

Sex in Canada

The Who, Why, When, and How
of Getting Down Up North

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Introduction:

The Social Science of Sexuality

Who wouldn't like to learn more about sex? Sex and sexuality are central aspects of our lives. Discovering one's sexuality is an important part of the transition from childhood into adulthood. Sex is often the basis through which we make connections with others and learn more about ourselves. It is tangled up with falling in love, forming families, and having children. It can bring us pleasure and pain, and we can invest our sexual relationships with all our hopes and our fears. Despite being so important to our lives, sex was unmentionable not very long ago, something deeply personal to keep hidden and private. Music, film, and television were censored and rated to keep sexual content away from impressionable young listeners and viewers. The only appropriate space for talking about sex was with a trusted partner or friend in a quiet, intimate conversation. Parents understood that they were to break this taboo only once. They dreaded the arrival of "the talk" with their children, then suffered through it awkwardly.

Now, in this era of self-expression and social media, we have more opportunities to talk frankly and openly about our sexual identities, behaviours, desires, and fears. Indeed, sex seems to be everywhere in our culture.¹ Although we still have a rating system, movies and TV series

routinely feature sex scenes, and sexually explicit material is all but unavoidable on the internet. Schools across the country offer sex education programs that teach children at various ages about the names of body parts, sexual and gender identities, birth control, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Recently, 2SLGBTQ+ people – a term for individuals with two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other non-heterosexual identities – have come out of the closet to live their lives proudly and publicly. And sexual harassment and violence are being taken more seriously, with some public figures being held accountable for their actions. The era of sex taboos, it may seem, is behind us.

Although much has changed in Canadians' willingness to talk about sex, the discomfort quickly returns when we scratch the surface. For example, chatting about the sexual relationships of elder populations, such as those in nursing homes, is still against the norm. Teen sex continues to worry adults. Unconventional sex practices, such as those involving costumes and role playing, may feel unfamiliar or unsettling. Experiences of low or absent sexual attraction, or asexuality, may be an uncomfortable subject for some. When we do discuss sex, we may avoid going into detail about behaviours or techniques, keeping to socially safer subjects such as romance and love. There are still norms against, for example, telling a friend what specifically turns us on or brings us to orgasm. All of this is to say that, although our culture has opened up significantly, silence remains the rule when it comes to some sexual topics.

Some of our ideas about sex have changed over time. For example, our thoughts on the morality of premarital sex experienced a sea change in the last century, as did our emphasis on the social relevance of women's virginity.² The taboos against masturbation have decreased dramatically as well.³ Canadians' attitudes toward lesbian and gay people have become more positive over the decades, and same-sex marriage, which became legal in 2005, is widely approved.⁴ At the time, it was quite controversial, but now it is not. All major federal political parties support it, and a large majority of Canadians do, too. The evidence from attitudes surveys suggests that Canadian morality around sex and sexuality emphasizes consent and honesty between partners, with a steady disavowal of extra-

marital sex, yet moral restrictions on sex before marriage or on remarrying after divorce have loosened considerably.⁵

Nonetheless, Canadians do not agree on every issue. For example, abortion is a thorny topic. Although a strong majority – about three out of four Canadians – supports legal abortion, a vocal minority thinks it should be made illegal or at least highly restricted.⁶ Sex education is also controversial. Most parents want schools to teach their children about sex and sexuality, but some think it is harmful to expose children to certain subjects, such as same-sex sexuality and birth control.⁷ These disagreements are perhaps not as divisive as in other countries, but it would be a mistake to assume that Canadians all think alike on matters of sexuality.

Anthropologist Gayle Rubin explains that, culturally, “sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance.”⁸ That is to say, sexuality and sexual behaviour are more meaningful to us than other common human traits and behaviours. We think we know more about someone if we learn how many sexual partners they have had than if we learn how often they snack on potato chips, for example. We see having sex for the first time as a critical milestone, whereas the age at which someone begins wearing eyeglasses seems of little consequence. This difference is owing to the special place that sexuality occupies in our value systems – the ways we judge whether we (and others) are good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, moral or immoral. When someone we know breaks a sexual norm, we can see it as proof of something larger, a character flaw. Further, each individual dimension of our sexual lives is regarded as relevant to weighing whether sexual behaviours are appropriate: whether we are married or single, whether we use only our bodies or include objects, whether we are by ourselves, in pairs, or in a group. Rubin argues that our inclination to divide “good” sex from “bad” helps us determine whether we are, at our very core, good or bad people. As a result, even sexual behaviours that are consistent with our own morality – for example, that are consensual, feel good, and harm no one – may still feel risky because we worry that we may run afoul of others’ moral judgments. We want others to think we’re good people.

Sexual behaviour, of course, is much more private and less visible than many other types of social behaviour. Because it is both private

and morally significant, it is subject to deep curiosity, even as social norms become more inclusive. In fact, as more sexual behaviours become accepted, we want to know even more about what others are getting up to. For example, Rubin wrote about sex in 1984, when the 2SLGBTQ+ movement was taking some early steps toward social acceptance. Today, though 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians have some distance to go before they achieve full equality, they have made many gains. So, I wonder, have Canadians made similar shifts toward accepting non-monogamous relationships? Do they have an open mind about self-pleasure and masturbation? How common is intercourse, oral sex, or the use of sex toys? It can seem that sexual norms are always changing, but there really aren't any rigorous studies that give the basic facts about who is doing what.⁹ Fortunately, the Sex in Canada study asked many of the questions that are still considered off-limits.

Stubborn controversies and silences around sex and sexuality can sometimes leave us with unanswered questions. We may wonder what is “normal” behaviour and whether what we do is the same as what the average Canadian does. We rarely have a sense, for example, of how often couples have sex or whether most people masturbate on a regular basis. We may ask what proportion of sexual relationships are monogamous or open, or whether being married or unmarried determines what a couple does in bed. Is anal sex just for gay men, or do straight couples do it, too? Does having children diminish your sex life? This book attempts to fill in such silent spaces to paint an accurate picture of sex in Canada.

It's important to remember that sociologists make a distinction between what is normal and what is average. Normal is related to norms, or social rules, of what is right and wrong, so we would understand normal behaviour to be consistent with those rules. On the other hand, average behaviours are practices and lived experiences that we can measure, more or less. In this book, we want to think about both averages and norms, so we consider behaviours and values. This book reports many averages for various sexual behaviours, and we can reflect on how this information might also tell us something about our social norms. For example, if the sexual behaviours of older Canadians differ from

those of younger adults, this may suggest that norms have changed over time. Older Canadians were socialized into one set of norms as they came into adulthood and sexual activity, and younger Canadians who reached adulthood decades later were socialized into a different set. The same can be said of differences in sexual behaviours among differing groups of people; they might give us a hint at social divisions in the norms. For example, if the behaviours of members of a religious group differ from those of Canadians in general, we might infer that a religious norm is influencing them.

As useful as it is to report the behaviour of the average Canadian, it is important not to stop there. By design, averages obscure variation. This book will also pay attention to how sexual practices diverge among Canadians. In particular, it focuses on how social differences, such as level of education, residence in a certain region, or gender, might influence various sexual behaviours. A sociological perspective considers how broader social patterns organize our lives, nudging us into shared habits and providing us with opportunities and challenges that differ from those in distinct social locations. A sociological perspective on sexuality, then, expects that the same social differences that affect our lives will also affect our sexual experiences, shaping both opportunities and challenges. Thus, this research attends to the ways that social categories and divisions are reflected in the sexual behaviours, identities, and partners of Canadians. In other words, this book asks, How does our social world shape our sexual lives?

