

Making Bisexual+ Histories Visible:

A guide to inclusive cataloguing and archival description

BI HISTORY PROJECT

1. Introduction: Why bisexual+ inclusive cataloguing matters

Bisexual+ people have always been part of history, yet bisexual+ histories remain significantly underrepresented, difficult to discover and frequently misrepresented within archival collections and cultural heritage institutions. This absence is not necessarily a reflection of an absence of historical lives, relationships, communities or activism. It is often the result of how historical records have been created, collected, described and interpreted.

Bisexual+ people have experienced erasure within both mainstream historical narratives and LGBTQ+ histories. Records of our histories have frequently been overlooked because records do not use the terminology that contemporary researchers might expect. There are particular challenges involved in researching and documenting queer history in general. The language people use to understand and describe their identities changes over time, and contemporary concepts of sexuality and gender cannot be neatly applied to historical experiences. Many of the identity labels used today did not exist, or were not widely understood or accessible to people in the past. Others have been reclaimed, redefined or developed through changing social and political movements. Historical individuals may have understood themselves in ways that are difficult to translate into contemporary terminology, or may never have had the opportunity to articulate their identities in the language we recognise today.

This presents a particular challenge for archivists and cataloguers. If we rely exclusively on the explicit use of contemporary identity terminology, we risk reproducing the very erasure that an inclusive approach to cataloguing seeks to address.

Bisexual+ inclusive cataloguing therefore requires a thoughtful approach to historical language, identity, relationships, community and representation. It involves recognising bisexual+ histories where they are explicitly documented, while also understanding how experiences of attraction, relationships, activism and community participation may form part of bisexual+ history without individuals having identified themselves using that terminology.

The objective is not to retrospectively assign identities to historical people, it is to make bisexual+ histories more visible, discoverable and accessible while respecting the complexity of the historical record and the identities of the people represented.

Seeing evidence of our community's past can help people understand their identities, find connections with previous generations and recognise that bisexual+ people have long contributed to political movements.

When bisexual+ people cannot find themselves within historical narratives, this absence can reinforce feelings of isolation and exclusion. It can also perpetuate misconceptions that bisexuality is a modern identity, that bisexual+ people have not contributed significantly to LGBTQ+ activism, or that bisexual+ identities are less valid than other sexual identities. Inclusive cataloguing is therefore an important part of ensuring that bisexual+ histories are recognised as an integral part of our shared cultural heritage.

2. Understanding bisexual+ history

What do we mean by bisexual+?

The term bisexual+ is used here as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing bisexuality and other identities associated with attraction to more than one gender, including pansexual, omnisexual, polysexual and other multi-gender-attraction identities.

The plus sign recognises the diversity of language and experiences within these communities. It should not be understood as suggesting that all identities are interchangeable or that bisexual people necessarily share the same experiences.

Bisexual+ histories are not always explicitly labelled

One of the most significant challenges in identifying bisexual+ history is that historical people did not necessarily have access to, or identify with, the terminology used today.

Some records explicitly document bisexual identities, organisations, activism and community-building. Others describe relationships, experiences, networks and social participation that may be relevant to understanding bisexual+ history without using the word bisexual.

For example, a historical publication might document a woman who describes relationships with both men and women but does not identify herself as bisexual. A community magazine might discuss sexual fluidity without using contemporary identity language. An activist might have participated in bisexual organising while being described in institutional records primarily through another aspect of their identity.

These records can be important sources for bisexual+ history without requiring archivists to assign identities to the individuals involved.

Bisexual+ history is interconnected

Bisexual+ history cannot be separated neatly from lesbian, gay, transgender and queer histories.

People have lived, loved, organised and campaigned together, often using different language to describe their experiences. Historical identities and community affiliations may have been shaped by social expectations, political movements, available terminology and personal circumstances.

Recognising bisexual+ history should therefore be about expanding our understanding of LGBTQ+ history rather than seen as creating any kind of division between communities.

