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Verbalizing the Self

Why Bisexuals Are Fighting to Update the Definition of Bisexuality

by [Rachel Charlene Lewis \(/web/20230129032538/https://www.bitchmedia.org/profile/rachel-charlene-lewis\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.bitchmedia.org/profile/rachel-charlene-lewis)

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In 2018, [Merriam-Webster announced](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2018-justice) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2018-justice>) “pansexual” as one of its words of the year. In an [April 2018 blog post](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/janelle-monae-out-as-pansexual-20180426) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/janelle-monae-out-as-pansexual-20180426>), the dictionary explained, “Pansexual was among our top lookups on April 26th, 2018, after singer Janelle Monáe was quoted in [Rolling Stone](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/janelle-monae-frees-herself-629204/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/janelle-monae-frees-herself-629204/>) magazine self-identifying with the term.” Searches rose 11,000 percent after Monáe said in that interview that she’s “someone who has been in relationships with both men and women—I consider myself to be a free-ass motherfucker.” As the percentage illustrates, when people learned that a celebrity identified as “pansexual,” they had an increased investment in pansexuality and more questions about its meaning. Following the announcement, Robyn Ochs, bisexual activist and editor of the [Bi Women Quarterly](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/http://biwomenquarterly.com/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/http://biwomenquarterly.com/>), [tweeted](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://twitter.com/robynochs/status/1078689926491893760?s=20) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://twitter.com/robynochs/status/1078689926491893760?s=20>), “#Pansexual is one of the Merriam Webster’s words of 2018. Yay! That’s one of my identities, along with #bisexual and #queer.” In a follow-up tweet, Ochs [continued](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://twitter.com/robynochs/status/1078690646913966081?s=20) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://twitter.com/robynochs/status/1078690646913966081?s=20>), “And maybe, just maybe, @MerriamWebster will update its definition of bisexuality so that it is reflective of the one used by most of the #bisexual people I know. #MerriamWebster: are you listening? Hello? Hello? Can you hear us?”

Ochs wasn’t the only person fighting to change Merriam-Webster’s definition of bisexuality. Five years ago, [Katie Carbrey launched a petition](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.thepetitionsite.com/901/624/147/change-the-definition-of-bisexuality-on-dictionary.com-to-reflect-the-bisexual-communitys-definition/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.thepetitionsite.com/901/624/147/change-the-definition-of-bisexuality-on-dictionary.com-to-reflect-the-bisexual-communitys-definition/>) on Care2 with the same goal. It reached 1,200 supporters, with commenters noting their reasons for signing. “Because I’m sick of being told that the way I and others define our own sexuality is wrong because ‘that’s not what the dictionary says,’” one person wrote. “I have been an out bisexual for 20 years and having people quote your inaccurate definition of bisexual to me in an attempt to invalidate what myself and the rest of then community uses is harmful,” another person commented. At the time of Ochs’s

tweet, Merriam-Webster was still offering a largely inaccurate definition of bisexuality that read, “possessing characters of both sexes and especially both male and female reproductive structures,” or “of relating to, or characterized by sexual and romantic attraction to members of both sexes.” Luckily, thanks to organizing and the work of Ochs, who collaborated with GLAAD to lobby Merriam-Webster to convince them to update the definition, the change happened this spring.

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“In the beginning of 2019, a friend put me in touch with a friend who worked at Merriam-Webster, and they explained that to change the definition, there has to be [proof] that the definition isn’t [true to] current usage,” Ochs told *Bitch* about the decision to push Merriam-Webster. “I said, ‘Look, this is how our community is defining this word.’ There were still a variety of definitions, but none of them looked like Merriam-Webster. Nothing changed.” Ochs was relieved when she noticed that Merriam-Webster had, at some point in the spring or summer (the update isn’t dated on their website), the definition had slightly shifted. “In the present, I was preparing a session I am going to be facilitating on bi and pan identities, and I went to Merriam-Webster so I could take a screenshot of the old, frustrating definition, and lo and behold there was a somewhat updated definition.” But it still had a few glaring flaws. “Of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one’s same sex and of the opposite sex,” the definition reads as of today. “Of, or relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one’s own gender identity and other gender identities.” Or “relating to, involving, or characteristic of both sexes.”

