



Sexual Fluidity Among Millennial Women

Journeys Across a Shifting
Sexual Landscape

Alice Campbell

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PREFACE

My motivation for writing this book can be summed up by an interaction I had with the barista as I was getting my morning coffee the other week. We were making our usual small talk, and at one point she asked me what my recently completed PhD thesis was about. When I told her it was about women who change their sexual identity, her whole face lit up. “That’s amazing! I’m one of those women. I had no idea that anybody had ever written about that!” I understood how she was feeling, having experienced it myself when I first discovered the work of Lisa Diamond. I, too, am one of those women. And I had experienced the feeling of being “doubly deviant” that Diamond observed among her study participants. Not only had I felt the sting of internalized homophobia for my occasional sexual attraction to and romantic love for other women, but I was at a complete loss as to what any of it meant. Was I an apple or an orange? A lesbian in denial? Or a young woman jumping on board the latest trend, titillating men with stories of her bisexuality? None of this rang true. But where did that leave me? I had no framework through which to interpret my experiences.

The aim of this book is to increase knowledge and understanding of the growing number of young women whose sexual orientations do not fit the rigid, binary taxonomy of the past. Leveraging longitudinal data that have been collected from Australian women since 1996, including a large sample of women from the Millennial birth cohort, I present new evidence on young women’s sexual identity trajectories and the factors that shape them. Drawing from previous research and taking a feminist sociological perspective, I propose a new model of sexual orientation and identity that

better fits young women's contemporary realities. Importantly, I show that, even today, young women's journeys across the sexual landscape are encumbered by heteronormativity. In my view, sexuality remains one of the main axes of our oppression as women (the other being our nurturing and caregiving). Telling this story is therefore not only an act of making women's diverse sexualities more visible. It is also an act of feminist resistance to heteropatriarchy, which exploits women and limits our capacities to live and love with the freedom that all humans deserve.

Brisbane, QLD, Australia

Alice Campbell

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CHAPTER 1

The Compass

This is the story of an age-old quest; the human quest for love and sex. In search of our holy grail, we battle through frightening and chaotic jungles and trek across lonely and barren deserts. As we seek that sunset on the horizon, it often feels as if we are travelling blind.

But rest assured: though our quest may be fraught with difficulties, we do not embark on it completely unequipped. For sitting deep inside each of us is a compass. Present from the day we were born, we cannot choose or direct this compass: it directs us. We must only learn how to read it. While it won't reveal the exact location of what we are looking for, it will at least tell us the direction in which we need to travel. Resolutely fixed on one magnetic pole or the other, our compass never wavers.

Over time, we become familiar with the compass inside us, and it can become an important part of how we see ourselves. If someone asks, "which way do you travel?" we might answer "I'm a South-traveler" or "I'm one of those who travels North". We form friendships with those travelling in the same direction as us, particularly when our journey takes us against the tide. We need only read our compass to remember who we are and where we are going. This compass is our sexual orientation, and in our quest for love and sex it ensures that we are never truly lost. And that's the end of the story...

Or is it?

I wrote this story of the compass for a "three-minute thesis" competition to encapsulate the master narrative of sexual orientation and sexual

identity that is most prominent in Australia, the United States, and other Western nations today. Master narratives are dominant cultural discourses that reflect and support the social order (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). They define the boundaries of what is considered normal or possible; whose experiences are validated and whose are stigmatized or ignored. For much of the twentieth century, the most prominent master narrative of sexual orientation was the “sickness” narrative (Hammack et al., 2013; Shepard, 2009). According to this script, there was only one acceptable direction of travel in the quest for love and sex: destination heterosexuality. Anyone who violated this norm was labeled deviant, insane, or even a criminal. While this narrative has been increasingly challenged over the past 50 years, its effects on the social order persist. We remain a heteronormative society in which heterosexuality is treated as the default norm and sexual minorities are marginalized—with negative implications for their health and wellbeing (e.g., Meyer, 2003; Perales, 2019).

The notion that there is more than one acceptable direction of travel and that we are each guided by our own innate compass has slowly taken root over the past few decades. This more inclusive narrative has been labeled the “species” narrative (Hammack et al., 2013). Essentialist in nature, it conceptualizes sexual orientation as a fixed trait residing within the individual and sexual identity development as a natural and linear process of discovery (Gordon & Silva, 2015). There is little doubt that the species narrative reflects the experiences of many people. It has also played a crucial role in the ongoing process of “homonormalization”—a term used by Rosencil et al. (2013) to describe the gradual erosion of a social structure that marginalizes and harms people with a non-heterosexual orientation.

