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## Challenging the Binary: Sexual Identity That Is Not Duality

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*Western society operates in a traditionally binary thought system. Although bisexuality has broken some of these dichotomies, other sexual identities, specifically pansexuality and its predecessor pomosexuality, continue to break down dichotomies of gender, sexual identity, and sexual orientation. Using the work of writers such as C. Jacob Hale, Tristan Taormino, and Marco Vassi, this article explores the sexual identities beyond homosexuality, heterosexuality, and bisexuality. Additionally, this article explores transsexual identities and their role in defining pansexual/pomosexual identities. Shifting definitions of hetero/homosexual are also examined as evidence of and support for emerging pansexual and pomosexual identities. Furthermore, this article notes the lag between theory on emerging sexual identities and community discourses surrounding those identities. Overall, this article discusses the ways that pansexuality and pomosexuality challenge several standard dichotomies in western society, while suggesting ways that further research could continue to deconstruct the multiple vectors of oppression caused by strict dichotomies.*

**KEYWORDS** *LGBTQ, pansexual, queer theory, bisexuality, research needs, transsexualism, postmodernism, heteronormativity, intersectionality*

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## INTRODUCTION

Many binary systems have oppressed people in the queer community: male–female, woman–man, and gay–straight are just a few of them. This oppression imposes multiple vectors of oppression on many people in the queer community. Given the constraints of these binary systems of thought, it is no surprise that new concepts and identities challenge these dualities. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) communities, as well as feminist and queer scholars, have come up with a plethora of concepts to challenge these binaries. First of these was the bisexual identity, which inherently challenged the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, but left the other two main dichotomies—male–female and woman–man—essentially unchallenged.

However, after the recognition of bisexuality, more sexual identities and concepts have emerged that challenge all three dichotomies in different ways, as well as the essential assumptions of bisexuality. Two of these concepts are pansexuality and pomosexuality. In the past decade, both have increased in usage a great deal, although pansexuality is the more prevalent of the two. Just as bisexuality emerged from the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, pansexuality and pomosexuality have emerged out of dichotomies as well. In the article “The Queer Heterosexual” from the *Village Voice*, Tristan Taormino (2003) discusses this binary confusion and opposition. Taormino writes:

Once staunch separatists, queer people are flaunting our fluidity when it comes to gender and identity. Whereas in the late '80s and early '90s the dominant LGBT narrative was a coming-out story, today it's more like, “I'm a lesbian in a relationship with a gay-identified bi guy, so what does that make me?” Plus, the evolution of an out, proud, vocal, and visible transgender community has turned everything on its head, making the term “opposite sex” practically meaningless, or at best confusing. What's the opposite sex of a male-to-female transsexual? Is the lesbian lover of a male-to-female transgender person bisexual or something else entirely? (p. 1)

Taormino raises the issue of the fluidity and ambiguity that challenging various binaries has brought about in the LGBT community. Pansexuality and pomosexuality evolved out of this alphabet soup of identities and transgressing identities.

Given the ambiguity from which pansexuality and pomosexuality have sprung, it is no wonder that there is ambiguity in the application or definition of the terms themselves. One important item to consider in the discussion of pansexuality and pomosexuality is the question of identity versus concept. Is pansexuality a legitimate sexual identity, or is it merely a theoretical concept

that is removed from actual existence? Is pomosexuality a sexual identity or is it a concept that encompasses other identities? There is no clear answer to these questions; however, by tracing the roots of pansexuality and pomosexuality through social movements, concepts, and other identities that affect them, certain aspects of pansexuality and pomosexuality become clear. In the most basic sense, pansexuality can be an identity claimed by individuals in LGBTQ communities, whereas, more often than not, pomosexuality is an umbrella term used to describe political resistance that encompasses identities and concepts that are unknown, unnamed, or otherwise completely transgressive.

