

What's the Real Difference between Bi- and Pansexual?

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June 29, 2018

[Home](#) [Culture](#) [Culture Features](#)

June 29, 2018 4:42PM ET

What seem to be straightforward labels for sexual preference are anything but – and they even confuse many in the LGBTQ community



People of all sexualities are welcomed at Pride, but there's been a recent blowback against the term "bisexual."

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When queer activist and *Younger* star Nico Tortorella is asked how he identified, he takes a big breath before replying, "Well that's a loaded question."

"In the [queer] movement right now, we have a tendency of getting hung on specific words rather than the person," the 29-year-old actor tells *Rolling Stone*. "And in my fluidity, I'm really attracted to this idea that it doesn't have to be one thing."

Bisexuality, pansexuality, sexually fluid, queer and simply "not doing labels" – all are different ways people identify to indicate that they are not exclusively attracted to either men or women. The truth is, however, there's confusion even among members of the LGBTQ community as to what these words mean, particularly when it comes to bisexuality.

In fact, the bisexual community doesn't even agree on what it means to be bisexual. The term pansexual was birthed out of the confusion, and to create a definitive and more inclusive label. This has led to in-fighting between members of the community, who are upset that their bisexual identity is being replaced by another label.

The meaning of pansexual is clear: someone who is attracted – either emotionally, physically or both – to all genders. This includes cisgender, transgender, agender and gender nonconforming individuals. The prefix was chosen because it comes from the Greek root “pan,” meaning “all.” But that's obviously not the case. Two months ago, when Janelle Monáe came out as queer and pansexual in a *Rolling Stone* cover story, searches for the word pansexual on *Merriam Webster* rose 11,000 percent, and the term became the most looked up word of the day.

The prefix “bi,” as we're all aware, means two. Because of this, many folks, perhaps even the majority of people, believe that a bisexual person is attracted to only two genders: cisgender men and cisgender women. Members of the queer community who believe this to be the definition of bisexual, believe that bisexuality perpetuates a gender binary. They don't believe it's inclusive of transgender people and gender nonconforming people.

Given that “bi” means two, that's a reasonable belief.

However, many bisexual-identifying individuals, myself included, now use renowned bisexual activist Robyn Ochs's definition of bisexuality, as stated on her website: “I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have in myself the potential to be attracted – romantically and/or sexually – to people of more than one sex and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree.”

In this definition, the “bi” stands for two (or more) genders. Gabrielle Blonder, a board member of the Bisexual Resource Center, a nonprofit whose mission is “providing support to the bisexual community and raising public awareness about bisexuality and bisexual people,” explains, “I use it to mean ‘attracted to genders like mine and genders different from mine.’”

The majority of pansexual individuals don't believe either of these definitions – and that's precisely why they prefer the term pansexual.

When the word “bisexual” became popularized, starting with David Bowie when he claimed bisexuality in a *Playboy* interview in 1976, we didn't have a nuanced understanding of gender like we do today. Now that we do have a better understanding, some bisexual people have updated the definition of bisexual to be inclusive of all genders, whereas others have favored abandoning it, for a new word, that frankly is less confusing, given that pan does indeed mean “all.”

Some pansexual folks even go a step further. “There’s the argument to be had that people use all the time, that bi is exclusionary. It feeds into the binary of gender,” says Tortella. “And I know that for me personally, that’s not the case. A lot of people say that bi is trans-exclusionary, but trans is not a gender itself, it’s a descriptor word for how people express their gender.”

That’s why Ethan Remillard, 22, who came out as bisexual in his early teens, said bluntly, “I identify as bisexual because I like fucking dudes and romancing girls. But I don’t claim pansexuality because trans[gender] girls and boys are the same as their cis[gender] counterparts.”

This is partly why people don’t like identifying with any sexual or gender identity label. Simply put, it’s confusing, and for many, the labels feels limiting. Also, inherent in your sexuality is an understanding of your own gender. If you’re not completely sure if you identify as male or female, then how can you accurately state your own sexuality?

This contributes to the growing popularity of the reclaimed word, “queer.”

“I use the term queer because I’m not sure of the specifics of my gender identity,” says Jill B., a 23 year-old artist. “So ‘queer’ feels like a good umbrella placeholder while I grow and learn and figure out all the details.”

