being outcomes, and possible protective factors. Every aspect of the monosexual norm was

associated with greater levels of depression and anxiety symptoms, and external stigma increased the likelihood that someone was a heavy drinker or used drugs, in the past year. Interestingly, bi+ individuals with greater levels of internalized stigma were less likely to use drugs. The protective factors explored were social support, resilience, and coping with discrimination. Each of these three factors was associated with fewer depressive and anxiety symptoms, and thus appear to be positive buffers for the mental health of bi+ individuals. Seeking distraction did not appear to be an effective strategy for bi+ individuals. These factors have a less significant protective effect for substance use. In fact, bi+ individuals who experience *more* social support are more likely to drink heavily or use drugs, possibly because they do so precisely in social situations. Both involvement in the bi+ and LGBTQ communities and some aspects of stable relationships, were not related to the mental health of bi+ persons. It is important to mention here that because of the corona crisis, bi+ persons may have been less able to find support in these communities because restaurants, bars, clubs and other LGBTQ venues were closed or LGBTQ events cancelled.

Limitations of this study

It is important to consider that in this study a comparison with monosexual persons could not be made. Thus, it remains unknown if the experiences of bi+ individuals in this sample differ from those with monosexual orientations. Within this study there is a lack of information regarding partners' preferences, or agreements made with partners about dating outside the relationship or inviting additional partners into the relationship, and whether this is related to the gender of the bi+ person or their partner. This topic receives more attention in the qualitative follow-up research. In addition, it is important to mention that this study has a cross-sectional design. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn about the direction of the associations found. It is also important to consider that the sample was selective, comprising of relatively young people and relatively many women. Therefore, generalizations of the findings to the bi+ population are impossible.

Conclusion

This study was intended to form an overview of experiences with the monosexual norm among bi+ persons, to what extent they experience support within communities and relationships, and to what extent their mental health and substance use is impacted. In addition, it was examined to which extent experiences with the monosexual norm are related to mental health and substance use among bi+ persons. The current research shows that bi+ individuals are regularly confronted with prejudice about their sexual orientation and the interpretation of their relationships, and they are often assumed to be heterosexual, gay, or lesbian. The invisibility, prejudice, and stigma experienced by bi+ individuals are significantly predictive of their well-being, and thus deserves more attention. In line with previous national and international research, these findings show that bi+ persons suffer from anxiety and depression feelings to a significant degree, and many bi+ persons report regular use of alcohol and drugs. Despite the fact that the current study does not compare to monosexual persons, the findings do show important areas of vulnerability. A positive finding of the current study shows that bi+ persons find support and feel at home in the bi+ and broader LGBTQ communities.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for policy, legislation and further research on the experiences and well-being of bi+ persons in the Netherlands. Despite the growing attention for the position of LGBTQI persons in the Netherlands, the bi+ group remains understudied. Rarely looked at are the unique experiences of bi+ persons, what they need, and what experiences with discrimination they have in society. Since many bi+ persons are invisible, it is extra difficult to accurately represent this group and to investigate how policy and legislation can protect them. For example, current research shows that many bi+ persons are not open about their sexual orientation with neighbors and colleagues, possibly because they are, or feel, socially unsafe in these contexts. This research also shows that there is great diversity in the relationship structures that bi+ persons have. Considering that monogamy is the norm, there is no focus on relationship diversity in Dutch policy, and it is currently difficult to make other relationship or family structures official before the law, therefore these relationships remain mostly invisible.

Finally, the lives of bi+ persons in the Netherlands appear to be diverse: the current research underscores why it is precisely so important to do justice to that diversity and to describe the unique experiences of bi+ persons.

Colophon

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