Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Common Worship Daily Prayer,
from St Patrick's Breastplate

PART TWO

Paying attention: what is going on?

The purpose of Part Two is to take a careful look at what is happening in the world around us with regard to identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. We describe, as dispassionately as possible, what is going on in God's world with its mix of goodness and fallenness, of glory and human weakness. In this Part of the book we are not seeking to interpret these observations from the perspective of the Christian faith. That will be the task of Part Three, when we will begin to discern what aspects are signs of God's kingdom drawing nearer, and what aspects seem to be pulling us further away.

Chapter 5 begins by setting out social trends concerning singleness, marriage, friendship and loneliness. It considers the place of sexual activity in relationships, including issues of commodification, freedom and consent. An exploration of how identity is perceived in relation to sexual orientation and gender is followed by a brief timeline of how society has responded to these trends.

The focus of **Chapter 6** is on scientific understandings of sexuality and gender. We begin by exploring the complexity and difficulty of scientific studies of sexuality before offering brief overviews of the science of sexual orientation, gender identity and variations in sexual characteristics. The chapter concludes with scientific findings about well-being, mental health, procreation and sexual orientation change efforts.

In **Chapter 7** we turn to look at the place of religious faith in society. We notice how other religions and other Christian churches have responded to matters of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, before turning to the Church of England and the Anglican Communion. These brief overviews provide a backdrop for the theological engagement that is the focus of Part Three.

A social revolution seems to be taking place. Across British society, we are seeing changes in the patterns of people's relationships, in sexual activity and attitudes, and in understandings of identity.

Relationships are changing. We are seeing changes in the proportion of people who remain single. We are seeing changes in the number and duration of people's sexual relationships. We are seeing changes in patterns of cohabitation, marriage, and divorce. We are seeing changes in when and where people marry, in what they hope for when they do, and in whether children are part of the picture. We have seen legal changes allowing same-sex couples to marry, and we are seeing different types of family appearing. More recently, we have seen how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced how we think about, value and conduct our relationships; although it is too early to tell how deep or permanent that impact will be, it is likely that no part of British social life will be untouched.

Attitudes to sex are changing. We seem to be caught between expanding ideas of sexual freedom and increasing concern about freedom's proper limits. Questions about sexual consent and power are becoming more prominent. Questions about sexual abuse have risen to the top of the agenda. Technology, often a harbinger of change in sexual practice, is raising new questions, such as those about the prevalence of online pornography and its continuing development, as well as the use of AI in various ways.

The ways in which we approach identity are changing. More and more of us are coming to recognize ourselves, or people we know and love, as trans, as lesbian or gay or bisexual, as asexual, as intersex. We are asking new questions about what that means, and about how anybody's identity works, whichever words we might choose to describe ourselves. We are also asking what are the best terms to use (see also the Glossary), and about whether 'identity' is even the right category for thinking about all this.

> For an explanation and discussion of the terms used in this paragraph, see Chapter 5, 'Identity and self-understanding' on pages 88–97 and the Glossary on pages 425–427.

These changes are visible in all our lives, in the stories we tell and hear, in the questions we ask, in the arguments that we fall into. Related discussions fill our news, our online debates, our public forums, and our legislature. There are arguments about the public

acceptance of same-sex marriage, or transgender identity in the very young, or the handling of cases of child sexual abuse, or what sex education in schools should cover, or the effect upon people of ubiquitous online pornography, of the impact of #MeToo – the list is endless.

All of this poses questions to us as a society. Should we focus on encouraging particular kinds of relationship? Or should we be enabling many different kinds of relationship, and many different kinds of family, to flourish? Are we able to be honest about the consequences of our choices? Do we have good ways of talking together about sex, about the good and the harm involved? Or do we need to learn to talk about it a whole lot less? Is identity something that we are given and need to discover, or are we free to define it? How are our identities, our bodies, our sex lives and our relationships connected?

All of this also poses questions to the Church of England as it does to other churches. What challenges do these changes pose to existing teaching and practice? What new possibilities and opportunities do they suggest? How are we to respond? What teaching, what forms of care, what rites, what disciplines, what ways of relating do we need? How do we respond as followers of Jesus? How do we respond as readers of the Bible, as inhabitants of a tradition, as members of a worldwide Church? How do we live and share the gospel – God's good news for the world in Christ – amidst all these changes?

Chapter 3 provided an outline of the Church of England's teaching on marriage and the place of sex within it, setting these in the context of God's gift of life and of the many relationships in which that life can flourish. Chapter 5 surveys some of the social changes that surround us in these areas, highlighting some that seem to pose the most urgent questions. In Chapter 6 we look at recent scientific developments that can contribute to our understanding of all these topics. In Chapter 7 we ask what responses there have been to these topics so far in the Church of England, in other churches, and in other religious communities. In each of these chapters, we do not have the space to provide more than a brief description of recent developments, but you can find more detail in the Living in Love and Faith Online Library (**www.churchofengland.org/LLF**).

The whole of Part Two is only one step in our journey, and these chapters are not themselves meant to offer answers. They aim to

provide preliminary descriptions, and to pose some questions, in order to set the scene for later Parts. In those later Parts we will explore Christian responses to these questions.

Before we begin, however, there are some important caveats to offer. First, British society is diverse, and always has been. It includes people of different religions, ethnicities, cultures, classes and genders. It is constantly being remade by people who bring other inheritances into it, and influenced by all the societies that surround it. It is also shaped by capitalism and its values, by modern technology, by a history of colonialism, by democratic politics, by a globalized market economy – and so on. We don't have enough space here even to name all the many forces that shape the world we live in, let alone argue about which are the most significant.

We have not had the space to tease out how the social changes we describe differ across ethnic groups, social and economic backgrounds, or regions – either in society as a whole, or within the church. There will be many exceptions to all of the trends we describe. There will be many ways in which those trends are tangled up with class structures and other uneven distributions of power. The descriptions we offer are only rough and partial characterizations – a broad brush picture – to serve as a backdrop to our explorations.

Second, none of the changes we discuss in these chapters is completely new. Even if we are living through a revolution, it is one that has been brewing for a long time – and there are all kinds of historical parallels to most of the elements that we now think of as new. The present situation may pose questions with a new urgency, or in new terms, but none of those questions is completely unprecedented. Whatever response the church gives to these questions now, that response will be one more episode in a long history of deliberation and decision. As we will be seeing in later Parts, the church has all sorts of resources to draw on as it responds – even if it also has all sorts of disagreements about the value and best use of those resources.

Third, we have had to choose which topics to cover and what words to use and not one of those decisions is neutral. We are talking about topics that people care about passionately and the words we use are likely to trigger strong emotions. They have the capacity to bless or to harm. They can certainly all be argued about – and those

arguments abound in church and society. We will highlight below some of the main instances where there is dispute about the terms we have chosen to use.

The way we have arranged our material is not neutral, either. Think, for instance, about your own reactions to the opening paragraphs above. They describe complex social changes and suggest that those changes might amount to a social revolution. Did you hear this as a story of progress – however uneven and fragile that progress might be? Did you hear it as a story of decline – of the erosion of important institutions or the forgetting of important truths? Did you hear it as describing something too messy to be thought of as either progress or decline? Did you hear it and think that, in a wider historical view, this is not really a revolution, just the ongoing process of change? All of these perspectives, and more, have fed into the production of this book – and, however much we have tried to smooth them out in the pages below, you will still hear echoes of them.

Finally, all of the questions that we raise throughout this Part are questions posed to us by real people's lives. They are posed by our own lives, the lives of all the people in our churches, the lives of our families, friends and neighbours. None of those people is a problem to be solved, or an issue to be argued about. This book is about *us* – all of us in our society and in the church. It is about our relationships, our identities, our experience in all our conditions of life. It is about the influence that our patterns of living have on others, for good or ill. It is about the questions that all of us pose to one another: questions about how we can live together in love and faith.

CHAPTER 5

Society

We begin by paying attention to what is happening in the society of which we are a part. We describe the kinds of relationships that people form today. This involves looking at singleness, marriage, partnerships, families and friendships. We rely on a variety of statistics to help us see some of the overarching trends and to remind us of the diversity of people's lives and relationships.

We then move on to consider the place of sex in relationships and draw out some trends and issues that affect people's lives. Finally, we turn to questions of identity: what is happening in our society with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity?

Our purpose in this chapter is to observe and notice rather than comment or evaluate. It is also to widen our field of vision from our own lives and those whom we know to society as a whole.