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT CANADA?

For decades, social scientists have had reliable information about sexual behaviour in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and other countries. In Canada, they have begun to include more questions about sexual behaviour in their surveys in recent years, but we are still behind other countries in generating a broad, informed picture.¹⁰ When I teach a Canadian university course on the sociology of sexualities, I'm often obliged to rely on statistics from the United States to give students accurate information on the social organization of sexuality, and I'm never surprised when they object that perhaps the statistics are different here.

There are several reasons to believe that Canada might be different from the United States, or from other countries, in terms of sexual behaviour.

First of all, Canada has several policies in place that distinguish it from the United States. Some of its criminal law governing sexual behaviour is different, as is the case with sex work. In the United States, tens of thousands of sex workers are convicted every year, most of them women.¹¹ In Canada, sex work per se is not illegal, though a number of crimes are related to it, and there are far fewer arrests surrounding the practice.¹²

Human rights law related to sexuality distinguishes Canada, too. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has been consistently interpreted by the courts such that 2SLGBTQ+ individuals should have equal treatment under the law and should be free from discrimination.¹³ In the United States, they come under a patchwork of legal rights, in which some states prohibit discrimination, but others do not. In some states, consensual sex between two adults of the same gender was a crime as recently as 2003, when the Supreme Court declared these laws unconstitutional. In Canada, similar laws were removed from the books back in 1969. In the United States, new laws banning trans and nonbinary youth from participating in sports teams that are consistent with their gender identity have been implemented in multiple states in recent years, and a new wave of laws prohibiting doctors from providing gender-affirming care to trans youth has been proposed (and in some cases, passed).¹⁴ In contrast, Canada passed federal legislation in 2017 to secure human rights for trans and gender-diverse people.¹⁵

Reproductive rights are more secure in Canada than in the United States. Although access to abortion remains a challenge for some Canadians, abortions are publicly funded regardless of the reason for the procedure.¹⁶ And though Canada was late in approving the drugs that induce medical abortions (as opposed to surgical ones), these are now widely available with a doctor's prescription. Navigating the Canadian health care system to obtain an abortion may be difficult, but the situation in the United States is even more challenging. In 2022, a Supreme Court decision overturned the right to abortion for all Americans, leaving the legal status of reproductive rights in a hodgepodge

of policies across the various states. The rights that had been in place for fifty years were eliminated as a result of a decades-long fight by anti-abortion activists.¹⁷ Despite these policy differences, Canada is estimated to have a somewhat lower rate of abortion than the United States.¹⁸

Canadian culture relating to sexuality also seems somewhat different from that of the United States. For example, Canadians are less enthusiastic about marriage, and many long-term partners choose not to marry.¹⁹ These common-law partnerships are often considered equivalent to marital partnerships, whereas in the United States, living together is generally seen as a first step toward marriage. The province of Quebec, and francophone culture more broadly, is also worth special attention as we consider the cultural differences between Canada and the United States. Sociologists have noted that though the attitudes of English-speaking Canada are similar to those of the United States, the French-speaking parts of the country are more socially liberal than either of these.²⁰ It is worth asking whether that applies to sexual attitudes or even to patterns of sexual behaviour – and we will, later in this book.

WHY DO A SEX SURVEY?

For all these reasons and more, it is clear that to really understand sex in Canada, relying on surveys from the United States simply will not do. The varied ways that Canadians express their sexuality are worthy of our attention, so we are going to need Canadian data. Fortunately, our survey provides a snapshot that can give a sense of what goes on in Canadian bedrooms, with whom, and how often. Our idea was to provide a broad foundation of knowledge on a wide array of behaviours and to establish a baseline for future studies that might consider trends in sexual behaviour over time. The survey offers a sense of the current state of social norms surrounding sexuality in Canada. And it lets us compare Canada to other countries around the world.

This research also helps us understand the social organization of sexuality in Canada. Sociologists know that the social world is not the same in every location; rather, social forces shape our world and influence how people react to their circumstances. Certain divisions, such as living in the countryside or in the city, affect how easy it is to meet a partner. Gender is a key predictor for many aspects of life, including sexuality,

and income, education, race, and age can form boundaries that push our behaviour in one direction or another. Taken together, these forces shape the landscape of sexuality in Canada, and this book will consider the variety of Canadian perspectives regarding sex and sexuality.

This book is meant to present these findings in a readable and engaging format, while touching on controversial and complex topics. Because it is based on solid scientific evidence, we can shed new light on controversies and break down complexities to examine the situation as it stands today. A core feature of this book is that it offers no opinions on how sex in Canada should be but rather stays squarely within the realm of how it is currently.

THE SEX IN CANADA SURVEY

The Sex in Canada survey was completed in 2018. That's right; all the data that I use for this book were gathered before the 2020 global pandemic. In the midst of the pandemic, we limited our contact with others, typically spent much more time at home, and in many cases worked remotely and helped our children do their schooling from home as well. All of this, combined with the stress and grief of a major health crisis, likely affected our sex lives in the short run and possibly even caused shifts in the long run. This book cannot offer any insights into Canadian sexuality during the pandemic. However, as a snapshot of our sexual behaviour in a pre-pandemic world, it is an important baseline of information. We know what Canadians think and what they do sexually without the extra burden of stress that COVID-19 brought to their lives. Perhaps in the future, another survey will offer comparative data so that we can see if behaviour changed in the post-pandemic world.

To conduct the survey, our team of sociologists and political scientists used a quota-based sampling protocol that was developed and administered by the research firm Environics Canada. We recruited a sample of participants who matched the proportion of Canadians in each of the following categories, according to the most recent census: gender, age, region of residence, and visible minority status. For example, 51 percent of Canadian adults are women, and so 51 percent of our survey respondents were women, too. Since 6.6 percent of Canadians live in the Atlantic provinces, we made sure that 6.6 percent of our participants

lived in these provinces, and so on. We conducted the survey in the two official languages of Canada, English and French, and let people choose which one they wanted to use. We delivered the survey in proportion to the census figures for anglophone and francophone Canadians – that is, 76 percent of the surveys were taken in English, and 23 percent were taken in French. This strategy produced a generalizable sample of Canadian adults; that means the answers of our participants can be understood to be representative of all Canadians. In total, the Sex in Canada survey was completed by 2,303 Canadian adults aged eighteen to ninety. More details on our methods are available in the [appendix](#).

The data collection strategy I describe here would be sure to turn up Canadians of all kinds, but we wanted to collect reliable data from lesbian, gay, and bisexual Canadians as well. So, we took some extra steps to survey a pool of LGB people that was a bit larger than what we might expect to find in the general population. We call this oversampling, and it allows us to understand the behaviours and attitudes of this group, especially if they differ from those of straight Canadians. In the end, our survey included 300 Canadians who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and 2,003 who identified as straight or heterosexual.

This approach of understanding sexuality through the lens of survey data has limitations. First of all, we must rely on the self-reports of participants. Were they telling the truth? We could not guarantee that all responses would be accurate, but we took many steps to ensure participants' truthfulness. First, we never asked them for their names or any identifying information. We made a point of telling them that the survey would ask personal questions, so that they could make sure they had privacy. Participants filled in the survey online, so they never had to speak to anyone on the phone or in person, which could potentially be embarrassing for them. Of course, I can't promise that everyone answered every question truthfully. However, I do feel that we did our best to create the conditions where they would feel comfortable to do so.