However, a small but growing body of evidence suggests that the species narrative has important limitations. Notably, it fails to account for the substantial minority of women who experience changes to their sexual attractions, behavior and/or identity over the course of their lives—changes that appear closely linked to women’s social and interpersonal contexts (Diamond, 2008; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rust, 1992). In light of this emerging evidence, some scholars have drawn attention to the species narrative as a potential source of minority stress through its reinforcement of “fixedness normativity” and exclusion of those who experience changes to their sexuality (Diamond, 2008; Everett et al., 2016; Van Anders, 2015). Others have called for sexual minority status to be defined

longitudinally (e.g., in the form of trajectories) rather than cross-sectionally (via a single measurement) to better understand health disparities by sexual orientation (e.g., Kaestle, 2019). Recently, new theories have been proposed that treat sexual orientation and sexual identity as potentially dynamic phenomena shaped by a person's social, cultural, political, biographical, and interpersonal contexts (Gordon & Silva, 2015; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2017). Yet, empirical evidence supporting these perspectives remains sparse, with very few analyses of large population samples and virtually no evidence originating outside of the United States.

This book aims to address unanswered questions surrounding women's sexual identity trajectories, the contexts that shape them, and their relationships to women's health and wellbeing. Grounded in a feminist sociological perspective, this book makes important theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to scholarship on women's sexualities. Above all, this book challenges the species narrative of sexual identity and makes the case for refining it to include and reflect women's diverse experiences. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I cover the following: I begin by defining key terms used throughout this book such as sexual orientation and sexual identity. I follow with a comprehensive overview of the most prominent master narratives of sexual orientation and sexual identity over the past century. I evaluate these narratives and discuss how they have affected both the scholarly imagination as well as the life outcomes of sexual minorities. I then identify gaps in our current knowledge and introduce the research questions that guide my empirical analyses. I conclude with a brief synopsis of each of the book's chapters.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND SEXUAL IDENTITY: DEFINITIONS AND NARRATIVES

Sexual orientation has been described as analogous to a compass directing the focus of an individual's sexuality to men, women, or both (Bailey, 2009). This compass manifests in the internal experiences generally considered to be at the heart of sexual orientation and its purest expressions: sexual attraction, desire, fantasy, and arousal (Bailey, 2009; Diamond, 2008; Van Anders, 2015). Sexual behavior and sexual identity are also central to the measurement of sexual orientation. Sexual behavior refers to a person's history of sexual and romantic partnering (Bailey, 2009), while sexual identity is a self-label reflecting an individual's perception of their

sexual orientation (Gordon & Silva, 2015). Importantly, sexual orientation is defined with reference to a person's own gender/sex,¹ plus the gender(s)/sex(es) of the persons to which their sexuality is targeted. Sexual identity categories have traditionally included heterosexual (oriented toward the other sex only), bisexual (oriented toward both sexes), and lesbian/gay (oriented toward the same sex only).

Sexual identities have implications for individuals' relationships with social groups, institutions, and one another (Diamond, 2008; Rust, 1993), making them of particular interest to sociologists and social psychologists (Van Anders, 2015). These implications can be both positive—such as a feeling of belonging—and negative, such as experiences of stigma, discrimination and feeling pressured to conform to an identity prototype (Diamond, 2008; Meyer, 2003). The term “sexual minorities” refers to people who report any same-sex attraction, behavior and/or a non-heterosexual identity, and are thus perceived as having a sexual orientation that is not exclusively heterosexual. Throughout this book, I use the terms “sexual minority”, “queer” and “non-heterosexual” interchangeably to refer to women with a sexual orientation or identity that is not exclusively heterosexual.

In heteronormative societies, exclusive heterosexuality is constructed as the norm, and same-sex sexuality as transgressive (van Anders, 2015). Sexual minorities therefore occupy a “marginalized sexual social location in a power hierarchy” (van Anders, 2015, p. 1185). As a result, they have an elevated risk of poor outcomes in a range of life domains compared to their heterosexual peers. For example, recent Australian research has observed higher levels of psychological distress, anxiety, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, lower levels of life satisfaction and mental health, and a wage penalty for some sexual minority groups compared to heterosexual people (Burns et al., 2018; Leonard et al., 2012; Perales, 2016; Sabia et al., 2017; Swannell et al., 2016). International meta-analyses and systematic reviews have identified similar disparities (Batejan et al., 2015; Klawitter, 2015; Lucassen et al., 2017; Plöderl & Tremblay, 2015).

While current definitions of sexual orientation and sexual identity have a basis in the scientific study of human sexuality, they are not inevitable or objective truths. Rather, they are firmly rooted in master narratives that have proliferated through countries such as Australia and the United

¹ A key limitation of current definitions of sexual orientation is the implicit assumption that gender and sex are binary and aligned, but this is not always the case (van Anders, 2015).

