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The evolution of the word 'bisexual' — and why it's still misunderstood

By Alex Berg

7–9 minutes

When Martin Rawlings-Fein, 43, first thought he might be bisexual in the 1990s, he saw the label as limiting. It wasn't until he met bi people who also identify as transgender and/or outside the gender binary that he realized this perception was something he needed to rethink. Rawlings-Fein, a trans man, said at the time people were “really confused” that a transgender person could be anything other than straight and that a bisexual person could be anything other than [cisgender](#).

“At first I was like, ‘bi, binary, well duh,’ but then I started looking at all of those people who were bi at that time, and a lot of them were trans or genderqueer, or in some way they were against the binary in their life, in their expression,” Rawlings-Fein, the former lead organizer for the [Bay Area Bisexual+ & Pansexual Network](#), told NBC News. “I started looking at all of those people who were bi at that time. I was like, ‘Wow, this is something I have to rethink and look at, reframe it.’”





Martin Rawlings-Fein. Kelley Clements

Decades after coming out as bisexual, Rawlings-Fein said he and other advocates still face the misconception that the term bisexual means their attraction is restricted to the gender binary — meaning those who identify as exclusively male or female. Amid this year's [Bisexual Awareness Week](#), which culminates with Bi Visibility Day on Sept. 23, activists and bisexual-identified people told NBC News that this is a pervasive stereotype, despite published documents dating to the 1990s that clarify the term's expansive meaning and Merriam-Webster Dictionary's update to its definition this past spring.

Beyond attraction to 'both men and women'

The first known use of the word "bisexual" was in 1793, though it meant "possessing characters of both sexes" at the time, according to its Merriam-Webster entry. The definition has changed and expanded many times over the centuries — including this year.

Bisexual+ advocate Robyn Ochs, 61, said she accidentally noticed that Merriam-Webster changed its definition of “bisexual” during a recent Google search. After the 200-year-old dictionary company named the nonbinary pronoun “they” its [2019 Word of the Year](#), Ochs said she wrote a letter in collaboration with the LGBTQ media advocacy organization GLAAD asking for an update to the word “bisexual,” because the expanded definition of “they” created “a contradiction in your binary definition of bisexuality.”



Robyn Ochs. Marilyn Humphries

Prior to the change, [Merriam-Webster](#) defined bisexuality as “attraction to both men and women.” In April, a [more inclusive definition was added](#): “of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's own gender identity and of other gender identities.” The change was due to a regularly scheduled update, according to Peter Sokolowski, an editor-at-large for Merriam-Webster.com.

Since the 1990s, however, Ochs, the editor of *Bi Women Quarterly*, has [defined bisexuality](#) as “the potential to be attracted — romantically and/or sexually — to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree.” She credits the work of Bay Area activists for helping introduce her to this expansive understanding.

From the Kinsey Scale to the ‘Bisexual Manifesto’

As “a child of the ‘40s,” activist ABilly Jones-Hennin, 78, said he first encountered ideas about bisexuality in a book he found in his father’s library that contained information about the Kinsey Scale, a measure of an individual’s sexuality [published in 1948](#) by the sex researcher Alfred Kinsey. Growing up, he said he seldom heard the term “homosexual” and doesn’t remember ever seeing or hearing the word “bisexual” until becoming involved in activism the 1970s.

Jones-Hennin said he believes misconceptions about bisexuality arise from assumptions placed on bisexual people from those outside the community.

“People don’t believe I’m bisexual because I’m in a same gender-loving relationship, and I have been in one for 43 years,” he said. “People define you as they see you at that moment.”





Loraine Hutchins and ABilly Jones-Hennin. Courtesy Loraine Hutchins

When Loraine Hutchins, 72, came out as bi in the early '70s, she said the word “bisexual” was used “sensationalistically.” At the time, Hutchins said activists didn’t have the same terminology that exists today to describe different gender identities — the term “gender” itself was a word she would only encounter “in an anthropology class.”

When Hutchins was co-editing the book [“Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out”](#) with activist and writer Lani Ka'ahumanu in the 1980s, she said sexuality research on “the B word” was rare. The pair found few researchers who addressed bisexuality as more than an “either-or, yes-no, gay-straight binaries” way, she told NBC News.

Yet, in practice, bisexual people have been defying the binary for decades.

“I would say prior to the '80s, there really wasn’t a word for people who dated other genders at the time, so people were dating each other in the bi community quite a lot,” Rawlings-Fein said. “There were a lot of people having a lot of interactions with a lot of different genders; they just didn’t have words for it back then.”

In 1990, [Anything That Moves](#) — a bisexual literature, art and

media magazine produced by the Bay Area Bisexual Network (now called the Bay Area Bisexual+ & Pansexual Network) — published the “Bisexual Manifesto,” a document that clarified that bisexuality is a fluid identity.

“Do not assume that bisexuality is binary or duogamous in nature: that we have ‘two’ sides or that we must be involved simultaneously with both genders to be fulfilled human beings. In fact, don’t assume that there are only two genders,” the manifesto read.

‘The alphabet soup explosion’

Since the 2000s, Ochs said she has seen an “identity explosion — the alphabet soup explosion,” with the proliferation of words like pansexual and asexual, and the linking of terms, such as “panromantic.” According to a [2019 report by The Trevor Project](#), a survey of tens of thousands of LGBTQ youth aged 13-24 turned up more than 100 different labels to describe their sexuality.





AC Dumlao. Caitlin Reilly

But even as new terms sprout, the word “bisexual” has continued to evolve, with the emergence of bisexual+ and bi+ over the past decade as umbrella terms for individuals with the capacity to be attracted to more than one gender, according to Rawlings-Fein.

AC Dumlao, a program manager at the Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund, said they “really like bi+ as an umbrella.” As stereotypes about bisexuality persist, Dumlao, 29, said it’s especially important to be visible.

“I think it’s important for me as a trans nonbinary person to be out as bisexual and to explain and show people that there’s no one way to be bisexual,” Dumlao said. “I just want to claim that little spot of the bisexual umbrella. I think it’s just like really leaning into the nuance and the gray area.”

As different terms continue to emerge that describe the “gray area” and bisexual activists look to the future of the movement, Ochs said people can use as many words as they want to describe their identities.

“These are all different words. These are all beautiful words,” Ochs said. “We can make a space for all of us.”

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