Which questions we choose to ask can shape our perceptions of sexuality. Even in the United States, where survey data on sexuality are more plentiful than in Canada, research shows that surveys are much more likely to ask about heterosexual, married, monogamous, and procreative sexuality than about any other types of sexual identities and activities.²¹

As social scientists ask their questions in hopes of discovering what sexual norms are, they are also inadvertently shaping those norms, in the eyes of the survey participants and within the audience of their research reports. For example, sexualities surveys, like sex education in schools, have focused more on risk than on pleasure.²² We have only recently begun asking about same-sex relationships or LGB identity, which has fortified 2SLGBTQ+-movement claims for equal treatment and full social inclusion.²³

In the Sex in Canada survey, we tried to focus on both risks and pleasure, and we avoided using any judgmental language to sway responses. However, our study was subject to certain pitfalls, many of which exist in other studies. Because we wanted to describe the sexuality of Canadians in general, we concentrated on what was widely shared. Sexual activities in which smaller numbers of people engage cannot be accurately captured with survey data, so this book has little to say about sex clubs, role play, or fetishes. Similarly, relationship forms that are favoured by small numbers of Canadians, such as polyamorous relationships and other types of consensual non-monogamy, are not well captured by a survey instrument like ours. There is no intent to imply a value judgment, but as Laurel Westbrook, Jamie Budnick, and Aliya Saperstein argue, by shining a spotlight on more numerous identities, activities, and relationships, we are also casting a shadow upon the rest. Fortunately, there is a lot of great social scientific work on sexual communities and practices that are not covered in these pages. I strongly recommend that you keep reading.

A NOTE ABOUT GENDER IDENTITY

As our understandings of gender are changing over time, so should our approaches to categorizing people in social science. For example, trans men and women, as well as nonbinary people, are not adequately represented by the usual male/female options on a survey. Some may not want to use gender categories to describe themselves at all. Social scientists who design survey questions are grappling with the issue of how to include everyone in their surveys, regardless of gender, and how to represent them well when presenting data. Consensus is emerging around the use of a two-step question sequence to capture sex and gender.²⁴ This is what

we employed. We first asked our respondents what sex they were assigned at birth, and then we asked what their gender identity was now, including nonbinary options. About 1 percent chose trans and nonbinary gender options. This was a bit greater than the proportion of trans and nonbinary people reported by the 2021 census, which found that 0.33 percent of Canadians identify as trans or nonbinary.²⁵

When I report on gender breakdowns in this book, I am using the second of our two questions to capture the gender identity of participants. So, when I say “men,” this includes cisgender and transgender men. When I say “women,” this includes cisgender and transgender women. There were not enough respondents in the nonbinary category for me to report them separately; nor were there enough trans respondents to make any reliable claims about the sexual behaviour of trans men and women. We need more research on these specific populations to have a complete understanding of gender and sexuality.

THREE STRANDS OF SEXUALITY

How do you measure sexuality? This question is more difficult than it may seem at first. “Sexuality” is a very broad term that covers many aspects of each of us, some deeply internal and personal, others that are shared and communicated with intimate partners or with the world. When a woman gets married to a man, she is communicating to her family and her community not only her long-term personal commitment, but also, as we tend to expect, her sexual commitment. We commonly assume that she is expressing a heterosexual identity, that she will have sex only with the groom, and that these aspects of her sexuality will remain consistent throughout her life. However, researchers have found that the situation is much more complicated.

Research has identified at least three strands that we can measure, more or less, to gain a picture of an individual’s sexuality at a given point in time: sexual identity, behaviour, and desire. Sexual identity refers to the way that we present ourselves to the world. At this moment in Canadian culture, we may use the terms heterosexual, lesbian, gay, asexual, bisexual, two-spirit, or queer to capture our sexual identities. Sexual behaviours are the sexual actions that we take, with a partner or by ourselves. And sexual desire tries to capture our inner feelings – what

turns us on or brings us pleasure, our fantasies and dreams. These strands are interwoven, but they are conceptually distinct aspects of how we understand ourselves as sexual beings.

One thing that is very clear in sexuality research is that we cannot measure only one strand and assume we know everything about the other two. For example, early research by Alfred Kinsey produced the “Kinsey Scale,” which suggested that many people who present a heterosexual identity harbour some same-sex sexual desires.²⁶ Similarly, survey research by sociologist Edward O. Laumann and colleagues shows very clearly that the number of people who report having had sex with someone of the same gender is much larger than the number of people who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.²⁷ Thus, when we ask about sexual identity, we are not getting an accurate understanding of people’s sexual behaviour. So, we learned that we cannot just ask people about their sexual identity and think we know everything about their sexual behaviour or desires.

This book is attuned to the three strands. Our survey used a spectrum of questions to learn about sexual identity, behaviour, and desire. To broaden our understanding of sexuality, we also asked about pleasure, feelings of intimacy with a partner, and discomfort and pain. We want to know more than just what Canadians do in bed. We want to know how they feel about it.

HOW IS THE BOOK ORGANIZED?

This survey offers a rich picture of sex in Canada, presented in a series of topics that lead us through several ways to understand our sexual selves. [Chapter 1](#) examines the role that sexual identity plays in shaping the world around us. The most familiar sexual identities are not universal; nor have they always been around. Still, they are powerful forces that shape our understandings of sexuality, while they influence our families, communities, and the social order.

[Chapter 2](#) asks, How much sex are we having? It considers a number of myths. For example, we may think that single people are having all the fun, enjoying sex on a regular basis and perhaps with several partners, whereas married people struggle to find the time and energy for sex. We take a look into the differences in sexual behaviour between young

people and older people, whose libidos, the story goes, have surely diminished over time. And we gain some insight into how often Canadians pleasure themselves, whether or not they are with a partner.

Chapter 3 considers the commitment between partners that may or may not accompany a sexual relationship. How committed are Canadians to their partners, how much cheating do they do, and how often are their relationships open to sexual exploration with outsiders? Plus, we look at how many people are having sex outside of relationships altogether. Casual sex in the form of hookup culture is all the rage among young urban adults, but is this also the case among the middle-aged or among seniors?

Chapter 4 turns to sexual behaviour. What are we doing the most, and what do we avoid? How many of us are having oral or anal sex? How many use sex toys and vibrators? How common is sex without the kissing and cuddling that we associate with love and intimacy? Does the script of penile-vaginal intercourse as the dominant form of heterosex limit the possibilities for straight couples more than for LGB couples? This chapter gives us a look into the sex acts of Canadians and how they might vary by gender, age, or sexual identity.

Sex can be a site of both pleasure and pain, and **Chapter 5** examines the good and bad feelings that accompany it. What behaviours are the most pleasurable, arousing, and stimulating? What brings us to orgasm, and why do men climax more often than women in heterosexual sex? Is emotional intimacy between partners linked to sexual pleasure? This chapter also examines the pain of sex, as in feeling pressured or coerced into having it, or having sex that is physically uncomfortable, as well as the risk of poor sexual health outcomes. Out of respect for our participants, the Sex in Canada survey stopped short of asking them to describe any non-consensual sexual activity, so though we know it is all too common, we don't dive deeply into it here.

Chapter 6 considers the social organization of sexuality. That is, how does social location affect sexual behaviours? This chapter looks at the small differences in sexuality that exist across the regions of Canada and the larger differences between anglophones and francophones. We think about how religion shapes sexual behaviour and how education influences the choices we make in our sexuality. This chapter also considers

the politics of sexuality, examining whether those who lean to the left on the political spectrum might engage in activities that, on average, differ from those who lean to the right.

