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# On the Importance of Bi+ Visibility: an Interview with Robyn Ochs

*Alex Donatelli*

11–13 minutes

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September 23rd, 2023 marks the 25th anniversary of Bi+ Visibility Day- a day to recognize and celebrate the Bi+ community and challenge bisexual erasure.



A champion for the bisexual community, [Robyn Ochs](#) is an educator, speaker, grassroots activist, and editor of [Bi Women Quarterly](#) and two anthologies: the 42-country collection [Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World](#) and [RECOGNIZE: The Voices of Bisexual Men](#). She was named by *Teen Vogue* as one of “9 Bisexual Women Who are Making History,” and she was chosen to represent Massachusetts on the *Advocate*’s “50 States, 50 Heroes” list. She is the recipient of Campus Pride’s Voice & Action

Award.

Among other things, she crafted the definition of bisexuality that is used by many bi+ activists around the world: “I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge in myself the potential to be attracted — romantically and/or sexually — to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree.”

To commemorate Bi+ Visibility Day, Campus Pride interviewed Robyn Ochs to discuss her journey as a life-long activist and her thoughts on the state of bisexuality today.

**Q: What does bi visibility mean to you?**

I came out to myself as bisexual 47 years ago this month. I didn’t know a single bisexual person. This was B.G. (before Google), so I lacked tools to find information or other people who shared my identity. It was scary, it was isolating, and for 5 very long years I was trapped in the space between knowing and being. I *knew* that I was bisexual, but I couldn’t imagine a way to *be* a bisexual person in the world. So I remained silent, and I was suffocating in my silence.

Finally, a co-workers sat me down and came out to me as bisexual. I blurted out, “So am I!” and my life changed – everything changed. So, to answer the question “What does bi visibility mean to me?” – By making herself visible, my co-worker’s let me know that I could exist as a bisexual person. Every time any bi+ person comes out as bisexual, pansexual, queer, fluid, or omnisexual, we become a beacon for others. We also remind non-bi+ people that bi+ people exist. Bi+ visibility is everything.

**Q: You mentioned several different terms that encompass bi+,**

## **can you speak on the evolution of language since you first started your activism journey?**

I facilitate a workshop called “Beyond Binaries” in which people are invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire about their identity and their experiences. I’ve been doing evolving versions of this workshop now for decades, and I’ve seen changes in how people respond.

People are using a wider variety of labels, and many identify with multiple labels simultaneously. I personally identify as bi, and as queer, and as pan. People are increasingly using identity words as adjectives instead of as proper nouns, thus allowing for an increasing number of possible labels.

One of the things I emphasize in my work is that identity is a journey, and that it’s perfectly okay to live in a state of questioning. I admire people who are comfortable occupying a space of uncertainty and open to the possibility of change.

### **Q: How do you think labels factor into bi+ visibility?**

Back when I came out, it felt like there were only two options – gay or straight. You were expected to decide which one of those two boxes you fit in, and then stay there for the rest of your life. Some of us fought hard to create a third box: bisexual, but I prefer to think now that there are no boxes – there are spaces. Imagine a large field: some people stay in one area of the field, and others move around; some people move a little bit over time, and others move a great deal; some people move in only one direction, and others move back and forth and around over time – and that’s all okay. The labels we use describe a range of identity spaces and cover a wide variety of individual experiences.

Some people question why we need labels at all, but there are still people who don't even know that we exist. For that reason, and for each other, there is value in making ourselves visible when we can. My hope is that someday labels will still exist, but they won't have the same social weight. I want to live in a world where being lesbian or gay or bi or trans or queer or ace are just interesting facts about you. "You're bisexual? That's cool, I'm left-handed."

**Q: What are your thoughts on intergenerational connections within the LGBTQIA+ community?**

I'd like to see intentional, ongoing, intergenerational conversations. After 47 years of identifying as bi, I have helpful, important wisdom to share. But, if I didn't listen to people all along the age spectrum, my perspective would be very limited. Everything that I teach I've learned, and students have been my best teachers.

One of my mentors turned 18 in May; he came out as bi when he was 12. I've known him his entire life. I have learned so much from him, and in return, he has learned from me. We all have so much to learn from each other and we are stronger together.

**Q: How do we work on building solidarity and connections within the LGBTQIA+ community?**

Our larger LGBTQ+ community is full of people who have experienced hurt. When you are hurting, it's very easy to distrust other people. Sometimes we gather in our little subcategories and do what we can to heal, to feel safe, and to support each other. These spaces are important but, for me, there is more to community.

