

Bi / Pan / Fluid 101

What are bisexuality, pansexuality, and sexual fluidity?

Bisexuality, pansexuality and other non-monosexual and fluid identities involve the potential to feel sexually attracted to and to engage in romantic or sexual relationships with people of more than one sex or gender. A bi/pan/fluid person may or may not be equally attracted to different genders, or may be attracted to persons regardless of sex or gender, and the degree of such attractions may vary over time. Self-perception is the key to a bi/pan/fluid identity. Many people engage in sexual activity with people of more than one gender, yet do not identify as bi/pan/fluid. Likewise, other people engage in sexual relations only with people of one gender, or do not engage in sexual activity at all, yet consider themselves bi/pan/fluid. There is no definitive test to determine whether or not one is bisexual, pansexual, or any other sexual orientation.

What's the difference between bisexual, pansexual, fluid, and other labels?

It depends on who you ask! Non-monosexual people may use many terms to identify their orientations, including: bisexual, pansexual, fluid, omnisexual, sapiosexual, multisexual, polysexual and queer. Some people claim multiple labels and use them interchangeably. Others maintain that “bisexual” refers only to those attracted to both men and women, whereas “pansexual” refers to sexual or romantic attraction regardless of a person’s gender. “Fluid” is sometimes used to refer to an orientation that seems to change with time.

Most organizations use the word “bisexual” to refer to all non-monosexual identities, as it is the most established of all the myriad labels. The most important thing to remember, however, is to respect each person’s individual self-identification, whatever term they use.

How can you measure sexual orientation?

While there is no agreed-upon method of determining how straight or gay a person is, there are a number of scales used to measure sexual orientation. The oldest and most famous of these, developed by Alfred Kinsey, describes a person’s sexual orientation using a scale from zero to six. Zero on the Kinsey scale means a person is exclusively heterosexual, six means exclusively homosexual; one to five on the scale means a person is non-monosexual to some degree.

Today, many see the Kinsey scale as overly simplistic and assert that sexual orientation and sexual identity are more complex and varied. Still, many people use the Kinsey scale to demonstrate a conception of sexuality as a spectrum or continuum, rather than a set of rigid categories.

Invisibility of Bi/Pan/Fluid Identities

Our society tends to assume everyone is heterosexual until proven homosexual. Two people in an other-gender relationship are assumed to be straight; two people in a same-gender relationship are assumed to be gay/lesbian. The truth is, however, that a person in either of these relationships could be bisexual/pansexual, and this possibility is rarely recognized in general society.

Bi/pan/fluid people are constantly rendered invisible by the very language often used to describe non-heterosexual people: “gay and lesbian.” Implicit in this language is the idea that anyone attracted to members of their own gender is gay or lesbian. Since “gay and lesbian” is the standard term to use in mainstream media, bisexual and other non-monosexual people are rendered invisible almost every time same-gender relationship (“gay”) issues are mentioned. The frequent use of the term “gay marriage” to refer to marriage equality serves as an example.

Bisexuals/pansexuals are frequently rendered invisible in history as well. Historical figures known to have had same-gender intimate relationships are usually portrayed as gay or lesbian, when in fact many had intimate relationships with persons of various genders. By taking the gay/straight dichotomy our society believes in and applying it to historical figures, bisexuality has become obscured not only in the present, but in the past.

How common is bisexuality/pansexuality?

It's not easy to say how common bisexuality is, since little research has been done on the subject. Most studies on sexuality have focused on heterosexuals or homosexuals. Alfred Kinsey's groundbreaking studies in the 1940s and 1950s found that as many as 15–25% of women and 33–46% of men could be considered bisexual, based on sexual behavior or attractions. While Kinsey's research is somewhat outdated, non-monosexuality likely goes underrepresented in most surveys. Non-monosexuals are, in many ways, a hidden population. In our culture, it is generally assumed that a person is either heterosexual (the normative assumption) or homosexual (deviant from the norm). Because non-monosexual identities do not fit into these standard categories, they are often ignored or denied.

When they are recognized, non-monosexuals are often viewed as being “part heterosexual and part homosexual,” rather than possessing a unique identity. Non-monosexuality threatens the accepted way of looking at the world by calling into question the validity of rigid sexual categories.

Relationships for Non-Monosexuals

Non-monosexual people, like all people, have a wide variety of relationship styles. Contrary to common myth, a non-monosexual person does not need to

be sexually involved with people of multiple genders simultaneously. In fact, some people who identify as non-monosexual never engage in sexual activity with one (or any) gender that they are attracted to. As is the case for heterosexuals, gay men, and lesbians, attraction does not involve acting on every desire. Like anyone else, non-monosexual people may choose to be sexually active with one partner only, and have long-term, monogamous relationships. Other non-monosexuals may have open or polyamorous relationships that allow for sexual activities with people of multiple genders. It is important to have the freedom to choose the type of sexual and romantic relationships that are right for the people involved, whatever their orientation.

