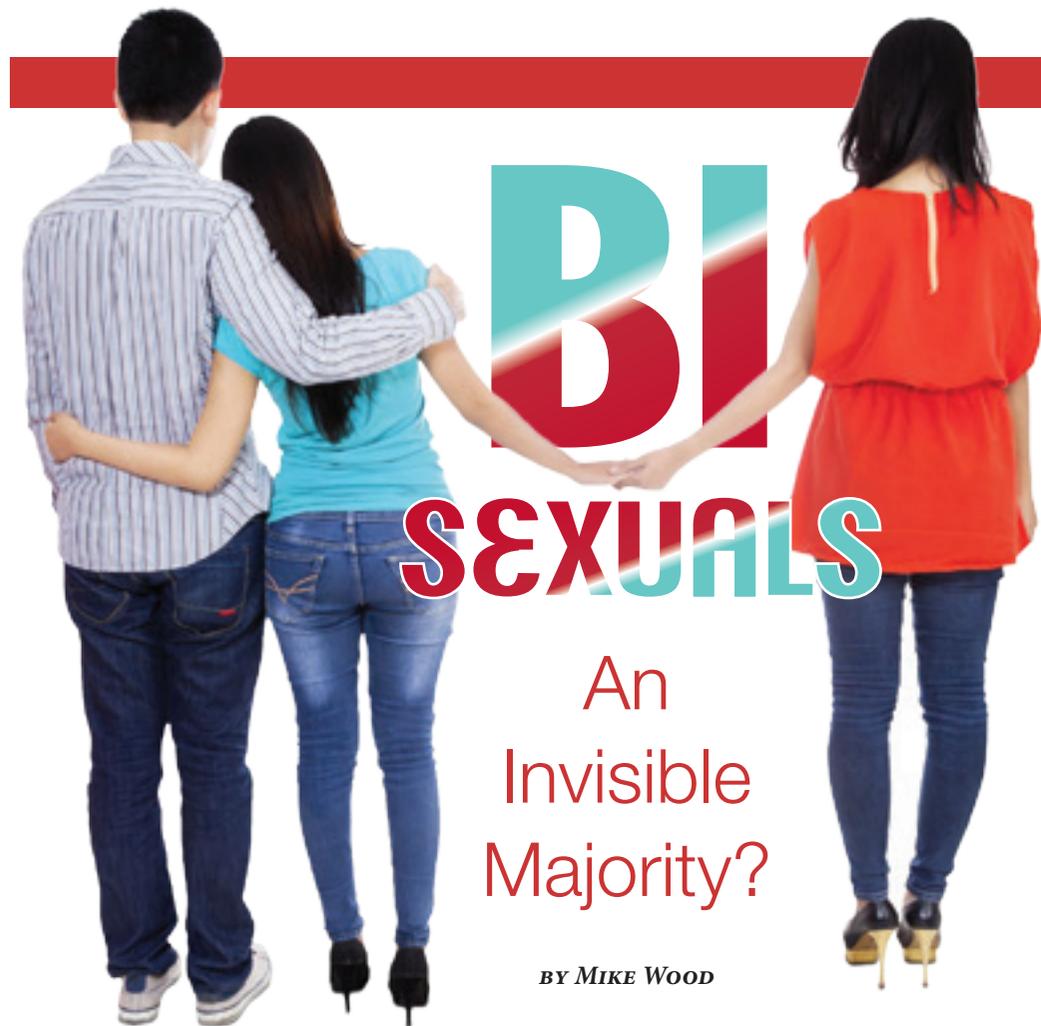




# central VOICE



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## BISEXUALS

### An Invisible Majority?

BY MIKE WOOD

Every member of the LGBT community understands that acceptance of who we are is of utmost importance in our lives. Yet there's one letter in the LGBT that is under the microscope of late and seems to be having its very existence questioned: Bisexuals.

According to the Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, among the 3.5% of the U.S. population who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, bisexuals comprise a slight majority (1.8% compared to 1.7% who identify as lesbian or gay). So if there are actually more bisexuals in this country, why is this group such an invisible majority?

Mention bisexuality and it's easily misunderstood by the larger part of the population, including heterosexuals and gays. The idea that a person can be attracted to both men and women is confusing for many to process, especially since traditional societal structures classify sexuality as one or the other, with no room for flexibility or fluidity.