3. Core principles for inclusive bisexual+ description

1. Respect self-identification

Where individuals have explicitly identified themselves using particular terminology, preserve and respect their chosen language. Do not assume that a person's relationships, appearance, political affiliations or personal history establish their sexual identity. Do not describe historical individuals as being an identity unless there is sufficient evidence that they used or accepted that identification. Instead, describe the evidence available in the records, using appropriate historical context and careful language.

2. Recognise bisexual+ histories beyond the word 'bisexual'

Do not rely exclusively on keyword searches for bisexuality when identifying relevant material. Consider relationships, activism, publications, social networks, community participation and discussions of sexuality that may be relevant to bisexual+ history.

3. Challenge bisexual erasure

Be alert to descriptions that present individuals or communities exclusively through heterosexual, lesbian or gay frameworks when the records demonstrate more complex experiences. Consider whether bisexual+ perspectives have been omitted, obscured or inadequately contextualised.

4. Preserve historical context

Historical terminology may be unfamiliar, offensive or inappropriate today. However, it can be important evidence of the attitudes, experiences and language of the period. Where terminology is retained, provide sufficient context to explain its historical significance and distinguish historical language from contemporary descriptive practice.

5. Recognise community expertise

Bisexual+ people and community organisations hold important knowledge about the interpretation and significance of historical material. Where appropriate, involve community members and specialist organisations in reviewing descriptions, identifying relevant material and developing inclusive terminology.

6. Make descriptions discoverable

Consider the terminology that contemporary researchers and community members may use when searching for bisexual+ history. Where appropriate, incorporate relevant contemporary access terms and subject headings without misrepresenting historical identities.

7. Treat inclusive cataloguing as ongoing work

Descriptions should be open to review as language and community understanding evolve. Inclusive cataloguing is not a one-off correction exercise but an ongoing process of reflection, consultation and improvement.

4. Identifying bisexual+ histories in archival collections

Potential records may include:

- Personal papers, correspondence and diaries.
- Oral history recordings and interviews.
- LGBTQ+ magazines, newsletters and publications.
- Activist organisations and campaigning records.
- Community group records and event documentation.
- Photographs, audiovisual material and ephemera.
- Records documenting relationships, social networks and community participation.
- Publications and discussions about bisexuality, sexual fluidity and multi-gender attraction.
- Records documenting exclusion, discrimination and debates about bisexual+ identities.

Importantly, material does not need to have been created by someone who explicitly identified as bisexual to be relevant to bisexual+ history. However, relevance should be established through the content, context and significance of the material rather than assumptions about the identities of the people represented.

Case study: Jeremy magazine and the complexity of historical identity

An example of the challenges involved in identifying bisexual+ history can be found in Jeremy, a British gay lifestyle magazine first published in 1969.

An article in issue seven, published in 1970, titled 'Girls on the Gay Scene', includes interviews with two young women discussing their experiences within London's gay social scene.One interviewee, Iris, describes relationships with both men and women. However, she expresses uncertainty about how to understand and describe her sexuality, explaining that she sometimes thinks she is queer and sometimes does not.

The second interviewee, Pam, discusses her experiences within the predominantly gay male social environment and describes assumptions made about her relationships and sexuality. Neither woman explicitly identifies as bisexual in the interview.

Nevertheless, the material offers valuable insight into experiences of attraction to more than one gender, sexual fluidity and participation in queer communities. These experiences are relevant to bisexual+ history and demonstrate the importance of looking beyond explicit identity terminology when researching historical collections.

An inclusive catalogue description should not retrospectively label either woman as bisexual. Instead, it should accurately describe what the article documents, preserve their own language and provide appropriate contextual information that allows researchers to recognise its significance to bisexual+ history.

This distinction is fundamental: we can recognise bisexual+ histories without claiming identities for people who did not use them.