Relationships

A changing picture

The patterns of relationships in our society are changing. It is easy to slip into grand generalizations when discussing this, so before reading on take a moment to think about the people around you. What kinds of story of singleness, of marriage, of living together, of divorce, of remarriage do you see? What shape is taken by the families you know – not in media representations and church reports, but amongst your own family, friends, and colleagues? Behind every statistic there are always real people – and every one of them has a story as complex as the people you know, driven by as many different factors. That complexity can get washed out when we focus on society-wide trends.

The statistics in the infographic on pages 68–69 illustrate some of the trends to which all those individual stories and decisions contribute. More people are living alone. Fewer are marrying, and those who do marry tend to marry later in life. As a result, 'the proportions of men and women in recent years ever married by age 25 are the lowest on record over the last 100 years.'[62] More people cohabit prior to, or instead of, marrying, to the extent that 'marriage without first living together is now as unusual as premarital cohabitation was in the 1970s'.[63] Fewer children are being born to married couples. Divorce is beginning to become less common – not just in absolute terms, which you might expect given the smaller number of marriages, but proportionally: the lifetime risk of divorce for people who marry today is the lowest since 1969. The number of same-sex couples is growing, as is the proportion who have married. More children are being born and nurtured in families headed by couples of the same gender.

English society has never been uniform, but the spectrum of relationships visible in our society (and in all our media) does seem to be broader than ever before. There are wide variations in practice and expectation. No simple explanation covers the changes that have taken place. The story needs to include changes

to marriage law; technological and medical changes affecting birth control and life expectancy; the emancipation of women, which has brought with it educational and professional opportunities and new possibilities of financial and legal independence; the evolution of the welfare state and changes to tax regimes; altered distributions of wealth and changing patterns of employment; shifts in immigration; growing awareness of domestic abuse and the need to escape it; changing patterns of religious commitment; changes to the kinds of behaviour that get stigmatized; changes to the ways in which human fulfilment tends to be imagined; and changes to people's attitudes to a wide variety of institutions. There is no one story to tell – no simple narrative of progress or decline.

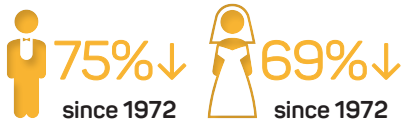
Singleness

Look, for example, at singleness. The word 'single' can be used to describe someone who is not married, someone who is neither married nor cohabiting, or someone who is not currently in a significant romantic or sexual relationship. Up until the late twentieth century, singleness (in the first of these senses) tended to be deprecated in many English contexts. Unmarried people – especially women – have often been seen primarily as people who lack something: they have not managed to find a partner, or they have somehow been prevented from marrying. Unmarried women were often marginalized, stigmatized and pitied. Countless novels, plays and films have reinforced this popular view, captured in pejorative phrases such as 'old maid', 'spinster' and 'on the shelf'. Yet, however invisible they have sometimes been, we know that there have, since the Middle Ages, been large numbers of unmarried people, both women and men, in both rural and urban contexts.

All of the kinds of change listed above have affected the prevalence, the variety and the perception of single people in our society. And singleness today – in any of the senses given above – is far more complex than it first appears. It includes the widowed, the separated, the divorced, and those who have never married. It also includes those who defer marriage until later, waiting until they have obtained occupational and financial security. It can include people living in a variety of family contexts, some who live in other kinds of shared accommodation, and some who live alone. For some, singleness is a choice; for others, it is a result of circumstance; for most, it might be something in between. For some, it may be

– MARRIAGE –

The proportion of people who marry has been decreasing since the 1970s. Marriage rates for opposite-sex couples have fallen to the lowest on record (since 1862) for both men and women.



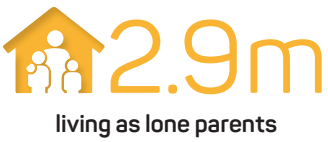
In 2017, there were 21.2 marriages per 1,000 unmarried men and 19.5 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women aged 16 years and over. Since 1972, marriage rates have fallen by three-quarters for men (75%) and by 69% for women.

In 2018 50.5% of the total UK population over 16 were married, a percentage which has been broadly stable for a decade, though is now declining slightly. Roughly 0.5% are same-sex spouses. A further 13.1% are cohabiting. Just over a third (35%) of people over 16 in England and Wales have never been married.

In 2017 the average age of men at first marriage in England and Wales was 38 years and for women it was 35. These figures have been rising steadily since the 1970s.

– SINGLE PEOPLE –

In 2019 there were 8.2 million people living alone, more than half of them aged between 16 and 64. The number has increased by a fifth over the last twenty years.



A further 2.9 million people lived as lone parents with children, which is 14.9% of families in the UK.

– DIVORCE –

More people have experienced divorce. The number of divorces in England and Wales exceeded 50,000 in 1969 and 100,000 in 1972, never falling below that figure until 2018 when there were 90,871 divorces of opposite-sex couples, a decrease of 10.6% compared with 2017 and the lowest number since 1971. Most of this decline is accounted for by the decline in the number of marriages, but the proportion of marriages that end in divorce appears now to be falling too. The Marriage Foundation estimates the lifetime divorce risk for today's newlyweds is 35% – the lowest level since 1969.

– COHABITATION –

25.8%↑

between 2009–2019

The number of cohabiting couples in the UK continues to grow, with an increase of 25.8% between 2009 and 2019.

90% (civil) **80%** (religious)

In 2017, almost 90% of opposite-sex couples were cohabiting when they married in a civil ceremony, as were over 80% of those marrying in a religious ceremony.

– SAME-SEX COUPLES –

40%↑

increase since 2015

More people are living as same-sex couples and more of these are married. In 2019 there were 212,000 same-sex couple families, having increased by 40% since 2015.

19%	28%	53%
married couples	civil partnerships	cohabiting couples

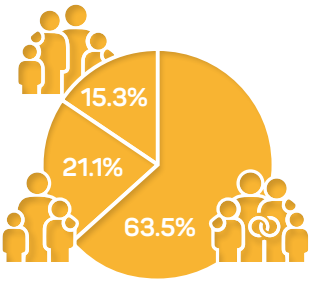
27% of these couples were married, 52% cohabiting and 21% were in civil partnerships. The same figures for 2015 were 19% married, 53% cohabiting and 28% in civil partnerships.

– CHILDREN –

48.4%

children born outside marriage

More children are born outside of marriage. The proportion of children born outside marriage has risen steadily since the 1960s to reach 48.4% (in England and Wales) in 2018, a year which also saw the 'largest percentage decrease in the rate [of live births within marriage] since 1973'.



Children grow up in a range of family structures. The latest (2019) study shows that, for the UK, 'Married or civil partner couples remain the most common family type in 2019. They represent two-thirds of families in the UK' in which dependent children live (63.5%). 21.1% of families are lone parent families and 15.3% are cohabiting couple families.

1.3m

cohabiting couple families in 2018

The study also notes that 'Cohabiting couple families have had the largest statistically significant percentage increase of those families with dependent children at 23.9% in the decade 2008 to 2018, rising to 1.3 million in 2018.'

The statistics above are drawn from the Office of National Statistics, with the exception of the 'Divorce' infographic where information was also sourced from the Marriage Foundation. For full source references see endnote 64 on page 431.

empowering, for others painful; for most it will be as complex as any other kind of status. For some Christians, as we will discuss later, singleness may be part of a calling or vocation which may take different forms, including the joining of a monastic community and the life lived with others that this brings.

The forms of companionship and intimacy possible for married and cohabiting people are not the only forms of companionship and intimacy available. A single life is a life shaped by different possibilities of relationship, not by an absence of relationships. Nevertheless, the church has often mirrored negative cultural attitudes towards singleness, including tacit assumptions that to be single is to lack completeness and to be lonely. Many single people in the church and across society would insist that their single status is not what defines them. It does not dictate their capacity for fulfilment or the contributions that they are capable of making.[65]

Marriage, relationships and fulfilment

There remains a very high level of expectation placed on marriage and other long-term relationships. In May 2019, Radio 4's *Analysis* devoted a programme to *Love Island*. The presenter, Shahidha Bari, talked about the culture of sexual encounter in Britain today. '*Love Island* dramatizes love as a market place,' she said.[66] The programme suggested that, for most participants in this market place, the end to which sexual activity tends is 'self-fulfilment'.

Multiple sexual encounters are seen as a necessary, even sometimes an irksome, means towards that end. People are seeking the holy grail: a person truly worthy of becoming their permanent romantic partner – and they expect to take time to find the right person.[67]

For many, there is an aspiration that, having found the right person, marriage will, sooner or later, follow. The anthropologist Helen Fisher told Bari that modern dating behaviour was in effect a prudent 'extension of the pre-commitment stage of partnerships.' Permanent union is not out of fashion, she explains, but marriage is not now seen as the beginning of a long exploration of commitment. Instead, it is the possible end of a long period of research and experimentation.

