The construction of a sociological 'homosexual' in Canadian textbooks

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Cet article étudie les images de l'homosexualité véhiculées dans les manuels canadiens de sociologie. En général, le traitement de l'homosexualité est faible, et dénote une ambivalence considérable. Le contenu des textes n'est pas toujours en harmonie avec le message transmis par la structure du texte. Le portrait de 'l'homosexual' adressé aux étudiants de premier cycle universitaire est comparé à la recherche actuelle au sein de la discipline.

The paper examines the images of homosexuality found in Canadian sociology textbooks. Coverage in general is weak and shows considerable ambivalence. The content of the text does not always match the message conveyed by the structure of the text. The portrait of the 'homosexual' directed to undergraduate audiences is compared with current research in the discipline.

INTRODUCTION

University textbooks are often the first, and sometimes only, contact that students have with a discipline1. They constitute the 'front lines' in the transmission of scholarly knowledge and present the 'first face' of a discipline to the uninitiated. Awareness of the possible impact of sociological textbooks in providing Canadian students with tools to analyze their own society has generated a decade of new books for Canadian consumption by authors and publishers in Canada.

This assessment of the images of lesbians and gay men in Canadian sociology textbooks comes at a time when a committee of the American Sociological Association has undertaken the same sort of evaluation of texts in the United States2. The textbooks examined here:

1/ appear with Canadian publishers or Canadian subsidiaries of foreign publishers (that are not just identical reprints of textbooks originally published by the parent corporation);

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were written by an author at a Canadian university;
3/ were published in 1974 or later and remain in print.

Textbooks were reviewed in three broad subject areas: 1/ introductory, 2/ social deviance, social problems, Canadian society, 3/ family, gender, and human sexuality. In all, thirty-five textbooks were reviewed, of which twelve fell into the ‘introductory’ category, eleven into ‘social deviance, social problems, Canadian society,’ and twelve into ‘family, sex, and gender’ (see Appendix). Only two are French-language books. Despite a wealth of recent monographs on Québécois society revealed in the standard record of French-language publications, Livres et auteurs québécois, little seems to have been pulled together into textbooks. Marcel Fournier’s (1974) observations about the reliance of Québec sociology on translations of texts from the U.S. and on books from France still appear to hold true.

THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE

The meaning of any text concerns more than the surface content of the words involved. Every statement raises, by contrast, a set of unspoken assertions when compared with the complete research literature on a subject. The positive portrayal presented in the text, then, makes alternatives invisible and defines itself against the unspoken by criteria of relevance, interest, significance, etc. Second, the surface content of a text joins with its structure to compose the text’s meaning. To use ethnomethodological language, the text comes about under certain ‘auspices’ which frame its reading. I contend here that the construction of a sociological ‘homosexual’ in Canadian textbooks displays tension between the social organization of the text and its overt content.

In general, homosexuality appears to have a low profile in the textbooks; seven of the twelve introductory books devote less than one paragraph to the subject. Of the remainder, two devote only a few paragraphs grouped under a subheading, while the other three offer more than a paragraph without an independent subheading. Four of the twelve textbooks lack an index entry to homosexuality. Coverage of the topic is even weaker in social deviance, social problems, Canadian society, family, sex, and gender textbooks with only five of twenty-three books providing as much as one paragraph or more, suggesting a generally low sociological interest in the area.

This void throws the texts which do treat gay people into greater relief. If coverage were common and its treatment diverse, individual statements would be given meaning in a polysemic context. As it is, with gay people reduced at times to asides and subordinate clauses, the particularity of these assertions comes to the fore. With such impoverished resources, the textbook reader’s interpretation of the subject at hand may, by default, rely upon little more than apparently off-hand comments.

Whatever the content of these statements, most remarkable is the consensus concerning the auspices by which homosexuality comes forward as a topic. Though not always grouped under this heading, all but one of the introductory textbooks agree that gay people are foremost a deviant group. (The one ‘dissenting’ textbook
lacks a chapter on deviance altogether.) Chapter titles and subheadings insist that gay people are best categorized under ‘crime and other forms of deviant behavior’ (Zeitin, 1981: 318; see Tieve, 1982: 71; Mansfield, 1982: 271; Hagedorn, 1983: 100, 160). The internal organization of these books necessarily constructs the ‘deviance’ category in opposition to chapter headings from which homosexuality is banished. By its absence, homosexuality remains dissociated from interpersonal relations, love, intimacy, cohabitation, mateship, and even sexual relations. Furthermore, gay people are clearly separated from the treatment of minorities and social movements.