It is important to begin the collection and analysis of information about pansexuality and pomosexuality in an academic forum, not only because these concepts help deconstruct existing binaries surrounding sexual identity and gender, but also because it is vital that academic research reflect the lived experiences and colloquial discussions of LGBTQ communities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

On subjects as recent as pansexuality and pomosexuality, the passage of time will be a very important factor affecting writers' views on the topics. Additionally, there are varying theoretical perspectives on the issue. Given that pansexuality and pomosexuality are identities that touch on a number of factors, the literature is relevant in three separate, yet intertwined categories: outsider queer sexual activity, transsexuality, and sexual identity. Pansexuality and pomosexuality lie at the intersection of these three categories. Given the recent nature of the concepts, only very recent writings use the terms 'pansexuality' and 'pomosexuality.' Therefore, any exploration of pansexuality and pomosexuality must look carefully at the locations where different aspects of those identities or concepts intersect, even if those two terms are not used there.

### Outsider Queer Activity

Many articles focus on activities that are outside not only of straight sex but also of queer sex. C. Jacob Hale (1997) discusses exactly this issue with the article "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex Without Women or Men." The article focuses on the leatherdyke communities and people within those communities who are still transgressing the boundaries of that community. Published in 1997, this article is more than 15 years old and therefore does not directly address the pansexual and pomosexual identities. However, Hale does mention the transgression of the simple binary structure that oppresses leatherdyke communities (and the greater queer

communities as well), and thus is relevant to this discussion. Similarly, Marco Vassi (1997) discusses sexual behavior that is beyond queer in his article "Beyond Bisexuality." Vassi discusses the idea of metasex, the notion that beyond bisexuality there is a philosophy of sex that has multiple layers and dimensions that extend far beyond bisexuality. Although Vassi, like Hale, does lay claim to other names or identities (such as 'pansexuality' or 'pomosexuality'), it is clear that his concept of sex acts does not fit into the binary view held by the society at large, and must be placed in a different category.

### Transsexuality

As far as this second category is concerned, the connection is somewhat obvious and already incorporated in Taormino's (2003) quote in the Introduction. The presence of transsexuals in queer communities has changed the face of bisexuality because transsexuals often don't fit into any other category offered by the binaries set up by society. Thus, much of literature about trans folk crosses the binary boundaries and becomes part of the discussion about pansexuality and pomosexuality. "Queer Femmes Loving FTMs" by Susan Driver (2006) and "Feminist Transmasculinities" by Reese Simpkins (2006) appear in an anthology about transfeminism; however, both have important ideas to contribute to the pansexual/pomosexual dialogue. Driver's article is based on personal experience and clearly speaks to the question of where trans people (and those who love them) fit into the binary world of bisexuality. Simpkins' article discusses how trans folk are redefining the dichotomies of sex, gender, and gender expression, which implies that they are transforming the dichotomous discussion of sexuality as well.

Researcher Holly Devor also views the discussion through a trans lens. Her articles "Female Gender Dysphoria in Context: Social Problem or Personal Problem" (Devor, 1997) and "Sexual Orientation Identities, Attractions, and Practices of Female-to-Male Transsexuals" (Devor, 1993) deal with the trans issue while venturing into the pansexuality and pomosexuality discussions as well. Whereas Devor (1997) focuses on gender expression of traditionally trans and nontrans people, the latter article (Devor, 1993) directly looks at the sexual practices of female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) and therefore begins the dialogue about where and how trans people fit into the binary system.

### Sexual Identity

This final category encompasses a wide variety of articles that deal with varying sexual identities that do not fit into the three-pronged LGB system.

Three prominent works will be discussed here. Taormino's (2003) essay "The Queer Heterosexual" and Clyde Smith's (1997) presentation "How I Became a Queer Heterosexual" deal with sexual identities that do not fit into the LGB system. "Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution," by Ann Ferguson (1981), deals with the differences in sexual identity between lesbians and bisexuals. Even though this is a much older essay (and does not use the terms 'pansexuality' and 'pomosexuality'), it does address these issues implicitly.

In this time period, the primary article to discuss pansexuality or pomosexuality directly in detail is the introduction to the anthology edited by Queen and Schimel (1997). Although most research of this era defines 'pomosexuality' in such a way as to encompass pansexuality, this article articulates and defines 'pomosexuality' in a way that allows pansexuality to coexist as a separate concept.

