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Q&A: Bisexual Activist Robyn Ochs On Bi-visibility, Erasure, And The Future Of The Bi+ Movement

Zachary Zane

15–19 minutes

When I first met Robyn Ochs at a Bisexual Resource Center fundraising event in Cambridge, MA, I was star struck. As a fellow bi+ advocate and writer, I had not only read her two anthologies, but also have quoted her [definition of bisexuality](#) in a number of my pieces. After building up the courage to speak to her, she agreed to conduct a formal interview for *the Huffington Post*. During our interview, I was able to ask her tough questions about bi-invisibility, bi-erasure, and the future of the bi+ movement.

Zachary Zane: Hi Robyn! First off, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today and for inviting me into your home. For those of us who don't know who you are, can you tell us a little bit about your work and your journey?

Robyn Ochs: I've been an activist since the early 1980s, and have engaged in different issues and approaches over the years, so trying to describe my work in a sound bite is difficult, but what I've come up with is: writer, speaker, teacher, [and] activist. That

pretty much summarizes what I do. My work includes bisexual advocacy as a central focus, but I've gone broader and now focus on identity in general. Much of my work involves pointing out the complications of identity and giving people the tools to understand identity in a complex, nuanced, intersectional, and messy way.



So with regards to identity, how do you balance this complexity with the fact that we're trying to have a political movement? I'm all for people identifying however they'd like, but for the sake of resources, and powers in numbers, don't we need a label to rally behind?

The fact is, our identities *are* messy. We can pretend we're much simpler than we are, but that doesn't move us forward. Organizing gets more complicated, but also more interesting, when you acknowledge the messiness of identity, and take into account the various labels we use to describe our sexual orientations and genders. And people, at various points in their lives, may change

their labels or add labels. There is growing resistance to the idea that you must choose one label and are required to stick with it forever. Therefore, the way to organize is around ideas and not labels, idea politics rather than identity politics. We don't need to organize groups of people who use the same identity word, but rather, people who share values and visions.

And we need to organize in a way that takes into account that there is no singular experience shared by everyone who uses a particular identity label. Everyone has multiple identities, and each of these affects how we experience our other identities. One of the things I didn't originally know, but have come to understand, is that *my* bisexual experience is not *the* bisexual experience. It's *a* bisexual experience. To be effective, I need to keep in my mind [that] my experience of identity is very specific. It's shaped by my age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, politics, where I grew up, [and] where I live now. Sharing an identity does not mean having the same experience.

That's right, and you've done a great job at bringing together all these unique voices and experiences in your anthologies.

Thank you. I've tried to, and my growing understanding of intersectionality and the interconnectedness of identity has changed the direction of my work. What I'm most interested in doing now, rather than telling my own story, is creating platforms to amplify the voices of others. *Getting Bi* [Voices of Bisexuals Around the World], *Recognize* [The Voices of Bisexual Men—An Anthology], the *Bi Women Quarterly*—all these are virtual stages that we built and invited people to step onto to share their varied experience. In each of these projects, I've said to people, "If you're someone who rarely sees yourself represented, then your voice is

particularly important. We want you to participate in this project.”

This is the work that now excites me.



Your work has been so helpful in bringing multiple voices of bisexuals into the public eye, but why do you think bi-erasure, in general, is so prominent?

I see a number of reasons. One is that bisexual people are very hard to see. If we see a bisexual person alone, they will most likely be read as heterosexual because that’s the default assumption in

this culture. If we see a bisexual woman with a woman, we see a lesbian couple – or two straight friends. If she’s with a man, we read [them as] a straight couple. So the only time bisexual people are visible is when we are loudly and openly promiscuous or polyamorous. As a result, people are left with two misassumptions: that there aren’t that many bisexual people, and that all bisexual people, are, by definition, polyamorous. Now, of course *some* are, but so, too, are *some* straight people, *some* lesbians, and *some* gay men. I simply challenge the idea that that polyamory is a definitional characteristic of bisexuality. But because of this, bisexual people who are single or monogamous are erased.

A second reason [for the high prevalence of bi-erasure] is that people tend toward binary thinking. In the U.S., the racial binary remains black and white, despite all evidence to the contrary. The gender binary remains man/woman despite the many people who identify otherwise. The political binary remains Democrat and Republican, though in reality, political affiliation is much more complicated than that, and there are certainly more than two parties. And the sexual orientation binary remains gay and straight.

One thing for me, now, being polyamorous, is that I often feel guilty when I write. Before being poly, I spoke about how bisexuals don’t need multiple people of various genders to make us happy, but I’m realizing I actually might.

But here’s the thing, Zach: You’re not responsible for maintaining the purity of the brand! There’s so much pressure on folks in stigmatized groups to do just that.

Yes! As some who identifies as bisexual, I often feel the

weight of the world on my shoulders because I'll be the first out bisexual person they've met.

It's tough! When I was 30, my then partner – who identified as lesbian – left me for another woman. I was heartbroken, but one thing that made me furious was the realization that, as a bisexual woman, had I done something similar to her, there would have been a very loud chorus of “See you shouldn't have gotten involved with a bisexual woman. I told you she'd leave you for someone else!” But when she did that to me, all people said is, “That's too bad.”

It made me angry to realize I don't have the luxury of doing the same stupid things everyone else gets to do. As a bisexual person, I'm held to a higher standard. I'm held responsible for “my people.” It's unfair. And a bisexual person who happens to be polyamorous – like you – often feels responsible for perpetuating a stereotype. But the reality is that's not your job. It's not your job to modify your behavior to make other people more comfortable. It's your responsibility to be true to yourself and to live your life.

