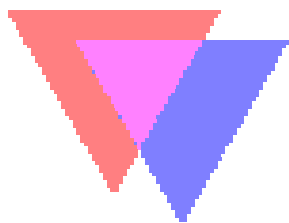


Bisexuality 101



Bisexuality 101

In general, society assumes that every same-sex couple is homosexual and that every “opposite sex” couple is heterosexual. As PFLAG parents, family and friends, it is critical that we give bisexual youth and adults the validation they deserve. Biphobia is the prejudice that occurs when bisexual people are ignored, unaccepted, or rejected by heterosexual society and lesbian and gay communities. We see the same assumptions and prejudice towards bi-racial people. Let’s face it, people are not always what we perceive them to be. The reality is that many people are bisexual and that bisexuality is a genuine, valid sexual orientation.

Bisexuality is the capacity for physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to more than one gender. The famous, controversial ‘Kinsey scale’ invented by Alfred Kinsey in the late 40’s presents the idea that most people fall somewhere between 0 (totally heterosexual) and 6 (totally homosexual) on a sexual “preference” continuum. Kinsey’s scale suggested that ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ are not opposites, but rather two possible positions on a continuum of sexual “preference.” There are other theories on the variables that play a role in determining sexual orientation. In fact, researchers are finding that many people have transitional phases of heterosexuality or homosexuality in their coming out process as bisexual. While there is a bisexual movement with several national bisexual organizations, it is quite small compared to the lesbian and gay movement. And, while many of the national lesbian and gay organizations now include

bisexuality in their mission statement, their programs and organizing do not specifically address this population.

Various myths about bisexuality perpetuate social rejection from both heterosexual society and the lesbian and gay communities. Some people see bisexuality as a phase, but the fact is that bisexuality is a long-term orientation for many people and bisexual people are a part of the larger movement advocating to end discrimination based on sexual orientation and securing equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. PFLAG plays a very significant role in this movement in that we are the parents, the grandparents, the sisters and brothers, the friends, and we are straight and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered. Because we want to hear all the voices and as many voices as we can, we want to be sure we represent the voices of bisexual people and their families and friends in our fight for equality.

Most people believe that they are either straight or gay. Bisexuality as well as the famous Kinsey scale, challenge this idea and make it difficult to maintain a clear border between straight society and lesbian and gay communities. This happens to others whose identities do not conform to “us and them” views of the world. In our racially polarized society, many multi-racial people who do not solely identify with one particular race are alienated from their communities. It is empowering to embrace one’s uniqueness and claim one’s value. For some with multiple identities or identities that challenge our society’s dualistic assumptions, it can be limiting to try to fit into any identity-based community. This is one factor that fuels the oppression, isolation, and invisibility for those who we claim to include. In the social justice movement we must advocate equal rights for everyone. If we as a whole society open our minds all the way and acknowledge bisexuality as a genuine social force, it would help form powerful and highly needed alliances between the straight and lesbian and gay communities. As

bisexuality becomes more recognized as a true sexual orientation by society as a whole, there will be more people coming out and identifying as bisexual. As a result, we may see more parents, families and friends of bisexual people joining organizations like PLFAG. It is important that bisexuals are truly included as part of the GLBT community and that we work together to challenge society to **end discrimination and secure equal rights for everyone**.

In writing this article, PFLAG paraphrased and expanded on information taken from BiNet U.S.A. at www.binetusa.org.

What's Your "Bi-Q"?

Many of us who are straight, gay or lesbian have limited knowledge of what it really means to be bisexual. Unfortunately we have all received lots of inaccurate information or no information at all about bisexuality. Here are some commonly asked questions with answers by the Bisexual Resource Center (www.biresouce.org).

Q: So what exactly is a Bisexual?

A: A Bisexual is someone who is sexually and emotionally attracted to men or women (and some would say to all genders).

Q: So they're equally interested in men and women?

A: Not necessarily. Some are, some aren't. Some say they're attracted to men and women in different ways, others say gender just isn't relevant to who they're interested in.

Q: Doesn't being interested in both genders mean they're only half as interested in either?

A: Most Bisexuals will probably say that when they're interested in someone, they're interested in them 100%.

