▶ STUDYING SEXUAL IDENTITIES

Many people use the language of sexuality in their everyday conversations without stopping to contemplate the meanings of the words they use. Comparatively, those whose job it is to think about sexuality issues (e.g., activists and academics) may spend an inordinate amount of time considering the meanings of the words they use, but they may ultimately use them in different ways. This is because a single definition rarely is able to fully encapsulate both the broad scope and subtle nuances of the language of sexuality. What follows is our attempt to sort out for you some of this language and to relate these terms to differences in the ways people think about issues of sexuality. Understanding these differences is important because they inform academic discussions about sexual identities and the media. It also is important to recognize, however, that our understandings of sexuality and the language we use to think and talk about it is rooted in culture and history. This book considers sexuality from a 21st Century Western perspective so the ideas and language reflect a 21st Century Western way of thinking about sexuality. Not only does the language we use reflect historical and cultural understandings of sexuality, it also has the possibility of limiting our imaginations of other ways to comprehend this topic. At the same time, the language used is continually in flux as cultural meanings are continually negotiated. Be mindful of these perspectives as you consider the definitions and descriptions offered below. (Textbox 1.1 asks you to imagine alternative frameworks for thinking about sexuality.)

BOX 1.1	Alternative Sexuality Models

As will be elaborated on in Chapter 2, when sexologists began to categorize people by their sexual behaviors and attraction, sexual orientation became key to thinking about sexuality. This sorting out of people's sexuality based upon the sex-gender of the person to whom they are attracted took hold and has been a central organizing principle to most understandings of sexuality. Although some sex researchers, like Alfred Kinsey, have attempted to complicate this binary system by introducing a continuum concept of sexual orientation or expanding the factors considered in determining a person's sexual orientation (e.g., the degree of attraction to different sexes), the model generally has held.

As Stein (1999) points out, traditional categories of sexuality (i.e., heterosexuality and homosexuality) leave little room for people who are transgender or intersexed

(Continued)

or attracted to transgender or intersexed people. Likewise, why do we not consider the sexual orientation of the person to whom someone is attracted? Our current notion of sexual orientation presumes that it would be the same as the individual who is attracted to the person. However, as Stein (1999) points out, there are lesbians who desire and act upon sexual desires toward gay men. There also are gay men who only desire sex with straight men. This is really only the tip of the iceberg. The sex and sexuality of people that a person is "oriented" toward is only one part of a sexuality equation that might include sexual desires that include objects, acts, venues, frequencies, etc. Our culture does have terms for some desires/behaviors (e.g., "object fetishism," "nymphomaniac," "exhibitionist," "sadomasochist"), but these labels, which generally carry pejorative meanings, typically are secondary to a person's narrowly defined sexual orientation.

   Consider for a moment how our worldviews might be different if sexual orientation was not limited to a two- or three-category system or if the sex-gender of sexual partners were not the defining principle. Develop an alternative framework for thinking about sexual identities. Instead of using sex-gender as the basis for determining sexual orientation, develop a completely new organizing principle. You might begin by using some of the desires and/or behaviors mentioned above, but then see how creative you can be. Once you have your new system, develop new identity labels to replace our current GLBTQ "alphabet soup." Think about how your new system would change social and political arenas.

Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, Sexual Identity—What Does It All Mean?

The term "sexuality" typically is used as an umbrella term to describe "the quality of being sexual" (Weeks, 2011, p. 198). This use of the word emerged in the early 19th Century and was furthered by sexologists at the end of that century. Although this definition is fairly straightforward, it fails to capture the complexity of all that people may associate with "being sexual." The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) attempts to identify those broad associations:

> Human sexuality encompasses the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals. Its various dimensions involve the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system; identity, orientation, roles, and personality; and thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural and moral concerns.
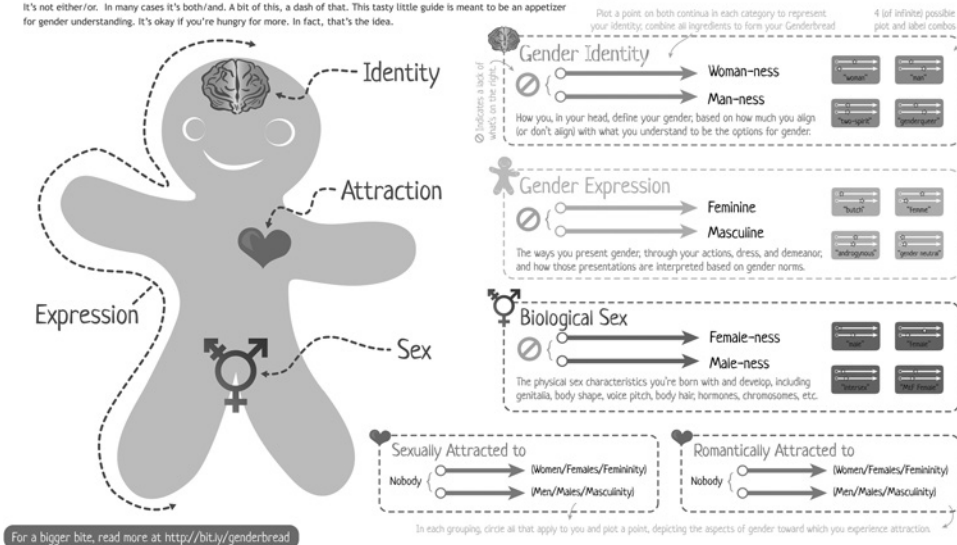>
> (quoted in Plante, 2006, p. xvii)

FIGURE 1.2 The Genderbread Person illustrates one way to think about the diversity of sexual identities
Source: **itspronouncedmetrosexual.com by Sam Killermann. Reprinted with permission.**

Given the extensive scope of all that sexuality might imply, the term increasingly is used in its plural form, suggesting that there are multiple, if not infinite, forms of sexuality.

One element of people's sexuality is their sexual orientation, commonly defined by the sex-gender of the person to whom they are sexually attracted. Some people think of sexual orientation as a binary—people are either heterosexual or homosexual. Sometimes the category of bisexuality is added into the mix, but people are supposed to fit neatly into one of these two or three categories. The reality, though, is that sexual orientation is much more complicated than that. To begin with, several factors may contribute to determining a person's sexual orientation. For instance, Plante (2006) notes that some definitions of sexual orientation include people's fantasies, feelings, and behaviors. However, our current way of thinking about sexual orientation leaves little room for situations in which people's fantasies, feelings, and behaviors do not necessarily align with each other or when they might change over time. The limitations of the popular binary understanding of sexual orientation also become clear when considering people who fall outside our binary understandings of sex and gender, as will be discussed later.