They are also conspicuously absent from textbooks on Canadian society. Not one Canadian studies book documents gay people as part of Canadian society or politics, tacitly divorcing them from issues of citizenship, civil rights, and national identity. So overwhelming is the deviance category, that gays are written out of interpersonal relations and distanced from the symbols of nationhood. This literary ‘final solution’ of homosexual existence is a feature traditionally shared by a number of minorities and women (see Adam, 1978: ch. 2).

Also practically invisible are lesbians. Only Sharon Stone’s 1983 article on a Toronto lesbian political group (Fleming and Visano, 1983) offers any sustained treatment of the subject. Apart from this, lesbians are confined to two oblique one-sentence references in the textbooks. Rosalind Sydie cites Adrienne Rich as follows: ‘Rich suggests that compulsory heterosexuality directed at all women is the means to ensure men sexual access to women’ (Rosenberg, Michael, Shaffir, Turowetz, and Weinfield, 1983: 198). And Anne-Marie Ambert (1976: 101), in a chapter on ‘General sex roles,’ remarks that lesbian invisibility is due to the fact that ‘society does not attach as much importance to the sexuality of women.’

In addition to the ‘deviance’ frame, homosexuality does turn up elsewhere in the introductory texts. Himelfarb and Richardson (1982: 44) refer (negatively) to Laud Humphrey’s Tearoom Trade as a problem in research ethics under a ‘Doing Sociology’ heading. Rosalind Sydie (Rosenberg, Michael, Shaffir, Turowetz, and Weinfield, 1983) mentions homophobia in a paper on ‘Femininity and paid labour.’ Westhues (1982: 112) includes homosexuals when the topic is subcultures, and Hagedorn (1983: 389) contains a fleeting reference to a correlation between ‘religiosity’ and ‘negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Metta Spencer (1981: 352), in a unique departure, discusses ‘homosexual relationships’ in a chapter on ‘The family’ and under a heading, ‘Regulation of sexual behavior and reproduction.’ Westhues (1982: 323), as well, makes a half-sentence reference to gay people as part of change in the family.

Also noteworthy is how few ‘social deviance’ textbooks treat the topic at all, at the same time as introductory books unanimously name it a ‘deviance.’

Finally, it should be noted that textbooks which present themselves as departures from tradition, ‘alternatives,’ or as vaguely progressive rarely differ from the disciplinary consensus. Schlesinger’s (1979: preface) ‘up-to-date topical issues dealing with family life in the late 1970s in Canada’ does cover: childless couples, communes, adoption, unmarried mothers, female-headed families, even ‘a manifesto for men’s liberation’ but remains silent on lesbian mothers and gay relationships. Reasons and Perdue (1981) devote considerable attention to ‘minority liberation’ and ‘sex and sexism’ but nothing to gay and lesbian issues, and Eichler
explicitly excludes ‘homosexual couples’ from her discussion ‘Beyond the monolithic bias in family literature.’ Only Fleming and Visano (1983: v) who promise ‘a turning point in the study of crime, law, deviance in Canada’ offer sustained treatments of lesbians and gay men as collective actors (rather than psychological oddities) raising significant sociological issues concerning the political organization of the criminal justice system.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Before anything more is said, it must be pointed out that the overt content of textbook treatments of homosexuality is unfailingly liberal. The authors bring up stereotypes in order to refute them (Zeitlin, 1981: 318; Whitehurst and Booth, 1980: 148); they find gay people to be the objects of prejudice; they conclude that prejudice is unreasonable. Most raise labeling issues to demonstrate the cultural relativity of deviant categories (Zeitlin, 1981: 319; Spencer, 1981: 195; Himelfarb and Richardson, 1982: 34), and some cite the American Psychiatric Association’s decision to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses (Mansfield, 1982: 315; Spencer, 1981: 195; Whitehurst and Booth, 1980: 128). Yet once again, the organization of the text undercuts this liberal message.

