



Project Report: A qualitative survey of pansexual and panromantic people's understandings and lived experiences of pan identities

Background:

In recent years, it has been reported that more and more people are identifying as pansexual and/or panromantic. Pansexuality has also become an increasingly popular topic in popular media, with various celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Brendon Urie, Joe Lycett, and others, publicly identifying themselves with pan identities. However, at present, there are no UK-specific psychological studies on pansexual or panromantic identities, and very little research actually talking to pansexual and panromantic people anywhere in the world. Therefore, we were interested to find out more about pansexual and panromantic people's understandings and lived experiences of their identities (from here on we use the term 'pan' to refer to pansexual and panromantic identities). The project was supported and funded by the *British Psychological Society* (BPS) Undergraduate Research Assistantship Scheme and gained ethical approval from the University of the West of England's Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) (HAS.18.04.152).

Who are the researchers?

- Dr Nikki Hayfield is a Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology. Her research interests are around sexualities and qualitative research methods.
- Karolina Krizova has recently completed her undergraduate psychology degree at UWE. Her research interests are around gender, sexualities, and mental health, and she is planning to continue her studies at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Both researchers are based at the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, UK.

What did participation involve and how were participants recruited?

Participation involved voluntarily completing a survey and responding to some open-ended questions about people's understandings and lived experiences of pan identities. These questions were generated based on our own personal interests in the topic, and on what has been written about pan identities on the internet and in academia. We trialled these questions with a small number of participants to check that they were clear before we sent out invitations inviting more pan people to take part.

We recruited participants by advertising the survey on various social media sites and groups such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Tumblr*, on forums such as *Reddit*, and on discussion boards such as *PansexualPride (proboards.com)*. Overall, we posted calls for participants via 58 different groups, pages, and forums. We also used our personal networks to spread the word about our study.

Anyone aged over 18, residing in the UK, and identifying as pansexual and/or panromantic was eligible to take part. Nevertheless, a few people indicated a non-UK country of residence after having participated, and as we really appreciated the time they invested in our project we included their responses. Participants were also asked to answer some mainly closed demographic questions, which we used to give us a picture of who had taken part.

Who took part?

Overall, 80 people responded to the survey, although only 60 completed the demographic information. Forty-five identified as pansexual and 15 as panromantic. We asked people about any additional sexuality labels they used and the most commonly reported were bisexual (18), queer (18) and asexual (12). Most participants were women, with far fewer men. Over half of our participants used more than one term to describe their gender and these included trans, genderfluid, non-binary, and other terms. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 48 years with an average age of 26 years. On the whole, most participants were White (50), non-disabled (46), and based in the UK (47). There were a mixture of participants studying (27) or in employment (18). Fifty-eight participants told us about their class categories - some were working class (22), while others were middle class (16), or a mixture of working/middle class (20). In contrast to previous literature viewing pansexuality as a 'young' identity, 18 of our participants were aged over 25, which suggests that pan identities could be being taken up by a wider range of age groups than previously identified.

What were the findings?

We noticed that lots of people really engaged in the task of answering the open-ended questions and we very much appreciated the detailed responses provided by our participants. There were some common themes around people's understandings and experiences across the survey responses. However, these broad commonalities form only a part of the numerous unique views and experiences our participants shared with us - it is not possible to capture all the detail and nuance of participants' responses in this summary. However, we have summarised some of the common patterns we identified across the survey responses below. We quote extracts from the responses to illustrate the sort of things that participants said and these are presented with participant numbers, age, gender and preferred pan identity (pansexual or panromantic).