In American culture, another aspect of people's sexuality has played an increasingly important role: the concept of sexual identity. A person's sexual identity considers "how o people understand themselves, how do they think of themselves; do they label themselves, and do they announce or enact that identity to an audience or in a social setting?" (Plante, 2006, p. 200). This definition by Plante should not be understood as suggesting that sexual identity is determined solely at an individual level. As people think about, label, announce, or enact their own sexual identities, they are creating linkages between themselves and others with similar sexual identities. As Weeks (2011) writes, "identity tells us about what we have in common with some people, and what differentiates us from others" (p. 187). While everyone has a sexual identity, sexual identities matter in a different way to those with marginalized ones. Being able to connect with other people based on those identities allows people with non-normative sexualities the opportunity for self-recognition and self-valuation, things usually taken for granted by most people. Many people also see sexual identity as the basis for being able to confront, challenge, and change a homophobic and heterosexist society. (The "Heterosexual Questionnaire" in Textbox 1.2 draws attention to how heterosexism marginalizes sexual minorities.)

BOX 1.2   The Heterosexual Questionnaire (M. Rochlin)

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to examine the manner in which the use of heterosexual norms may bias the study of gay men's and lesbian's lives.

Instructions: Heterosexism is a form of bias in which heterosexual norms are used in studies of homosexual relationships. Gay men and lesbians are seen as deviating from a heterosexual norm, and this often leads to the marginalization and pathologizing of their behavior. Read the questionnaire below with this definition in mind and respond to the questions.

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?
3. Is it possible that your heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear of others of the same sex?
4. Is it possible that your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?
5. If you've never slept with a person of the same sex, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?

6. Do your parents know that you are straight? Do your friends and/or roommate(s) know? How did they react?
7. Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality? Can't you just be who you are and keep it quiet?
8. Why do heterosexuals place so much emphasis on sex?
9. Why do heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into their lifestyle?
10. A disproportionate majority of child molesters are heterosexuals. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual teachers?
11. Just what do men and women *do* in bed together? How can they truly know how to please each other, being so anatomically different?
12. With all the societal support marriage receives, the divorce rate is spiraling. Why are there so few stable relationships among heterosexuals?
13. Statistics show that lesbians have the lowest incidence of sexually transmitted diseases. Is it really safe for a woman to maintain a heterosexual lifestyle and run the risk of disease and pregnancy?
14. How can you become a whole person if you limit yourself to compulsive, exclusive heterosexuality?
15. Considering the menace of overpopulation, how could the human race survive if everyone were heterosexual?
16. Could you trust a heterosexual therapist to be objective? Don't you feel s/he might be inclined to influence you in the direction of her/his own leanings?
17. There seem to be very few happy heterosexuals. Techniques have been developed with which you might be able to change if you really want to. Have you considered trying aversion therapy?
18. Would you want your child to be heterosexual, knowing the problems that s/he would face?
19. What were your first reactions upon reading this questionnaire?

(M. Rochlin. Printed in the *Peace Newsletter*, 1982, Issue #488, p. 14. Reprinted with permission.)

The Alphabet Soup of Sexual Identities

People often refer to the "alphabet soup" of sexual identities, an ever-growing list of terms inclusive of historically marginalized sexual and gender identity categories. The basic list includes L(esbian), G(ay), B(isexual), and T(ransgender). In recent years, Q(ueer) has been added, and sometimes a whole mouthful of other letters like a second

Q(uestioning), A(lly), I(ntersex), H(IV-affected), and even W(hatever). Like all identity labels, those applied to sexuality carry with them certain histories and are tied to particular ways of thinking about the meaning of sexuality as an identity marker. Below, we consider some of the most common labels attached to sexual identity categories. In addition to including a definition of each term, the descriptions also place many of them in an historical context.

▶ *Heterosexual*: This term today refers to a sexual identity in which people find themselves sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex. Before the 20th Century, heterosexuality used to refer to someone pathologically concerned with the opposite sex. In general, however, heterosexuality has mostly gone unnoticed or unmarked in discussions of sexuality. Because it is the perceived norm, scholars, scientists, activists, and everyday people have not spent a lot of time thinking about it. Yet, over the past 20 years, the term increasingly has come under question, with a number of theorists pointing to the fact that heterosexuality, like other sexual labels, is a cultural construction. Also, sexuality scholars are drawing attention to the fact that within heterosexuality, not all sex is treated equally and certain types of sex (e.g., prostitution, sadomasochism) and the people who engage in them are marked as deviant. Gayle Rubin's concept of the "charmed circle" (see Textbox 1.3) illustrates this point.

▶ *Homosexual*: Most commonly, this term refers to a sexual identity in which people find themselves sexually attracted to people of the same sex. In that sense, it often is understood as the binary opposite of heterosexuality. Originally identified with behaviors, over the course of the 20th Century the term was used to label people who either engaged in same-sex sexual activities or expressed desires for people of the same sex as pathological. Based on this history, many members of the GLBTQ community do not like the use of this term as a noun.

▶ *Gay*: This term sometimes is used as a more accepted and positive alternative to "homosexual" and is used to describe people who identify themselves as sexually attracted to someone of the same sex. Unlike the term "homosexual," which grew from the medical discourses of sexology, "gay" was a term of self-determination. Adopted by U.S. activists as early as the 1950s, it gained widespread acceptance and use by the 1970s when activist groups like the Gay Liberation Front adopted the term in their struggle for social recognition and acceptance. Today, the term is recognized globally. In the GLBTQ community, the term more specifically refers to men who identify themselves as sexually attracted to other men.

▶ *Lesbian*: Lesbian is used more specifically to refer to women who identify themselves through their attraction to other women. In reality, the term has a complicated and contested history. The term originates from its association with the Greek poet, Sappho, who lived on the island of Lesbos and wrote about love between women. By the late 19th Century the term took on more negative connotations and for the first half of the 20th Century was used to describe women who seemed more masculine than feminine. With the emergence of the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s, lesbianism began to be associated more positively with both women's and gay liberation. Still, the connection between lesbianism and masculinity in women remains, as well as between lesbianism and more radical strains of second-wave feminism. Therefore, some young female activists reject the term.

▶ *Bisexual*: This term refers to people who identify themselves by their attraction to people of both the same and the opposite sex. A far more recent term than the ones listed above, bisexuality first was used as a term somewhat synonymous with heterosexuality. In many ways, bisexuality as a self-defined identity challenges the biological basis upon which some people make claims of being gay or lesbian. Until very recently, the term did not register as a valid or even unique identity, and gender differences can inform how it is applied. For example, Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of the "lesbian continuum" provides an example of how women's sexuality often is understood in more fluid terms, making it more likely to fall outside of absolute classification. However, the strong connection between hegemonic masculinity and homophobia may make self-identified male bisexuality less common. (See Kimmel, 2011, for a discussion of the dominant role homophobia plays in men's relationships, thus limiting the potential of physical and emotional intimacy between men.) In addition to the potential of facing hostility from heterosexuals, bisexuals also sometimes face hostility from those who identify as gay and lesbian and view bisexuality as a phase or as a form of internalized homophobia and, thus, a refusal of the gay or lesbian identity.