Consider the following:

1/ ‘When we meet the drug addict, the bum, the homosexual, the pedophile, the stripper, he or she often differs from what we expected’ (Mansfield, 1982: 281).


Mansfield’s (1982: 271) half-page photograph of an unidentified group of white, middle-aged picketers adds to the uneasy relationship between apparent intent and structure of meaning. The central focus of the picture is a prominent picket sign embazoned with the familiar list: ‘Queers, creep, potheads, perverts, reds – beware! EBS is on the march.’ The caption reads: ‘There is little agreement within society about what constitutes deviant behaviours.’

Each statement overtly cautions students against the perils of labeling and yet the rule, which unites these lists into a coherent whole, remains unexamined. No word (or label) stands in isolation but takes its meaning from its milieu. If sociologists believe their own theory of ‘differential association,’ homosexuals are keeping the wrong company! Despite the turmoil in the sociology of deviance during the 1960s and 1970s (see Gouldner, 1965: 103; Thio, 1973: 1; Conrad and Schneider, 1980: ch. 1, 2; Balkan, Berger and Schmidt, 1980: Part 1), surprisingly little has changed. The logic that unites homosexuality and suicide into a single topic for sociological analysis (see Teevan, 1982: 71) owes more to Saint Augustine than to social theory. Alexander Liazos’s 1972 critique of the ‘nuts, sluts and “preverts”’ school of deviance seems not to have had significant impact; his recommendation to ‘banish the concept of “deviance” and speak of oppression,
conflict, persecution, and suffering’ (Liazos, 1972: 269) is lost. This sociological constitution of a category of ‘social detritus’ cannot but frame the ostensible message of tolerance and good will.

Sometimes the tension between the moral structure and liberal surface of sociological presentations is thinly concealed. Hagan (1979: 39) and Himelfarb and Richardson (1982: 140) cite Humphrey’s Tearoom Trade but ignore his Out of the Closets, thereby locating homosexuality as an unsavory activity conducted in washrooms while suppressing the political battleground where the celebration of gay/lesbian relations confronts state, church, and familial repression. Most egregious of all is Jean-Pierre Trempe’s ‘Déviation de la conduite érotique’ in Sexologie contemporaine (Créault, Lévy and Gratton, 1981: 299) which insists: ‘La promiscuité masculine favoriserait ainsi une fuite des responsabilités et de la profondeur du lien.’ This is one of many passages in this book devoid of scholarly references and without support in the research literature.

It is remarkable how a number of authors are content to observe that gay people ‘offend the sentiments of the dominant majority’ (Zeitlin, 1982: 319; see Spencer, 1981: 188; Grayson, 1983: 460) without specifying who this opposition is or why they are opposed. Few sociologists would make do with such banal claims as ‘many Canadians dislike black people’ or ‘much of society distrusts Jews’ without recognizing a responsibility to identify and analyze racism and anti-Semitism. Yet only four of thirty-five textbooks take a stab at the question of homophobia. Both Sydie (Rosenberg, Michael, Shaffir, Turowetz, and Weinfield, 1983: 206) and Ambert (1976: 102) attribute homophobia to anxiety among men attempting to embody masculine gender ideals, while Whitehurst and Booth (1980: 148) break it into a set of wrongheaded attitudes (gay people ‘recruit,’ threaten the family, are inappropriate role models, and an ‘unnatural evil’) which, they say, are not founded in fact. Thomas Fleming’s recent ‘Criminalizing a marginal community’ distinguishes itself as the only article in recent textbook sociology which analyzes the mechanics of homophobia by examining police image management and the media’s construction of public knowledge around the 1980 Toronto bath raids (Fleming and Visano, 1983). The other textbooks present homophobia as a moral consensus with no attempt to de-reify the category of ‘public opinion.’