Taken together, the findings presented in this book offer a solid empirical foundation for our knowledge about sex in Canada. By its end, we will understand how much and what kind of sex Canadians have on average and how they feel about it. We will also have a sense of the wide variety in their sexual behaviours, identities, and desires. In some instances, the analysis will give the answers we expected, whereas in others, the data hold a few surprises. And we will know how these averages vary, if at all, by social locations such as age, racial identity, level of education, and language group. In the end, this book is an overview of the social organization of sexuality – the way that social forces nudge us into patterns of sexual behaviour.

1

Thinking about Sexual Identity

Sexual identity is one of the most important social divisions that organize our sexual lives. It says something essential, not only about our attractions and desires, but also about our families and communities. It is a way for us to make sense of who we are and to communicate this sense to others.¹ When I say I am “straight” or “heterosexual,” I am telling you a little something, but not nearly everything, about my sexual desires. I may be communicating the gender of my partner, but perhaps the full truth about my sexuality is more complex, or maybe it has changed over time. Some people experience their sexuality as an unalterable truth about who they are, whereas others feel that it is more fluid.

The 2SLGBTQ+ acronym, which combines a set of sexual identities that distinguish themselves from the straight identity, is now widely known. Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities have been claimed by people who were once labelled as deviant by powerful social actors in legal, medical, and psychological communities. Giving a positive set of names to that which has been demeaned by others has been central to the struggle for rights and equality, as has forming an inclusive community that broadens coalitions rather than

limits them. For this reason, the acronym can be expanded to include additional identities. For example, the 2S in 2SLGBTQQIA+ refers to two-spirit Indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality. The second “Q” in QQ represents people who are questioning their sexuality, a recognition that for some, identities change over their lifetime. The “I” stands for intersex people, those whose sex at birth falls somewhere between the binary categories of male and female, and who have been fighting for the right to self-determination of their gender and sex. The “A” is for asexual people, who experience low or absent levels of sexual desire, and the plus sign “+” symbolizes other possibilities.

In this book, I most often refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and straight identity categories. They are the most numerous among the groups mentioned above and are thus most easily captured with survey methods. I will use the acronym LGB in discussing survey data about participants who claimed lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. However, when I refer to the communities, social movements, and subcultures that formed around these sexual identities, I use the 2SLGBTQ+ acronym that is most prominent today. These are not simple choices. The language we use to represent these communities and their diverse members has been contested and debated, changing over time. It will continue to change. Sociologists know that sexual identity is much more than a label we choose to describe ourselves. These categories form divisions that shape our social world. In this chapter, I give a historical sketch of how we came to adopt these particular identity categories and discuss how they have become forces that affect our lives.

HISTORY OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

Those who have studied sexuality throughout history have found same-sex sexual activity to be universally present to some degree and in some form in all cultures for which there are historic records.² However, cultures vary widely in how they understand and interpret it. The categories of sexual identities that we use in Canada today can be traced back to nineteenth-century Europe, with the exception of two-spirit identity, which was crafted to represent Indigenous traditions. It is surprising to some that we cannot trace these identities further back than the 1800s, as they can seem to be natural and obvious. However, the

terms “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” and “bisexuality” did not exist before the nineteenth century. They were invented then.³

If men have been having sex with men, and women with women, throughout time and across all cultures, how can LGB (and straight) identity have been invented only in nineteenth-century Europe? The key to understanding this mystery is seeing the sexual behaviour (what we do) and the identity category (who we are) as two separate things. The behaviour was always around, but our way of understanding what it means about who we are took on a unique form in Europe over the nineteenth century. Prior to this shift in thought, religious institutions were dominant in defining what sexuality meant, and their approach was to see it as either sinful or morally good, rather than as something that categorized individuals as one type of person or another. For example, a person who did something “wrong” sexually committed a sin or crime like any other: it was an aberrant behaviour that deserved a consequence.⁴

However, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as science and medicine sought to replace religion as the primary lenses through which we understand sexuality, sexologists and psychologists began to view it differently. They saw sexual behaviour as revealing something about the core nature of individuals, grouping them into various “types” of people. Sigmund Freud’s theories of psychosexual development were one key influence in this way of thinking, but he was not the only intellectual of his day to reimagine sexuality as central to the self and identity.⁵ Freud was joined by a host of doctors, psychiatrists, and sexologists who approached sexuality as an expression of “who we are” as opposed to simply “what we do.”

In particular, several sexologists were concerned with distinguishing normal, healthy sexuality from what they saw as abnormal, unhealthy variations.⁶ Among their extensive efforts to document variations of all types, the terms “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality” became new ways to describe distinct categories of people. Over time, heterosexuality was understood to denote normal sexuality, and homosexuality was seen as mentally unhealthy. Although some who used these terms were activists fighting against the criminal laws that banned same-sex sexuality, their efforts at reform largely failed, and severe treatment of those who

were diagnosed as homosexuals became the norm. Over the course of the twentieth century, many psychologists attempted to “treat” what they considered to be the mental illness of homosexuality with a variety of harsh and punitive techniques, including institutionalization, castration, and aversion therapies.⁷ In this context, same-sex desire was something to keep secret, as its discovery was likely to result in very negative reactions, including expulsion from one’s family, being fired from work, or being involuntarily committed to an institution.

In the twenty-first century, lesbian and gay communities began to resist this diagnosis and its accompanying punishments. A few psychologists began to rethink the categorization of homosexuality as a mental illness. One in particular, Dr. Evelyn Hooker, conducted a study in which she found that a panel of experts could not accurately diagnose homosexuality, an important work that showed homosexuals to be psychologically well adjusted.⁸ By 1973, the protests of lesbian and gay activists had convinced the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality from its diagnostic manual.⁹ A large body of evidence was amassed demonstrating clearly that homosexual people were as mentally healthy as heterosexuals. The idea that same-sex attraction is a sign of mental illness has since been abandoned by psychiatrists and psychologists.

This history of the shameful treatment of homosexual people pushed many to reject the labels homosexual and heterosexual. In addition, gender and sexuality scholars began to question the categories themselves. When Michel Foucault wrote that the scientific categorization of sexuality as healthy or unhealthy was a political project in the service of power, he hinted at a rich array of possibilities for sexuality beyond heterosexual and homosexual.¹⁰ Gender theorist Judith Butler’s suggestion that gender is performative and fluid, producing infinite possibilities beyond the binary categories of man and woman, was similarly highly influential.¹¹ As activists resisted the psychological diagnoses embedded in the heterosexual/homosexual schema, theorists argued for more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality.¹²

However, even after all these changes, we still retain the underlying idea that the preference for one gender or another forms the principal basis of our sexual identities. We may refer to “gay and lesbian” rather

“homosexual,” may opt for “straight” rather than “heterosexual,” and may use the word “bisexual” for people who do not fall into either camp. Today, this schema remains the primary (but by no means the only) way that we make sense of our sexual selves: through the genders of ourselves and of our partners. If I am a woman and my partners are men, I am straight; if my partners are women, I am a lesbian. And if some of my partners are men and others are women, I am bisexual. Simple, right? As we will see, not necessarily. Although these categories do not always capture the wide variety of sexual and gender experiences that people embody, they are the ones that, for the most part, we use to describe ourselves.¹³

HOW MANY CANADIANS ARE LGB?