▶ *Pansexual*: Sometimes referred to as omnisexual, pansexual describes an attraction to a person regardless of sex or gender. People who use this label may describe themselves as "gender blind" or as being attracted to a person's personality rather than his or her sex. The term also acknowledges a space for intersexed and transgendered people in an otherwise binary understanding of sexuality and gender.

▶ *Asexual*: This term increasingly has been adopted by people who do not experience sexual attraction to anyone. Unlike the term "celibacy," which

describes someone's *behavior*, asexuality describes the lack of sexual *desire*. Only recently has asexuality begun to be studied, as it becomes more visible with the existence of asexual communities and organizations made possible by digital media.

▶ *Straight*: "Straight" has become a colloquial term for "heterosexual." The term first was used in the phrase "to go straight," which in the 1940s referred to someone who had previously engaged in homosexual behaviors but had stopped doing so. "Straight" was a reference to the "straight and narrow."

▶ *Transgender*: Transgender refers to people who experience a disconnect between their biological sex and their gender identity. When the term first gained currency in the 1970s, transgender was used as a term of self-identification by those who rejected gender norms but did not identify with transsexuals or transvestites. Today, transgender typically serves as an umbrella term for a range of identities that refuse the link between biological sex and a set of socially acceptable gender norms. Therefore, it generally is seen as destabilizing common assumptions about the "natural" link between sex and identity. While transgender refers to a person's gender identity, only in the past 50 years have homosexuality and gender variance been clearly distinguished from each other.

▶ *Tran(s)exual*: Unlike the term "transgender," which largely was created by a community of people seeking self-definition, "transsexual" began as a medical term. It was coined by Dr. Harry Benjamin, a German endocrinologist involved in clinical work with transsexuals beginning in the 1950s. The term still is used today to categorize individuals expressing strong desires to transition into a life lived as a member of the opposite sex. Some choose to do this by altering their cosmetic appearance, others seek to alter their bodies through the use of hormone treatments, and some individuals choose to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. Trans activists use a singular "s" to differentiate between their intentionally chosen sexual identity as opposed to a medically imposed one.

▶ *Transvestite*: Originating in the early years of the 20th Century, transvestite refers to a person who cross-dresses. Originally, many presumed a strong correspondence between transvestism and homosexuality. Today, it is more commonly understood that there is little link between cross-dressing behaviors and sexual orientation. The label transvestite historically has carried negative connotations and has fallen out of use by the GLBTQ community, where the descriptive term "cross-dresser" generally is preferred.

▶ *Trans**: Some writers have begun to use this term (with the asterisk) to acknowledge the gender variance that exists within the trans community. The use of the asterisk stems from computing in which the symbol represents a wildcard, or any possible characters attached to the original search term. "Trans*" includes transgender men and women, along with a range of other identities like gender-fluid, non-binary, gender queer, third gender, or agender.

▶ *Ze* and *hir*: These are gender neutral pronouns generally accepted in the transgender community. "Ze" is the neutral stand in for the terms "he" or "she", while "hir" is the alternative to "his" or "her."

▶ *Cisgender*: This term was developed by those in the transgender community to refer to individuals whose biological sex aligns with their gender expression. The Latin-derived prefix "cis" means "on the same side" and serves as an antonym to "trans."

▶ *Queer*: The term "queer" typically is used to signify an attitude toward sexuality and gender that rejects gay rights politics rooted in identity categories. However, the term has had a complex history, and its meaning continues to be contested. At the turn of the 20th Century, gay men used this label themselves before it took on a pejorative meaning and became an epithet used against gay people. The term has since been reclaimed by the GLBTQ community. "Queer" sometimes is used as an umbrella term for all non-normative sexual and gender identities. It also has been adopted by radical activists who resist what they see as the assimilationist nature of those involved in the struggle for civil rights for gays and lesbians. The term often is favored by younger activists as a specific rejection of the narrower identity categories of heterosexual, gay, lesbian, woman, and man. Instead, these activists see their identities tied less to the sex-gender of the person to whom they are attracted and more tied to a radical rethinking of gender and sex relations. In academia, the term most frequently is associated with queer theory, which will be discussed below. Given all of the possible connotations of this word, it is best to always consider the context in which it is being used to determine the user's intended meaning.

▶ *Genderqueer*: This term refers to gendered identities that fall outside the normative binary of masculine and feminine and might include, for example, people who refuse all gender labels and people who identify as both masculine and feminine. The practice of intentionally disrupting traditional gender categories by sending confusing or contradictory messages about one's sex is called *genderfuck*.

▶ *Intersex*: This term describes a number of biological variations in which people's physical sex characteristics do not align with a traditional two-sex model of male and female. An intersex condition may be discovered at birth, at the onset of puberty, or sometimes not until a person dies and an autopsy is performed. In recent decades, the medical community has drastically changed its treatment of intersex people to encourage a "wait and see" approach with children until they are old enough to have input in any medical decisions. While most intersex people choose to live their lives according to traditional norms associated with one gender or the other, an increasing number of intersexed people are rejecting a binary system of sex-gender and embracing their unique gender variations. Intersex and transgender activists sometimes work together to fight what they view as an oppressive binary sex-gender system.

## BOX 1.3   The Limits of Social Acceptance

Social discourses about sexuality since the 1970s primarily have focused on sexual orientation; however, it is important to remember that same-sex desire is just one type of sexual practice for which people have been judged to be sexual deviants and, therefore, social outcasts. Gayle Rubin (1999), a cultural anthropologist and influential writer on gender and sexuality, suggests that American culture is based on a sex hierarchy, in which "marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid" (p. 158). She argues that our sexual value system consists of a charmed circle of "good, normal, natural, and blessed sexuality" and the "outer limits" of "bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality" (p. 153). While homosexuality falls to the outer limits of this sexual value system, so, too, does fetishism, pornography, sadomasochism, masturbation, prostitution, pedophilia, and polygamy. Similarly, just as homosexuality has been subject to religious, legal, psychiatric, and popular derision, so, too, have these other sexual behaviors.

Rubin (1999) argues that cultures draw lines to determine what type of sexual behaviors fall on the side of "good sex" and which do not. These lines are not historically static. Instead, they are contested terrain, as people debate over the acceptability of sexual practices that fall outside the charmed circle. However, the more elements of the charmed circle to which a person's sexuality adheres, then the more likely it is that it will move closer toward the line of "good sex." For example, monogamous gay couples who engage in private vanilla sex come closer to the line of acceptability than transsexuals who engage in S/M sex for pay.