I value my beautiful bi+ spaces and I am also engaged with a larger community committed to working in coalition to create a

world in which people of all orientations, genders, racial and ethnic identities, abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, etc. can live safely, openly, and with full access and opportunity. We need to honor and respect our similarities and our differences. We need to center those who are the most marginalized. We need to listen to and learn from each other.

**Q: What would you say is “the state of affairs” of bisexuality today?**

Less than 1% of people in my age cohort self-identify as bisexual. In Gen-Z, the percentage is 13%. What it says to me is that people today have more resources, more information, and more beacons. I think of shows like *Heartstopper* – there are more shows and YA novels with bi+ characters, and more out bi+ public figures in the arts, in politics, even in sports. We have always existed, but we didn’t feel like we could make ourselves visible. Now, increasingly, we do, and we are.

Another explanation for the increase in the percentage of people identifying as bi+ is that its definition has expanded. I am proud to have had a role in this change. Here’s how I define bisexuality: “I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge in myself the potential to be attracted – romantically and/or sexually – to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree. For me, the *bi* in *bisexual* refers to same and different gender attraction.”

Bi+ folks have too often dealt with imposter syndrome, wondering (or having others insist) that if they are not equally attracted to men and women, if they have not had an equal number of relationships with men and women, if most of their attractions have

been toward a particular gender – they are not “really” bisexual. They’ve also likely been told that the term bisexual is binary and excludes the possibility of attraction to trans and nonbinary people. This expanded definition addresses this. So many people have told me that seeing my definition allowed them to give themselves permission to claim a bisexual identity.

Bi+ *invisibility* continues to be a huge challenge. People in the United States, for the most part, think in binary frames, and the dominant frame for sexual orientation is gay/straight, making it difficult to imagine identities between and beyond this frame. As long as we continue to engage in binary thinking, bi+ *invisibility* will persist.

Bi+ people face challenges that overlap heavily with those faced by lesbian and gay people, and we also face unique challenges. For example, data shows that bi+ people have higher rates of suicidality and intimate partner violence. One unique challenge we face is the prevalent belief that bisexual people don’t experience oppression, or that if we do, we’re at most only 50% oppressed. The reality is, if we weren’t experiencing oppression, we wouldn’t have higher rates of various mental health and other issues. In my experience, this gaslighting – this denial of our lived experience – is very stressful.

**Q: What are some examples of bi+ representation that bring you joy?**

I am an enormous fan of young adult LGBTQ+ literature, in part because there are so many excellent and diverse bi+ characters. I go into YA novels and feel nourished, happy, whole, possible. I wonder sometimes what I would be like today if I’d had those

resources as a teenager. One of my goals as an activist has been to create resources that didn't exist back when I needed them so that they will be available for people who need them today.

Visibility matters. Sarah McBride, who is trans and bi+, is a Delaware state representative currently running for state senate. Andrea Jenkins, president of the Minneapolis City Council, is a trans, Black, bi+ woman. What excites me is that Sarah and Andrea are not the only out bi+ politicians today. We are still underrepresented, but even in this time of violent, vicious backlash, we continue to make progress.

Every time a public figure takes the risk of coming out as bi+, I feel the warmth of their light. I feel nourished by them. Their existence and their presence bring me joy and a powerful dose of Vitamin B+.

**Q: You've been doing this type of activism for a long time, so what are some of the ways that you've been able to take care of yourself and sustain the work that you've been doing?**

I've been an activist since I was a child. My mother has always been politically engaged and I grew up going to protests, writing letters, and speaking out. I see my activism as a life-long commitment, and I don't want to become a grumpy, burned-out former-activist (I know many of these). This means pacing myself. It means taking the time – literally and figuratively – to dance. I think of Emma Goldman's quote: "If I can't dance, then I don't want to be part of your revolution." I get enough sleep. I know I will be more productive and more useful to the world if I am rested and healthy. I listen to my body and my brain, and when they tell me they are overwhelmed, I try to figure out a way to step back to heal

and recover.

**Q: Finally, what advice do you have for those wanting to support the bi+ community?**

Continue to educate yourselves, and speak out. Just being a nice person who doesn't discriminate against bi+ people isn't enough. Those who want to support us must do so actively. To be an accomplice or ally to any group of people requires making your solidarity *known*; and you need to speak out in support of us whether or not we are in the room.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*