BiCon 2004 Survey Report

Produced by the Bi Research Group (Bi-Blio)
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Bi-BLIO

The BiCon 2004 survey was conducted last year by the Bi Research Group, a collective of bi people interested and involved in bi research, who have met and started working together over the past year. The survey was intended as an initial start towards contributing our skills to some work which can benefit the bi community as a whole, rather than simply helping our research. Despite the fact that BiCon has been running for 20 years now, we simply don't actually know that much about it, despite it being the single largest and most visible bi event in the country. This means that when activists in the community need to liase with the media, local authorities and other agencies about Bicon, it can be quite difficult to say who actually comes along. Knowing more about people's backgrounds, identities and where they live can also help future BiCon organisers when thinking about how to publicise the event, and to make it run better. On top of this, it's also good for everyone to know more about the visible, organised community, as it's often easy to form impressions that simply might not be true.

We put together the survey based upon a number of other surveys done with bi people at different times for different reasons. We are strongly committed to doing research *for* the bi community rather than simply *on* it, and so we've learnt a lot from your answers, and will be adapting next year's survey to take into account your thoughts and feelings about our work. Thankyou all for helping us with this research, and we hope you'll continue to help us with this and other projects we work on. Any questions or comments you have about this can be directed c/o biblio@bicommunitynews.co.uk

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Summary

The survey form was distributed with programmes and other information when people arrived and registered at Bicon. Forms were also available at the main desk, and were filled in anonymously and returned both at he conference, and afterwards via a Freepost address used by that year's organising team. Out of 273 attendees at Bicon 2004, we received 92 responses, a response rate of 34%, which was quite high considering the scale of this survey.

Based on the responses we got, there were a few particularly important findings. Bicon attendees are a broad spread of ages, ranging from 17 to 61 in our respondents, with nearly two thirds of them over thirty. We come from all over the country, and some even travel from other EU countries to reach the event. In other ways, we are less diverse. Over 99% of the respondents were white (although there were some problems with the way we asked this question), most were living in cities, and nearly 80% were qualified to degree level or above.

36% of people had some form of physical or mental health impairment that affected their day-to-day life, reflecting BiCon's commitment to providing equal and open access to all. 25% of people had had a diagnosis of mental health issues from a professional. It's difficult to compare directly, but we know from other research that bi people suffer from higher rates of mental health problems that lesbians and gay men; who in turn have higher rates than the general population. Certainly, this underlines that providing emotional and counselling support for people at Bicon is absolutely vital.

We were also interested in how many times people had been to a Bicon before. 60% of people had been before, and of those, most people had been to between 1 and 3 bicons previously. People seem to move through the event in roughly three year cycles, with groups meeting, going to Bicon for a few years, and then beginning to drift away. Although this finding could be seen in a negative light, on the other hand it could mean that Bicon is providing a space for people to learn about their sexuality, meet and build their own bi communities which may continue for many years after. This high turnover also means that over the years it has been running, Bicon has potentially helped many, many more people than the two hundred or so that we see actually in attendance each year, underlining how very important the space it provides actually is.

The first timers who answered had mostly found out about Bicon through personal connections, including local bi groups and the Internet. Few mentioned physical publicity and no-one had heard through an LGBT group. Only 7% did not know anybody else who would be at BiCon this year. This suggests that most people become involved in Bicon through personal connections, and perhaps that there is not enough outreach beyond white, middle class, IT literate communities.

Finally we asked some questions about people's identities, relationships and sexual practices, including the classic 'Klein Grid' assessment of sexuality.

Many of you found some or all of these questions difficult or impossible to answer for several reasons, but particularly because of the way they took the adoption of identity and gender 'labels' to be fixed and simple categories. We're going to take your comments into account and look at alternative ways of researching this area, while also refining what we've done so far.

