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Bi, gay, pansexual: What do I call myself? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I don't like to be considered gay nor bisexual, and I identified as pansexual for a bit, until I found out that pansexuality is sexual expression of all kinds. I want to know what I am. I don't like labels and I think that everyone and anyone can fall in love with anyone else of any gender; therefore I believe that there is no such thing as sexual orientations. What is a word for that?

Answer

Dear Reader,

We live in a society that, unfortunately, likes to put people in boxes with simple labels: gay, bisexual, black, white, etc. For some of us, the fit doesn't seem to really work, and many times this insistence on a clear-cut, one-word label can actually prevent us from getting to know each other as the multi-faceted individuals we are. Even some of the specific terms you mentioned are defined quite differently by different individuals who identify by them. For example, although some consider pansexuality to mean sexual expression of all kinds, as you explained, others define pansexuality to mean the attraction to a person regardless of where they stand on the gender or sexuality spectrum. There does not seem to be a term that fits exactly how you describe (yet!), but you might find it satisfying to come up with a term or short description of how you identify that you can use when you'd like.

It appears that you've been thinking about this a lot, and though you profess that you don't like labels, you still find yourself searching for one. While labels are limiting, they can also be useful or even liberating sometimes. Being able to describe oneself with a word or term that is shared with others can help an individual form a community with people who might have similar experiences. Sometimes the changed usage of a label empowers groups of people, such as the embracing of the word "queer" by some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Just as labels change over time, so too can a person's sexuality. As far as labels go, it seems that there isn't an agreed-upon term for someone who doesn't believe in sexual orientation and thinks that it's possible for any person of any gender to love any other person. You might find that you have to explain this concept rather than give a one-word answer if someone asks, "What are you?" Better yet, explain why that question is limiting in and of itself. You are a person who likes to think that identity is complex and deserves more than a one-word answer.

Looking at some of the specific terminology you mentioned in your question, not all of them have an agreed-upon definition. For example, the term "bisexual" can actually be interpreted in different ways — not just meaning an attraction to both males and females. Some consider the "bi" to signify an attraction to two genders — not just men and women but any two genders. Other individuals who choose to identify as bisexual use the term to signify:

- Being attracted to the same gender and another gender
- Being attracted primarily to one gender but also open to another gender
- Being attracted to individuals regardless of gender identity
- Having changes in attraction over time
- Rejecting the idea of the gender binary (that only two genders exist)

Some believe that bisexual is too limiting and too reinforcing of the idea of the gender binary — enter the term "pansexual." The term is, as you pointed out, a complex one. Some people define it the same way you originally thought: openness to being with members of both the same and opposite sex. The term arose in the early 1900s (especially prominent in certain psychoanalytic circles) to describe a way of thinking that sexual instinct plays a part in all human thoughts and activities, even being the most important or only source of real energy in our lives. Over the years, though, pansexual has come to mean that a person is capable of falling in love with or having a sexual attraction to a person regardless of where they stand on the gender/sexuality spectrum. Pansexual individuals can be attracted to cismen, ciswomen, transmen, transwomen, ^[2] intersex people, androgynous people, and everyone else. It's generally considered a more inclusive term than bisexual.

In the meantime, perhaps you can come up with your own term for yourself, as well as for those with attractions similar to yours.

Alice!

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