The complex relationships between pan and bi identities

Our participants presented complex understandings of the relationship between pan and bi identities, which were quite different from some of the simplified ways in which they have been represented on the internet, as completely different and incompatible. In our project, while some saw pansexuality as a less binary counterpart to bisexuality - *“bi means both men and women and pan means all genders”* (P58, age 38, man/trans/non-binary, panromantic) - others viewed pan and bi as two words for virtually the same thing. A lot of participants also emphasised the multitude of different existing definitions or interpretations of bisexuality:

“I think there are many different ways to define bisexuality (being attracted to men and women, being attracted to two genders, being attracted to multiple genders, etc.), and it doesn’t necessarily exclude nonbinary individuals.” (P51, age 19, woman, panromantic)

Some also reported that their understanding was that the general definition of bisexuality has been shifting and has become more broadly inclusive of identities beyond gender binaries:

“Recently bi and pan have sort of converged, so it’s really up to the person which label fits better. [...] Most people would say bi means attraction to two genders, but since awareness has been brought to gender non-conforming people, trans people, etc. bisexuality has become more than just attraction to both girls and boys.” (P56, age 18, woman/cisgender, pansexual)

Therefore, many participants said they used bi terms alongside pan (and often other labels) to describe their sexuality. Some specified where and when they avoided or used particular terms and this was often in nuanced ways:

“On Tumblr, where I feel the most free to explore my sexual labels, I identify as panromantic grey asexual. To people who are close to me who understand LGBTQ labels but don’t fully understand the nuances, I identify as pan ace. To people who understand LGBTQ labels and who I am comfortable enough around to reveal I’m not straight, I say I’m bisexual. To people who show attitudes of homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia, etc., I do not reveal my identity and allow them to believe I’m straight.” (P50, age 24, woman/cisgender, panromantic)

The survey and demographic responses indicated that people who identify with pan identities use a wide range of additional labels to capture the nuances of their own gender and sexual/romantic identities. However, they also strategically use the labels which are most likely to be understood by others depending on the specific context.

The lack of education or awareness of pan identities and gender diversity within schools and the wider culture

The vast majority of people said they found school sex education limited because it mainly addressed heterosexual identities, or at best lesbian and gay identities, but rarely included bi or pan identities. Many wished they had received a more inclusive education in relation to both gender and sexuality:

“My school only ever really talked about hetero relationships and at most maybe one or two gay relationships. Bi or pan people were never mentioned.” (P46, age 20, woman, pansexual)

“It would have been liberating and helpful to learn about sexual orientations and genders at school.” (P65, age 25, woman, pansexual)

Similarly, the participants reported that those in the wider culture lacked awareness of gender diversity beyond the man/woman binary. They underscored the importance of gender inclusivity and of breaking down binaries, and this was also often cited as the reason for choosing pan terms to capture their sexual identity. Discovering pan identities and identifying with these terms was often associated with researching and learning more about sexuality and gender politics and diversity.

“I learnt about it [pansexuality] online, reading articles and op-eds about other people’s identities, almost as an accident as I was learning about transgender people [...] During that research, I happened upon a lot of literature about other sexualities and polyamory [...] articles that tackle a lot of the basics about sexuality and gender identity and I used it a lot to learn more about the whole LGBT+ spectrum.” (P3, age 22, woman/cisgender, pansexual)

Participants also reported that those in wider society were generally lacking awareness or accurate knowledge of pan identities. They described how they encountered tiresome “kitchenware jokes” and a lack of understanding from others in their everyday lives:

“In the wider culture I think that there’s very little knowledge about pansexuality [...] I find that people who aren’t aware of the term generally either make a joke about sexual attraction to kitchenware, [or] make accusations of me just wanting to be special.” (P2, woman, pansexual)

“Tumblr is full of pansexual nonbinary people. It’s out in the rest of the world it’s hard.” (P42, trans/non-binary/genderqueer, pansexual)

The perception was that many people lacked knowledge of sexual and gender identities and so participants sometimes reported that they would avoid disclosing their pan identity, to avoid having to have a discussion about their sexual and gender identities:

“I have talked about being pansexual with very few people. The people I am out to know me as bisexual, because it is a more familiar term, and because coming out as pansexual requires a discussion on gender politics which most people are conservative about.” (P48, age 19, non-binary/genderqueer/maverique, pansexual)

Many expressed the wish for the society to be more educated and accepting of sexual and gender diversity, so they could be more open themselves: *“I wish more people understood so I could be more comfortable being myself.”* (P52, age 19, woman/cisgender, pansexual). This lack of education and awareness means that pan people have to make specific efforts to search for and seek out information about their identities for themselves, and are required to explain gender and sexuality if they disclose their pan identities to others.

