Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools
By Maria Pallota-Chiarolli

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Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools looks at the lives and experiences of bisexual and polyamorous youth in a school setting, examining their personal narratives and placing them into the broader cultural experience of existing in the odd murk between traditional views and modern counter-cultural views. The book is based on the author’s prior work in the subject, and draws heavily on interviews the author conducted with bisexual and polyamorous youth. The book provides a breath of fresh air for researchers and students examining the grey area between mainstream cultural assumptions surrounding relationship and sexual identity.

The book is split into five chapters, with the first two introducing the core analytical framework of passing, bordering and polluting that the author uses, and placing bisexual & polyamorous youth within current sociological and cultural perspectives. The third and fourth chapters apply the book’s framework, examining bisexual (Chapter 3) and polyamorous (Chapter 4) youth in much greater detail through the individual experiences of each within the book’s framework. The final chapter includes thoughts on
how to increase inclusivity for bisexual and polyamorous youth in the school environment.

The heart of the book lies in its use of the passing, bordering, and polluting framework. This framework is a useful, though challenging to apply, tool in understanding the lived experience of bisexual and polyamorous youth. The challenge in applying this model lies in how bordering relies on the contrast between opposing cultural images, rather than being independently definable. This is best exemplified by how bisexuality is placed between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and is often seen as having traits of both, instead of its own unique traits.

Despite the challenges of using this framework, the author’s choice of it, as opposed to a more traditional sociological framework, was an intentional decision to better capture the lived experience of the individuals studied:

The logics I utilize in this research that attempt to describe and interpret the complex realities of contemporary social relations and identifications without dichotomous reduction and distortion can be defined by the French term ‘metissage’ and the Spanish term ‘mestizaje.’ Both these terms mean mixture and multiplicity, or as so aptly translated by the young people…being ‘messy’ (p. 30).

The author often returns to this idea of ‘being messy’ in her explorations of bisexual and polyamorous youth experience. The book also shows that often bisexual and polyamorous individuals can’t help but identify themselves by contrasting their experience with existing opposing cultural images. It is fair to conclude that the ‘messy’ feel of bordering is simply reflects the ‘messy’ experience of bordering. This makes the passing, bordering, and polluting framework very effective as an ethnographic tool, however it is challenged by the lack of bordering’s ability to stand apart from passing and polluting.

Despite this challenge, the book’s framework proves to be an exceptional tool in understanding the experiences of bisexual and polyamorous youth. The challenges of using the framework are ultimately overshadowed by its usefulness in academically scrutinizing an experience that usually isn’t brought into modern sociological literature.

Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools is not meant for the introductory sociology student, as it is dense with a robust sociological vocabulary and assumes at least some knowledge of sociological constructs of family, sexuality, and identity. Contained within this book, however, is a very insightful examination of the lived experience of bisexual and polyamorous youth, and a strong contribution to the literature examining both of these groups. Lastly, the book provides a unique framework for analysis, giving insight into areas of bisexual and polyamorous experience that are rarely acknowledged.