Despite these problems, there were some interesting findings, some of which we're still working on and will produce another report on at a later date. Some of the questions asked people to tell us about the categories they would use to describe themselves, which is perhaps less problematic. For example, with gender 47% of the respondents described themselves as mostly/only female; 36% as mostly/only male; and 19% as trans or genderqueer. We also asked people what kinds of identity labels they used to describe their sexuality. 85% of people ticked 'bisexual'; 22% 'homosexual'/'lesbian'/'gay'; 10% 'straight'/'heterosexual'; and 51% 'queer'. This was a complex finding, and it's worth bearing in mind that people often chose several of these categories at once (e.g. 'bisexual' and 'gay'). However, the findings probably reflect two things. Firstly, the openness of Bicon to the non-bi friends, partners and allies of bi people is confirmed in this. Secondly, a small but important minority of people wrote that they didn't like using specific labels to describe their complex and fluid sexuality. These people often ticked boxes like 'queer' and 'don't use a term', or added new terms in. In particular, the strong adoption of 'queer' by so many people suggests that the word may have changed its meaning for some, indicating something more flexible than the traditional 'LGB' identity labels. However, we need to look at this in more depth to understand better what is happening here.

There is still yet more analysis to be done on some of the findings and we hope to produce a second report in the future. However, at present we're concentrating on improving and simplifying the survey for use at Bicon 2005, as it's important that we continue with the work we've started here.

Demographics

Age

Age groups of Bicon attendees
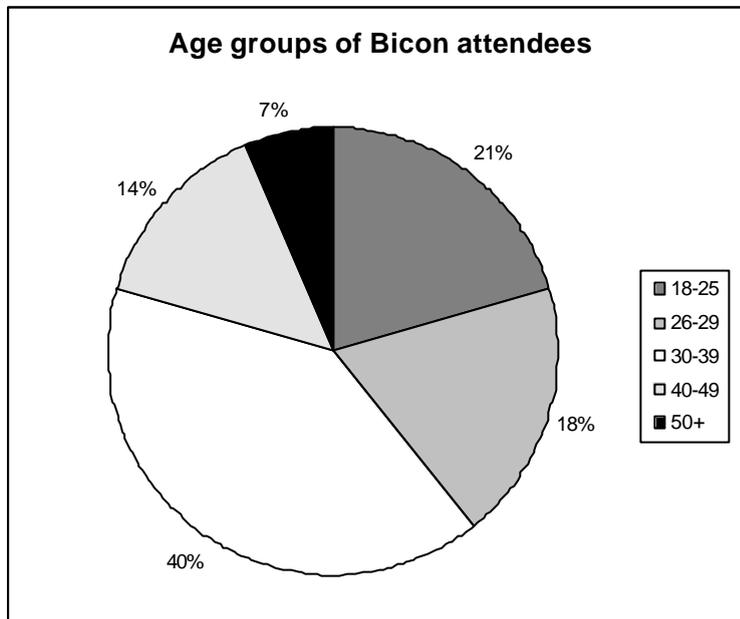
The majority of BiCon attendees were over thirty, which contrasts with the emphasis on youth in many parts of the gay scene, and also with some perceptions that BiCon will be mostly attractive to younger people.

Ethnicity
There were some problems with this question, especially because we didn't define ethnicity properly. However the vast majority of attendees (99%) were of a white ethnicity, with a mix of other backgrounds within that, Irish/Scottish/Welsh being the most common

Location
82% of attendees were from England and only 3% from outside the UK.

27% of attendees were from London, 13% from the North West and 11% from the East Midlands, representing the cities which have the largest bi groups (London, Manchester and Birmingham).

77% of people lived in a large town or city (population over 100,000).

This suggests that local bi groups are very important for raising awareness of Bicon and the organised bi community, since regions with equivalent sized cities (for example the North East – Newcastle) but no bi groups have smaller numbers of people attending. In addition, the figures indicate an important link between Bicon and the local groups, with them helping sustain one another over the years.

Employment

76% of attendees were employed, 15% in full time education and the rest were unemployed (3%) or on long term sick leave or similar. Of those in employment 43% worked in the private sector and 53% in the public/voluntary sector. 89% worked full time.