**"...it's sort of a prerequisite that they're at least okay with my bisexuality, even if they don't fully understand it."**

Jeff Waters, 27, started self-identifying as bisexual just a few years ago and has only recently come out to his family and a handful of friends. "When I was a teenager, I knew that I wasn't straight, but I wasn't sure exactly what I was, which is why I didn't come out until more recently—I didn't really know what to come out as, and didn't really have a ton of examples of bisexual people to point to." While he's currently single, he does say that dating can be inhibiting: "Before I agree to meet up with someone, it's sort of a prerequisite that they're at least okay with my bisexuality, even if they don't fully understand it. But I do get a lot of messages from other men who say things like 'message me when you learn you're just gay', and women who, across the board, say 'I don't date bi guys - sorry!'"

Basilio A. Bonilla Jr., 23, identified as heterosexual until just about a year ago when he acknowledged to himself that he is bisexual. When he ran for Bethlehem

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### MILLENNIALS SPEAK OUT

Labels are for clothing not people, so the saying goes.

Yet in today's "selfie" world each of us can make our own rules. Monikers within the gay world - which

some call our alphabet soup - have evolved from "LGBT" to which has been added a Q to represent "questioning" to which is added an A for allies. Then we have another Q for "queers," who embrace the slur as a way to disarm the user and empower themselves..

Hard to know what's politically correct or acceptable *du jour* if that's your goal.

Central Voice recently sat down with a group of younger folks at the LGBT Community Center, Harrisburg. We asked them to describe their chosen labels. To enlighten us with their whys and wherefores.

We asked how each participant thought of himself or herself vis-a-vis a label or social expectation.

Rickie, 18, told us "I just knew I wasn't supposed to be born male. I just feel a stronger connection with men than women."

Liandra, 20, said, "I call myself bisexual and currently am in a heterosexual relationship."

"No labels apply to me while I'm alone, I'm just me," Denzel, 21, said.

Solona, 22, prefers to identify "as a transsexual woman who

is mostly gynephilic, meaning that I am mostly attracted to people who are women and/or present as female." She likes to call herself "transsexual" as opposed to the umbrella term "transgender" because she doesn't "identify as transgender before deciding to medically transition with hormone replacement therapy."

How comfortable are participants with how others may label them?

Denzel is sensitive to the need of others to have a label or designation for someone. He is usually comfortable with whatever label others may use to describe him. "I am this way because labels are limiting, I choose not to limit myself," he explains.

Rickie seems comfortable too with the ways others may view his sexuality. "I feel mutual. If that person feels that way, let them. Just because it seems the same, does not mean it is."

Liandra says, "I am bisexual because I love both genders  
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Are Labels Useful?

BY FRANK PIZZOLI

# BISexuals

## INVISIBLE MAJORITY?

Continued from page one

Area School Board, Bonilla Jr. campaigned on transparency. In the third year of a four-year term, he feels he can't hide. He has not yet been in a relationship with a man, but says he is comfortable declaring himself as bisexual. "Do I feel that it is a fair representation of who I will be in the future? I don't know. No one ever knows what can happen in the future, but as far as right now is concerned I am a bisexual male." When Bonilla Jr. first came out as bisexual at least two of his gay friends doubted his proclamation of bisexuality, but he says, "I am being honest with myself and should not be pressured into being who I'm not." Bonilla Jr. also believes that society is more accepting of bisexual females than it is of bisexual men, "I think a majority of men who are bisexual remain in the closet because our society is more open to bisexual women."

According to the same Williams Institute study referenced earlier, women are substantively more likely than men to identify as bisexual. A Pew Research Center study from 2013 supports this statistic citing that "four-in-ten respondents identify themselves as bisexual." That means 40 percent of the LGBT community identifies as bisexual, with women making up 29 percent of that number and men 11 percent.

Janice Rael, 45, says she never considered that she had same-sex attractions until shortly before her 22nd birthday, when, after some failed relationships with men, she admitted to herself that she had crushes on women. "As soon as I met and started dating my first girlfriend, I believed I was a lesbian, and came out as one," says Rael. "It took me a few more months to come to terms with the fact that I was still attracted to men despite my interest in women. I came out again, as bisexual. I have now been with the same partner, a man, for over 21 years, but I have never lost my bi identity."

Robyn Ochs, 55, came out to herself as bisexual 38 years ago, during her first weeks at college, and she has identified as bisexual ever since. She has shared her life with a woman who identifies as a lesbian for 17 years; they've been married for 10. Ochs is the editor of the *Bi Women Quarterly* and co-editor of *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexual around the World* and of the forthcoming anthology, *RECOGNIZE: The Voices of Bisexual Men*, which is due out September 1. "I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have the potential to be attracted—romantically and sexually—to people of more than one sex/gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree," explains Ochs.