How does someone become bi/pan/fluid?

Some people believe that a person is born heterosexual, homosexual, or non-monosexual (due to genetics or prenatal hormonal influences, for example), and that their identity is inherent and unchangeable. Others believe that sexual and romantic orientation comes about through socialization (e.g. imitating or rejecting parental models) or conscious choice (e.g. choosing lesbianism as part of a political feminist identity). Many believe that these factors interact. Because biological, social, and cultural factors are different for each person, everyone's orientation is highly individual, whether they are bisexual, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, queer, or asexual. The value placed on a sexual identity should not depend on its origin. The way an individual identifies themselves should always be respected.

Many people assume that non-monosexuality is just a phase people go through. In fact, any sexual identity can be a phase. Humans are diverse, and individual sexual feelings and behavior can change over time. The creation and consolidation of a sexual identity is an ongoing process. Since we are generally socialized as heterosexuals, many gay and lesbian people experience a non-monosexual stage as part of their identity development. Many others come to identify as bisexual after a considerable period of identification as gay or lesbian.

Common Myths about Non-Monosexuality

Non-monosexuality does not exist ... Everyone is bisexual ... Bi/pan/fluid people just haven't figured out their sexual identities yet

The biggest myth about non-monosexuality is directly tied to the issue of invisibility, the idea that it doesn't exist. Saying that "everyone is bisexual" effectively means that no one is bisexual, as it invalidates the unique identity of bisexual people. Assertions that bi/pan/fluid people are confused or are denying their true identities try to force non-monosexuals into a normative binary system. While it is true that, for some people, "bisexual" is a temporary label, many people have a deep, lasting sense of themselves as bisexual, pansexual, or fluid.

The only true bisexuals are people equally attracted to both genders ... Bisexuals feel exactly the same way about men and women

Bisexuals differ in the relative weight they put on their feelings toward a given sex. Non-monosexual people may also have different feelings about different genders. Some say that their relationships with people of all genders are the same, while others say the nature of their feelings for different genders differs.

Bisexuals cannot have good relationships ... Non-monosexuals can't be monogamous ... Bi/pan/fluid people are promiscuous

Bisexual people can feel significant sexual attraction or affection for people of all genders. This doesn't mean that they must have sex with more than one person at the same time. Just like gay men, lesbians, and heterosexuals, non-monosexuals practice abstinence, life-long monogamy, serial monogamy, open relationships, poly-fidelity, and casual sex. The relative merits of these relationship styles is an issue distinct from bisexuality itself. Values such as trust and stability can be embodied in more than one model of relationship.

Bisexuals cause AIDS ... Bi/pan/fluid people spread HIV to the heterosexual population and to the lesbian community

HIV is spread through unprotected sex and needle sharing, specific behaviors. It is not the fault or responsibility of any one social group. People who are self-aware and educated about HIV/AIDS pose no special risk.

Bisexuals are strange, exotic people ... The sexuality of bi/pan/fluid people is mysterious and interesting

Non-monosexual people are distinguished from monosexual people by their orientations and not by anything else. People with similar orientations and histories may have similar identities, but may also have completely different identities.

Bi/pan/fluid people don't have to come out ... Non-monosexuals are hiding

There are different kinds of closets, passing privileges, and disclosures. Bi/pan/fluid people share with gay men and lesbians the experiences of

living in a heterosexist society. Because of this, they are familiar with the idea of coming out of the closet to straight society. But, to avoid stigma in gay/lesbian communities, they may find themselves in a second closet where they hide their bi/pan/fluid identities. Non-monosexual people are not all equally visible. A socially-experienced bi/pan/fluid person may blend into both communities unless they make an effort to be out.

Biphobia

Biphobia is discrimination against bisexuals, pansexuals and other non-monosexual people based on fear and/or misunderstanding. Biphobia exists in straight communities as well as gay and lesbian communities. In fact, many of the most biphobic people have been gay or lesbian. Because of this, bisexuals have had to struggle for decades to be included with gays and lesbians in the gay rights movement and the queer community. Many lesbians felt betrayed by bisexual women who “slept with the enemy” and didn’t have the courage to become real lesbians. Many gay men felt that bisexual men were only out for a good time and were not really “one of them.” Although this attitude has diminished greatly due to the tireless work of bisexual, pansexual, and allied activists, biphobia among gay men and lesbians does still exist. A good portion of bi/pan/fluid activism is actually still aimed at educating gay and lesbian populations.