The charmed circle

Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality

Heterosexual
Married
Monogamous
Procreative
Non-commercial
In pairs
In a relationship
Same generation
In private
No pornography
Bodies only
Vanilla
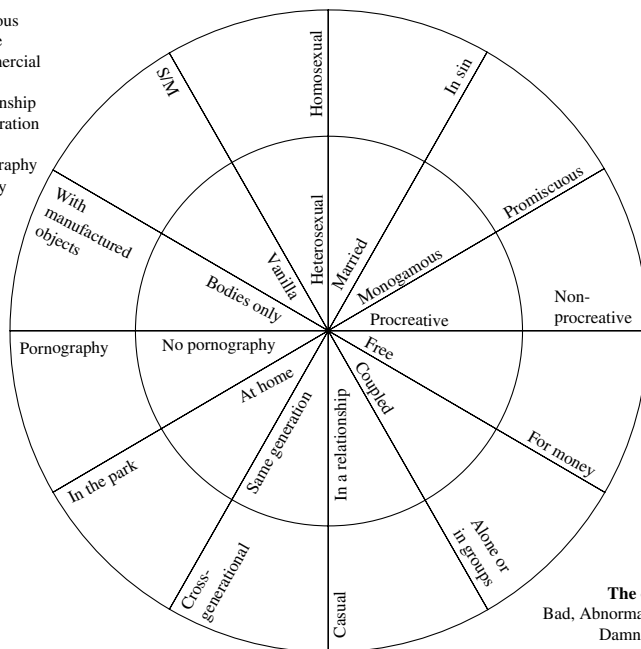
The outer limits:
Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural,
Damned Sexuality

Homosexual
Unmarried
Promiscuous
Non-procreative
Commercial
Alone or in groups
Casual
Cross-generational
In public
Pornography
With manufactured objects
Sadomasochistic

FIGURE 1.3 The charmed circle of sexual behaviors
Source: **Gayle Rubin, 1993, p. 13. Reprinted with permission.**

   People who fight to hold fast existing lines of acceptability often presume what Rubin calls a "domino theory of sexual peril." Rubin writes, "The line appears to stand between sexual order and chaos. It expresses the fear that if anything is permitted to cross this erotic DMZ, the barrier against scary sex will crumble and something unspeakable will skitter across" (p. 161).

What role do media play in enforcing the charmed circle? Brainstorm films and television portrayals of people whose sexuality falls outside of the charmed circle (e.g., fetishists, sadomasochists, prostitutes, or those engaging in cross-generational sex) and consider the following:

1. In what genres do they appear?
2. How are they portrayed?
3. How far outside the charmed circle do their behaviors put them?
4. How do their actions impact them and/or others?
5. Do their portrayals reinforce a domino theory that these behaviors lay at the brink of sexual chaos?

Essentialist and Social Constructionist Perspectives

Even if people share a common vocabulary for the way they talk about issues of sexuality, some of their underlying assumptions may result in them "talking past" each other. One example is whether someone adheres to an essentialist or social constructionist perspective of sexuality. In its popular usage, "essentialism" refers to a person's belief that an individual's sexual orientation is inherent and unchangeable. Gay or lesbian people who adhere to this perspective might express that they "always knew" they were attracted to people of the same sex or use language that reflects "discovering" or "uncovering" their "true sexual identities," which presumes that identity was always a part of them, even if they had not yet recognized it. The very term "sexual orientation" reflects an assumption that people naturally are oriented to be homosexual or heterosexual, and essentialists often look to biology as the root of what they see as predetermined identities.

In comparison to the popular usage of the term "essentialism," its use by sexuality scholars generally refers to broader understandings of sexuality. In its academic usage, essentialism refers to the assumption that sex exists a priori, or prior to, culture. As Gayle Rubin (1999) explains, essentialism is "the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions. Sexual essentialism is embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical" (p. 156). From this perspective, sex is thought about at the level of the individual and is rooted in hormones and bodily desires. As a result, an

essentialist approach to sexuality considers sex to be unchanged over time and across cultures. For example, a woman who has sexual desires for other women in the early 21st Century would make sense of those sexual feelings in the same way as a woman in the early 20th Century, even if the label of "lesbian" did not yet exist to describe those desires and/or behaviors. The same would hold true for people who experience gender dysphoria, or feelings that their biological sex does not align with their psychological feelings of gender. Essentialist assumptions rarely are labeled explicitly as such by people who make them, but these underlying assumptions can be found in the arguments being made. For example, arguments against same-sex marriage that rely on biblical prohibitions against homosexuality often are drawn from the perspective that homosexuality largely is unchanged in more than 3000 years.

By the late 1970s, some scholars began critiquing essentialist views of sexuality and began theorizing sexuality from a social constructionist approach. Social constructionism conceives of identity as being culturally and historically situated. People occupy sexual identities that are available to them in their time and place, and those identities help them to frame and make sense of their experiences. The divide between essentialist and social constructionist perspectives should not be understood to represent a nature versus nurture debate, both of which assume pre-existing categories for people to either be born into or to be socialized into. A social constructionist perspective does not deny that biology and hormones contribute to sexual desire, but takes up questions about the role of culture in our understandings of sexuality. Rubin (1999) writes, "The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity of language are necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms" (p. 157).

We can return to our example of biblical prohibitions against same-sex sexual practices to illustrate how a social constructionist approach might raise questions about how sex and sexual practices have changed in the past 3000 years. A social constructionist might point out that biblical prohibitions against men having sex with other men are situated within a particular historical-cultural moment in which modern-day understandings of homosexuality did not yet even exist. They might contextualize ancient same-sex sexual practices within a rigid gender hierarchy in which women were the property of their fathers or husbands, sex and procreation were understood as being synonymous, ancient science conceived of male semen as containing the full essence of human life (with women's bodies serving as little more than incubators), and man-on-man rape was used as a form of domination. In recognizing how cultural conditions have changed over the past 3000 years, a social constructionist perspective suggests that our modern-day conception of homosexuality does not align with ancient same-sex practices. The next chapter will elaborate on how sexuality began to be conceived of in terms of identities rather than behaviors, but the titles of the following books illustrate

an academic turn to a social constructionist perspective of sexuality: Hannah Blank's (2012) *Straight: The Surprisingly Short History of Heterosexuality*, David Greenberg's (1990) *The Construction of Homosexuality*, Jonathon Ned Katz's (2007) *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (2007), and Stephen Seidman's (2003) *The Social Construction of Sexuality*. Understanding essentialism and social constructionism will help you recognize how these perspectives have informed attention to GLBTQ issues inside and outside of academia, which is discussed below.

