

Chapter 5

You Can Stand Under My Bi+ Umbrella: Exploring Students' Chosen Plurisexual Identity Labels

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the benefits and costs of using umbrella terms such as plurisexual, bisexual+, or m-spec to describe a diversity of identities, behaviors, and attractions. Language is inherently linked with power and ideology. Through language, political powers and social structures create, maintain, and enforce a social production of identities that are often assumed to be natural. Those who fall under the m-spec umbrella (e.g., bisexual, biromantic, pansexual, panromantic, omnisexual, fluid, and queer people, among many others) challenge the social production of monosexual labels (e.g., straight, gay, lesbian). Despite plurisexuals' disruption of rigid categories, plurisexual students have reported feeling limited by the language available within higher education institutions. The authors explore the limitations of language, enriched by the voices of bi+ undergraduate and graduate student participants from their previous studies, and offer suggestions for serving bi+ students.

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INTRODUCTION

Those who experience multi-gender attraction (e.g., bisexual, biromantic, pansexual, panromantic, omnisexual, fluid, and queer people, among many others) challenge the social production of monosexual labels (e.g., straight, gay, lesbian). Despite plurisexual peoples' disruption of rigid categories, bi+ students have reported feeling limited by the language available within higher education institutions (Prieto Godoy, 2020).¹ Dominant United States (U.S.) society tends towards a dichotomous view of sexuality (i.e., gay-lesbian/straight; Hayfield, 2021), yet an increasing number of college students identify outside this binary. In 2022, American College Health Association data revealed 13.8% of undergraduates identify as bisexual, 3.1% as queer, and 2.8% as pansexual. These patterns are likely to continue as future generations enter higher education. A recent survey of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth aged 13-21 found that 32.9% identify as bisexual, 18% as pansexual, and 3.8% as queer, with others adopting increasingly fluid or emerging identity labels (Kosciw et al., 2020).² It is critical that higher education and student affairs professionals understand how best to support these students, particularly given their generally negative collegiate experiences (Bryon et al., 2017; Kay, 2022; Tavarez, 2022). Minimally, doing so requires an openness to understanding plurisexual identities and identity labels.

In their retrospective of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues on U.S. college campuses over the past three decades, Rankin et al. (2019) asserted, "it is crucial to examine how community members are named and who is centered as a result of this naming" (p. 437). Language is inherently linked with power and ideology; it is used to communicate knowledge, beliefs, relationships among groups, and to establish expectations (Fairclough, 2015). Through language, political powers and social structures create, maintain, and enforce a social production of identities that are often assumed to be natural (Foucault, 1972). All social objects and phenomena, including the structures that maintain such hierarchies, are not independent of our discursively shaped understandings. It is through the discursive process of fixing, labeling, classifying, and differentiating that all reality is socially constructed (Chia, 2000). Organizations are no exception to the power of language as material products of discourse (Chia, 2000).

Organizations are not only a product of discourse but serve as collaborators and contenders of discourse (Boje et al., 2004). Through our investigations of bi+ students' experiences in higher education, the students revealed the micro, meso, and macro levels of engagement with language that led them to self-identify with particular labels. We do not seek to provide the reader with an extensive theoretical understanding of discursive practices and organization. However, we do strive to emphasize the importance of not taking language for granted. This chapter investigates the benefits and costs of using umbrella terms (e.g., plurisexual, bisexual+, multi-attraction spectrum/m-spec) to describe a diverse array of identities, behaviors, and attractions. We explore the nuances in how students self-identify and their rationales for such identification. We also examine the limitations of language, enriched by the voices of plurisexual undergraduate and graduate student participants from our previous studies, and offer suggestions for serving bisexual+ students. We emphasize implications for practitioners seeking to create and market inclusive policies, programming, and other m-spec-affirming resources. This chapter will have further utility for researchers interested in recruiting and writing about bi+ students.

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