Income

Income brackets of Bicon attendees
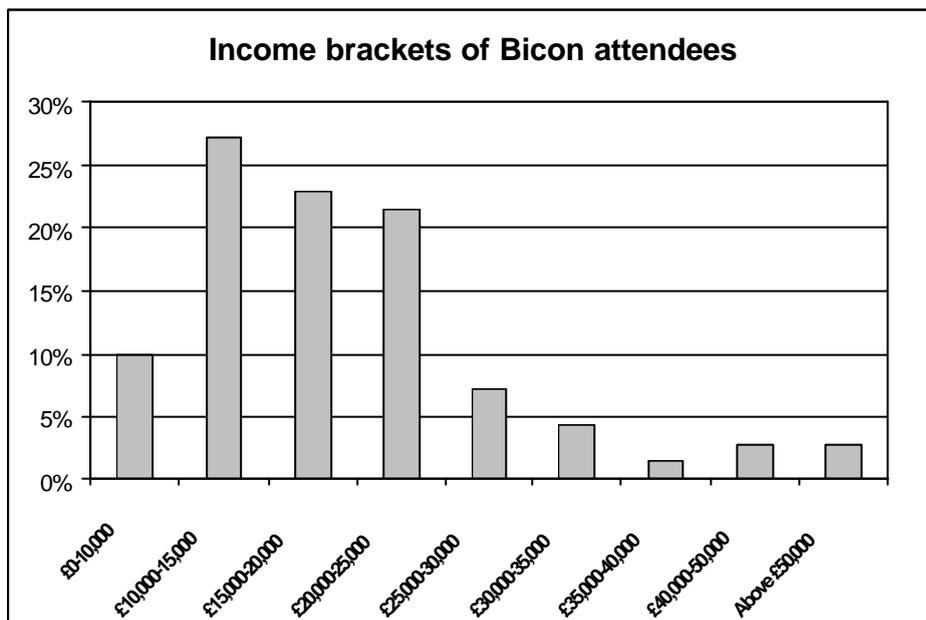
Most earned between £10,000 and £25,000. Compared with the general population, average incomes seem quite low, especially considering the education levels of the respondents. This may be because of the relatively high numbers of people working in the public or voluntary sector (53%).

Education

79% are educated to at least degree level: 46% of attendees have a degree and 33% have a postgraduate degree or professional qualification as their highest qualification. This is a *unusually* high level of education, and should raise questions to activists about the representativeness of the 'organised' bi scene. In this context, the strong reliance on the Internet in general, and fora such as LiveJournal to publicise our activities should perhaps be questioned.

Religious/Spiritual beliefs

Belief	Percentage
None	35%

Atheist	14%
Agnostic	13%
Pagan	12%
Christian	8%
Humanist	3%
Buddhist	1%
Hindu	0%
Muslim	0%
Jewish	0%
Sikh	0%
Other	10% - 1 quaker, 2 unitarian, 4 combination

The majority of people said they had no religion, were agnostic or atheist.

Health

36% of attendees had either single (24%) or multiple (12%) mental or physical health impairments that interfere with day-to-day life. 25% had been diagnosed by a mental health professional with an impairment. It's difficult to compare directly, but recent research in the area of mental health has found that bi people suffer from higher rates of mental health problems than lesbians and gay men, who in turn have higher rates than the general population; probably because of the lower levels of acceptance and social support they get.

Impairment	Percentage
Mental health issue	25%
Unseen impairment (e.g.diabetes, epilepsy)	12%
Learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia)	5%
Hearing impairment	3%
Mobility impairment	3%
Visual impairment	2%
Speech impairment	0%

Mental health issue	Percentage
Depression	16%
Anxiety	8%
Self-harm	8%
Seasonal affective disorder	7%
Panic disorder	3%
PTSD	3%
Bipolar disorder	2%
Obsessive compulsive disorder	2%
Eating disorder	1%

Schizoaffective disorder	1%
Borderline personality disorder	0%
Phobia	0%
Postnatal depression	0%
Schizophrenia/Psychosis	0%
Other please specify	1 each of: adult attention deficit disorder, aspergers, burn-out