States over the past fifty years. The term “master narratives” refers to the dominant discourses on what it means to be a member of different social categories within a culture (e.g., a mother, a Christian, a lesbian), as well as a good member of that culture overall (Hammack & Toolis, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). Hammack and Toolis (2015) have described the defining features of master narratives. According to these authors, master narratives provide individuals with a reference point from which to construct their personal identities and make meaning from their lives. Importantly, master narratives are not neutral but rather convey an ideology and have implications for the social order. They are also compulsory, with individuals compelled to internalize and reproduce them in order to maintain that social order. In this sense, a master narrative acts as a “press” applying pressure to individuals and thus shaping and constraining their development.

Master narratives of sexual orientation and sexual identity have shifted over the past 100 years in countries such as Australia and the United States (Hammack & Cohler, 2011; Shepard, 2009). The current master narrative is encapsulated in my story of the compass, presented at the start of this chapter. According to this narrative, sexual orientation resides within the individual, “is generally thought to have a biological basis, to operate in a stable fashion, and to channel all markers of erotic interest (sexual attractions, fantasies, behaviors, and even romantic affection) in the same direction over the life course” (Diamond, 2012, p. 1). As such, it contains all the hallmarks of both classical and modern essentialism as described by DeLamater and Hyde (1998): it assumes that there are underlying, true and discrete forms (i.e., sexual orientations) that are biologically determined and constant over time. This essentialist narrative, labeled by Hammack et al. (2013) as the species narrative, proliferated through society over the past 50 years and shaped scholarship on human sexuality. It set the scene for the promulgation of universal, stage-based models of sexual identity development, whereby a person discovers and accepts their sexual orientation before affirming it via the adoption and integration of the relevant sexual identity (e.g., Cass, 1979).

The species narrative was an undoubtable improvement on the sickness narrative that dominated for most of the twentieth century. According to this earlier narrative, same-sex attraction and behavior were pathological—signs of deviance, disease, insanity, and even pedophilia (Hammack et al., 2013; Shepard, 2009). This sickness narrative was evident in the inclusion of homosexuality as a diagnosable mental illness in the American Psychiatric

Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual up until 1973, and laws criminalizing same-sex behavior (Hammack et al., 2013). The shift from the sickness to the species narrative, which began around the 1970s, was consistent with the aims of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement and brought about tangible improvements to the lives of sexual minorities (Hammack et al., 2013). A recourse to essentialism became the default for activists seeking to eradicate sexual orientation discrimination and secure equal rights (Bailey et al., 2016).

Yet despite its mainstream dominance and the social progress that accompanied it, the species narrative received increasing criticism from academics. The emergence of socio-genic paradigms such as life-course theory challenged the idea that processes of human development are universal, linear, contained within the individual and immune to the influence of sociopolitical and historical contexts (see e.g., Elder et al., 2003; Elder Jr. & Shanahan, 2006). Beginning with Foucault (1978), social constructionists drew attention to the role of discourse in the cultural construction of sexual identities (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). By the 1990s, queer theorists were developing an alternative master narrative of sexual identity, which Hammack et al. (2013) label the "subject" narrative. According to this perspective, the meanings attributed to sexual behavior are historically and culturally contingent, and identities "are multiply determined, dynamic, and fluid" (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998, p. 252). Queer theory challenged the notion that the gender/sex binary on which sexual identities are based represents natural and timeless categories (e.g., Butler, 1990). In doing so, queer theorists sought to contest and undermine the heteronormative social order (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998).

At the forefront of empirical challenges to the species narrative were a handful of pioneering researchers focused on the sexual experiences and identities of women (e.g., Diamond, 1998, 2008; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Peplau et al., 1999; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Rust, 1992, 1993; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). The species narrative had been supported by research conducted overwhelmingly on white, gay men (Diamond, 2012; Hammack et al., 2013), and it became increasingly clear that the experiences of many women—who struggled to fit themselves into the taxonomy of sexual identities provided by this narrative—had been ignored. For example, some women perceived their sexual orientation as falling "in between" the traditional categories of heterosexual, bisexual,

and lesbian; others reported being attracted to the person not the gender (Diamond, 2008; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Sexual fluidity—that is, changes in sexual attraction, behavior, or identity—were observed within women over time (Diamond, 2008; Everett et al., 2016; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rust, 1992). Crucially, evidence that social and interpersonal contexts could facilitate or constrain women’s sexual experiences and identities was compelling (Diamond, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Rust, 1993). In 2012, Diamond (p. 3) stated: “In essence, it is time to reconsider the nature and development of female sexual orientation: Do women really lack an erotic compass? Or do they simply have a different type of compass; or perhaps more than one?”

