

# **A Society Not Made By or For Us: The Challenge of Cis-Heteronormativity**



**Book One from  
2SLGBTQ+ Community & Life During a Global Pandemic:  
A Resistance Based Photovoice Collective**

By

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**This digital book is the first in a series of five books.**

This book examines one of the themes in a larger photovoice research project that investigated the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ people with community during the COVID-19 pandemic. As community engaged research, the photographers who submitted images acted as participant researchers, which means that they both submitted images as participants in the study as well as contributed to the thematic analysis of the images as researchers during Community Cafés (small group online meetings).



**(stock image)**

# **Cis-heteronormativity**

Cis-heteronormativity refers to the belief that there are only two sex or gender categories, male/masculine and female/feminine, and only one possible sexual orientation – heterosexual.

Cis-heteronormativity is regarded as natural and the only normal way to be, leaving 2SLGBTQ+ people to be seen as unnatural or abnormal.

Some of the issues that come along with cis-heteronormativity include compulsory heterosexuality and having to come out as 2SLGBTQ+, bias, discrimination, lack of acceptance and lack of safety, and institutional exclusion.

# **Compulsory Heterosexuality and Coming Out**

The naturalization and normalization of heterosexuality and binary genders place 2SLGBTQ+ people in positions of having to “come out” or disclose our sexual orientation or gender identity, not just one time but throughout our entire lives.

Coming out as 2SLGBTQ+ can be difficult because cis-heteronormativity places us as outsiders or deviant, and we fear not being accepted by our family and friends.



Bloom When You're Ready  
Sarah Syrett



(2020)

Under the right conditions, everyone can bloom. This photo beautifully represents the idea that, like the flowers, not all 2SLGBTQ+ people are ready to be open or bloom; some are more colorful, some stand taller, some are open, some are still figuring it out, and others are still tight in the bud waiting for the right time or safe time to open and bloom.

Sarah commented: "I often feel very alone as a queer person in this community, even though I am sure there are many more queer people than just me - many of them may not feel safe enough to come out or may not have even recognized it within themselves or are not yet accepting of it or they're quiet about it, so I don't see them. It's weird because we're all in the same place and yet we may not be visible to each other. It's hard to come out. It can be hard to even acknowledge and accept that you are part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community because it means you're different than the cisgender, heterosexual norm. The fact that we even have to come out is a sign that the system is set up in a way that excludes us from feeling safe and comfortable and confident as we are. That makes it hard to find community."

She would use this image to remind people that "it is an honour to bear witness to someone's coming out and how important the reaction can be to the process. It requires patience, acceptance, timing, and a ton of deep work to get to that point. It could also be used to remind folks that you can come out at any time in your life, just like these flowers will bloom when they're ready."

# Stop Assuming and Listen!



(stock image)

A consequence of cis-heteronormativity is the assumption that everyone is or should be heterosexual and cis-gender. These assumptions made it difficult for some participant researchers to recognize their own identities until later in life.

Sarah said "I think we should stop assuming people are straight unless they say otherwise. Let's just assume nothing and then believe what they tell us." This sentiment was echoed by many of the participant researchers.

# **Bias, Discrimination, Lack of Acceptance and Safety, and Institutional Exclusion**

Cis-heteronormativity exists at all levels of 2SLGBTQ+ life from the bias, discrimination, and lack of acceptance and safety that people experience to the exclusion from institutions such as churches, hospitals, police, workplaces, and even public washrooms. As Sarah commented, it is “painting people who live outside of heteronormativity with a bad brush.”

Our lives are deeply affected by the discriminatory effects of cis-heteronormativity.

# Permission Passage



(Photo by Boobeck, 2020)

This photo represents Boobeck's feelings since she has come out, which include missed opportunities and closed doors because she is not in a heterosexual relationship.

Boobeck used the boarded-up door image to represent missed opportunities, places, and experiences due to closed-minded people. The door is a barrier or boundary for which someone needs permission to enter.

# A Happy Diversion



(Photo by Steven B. Andrews, 2020).

Steven submitted this photo representing a performance he was doing for “Songs for Isolation” on his YouTube channel.

Steven talked about the discrimination he often faced when performing and his desire to be taken seriously as an entertainer while also trying not to take himself too seriously.

During one of the Community Cafés, Steven discussed people not realizing what gay people have been through and always expecting the flamboyant “hey girl” gay stereotype, which Steven said he sometimes makes light of. However, Steven also felt like he’s sometimes made to be a joke, and both Steven and Sarah discussed it being important for people to understand that the shtick is the joke, not the man and not his sexuality.

# Circles of Love



(Photo by Boobeck, 2020).