The importance of online communities and resources

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the lack of school education, the overwhelming majority of participants told us they had independently engaged in learning and teaching themselves about pan identities. They did so via the internet and this was often where they were also able to engage in sexuality related communities and socialise with others. We were particularly struck by the importance of these online spaces – mainly *Tumblr* – and the part these played in the exploration and development of our participants’ identities (also see quotes above):

“I learned of pansexuality online, and that is where I do most of my research. I first saw it on Tumblr, a blogging website where many people are open and unafraid to discuss progressive topics.” (P15)

“Almost all of my information on pansexuality has come from the Internet, such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr. These are the best places to find personal experiences.” (P54, age 19, woman, pansexual)

However, some participants also discussed negative experiences encountered online:

“The misinformed pan posts on Tumblr from bi, gay, and lesbian persons are hard to escape. [...] I have seen posts on Tumblr about how pansexuality is a transphobic label, a biphobic label, a label for people trying to be “even more special” than just bi. [...] Pretty

much any awful shit straight people say about non-straight, non-strights have said about pans.” (P50, age 24, woman/cisgender, panromantic)

While the predominance of internet communities may have partly been due to our recruitment strategies (e.g., via online calls for participants), nonetheless it seemed that these sites were important virtual space where some pan people were able to find others and discuss their shared identities – although not all online space was necessarily inclusive or supportive. This use of the internet may also reflect the lack of physical spaces or community groups which currently exist for pan people.

Summary of key findings:

- Participants presented varied and complex understanding of the relationship between pan and bi terms and of the various and shifting interpretations of bisexuality
- Participants mainly used pan labels to indicate their awareness of gender diversity and capacity to be attracted to people of any or all genders
- Participants drew on an array of gender and sexual/romantic terms to describe their identities and used these labels selectively and strategically depending on who they were talking to
- Participants reported that sex education was lacking and that they had not learnt anything about attraction to more than one gender at school
- Participants discussed how lots of people within the wider society were lacking in knowledge about sexual and gender identities
- Many participants found that the internet (in particular *Tumblr*) was a useful resource to find other pan people and talk about their identities

What else have we done with your responses?

So far, Karolina has:

- Presented a poster at the *British Psychological Society* annual conference which was held in Harrogate in May 2019
- Written a dissertation which summarised the academic literature to date and reported more the data in more depth and detail.

Nikki has also written a final report for the *British Psychological Society*, and we are very grateful for their support.

What will we do next?

We plan to do further analysis of the data so that we can:

- Present the findings at a public event
- Write an academic paper which when published will report our findings in more depth.

We will also be making recommendations to outline the need for:

- The recognition of pansexuality and panromanticism as valid, distinct, and complex identities that should not be simply conflated with other identities, in either research or practice
- More research on pansexual and panromantic identities and how they intertwine with other aspects of identity (such as asexual and aromantic identities, gender, age, race and ethnicity, class, disability, and so on), and in relationships (including in relation to monogamies and polyamories). This research should include people from various backgrounds and also those without access to the Internet
- Further exploration of the unique patterns of discrimination and prejudice experienced by pan people - panphobia and pan marginalisation - to increase knowledge about how pan people are impacted by reactions and responses to their identities in their everyday lives
- The development and provision of suitable and targeted community resources (for example, peer groups and other sources of support) for pan individuals
- Informing policy that works towards more inclusive sex education in schools, beyond heterosexual and same-sex/gender relationships and identities, to better support students who identify as pansexual and panromantic, and to increase general acceptance and understanding of diverse sexual and gender identities
- Informing professionals including counsellors, psychologists, and teachers, about sexual and gender diversity, so that they can better support the people they work with

And finally ...

We would like to thank again all our participants for contributing to this project and sharing their personal thoughts and experiences with us. We hope you enjoyed reading this report of our findings. We were very appreciative of your participation and the efforts that you all went to in completing the survey. Thank you very much for taking part.