Q: Aren't people really either heterosexual or homosexual?

A: No. It's well recognized in medical and psychological circles that bisexuality is a very real and genuine sexuality. But anyway, there are plenty of Bisexuals around who can tell you that.

Q: Isn't it just a phase?

A: No more than being heterosexual or homosexual is.

Q: But isn't it a transition to being lesbian or gay?

A: Maybe for some people. Some lesbians or gay men "come out" as Bisexual first, but most Bisexuals remain bisexual for the rest of their lives.

Q: But surely they're just confused, they haven't made up their minds yet?

A: Don't make the mistake of assuming there are only 2 options to choose from. Bisexuality is an option in its own right. A lack of information about Bisexuality is probably the cause of most confusion a bisexual might feel.

Q: Didn't Freud think we're all Bisexual?

A: Not quite - Freud thought we were all born Bisexual, and may develop a preference later in

life. No one is really quite sure about this, but most people have had at least some feeling for both genders at some stage in their lives.

Q: Suppose I have - does that mean I'm bisexual too?

A: Strictly speaking, maybe. But what you call yourself is up to you. Some may feel the attraction they feel for one gender isn't enough to call themselves Bisexual. Some people have other reasons for not identifying as Bisexual, as well.

Q: Like what?

A: Some people may want to feel "normal" and think of themselves as heterosexual. Others for political or social reasons may wish to identify with the Lesbian & Gay communities.

Q: Doesn't the term "Lesbian & Gay" include "Bisexual" as well?

A: That's a hot issue for some people. Some people think so, but there are plenty (bisexual and otherwise) who disagree. Lesbians fought for the right to be explicitly named, because they felt invisible. That battle is still going on for Bisexuals.

Q: So why aren't the Bisexuals more visible?

A: Well, no-one walks around with "Bisexual" stamped on their foreheads. It's very easy to miss them. If you see 2 people of the same gender kissing, you don't think to ask if they might be bisexual. And they might be. Similarly, if you see a man and a woman kissing, either of them might be bisexual, too.

Also, there's a real lack of information about bisexuality in our libraries and the media. And there are very few organizations that specifically address Bisexual issues. Some bisexual people have felt as if no-one knows they even exist.

Q: Haven't they received a lot of publicity for spreading AIDS?

A: Bisexuals have been targeted as scapegoats by people who think of AIDS as being a "Gay disease." Bisexuals are thought to be a "bridge" group between the heterosexual and homosexual communities.

Let's get things straight (forgive the pun). One thing spreads AIDS: taking someone else's bodily fluids (like blood or semen) into your body. The AIDS virus neither knows nor cares what your sexuality is. Safe sex will go a long way towards helping stop the spread of AIDS, and everyone - bisexual, straight, or whatever - needs to pay attention to that.

Bisexuality*

What is Bisexuality?

Bisexuality is the potential to feel sexually attracted to and to engage in sensual or sexual relationships with people of either sex. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary over time.

Self-perception is the key to a bisexual identity. Many people engage in sexual activity with people of both sexes, yet do not identify as bisexual. Likewise, other people engage in sexual relations only with people of one sex, or do not engage in sexual activity at all, yet consider themselves bisexual. There is no behavioral "test" to determine whether or not one is bisexual.

Bisexual Identity

Some people believe that a person is born heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual (for instance due to prenatal hormonal influences), and that their identity is inherent and unchangeable. Others believe that sexual orientation is due to socialization (for example either imitating or rejecting parental models) or conscious choice (for example, choosing lesbianism as part of a political feminist identity). Others believe that these factors interact. Because biological, social, and cultural factors are different for each person, everyone's sexuality is highly individual, whether they are bisexual, gay or lesbian, heterosexual, or asexual. The "value" placed on a sexual identity should not depend on its origin. Many people assume that bisexuality is just a phase people go through. In fact, any sexual orientation can be a phase. Humans are diverse, and individual sexual feelings and behavior change over time. The creation and consolidation of a sexual identity is an ongoing process. Since we are generally socialized as heterosexuals, bisexuality is a stage that many people experience as part of the process of acknowledging their homosexuality. Many others come to identify as bisexuals after a considerable period of identification as gay men or lesbians. A recent study by Ron Fox of more than 900 bisexual individuals found that 1/3 had previously identified as lesbian or gay. An orientation that may not be permanent is still valid for the period of time it is experienced. Bisexuality, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, may be either a transitional step in the process of sexual discovery, or a stable, long-term identity.