Who wants to be married, and how and where?

A large survey undertaken in 2003 tells us that

- monogamous marriage was a current 'relationship ideal' for a little under half the population, though women were keener (48.5% against men's 40.9%);
- a further 21% said they would like a permanent monogamous partner but wished to live independently;
- a further 18% said they would opt for monogamous cohabitation; and
- when asked what their ideal relationship for five years' time would be, two-thirds said they wanted to be 'married with no other partners' (62.5% of men, 69.3% of women), and another fifth chose 'cohabiting with no other partners' (20.4% of men, 18.0% of women).[68]

More recently, in 2017, when the Church of England Life Events team asked 1,000 unmarried 18- to 35-year-olds whether they planned to get married in the future, 72% said yes.[69] The number of people hoping for a permanent monogamous relationship remains high.

Following the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act in 2013, same-sex couples were able to marry from 29 March 2014 onwards; same-sex couples who had been in a civil partnership were able to convert their partnership into a marriage from 10 December 2014. On 31 December 2019, heterosexual couples were granted the same rights to enter civil partnerships and to convert these into a marriage.

- In the nine months of 2014 when same-sex marriage was legal, 4,850 couples were married. In the three weeks at the end of that year when it became possible, a further 2,411 couples converted their civil partnerships into marriages.[70]
- In 2015, 6,493 same-sex couples were married; 9,156 couples converted their civil partnerships into marriages.[71]
- In 2016 (the most recent year for which full statistics have been published), 7,019 same-sex couples were married; 1,663 couples converted their civil partnerships into marriages.[72]

- By 2019 there were 212,000 married same-sex couples in the UK, having increased by 40% since 2015.[73]

The number of weddings taking place in church has dropped.

- In 2017, less than a quarter of all marriages were religious ceremonies, having fallen from less than a half in the late 1970s.[74] The fastest growing choice of venue for civil marriages is in 'approved premises' like hotels and country houses: in 2015, 89% of opposite-sex couple and 88% of same-sex couples married in approved premises.[75] Weddings in holiday settings are increasingly popular.

- The number of weddings taking place in the Church of England has fallen by 27% from 2007 to 2017. In 2018, there were 35,000 Church of England marriages (none of them for same-sex couples) and 2,500 services of prayer and dedication after civil marriages in 2018, down from 38,000 and 3,000 respectively in 2017.[76]

If marriage is indeed now seen as the end rather than the start of commitment, a great deal is being asked of it. It is looked to for romantic permanence, and as the place where the needs of the self may be met by its soulmate. 'It's not that we don't believe in love anymore, but that love means everything', claimed Bari. 'This is why the modern couple fails', agreed the philosopher Pascal Bruckner. 'It is like an overloaded boat that sinks under its own weight.'

This idea of marriage as the end of a search for the true romantic partner goes deep in our culture. It is the basic plot, for instance, of the classic novel – one of the most influential genres in modern history, with a mass of other narrative forms growing from it in film and TV, from sitcoms to romcoms. Yet this idea sets the bar for a successful marriage extremely high, and the result is often a never-ending quest: a pattern of serial monogamy in which each partner in turn fails to match the ideal.

We should be careful not to caricature people's reasons for marrying, however. One recent study indicated that those reasons can include a desire to comply with convention (especially religious and parental expectations); to express and celebrate

publicly an already formed relationship; to confirm commitment to a relationship now understood to be permanent; to set up 'a framework within which a process of deepening commitment would take place', especially as a context for raising children; or for financial reasons or reasons related to immigration.[77]

For many in our society, marriage holds out an attractive promise of security, intimacy, and mutual care, legally protected and culturally valued. Data repeatedly show it to be the most positive context for the flourishing of children, although there is debate about how much of this is due to the parents being married and how much to other factors.[78] It is not surprising to find groups who have in the past been excluded from marriage longing for its benefits, or simply longing to live in a society where they are not automatically excluded from a widely valued ideal.

Marriage, procreation and the well-being of children

The overall birthrate, inside and outside marriage, is falling fast in the UK. In 2018 it was 1.7 per woman, whereas a 'replacement rate' of 2.1/2.2 would be needed for population numbers to be stable. This is a major trend in the Western world, and it gives rise to an ageing population. Women are having fewer children (one per family is now more common) and women tend to be starting child-bearing later in life.

The percentage of live births outside marriage continues to increase: 48.4 per cent of live births were outside marriage in 2018. There is evidence across a number of measures that 'children born to parents who are cohabiting are more likely to see their parents separate than those children born within marriage'.[79]

A question that arises from these statistics is the relationship between marriage and the well-being of children. An in-depth US study (corroborated by a more recent UK study) of the link between marriage and child well-being asserts that 'children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better than children in other family forms across a wide range of outcomes'.[80] There are many possible factors that may account for this seemingly consistent phenomenon, such as family income, parents' physical and mental health, and parenting quality. The study concludes that 'studies of child well-being that attempt to control the indirect effects of these mechanisms typically find that a direct positive association remains

– BIRTH RATE –

1.7↓

live births per woman in England and Wales

In 2018 the number of live births in England and Wales decreased for the third year in a row. The total fertility rate decreased from 1.76 to 1.7 children per woman in 2018; this is lower than all previous years except 1977 and 1999 to 2002. A 'replacement rate' of 2.1/2.2 would be needed for population numbers to be stable.

– RELATIONSHIPS –

80.5

live births per 1,000 married women

In 2018, there were 80.5 live births within marriage per 1,000 married women aged 15 to 44 years, which was a 5.8% decrease compared with 2017. This was the largest percentage decrease in the rate since 1973.

48.4%

live births outside of marriage

Meanwhile 48.4% of live births were outside of marriage in 2018. This continues the long-term increases in the percentage of live births outside of marriage, since the 1960s. Conceptions in England and Wales have also shown a similar trend where most conceptions in 2017 occurred outside marriage or civil partnership.

– AGE GROUPS –

40+

Fertility rates decreased in all age groups except for women aged 40 years and over.

Fertility rates for women aged 40 years and over have generally increased since the late 1970s until 2017. However, in 2018, the fertility rate for this age group remained the same as 2017, at 16.1 births per 1,000 women aged 40 years and over. This ended a four-year period of consecutive increases and was the only age group for which the fertility rate did not decrease in 2018.

<20↓

In contrast, since the turn of the century, there has been a long-term decrease in fertility rates for women aged under 20 years. This trend continued in 2018, when the fertility rate for this age group decreased by 6.3% compared with 2017, to 11.9 births per 1,000 women aged under 20 years.

30-34

Women aged 30 to 34 years have had the highest fertility rate of any age group since 2004. Prior to this, women aged 25 to 29 years generally had the highest fertility rate. This indicates women are delaying childbearing to older ages.

The statistics above are drawn from the Office of National Statistics. For full source references see endnote 81 on page 433.

between child well-being and marriage, strongly suggesting that marriage is more than the sum of these particular parts'. In other words, the author of the paper suggests that there is something about marriage that is able to have a further and particular influence, which is difficult to replicate in other forms of relationship.

These and other studies indicate that relationship stability is a key aspect of child well-being, but that a causal link between marriage and relationship stability cannot be proven. A recent study shows that, although cohabiting couples are more likely to separate than married couples, once cohabiting couples have children, the difference between married and cohabiting couples is significantly reduced.[82] The interaction of mechanisms impacting child well-being both inside and outside of marriage are complex, as are the individual life experiences of the parents themselves.