It turns out that, as a rule, we are terrible at guessing the proportion of the population that is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. If I asked you to guess, what would you say? If you are like most Canadians, you might opt for something like 10 or 15 percent, which would substantially overestimate the LGB population.¹⁴ In fact, only about 4 percent of Canadians identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual: about 1 million people.¹⁵ If you didn't know that, it's really not your fault. Government agencies that are tasked with tracking population dynamics have only recently begun counting LGB, trans, and nonbinary people.

The Canadian census began counting cohabiting same-sex couples in 2006, after same-sex marriage was legalized. As of 2011, there were over sixty-four thousand households with such couples, about 0.8 percent of all cohabiting couples in Canada.¹⁶ Of course, by counting only households, we miss all those who are single and who are in a relationship but not living together. The census, the only survey that attempts to include everyone rather than just a representative sample, would give the most accurate figure, but Statistics Canada has included sexual identity questions on some very large-scale surveys, which provide highly reliable estimates. Note that at this point, surveys ask only about lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. No large-scale estimates are available for queer, two-spirit, pansexual, or asexual identities.

One such survey administered by Statistics Canada, the Canadian Community Health Survey, did include a question on sexual orientation.

Statistics Canada used its various surveys to release a report in 2021 that estimates 4 percent of Canadians over age fifteen has an LGB identity.¹⁷ Among this group, about one-fourth identify as gay men and about 17 percent as lesbian women. Over half of those in the LGB group (about 2–3 percent of the population) identify as bisexual, with women twice as likely than men to describe themselves in this way. There is some evidence that the proportion of Canadians who identify as LGB will grow over time, as young people are more likely than older age cohorts to do so. This pattern has also been documented in the United States.¹⁸ It suggests that the shift away from the exclusion and marginalization of LGB people in recent decades is making more space for people to claim LGB identities.

Even though the census doesn't yet ask about sexual identity, this important counting tool did recently change the way it asks about sex and gender in order to establish the size of the transgender and nonbinary population. Canada was the first country to take this step, which activists and scholars had been advocating for years.¹⁹ The census revised its sex question to a two-part series that first asks for sex at birth and then asks for current gender. The gender question includes male, female, and a third option that allows people to input their gender identity in their own words. In this first census to capture the trans population, Canada counted just over 100,000 trans and nonbinary people, or about 0.33 percent of the population.

As many members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community will argue, sexuality doesn't fit neatly into a series of checkboxes. The need to chronicle, count, and measure the LGBTQ+ population through scientific tools such as surveys imposes more order onto sexual identities than is called for by the way in which people live their sexual lives.²⁰ This is just as true for people with straight identities as for those who are LGB. We often assume there are clear and permanent lines between straight and lesbian or gay. That is, straight people are always and exclusively attracted to members of the other gender, and as soon as someone has sex with a same-gender partner, that means they are gay or lesbian, and they will remain so for the rest of their lives. Anyone who falls between these two situations, we might imagine, is "really" a bisexual. However, sexual behaviour and identity in the real world just don't work this way.²¹

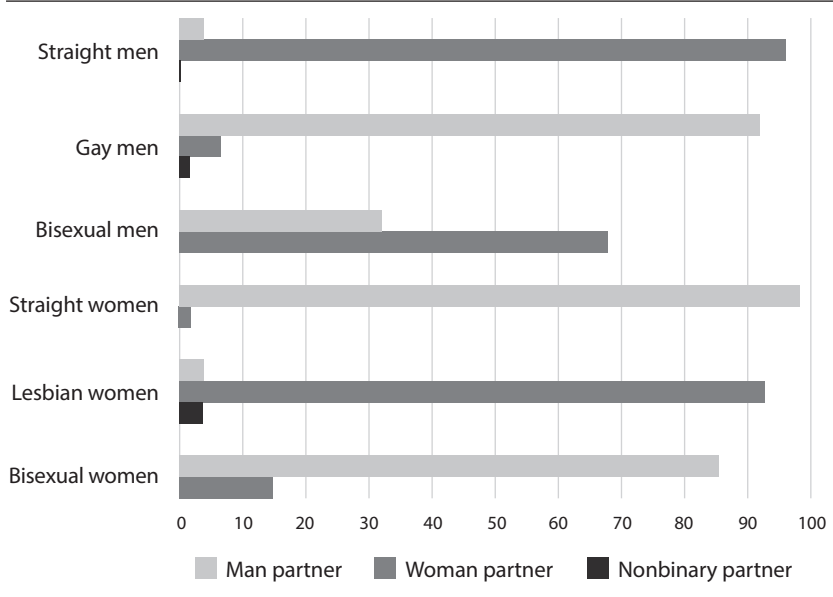
For example, people's sexual identities don't always match up with the gender of their sexual or romantic partner.²² In other words, some people experience a discordance between their sexual behaviour and their sexual identity.²³ Although having a sexual experience that doesn't match your identity might prompt you to rethink it, some Canadians feel comfortable in an identity that doesn't precisely match their behaviour.²⁴ This might be due to social pressure to stay in the closet or an understanding of the self that is distinct from one's sexual activity.²⁵ One research study that examined rural men who identified as straight despite having sex with other men found that they valued the sense of masculinity that was tied to a straight identity.²⁶

In our survey, most of the women who identified as straight and who were currently in a relationship had a male partner. A small fraction, 1.9 percent, reported that their partner was female. You might think that they simply made a mistake when they filled out this part of the survey. That's not impossible, as we all know how easy it is to check the wrong box on a form. However, among the straight-identified men who were currently in a relationship, 3.9 percent stated that their partner was male. Similarly, 3.7 percent of the women who identified as lesbian reported that their partner was a man, and 6.5 percent of gay men said they were currently dating women. [Figure 1.1](#) shows that sexual identities are only rough approximations of people's sexual and romantic lives.

This same mismatch between sexual identity and gender of partner also popped up when participants answered our questions about sexual behaviour. If you think that gay men have sex only with men and lesbian women with women, the information in [Figures 1.2](#) and [1.3](#) may surprise you. In fact, 10 percent of gay men stated that, during the last year, one or more of their sexual partners was a woman. About 8 percent of lesbian women reported that one or more of their partners was a man.

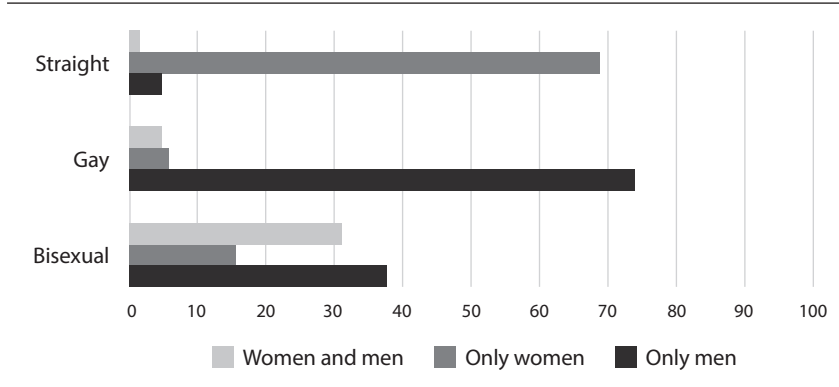
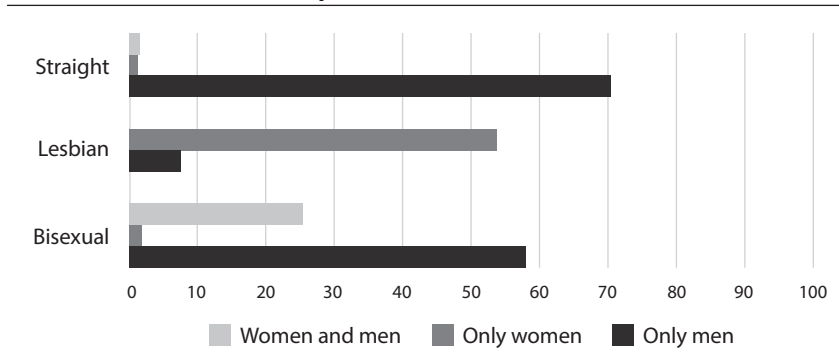
If we focus on straight-identified people, we see a similar pattern. For example, 3 percent of straight women reported that one or more of their partners in the past year was a woman. The figure was higher for straight men who had sex with men. About 6 percent of them reported having one or more men as a sexual partner during the last year. This pattern is consistent with other surveys on sexual identity and partner choice.²⁷

What this tells us is that sexual identity can be flexible and expansive.

