PERSPECTIVES:

red light, green light

GAY, STRAIGHT, BI:
DO THESE LABELS STILL APPLY?

By Miranda Elliot, 19
Contributor

“I love the person, regardless of the gender.”

This is how I described my sexuality at 14. I say that love was something that just happened and that the gender of a person wasn’t a big deal if I loved that person. But people were not usually OK with that answer. People wanted to know exactly how I identified: Gay, straight or bi? I felt the need to pick a label, but nothing quite fit. “Bisexual” didn’t sound right. It kind of sounded like a terrible disease. But while it sounded pretty horrible, it was the closest word to how I felt.

As I got older, I tended to be attracted to girls, but was still attracted to boys sometimes. I remember talking one time with a bisexual friend about how I wished I could identify as a lesbian because that word sounded so powerful. Lesbian women sounded so sure of who they were. I wished I was that sure.

Fit the Label

For a long time, I tried to fit into the lesbian label. I did everything “right.” I only dated girls. I cut my hair into a fauxhawk and watched The L Word every week. I was the poster child and cheerleader for the lesbian club. But then I had a crush on a transgender guy (born female, but he identified as male). I soon saw that while identifying as a lesbian made me fully accepted by the lesbian club, crushing on a guy (whether he was born one or not) excluded me from it.

I began to wonder, what do these labels mean? Is there ever any one word that can perfectly describe who you are? I realized that to be part of the lesbian community I had joined, I had to confine myself to certain ways of being. This meant specifically dating only girls. But what does dating a guy or a girl even mean anymore, as more and more people identify not only as male and female but somewhere in between the two?

I know some of my straight friends feel the same way: They mostly date people of the opposite gender, but identify as “heteroflexible” or even refuse to label themselves. It’s easiest for them to say, “I’m straight,” but that label does not completely describe who they are. Sometimes my “straight” female friends get serious crushes on other girls. Or sometimes, like me, they feel attracted to people who do not identify as male or female. We have no idea what label to use in that case.

These days, I try not to label my sexuality. There isn’t really a good word to describe who I am and who I like. There’s no word for a feminine, nerdy, outspoken girl with a nose ring, who’s not really attracted to other feminine girls (except for that one really cute girl I dated this summer!). There’s no word for a girl who loves intelligent butch girls who are in touch with their emotions and trans guys with mohawks and lip rings who identify as queer feminists. But even this description of me isn’t always true, because I am constantly changing.

Too Complex for Labels

How can one word—gay, straight or bi—that never changes describe how complex we are? There will always be times when a label for our identity doesn’t hold up. Identities can be really powerful. They can help us form communities with other people who identify the same way. But they can also be confining and exclusive. I’m not opposed to labels. I think they’re a great way to express yourself in a simple way to others. But life is complicated. Those labels often break down. To really explain who we are, we need millions of words, not just a single label.
Same-sex romantic and sexual relationships have been around as long as people have.

But it’s only since the late nineteenth century that people have started identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual (GLB). And then, of course, there’s the label “straight,” which more often than not, isn’t used. Why? Because everyone is assumed to be straight until proven gay, lesbian or bisexual. Some say these labels are limiting, but I think they are necessary in the world we live in.

Labels have given GLB people an identity, both politically and socially, and a way to build a supportive community in a world that is often hostile to them. By banding together under these labels, GLB people can fight discrimination and work for change. Some states have created Safe Schools Laws to protect GLB youth from discrimination and harassment because of the work of GLB people and their straight allies.

Labels can also create group pride. Twenty-year-old Pedro Pomales, of Philadelphia, PA, is proud to be a member of the GLB community. “When you first come to terms with being gay, it can be quite scary and almost unbearable, but then you realize it is who you are,” he says. “I can honestly say I am proud to be part of a group of people who fight and will continue to fight even when the odds clearly appear to be against us.”

There is still a large amount of work to be done until GLB people are treated equally in our society. Change will only come when gay, lesbian and bisexual people come together with their straight allies. Using a label like gay, lesbian or bisexual is an important part of organizing for change. In due time, I hope that no matter what label people choose, they will be safe and accepted for who they are.

You Know Gay, Straight and Bi, But What about...Heteroflexible And Pansexual?

Heteroflexible: An expression of sexual identity. For most people, this term means they are typically in a heterosexual romantic relationship but also are open to having sexual experiences or romantic relationships with persons of the same gender.

–from Sexetc.org

Pansexual: An expression of sexuality identity. Like bisexuality, but even more fluid. A pansexual person can love not only the traditional male and female genders, but also transgender and androgynous people.

–from UrbanDictionary.com

ON THE FORUMS AT SEXETC.ORG

My sexuality is never labeled. I just say I’m open. I’m never emotionally attracted to girls; it’s a purely physical attraction. But I tend to fall emotionally for guys. I don’t choose a label, because the second you want to do what YOU want to do and it doesn’t fit into [a certain category], then you get called a liar or a fake. Does anyone get what I’m saying?

–Felicia, 15, Washington, D.C.

I’m a guy. I like guys and girls, but I could only ever fall in love with a girl. My attraction to guys is physical (though obviously everything is changeable). I also imagine my future with a wife and kids and everything. But when I first told my friends, they were like, ‘You can’t be bi; you’re only physically attracted to guys’ and refused to believe me. So, now I just say I’m bi and pretend that I could love a guy.

–Robbie, 15, United Kingdom

I’m physically attracted to some girls, but I can’t picture falling in love and settling down with one. I tend to call myself bi, but I’m not really sure that I should. There’s a chance that I could fall in love with a girl, but I think it’s pretty slim. I think that “heteroflexible” is a good word. I also think “pansexual” is good, since it includes people who don’t identify as male/female. But since I don’t feel that I am bisexual, I don’t really feel that I’m pansexual either.

–Indie, 19, AK

I don’t know—it’s all very confusing. I never really thought of myself as sexually confused, but looking back on everything, I guess I am.

–Erica, 16, CT