These studies also suggest that same-sex couples are as good at parenting as different-sex couples. They argue that any differences can be explained by the fact that children being raised by same-sex couples have, on average, experienced more family instability. This may be, for example, because many children being raised by same-sex couples were born to heterosexual parents, one of whom is now in a same-sex relationship. Furthermore, it is suggested that those same-sex couples who raise children are now 'more likely to be raising their children from birth' than they were ten years ago, and therefore such differences of instability may be expected to decrease. Recent findings of longitudinal research – which follows lesbian mothers and their children who were conceived by donor insemination during the 1980s – concludes that '25-year-olds born into planned lesbian families did not differ from reports on emerging adults generally in these predictors of mental health: education; having an intimate relationship; or quality of relationships with intimate partner, friends, and parents. However, offspring affected by associative homophobic stigma had higher rates of behavioral/emotional problems.'[83]

Friendship and loneliness

According to Kate Leaver's study, *The Friendship Cure*, many contemporary Western people regard friendship as more reliable than marriage.[84] While there are overlaps, friendship is often distinguished from couple relationships in a number of ways. First, friendships can be picked up and let go of, and may therefore be

less intense than couple relationships.[85] Friendship represents a commitment to stay in each other's lives by choice more than by obligation: the notion of freedom is inherent in popular understandings of friendship. One of the appeals of friendships over family relationships is the way that they enable people to define and identify themselves in ways that are under *their* control, in what might be called 'families of choice'.[86] Friendships tend to be relationships of equality rather than hierarchy. Because of the voluntary nature of friendships, and the equality at their centre, they also require a different kind of ongoing reciprocity and effort. Some sociologists have argued that friendship is a particularly 'ethical kind of love'.[87]

Secondly, friendships tend not to become institutionalized in the ways that exclusive couple relationships do. Where couples over time tend to subordinate individual goals to those of the unit, friends remain autonomous agents, pursuing their own lives and bringing their distinct life experiences to the relationship in a creative act in which each party is enriched.[88] The absence of formal contracts means that friendship is comparatively 'weak' as a social bond. Yet despite the informal, voluntary and non-institutionalized nature of friendships, they are increasingly perceived to offer alternatives to more traditional social models based on the sexual couple relationship and the raising of children. For those choosing to remain single or not to have children, living arrangements organized around friendships are increasingly common.[89]

Research suggests that human beings can sustain relationships with a maximum of around 150 people, of whom 15 are close friends, 35 are friends and the rest are acquaintances.[90] In contemporary society there are many types of friendship: legacy friends from early life, family friends, college and work friends, neighbourhood friends, casual friends and social media friends. Friendships within and between genders are much more fluid today than in traditional societies.

Friendships and friendship groups alter considerably over time as different stages of life draw people into different environments and spaces, forging new encounters and relationships. For example, a significant shift in friendship patterns happens when people have children. Parents suddenly find themselves in antenatal groups, play groups and at school gates, mixing with a whole new cohort of other parents. The friendships that emerge around child-rearing are often anchored by mothers, who find in other mothers solidarity

and support in the responsibility of caring for and raising children. These friendships are characterized by mutual caregiving – for the children, for each other and for each other's families – and are time-bound and contingent on the life-stage of the children.[91]

According to Leaver, modern female friendships tend to involve more intense sharing than male friendships. Male friendships tend to be about doing things together and being there for each other. Friendships between genders have become more prevalent, as work and social life bring the genders more regularly into contact with each other. However, the nature of such friendships may be challenged by the different social rules for friendships between genders, particularly where both parties are heterosexual, and questions of sexual attraction may arise.

The mixing of friendships with sex – 'friends with benefits' or 'erotic friendships' – seeks to incorporate the benefits of sexual intimacy without elements of romance or commitment. However, some sociologists have argued that friendships which incorporate sexual elements involve hidden power dynamics which work against the equality at the heart of the relationship because it remains the case that there are different social rules that inform male and female intimacy.[92]

A major and new feature of friendship in society today is the phenomenon of online friendships, which can themselves come in a variety of forms, and that interact with offline friendship in complex ways that are not yet well understood. The nature of online encounters – often fleeting and transient – pose challenges to the very ways that 'friendship' has been defined and understood. Online spaces both foster the development of entirely new friendships and help deepen connections within existing friendships through the regular sharing of experiences and feelings. Whilst there can be negative consequences to online expressions of friendship – such as people unfavourably comparing themselves and their lives with the (curated) lives of their friends, or feeling the pressure to present well-liked content – the benefits of technology for friendship are well evidenced. Online friendships can be a very important or even primary route to friendship, not least because the Internet can enable the elderly, widowed, introverted, isolated, disabled and hard of hearing to keep in touch with friends and indeed to find friendships. Further they enable the development and sustenance of relationships across geographical contexts in increasingly mobile

populations. During the COVID-19 pandemic an increasing number of people connected with family and friends in this way. This was particularly significant for some older people who would not have relied on virtual ways of connecting prior to the lockdown.

Friendships can be life-affirming because they imply likeability and worth. They represent emotional investment in each other's lives. They are generally good for health, especially as people get older.[93] One of the effects of the pandemic was, for some, a renewed sense of mutual care manifested in the forging of local, neighbourly relationships.

They can, however, be an arena for problems. Friendships tend to form between people who are like one another, and so tend to reinforce social silos rather than bridging social divides. Like other forms of relationship, friendships can be arenas for social anxiety, for manipulation, and for bullying. They can be sites for the negotiation of prestige: the more 'friends' a person has, especially on social media, the more influence and significance that person is perceived to enjoy.

Alongside changing patterns of friendship, our society has also seen a growth in loneliness, to the extent that many now speak of a 'loneliness epidemic'. The incidence of loneliness was exacerbated, especially among some young people, during the pandemic. Loneliness is not the same as living alone – though the massive growth in solo living is one of the factors in the growth in loneliness. Loneliness is a matter of felt isolation, an experience of lacking rich contact with others – lacking friendship. The causes are multiple: demographic, economic, and cultural, involving everything from lengthening life expectancy to urban planning, and from divorce rates to changing patterns of employment.[94] The consequences are serious: as well as itself being a painful experience, loneliness appears to be bad for our mental and physical health in a wide variety of ways.[95]

Sex

The first section of this chapter was about relationships; this section is about sexual activity: both intercourse and other kinds of sexual interactions and experiences. We have thought carefully about how to do justice to the reality of sex in what we write. There are,

perhaps, other kinds of literature better suited than a book like this to capturing the passion and the pleasure of it, as well as the dangers and disasters. It is important, however, as we start to describe cultural trends and behavioural statistics, not to lose sight completely of what all these words are about.

Facts about sexual behaviour are notoriously difficult to establish securely, since much research relies on people being willing to tell the unvarnished truth about their sexual histories and habits. We have highlighted some research findings in the infographic below, but in general it seems that in recent decades people are having sex with more partners, and starting earlier in life, but that they are not necessarily having more sex. More women are having same-sex sexual experiences. Few people now think that sex before marriage is wrong, but most think that married people should only have sex with their partner.

See Chapter 3 (pages 32–34) for a discussion about marriage and the gift of sex, and Chapter 12 (pages 256-257) for a reflection on the Song of Solomon. For a conversation about sex and relationships see Part Five, Scene 2 (pages 389-396).

Sex and fulfilment

Sexual activity in our society is shaped by some widespread – though not universal – assumptions. One set of assumptions has to do with the benefits of sexual activity. Studies show that sex can contribute to individual happiness and perhaps to other aspects of health.[96]

In the twentieth century, sexual desire became increasingly important to our understanding of how human beings work.[97] The idea developed that, if sexual fulfilment makes you flourish, sexual repression must be inappropriate. The recent rise in those identifying as asexual – that is, as people who do not experience sexual attraction to others – is just one way in which assumptions about the centrality of sex to human existence have been challenged. Nevertheless, the idea that sex is necessary is still widespread, although as we have noted, people are actually having less sex now than in previous decades. Sex is often, perhaps, seen as analogous to food: perhaps marvellous, perhaps boring, occasionally toxic; but always vital for survival – and heterosexual intercourse is, of course, vital for the continued existence of the

The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) covers various different kinds of sexual activity: vaginal, oral, anal, and other genital contact. The survey takes place approximately every 10 years. The latest survey, Natsal-3, took place between September 2010 and August 2012.

– WHO –

11.7 **7.7**

average lifetime sexual partners in 2012

In the 1990s, the average number of opposite-sex sexual partners people report having had over their lifetime went up for both men and women; more recently the increase has continued only for women. The average for men aged between 16 and 44 in 2012 was 11.7, for women 7.7.

7% **16%**

same-sex sexual experiences

Over the same period, the number of men reporting same-sex sexual experiences rose slightly, from 6 to 7%, whereas the number for women rose significantly, from 4 to 16%.

– WHEN –

31% **29%**

first had sex before age 16

The numbers reporting that they first had sex before they were 16 has gone up. Among those aged 16–24 at the time of the 2010–12 survey, those figures had risen to 31% of men and 29% of women.

3↓

average times people had sex over four weeks

On average over the past two decades the median number of times that people aged between 16 and 44 say they have had sex over the past four weeks has decreased from 5 to 3.

– SEX & MARRIAGE –

The idea that sexual intercourse should be reserved for within marriage has not characterized the behaviour of the majority of any cohort born since 1935, and has been growing less prevalent for each successive cohort.