Bisexual, pansexual, fluid, and otherwise non-monosexual people cannot be defined by their partner or potential partner, so they are rendered invisible within the either/or framework of normative sexuality. This invisibility is one of the most challenging aspects of a non-monosexual identity. Living in a society that is based and thrives on the reassurances and balanced polarities of dichotomy affects how we see the world and how we negotiate our own and other people’s lives.

Most people are unaware of their binary assumptions until a non-monosexual speaks up or comes out and challenges those assumptions. Very often, the non-monosexual person is dismissed, told they are confused, and told to make up their mind. For bi/pan/fluid people to maintain their integrity between a homo-hating heterosexist society and a dismissive queer community, they must have a strong sense of self, and the courage and conviction to live their lives in defiance of what is considered normal.

Some examples of biphobia are:

- Assuming that everyone one meets is either heterosexual or homosexual.
- Claiming to understand a bi/pan/fluid identity because you identified that way before you came to your “real” lesbian/gay/heterosexual identity.
- Assuming a bi/pan/fluid person would want to fulfill one’s sexual fantasies or curiosities.
- Referring to non-monosexuality as a “phase” or to bi/pan/fluid people as “confused”
- Using the terms “switch-hitter,” “fence-sitter,” “AC/DC,” or even “bisexual” as slurs or in an accusatory way.
- Not confronting a biphobic remark or joke for fear of being identified as bisexual.
- Thinking that bi/pan/fluid people will have their rights when lesbian and gay people win theirs.

- Asking your bi/pan/fluid friend about their partner only when that person is the same gender or a different gender, only when you feel their relationship is “like yours”
- Expecting bi/pan/fluid activists and organizers to minimize their issues and to prioritize the visibility of lesbian and gay issues.
- Avoiding mentioning to friends that you are involved with a bi/pan/fluid person or working with a bi/pan/fluid group because you are afraid they will think you are a bisexual.

Being an Ally to Bi/Pan/Fluid Individuals

- Acknowledge that a bisexual person is always bisexual regardless of their current or past partner(s) or sexual experience(s).
- Use the term “monosexual” when referring to people who are not bi/pan/fluid, that is, people who are attracted to only one gender.
- Check in with someone about what term(s) they prefer. Different people prefer different terms for different reasons. Respect each term.
- Be inclusive of bi/pan/fluid people of color. This means not assuming that all bi/pan/fluid people are white and acknowledging that racism exists within the non-monosexual community. Recognize that bi/pan/fluid people of color may identify with different terms from white non-monosexuals.
- Recognize that coming out can be different for people who are non-monosexual than it is for lesbian and gay people. Because non-monosexuality is delegitimized and made invisible, non-monosexual people usually have to come out over and over. Often, after they come out, they also have to convince people that they are truly non-monosexual, and not just “confused.”
- Recognize that sometimes it’s appropriate to group people who are non-monosexual with people who are lesbian and gay, and sometimes it’s not. For example, healthcare & economic studies on LGB people that separated the bisexual category from lesbian/gay have found that there are significant disparities.
- Recognize that privilege is complicated. Bisexuals don’t have straight privilege because they are not straight. Some will never have a normative relationship. However, many have passing privilege in different forms. This might be gender conforming privilege, which people of any sexuality can have. This might also mean being assumed to be straight when with a partner of a different gender. (Note that this often does not feel like privilege but rather an erasure of bi/pan/fluid identity). Acknowledgement of one’s own privilege (whichever forms it takes) is always important.
- Recognize that the way that specific relationships function is entirely independent of orientation. Be positive about all relationships – monogamous, polyamorous, or anything else.
- Do not attempt to quantify how bisexual, pansexual, or fluid someone is. This is related to the stereotype that people who are bi/pan/fluid are lying or confused and sometimes satisfies a craving to categorize non-monosexual people as either “more gay” or “more straight”. People often try to do this by asking someone about their romantic or sexual behaviors. People deserve to have their privacy while having their identities respected.
- Be aware that when you use “gay” as an umbrella term, you do not recognize the variety of unique, non-monosexual identities. Such a practice renders non-monosexuality invisible. For example, terms like “gay rights,” “gay marriage,” and “gay sex” imply that bi people are only included when “acting gay” (i.e. when they are engaged in same- sex

relationships/sexual activity). Instead, use terms like “marriage equality” and “same-gender relationship”/“other-gender relationship.” Relationships don’t have orientations.

All the information within this section was lifted directly from the following sources, with editions:

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