Boobeck discussed not being accepted by the oldest of her three children when she came out as a lesbian and said it was a struggle for him to accept her. While he is accepting now, "he grew up thinking being gay was a really bad thing and therefore his mother was bad and so was her partner."

Boobeck noted that she never thought coming out as a lesbian was an option for her because "the world is a dangerous and hateful place."

# Loving Hands



(Photo by Boobeck, 2020).

Boobeck also discussed public displays of affection feeling very unsafe for her, which is represented in this photo. She talked about being envious of young 2SLGBTQ+ people feeling safe and able to walk down the street holding hands with their partners.

This is something Boobeck feels that she will never feel safe enough to do because of her career working with children and because of the homophobia and hatred that persists within society.

# On the Outside



(Photo by Sarah Syrett, 2020).

Sarah shared this photo to represent places from which she feels excluded. She sees this church every day, and she says, “from my vantage point, it’s behind a fence and it feels as though I’m being kept out of/away from it, on the outside of this structure physically and systematically.”

Sarah talked about there being many spaces that 2SLGBTQ+ community are excluded from and that these spaces often feel uninviting and are places she does not feel comfortable going, noting: “I am confronted daily with this reality as the church itself feels like an unsafe place and a place I will never feel accepted or included.”

Sarah suggested that if she were to use the photo to empower or educate, she would use it to “remind them of how many things there are in the world that remind 2SLGBTQ+ folks that we are different and don’t belong . . . I think folks would have a deeper understanding of how exclusive society can be.”

# Conclusion

2SLGBTQ+ people face systematic exclusion because society is set up in a way that naturalizes, normalizes and values heterosexuality and binary (man/woman) genders.

The City of Brantford and the County of Brant lack diverse representation on council and are dominated by white men in positions of power, which undoubtedly affects their ability to address social and political issues that are not representative of their own needs and desires and are generally not issues that directly affect them. Those in power are responsible for creating and maintaining the norms that distribute vulnerability for some and security for others in Brantford and the County of Brant.

While experiences of bias, discrimination, as well as systematic and systemic institutional exclusion were specifically noted by participant researchers, they were not understood as individual instances of violence or harm. Rather they were seen as intentional, systematic, and systemic, meaning they are purposeful and operating through all aspects of life from community to institutions like government, police, education, healthcare, and social services.

# **What can be done about cis-heteronormativity?**

Stop assuming and listen. 2SLGBTQ+ people have to “come out” as 2SLGBTQ+ over and over throughout their lives because of assumptions of heterosexuality and binary (man/woman) genders. This happens because cis-heteronormativity is deeply embedded and reinforced in all aspects of life. If we stop assuming, listen, ask people how they identify, and use neutral language until we know how a person identifies, then we are challenging cis-heteronormativity and making our spaces and communities safer and more inclusive of 2SLGBTQ+ people.

The next book in this series will look at the ways in which the photographers who submitted images challenged cis-heteronormativity in their everyday lives.

# Local Community Resources

## The Bridge Brant

- Web: [www.thebridgebrant.com](http://www.thebridgebrant.com)
- Email: [thebridgebrant@gmail.com](mailto:thebridgebrant@gmail.com)

### Social:

- [https://www.facebook.com/  
TheBridgeBrantford](https://www.facebook.com/TheBridgeBrantford)

## WorQshop: Building Safer Spaces

- Web: [www.worqshop.ca](http://www.worqshop.ca)
- Email: [info@worqshop.ca](mailto:info@worqshop.ca)

### Social:

- [https://www.facebook.com/WorQshop  
-Building-Safer-Spaces](https://www.facebook.com/WorQshop-Building-Safer-Spaces)
- [https://www.instagram.com/worqshop  
buildingsaferspaces/](https://www.instagram.com/worqshop-buildingsaferspaces/)

## Brantford, Ontario LGBTQ+ Community Facebook Group:

- [https://www.facebook.com/groups/  
379313486333504](https://www.facebook.com/groups/379313486333504)

## Brantford Pride

- Web: [www.brantfordpride.ca](http://www.brantfordpride.ca)
- Email: [brantfordpride@gmail.com](mailto:brantfordpride@gmail.com)

### Social:

- [www.facebook.com/BtfdPride/](http://www.facebook.com/BtfdPride/)
- [https://www.instagram.com/  
brantfordpride/](https://www.instagram.com/brantfordpride/)

## County of Brant Pride

### Social:

- [https://www.facebook.com/groups/  
816583548754351](https://www.facebook.com/groups/816583548754351)

## Laurier Brantford Queer Sphere

- Email: [queersphere@wlu.ca](mailto:queersphere@wlu.ca)

### Social:

- [https://www.facebook.com/Queer  
Sphere](https://www.facebook.com/QueerSphere)



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