How Common Is Bisexuality?

It is not easy to say how common bisexuality is, since little research has been done on this subject; most studies on sexuality have focused on heterosexuals or homosexuals. Based on research done by Kinsey in the 1940s and 1950s, as many as 15-25% of women and 33-46% of men may be bisexual, based on their activities or attractions. Bisexuals are in many ways a hidden population. In our culture, it is generally assumed that a person is either heterosexual (the default assumption) or homosexual (based on appearance or behavioral clues.) Because bisexuality does not fit into these standard categories, it is often denied or ignored. When it is recognized, bisexuality is often viewed as being "part heterosexual and part homosexual," rather than being a unique identity. Bisexuality threatens the accepted way of looking at the world by calling into question the validity of rigid sexual categories, and encourages acknowledgment of the existence of a diverse range of sexuality. Since there is not a stereotypical bisexual appearance or way of acting, bisexuals are usually assumed to be either heterosexual or homosexual. In order to increase awareness, bisexuals have begun to create their own visible communities.

Bisexual Relationships

Bisexuals, like all people, have a wide variety of relationship styles. Contrary to common myth, a bisexual person does not need to be sexually involved with both a man and a woman simultaneously. In fact, some people who identify as bisexual never engage in sexual activity with one or the other (or either) gender. As is the case for heterosexuals and gay men and lesbians, attraction does not involve acting on every desire. Like heterosexuals and gay people, many bisexuals choose to be sexually active with one partner only, and have long-term, monogamous relationships. Other bisexuals may have open marriages that allow for relationships with same-sex partners, three-way relationships, or a number of partners of the same or other gender (singly or simultaneously). It is important to have the freedom to choose the type of

sexual and affectional relationships that are right for the people involved, whatever their sexual orientation.

Bisexuals and AIDS

AIDS has had a major effect on the bisexual community. Bisexual men are often scapegoated as the agents of transmission of AIDS from the gay to the heterosexual population, and bisexual women may be scapegoated as transmitters of AIDS to lesbians. However, it is behavior, rather than sexual orientation, that puts people at risk for acquiring the virus that causes AIDS.

Activities that involve the exchange of bodily fluids, notably semen, blood, and vaginal fluid, are dangerous. Bisexuals, as well as homosexuals and heterosexuals, must educate themselves about safer sex practices, such as the use of condoms and dental dams. Safer sex guidelines can be obtained from health centers and AIDS education and action groups. Bisexuals are joining with gay people and other affected groups in an effort to fight AIDS by calling for an increase in research and education, better treatments, and an end to discrimination against people with AIDS and those perceived to be at risk for AIDS.

Bisexuality and Politics

Because bisexuals do not fall within the norms of traditional sexuality, they experience many of the same types of discrimination faced by gay men and lesbians. Bisexuals may face discrimination in employment and housing, and may be victims of anti-gay violence. Efforts are underway in many areas to pass gay and lesbian rights laws; bisexuals must be included under these laws as well. Bisexual parents, especially those with non-traditional living arrangements, are at risk of losing custody of their children, and it is virtually impossible for open bisexuals to become foster or adoptive parents. Our society must realize that children need a loving and nurturing home environment, and that the ability to provide this is not determined by sexual orientation. Bisexuals are an increasingly visible presence within a variety of political movements. Bisexuals are working with gay men and lesbians on common issues such as foster care, domestic partnership, and AIDS, as well as fighting discrimination against bisexuals within the gay and lesbian community. Efforts are underway to promote education and to counter myths and biased portrayals of bisexuals. Many bisexual groups exist for the purposes of support, socializing, and activism, and the number is growing. Bisexuals have the potential to become an important part of the effort to ensure equal rights for all people and to promote an acceptance of sexual diversity.

* This section is a pamphlet that was prepared by BiCEP (the Bisexual Committee Engaging in Politics) and is published by the Bisexual Resource Center, and is available on the Bisexual Resource Center website at www.biresource.org.