5. Writing inclusive catalogue descriptions

Use language that is accurate, respectful and evidence-based

Avoid assumptions about sexual identity based on relationships, appearance, marital status or social affiliations. For example:

Avoid	Consider instead
A woman who experimented with lesbian relationships	A woman who describes relationships with women and men
A bisexual lifestyle	Relationships and experiences involving people of more than one gender
A lesbian who later became heterosexual	An individual whose documented relationships changed over time
A heterosexual couple, where identities are not established	A couple, unless the records establish how they identified
A gay publication featuring heterosexual women	An LGBTQ+ publication featuring interviews with women involved in the gay social scene

These alternatives are not universal replacements. The most appropriate description will depend on the evidence and context of the material.

Do not assume relationship = identity

A person's relationships do not necessarily establish their sexual identity. A woman who married a man may have identified as bisexual, lesbian, heterosexual, queer or something else entirely. Similarly, a man who had relationships with men may not have identified as gay or bisexual. Where identity is not explicitly established, describe the documented relationships or experiences rather than assigning a label.

Avoid assumptions based on gender

Be particularly careful not to interpret relationships through assumptions about gender or sexuality. A historical record describing two people in a relationship may not provide sufficient evidence to establish either person's sexual identity or how they understood the relationship.

Similarly, descriptions of relationships between people of different genders should not automatically be presented as heterosexual.

Recognise bisexuality as an identity in its own right

Avoid language that presents bisexuality as a transitional identity, an experiment, indecision or an incomplete form of lesbian or gay identity. Descriptions should not reproduce assumptions that bisexual people are confused, untrustworthy, promiscuous, indecisive or privileged in ways that invalidate their experiences of discrimination. Where such attitudes appear in historical material, describe them as historical perspectives or examples of prejudice rather than presenting them as established facts.

6. Revising problematic historical descriptions

Legacy catalogue descriptions may contain terminology or assumptions that are inaccurate, offensive or exclusionary.

When reviewing existing descriptions, consider:

1. Does the description accurately reflect the material?
2. Does it rely on assumptions about sexual identity or relationships?
3. Does it overlook evidence of bisexual+ experiences or community participation?
4. Does it reproduce historical prejudice without sufficient context?
5. Does it use terminology that is no longer appropriate as contemporary descriptive language?
6. Would additional context improve discoverability and understanding?
7. Have relevant communities or specialists been consulted where appropriate?

Example: Revising a legacy description

Original description:

'Papers relating to the activities of a lesbian organisation and its female members.'

Consider whether the collection also contains correspondence and publications documenting bisexual+ women's participation in the organisation, including debates about bisexuality and exclusion.

Potential revised description:

'Papers relating to the activities of the organisation, its members and its involvement in feminist and LGBTQ+ activism. The collection includes material documenting debates about bisexuality, women's sexuality and participation in lesbian and bisexual communities.'

The revised description makes bisexual+ histories more visible without assuming that all members identified as bisexual or changing the historical character of the organisation.

Important: This is an illustrative example. Any revision should be based on the actual contents of the collection.

7. Practical workflow for inclusive bisexual+ cataloguing

The following workflow can be adapted by organisations of different sizes and capacities.

Step 1: Identify relevant collections

Review existing catalogue descriptions, collection guides and research resources. Look beyond explicit references to bisexuality and consider material relating to LGBTQ+ activism, relationships, sexuality, community participation and relevant historical debates.

Step 2: Examine the original records

Establish what the records actually document. Identify the language used by their creators and subjects, the historical context and any evidence relating to identity, relationships or community affiliation.

Step 3: Identify gaps and assumptions

Consider whether existing descriptions overlook bisexual+ experiences or impose assumptions that are not supported by the records.

Step 4: Consult relevant expertise

Where appropriate, seek input from bisexual+ community members, specialist organisations, researchers and other knowledgeable stakeholders.

Consultation should be meaningful and proportionate, with clarity about how contributions will be used and what influence participants can have over decisions.

Step 5: Revise descriptions

Make changes that improve accuracy, context and discoverability. Preserve historical evidence and explain significant changes where appropriate.