From Gay Politics/Theory to Queer Politics/Theory

The development of gay and lesbian studies as a legitimate discipline in colleges and universities has been intertwined with political activism. As a result, academic theory must be contextualized within the historical trajectory of the gay rights movement. As noted in the definitions above, and as will be elaborated upon in the next chapter, the idea of people's sexuality serving as a marker of their identity came into full force in the 1970s. As those with non-normative sexualities began developing communities and fighting against discrimination, they began to recognize themselves as sexual minorities. In the process, they took up an ethnic model of fighting for civil rights, sometimes referred to as identity politics. Drawing on essentialist arguments, gay and lesbian activists fought for the same visibility and rights as their straight counterparts. In short, they fought for gay people's assimilation into American culture. This line of argument has been and remains a key strategy for achieving legal and political gains. For example, in the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court case *Goodridge* v. *Department of Public Health* (2003), the first state court decision to legalize gay marriage, the court found that denying same-sex couples the right to marry denies them equal protection under the law, a right guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. Even those strongly opposed to gay rights recognize the powerful force of identity politics. A publication from the conservative American Family Association's publication *Homosexuality in America: Exposing the Myths* states:

> casting the debate along the lines of *one's identity as being a homosexual* rather than *one's actions as engaging in homosexual activity* . . . makes it . . . more difficult for those who oppose homosexual activities in the public area to argue their case.
>
> <div align="right">(Howe, 1994, p. 3, italics in original)</div>

In academia, research on sexual identity has not been as beholden to essentialist assumptions as in gay rights political activism. During the late 1970s to the early 1980s, as gay and lesbian studies began getting a foothold in higher education, academics

rejected transhistorical understandings of sexuality. Instead, they explored the role of culture and society in framing people's understandings of sexual identities. That is, they embraced a social constructionist model of sexuality. However, they did so while still adhering to a general framework of identity politics (Seidman, 1995). Although identity politics remain at the forefront of political debates about sexual equality, beginning in the mid-1980s academics began questioning the limits of this approach. They feared that the existing strain of identity politics threatened to homogenize other important differences between gay people and continued to alienate those people whose sexualities lay too far outside the bounds of acceptability. Drawing on the work of French post-structuralists, these academics suggested a radical new approach to thinking about sexual inequalities—queer theory.

Queer theory is dedicated to drawing attention to sexuality and gender as social constructions in order to deconstruct the very idea of identity categories and their attendant power relations. French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault's three-volume work *The History of Sexuality* (1978/1990; 1985/1990; 1986/1990) has been foundational to such queer theory projects. In it, he traces the way that medical and religious discourses contribute to the idea that people's sexualities somehow reveal an essential truth about them. A discourse is a set of meanings and practices that circulate around a particular bounded area of social experience, such as sexuality and gender. Discourses produce particular knowledge claims as the "truth" about some part of our world. Foucault (1978/1990) was concerned with the way that discourses crystallized same-sex practices into an essential homosexual identity. Referencing the term commonly used at the time to describe men who engage in anal sex with other men, he aptly states, "the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (p. 43). Foucault also contended that once the category of "homosexual" was constructed, people to whom that label was applied could be identified as deviant and disciplined by the broader society.

As homosexuality became understood as a category around which to organize and give meaning to a set of sexual practices, the category of heterosexual emerged as its binary opposite. Similar to homosexuality, heterosexuality did not exist until the late 1800s, when medical discourses bound together "one historically specific way of organizing the sexes and their pleasures" into a cohesive sexual identity (Katz, 2007, p. 34). The result is today's heterosexual-homosexual identity binary. Binary systems sustain hierarchies of power as one category becomes the universalizing experience, which is defined against the devalued "Other." This is the case for familiar gender and sexuality binaries like male/female; masculine/feminine; heterosexual/homosexual; and cisgender/transgender. Queer theory attempts to destabilize seemingly natural binary identity categories by drawing attention to their artificiality and arbitrariness. For example, queer theorist Judith Butler (1990) focuses on gender categories, suggesting that gender

does not exist outside of people's "performance" of it. That is, there is no such thing as "woman" or "man" without the everyday gender performances that construct them as categories to occupy. In effect, gender is a masquerade given meaning through its enactment. In challenging the naturalness of gender, Butler also disrupts any ostensibly natural associations between sex, gender, and sexuality.

Queer theorists also are concerned with the way that the heterosexual/homosexual binary has shaped broader cultural categories, creating a heteronormative cultural arrangement. Heteronormativity is an important concept in queer theory; it describes the way in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of society. Such a world privileges coupling, sex as a sign of intimate connection, and reproduction. Berlant and Warner (1998) suggest that social belonging necessitates adherence to these heterosexual norms, and heteronormative logics occupy even those areas of society far removed from matters of sex, such as "paying taxes, being disgusted, philandering, bequeathing, celebrating a holiday, investing for the future, teaching, disposing of a corpse, carrying wallet photos, buying economy size, being nepotistic, running for president, divorcing, or owning anything 'His' and 'Hers'" (p. 555). Heterosexuality, thus, serves as a central organizing principle in politics, law, religion, medicine, education, commerce, and, of course, media.

While queer theory developed as a critique of identity politics, many academics who apply queer theory to the study of sexuality still recognize the effectiveness of utilizing an ethnic assimilationist model to achieve social rights for GLBTQ people. However, they also critique the limitations of identity models in which the charmed circle of acceptance grows wider only for those GLBTQ people who still subscribe to hetero/homo, cis/transgender binaries and their heteronormative logics (Rubin, 1999).

Complicating Sexual Identity

As mentioned earlier, another critique of the identity politics model of fighting for equality for GLBTQ people is that it overlooks other aspects of people's identity like race, class, and gender. Once the GLBTQ community became increasingly visible following World War II and began organizing toward the political ends of achieving gay rights, sexuality became their defining identity category. When a group of people become identified by a single aspect of their shared identity, that group's identity becomes homogenized and people are viewed as being the same regardless of other areas of difference. Johnson (2005) addresses this problem in GLBTQ studies:

> [Gloria Anzuldúa] warns that "queer is used as a false umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities and classes are shored under." While acknowledging that "at times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks

against outsiders," Anzuldúa nevertheless urges that "even when we seek shelter under it ['queer'], we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences."

<div align="right">(p. 127)</div>

In people's daily realities, these differences matter. For example, imagine how the experiences of a homeless Latina transgender woman may differ vastly from those of a white transgender male college professor. The latter likely would have more access to financial resources and health care needed for a physical transition (e.g., wardrobe, voice coaching, hormones, or surgery), while the former would be more at risk of being the victim of violence (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2013). Although these two individuals may share similar hopes for transgender legal protections and social acceptance, it would be problematic to believe there are no differences in the way they think about their own identities or in the way others view them.

Another critique of identity politics is that visibility is limited to those members of the GLBTQ community most palatable to the broader culture. This approach is a strategic one; in order to encourage those in power to consent to rights for a minority group, it can be beneficial if they view people who are part of that group as being "like" themselves. In the case of gay rights, this means that middle-class, white gay men generally serve as the cause's "poster children." Bérubé (2011) points to examples of this happening in debates in the early 1990s over whether gays should be allowed to serve in the military. One of the primary organizations working with the White House and some sympathetic members of Congress to craft a "gay response" to the controversy was "The Campaign for Military Service." The group was made up of "well-to-do, well-connected, professional [white] men," whom Bérubé (2011) describes in the following way:

> Wearing the protective coloring of this predominantly white gay world, these professionals entered the similarly white and male but heterosexual world of the U.S. Senate, where their shared whiteness became a common ground on which the battle to lift the military's ban on homosexuals was fought.

<div align="right">(p. 207–208)</div>

Because of the group's membership, the white witnesses they used to testify about their experiences as gay military members, and the "race analogy" arguments they made that treated discrimination based on sexual orientation as similar to race-based discrimination, the stories and experiences of non-white, gay military members, were made invisible to politicians and the broader public. In Chapters 3 and 4, we will relate these concerns about identity politics to the media and consider how GLBTQ media

visibility tends to erase differences and privilege the most palatable images of gayness and, increasingly, transgender identity.