We all might agree that human sexuality is more complex than simply black and white, and more akin to something with varying degrees of gray. But, in mainstream



society, sexual fluidity also seems to be more acceptable among women (think: Drew Barrymore or Anna Paquin) because it's cool and chic and even sexy, but for men? Well, not so much. Many may recall when handsome Olympic diver, Tom Daley, came out as bisexual...only to come out as gay a few months later and acknowledge he was dating Oscar-winning screenwriter Dustin Lance Black.

"I fully understand the psychological impetus to come out that way, and since it happens all the time, I think people just assume that everyone who says they're bisexual is just on the road to something else," admits Waters. As such, there's a notion, primarily among gay guys, that men who say they're bisexual are not being honest with themselves. "For many people, it's a method of self-protection from the backlash—often from conservative family members/friends—of being otherwise just gay, while still allowing yourself to introduce yourself as a non-straight person," continues Waters.

What this creates, however, is an invisibility factor for bisexuals, because they're still stuck in that closet that gays and lesbians have been pushing themselves out from in greater and greater numbers in recent years. "It is joked that bi men are mythical unicorns, since

we don't always see out bi men asserting themselves as bi," states Rael. "Sometimes I feel invisible, living as a suburban housewife married [to a man] for 20 years. I am afraid that people make incorrect assumptions about me based on the gender of my significant other. I want to be authentic, I want to be real. I don't want to hide who I am or who I love. But many bi people prefer the closet, to avoid discrimination and prejudice."

The perception of bisexuality in the LGBT community is troubling for all of those we spoke to because it denies a subset of people their authenticity, their truth. "In the mainstream and in LGBT communities there are huge social costs to coming out as bi, so many people refrain from speaking up. And one of the main challenges faced by bi folks is that we are simply not seen, not imagined. When people see a man and a woman in a relationship, they read them as two heterosexuals. When people see two women in a relationship, they read them both as lesbians. And two men together are read as gay. So only a small subset of bisexuals—those like me who loudly and persistently claim this identity, and those who are currently in polyamorous relationships with people of more

than one gender and out about it—get read as bi," explains Ochs.

We've all heard the myths about bisexuality: It's just a phase, they're confused, it's just a pit stop away from gay. But what all those we spoke to seem to agree on is that fluidity is a huge component of all human sexuality, not just bisexuality. "Any identity can be a phase—identities are just words that we use to describe ourselves to others. I have no doubt that there are men currently identifying as bi who will later identify as gay. There are also men who identify as gay, or as straight, who will later identify as bi, and men who identify as bi who will continue to identify as bi. And there are men who privately identify as bi but allow others to assume that they are straight or gay. It's certainly the easiest route to take," explains Ochs.

Herein lies the inherent problem, as bisexuals closet themselves fewer bisexuals come forward, but this begs the questions: Why should they have to come out publicly, and why do they have to prove themselves and their very existence? "It's pretty ridiculous to try to convince people that I exist, so I can't really be bothered with that, and I don't say that in a dramatic way. I am just not interested in debating my very existence with someone whose arms are folded tight," Waters says.

Attractions have both physical and emotional manifestations and until we've walked in another's shoes we shouldn't be so quick to label or assume each person's journey is the same as our own. "There are plenty of gay men who used to be married, and so they assume that because they were married to a woman, and now gay, that everybody else who might like women is following the same path. In all areas of life, not just pertaining to matters of sexuality, it is so important to remember that your experience is not necessarily going to be the experience of someone else. Not only is that okay, but that's the way it ought to be. Not only do you have permission to be yourself, you are supposed to be yourself. People come to their own understandings of themselves on their own time, and in different ways, and they might end up differently than you did," asserts Waters.

To put people in a neatly defined box that everybody can understand may be a matter of habit, but it's not necessarily productive. "I understand that each of us must choose the label that best suits us, or reject labels if that is your preference. I can see why it is easier for bi people in same-sex relationships to let people assume that they are gay or lesbian. I hope to one day see more bi people embrace their own orientation and come out of the closet. I hope to see more acceptance of bi people from both straight and gay communities. I hope that one day, bisexuality is recognized as the normal, stable orientation that it is," says Rael.



Bonilla



Rael



Ochs

# BISEXUALS



**46%**

bisexual women  
who have  
experienced rape



**47%**

bisexual men who  
have experienced  
sexual violence

## Report Details High Rates of Violence, Discrimination toward Bisexual People

According to a new report released, while more than half of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community identifies as bisexual, bisexual people are vulnerable to poverty, discrimination, and poor physical and mental health outcomes—often at rates higher than their lesbian and gay peers.