Previous BiCons Attended

60% of participants had attended BiCon before.
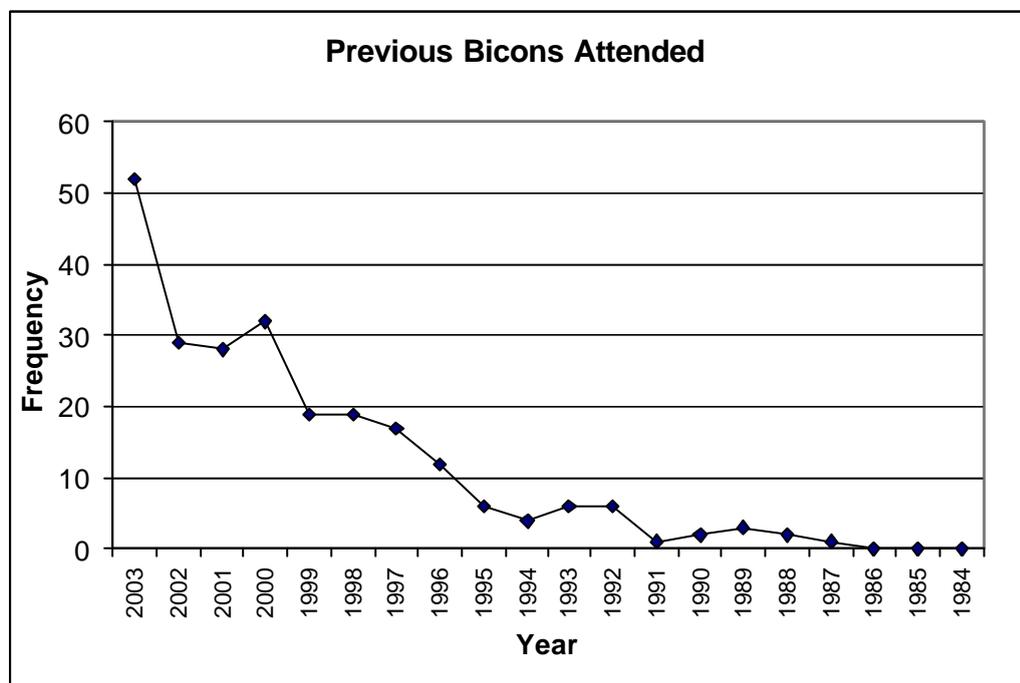
The graph of previous attendance at Bicons amongst non-newbies suggests drop-offs after 3 years of attending, on an ongoing cycle. Maybe we shouldn't be aiming at achieving a consistent group of BiCon attendees? BiCon may well be serving its purpose if people come, get what they need out of it, and then stop coming. The 'bumps' in the graph also suggest that groups of people are dropping away from BiCon together, and it may be simply that these are networks of friends who form ongoing relationships outside of Bicon, and therefore no longer need that form of support. It implies that Bicon itself is helping such networks to form, which is a highly positive implication. Finally, this high turnover also means that over the years it has been running, Bicon has potentially helped many, many more people than the two hundred or so that we see actually in attendance each year, underlining how very important the space it provides actually is.

However, we know very little for sure about this. Maybe we should have an open question in the next survey asking about past attendance, and about the friendships and relationships they have formed at Bicon?

The new people had heard about BiCon mostly from friends (38%), followed by the Internet (25%), local bi group (16%) and partner (16%). 1 had heard from another bi conference and 1 from an LGBT group. None mentioned BiCon physical publicity, and the low number from LGBT groups also suggests a distinct lack of awareness of Bicon amongst these groups.

Only 7% of people did not know anybody else who would be at BiCon this year. These figures suggest that most people are finding out about BiCon from friends and coming with people they know, suggesting (alongside the demographics) that there is not enough outreach about BiCon outside of white, middle class, IT literate contexts.

Expectations of BiCon

Expectation	Percentage
I want to be a bisexual space, where bisexuality isn't seen as different	84%
I want to meet other bisexual people	68%
To have sex	24%
I want to find a bisexual partner	17%
I am coming to support my bisexual partner	15%
I think I might be bisexual and want to find out more about bisexuality	7%
Other	37% (friends/fun, queer/gender-free safe space, learning, organising/volunteering)

Bi safe space is obviously the most important thing for the attendees, and this shows that Bicon is probably serving its purpose. However, other, less formal issues are important, particularly those around sex and relationships. Another important feature which seems to have grown organically within Bicon is the concept of gender free/unimportant/safe space, which is one that could perhaps be recognised more formally?