5%

considered pre-marital sex wrong in 2003

84.4% – men –

88.7% – women –

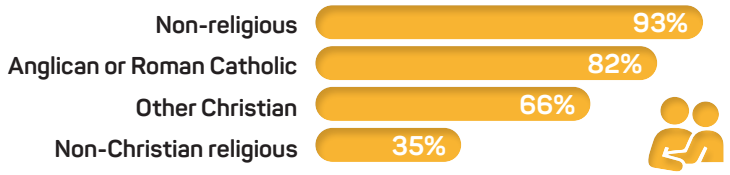
considered extra-marital sex wrong in 2003

Few people surveyed in 2003 considered pre-marital sex to be wrong (5%); but most considered extra-marital sex to be wrong (84.4% of men, 88.7% of women).

A more recent 'British Social Attitudes' survey, with a different methodology, suggested that in 2018:

– SEX & MARRIAGE –

74% of people considered pre-marital sex to be 'not wrong at all'.



The vast majority (93%) of those who identify as non-religious consider premarital sex to be "rarely wrong" or "not wrong at all", falling to 82% among those who identify as Anglican or Roman Catholic, 66% among those who identify as other Christian and 35% of those who are affiliated with non-Christian religious groups.

We do not have statistics on the proportion of sexual activity that is undertaken for the sake of, or with openness to, the birth of children. The statistics on abortion, however, suggest that considerably more sexual activity leads to conception than people expect or want:

– ABORTION –

205,295

abortions in England and Wales in 2018

There were 205,295 abortions for women in England and Wales in 2018. This is the highest number recorded.

17.4↑

per 1,000 women in 2018

The abortion rate – the number of abortions per 1,000 women – rose to 17.4 in 2018 from 16.4 in 2017, but it is down slightly from 17.5 in 2008.

8.1↓ **per 1,000 <18**

9.2↑ **per 1,000 35+**

The abortion rate for women under 18 has been decreasing steadily; at 8.1 per 1,000 it is now less than half the 18.9 rate of 2008. The rate for women aged 35 and over has increased from 6.7 to 9.2 in the same period.

In 2018, 97.7% (196,083) of abortions in England and Wales were performed on the legal ground that 'continuance of pregnancy would involve risk, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated, of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman' rather than on other grounds.

The information above is drawn from the most recent *National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles* and the Department of Health and Social Care *Abortion Statistics*. For full source references see endnote 98 on page 434.

human race. In many contexts, adults are assumed to be sexually active, so that those who are not (whether by calling, choice, chance, imposed constraint or because they identify as asexual) can feel unnervingly invisible. To be implicitly defined, or dismissed, as deviantly abstinent – even if the facts show that it might not be as unusual as all that[99] – is painful and difficult. On the other hand, adults with some kinds of disability are often assumed to be sexually inactive, which can be no less of a stereotype.

Commodification

Sex is an activity between people who are both (or should both be) agents. It is an activity between people who are both subjects as well as objects. Being an 'object' of sexual desire certainly matters. That is, it matters to most people that others can desire them and be aroused by them. But being a subject matters too: people are not simply desired but desiring, not simply arousing but aroused. Sex involves not just the entangling of bodies, but the entangling of subjectivities. That is, in a healthy sexual relationship, each partner needs to have a sense of what the other wants and needs; the feelings, pleasure and excitement of each partner will be dependent on those of the other. We speak of 'objectification' when this is absent – when the subjectivity is all on one side, the objectivity all on the other. In a situation of objectification, the only desire that matters to me in a sexual encounter is *my* desire – and the only question to be asked of the other person is whether they match my desire. The other person becomes a commodity, used for my gratification.

Freedom and consent

Another set of widespread assumptions about sexual activity in our culture has to do with freedom and consent. It is often assumed that people's decisions about sex are their own. People are free, within certain limits, to make decisions about whether and when to have sex, with whom, in what ways – and whether and when to abstain. Accordingly, nobody can demand sexual activity (or sexual abstinence) from someone else – and the need for the consent of the other people involved is the primary limit on anyone's sexual freedom.

The age at which people in England are deemed legally capable of consenting to sexual acts was raised from 12 to 13 in 1875, and to 16 in 1885. Across Europe, the age of consent varies from 14 to 18.

Pornography

Since the rise of the Internet, pornography – generally understood as visual depictions of sexual behaviour intended to arouse the viewer – is nearly all digital. 'Mainstream' porn is usually offered as free-to-use; it is easy to access, despite restrictions about advertising. It is also big business with ongoing investment in developing technologies. In 2018 one of the world's biggest free-to-use digital sites, Pornhub, had 33.5 billion visits worldwide, an increase of 5 billion on the previous year, with daily visits up at almost 100 million per day and a volume of content provided to match demand. The UK is second after the US in the top 20 countries using Pornhub's services. And Pornhub is only one of about ten major porn sites.

Preferences within digital porn sites are navigated through search term categories. Some are unvarying categories provided by the site, others are generated through the analysis of users' search keywords. Search patterns follow the ordinary world of media: cinema, videogames, sports events, and celebrities, as well as terms of sexual preference. 'Lesbian' is the top search term for women and men; 'trans' has risen fast as a search term during 2018.

Although porn sites primarily cater for men, women users are catching up. In 2018 29% of Pornhub's users were women. No data is offered by the sites about usage by under-18s.

'Free' porn makes profits through advertising based on algorithms of user preferences. The free content therefore directs users to more 'specialised' pay-to-use offers based on digital analysis of their usage. As with other algorithmic models, this can mean that the tastes of users are being shaped, directed and sharpened by the commercial imperatives of the business.

There are few checks upon the age or employment conditions for porn actors.[100]

In order to be able to consent, someone also needs the mental capacity to make a choice: they need, in particular, to understand what they are being asked to do. Some people with some mental disorders may therefore not be in a position, legally, to consent.[101]

The idea of the need for consent may seem obvious now, but that has not always been the case and not just in the ancient world. You only need to think of Britain's very deep involvement in the slave trade. Until the nineteenth century, it was possible for all kinds of people to claim absolute rights, including sexual rights, over another person simply by paying a price for them. Nor is that reality now safely confined to history. Modern slavery, where people are confined economically and physically and their bodies and labour used for others' gain, is widespread and difficult to counter, especially with people who are in a country illegally. The UK government estimated in 2018 that there were between 10,000 and 13,000 victims of slavery in the UK, and that the number was increasing. Thousands of those people are suffering sexual exploitation.[102]

Marriage was another context in which, until recently, people did not have the kind of freedom that we are discussing here. Men could not be convicted of marital rape in the UK until 1991, because it was deemed that marrying someone automatically implied consent. Marital rape was only established as an international human rights violation in 1993. In 2018, a YouGov survey of nearly 4,000 people, commissioned by the End Violence Against Women coalition, stated that 'Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of the people we asked thought that in most cases it isn't rape if non-consensual sex occurs within a long-term relationship.'[103]

In recent years, much more attention has been paid in our society to protecting people from unwanted sexual behaviour. Intervention in cases of domestic abuse has become more common. More attention has been paid to the many forms that rape can take, even though public awareness of these developments is patchy. Rates of conviction for rape remain distressingly low, however, in part because of arguments about what constitutes consent, or the perception of consent.[104] The #MeToo movement and similar developments have contributed to increased awareness of many other forms of unwanted sexual behaviour, and of the harm that they do. A narrative of steadily increasing permissiveness is much too simplistic to capture the changes taking place in our culture.

One of the consequences of the #MeToo campaign has been to expose problems with consent when one party is significantly more powerful than the other. Someone might be coerced into having sex in any number of overt ways, but the coercion can also be far

more subtle. Someone might agree to have sex only because of an implied threat, or because they have been subject to psychological pressure. They might agree only because refusing will have other social or professional consequences for them, or even because they are intimidated by the other person's importance or forcefulness. While guidelines on consent, such as those given by the #Consentiseverything project, are very important, and work well in the absence of significant power dynamics, they are not enough.[105]

Domestic abuse

'Domestic violence' is defined as any act or omission that causes psychological, physical, sexual or economic harm, or that restricts a person's freedom and development by means of control or coercion,[106] and that takes place between adults within the context of an intimate relationship, whether dating, cohabiting, married, separated or divorced.[107] It might be an isolated act of physical violence, but it could equally well be an ongoing process of coercion. Violence or the threat of violence is often used by one partner to control the other, and, rather than a series of isolated incidents, forms the shape and substance of the relationship.