*Understanding Issues Facing Bisexual Americans* is a guide offering an overview of the economic and health disparities facing the bisexual community, and recommendations for supporting bisexual people through advocacy, research, and programming. The resource was developed by BiNet USA, the Bisexual Resource Center, and the Movement Advancement Project (MAP). The report is available at [www.lgbtmap.org/understanding-issues-facing-bisexual-americans](http://www.lgbtmap.org/understanding-issues-facing-bisexual-americans).

“Despite comprising the largest population within the LGBT community, bisexual people are among the most invisible,” said Ineke Mushovic, executive director of the Movement Advancement Project. “The failure to account for bisexual lives and experiences compounds a lack of social support and keeps bisexual people in the closet.”

Bisexual people experience significant health, safety, and economic disparities. These include:

**POVERTY:** Approximately 25% of bisexual men and 30% of bisexual women live in poverty, compared to 15% and 21% of heterosexual men and women, respectively, and 20% and 23% of gay men and lesbians.

**EMPLOYMENT:** While 20% of bisexuals report experiencing a negative employment decision based on their sexual orientation, almost 60% of bisexual people report hearing anti-bisexual jokes and comments on the job. Nearly half of bisexual people report that they are not out to any of their coworkers (49%), com-

pared to just 24% of lesbian and gay people.

**VIOLENCE:** Bisexual women experience significantly higher rates of violence—both overall and intimate partner violence—compared to lesbians and straight women: 46% of bisexual women have experienced rape, compared to 13% and 17% of lesbian and straight women, respectively. Bisexual men also report higher rates of sexual violence; nearly half of bisexual men (47%) report experiencing sexual violence other than rape in their lifetime.

**SUICIDE:** One study found bisexuals were four times more likely, and lesbian and gay adults two times more likely, to report attempted suicide than straight adults.

“Bisexual people often face pervasive stereotypes and myths surrounding bisexuality,” said Ellyn Ruthstrom, president of the Bisexual Resource Center. “The fear of being stereotyped manifests itself in a real way: bisexual people are six times more likely than gay men and lesbians to be closeted. This impacts the emotional well-being of many bisexual people and is a contributing factor to the community’s higher rates of poor physical and mental health.”

“More and more organizations are realizing that they need specific resources and programming for bisexual people,” said Faith Cheltenham, president of BiNet USA. “Cultural competence and deliberate and thoughtful visibility will support the bisexual community and combat stigma and discrimination against bisexual people.”

*BiNet USA is America’s civil-rights & advocacy group for all bisexual, fluid, pansexual, and queer-identified people, and their families, friends, and allies. [www.binetusa.org](http://www.binetusa.org)*

## FACTS:

### Bisexual Men Have Higher STI Rates than Gays

Men who have sex with men and women (MSMW) have a much higher rate of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) when compared with gay or straight men, ScienceDaily Reports. Publishing their findings in *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted a review of studies pertaining to MSMW published between 2008 and 2013.

MSMW make up an estimated 2 percent of the sexually active males in the United States.

The researchers found that while the prevalence of HIV is lower among MSMW when compared with gay men, MSMW are more likely than straight men to be living with the virus. MSMW are also less likely to undergo HIV testing than either gay or straight men. Twenty-one percent of MSMW reported receiving treatment for STIs in the past year, compared with 12 percent of gay men and 2.3 percent of heterosexual men.

The investigators theorized that behavioral elements may account for the disproportionate rates of HIV and STIs among MSMW. When compared with gay or straight men, MSMW may use condoms less frequently, start having sex earlier, be more likely to experience rape, have more sexual partners, be more inclined toward substance abuse, be more likely to have sex for money or goods, and may be more likely to have sex with male or female partners who themselves have higher risk factors for HIV or STIs. In addition, social stigma toward bisexuals may play a role in the higher HIV and STI rates among MSMW, as may economic concerns and pressures to conform to a masculine ideal.

“MSMW’s attitudes toward pregnancy influence their sexual health. Qualitative data from black men suggest that desires to prevent pregnancy may prompt some MSMW to consistently use condoms with women,” William L. Jeffries IV, PhD, MPH, writes in the paper. “Yet, MSMW may avoid condom use when their female partners use other contraceptives or when female partners perceive condom use as a sign of relationship infidelity. Further, MSMW’s desires to produce offspring biologically may prompt sex without a condom with female partners. In this regard, desires for fatherhood may indirectly increase these men’s vulnerability to HIV/STIs and transmission of these infections within their sexual networks.”