Seven of twelve introductory textbooks do mention the existence of a gay movement but none bother to cite publications of or about the movement. It is not surprising, then, that serious errors creep into its presentation. While some prefer the tautology that the gay movement is a homosexual interest group, others fall into the ‘gay marriage’ fallacy claiming either that gay people want to have marriage-like relationships but ‘fall short of the psychological adjustment of heterosexual men and women’ (Zeitlin, 1981: 321; see Spencer, 1981: 352) or that the gay movement wants legal marriage but will never get it (Spencer, 1981: 352; Ramu, 1979: 177, 194). This preoccupation is reminiscent of a problem which dogged the black movement: as black leaders talked of discrimination by employers and landlords, police and mob violence, as well as about basic democratic and civil rights, white racists insisted that what the black movement ‘really’ wanted was interracial marriage (Adam, 1978: 45; Adam, forthcoming). The gay marriage issue also seems to be projected onto the movement and those who
claim it to be an objective of the gay movement would be hard pressed to turn
up supporting references.

The moral entelechy contained by sociological discourses on homosexuality is
so strong that political issues are washed away unsupported by any analytical
framework. The social psychological pitch of Sawchuk’s ‘Becoming a homosexual
[sic]’ (Haas and Shaffir, 1974) is so definitive that subjects’ statements about
police harassment are treated as part of the landscape and are not taken up to
topicalize anti-gay repression. Once again, Fleming and Visano’s (1983) Deviant
Designations and Whitehurst and Booth’s (1980) The Sexes stand out as the only
books willing to mention contemporary issues of sexual politics.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL ‘HOMOSEXUAL’

Introductory sociology, then, almost wholly encloses gay people within the ‘de-
viance’ category thereby legislating a very particular reading of homosexuality.
It is a category which effectively holds a diverse set of people ‘at arm’s length,’
assuring their fundamental ‘otherness.’ It is as if sociology would have students
believe that the discipline is overtly tolerant, progressive, and sympathetic to the
‘underdog’ while covertly confirming conventional middle-class morality as the
basic appropriate orientation to the social world. Whatever the intent of the
authors, the structure of the text asserts a drag upon the ostensibly ‘progressive’
pull of the overt message.

So effective is the deviance presumption that (Fleming and Visano (1983)
excepted) no thought is given to the social and historical development of anti-
homosexual repression or to specification of what persons or structures are the
agents of this repression. Despite a move in psychology toward research into
homophobia which finds strong correlations among the psychological profiles of
homophobic, racist, sexist, and other highly prejudiced personalities, sociology
(at least in its textbooks) shows little serious interest in specifying the social
categories from which anti-gay violence flows. The deviance category appears to
be so strongly held that homophobia is largely taken for granted despite a pro-
fessed commitment to analyze labeling practices. The passive voice of textbook
texts constructs a voice of objectivity which puts forward a social consensus which
agrees upon gay people’s disreputable status. Not a single introductory textbook
probes the medical profession, the police and criminal justice system, the media,
the church, or state for the roots of anti-gay repression.

The ‘arm’s length’ approach produces social distance: gay people are always
‘over there.’ They never turn up in this country, this city, or this classroom.
When recommendations for further reading are appended to a chapter, books
about gay people are never included despite limited coverage in the text itself.
Though every sizeable classroom of introductory sociology very likely contains
several lesbian and gay students, the books presume only heterosexual readers
having to cope with an alien phenomenon. Gay readers are confronted by a void
(see Adam, 1978: ch. 2).

The problem posed here is the responsibility of sociologists to analyze rather
than simply participate in commonsense reality. Is it enough, as David Silverman
(1972: 8, 9) points out, to have a sociology which is a folk discipline founded on
the 'assumption of a preconstituted world available for study' and producing yet another member's account of the world, or should the 'folk rules and schemes of knowledge used by members to perceive, define, classify, and explain social reality' themselves be objects of analysis? Should sociological knowledge differ from the news accounts constructed by journalists (see Tuchman, 1978) which simply reproduce the social 'web of facticity'? David Walsh's (1972: 49) criticism of the sociology of deviance retains its force, at least insofar as it is portrayed in introductory books: 'sociological accounts addressed to the elucidation of the underlying reality of the social world remain a species of members' explanations rooted in the commonsense attitude which takes that world for granted - they remain first order accounts.'