Identity

Because of the way the question was worded, with space for people to self describe their gender, we categorised the responses in three broad ways: people who self-described as mostly to only male; people who self-described as mostly to only female; and people who self-described as transgendered, genderqueer, or gave a strong mix of gender terms. Because of the way that people did this (e.g. "mostly female, trans"), these categories are not mutually exclusive, and therefore should not add to 100%

Gender

Female (more → only):   47%
Male (more → only):   36%
Trans / genderqueer: 19%

Many attendees wrote extra information around this question because they were unhappy with the categories given. For example, some people wrote 'transgender' or some variant upon the term; a mix of gender descriptions such as 'effeminate male'; or words to indicate they resist the use of labels in this way, such as 'fluid' or 'me'.

Sexuality

Identity	Percentage who ticked
Bisexual	85%
Homosexual/Lesbian/Gay (5, 6, 9)	22%
Straight/heterosexual	10%
Asexual	2%
Queer	51%
Transgender	17%
Androgynous	9%
Monogamous	21%
Non-monogamous	36%
Celibate	4%
Don't use a term	12%

The survey question had asked people to rank these, but many respondents found this confusing or nonsensical, particularly in the way it mixed together and asked them to rank the importance of gender and sexuality terms, so we abandoned this aspect of the analysis.   Other terms that several people had used: 'BDSM','kinky'; 'bicurious', 'straight-ish'; 'pansexual'; 'dyke'. This is a complex finding, and it's worth bearing in mind that people often chose several of these categories at once (e.g. 'bisexual' and 'gay'). However, the findings probably reflect two things. Firstly, the openness of Bicon to the non-bi friends, partners and allies of bi people is confirmed in these figures. Secondly, a small but important minority of people wrote that they didn't like using specific labels to describe their complex and fluid sexuality. These people often ticked boxes like 'queer' and 'don't use a term', or added new terms in. In particular, the strong adoption of 'queer' by so many people suggests that the word may have changed its meaning for some, indicating something more flexible than the traditional 'LGB' identity labels. However, we need to look at this in more depth to understand better what is happening here.

Relationship Status

Not in a relationship:	14%
Married:	18%
In open/poly relationship:	40%

No question here for people not married, but monogamous, despite the previous question showing there are many monogamous people at Bicon. Also, it seems the assumption has been made in this question that married people are monogamous, although the previous question gave a different indication of monogamy (21%) versus non-monogamy (36%).

Likewise, the questions about sexual practices, and the gender of people's partners were also questioned by some participants, and were perhaps too personal for a general survey. The findings were quite complex, and will be picked up in a follow up report.

Klein Grid comments

The Klein grid data was highly complex and has not yet been fully analysed, although we hope to eventually do this, and perhaps cross-reference the responses with answers to some of the other questions. 15% of people left this completely blank and many others left the grid incomplete, particularly in relation to the 'future' part of the grid, where, people also left many question marks and scribbling out.

17% felt moved to comment about their reaction to the Klein grid questions, for example:

- No crystal ball / *que sera sera* / how the fuck should I know (regarding the future)
- Too mixed to specify
- Find this too hard to do from a changing genderqueer identity, various types of partners, sorry.
- Impossible to answer, I actually reject this totally as a model for sexuality it really is flawed, PLEASE don't use it again
- Collect it a different way, my head hurts
- It's still unclear what this means (regarding the terms at the bottom)
- This is bollocks!
- Don't understand this
- Fantasy is a complex issue not easily answerable
- (Regarding labels) Not a priority, other things – age, class, ethnicity. Labels confine
- This grid is far too oversimplified, may be worth looking into other ways of collecting data in this form, more qualitative form of data collection?
- Transition (in the middle of one of the boxes)
- NOT APPLICABLE FOR TRANSGENDERED PERSON
- Hetbigayer (written inside lifestyle boxes)
- Answered best I can but tricky when gender/sex isn't always set (some or other) in other's or self (also wrote pansexual and queer in boxes)
- What is 'other sex only' to someone trans? etc.

These responses, combined with the responses to some of the gender and sexuality questions, have strong implications for next year's survey. As well as the problems of getting people to self administer a complex research tool that was designed for use in an interview context, it is very obvious from these responses that many people resisted the basic assumptions underlying the grid, and that many transgendered people and their partners found it actively insulting. Secondly, we should probably look again at this approach to researching identity, by using preconfigured labels and boxes to tick. It might prove productive to use open ended questions in which people can talk about these issues freely, alongside collecting statistics on these issues.