FIGURE 1.1 Sexual identity and gender of relationship partner

For a proportion of our participants, it did not map perfectly onto their partner's gender at the moment that they took our survey. We also know that many, but not all, people experience changes in their sexual desires over their life course. Some redefine their sexual identity, such as when lesbian or gay people come out of the closet, claiming a new identity to their friends and family. But identity changes can go in the other direction as well. For instance, women who have lived as lesbians for decades sometimes find a male partner later in life and take on a straight or bisexual identity.²⁸

That sexual desire is fluid has been understood for some time. This idea has been advanced as an important corrective to Freudian approaches that situate sexuality as a deep truth about oneself, a uniquely core attribute of the self that determines many other aspects of personality and relationships. This very solid and unchanging concept of sexual identity works for some people, who feel that they have always known about the direction of their sexual desires, which express something important and real about who they are as individuals. However, the idea posited by Foucault, Butler, and other theorists – that gender and sexual-

FIGURE 1.2 Gender of sexual partners of men**FIGURE 1.3** Gender of sexual partners of women

ity are always changing and emerging – feels right to others, whose desires do not necessarily fit well into the straight, lesbian, or gay checkboxes on a survey.²⁹ From this perspective, both sexuality and gender are, to some unknown degree, emergent and performative, unfolding through interactions in an ongoing way. Categories such as queer and pansexual, which avoid the constraints of traditional identity markers, emerged to make sense of sexuality in a new way, as I will discuss.

Although it may be tempting to pronounce on whether sexual identity is solid or fluid, the evidence shows that Canadians use both understandings. The Sex in Canada survey revealed that some people embraced a flexible understanding of their sexual identity. For others, having a solid

understanding of their sexual identity is a useful tool to situate them in their social world. And this system of understanding does more than just describe the sexual orientations of individuals; it structures the social world.

SEXUALITY STRUCTURES OUR WORLD

Just like gender (and other social forces such as class, race, and ethnicity), sexuality orders and shapes the world around us.³⁰ It is social in that it groups people into “types,” a process that can bring them together but that can also separate them. Sexual identities describe communities of people, gathering them together. They create neighbourhoods and community groups. They organize friendships and family ties. Assumptions about sexual identities are embedded in social policies and institutions.³¹ In this section, we think about how most of the world is organized around heterosexuality. In response to this, communities, subcultures, and social movements have formed around sexual identities that do not conform to heterosexual expectations.

COMMUNITIES

It may be easiest to see how sexual identities shape the social world by thinking about 2SLGBTQ+ communities. For over a century, gay men, lesbian women, trans people, and those with queer sensibilities have formed neighbourhoods in cities, sometimes called “gaybourhoods.”³² Over time, 2SLGBTQ+ people move in. Businesses that cater to them, such as bookstores, bars, and clubs, cluster in these spaces.³³ Feminist bookstores have been important hubs for lesbian communities.³⁴ Health care clinics may post a rainbow flag in their windows. Annual pride parades both protest discrimination and celebrate 2SLGBTQ+ lives.³⁵ These neighbourhoods are visible because they are marked as 2SLGBTQ+: physically, culturally, socially. Sexual identity is central, not just to the individuals who live there, but also to the social institutions and to the larger community. Of course, 2SLGBTQ+ communities develop in other spaces as well, including small towns and rural areas.³⁶

Just as these neighbourhoods are structured around sexuality, so are other neighbourhoods and communities. If you think about the visible

markers that reveal how sexuality brings people together in a 2SLGBTQ+ neighbourhood, shapes their lives, influences how they connect, spend their leisure time, and so on, you can understand that the rest of the social world is similarly organized around sexuality, too. However, most of it revolves around heterosexuality. Just as gaybourhoods bring 2SLGBTQ+ people together, provide services for them, and create community, in most of the social world, heterosexuality is the somewhat invisible identity around which much of our life is organized. In fact, heterosexuality is so dominant that it may be a little difficult to detect. But if you look for it, you will see that it is everywhere all the time, a taken-for-granted part of life. The tacit assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless identified otherwise underlies much of the social world, from government agencies to mortgage applications to interactions at your local grocery store.

We call this heteronormativity to convey the idea that heterosexuality lies at the root of many norms.³⁷ Of course, heteronormativity is also intertwined with the way that gender organizes our lives.³⁸ Theorists refer to the sex/gender/sexuality system in highlighting that many gender expectations for men and women work in service of a world that is organized around heterosexuality.³⁹ The “normal” life that is set up for the nuclear family – a married heterosexual couple with children – is embedded in more of the social world than just neighbourhoods. It is baked into the way that businesses sell us products and services. Schools structure their curriculum and their extracurricular activities around heterosexuality.⁴⁰ Family events and neighbourhood gatherings often rely on differing expectations for mothers and fathers.

CULTURES AND SUBCULTURES

Sexuality can be understood in still more expansive terms, as an important force that organizes our culture. One way to think of culture is in concrete terms, as the films, books, and music that it produces. Heterosexuality is clearly a leading character in the media that we consume on a daily basis, although more room for 2SLGBTQ+-focused characters and plots has been created in recent decades. The imagined selves that are reflected back at us through creative media are now more

sexually diverse than they were fifty years ago, but they still primarily feature heterosexuality as the unremarkable expectation for families in particular and social lives in general.

Another way to think of culture is in its broadest sense, as the system of meanings that tell us who we are, what our shared beliefs and values are. These understandings are produced by interactions among individuals, as well as by institutions such as government, religion, and our health care system. This is how heterosexuality can be understood as culturally dominant. Everything from nursery rhymes through high school proms, from university dorms through retirement communities is grounded in an assumed heterosexuality that goes unmarked. LGB identity (or another sexual identity) must be claimed explicitly to overcome this presumption.

Many 2SLGBTQ+ subcultures have developed in response to the dominant position of heterosexuality. They have a rich history in the theatre, in campy drag shows, and in early film.⁴¹ In art, music, film, and fashion, 2SLGBTQ+ subcultural styles can play with, mock, and criticize heteronormativity and gender norms. In the interplay between our dominant heterosexual culture and the 2SLGBTQ+ subculture, we have further evidence of the ways that sexuality shapes our shared experiences. Some aspects of gay men's subculture are distinct from that of lesbian women, but in many instances, shared subcultures create inclusive spaces for gay men, lesbian women, queer, trans, and gender-expansive people with systems of meaning that stand apart from the dominant culture.