It is no doubt unfair to fault introductory textbooks for problems which lie deeper in the discipline; much of the difficulty can be traced to the dearth of Canadian research on the topic. Still, there are sources available. One of the most remarkable absences is of work where lesbians and gay men speak for themselves. Sawchuk's (Haas and Shaffer, 1974) article contains a single reference to Dennis Amtman's *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* and Rosenberg, Michael, Shaffer, Turowetz, and Weinfield (1983: 414) reprint an excerpt from a pamphlet produced by the gay Metropolitan Community Church. Again, articles printed in Fleming and Visano (1983) are unique in having taken the trouble to look into knowledge produced by the research subjects themselves. None of the other textbooks refer to more than a decade of reporting by the Toronto journal, the *Body Politic*, or to Ed Jackson and Stan Persky's (1982) compendium drawn from that journal, *Flaunting It*! The lack of references to major Québécois publications such as Luc Benoît et al (1978) *Sortir* or work by Paul François Sylvestre (1979), reflects (as does lesbian invisibility) a larger bias in Anglo-Canadian sociology. Finally, it should be noted that none of the now sizable corpus of social theory devoted to homosexuality has penetrated any of these texts (see, for example, Hocquenghem, 1978, Faderman, 1981, Plummer, 1981; Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1981, 1985; Levine, 1979; Herdt, 1984).

The distancing procedures, with which gay people are handled, are nowhere so clear as in the presumption that the rest of the world has nothing to learn from studying lesbians and gay men. But fleeting references in the textbooks occasionally show breaks with the orthodoxy and point the way to genuine alternatives. Parkinson's (Mansfield, 1982: 285) references to the Gay Tide case is an opening which is closed off by concluding, 'The failure of the Court to find in its favour indicates that the old moral categories are still dominant.' Yet the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in the Gay Tide case that the press has an unqualified right to print whatever it wants and that disenfranchised minorities have no right to be heard even through paid advertisements. Such a decision has serious implications for the civil rights of all Canadians and creates an opportunity for sociological insights into the workings of the Canadian judicial system. John Lee (Grayson, 1983: 504, 514) on the other hand, is willing to illuminate police practices with passing comments on the mass arrests of gay men in 1980 in Toronto. Edgar Z. Friedenberg (Rosenberg, Michael, Shaffer, Turowetz, and Weinfield, 1983: 128) as well, points up problems in Canadian law by reference to the repeated prosecution of the *Body Politic* by the Ontario Attorney-General.
In a similar manner, in articles devoted to other matters, McDaniel and Agger (1982: 194, 213) use labeling of homosexuality as an example of the abuse of professional power by physicians.Remarkably, none of these examples are indexed, either because the books have no index at all, or because index references to homosexuality refer back to only more orthodox treatments of the subject.

Conclusion

A survey of Canadian sociology textbooks shows weak coverage of lesbian and gay communities in Canada. Despite almost universally ‘liberal’ rhetoric, a closer reading of the texts reveals profound ambivalence in sociological treatments of homosexuality. Most subscribe to a conventional ‘deviance’ characterization of the subject and display a variety of distancing techniques to remove lesbians and gay men from the core issues of human existence, whether they be questions of intimacy or political economy. Nearly all presume that heterosexuals have nothing to learn from the gay world and that the textbook readership is exclusively heterosexual. Modern research and theory on homosexuality, whether from inside the gay movement or from scholars, from Canada or elsewhere, has yet to ‘trickle down’ to the textbooks.

Notes

1 I would like to acknowledge the assistance and encouragement extended by members of the American Sociological Association Committee on the Status of Homosexuals in Sociology. They are: Patricia Y. Miller, Janet Chafetz, Harvey Molotch, Florence Cancian, M. Elaine Burgess, and Ira L. Reiss. Stephen Murray and Martin Levine also commented on earlier drafts. This paper was first presented to the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, Montreal, 1985.

2 This textbook review is part of an ongoing assessment of sociological studies of homosexuality which, in a previous report, explored aspects of the production of knowledge about homosexuality in sociology (see American Sociological Association, 1982).

3 Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz’s 1983 American Couples presents an important new challenge to this presumption.
## APPENDIX
### TEXTBOOK COVERAGE

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