I couldn't agree more.

And as someone who's been an activist for a very long time, I've learned “We're not like that!” isn't a useful response to the stereotype that we're all polyamorous. I instead say, “That's not a definitional characteristic of bisexuality.” I've changed the way I respond to stereotypes.

So what is your take on monogamy and non-monogamous relationships?

I think there are two types of monogamy. I call these reflexive monogamy and radical monogamy. Reflexive monogamy refers to

absorbing the messages we've absorbed from a young age that we're supposed to be monogamous, and taking for granted that monogamy is superior. Radical monogamy, as I define it, is throwing away the *should* and asking yourself the question, "What type of relationship structure works best for me in this relationship?" and then choosing based on your own needs and those of your partner – or partners.

So for me, being monogamous – *now* – isn't because I believe monogamy is superior. It used to be that, because I drank the Kool-Aid like most people, but now it's about choosing what works best for me. That's very different than reflexive monogamy.

At the other extreme, some folks have the idea that monogamy is retrograde, but I believe actively reflecting on and then *choosing* monogamy is radical. In a culture full of *shoulds*, insisting on your right to choose what is best for you is radical.



Changing the topic a little bit, I know you're heavily involved in trans activism. We now think of gender and sexuality as being two distinct entities, but we also know there's a [higher rate of trans/genderqueer people who identity as bi+](#) than cisgender folk. Does it mean gender and sexuality are more interrelated that we previously imagined?

I do think that when you open one door it can open other doors. I have a number of friends who identity as biracial and bisexual who believe that understanding one has helped them understand the other. Once you have that feeling of liminality, it's easier to see that that there are no crisp, clear borders around your other identities. It becomes easier to see the complexities of identity.

I thought you were going somewhere else with that question, but one of the reasons I now do activism for transgender people is because I know from personal experience how difficult it is to have to defend the validity of my experience all the time. And I believe that is one thing I share with trans people—the basic level of disbelief from the people around us saying, “You're not what you say you are. You're wrong!” I take [trans] people at their word. That simple act of respect and acknowledgment is so important.

We should all have a fundamental right to be respected.

Yes, exactly! When I hear people say dismissive things about teenagers, like, “Oh those kids don't know what they're doing.” (*She shook her head side to side*). Youth know a lot more than adults give them credit for. And they certainly know more than the adults around them about what's happening inside of their own heads and bodies. Maybe they haven't figured out what to call it, and that's okay. We're all figuring it out throughout our lifetime. But

as one of my students said, it's *Identity*, not *you* identity. It's *my* identity, not *your* identity. And I try to live by that. If somebody tells me something about their experience of self, it's my job to believe them.

And if it changes, who cares? There doesn't need to be an "I told you so!"

That's another thing I try to emphasize in my work—that identity is a journey, and you don't have to have all the answers. It's okay to live with uncertainty. And it's okay, if at some point in your life, you realize that a different word fits you better. We spend our lives discovering ourselves.

That's what life is.

There's no shame in that. But we're taught to choose an identity, and if we don't stick with it, we're told we're being inconsistent or disloyal, especially when we come out as lesbian or gay, and then later come out as bisexual.

It's like you're either with us or against us. There's no middle ground.

We're not sports teams, and even sports teams trade players all the time! But we're not on teams. When you get out of identity politics and into idea politics, it doesn't matter how you identify; what matters is whether you're willing to stand with me. Are you gonna show up? That's what matters. And then, when you consider intersectionality, it gets even more complicated. Are you gonna show up for things that won't impact you as directly? Will you stand up for the people around you who experience challenges and struggles that you may not be experiencing yourself?

Very true. Moving on a little from this, how do bisexuals get more funding, groups, and specific programs?

Oh god, we need funding! But some things are different now. We now have data that shows that about [half of LGB people identify as B](#). We didn't have that before. We now have clear and disturbing data that bi+ people are experiencing an immense amount of identity stress. We're experiencing [high rates of depression, suicidality, self-harm, smoking and alcohol abuse, intimate-partner violence](#), and we are more likely to experience feelings of isolation than monosexuals. There's data from a recent [HRC study](#) that finds bi+ youth are less likely than lesbian and gay youth to feel there's a supportive adult who they can talk to. There's a recent [YouGov study](#) showing if you ask people where they fall on a continuum, a third of 18-24 year olds in the U.S. and Israel put themselves along the continuum, rather than at either end. And in the UK, [the percentage is 50%](#). So we now have evidence that there are a lot of us, that we have distinct needs and challenges, and we therefore need specific care and attention. We're in a place now where these tools are lying on the table, and the question is whether we can persuade the larger LGBTQ+ community to pick up these tools and do something with them. We're in a moment full of potential.

My last question, and we touched on this a little bit, but what are things we can do to increase visibility and minimize erasure going forward?

For those of us for whom it's safe to come out: Come out often and to as many people as you possibly can. We need to tell our stories, and create safe spaces for others to tell theirs. We need to keep the pressure on LGBTQ+ organizations, funders, and any other

organizations that serve LGBTQ+ people, to see us and recognize our specific needs. We have a tremendous amount of work to do. I believe the power of binaries is so strong that our work will never be done, so we'll need to keep on reminding people – over and over – that we're here.

[Robyn Ochs](#) is a writer, speaker, teacher, and activist. She collected stories of bisexuals from many different walks of life for her [two co-edited anthologies](#): *Recognize: The Voices of Bisexual Men* and *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals Around the World*. She's also the editor of [Bi Women Quarterly](#).

Photos courtesy of Robyn Ochs

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