One in four women in England and Wales, experience some form of domestic violence in their lifetimes.[108] Although both men and women commit and suffer from domestic violence, the vast majority of victims are women. Women are more likely to suffer from sustained, serious forms of violence. For many women, domestic violence is thus an everyday, persistent, and sometimes deadly experience.

There is no single cause of domestic violence. Instead, a wide range of factors increases the likelihood of violence taking place in a marriage or other intimate relationship.[109] If families are forced to live for extended periods at close quarters, as in the lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the risk of domestic violence increases. If a society is marked by violence and insecurity, the risk increases. If there is poverty, exclusion and inequality in a community, the risk increases. If men and women's cultural identities and social roles are rigidly established, and there is little tolerance of change, the risk increases. And if marriage is so protected that divorce is difficult to access, the risk increases.

A particularly stark statistic relates to the proportion of sexual assaults on men and women. In a survey carried out in 2016-17, 20 per cent of women and 4 per cent of men had experienced some type of sexual assault since the age of 16. This is equivalent to 3.4 million female and 631,000 male victims.[110]

We have highlighted above some changes in attitudes to sex across the twentieth century. Those changes were bound up, in part, with attempts to liberate people from situations in which sexual consent was absent or undermined. They accompanied the development of new forms of analysis – such as feminist critique – which could be used to identify the power dynamics affecting sexual relationships. The same processes, however, often led to sex being valued in its spontaneity, to be enjoyed in the moment, quite possibly with no binding promises made for the future. It has taken a long time to notice that such an approach to sex can itself work to the advantage of the most powerful in society and leaves the less powerful (women, children, the poor, the young, and those whose sexuality has given them no legal redress) vulnerable.

We should not ignore or downplay another horrific reality. As the Interim Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse says:

> **No-one knows, or will ever know, the true scale of child sexual abuse in England and Wales. It will always be hidden from view...**
>
> **According to the 2015–16 Crime Survey for England and Wales, 7 per cent of people aged between 16 and 59 reported that they were sexually abused as a child. Although this survey did not include young children or all forms of sexual abuse, this still equates to over two million victims and survivors in that age bracket across England and Wales, a substantial proportion of the population.**[111]

It is also worth noting the existence of 'peer sexual abuse', in which children are abused by other children. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reports that more and more children are contacting its Childline service to ask for advice after having been coerced by another child into unwanted sexual activity.[112]

The Church of England and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse highlighted the fact that the Church of England's record on protecting people from harm, ensuring sexual safety, and upholding sexual consent, has at times been shockingly poor. There have been similar failures in the church's protection of vulnerable adults, and its responses to domestic abuse. As a result, many do not regard the Church of England as a body that one can look to for good news in the area of sexual relationships.

This book and its accompanying resources were commissioned for the specific purpose of providing the Church of England with teaching and learning resources about human identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage, with a particular focus on the questions raised by LGBTI+ people among us. The process of creating the Living in Love and Faith resources has involved the Church of England in sustained and serious conversations about human sexuality among the bishops, members of General Synod and the Living in Love and Faith groups. Furthermore, the purpose of this book and its accompanying resources is to promote church-wide engagement, undergirded by the Pastoral Principles, that, it is hoped, will lead to a new culture of openness and mutual respect.

Questions surrounding child sexual abuse in the church relate to these overall themes. While acknowledging the reality of abuse in the church, it is important that the specific work of theological reflection on IICSA be carried out separately from the Living in Love and Faith project, and, importantly, together with victims, with great pastoral sensitivity and only after the full published findings of IICSA have been carefully assessed. However, whatever the church's response to the changes that we are describing in this chapter, it is clear that it must be accompanied by ongoing humility, scrutiny and repentance.

There are also other questions to ask about children and consent – some of which relate to topics we will turn to later in this chapter. Who decides what action to take when children identify as trans?[113] Whose responsibility is it when children are sexually active before the age of consent? Who decides how to respond to a child born with what are called 'Variations in Sexual Characteristics' (VSC), commonly known as intersex characteristics? We see children as needing adult protection and adults' help to make decisions about their bodies, and yet the most fleeting look at the history of children's treatment within families and by institutions, including the church, shows how vulnerable this leaves them to adult abuse – and how patchy, painful and difficult is their redress.

In today's online-dominated world whole new dimensions to these concerns have emerged. Protecting the images of children's bodies is a vital aspect of the current safeguarding agenda. Adults, too, need similar protection: images and videos of people can proliferate online and ruin lives.[114] Some of the pressures on freedom are more subtle: people's online choices and preferences, including the choices and preferences of children, are nudged by algorithms processing their mined data, until the question of who has actually made a particular choice becomes extremely problematic.[115]

Identity and self-understanding

Having looked at relationships and sex, we now turn to a set of developments that come under the broad heading of 'identity' or 'self-understanding'. In this context, 'identity' refers to a person's deeply rooted sense of themselves: their habitual, often seemingly automatic, ways of understanding who they are and how they fit into the wider world around them. It refers to deep patterns of feeling, imagination and understanding that colour the whole of someone's experience. Those patterns emerge through the interaction between a person's inheritance and their environment, from the first moment in which their cells start developing in the womb. They are shaped by a person's whole history, by all the people around them, by all the ways in which they have been classified and positioned. They are shaped by all the ways in

which a person has responded to all of that, and all that they have discovered about themselves in the process.

To understand people's identities, one needs to listen to their stories – and that is one of the reasons why this book has stories woven through it. That is not to say that the way people tell their own stories automatically does justice to who they are. People might not have a clear sense of their own capacities and limitations. They might not see the ways in which they are influenced by others, or the impact they have on those around them. They might miss the ways in which they fit into the power structures that shape our world, or the larger stories of which they are a part. To understand people's identities demands critical attentiveness to the stories people tell about themselves, and to all the stories that are woven around them.

Our more abstract discussions of identity are not meant to divert attention from those stories or push them to the sidelines. One could think of them, instead, as a commentary on those stories – not just the stories given explicitly in the book, but the stories of all the people in our church and in our society, whatever their sexual orientation or their gender. Our abstract discussions are a commentary that might help us listen to those stories more closely, ask deeper questions of them, and see more clearly what questions they ask of us.

There can be many different aspects of identity, including class, race, and nationality, but in this section we are going to discuss sexual orientation and gender. Here more than anywhere else in this chapter we recognize that there is no neutral language to use. Even using the term 'identity' as the heading for the chapter is controversial. The word 'identity' can be heard as meaning something like 'the deepest story that can be told about a person' – and so it can tip us into a competitive argument over what the deepest story about a person should be. We recognize that controversy, but have tried to use the word 'identity' more loosely and descriptively. All kinds of factors can be part of a person's 'deeply rooted sense of themselves', to differing degrees and in differing ways. We are not trying, simply by using the heading 'identity', to pre-empt discussion of how much all these different components matter, how they might interact, or what difference they might make.

Many of the other terms that we use in this section are similarly controversial. We have tried to indicate some of the main areas where contention and questions arise for some, while also paying close attention to those of us who find the language we have used an important and liberative way of articulating our experience.

See Chapter 10 (pages 201–211) for a discussion of identity in the Christian narrative.

Sexual orientation

The first area of identity that we want to cover is sexual orientation. A person's orientation is their tendency to feel sexual interest in, or attraction to, people of particular sexes or genders, or to feel such interest or attraction to people regardless of sex or gender. Asexuality, which describes people who are not sexually attracted to anyone, is not a 'sexual orientation' as such, but a reality that is important to bear in mind in these discussions.

Some resist the language of 'orientation', or resist describing it as a matter of 'identity', preferring to keep the focus on patterns of attraction, behaviour, and sexual relationships, without making assumptions about how central these are to a person's identity.

Various terms are commonly used to name different kinds of orientation. To give a list that is certainly not exhaustive: a person might be called

- 'heterosexual' to the extent that they are predominantly attracted to people of the 'opposite' sex;
- 'homosexual' (normally lesbian or gay) to the extent that they are predominantly attracted to people of the same sex as themselves;
- 'bisexual' to the extent that they find themselves attracted to both men and women and possibly other gender categories (and since this is about the experience of attraction, someone might be in a lifelong monogamous sexual relationship and still be bisexual).

As mentioned above, the word 'asexual' is not a sexual orientation, nor is 'gender fluidity', which is discussed in the next section.

In 2020, the Office for National Statistics Annual Population Survey published data on sexual orientation in the UK which had been gathered in 2018. The survey captured the self-perceived orientation of respondents over the age of 16 at the time of the survey and extrapolated the data to give indicative figures for the whole UK population. It found that:

– IDENTITY –

94.6%↓

identified as heterosexual

94.6% of the UK population identify as heterosexual or straight – a decline from 95.3% in 2014.