At the same time that identity politics has been critiqued for privileging one identity category over others, academics who study socially marginalized groups similarly have been critiqued for failing to recognize the complexity of identity and its relationship to social oppression. In response, some GLBTQ scholars have turned to women's studies and related fields and the concept of "intersectionality" to better theorize how the various aspects of a person's identity should be understood not as isolated categories, but as influencing each other (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). For example, if you are an able-bodied white man, the experiences you have had as a man cannot be understood outside of the other aspects of your identity, like being white and able-bodied. Similarly, other people interact with you based on the intersections of those identities. The concept of intersectionality goes beyond the individual level, however. It also suggests that social oppression does not operate along individual identity categories. If we apply this perspective to sexual inequalities, then intersectionality requires us to consider heterosexism in the context of other social inequalities like sexism, racism, and classism, which both shape and are shaped by sexual oppression.

Some queer theorists, though, are uncomfortable with the use of the term "intersectionality," because it is theoretically rooted in identity categories, and queer theory emerged as a critique of identity politics. Johnson (2005) suggests a field of "quare studies" as a way to bridge queer studies and black studies in a way that does not privilege or erase sexual or racial identity. Writing from a performance studies background, Johnson (2005) proposes "theories in the flesh" that "emphasize the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classicism affect how we experience and theorize the world" (p. 127). He points to examples of folklore and literature that challenge assumed hierarchies by considering how within oppressed groups, some people still are culturally privileged. For example, straight African-Americans are culturally privileged over gay African-Americans.

Until fairly recently, much of the research on sexual identities and the media has not taken up questions of race, class, and/or gender. GLBTQ media representations have been disproportionately white, male, and upper class. Demonstrating how privilege operates, these unmarked categories largely have gone by without attention. This is changing, though, with scholars drawing attention to these privileged categories. For example, Kohnen (2014) positions GLBTQ representations in American film and television within the context of whiteness. Also, as GLBTQ media representations become more diverse, an increasing number of scholars are taking up questions of race, class, gender, and even age (see, for example, Goltz, 2010). We will raise questions of race and gender throughout this book, but we also recognize these topics deserve more attention than the space of this book allows. Additionally, this book focuses exclusively

on Western media and operates from Western understandings of sexuality. (Text-box 1.4 provides suggestions of documentaries that address sexuality in non-Western contexts.)

FIGURE 1.4 Husband and wife during their traditional wedding ceremony
Source: **Antony Thomas, 2005, *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She*.**

As this chapter discusses, our understandings of gender and sexuality are cultur-ally and historically situated. In Western cultures, our gender-sex system is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition that emphasizes binary thinking (e.g., Adam and Eve) and privileges heterosexual procreation (e.g. "Be fruitful and multiply"). This Western way of thinking about gender and sexuality has informed many areas of social life, including familial arrangements, civil and criminal laws, and even med-ical practices. If you have lived your entire life in Western culture, then you may never have stopped to imagine alternative understandings of gender and sexu-ality. The documentaries below introduce viewers to alternative understandings of sexuality and gender found in different cultures, including non-Western ones.

(Continued)

In addition to thinking about how these films' content demonstrates the cultural specificity of gender and sexuality, also consider who produces and narrates the films. Are films' creators from inside or outside of the culture they describe? Consider how the cultural perspective of the documentary makers may shape the stories that they tell.

Be Like Others: Transsexual in Iran (2008). A look at young Iranians who
undergo sex reassignment surgery.
*City of Border*s (2009). A conversation with the owners and patrons of a Jerusalem gay bar.
God Loves Uganda (2013). An account of how American Evangelicals spread
conservative beliefs, including homophobic views, in Uganda.
The Hijras: India's Third Gender (2002). An introduction to a religious community
of men in India who challenge categories of male and female.
Jerusalem is Proud to Present (2008). An account of the obstacles faced by
members of Jerusalem's LGBT community center as they plan an international
World Pride event.
Ke Kulana He Mahu: Remembering a Sense of Place (2001). An introduction to
the gay scene in Hawaii and a look at how attitudes about sexuality have
shifted over time.
Kuma Hina: A Hawaiian Model for Gender Diversity (2014). The story of a transgender Native Hawaiian teacher as she attempts to encourage love, honor,
and respect for gender diversity.
Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She (2005). An examination of sexual and
gender variance around the globe that includes perspectives from modern
science and people's life experiences.
Paper Dolls (2006). The story of five Filipino transsexuals who emigrated to Israel,
working as healthcare providers for elderly Orthodox Jewish men by day and
performing as drag queens at night.
Two Spirits (2009). The story of a "two-spirit" Navajo youth killed because of his
non-normative gender/sexuality.
World's Worst Place to Be Gay (2011). An investigation into the institutionalized
homophobia found in Uganda.

▶ THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND IDENTITY

Academics concerned with issues of sexual identity oftentimes turn to media to consider the role they play in circulating particular understandings about sexuality. Just as

GLBTQ studies include a range of approaches with varying assumptions and theoretical perspectives, so, too, does media research. Media scholars seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of popular media forms, particularly print (newspapers, magazines), radio, television, film, the Internet, and gaming. Their breadth of research spans contemporary and historical aspects of the media industry, regulation of the media industry, the commercialization of mass media, representations in various media (film, television shows, advertisements, websites, popular music, video games), media technologies, the impact of media on individuals and society, the ways that people make sense of media messages, and more recently the growing role of everyday individuals in creating media content. Media researchers might study the work of individuals in a newsroom or the broader role of the commercially based media system in determining the kinds of content available. They might study a single television program to see how it relates to broader cultural concerns or study a broad range of images to examine broader patterns of representation. When it come to audiences, media researchers might use a laboratory setting to gauge the short-term impact of specific media messages, survey research to gauge longer-term impacts, or use ethnographic methods to study how people use and make sense of the media in their everyday lives. They might consider how particular technologies, such as the television or Internet, impact the relationships between individuals, politics, business, etc. No matter the particular question or method used, most media scholars agree that grasping the cultural and social impacts of media requires a multifaceted approach.

The study of media draws from two primary camps of research, a mass communication tradition and a media studies tradition. Mass communication research emerged with the introduction of new technologies that allowed for mass dissemination of messages (e.g., radio and television) and draws primarily from the social sciences, particularly sociology and psychology. Mass communication theorists initially were concerned with the effects of media at both the individual and societal levels. However, as a subset of media researchers and theorists began drawing more from the fields of political science, literary studies, and anthropology, the label of media studies increasingly was applied to a body of work that concerned itself with increased attention to the cultural implications of media. The development of new media technologies allowing for narrowcasting and two-way communication also have led some researchers to prefer the term "media" over "mass communication" to describe their field of study.