The first and third definition frustrate me the most because the use of “opposite sex” still clearly relies on this binaristic understanding of gender in which one is attracted to people who are the same or opposite sex from them. This leaves out nonbinary and genderqueer people who some bisexuals are also attracted to. It’s not a simple either-or; it’s a both, and. The use of “both sexes” also implies the same argument; there are two options, and you’re related to or involving both. These concerns might seem nitpicky, but we’re in a time when bisexuality is on the rise and is still simultaneously erased and questioned on a constant loop. The number of bisexual people [has tripled since 2008](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://qz.com/1601527/the-rise-of-) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://qz.com/1601527/the-rise-of->

[bisexuals-in-america-is-driven-by-women/](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/07/health/bisexuality-on-the-rise/index.html)), especially among [women](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.pnas.org/content/117/31/18369) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/07/health/bisexuality-on-the-rise/index.html>), though researchers have made the case that homophobia and biphobia prevents us from better understanding bisexual men (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.pnas.org/content/117/31/18369>). Biphobia is still prevalent, and we're only now to the point where television characters will [use the word "bisexual,"](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/bisexual-erasure-grace-and-frankie) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/bisexual-erasure-grace-and-frankie>) even if their experiences clearly [illustrate bisexuality](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/bisexual-characters-on-television) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/bisexual-characters-on-television>). That's why it's so important that we have nuanced and accurate explanations of [bisexuality](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://theestablishment.co/when-are-we-going-to-get-over-biphobia/index.html) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://theestablishment.co/when-are-we-going-to-get-over-biphobia/index.html>): there's a lot of muck for this information to wade through, given the [near-constant questioning](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.advocate.com/bisexual/2020/7/21/male-bisexuality-real-new-study-confirms-once-and-all) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.advocate.com/bisexual/2020/7/21/male-bisexuality-real-new-study-confirms-once-and-all>) of bisexuality and if [bisexual people really exist](https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/magazine/the-scientific-quest-to-prove-bisexuality-exists.html) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/magazine/the-scientific-quest-to-prove-bisexuality-exists.html>).

"I've identified as bi for 44 years this month, and one of the ongoing, continuous frustrations has been the disconnect between what I mean by the word 'bisexual,' and what other people think I mean."

TWEET THIS (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230129032538/https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?url=https://bit.ly/3CPSOA2&via=bitchmedia&text='I've identified as bi for 44 years, and one of the ongoing frustrations has been the disconnect between what I mean by the word 'bisexual,' and what other people think I mean.'> — [@ROBYNOCHS](https://twitter.com/robbynochs)).

That’s why the fight to ensure accurate definitions matters to people like Ochs. “People go to the dictionary to understand words; that’s what dictionaries are for,” Ochs said. “We go to them, and we look for the meaning of things. I’ve spoken to many people who have not used the word ‘bisexual’ to describe themselves [specifically because] they didn’t match the dictionary definition.” Definitions matter. There’s a reason that we see dictionaries as more legitimate sources of information than the average website, and that we turn to them even as we’re trying to figure out how to better describe ourselves. “I’ve also had people throw the dictionary definition at me as proof that being bisexual excludes and harms nonbinary people,” Ochs said. “What I’ve been using since the ’90s does no such thing, but dictionaries have authority. They can help, and they can do harm. They have power in their officialness.” More accurate terminology gives us what we need, especially as LGBTQ people, to do something as simple as search these terms on various websites and figure out what being queer means for our futures. When I realized I was bi, I immediately took to the internet, combing through the likes of *Autostraddle* (a website I still write for) to find something that made me feel seen.

Even now, as I continue to better understand my own queerness, I still search for words that feel the most right. It’s never just about a label; it’s about the self. It’s hard to know yourself when you don’t even have the word to put to your feelings, your experiences, and your sense of self. As we fight through structural oppression, biphobia in our social circles, and healthcare disparities, at the very least, we deserve a dictionary definition that accurately represents our community. “I’ve identified as bi for 44 years this month, and one of the ongoing, continuous frustrations has been the disconnect between what I mean by the word ‘bisexual,’ and what other people think I mean,” Ochs says. Hopefully, this can be one step toward lessening that frustration.

Read this Next: From Online Discourse to IRL ([/web/20230129032538/https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/bisexual-round-table](https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/bisexual-round-table))



by Rachel Charlene Lewis

October 7, 2019

Bitch is lucky to have multiple bisexual employees, so we're using this roundtable to parse out our own experiences as bisexuals.

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BY RACHEL CHARLENE LEWIS

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Rachel Charlene Lewis has written about culture, identity, and the internet for publications including i-D, Teen Vogue, Refinery29, Greatist, Glamour, Autostraddle, Ravishly, SELF, StyleCaster, The Frisky (RIP), The Mary Sue, and elsewhere. Her literary work, reviews, and interviews have been published in Catapult, The Los Angeles Review of Books, The Normal School, Publisher's Weekly, The Offing, and in several other magazines. She is on [Twitter \(https://
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