Breaking Down the Acronym: B

This week on our journey to become a more mindful and informed congregation with regards to the LGBT+ community, we will define the third letter of the acronym: B, for Bisexual.

Within the LGBT+ community today, bisexual is an umbrella term for "anyone who is attracted to more than one gender." Just as "*hetero*sexual" means "attraction to *another* gender" and "*homo*sexual" means "attraction to the *same* gender," the term "*bi*sexual" refers to "attraction to *both* the same and other genders." (Note that the "two" here is "same and other," not "men and women." The idea that bisexuals are attracted solely to "men and women" is a common misconception that was started by people who either didn't know about or didn't understand the concept of gender nonconformity. We will talk more about gender next month.)

In ancient times, it was a simple fact of life that many people experienced multiple-gender attraction. From the Ancient Greeks and the Romans, to the Han Chinese and later dynasties, to dozens of pre-colonial African peoples including (but not limited to) the Nandi of Kenya, the Nupe and Igbo of Nigeria, the Langi of Uganda, and the Ndebele and Shona of Zimbabwe, there exist a wide array of both records involving bisexuality and pre-colonial languages that have words used to describe bisexual behavior. Because it was so common to be bisexual in the ancient world, the only *specific* instances of bisexuality that were written down are ones that involved leaders or cases that were particularly unusual for the times.

Though bisexuals suffered similar treatment to gay people and lesbians in Europe from the Medieval period onward, bisexuality persisted in non-European cultures for thousands of years. Most non-European and non-Abrahamic societies only started punishing bisexuality (and homosexuality) after extended contact with Western civilization—and especially so after colonization—from the 17th century onwards.

Much of bisexual history is intrinsically tied into lesbian and gay history due to the fact that laws against homosexuality also inhibited bisexuals in same-sex relationships. However, misconceptions about bisexuality often led to bisexuals being pushed out of LGBT+ spaces, so people started pushing for bisexual awareness and visibility in the 1970s. "Being bisexual does not mean they have sexual relations with both sexes but that they are capable of intimate involvement with a person regardless of gender," said activist and writer Janet Bode in 1977. Many publications throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s continued to expand and refine the bisexual identity.

Since then, bisexuality has become the umbrella term for all members of the LGBT+ community who experience attraction to more than one gender. Some of the more specific, modern terms under the Bi umbrella include polysexual (attraction to multiple, but not all genders), omnisexual (attraction to all genders, but that attraction manifests in different ways), and pansexual (the original bisexual definition: attraction to all people regardless of gender). Many people who fit these definitions are content to simply identify as bi; others like to use the more specific terms because they make them feel more comfortable. Regardless of what term someone uses, the biggest thing to remember when it comes to bisexuality and all of its derivatives is that none of them exclude transgender or gender nonconforming individuals.

Some notable bisexuals in history include writer Oscar Wilde, jazz singer Billie Holiday, writer Virginia Woolf, Alexander the Great, Civil Rights leader Malcolm X, all ten of the Chinese emperors who ruled during the first 200 years of the Han Dynasty, poet Walt Whitman, painter Frida Kahlo, King Mwanga II of Buganda, actress Tallulah Bankhead, Julius Caesar, Augustus Caesar, and singer Freddie Mercury. As stated in "Breaking Down the Acronym: L & G," some sapphic women like First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt may have been bisexual, but as their non-heterosexuality was only found out posthumously, there is no way to be sure.

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