2.2%↑

identified as LGB

In 2018, 2.2% (approximately 1.2 million people) identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB), an increase from 1.6% in 2014. 1.4% identified as lesbian or gay, and 0.9% as bisexual.

2.5% 2.0%

identified as LGB

Men (2.5%) were more likely to identify as LGB than women (2.0%).

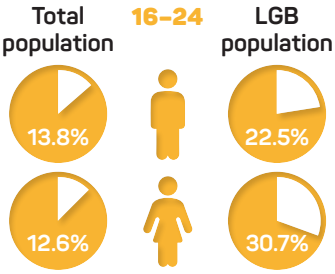
– SINGLE –

68.7%

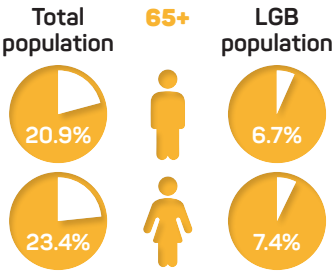
More than two thirds (68.7%) of people who identified as LGB were single (never married or in a civil partnership).

– AGE –

They noted that people in older age groups were less likely to identify as LGB than those in the younger age groups:



Of the total population aged 16 years and over, 13.8% men and 12.6% women were aged between 16 and 24. However, of the total population of people who identified as LGB, 22.5% of men and 30.7% of women were aged between 16 and 24.



Of the total population aged 16 years and over, 20.9% of men and 23.4% of women are aged 65 years and over. However, of the total population of people who identified as LGB, only 6.7% of men and 7.4% of women were aged 65 years and over.

The statistics above are drawn from the Office of National Statistics. For full source references see endnote 116 on page 435.

Sexual orientation from a historical perspective

It is very difficult to line up any of our terminology with the experience of people in the past – or, indeed, with that of other cultures. There is a tendency either to assume people have had the same kinds of feelings over the whole of human history, or to regard some forms of orientation as specific to our times. This is part of a wider approach to past societies, in which we either search the past for possible allies or instead emphasize their difference from 'us'. So, considering relationships in ancient Greece between an older man and a much younger one, some people would see this as homosexuality (although the word 'homosexual' was only created in the late nineteenth century), others as sexual abuse, and – because the older man was also supposed to have a female wife and to have children with her – others would see it as bisexuality. The use of many of these terms – in this example, and in countless others – is contested.

Gender identity

The second aspect of identity that we want to explore is gender. Before going any further, however, it is important to recognize that almost every part of the discussion below is controversial. There is no neutral terminology available. Every way of talking about this material is 'theory-laden': it assumes a particular way of understanding the subject matter. We have therefore had to make choices. We have chosen to use a set of terms and distinctions that are used in many scientific and academic discussions in this area, and that are important to many trans people (that is, people who identify as transgender – see below).[117] They are regarded by many trans people as necessary to do justice to their experience, and as avoiding assumptions that are seen as discriminatory. There are, nevertheless, serious discussions about many of these terms and distinctions. Some in the church, and in wider society, defend them; others dispute the understandings of gender that they appear to assume. We will highlight some of the questions this raises along the way, and return to them later in the book. We don't want the choices we have made in this section to pre-empt those discussions.

Since the 1970s, it has become common to distinguish gender from sex. In this context, 'sex' has to do with biology, and specifically

to the ways in which bodies are sexually differentiated. 'Gender', on the other hand, has to do with culture and experience, and specifically to the ways in which sexual differentiation is responded to and experienced. It can refer to someone's sense of their own identity, or to other people's ways of categorising them.

When we look more closely, all the parts of these initial definitions quickly get more complicated. On the biological side, to talk about 'the ways in which bodies are sexually differentiated' can refer to a number of different things. To give a simplified list, it can refer to:

- a person's chromosomes;
- aspects of their body that develop while they are in the womb, including: genitals, internal reproductive organs, brain structure, balance of hormones;
- the ways in which any of these aspects of their bodies develop through childhood and beyond, especially during puberty.

The relationship between these different aspects of sexual differentiation is sometimes more complicated than people expect – as we will be discussing in the material on intersex in the next chapter.

Gender can be similarly complicated. In recent discussions, the word 'gender' can refer to any of the following:

- The way in which a person is categorized at birth. Parents or medical professionals typically identify where a baby fits within the standard gender categories prevalent in the society around them: 'It's a girl!' It is increasingly common to call this 'gender assigned at birth'.
- The way that someone currently understands themselves: their sense of where, if anywhere, they currently fit within their society's gender categories, or of their lack of fit with those categories. This is often referred to as 'gender identity'.
- The ways in which someone expresses or performs gender, in behaviours and adornments that have gender associations. This is often referred to as 'gender role'.

- A society's expectations for how people will look and behave, and the conscious and unconscious evaluations that will tend to be made of people, based on what is known or believed about those people's gender.

With all of these, there are complex discussions about where the distinctions people use come from. When we categorize babies at birth, when we develop an understanding of our own gender identity or perform gender roles, when we make stereotypical assumptions about people, we are always responding to what we see and know in ways that are shaped by our whole history and all our social interactions, in the way outlined at the start of this section on identity.

The first of the points above illustrates something of the controversy that exists in this area. It has only fairly recently become common to speak about gender being 'assigned at birth'. Some would argue that what happens at birth, except in relation to some intersex individuals, is a straightforward recognition of biological sex. Others insist that what is happening is the assigning of an individual, on the basis of just some of their biological features, to one of the two gender categories that we stereotypically divide our world into.

Gender and sex

The third place where things get complicated is precisely in the distinction between sex and gender – because the two are tangled together. One connection between sex and gender is obvious. The way in which a baby is categorized at birth is typically a response to that baby's visible genitals – though we will see in the next chapter that the picture is not always so straightforward. There are other connections between gender and the body, however. It has been argued, for instance, that someone's sense of their own gender, whether or not it is the one assigned to them at birth, might emerge in part from the way their body has developed. It might, for instance, emerge from the ways their brains and nervous systems have developed. That might have to do with development that took place while they were still in the womb, but it can go beyond that. There are, in other words, complex two-way flows between sex and gender, some aspects of which are not yet well understood. Some now therefore refer to 'gender/sex' as a single complex reality, rather than try to sustain a neat distinction between biology and culture.[118]

History of trans identities

What we understand as trans (in all its different forms) has been understood very differently in different cultural settings and periods of history. Many societies have had ways of categorising gender that don't divide everyone up into 'male' and 'female'. In some societies people who we might today identify as trans have had a special status as shamans or priests. For example, North American tribal cultures often recognized 'Two-Spirit' people – a term which overlaps with what we are calling trans, as well as with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and intersex. In different ways, in different contexts, such people have been treated with reverence and sometimes have a role as leaders of the community.[119] The word 'transsexual' was first used in German in 1923 and in English in 1949, framing as a medical issue the experience of those who don't identify with the gender that they were assigned to at birth.

The word 'transgender' is more recent, and was coined in part to avoid this medical framing. It can be traced back to the 1970s, when it was popularised by an American activist, Virginia Prince. She used it to describe the way in which she lived full-time in a gender role different from the gender to which she had been assigned at birth, but without surgical intervention. Since then, usage of the term has evolved to cover all those who don't identify with their assigned gender.

The adjective 'trans' (or 'transgender') can be used to refer to any individual whose sense of their own gender identity does not match the gender that they were assigned to at birth. The adjective 'cis' (or 'cisgender') can be used to refer to any individual whose sense of their own gender identity does match the gender that they were assigned to at birth. ('Cis' is a Latin prefix, often contrasted with the prefix 'trans'. It has been used, for instance, in geographical contexts: 'cisalpine' meaning 'on this side of the Alps' and 'transalpine' 'on the other side of the Alps'. It was adopted in discussions of gender in the 1990s, simply in order to have words to use for people on both sides of the distinction we are discussing.)

The adjective 'trans' is increasingly used to name a wide range of different kinds of identity. It is perhaps most commonly used for someone who was assigned female at birth but who identifies

as male, or vice versa. It can also be used of someone who was assigned female or male at birth but who does not identify as either. Amongst various other possibilities, someone may identify as 'non-binary' if they don't identify either as fully male or fully female; they may identify as 'gender-fluid' if they experience their gender identity as fluctuating or as context-specific; they may identify as 'agender' if they don't identify at all as either male or female.

