

# **Beyond the Binary:**

## **A Phenomenological Study of the Campus Experiences and Social Identities of Bisexual, Pansexual, Fluid, and Queer Students at a Public University**

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### **Study addressed three central research questions:**

- 1) What are the experiences of BPFQ college students at a large public research university?
- 2) What are the social and interpersonal forces shaping sexual identity labels and meaning-making?
- 3) Where and how do students access support on campus?

### **Methodology**

This 2012 Master’s Thesis is a phenomenological study of seven students at Western University, a large public research university in the Western region of the United States. Data was collected in the format of online and telephone interviews, reflection activities, and institutional document analysis. The sample consisted of six undergraduates and one graduate student. Gender identification of the participants included four females, two males, and one genderqueer student. Five students self-identified as people of color.

### **How do you define your sexuality?**

"Fluid with an emphasis in male identified individuals."

"...my desire is definitely fluid, same with gender"

"I am physically attracted to both males and females."

"I am attracted to people and do not exclude people by gender. I just go with the flow."

"I love regardless of gender."

"I do not look at gender. I am attracted to people and their personalities."

"I use queer to describe both my sexuality and sexual identity, and with my queer sexuality comes a politics."

### **Terminology:**

**Bisexual** – A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men and females/women.

**Pansexual** – A person who is sexually attracted to all or many gender expressions.

**Fluid** – a sexual or gender identity that that exists beyond a binary system of either gay or straight, man or woman. People with a fluid identity may resist using labels or choosing boxes to define themselves. Also used by people whose sexual or gender identity is not fixed on one point of a continuum.

**Queer** – This term is sometimes used as a sexual orientation label instead of 'bisexual' as a way of acknowledging that there are more than two genders to

be attracted to, or as a way of stating a non-heterosexual orientation without having to state to whom they are attracted.

### **Western University Profile:**

- 1) Campus is a large, four-year public research institution in the U.S.
- 2) Student body is racially diverse with a 77.1% students of color population
- 3) Campus houses six ethnic and gender resource centers
- 4) Ranked as one of the top LGBT-friendly campuses nationwide according to the Campus Climate Index

### **Themes pertaining to the essence of being a BPFQ student at Western University:**

#### **1) Transition to college**

“Participants attributed their growth and initial feelings of comfort with their summer transitions experiences. The students who were out to family members and friends in high school had anxiety about coming out in college, and some of the students were not ‘out’ at all in high school and experienced great anxiety about what Western held for them. Though some had concerns about a potentially negative adjustment to college, students reported feeling safe and a part of a community on campus. Students’ initial experiences were instrumental in their transition, including the Academic Honors Orientation Program, freshman residence halls, and New Student Orientation Programs.”

“The students connect their transition campus and their early feelings of community and safety to their summer orientation experiences. Four of the [seven] participants in the study specifically discussed the Common Ground activity as the moment when they ‘came out’ and saw that other students and staff were ‘out’ as well.”

#### **2) First year residential experience**

“Students living in the residence halls described the overall comfort and openness in these communities and explained their LGBTQ identities as a central focus of their first-year adjustment concerns.”

#### **3) Fear of initially accessing the LGBTQRC**

“Mocha expressed her nervousness about visiting the LGBTQ Resource Center: ‘I went [to the LGBTQRC] the first day, of school...all kinds of terrified... (laughing).’ Vika visited the second week of school:

I was really nervous; I had never been to one of these. I walked in there and someone said hi to me, they started to talk to me. That was a really good start; I probably wouldn’t have come back if it weren’t for that.

BT had anxiety about the implications of visiting the LGBTQRC as well, but she was warmly greeted by staff members:

Super friendly right off the bat. I went to the resource center and Cari and Grey were just chilling in their office and I was so nervous to come inside. It was my first time, I would come close to the office, but I would always back away. I finally came inside and Grey and Cari were super, super friendly. They came out of their offices and they showed me around the resource center and they sat me down and told me about the other students that were involved in the resource center. They made me feel at home. They gave me a lot of activities to go to. They told me I should go to pride prom and other activities. They introduced me to a lot of the students, like ‘this is BT, she’s new. Make her feel comfortable here.’ It was really nice, I liked it. I went to Tuesday Talks, national coming out day, Girl Talks, yeah.”

#### **4) Perception of campus climate and safety**

“Mocha attributes the role of campus diversity in creating an inclusive campus environment:

I think our campus is a ‘freak show of diversity,’ it’s ridiculous (smiling). I think that plays a huge role in terms of the LGBT because everyone, when you go into class, the people surrounding you will all be from a different country and it’s ridiculous in that it completely helps, any other discrimination, racism, all those issues are put aside, there’s not a problem, that translates into the LGBT issues also pretty well. I think diversity is the biggest thing, in terms of making our campus safe for LGBT people.

Mocha’s perception of the presence of global diversity on campus as lending to a campus that is safe for LGBT people was echoed by other participants. “

“Students reported ongoing assessment of their environment and their decision to use varying sexual identity labels or express a non-normative sexual identity. Each participant noted the distinction between their perception of on-campus and off-campus physical safety, in which campus was viewed as a very safe environment and anywhere off-campus was a cause for concern.”

“...they are constantly engaging in assessing and reassessing their physical environment, the social context, and LGBTQ politics in order to determine which behaviors, identities, or gender expressions were suitable or acceptable in a given instance.”

#### **5) Campus involvement opportunities**

“Students spoke of the enormous amount of involvement opportunities on campus, whether they were on involved on campus or not. It seemed to be the marker for which they attribute much of the openness of campus.”