A key area of inquiry for media scholars in both camps is the relationship between media and identity, and how they conceive of the relationship between media and identity likely depends on whether they come from a social scientific mass communication tradition or a cultural studies approach found in media studies. The first way of thinking about media and identity is viewing identity as prior to media, that is to say that identity categories are treated as generally stable, identifiable, and self-evident. This relationship

is explored most commonly within the social scientific approach to the study of media. The second way of conceiving of the relationship between media and identity involves thinking of media as part of the process of constructing identity. Identity is conceived of as less fixed than in the social scientific approach. These are not always two discrete approaches, and slippages between the approaches can occur; however, recognizing some of the underlying assumptions about identity that inform these approaches will better help you understand the research on sexual identities and the media that you will encounter.

The Social Scientific Approach: Identity Prior to Media

The social scientific approach, as mentioned above, often is associated with the field of mass communication and derives primarily from the fields of sociology and psychology. McQuail (2010) describes this approach as

> offer[ing] general statements about the nature, working and effects of mass communication, based on systematic and objective observation of media and other relevant sources, which can in turn be put to the test and validated or rejected by similar methods.
>
> (p. 13)

In striving to be scientific, the field of mass communication operates as part of a broader scientific approach to the study of many forms of communication that presume reality exists outside of our perception of it. The goal of this approach is to strive for objectivity and the production of clear, empirically based data. Scholars and activists using this approach employ a variety of methods and are far more likely to use quantitative forms of analysis and experiment-based studies than are those working within the critical/cultural paradigm. Both academics and activists complete this kind of work, and activists often turn to social scientific approaches for their clear, data-oriented results, which are more easily conveyed to the general public than the work completed in a critical/cultural approach.

   A social scientific approach rarely theorizes the relationship between media and identity, but is informed by an assumption that identity formation happens prior to culture, broadly, and media, specifically. It treats identity categories, such as race, gender, and sexuality, as self-evident, stable categories. While not all people who embrace a social scientific perspective to the study of communication embrace an essentialist view of identity, they nonetheless see the relationship between media and identity as one that can be harmful if distorted and "negative" images of social groups circulate, but one that can be beneficial with the circulation of "positive" images. For example,

Calzo and Ward (2009) surveyed college students to determine whether correlations exist between their media use and their attitudes about homosexuality. Saucier and Caron (2008) conducted a quantitative content analysis of the content and advertisements in gay men's magazines to study their objectification of men's bodies. As in the case of these studies, a social scientific approach considers how media shape social and individual attitudes and perceptions of already existing, identifiable, and understandable social groups. That is, they do not question the identity categories that they study or theorize broader relationships between media and identity as social categories.

In addition to being concerned with the creation of positive and negative representations of social groups, sometimes scholars are interested in questions of accuracy. That is to say that representations of various groups in some way accurately reflect some concrete reality associated with a particular group. Scholars working in this model generally try to measure the media representations of certain groups of people in order to compare them to the "real" characteristics of this group, looking for ways that messages about particular social groups are either accurate or distorted. For example, GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) regularly uses quantitative content analysis to look for patterns in GLBTQ representations. The underlying assumption of a social scientific approach is that media content can shape people's views about a particular social issue or group of people and can impact an individual's psychological state.

This view of media is accompanied by a view of the audience that more often emphasizes the power of media to persuade or impact individuals. An early version of this thesis was the hypodermic needle theory, which held that media had a direct impact on individuals, injecting them with their messages. Today, very few scholars hold this view, and most think of media audiences as fairly active in negotiating meanings. However, scholars working in the social scientific tradition nonetheless hold onto the idea that distorted messages generally have a negative impact on individuals and society, as people come to act in the world based on *false* information. In this view, media have an impact on identity, but only in impacting how people feel about their own and others' identities as either male, female, gay, lesbian, or transgender. Broader issues of identity construction generally are left unasked.

Critical/Cultural Approach: Media Prior to Identity

The critical/cultural approach focuses on somewhat different sets of questions than the social scientific approach. More interpretive than scientific, this approach is marked by attention to the broader contexts within which media operate. While sometimes drawing from the social sciences, this approach also is informed from humanities-based theorizing, including cultural studies, literary theory, semiotics,

linguistics, feminism, psychoanalysis, philosophy, queer theory, and film theory. The methodological approaches are more interpretive, and one is far less likely to use quantitative analysis or work toward scientific objectivity. Drawing on a range of theoretical approaches, critical/cultural scholars explore the connection between media and broader social and cultural power relationships, considering media to be a key agent in contributing to broader systems of meaning. While objectivity is valued in the social scientific approach, the critical/cultural approach is openly political. As Baran and Davis (2012) explain, critical/cultural scholars "start from the assumption that some aspects of the social world are deeply flawed and in need of transformation. Their aim is to gain knowledge of that social world so they can change it" (p. 15). They use textual analysis, ethnography, and theoretical concepts to examine both how people make media within institutions and how they make sense of media messages in their everyday lives.

While social scientists usually see identity as being formed prior to media exposure, independent of it, or somehow distorted by media, critical/cultural scholars are interested in the ways that media construct ideas about subjectivity and sexuality. Rather than seeing media as saying something about a pre-existing group, media is understood as a central site for negotiating the very meanings of identities and for making particular identity categories available in the first place. In this way, media are conceived of as a social institution, similar to families, schools, and religion.

Scholars in the critical/cultural approach work with a model of communication that considers language and practices as flexible and open to interpretation. A key model that has guided this line of inquiry is Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980). Hall's model generally understands media as a key site for the construction and circulation of dominant discourses about identity categories such as race, gender, and sexuality. Hall's approach looks at the process through which meaning is created in our media system. The encoding process includes all of the practices that go into making a mass media text, from the individual activities of a production team to the broader economic structures of the media industry. The process of making a media text is complex, with many different people coming together to produce the second node, the text. Bearing the traces of a number of competing ideas, most media texts exhibit a degree of fluidity in their meaning, what later media scholar John Fiske called polysemy (1986). The word "text" also is important here, because key to the encoding/decoding model is the understanding that meaning making does not occur until the text actually is "read" (watched, listened to, consumed, etc.) by an audience member, the decoder. In the encoding/decoding model, meaning making is understood as a shared process between the encoders and decoders.