People also have no qualms claiming multiple sexual identity labels. “Early on in my coming out, bisexual just fit ... and queer felt disconnected from who I was, a bit academic and drugged in hate,” says Ryan Carey-Mahoney, 26, a LGBTQ activist. “Then, as I grew into myself a bit more, I found queer to be none of those things. It was inclusive of many identities – bisexuality and others – and brought people together. It was uniting in a way that just saying ‘gay’ when describing the community can feel dividing.”

Now, Carey-Mahoney identifies with both labels. “They both, now, fit me like a glove, and trust me, honey, I’m wearing them proudly.”

Interestingly, when Tortorella does wish to identify with sexual labels – as opposed to simply human – he actively changes his label depending on who he’s speaking to and what their intention is.

“If I’m talking to somebody who’s more conservative and doesn’t believe in a nonbinary gender, then it’s easier to use the word bisexual, but if I’m talking to someone who’s invested in gender, queer theory, and understands the spectrum, then I’m more comfortable using the word ‘pansexual’ or the word ‘fluid.’”

Fluid, in this case, meaning that sexual attractions have the capacity to change over time and can be dependent on different situations.

Tortella does note, however, that there is a rich history to the word bisexual, and it would be nice to honor it.

“The B existed far longer than the P ever did in the acronym, and there’s something to be said about that,” he says. “There’s something to be said about standing up for the mothers and fathers of the community who fought for [our rights to embrace a queer identity].”

Tortella’s not alone in his reasoning. “I personally like the historical aspect of it,” says BRC’s Blonder. “It’s the label we’ve fought for recognition under for decades, and it’s the most widely-known label. Language isn’t a static entity, and words can change meaning over time. Much like October is no longer the eighth month of the year, I believe the term bisexual has morphed into a different meaning than it originally was.”

For others, it’s less about history and more about the arduous, personal journey it took to finally claim a sexual label, only to then be told that their label is wrong, obsolete, or transphobic – and by members of the same community who are supposed to be embracing them no less.

“I’m proud to be bisexual” says Daniel Saynt, founder of [NSFW](#), a private club offering educational experiences in relationships, kink and intimacy. “It took me 30 years to get to that point and it sucks that now that I’m comfortable in my sexuality, I’m told I’m not accepting enough cause I don’t consider myself pansexual. Pansexuals shouldn’t be attacking bisexuals just cause there’s a new term that’s more inclusive. We don’t attack gays for not being attracted to women and we shouldn’t attack a bisexual [person] just because they may not find a trans person attractive.”

Saynt is one of the people for whom bisexuality does indeed mean exclusively attracted to cisgender men and women. He embodies what many bisexual activists and individuals are fighting against.

“I’ve definitely met attractive trans and non-conforming individuals, but the feelings I have [for them have] never been sexual in nature,” Saynt continues. “It’s more of an appreciation for who they are, what they represent, and just a desire for them to find happiness regardless of identity.”

The question then becomes, is it transphobic to not be attracted to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals? If so, then are members of the LGBTQ community clinging to a label that’s potentially harmful to other members of the LGBTQ community?

“For some time, I felt compelled to cling to the bisexual label in a pseudo-noble effort to protect the identity from a perceived diaspora of individuals turning to the term pansexual,” Jill B. says. “At first, it felt important to continue defending bisexuality, as I had always done when members of the straight or gay communities attempted to invalidate or exclude it. [I felt] like a captain going down with his ship. Over time, this came to be less

important than accurately portraying the full spectrum of my sexuality.”

Nevertheless, everyone I spoke to said that there is room in the larger bi and pansexual communities for multiple labels to exist.

“I think there’s room for all of. We’re all here. And it’s our right to claim whichever label we want.” Tortorella said.

Bisexuality, to many, is also seen as an umbrella term, inclusive of sexually fluid labels like pansexual. There’s even been a push in the bisexual community to use the term bi+ to really emphasize that bisexuality is the larger encompassing term.

Jill B., even though they abandoned the bi label, still believes there is room in the queer community for the diversity of sexually fluid labels. “I’m hopeful that the spark in conversation regarding sexual fluidity will generally increase visibility for those who neither fully identify as straight or gay.”

Still, they’re not convinced if having all these labels will be beneficial to the community in the long run. As Jill B. notes, “I am not sure whether an increase in labels will prove to be unifying or divisive for us.”