## ANALYSIS

The first step in understanding pansexuality and pomosexuality is to understand the roots of the words. Queen and Schimel (1997) begin by defining what 'pomo' means as a prefix. They write "Pomo: short for Postmodern in the arts, a movement following after and in direct reaction to Modernism; culturally, an outlook that acknowledges diverse and complex points of view" (Queen & Schimel, 1997, back cover). They then define 'pomosexuality' as follows: "The queer erotic reality beyond the boundaries of gender, separatism, and essentialist notions of sexual orientation" (Queen & Schimel, 1997, back cover). Clearly, the definition of the 'pomo' prefix is meant to situate 'pomosexuality' as a term that "acknowledges diverse and complex points of view" in the realm of sexuality.

The 'pan' prefix of 'pansexuality' is similarly useful. 'Pansexual' is most commonly used in the world outside academia as a sexual identity term similar to 'bisexuality,' but more inclusive of trans people. It also shows an awareness of the implied gender binary in the term 'bisexual.' Pansexual is rarely used as a term in the literature of this period. In the documents reviewed here, it appears in only one article (San Juan, 1991), where it is used in conjunction with the term 'panethnic.' It is applied to the work of an artist named Jean Toomer, whose pansexual, panethnic work represents his "search for reality beyond labels and for mankind above race and nationality" (San Juan, 1991, p. 223). San Juan's concept of "realities beyond labels" is very similar to the definition of pomosexuality. The difference lies in its use and application.

Although pansexual is commonly used in society as an identity term that is more inclusive (as the prefix suggests) than bisexual, 'pomosexual' implies something wider than the pansexual identity. Queen and Schimel

(1997) describe a pomosexual person as follows: “like the queer s/he closely resembles, may not be tied to a single sexual identity, may not be content to reside within a category measurable by social scientists or acknowledged by either rainbow-festooned gays or by Ward and June Cleaver” (p. 23). This statement moves pomosexuality away from a sexuality identity term and transforms it into a cultural concept and a term that can be applied to identity. These authors also make sure to include pansexuality in the net of possible sexual identities that the pomosexual can move in and out of.

Once the basic terms are established, it becomes easy to see that pansexuality and pomosexuality developed as reactions to the binary system—even a system that includes the concept of bisexuality. Such systems confine human experiences in small boxes that are insufficient to contain the reality of those experiences. There are so many experiences that clearly do not fit into these LGB boxes, no matter how satisfying it was to add the B to LG.

Trans communities are clearly one of the most fertile locales that forge new identities that challenge the binary system. This is because trans gender expression is already a challenge to the binary. Simpkins (2006) discusses the challenge that trans people bring to the binary world when she writes, “By disrupting the coherency of the male = man = masculine formula, the trans movement challenges dominant discourses of sex/gender” (p. 83). According to Simpkins, the trans movement challenges the binary sex/gender discussion, but because gender is almost always linked to sexuality the trans movement also challenges the binary sexuality discussion. What Simpkins implies, Devor (1993) overtly discusses: “present classificatory systems are unable to capture adequately the subjective experience of post-transition transsexuals who identify and live as gay men or lesbian women” (p. 305). This assertion can be expanded to all trans people—not only those who are posttransition or who identify as gay men or lesbian women. Devor (1993) was correct at that time (and perhaps even today): There were not sufficient terms and categories to encompass the lived experience and self-identity of many trans people (and nontrans people as well).

The issue is that in a culture where identity terms are so important, no group can thrive in the long term without creating an identity term or concept that fits their messy lived experiences (even if this means that those experiences will be stuffed into a neat and tidy box). The concepts of pansexuality and pomosexuality are attempts to solve the problem that Devor (1993) mentions. Driver also discusses these messy lived experiences and comments on the fact that loving a female-to-male trans person as a queer femme steps outside the binary system of classification (Driver, 2006, p. 112). This movement beyond binary classifications shifts both individuals to identities that are traditional and transgressive—and ultimately unknown. The fact of the matter is that pansexuality and pomosexuality are necessary terms that have arisen to help name the previously unknown.