Biphobia*

Despite education efforts and outreach, there are still many misconceptions and stereotypes about bisexual people, even among the gay and lesbian community. What does it mean to be biphobic or misinformed on bisexuality? Here is a list of some of the common myths about bisexuality to watch out for in yourself and others:

- Assuming a young person's bisexual identity is a phase before coming to a "real" lesbian or gay identity.
- Expecting bisexual people to get services, information and education from heterosexual service agencies for their "heterosexual side" and then go to gay and/or lesbian service agencies for their "homosexual side."

- Thinking bisexuals only have committed relationships with “opposite” sex/gender partners.
- Assuming that bisexuals, if given the choice, would prefer to be within an “opposite” gender/sex coupling to reap the social benefits of a “heterosexual” pairing.
- Thinking that the fight for bisexual rights hinders the advancement of rights for gays and lesbians .
- Expecting a bisexual to identify as gay or lesbian when coupled with the “same” gender.
- Assuming that everyone you meet is either heterosexual or homosexual.
- Thinking bisexual people haven’t made up their minds.
- Using slurs like “fence-sitter” or “switchhitter.”
- Assuming bisexual means “available” or “promiscuous.”
- Thinking that people identify as bisexual because it’s “trendy.”

* Adapted from the Bisexual Resource Center pamphlet, “What Does Biphobia Look Like?”

How to Make Your PFLAG Chapter Inclusive of Bisexual People, Their Families and Friends

Many of you are working to fulfill PFLAG’s mission to “promote the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, **bisexual** and transgendered persons, their families and friends” through support, education, and/or advocacy. The first step in making your chapter bi-inclusive is recognizing and accepting bisexuality as a valid sexual orientation. The next step is recognizing your current chapter members’ needs in regards to bisexuality and being prepared for future inquiries or needs for support, education, and/or advocacy. Here are some examples of steps that can be taken within your chapter:

- **Support-** having the option of forming a separate support group within the chapter that deals with bisexuality.
- **Education-** having bisexual resources available, including local organizations and groups as well as publications available on the topic of bisexuality. Asking a bisexual speaker or speakers to present to your group is a good way for your chapter to have many questions answered and give attendees an opportunity to interact with someone who identifies as bisexual.
- **Advocacy-** coalitions with local bisexual groups or advocacy organizations.
- **Other-** when advertising your local chapter meetings for example you could include something like this, “Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered people meet every...” to ensure people know that bisexual people are

included in the name. (This is not to be confused as a name change, but simply as a clarification.)

Bisexuality: Organizations and Publications

Organizations

BiNetUSA

4201 Wilson Blvd., #110-311, Arlington, VA 22203; www.binetusa.org

Bisexual Resource Center

P.O. Box 1026, Boston, MA 02117 USA; 617/424-9595; <http://www.biresource.org>

Bi Without Borders

PO Box 581307, Minneapolis, MN 55458; <http://bisexual.org/g/biwithoutborders/>

For statewide bisexual organizations, please refer to the Bisexual Resource Center's website for a comprehensive listing.

Books

Bi Any Other Name. Lorraine Hutchins and Lani Ka'ahumanu (eds). Alyson Publications, 1991.

Bisexual Option. Fritz Klein, M.D. Haworth, 1993.

Bisexual Politics: Theories, Queries and Visions. Naomi Tucker, Liz Highleyman and Rebecca Kaplan (eds). Harrington Park Press, 1995.

Bisexual Resource Guide. Robyn Ochs. Bisexual Resources Center, 2000.

Bisexuality: The Psychology and Politics of an Invisible Minority. Beth Firestein (ed). Sage Publications, 1996.

Bisexuality in the Lives of Men: Facts and Fiction. Brett Beemyn and Erich Steinman (eds). Harrington Park Press, 2001.

Bisexuality in the United States. Paula Rodriguez Rust (ed). Columbia University Press, 1999.

Blessed Bi Spirit. Debra Kolodny (ed). Continuum Publishing Group, 2000.

Dual Attraction: Understanding Bisexuality. Martin Weinberg, Colin Williams and Douglas Pryor. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life. Marjorie Garber. Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Women and Bisexuality. Sue George. Scarlett Press, 1993.