BISEXUALITY

Do bisexual people also have subcultures? This remains an open question.⁴² To this point in Canada's history, bisexuality has been more useful in reflecting the sexual preferences and expressing the personal identities of individuals than in forming social institutions, neighbourhoods, or community groups. Whereas bisexual people have been included in 2SLGBTQ+ community groups, organizations, and activism to varying degrees, they have also felt somewhat marginalized in these communities.⁴³ Many bisexuals claim that they do not feel fully embraced by

either heterosexual cultural institutions or gay or lesbian subcultures. This lack of inclusion has a negative impact on their mental health.⁴⁴

Over the decades, a number of cultural icons have been bisexual, but the development of bisexual community organizations and cultural institutions has been limited. However, bisexuality is on the rise. Recent population studies in the United States show that 5.5 percent of women and 2.0 percent of men identify as bisexual.⁴⁵ Younger generations are far more likely than previous ones to adopt a bisexual identity, along with other sexual identities such as queer and pansexual, all of which resist limiting attraction to either gender.⁴⁶ This may be a sign that, as social inclusion of lesbian and gay people increases, people are more willing to claim a sexual identity that is not restricted by gender preference.

INEQUALITY, ACTIVISM, AND CHANGE

To understand sexuality as a social force is also to see it as a mechanism of inequality. Our sexual identities place us in particular locations relative to other sexual identities, in either the dominant group or the marginalized group. The position of heterosexuality as self-evidently normal, good, and healthy is reflected not only in culture, but also in social structure. Inequality can be measured in various ways. For example, we might consider legal, political, and social exclusion and inclusion of heterosexual and LGB people as measures of inequality.

In the not very distant past, the inequalities between straight and 2SLGBTQ+ people were extreme. As recently as 1968, sex between two men was a criminal offence in Canada (indeed, arrests continued well after that date).⁴⁷ Homosexuality was formally defined as a mental illness, and both adults and minors could be institutionalized against their will for their sexuality. Gender presentation and identity have similarly been treated as both mental illnesses and crimes. Representations of 2SLGBTQ+ lives in popular culture were rare and often in the form of exaggerated negative stereotypes.⁴⁸

Due to the decades-long struggle of 2SLGBTQ+ organizations and communities, the law, social institutions, and public opinion have significantly shifted toward inclusion and equality.⁴⁹ The coalition model

of working together has been responsible for many of Canada's policy changes during the last several decades, such as the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in non-discrimination law and the legal recognition of same-sex marriage. For example, although the Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not mention sexual identity directly, the courts have interpreted its provisions as standing for equal rights for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Canada legalized same-sex marriage in 2005, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau officially apologized for Canada's mistreatment of 2SLGBTQ+ people in 2017. Anti-discrimination protections for transgender people were also passed in 2017. This distinguishes Canada from the United States, where some states and cities prohibit discrimination against 2SLGBTQ+ people, though others do not.

However, Canada's anti-discrimination laws have not solved the problem of sex-based inequalities, which become visible in social patterns across groups of people. For example, 2SLGBTQ+ people are under-represented among our elected officials. Whereas some out lesbian and gay individuals have won elections, such as former Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne, this is still a relatively rare event. If sexual identity did not matter to elections, we would expect about 4 percent or so of elected officials to be LGB, to match the population. We may be moving in that direction, but we are not there yet.

Lesbian and gay people may make less money than their straight counterparts. In Canada, data on sexual identity are limited, so many questions about its link with wage inequality remain unanswered. However, we do have good data on the incomes of married and common-law couples. Analyses of these data reveal that gender and sexuality combine to affect income disparity among individuals. There is a sex/gender order to income inequality: straight men are better paid than gay men, who in turn make more than lesbian women, who make more than straight women.⁵⁰ In this analysis, there is a wage penalty for gay men relative to straight men. However, straight women are at the disadvantage relative to lesbian women. Sexuality seems to be an important part of the story of gender and wage inequality, but more research is needed.

Another way of thinking about inequality is in terms of risk of victimization. Members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community are at highest risk

of harassment and targeted violence. In Canada, they are disproportionately victimized in violent crimes.⁵¹ Lesbian women and gay men are 2.5 times more likely than heterosexuals to experience violence, and bisexuals are 4.0 times more likely. Trans people are also at heightened risk of violence. Although more data are needed, community surveys consistently report that they experience relatively high rates of violence. For example, the 2015 Trans PULSE report that surveyed trans Ontarians noted that 1 in 5 of them reported being assaulted, either physically or sexually.⁵²

Nonetheless, social attitudes toward lesbian and gay people have substantially improved over time, a trend that has been particularly dramatic in Canada during the last forty years. Whereas Canadians once expressed strongly negative opinions of lesbian and gay people, Canada is now among a handful of countries with very positive attitudes.⁵³ This has come about because young people do not share the negative views of the older generation and because Canadians of all ages have revised their opinions.⁵⁴ However, such acceptance is not universal, and some young people are still harassed by their peers and rejected by their families.⁵⁵

A sociological view of sexual identity sees these inequalities as part of our social structure, evidence that sexuality forms divisions and boundaries that order the world in much the same manner as gender, race, and class.⁵⁶ This perception means that sexual identity not only reflects the preferences or sexual desires of individuals, but also exists outside the individual, slotting us into neighbourhoods and community groups, setting expectations for how we conduct our lives, producing cultures and subcultures that give meaning to our lives, and causing inequalities along dimensions of sexual identity.⁵⁷

KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND SEXUALITY:

TWO-SPIRIT IDENTITY IN INDIGENOUS CULTURES

I note above that Canadian ideas about sexual identities came originally from Europe. It is important to understand that other cultures have their own understandings of sexual identity. In fact, many Asian, Latin American, and African cultures, as well as Indigenous cultures around the world, have developed ways of understanding gender and sexuality

that differ from the heterosexual/homosexual model that is most familiar in Canada. Rather than engaging in cultural tourism by dropping a few examples of unfamiliar sexualities into a discussion that otherwise ignores them, exoticizing the people who don't conform to the Eurocentric model, I encourage you to read further on this topic.⁵⁸

One alternative way of understanding sexuality, however, is worth mentioning because of its relevance in Canada: the two-spirit identity, which emerged as a form of resistance to colonization.⁵⁹ Indigenous peoples who live in Canada are not of a single culture; rather, they are many nations with many cultures. Before Europeans set foot on this continent, they had many different ways of understanding gender and sexuality. Colonizing forces attempted to eliminate these cultures as part of the larger project of occupying land and controlling the governance of the place we now know as Canada.

Surveillance and social control were central to that project. For example, colonization as a bureaucratic process included observing the sexual practices of Indigenous peoples and generating a historical record that marked them as unusual, deviant, and strange. The production of knowledge that mocks and dismisses Indigenous ways of being and knowing has been a core part of the colonial project of social and economic dominance, and gender and sexuality have featured heavily in it.⁶⁰ Portraying Indigenous peoples as sexually immoral, exotic, and strange served as one among several justifications for colonization.

In resisting colonization, which is still in place today, Indigenous people struggle to prevent the eradication of their cultures.⁶¹ Individuals from many cultures form coalitions to resist the colonial practices that erase their ways of knowing and being. For example, some Indigenous peoples of North America use the term "two-spirit" to describe a particular Indigenous sexual and gender identity – one that colonizers had labelled with an offensive term.⁶²

Producing a positive word to describe Indigenous sexuality and gender signals a refusal to be defined by colonialization. It demonstrates that Indigenous sexual and gender identities are best understood through a lens that respects Indigenous cultures and traditions. It acknowledges the European origins of the LGB categories that are common in Canada today and establishes a non-colonial possibility for Indigenous peoples

to exist on their own terms. In other words, the framework for sexual identity that dominates Canadian culture – and the one that forms the basis of this book – cannot simply be imposed upon Indigenous traditions.⁶³ For this reason, I do not attempt to describe the sexual lives of two-spirit or other Indigenous people. Two-spirit communities should be allowed their own voice regarding their experiences of sexuality in Canada.