“Raj describes the Queer community at Western:

Very outgoing. There’s a lot of stuff going on. It’s a very thoughtful community, we’re really often just thinking of new ways to think about queerness in the context of Western; it’s very studious. A lot of people who are in the LGBTQ community on campus have taken women’s studies classes or are in queer studies, it’s a very studious community. We’re always trying to think of new theories, think of the best ways to create a more open environment at Western.”

#### **6) Resistance to labels**

“Although students were not inclined to label their sexuality internally or for use in social settings, they encountered pressure to do so. Often, peers and others would not understand BPFQ identities and students found themselves defining their attractions and experiencing frustration due to the pressure this process puts on them to repeatedly validate themselves.”

#### **7) Language politics**

“Politics surrounding language used regarding sexuality is the reinforcement of acceptable and unacceptable social identities. Students are pushing for more fluid, flexible definitions of sexuality and are therefore a part of a large social reconceptualization of identities. There appears to be a social reconstruction of sexualities and the possibility for a re-framing of prototypes associated with people who ‘can’t choose’ and ‘are greedy’ to those who ‘love everyone regardless of gender.’”

#### **8) Exposure to stereotypes**

“Vika describes Fluidity:

Fluidity, when I describe fluidity to people, they usually think, the first thing they hop onto is bisexual. They think that you’re attracted to guys and you’re attracted to girls and they also think in binaries, so it’s already out of the ball park, they didn’t get it. Fluidity is usually

something they don't understand, so they attach it to...well, if you're attracted to girls and you're attracted to boys now, then you're bisexual right? I'm like no, no, no. things like that. Fluidity definitely has confusion.

Students experienced negative stereotypes for bisexual identities and behaviors within heteronormative and queer environments. Their internal definition of their sexuality would not leave them susceptible to these encounters, yet their peers make the association with traditional labels, such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, as they move toward understanding the student's identity and definition. Students did not report feeling that these stereotypes directly referred to their sexuality as their labels were constructed on paradigms of sexual fluidity.

## **9) Internal versus social group identities**

"When others don't understand their identity, they are likely to use more commonly understood terms at the expense of the true meaning they attach to their identity. These negotiations happened frequently in participants' experiences and appeared normative and could be a product of the lack of clear prototype for Fluid, Pansexual, and Queer sexualities."

"Some students noted the pressure that is placed on them due to their constant engagement in these types of conversations. They find themselves educating others on sexualities and sometimes note that these conversations are tiring and occur often."

## **10) Factors determining access to support**

"Gender, cultural, and sexuality campus resource centers at Western consist of a Women's Resource Center, Asian Pacific Islander Student Programs, Latino Chicano Student Programs, Native American Student Programs, Pan African Student Programs, and the LGBTQRC. Friendliness of staff and students was a primary consideration for students' decision to visit campus resource centers."

"Raj additionally visited the campus Counseling Center and described his positive experience:  
Besides that, I have gone to the counseling center on campus and they're very helpful and open. They're all member of the LGBTQRC Allies Group. I think that's really awesome that all of them are a part of the allies program."

"Students reported anxiety about accessing the LGBTQRC initially and each felt the space was welcoming after they overcame this fear. Factors inhibiting future access to campus resource centers were feeling unwelcome by their peers within cultural spaces and excessive language restrictions within the space."

"Aurora felt pushed away from LGBTQRC due to language restrictions 'and it's just...you can't be that way all the time, it's too restrictive; so I don't go there much anymore, for that reason.' Cupcake had other reasons for not accessing the centers:

Honestly, I don't spend a whole lot of extra-curricular time on campus, and even when I do, sexuality is never really an issue that's needed to be addressed, so I haven't felt the need to be "out" in that sense. If I were ever to attend an LGBT event then I probably wouldn't mind being more open.

Students communicated that their perception of the centers as welcoming and friendly by students, as well as staff members, was integral to their decision to remain engaged with these spaces. Staff in the centers were referred to as friendly, helpful, and welcoming frequently by students; however, there were different perceptions as to how other students in the space welcomed them individually or as a member of the larger LGBTQ community."

"In his time at Western, David has established a network of mentors for which he seeks support and guidance. Among them, there are campus professionals from the Academic Honors Program, LGBTQ Resource Center department, student affairs administration, and Campus Program Board."

"Mocha attributes campus offices she has sought assistance from 'Student Life, Student Affairs, LGBTQRC, APISP (center), counseling center, your academic advisor, or your RA if you're in the dorms.'"

## **11) Queer people of color spaces**

“Spaces allocated for issues concerning the intersection of queer and cultural identities were important to these students. Finding a community of peers that they relate to while learning more about their own identities was beneficial for them. In turn, they created and supported opportunities to provide educational and community-building opportunities for other queer students of color.”

### **Recommendations for Practice:**

- 1) Conduct Assessment Regarding Fluid Identities
- 2) Facilitate Common Ground Activity
- 3) Implement Collaborative Orientation and Transition Programs
- 4) Examine Freshman Residential Education
- 5) Conduct Sensitivity and Ally Trainings
- 6) Provide Programs Allowing for Anonymity
- 7) Promote Campus Racial Diversity

### **Areas of Future Research**

- 1) Programs that attract and support BPFQ students
- 2) How campuses provide LGBTQ services without an LGBTQ office or resource center
- 3) Experiences of BPFQ student communities not represented in this study
- 4) Polyamory