Hall's model does not suggest, though, that decoders are free to take *any* meaning from a text. Rather, both encoders and decoders share a similar set of ground rules
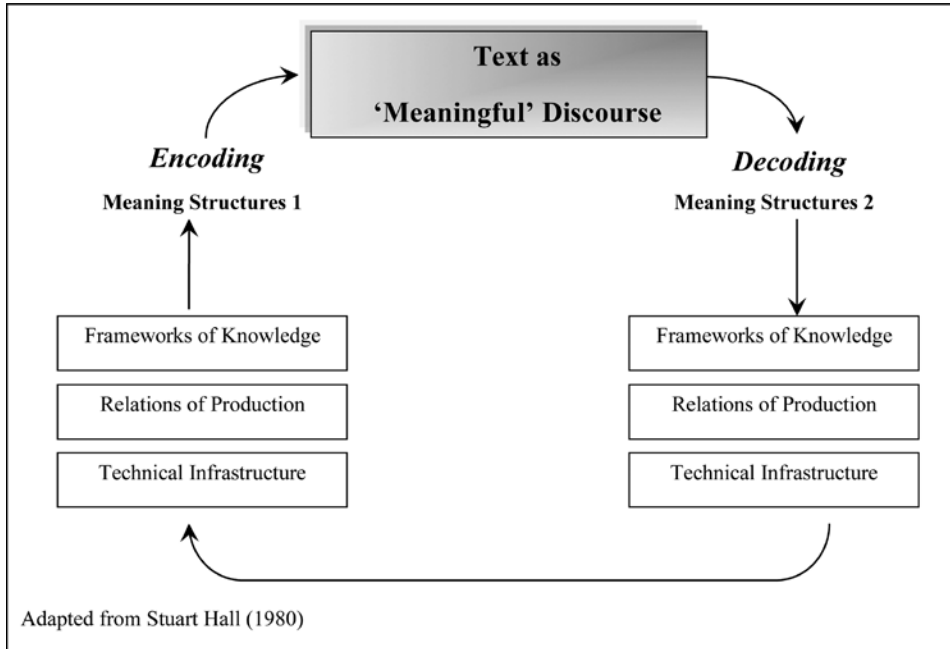
FIGURE 1.5 Encoding decoding
Source: **Adapted from Stuart Hall, 1980, p. 130. Reprinted with permission.**

that are brought together in the "codes" of the text. Codes are signs in a text, ranging from technical aspects, like camera angles, lighting, and sound to cultural signifiers, including clothing props, and dress. Audiences are able to make sense of these codes because they draw on cultural meanings. What is important for many cultural studies scholars is that the activities of audiences in making meaning feed back into the process of cultural creation, as encoders and decoders work together to produce meanings about the world. While those with the power to create media messages have more power, decoders still play a crucial role in the process. For example, Sender's (2003) focus group interviews with straight and gay audiences found a complicated relationship between advertising messages and people's varied interpretations of those messages. The relationship between media and identity in this model differs from the social scientific approach, with media not simply reflecting, accurately or not, some aspect of the real world for viewers, but instead, the media actually circulate meanings about identity categories, which in turn shape how we see ourselves and others. In this view, we do not come with our identities pre-formed, but, rather, we continually negotiate our ideas about others and ourselves in conversation with the media.

Media and Identity in the Digital Age

Our digital age has brought new challenges to thinking about the relationship between media and identity. Both of the approaches described above were developed during the era of mass communication, when television and radio were the central media of daily life. The digitization of media has led to enormous structural changes in the media industry. If both models left room for individuals to actively engage with media, in our digital media environment, the concept of media consumers as *audiences* is beginning to shift. Increasingly, scholars are understanding media consumers as *users*, who do not simply consume media, but also increasingly produce media content that can be cheaply distributed via the Internet and have increasing control over how and when they consume media content. Today, many media scholars, most prominently among them, Henry Jenkins (2012), consider the ways that the interactive nature of new media technologies is changing the relationships between audiences and industries, and even the nature of media texts. One example of media's interactive component is the "It Gets Better" campaign, a series of videos made by celebrities and everyday people, including police officers, military members, and public officials, telling young people who felt isolated and alone that their future as a gay person was a bright one. The videos became instant hits on YouTube, circulated widely through social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, and even pop music megastar Lady Gaga adopted the language of empowerment for her "little monsters" in a widely circulated ad for Google Chrome. "It Gets Better" demonstrates how our current media landscape gives everyday people the chance to intervene in, create, dispute, and take up media in whole new ways in terms of thinking about identity. In addition, the great variety of practices in the digital media environment generally have weakened the methodological divide between scientific and interpretive approaches, so that increasingly scholars use an array of methods to grasp the complexity of new media practices. This increasingly has meant that scholars who see media as part of the process of constructing identity sometimes turn to the use of quantitative and other scientific methods.

As scholars grounded in the tradition of cultural studies, we generally embrace a constructionist perspective in considering the relationship between media and social identity, and see media as a key site for the construction, negotiation, and reinforcement of identity categories. However, it is key to realize that the scholarship produced by those who see identity as existing prior to the media yields equally important insights into the relationship between media and sexual identities. On the one hand, the distinction between these two approaches is often subtle and even irrelevant. Depending on the topic under consideration, scholars and activists working within these two traditions might come to very similar conclusions. On the other hand, sometimes the difference is of great significance, and the vast theoretical differences between these approaches

might create vastly different conclusions about a particular media practice. Whether you are reading ideas in this book as they are informed from a critical/cultural perspective or encountering the wide body of research that draws from the social scientific perspective, we encourage you to think of media as a series of social practices and relationships between texts, audiences/users/consumers, institutions (corporations, production companies, governments), and technologies. The *meaning* of the relationship between sexual identity and media is not fixed in any one of these places, and the relationships between any of these sites are not one-way (though they can be unequal).

▶ CONCLUSION

This chapter has introduced you to a lot of concepts, and you likely have a lot of questions. Key to remember is that we are in a complex historical moment when it comes to GLBTQ political rights, social acceptance, and cultural visibility. We have provided you a beginning point of vocabulary to think and talk about these issues, but language, like the ideas it represents, is unstable and continually in flux. We outlined key perspectives in thinking about sexuality, including an essentialist approach, which treats sexuality as existing prior to culture, making it unchanging and transhistorical, and a social constructionist approach, which points to the role of culture and society in constituting sexual identity categories. In academia, GLBTQ studies have adhered to a social constructionist approach, but as some scholars became increasingly uncomfortable with the identity politics model informing much of the research, they developed queer theory as a way to question the very identity categories being studied. Both approaches have been criticized for homogenizing the GLBTQ community and their experiences, failing to recognize important differences like race, class, and gender. The chapter also introduced you to different ways that media research has conceptualized the relationship between media and identity, with a social scientific approach seeing identities as existing prior to media and studying how media influence the way we think about our own or others' identities and the critical/cultural approach assuming that identities are socially constructed and thus concerned with the role media play in particular identity constructions.

As you read about the relationship between media and sexual identities in the following chapters, there are some key questions to keep in mind, both about the media and about what you read about the media:

1. What central assumptions about sexual identity are made available and/or advanced by/through a particular set of media practices?

2. What role might these media practices play in our understandings of our own and others' sexualities?

3. What theoretical perspectives and central assumptions about media and sexual identities are informing the writings of the academics and popular press writers that you read? (Yes, even scholarship does not get to an essential "truth," but plays a role in the broader process of negotiating the meanings of identity.)

We certainly do not expect you to buy into every argument in this book (or made by your professor or fellow students), but we do encourage you to work in good faith to think about alternative viewpoints. When you finish this book, your opinions may or may not change, but we hope you realize that your way of looking at these issues is only one-way—and you will be making a choice about which view you take on.

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