The subject narrative has slowly gained traction within academia. Universal stage-based models of sexual identity development have been widely rejected, and theoretical models of sexual orientation and sexual identity that are more consistent with the subject narrative have recently been proposed. These include Katz-Wise and Hyde’s (2017) facilitative environments model, Gordon and Silva’s (2015) sexual landscape theory, and Hammack’s (2005) integrative paradigm of sexual orientation development—which is based on life-course theory. However, empirical evidence in support of these theories remains limited. In particular, most evidence has come from research using small and/or purposively recruited samples (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Everett et al., 2016; Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2017; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Rust, 1993; Thompson & Morgan, 2008), and very little has been generated using large population samples—with some notable exceptions (e.g., Everett, 2015; Kaestle, 2019; Ott et al., 2011; Savin-Williams et al., 2012; Silva, 2019). On the one hand, this is appropriate. Qualitative research does not reduce complex phenomena to the same extent that quantitative research does. Qualitative methodologies are thus well placed to examine processes of interpretation and meaning making, as well as individuals’ lived experiences. Further, the use of purposive samples is often necessary when examining relatively rare and potentially stigmatizing experiences. On the other hand, there are questions that only analyses of data from large, national samples can answer. This includes questions surrounding the population prevalence and patterns of changes in sexual identity, and systematic analyses of the predictors and outcomes of such changes. It is only recently that appropriate data sources have emerged that allow these questions to be addressed.

THE CONTEXT FOR THIS BOOK

In this book, I utilize longitudinal survey data from a large sample of Millennial women (born 1989–1995) to address gaps in our current knowledge on young women’s sexual identities. Moving beyond the species narrative and traditional cross-sectional approaches, I apply a longitudinal, life-course lens and generate novel evidence on the patterns, predictors, and outcomes of sexual fluidity (sexual identity change) in this generation of young women. To do this, I develop and draw from a theoretical framework grounded in the life-course approach (Elder et al., 2003) and sexual landscape theory (Gordon & Silva, 2015), which I refer to as my Life Course-Sexual Landscape model. This model views women’s sexual identities as potentially dynamic, biopsychosocial phenomena. Drawing from this model, I seek to understand how social and historical contexts shape women’s sexual identity trajectories and, in turn, how women’s sexual identity trajectories shape their health and wellbeing outcomes.

The development of new evidence and perspectives on women’s sexual identities is an especially apt endeavor for these times. Over the past decade, there has been a rapid increase in the proportion of young women adopting a minority sexual identity. According to the latest data from Gallup, the proportion of U.S. adults who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) has more than doubled in the past ten years (Jones, 2022). This increase is overwhelmingly driven by younger generations, with 21% of Gen Z adults (born 1997–2003) identifying as LGBT, compared to 11% of Millennials (born 1981–1996), 4% of Gen X (born 1965–1980), and 3% of Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964). Bisexual identification is especially on the rise among younger generations of women: 15% of Gen Z adults currently identify as bisexual, and women are three times more likely to identify as bisexual than men (Jones, 2022). Studies analyzing repeated cross-sections of college students (Massey et al., 2021) and the general population (England et al., 2016) find the same thing: bisexual attractions, behavior and identity are on the rise among successive birth cohorts of women, but not men.

While women’s sexual identities have changed rapidly over the past decade, their positions in the social order have not. Since the early 2000s, the gender revolution appears to have slowed or stalled altogether

(England et al., 2020). Meaningful inequalities between women and men in income, wealth, and occupational status persist, while violence against women remains at epidemic proportions. Recently, antifeminist backlash has grown (Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020), evidenced for example by serious challenges to women's rights to abortion in the United States. In this context, challenging orthodoxies and helping to write a new narrative about women's sexualities seems a more important endeavor than ever. Feminist scholars have long recognized the interconnections between heteronormativity, institutionalized heterosexuality, and women's oppression (e.g., Jackson, 2018; Rich, 1980). Research on women's sexualities is inherently interesting and important for its own sake. Beyond that, it can also shed important light on how heteropatriarchy is reproduced and continues to impact the lives of women and sexual minorities.

With most previous research on women's sexual identities having been conducted in the United States, my research provides evidence on sexual identity change in a novel country context (Australia). It is therefore important that I provide readers with a brief overview of how the sociopolitical context in Australia compares to that in the United States. Levels of structural stigma toward sexual minorities have decreased over the past two decades in many Western countries and, when viewed in a global context, Australia and the United States are more similar than different in this regard (McGee, 2016; Mendos, 2019). For example, the national legalization of same-sex marriage occurred around the same time in both countries (2015 in the United States and 2017 in Australia). Yet, the two countries also differ in important ways. Protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation are weaker in the United States compared to Australia (Mendos, 2019), and negative attitudes toward sexual minorities are more common (McGee, 2016; Valfort, 2017). For example, in 2019, 21% of adults in the United States thought that society should not accept homosexuality compared to 14% of adults in Australia (Pew Research Center, 2020). This may be a product of differences in the religious landscapes of the two countries, with strong trends toward religious diversification and secularization in Australia over the past few decades (Perales et al., 2019; Stanley, 2015). This book will therefore provide evidence on sexual identity change in a somewhat more liberal country than previous studies from the United States.