LGBTQIA+ IDENTITIES

There have been many challenges, modifications, and additions to sexual and gender identity categories. For example, “queer” emerged in both intellectual and activist communities as a criticism of the LGB/straight identity system and the politics that such a system implies. The body of scholarly work known as queer theory has been highly influential in its claims. As it reminds us, the categories that provide us with sexual identities, but that also shape the social world, are just one possibility through which we might imagine ourselves.⁶⁴ Some queer theorists argue that identity categories imply a certain type of activist project that emphasizes equality and respectability rather than social transformation.⁶⁵ Then again, some individuals use “queer” to refer to a sexual identity. In certain cases, this denotes support for an expansive or radical political project; in other instances, it simply feels more comfortable than the words lesbian, bisexual, or gay.

TRANSGENDER AND NONBINARY GENDER IDENTITIES

“Transgender” refers to people whose gender differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. “Cisgender” is the opposite of transgender, describing people whose gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth. Although transgender people have existed throughout history, these particular terms are somewhat new, and they are being debated and changed over time. For example, some prefer “trans,” arguing that it offers a broader umbrella for a community that understands gender and sex in a variety of ways.⁶⁶

Some people adopt a nonbinary gender identity that is neither man nor woman. Imagining gender as a spectrum, rather than as two distinct categories of male and female, allows a range of possibilities for the

presentation of self.⁶⁷ As gender is deeply embedded in both the English and French languages, new terms have been proposed to express non-binary pronouns for people who don't see themselves as fitting either "she" or "he." In English, the practice of using "they" as a singular, non-binary pronoun has gained ascendancy in recent years, becoming accepted by prominent style guides.⁶⁸

Trans and nonbinary communities have been in, of, and around lesbian and gay communities for decades. Indeed, performing gender, playing with the multiple meanings of gender, and mocking traditional gender stereotypes have been important parts of gay and lesbian subcultures, art, and performance, and transgender people have been leaders in activism to produce social change. Today, the 2SLGBTQ+ acronym intends to capture the togetherness of communities who have been marginalized for their genders and sexualities but who have united in their struggle for change and inclusion.

INTERSEX IDENTITY

"Intersex" describes individuals who, due to a range of medical conditions, do not totally conform to male or female sex categories.⁶⁹ They have formed communities to resist the surgeries that alter genitalia to look more male or (more often) more female. These procedures are most likely to occur when intersex people are very young, often as infants. Intersex activists want intersex people to exercise consent over their own bodies, opposing medically unnecessary cosmetic surgeries on children.⁷⁰ They have succeeded in convincing some medical professionals that cosmetic genital surgeries are unnecessary, though the practice has not yet been banned by law. Intersex people have often found places in 2SLGBTQ+ communities and have worked with 2SLGBTQ+ activists to produce social change.

ASEXUAL IDENTITY

Of course, not all sexualities are covered by the LGB framework. Asexuality, for example, is a relatively emergent identity that describes low or no sexual desire.⁷¹ Sometimes people combine an asexual or "Ace" identity with an LGB or straight identity to communicate that they have

low sexual desire for a particular gender or genders. Others want to express a feeling of attraction accompanied by a lack of interest in sex.⁷² Online communities have formed around Ace identities, enabling people to think through their sexuality in conversation with others who share a low or absent sex drive.⁷³ Asexuality should be distinguished from celibacy, which is best characterized as a choice to abstain from sex, rather than having little desire for it.

PANSEXUAL IDENTITY

“Pansexual” refers to an identity that is open to partners regardless of their gender identity or presentation. The word suggests a criticism of binary understandings of gender and of the rigidity of categories in the LGB system.⁷⁴ For this reason, pansexuality is slightly different from bisexuality, in that it acknowledges those with nonbinary gender. Those who feel that gender is not a central feature in what they find attractive in others may also choose to describe themselves as pansexual.⁷⁵

Each of these sexual identities is both a personal and a political project that combines concerns over “who I am” with ideas about how the world is organized. The last several decades have seen profound change around sexual identity. Despite queer critiques and the rise of many new identities, most social and political change has occurred in the area of lesbian and gay rights. This is reflective of the social order described above, and the LGB framing of sexual identity has become increasingly institutionalized in laws and social practices. Transgender identity is also becoming institutionalized. Standards of care for gender transitions have been established in the medical system, and the law now recognizes the rights of transgender people. For example, federal passports allow people to change their gender when they transition. Canada also legally recognizes nonbinary gender in some institutional ways, such as providing for the option of a third gender, “X” in addition to “M” and “F,” on legal documents.

This institutionalization of the 2SLGBTQ+ identity system does not necessarily mean that this way of knowing will forever organize our world. We have seen many changes over the last few decades, and the criticisms of these approaches, as well as the categories that have recently

been produced, may become more prevalent in the future. For now, however, this way of knowing sexuality and gender forms the basis of our social life.

SEXUAL IDENTITY: BOTH PERSONAL AND SOCIAL

As sexual identity shapes the world in general, our own personal identity will influence how we engage with it, influencing where we live, what we do for fun, and who our friends are. Of course, we should also expect to see differences in sexual behaviour. For example, gay subcultures have sometimes embraced more expansive sexual norms than those of the heteronormative culture. They reject or modify expectations of monogamy in favour of sexual freedom.⁷⁶ Do gay men have more sex than straight men? And can we ask the same question for lesbian women, who are also part of the 2SLGBTQ+ subculture but who have formed distinctly women-centred subcultures of their own?

Sexual identity categories are not the perfect way to describe sexuality. They are the products of a particular time and place, like all social constructions. Embedded within them is an insistence that heterosexuality is central and that other orientations are marginal. They assume that sexual orientation is a core element of the self and is thus permanent and rooted in biology. However, human sexuality is complex. It is about more than just the gender of our partner, and sometimes sexual feelings change over time. The available identity categories are not always a perfect fit with the desires and feelings of every individual at every moment in their lives. Still, the system has important consequences for the social world. It has served as the basis for the formation of communities. It is an essential component of both the dominant culture and a set of vibrant subcultures. It is entrenched in the law and throughout our institutions. Although it may not fit each individual perfectly, it is a force that organizes the world.

It may seem too obvious to claim that sexual behaviour is also governed by sexual identity, but as the survey data show, sexual activity is influenced but not determined by sexual identity. Many decades of research confirm that we cannot equate sexual identity with sexual behaviour, because there is always a gap between who people say they are and what they say they do. This is true for straight people, some of whom

report having same-sex partners, as well as for lesbian and gay people. Whereas some people claim a bisexual identity to signal that their partners are of either gender, others have similar behaviour while claiming a straight, lesbian, or gay identity.

Newly recognized sexual identities, such as asexual and pansexual, expand the possibilities for understanding ourselves. However, it remains to be seen whether they will become embedded in our social structure and culture in the way that LGB identities have. Perhaps as time marches on, the boundaries between straight and LGB identities will become less relevant to us. For now, however, there is abundant evidence that this system of sexuality is a key force that shapes our social world.

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