Gender identity can change with time. Gender fluidity is a term which is used in different ways. Often it describes non-binary gender identity, or a person's understanding of themselves as gender fluid, having transitioned from one (binary) gender to another. It may also refer to change in gender identity across time, or to the recognition of a multiplicity or continuum of gender categories. Discussions about sex, gender and gender identity are ongoing and there is still much to learn about these matters.[120]

Some people who identify as trans (but not all) experience gender dysphoria. Dysphoria is a deeply rooted discomfort or distress. A person can experience it towards bodily features that are not typically regarded as matching their identified gender ('physical dysphoria'). It can also be experienced towards the ways in which other people respond to and categorize those bodily features ('social dysphoria'). Identifying as trans does not necessarily bring with it these kinds of visceral discomfort, but many trans people do experience them with differing levels of severity. This experience can lead to anxiety, depression, and an increased risk of suicide.[121] ('Gender incongruence' is the term now suggested by the World Health Organization for 'a marked and persistent incongruence between an individual´s experienced gender and the assigned sex', which need not manifest as dysphoria.[122])

Some trans people transition. That is, either temporarily or permanently, they express a different gender identity from the one they have previously expressed. Such transitioning can be social: changing some or all of one's name, the pronouns one uses, one's clothing, make-up, hairstyle, voice, deportment, and social roles. It can be legal: seeking recognition of one's gender identity on legal documents such as passports, as allowed under the 2004 Gender Recognition Act (though relatively few people take advantage of this[123]). It can also be medical: pursuing various different kinds of hormonal or surgical treatments designed to align some aspects of the body more closely with a person's identified gender.

Transitioning is normally understood as a way for someone to do justice to a gender identity that they have been aware of for a long time (perhaps for as long as they can remember), or that they have slowly discovered – though some also experience their gender identity as changing over time.

Transgender: statistics

It is very difficult to know how many trans people there are in the UK. The Government Equalities Office tentatively estimated in 2018 that there are currently between 200,000 and 500,000 trans people in the UK. Recent studies in the United States suggested that trans people make up between 0.5 and 2.7% of the population – with this very wide variation reflecting significant differences in the definition used.[124]

The situation is changing rapidly, however, and these numbers may turn out to be too low. The growth in public awareness of trans people, the prevalence of social media sites and online trans forums, the spread of new vocabularies for naming trans experience, seem to be leading to increased numbers of people identifying as trans.

These increases are reflected in referrals reported by gender clinics in a number of countries. In the UK, referrals of young people to the Gender Identity and Development Service (GIDS), part of the Tavistock-Portman NHS Trust, have been rising steadily, growing from 678 in 2014–15 to 2,590 in 2018–2019. The average age at time of referral has also dropped over the last decade. The treatment of children and young people continues to be a source of significant controversy.[125] In 2018/19, 1,740 of the referrals were for young people assigned female at birth, and 624 for those assigned male at birth, though this may simply be a matter of a correction to an earlier under-diagnosis of people in the former category.

It is important to remember, however, that not all trans people seek this kind of medical treatment, and only some of those who do are referred to clinics like this. The number of referrals is only one indication of the number of people identifying as trans in the population more widely.[126]

Society's response

There have been enormous changes in the way that society has responded to LGBTI+ people over the past half century, and these have been mirrored in numerous changes to law and policy.

1967: Male same-sex acts in certain circumstances were decriminalized, but full legal equality remained a long way off: according to a Guardian article published in 2007, between 1967 and 2003, 30,000 gay and bisexual men were convicted for behaviour that would not have been a crime had their partner been a woman.[127] In the 1970s, in particular, there were still frequent prosecutions for homosexual activity, often following entrapment by the police.[128]

1988: The Conservative Government passed the Local Government Act. Section 28 ruled that local authorities 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality'.

1994: The male homosexual age of consent, which had been set at 21 in 1967, was lowered to 18.

2000: Following the election of a Labour government in 1997, there was an increased liberalization of the laws concerning homosexual activity. The age of consent was reduced again to 16. The bar to LGBT people serving in the armed forces was removed. Until then, military personnel found guilty of same-sex activity could be immediately discharged for gross misconduct. The army, navy and air force subsequently introduced many changes to their procedures, including representation on Pride marches and recruitment advertisements in LGBT magazines.

2003: Section 28 was repealed.

2004: The Civil Partnership Act was passed with overwhelming support in the House of Commons. The first civil partnerships were created in 2005.

2004: In the same year, the Gender Recognition Act passed into law. It enabled, for the first time, trans people to achieve legal recognition of their affirmed gender.[129]

2010: The Equality Act both combined and extended earlier anti-discrimination legislation. It introduced the concept of 'protected characteristics' and made discrimination illegal on the grounds of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, and sexual orientation.[130]

2013: The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 was introduced by the Conservative Government. The Act passed with large majorities in both Houses of Parliament.

2018 A consultation about a Reform of the 2004 Gender Recognition Act was undertaken by the Conservative Government.[131]

2019: The law on civil partnerships was changed to include heterosexual couples.

2019: The Conservative Government's requirements on relationship and sex education in schools – 'we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum'[132] – encountered opposition, mainly on the grounds of religious belief. Guidance on how to respond to 'disruption' over LGBT teaching/relationship education was issued by the government in October 2019.[133]

These legal changes, which overall mean that LGBTI+ people are more able to be open about their identities and relationships, have been accompanied by a growth in the visibility of those minorities, and by rapidly changing social attitudes to them.

The first march for gay equality took place in London's Highbury Fields in November 1970, attended by only 150 people.[134] Two years later, London's first Gay Pride march was attended by between 700 and 2000 people. The controversy over Section 28 led to increased numbers attending Pride marches in protest. In 1983 the march was renamed 'Lesbian and Gay Pride', and in the 1990s it became more of a carnival, with large park gatherings and a fair after the

marches. In 1996 the event was renamed 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Pride'. An estimated 1.5 million joined the London Pride March in 2019.[135]

The Government's LGBT Action Plan, published in 2018, says that

> **The existing evidence base shows that acceptance of same-sex relationships among the general public is at a record high and continues to increase, with 64% of the British public saying same-sex relationships were 'not wrong at all' in 2016, up from 47% in 2012, and 11% in 1987.**[136]

A more recent report suggests a slight decline in acceptance of premarital sex and same-sex sexual relationships.[137]

In recent years there has been a significant growth in public awareness of trans people, helped in part by such celebrities as Caitlyn Jenner, Andreja Pejic, and Laverne Cox. This has prompted some critical reactions. Controversy has surrounded issues such as the access to women's bathroom facilities,[138] or to women's sporting events,[139] by trans women, as well as about treatment of children and young people experiencing gender dysphoria.[140] There have also been debates amongst feminist thinkers.[141] Some focus on the differences between the socialisation and experience of cis women and of trans women before they transition, and on that basis question whether trans women are truly women. Others have argued that women's experience is very diverse, and that the experience of trans women is part of that diversity. Public debate on these matters is often polarised and strongly expressed, especially in social media.

The growth in public awareness of LGBTI+ people has not made life safe for LGBTI+ people. Reported LGBT hate crimes doubled between 2014 and 2018, and reported transphobic crimes more than trebled.[142] Recent data obtained by the BBC indicates that the number of reported hate crimes against trans people recorded by police in England, Scotland and Wales has risen by 81 per cent from 1,073 crimes in 2016/17 to 1,944 in 2018/19. Reported crimes are likely to be only a fraction of all incidents, however, and it is unclear what proportion of these increases reflects greater awareness and higher rates of reporting, and what proportion reflects an increase in the number of incidents themselves.

Drawing on a YouGov poll of more than 5,000 LGBTI+ people in Britain, the charity Stonewall estimated in 2017 that 'Two in five trans people have experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity in the last 12 months.'[143] In the same year, the Government Equalities Office received over 108,000 responses to a survey of LGBTI+ people:

- More than 70 per cent of those surveyed said they had 'avoided being open about their sexual orientation for fear of a negative reaction from others'

- 68 per cent said that they had avoided holding hands with a partner in public for fear of a negative response from others.

- Two out of every five reported that they had experienced an incident such as physical violence or verbal harassment in the last twelve months – the vast majority of which were left unreported, because the respondents believed that such things 'happen all the time'.[144]

Although LGBTI+ people are now free from fear of prosecution, there is a long way to go before they are free of fear from harassment.

All the discussion above of statistics, medical interventions, and cultural trends can obscure the fact that we are always talking about *people*. We are talking about real individuals, each with their own rich and varied history of experience. We are often talking about people who have had to endure high levels of bullying and exclusion, in society and in the church. And we are talking about people who have too often been treated – including by the church – as problems to be resolved or issues to be debated.