Step 6: Improve access points

Consider whether relevant contemporary terminology, subject terms and contextual information can help researchers discover the material.

Step 7: Review and evaluate

Invite feedback, monitor discovery and use where possible, and establish opportunities to revisit descriptions as understanding develops

.

8. Community participation and co-curation

Bisexual+ inclusive cataloguing should not be undertaken solely through institutional assumptions about what constitutes relevant history.

Community participation can help identify material that might otherwise be overlooked, provide context for unfamiliar terminology and reveal connections between collections and contemporary community experiences.

Organisations should consider:

- Working with bisexual+ community archives and specialist organisations.
- Inviting community members to contribute knowledge about relevant collections.
- Developing collaborative cataloguing and interpretation projects.
- Supporting oral history and community documentation initiatives.
- Recognising the diversity of bisexual+ experiences, including differences relating to gender, race, disability, class and age.
- Ensuring that participation is accessible and that contributors understand how their knowledge will be used.
- Recognising community expertise and avoiding extractive consultation.

Community participation should not be treated as a substitute for institutional responsibility. Archives remain responsible for maintaining accurate descriptions, addressing harmful practices and creating sustainable approaches to inclusive access.

9. Further considerations: Avoiding common pitfalls

Do not treat bisexuality as a contemporary phenomenon.

Bisexual+ identities and experiences are not new, even though the language used to describe them has changed over time.

Do not assume that all LGBTQ+ histories are automatically inclusive of bisexual+ people.

Material described as lesbian, gay or queer may contain important bisexual+ histories that remain invisible without further contextual research.

Do not impose contemporary labels on historical individuals.

Recognising the relevance of historical material to bisexual+ history does not require assigning an identity to its subjects.

Do not remove historical language without considering its significance.

Problematic terminology may be important evidence of historical attitudes. Consider contextualisation and appropriate access points rather than automatically deleting it.

Do not assume that bisexual+ people have experienced the same histories or forms of exclusion.

Bisexual+ communities are diverse. Descriptive practice should avoid presenting one experience as representative of everyone.

10. Final checklist for bisexual+ inclusive descriptions

Before publishing or revising a catalogue description, ask:

- Have I accurately represented what the records document?
- Have I avoided assigning sexual identities without supporting evidence?
- Have I considered whether bisexual+ histories may be present even where the word bisexual is not used?
- Have I avoided presenting relationships as definitive evidence of identity?
- Have I considered historical terminology and provided context where necessary?
- Have I challenged assumptions that might contribute to bisexual erasure?
- Have I considered whether the description could be improved through community knowledge or consultation?
- Have I considered contemporary search terminology and discoverability?
- Have I preserved the complexity of the historical record?
- Have I created opportunities for future review and improvement?

What now?

Bisexual+ histories are not absent from the past, but they are frequently absent from the ways in which we have chosen to document, describe and interpret it.

Inclusive cataloguing offers an opportunity to challenge this absence, recognising the complexity of historical identities and experiences while making bisexual+ histories more visible and accessible.

The challenge for archivists is to find ways of recognising these histories without imposing contemporary assumptions, erasing historical context or claiming identities for people who did not use them.

By combining careful descriptive practice with community knowledge, critical reflection and a willingness to question established assumptions, archives can contribute to a richer, more representative understanding of the past.

About



The Bi History Project is an archival and heritage initiative dedicated to celebrating and preserving the histories of bisexual+ people. Through research, public engagement, writing and collaboration with archives and cultural heritage organisations, the project works to address the historical erasure and underrepresentation of bisexual+ people. It aims to make bisexual+ histories more visible, accessible and recognised as an integral part of LGBTQ+ history and our wider cultural heritage.

The project is founded and led by Melissa Reeve. She is an archivist, digital collections specialist and inclusive heritage practitioner with over a decade of experience across community archives, national collecting institutions and university special collections. She is passionate about challenging historical erasure and developing practical, community-informed approaches to making heritage more inclusive.

BIHISTORY.COM **@BIHISTORY**