In addition to looking at pansexuality and pomosexuality as emerging from the trans movement and trans people's experiences, these terms also have to do with sexual activity that is outside queer communities' traditional standards. These extreme outsider behaviors fall more often under the umbrella of pomosexuality than that of pansexuality. This is due to the fact that, although they can affect sexual identity, the majority of experiences reflect lifestyle and cultural context, not merely sexual identity, and therefore are more appropriately placed under the more inclusive term 'pomosexuality.' Hale (1997) discusses leatherdyke boy-daddy play as an example of precisely this outsider type of pomosexual sexuality. Hale discusses the multiple gender performativities and identifications that happen in the lives of leatherdyke boys and their daddies and additionally states that allowing for multiple gender identification does not make them more radical than stable gender identifications (p. 234). The concept that the play some leatherdyke boys and daddies participate in provides them not only the ability to explore but also the ability to self-identify as multiple genders falls clearly under the umbrella of pomosexuality.

Moreover, even sexual identities that do not fit into the realm of pansexual or pomosexual still enter into the discourse about these two terms due to the ways these other terms are defined. Terms other than 'pansexuality' and 'pomosexuality' that begin to break down the binary tradition of sexual identity all overlap with the terms 'pansexuality' and 'pomosexuality.' In their essay "Bi Any Other Name," Hutchins and Kaahumanu (1991) discuss the multiple meanings of the term 'bisexual,' and some of the issues bisexuals face as the pioneers of alternative sexual identities that fight the simple heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. They write that bisexuality "challenges the current assumptions about the immutability of people's orientations and society's supposed divisions into discrete groups" (p. 394). Although Hutchins and Kaahumanu are describing bisexuality, the same could easily be said for pansexuality and pomosexuality. Of course, bisexuality was the first identity term to challenge the dichotomy of homosexual/heterosexual that had been in place for decades. They are right to point to bisexuality's role in challenging the binary system. In fact, bisexuality turned out to be the first step toward the emergence of pansexuality and pomosexuality. However, I disagree with their later assertion that bisexuality is an inclusive term, because by the nature of its prefix bisexuality asserts the sex/gender binary while fighting the homosexual/heterosexual one. Without bisexuality having paved the way, there would most likely be no pansexuality or pomosexuality—or for that matter anything other than heterosexual and homosexual identities.

Overall, the use of the terms 'pansexuality' and 'pomosexuality' differ, even as they overlap a great deal. Both are attempts to challenge the multiple binary systems that oppress all people by way of the binary system that still rules the LGB trinity.



## CONCLUSION

In his critique of queer theory, Hale (1997) claims that for sexual-minority communities, the “theory lags far behind community discourse” (p. 223). The same can be said for pansexuality and pomosexuality. Even if these terms are not used to describe sexual-minority communities (which they arguable could be), academic theories about pansexuality and pomosexuality lag far behind the community discourse. This research uncovered almost no sources that referred to pansexuality directly, and only one anthology that dealt with pomosexuality at all. However, pansexuals and queers who discuss pomosexuality form communities that are growing. Theory and academia clearly need to catch up quickly.

With further investigation, it is possible that past bisexuality research would show that much of what was being said about bisexuality now more appropriately describes pansexuality or pomosexuality. Furthermore, it is likely that continued growth in research and theory that is trans inclusive will result in more insight into pansexuality and pomosexuality. However, until all communities can accept the concepts of fluidity, choice, and nonbinary living there will be no place for pansexuality or pomosexuality in traditional academic research on sexuality.

Queen and Schimel (1997) put it best when they said,

Pomosexuality lives in the space in which all other non-binary forms of sexual and gender identity reside—a boundary-free zone in which fences are crossed for the fun of it, or simply because some of us can’t be fenced in. It challenges either/or categorizations in favor of largely unmapped possibility and the intense charge that comes with transgression. (p. 23)

Pomosexuality and pansexuality are likewise charting the uncharted (or at least the previously unnamed and undefined), and by so doing have the possibility of changing the face of modern Western society.

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