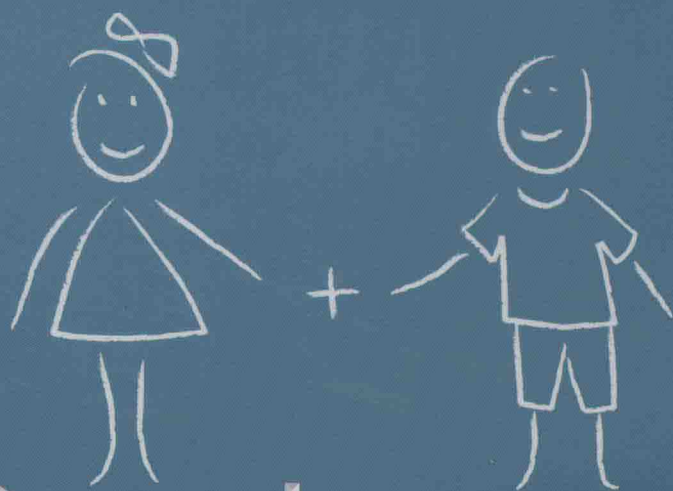


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Gender Relations in Canada

Intersectionality and Beyond

Janet Siltanen & Andrea Doucet

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*JS—To Margaret (Peggy) and Margrit
for helping me to get here, and to David and Calum
who make being here worthwhile.*

*AD—To three women who've made
all the difference: Norma Doucet, Carol Gilligan,
and in memory of Suzanne Mackenzie.*

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Contents

Dedication	vi
Acknowledgements	vii

Chapter 1	Sociology and the Analysis of Gender Relations	1
	Chapter objectives	1
	Introduction	1
	Part 1: The first sociological shift—Accepting that gender matters	4
	Part 2: The second sociological shift—Interrogating gender	15
	Conclusion: Sociology and the analysis of gender relations	31
	Research questions	32
	Discussion questions	32
	Further reading	32
Chapter 2	The Multiple Genders of Childhood	34
	Chapter objectives	34
	From there to here: How gendered is contemporary childhood?	34
	Girlhood and boyhood in a post-modern world	37
	Sex/gender and male/female: Moving beyond dichotomies and essentialism	51
	Multiple femininities and masculinities	60
	Conclusion	62
	Research questions	62
	Discussion questions	63
	Further reading	63
	Films	63
	Websites	63
Chapter 3	Gender Intensification: Adolescence and the Transition to Adulthood	65
	Chapter objectives	65
	Introduction	65
	Entering the social world of adolescence	66
	Transitioning to material independence	75
	Becoming oneself	80
	Conclusion	92
	Research questions	93
	Discussion questions	93

Further reading	93
Films	94
Websites	94
Chapter 4 Diverse Paths: Gender, Work, and Family	95
Chapter objectives	95
Introduction	95
Paid work	97
Women and men and unpaid work	106
Defining and understanding unpaid work	109
Gender differences in housework and child care	115
Why do differences matter?	126
Conclusion	128
Research questions	131
Discussion questions	132
Further reading	132
Films	133
Websites	133
Chapter 5 Making Change: Gender, Careers, and Citizenship (by Mary Ellen Donnan)	134
Chapter objectives	134
Introduction	134
Caring as a gender order	136
Social construction of gendered employment	139
Gender consequences of globalization	152
Improving on career inequalities and imagining inclusive solutions	157
Conclusion	168
Research questions	169
Discussion questions	170
Further reading	170
Films	171
Websites	171
Chapter 6 Analyzing the Complexity of Gender: Intersectionality and Beyond	172
Chapter objectives	172
Introduction	172
Theorizing complexity: From additive models to intersectionality	176
Developing an intersectional approach: Questions and challenges	178
Intersectional approaches and gender-based analysis in Canada	186
Gender relations and issues in the production of new sociological knowledge	190

Conclusion: Moving understandings of diverse gender relations forward	198
Research questions	200
Discussion questions	200
Further reading	200
Notes	202
Glossary	205
Bibliography	208
Index	234

Sociology and the Analysis of Gender Relations

Chapter Objectives

1. To illustrate how the sociology of gender relations is grounded in everyday life problems and issues.
2. To demonstrate connections between agency and structure in experiences of masculinities and femininities and to encourage you to think about how these connections work in your own life.
3. To lay out two key conceptual shifts in the development of sociological thinking on gender relations. The first shift involves mainstream sociology accepting that gender matters, and the second shift involves identifying the interrogation of gender as a central sociological task.

INTRODUCTION

Fill in a school registration form, apply for a bank account, renew your driver's licence, send in your tax return, and the one question about yourself that you will always be asked is: are you male or female? Most of us are pretty clear about what answer we should give to this question. But are we clear about why the question is being asked at all? Why is it that in our society, one of the first things we notice about a person—say, a newborn baby, the latest Canadian Idol, a hockey player, or the governor general—is whether that person is male or female?

On the surface, the question may seem commonplace and mundane. But it can also be disturbing and dangerous. This sense of danger is powerfully portrayed in the movie *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) which, along with a 1998 documentary film (*Brandon Teena: A Story*), is based on the true life story of Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old male living in a small town. Brandon hangs out with the local guys, drinks heavily, gets into trouble with the law, and dates several women who come to love him as one of the most sensitive and considerate young men they have ever met. The story turns, however, from one of simple small-town life to a series of violent scenes when it is

accidentally revealed that Brandon's physiology is out of sync with his public gender identity. Brandon Teena is in fact Teena Brandon, and this discovery by others tears his life apart as he suffers betrayal, humiliation, rape, and ultimately murder. Issues of how gender matters to others are painfully portrayed in the film when Brandon, turned over to the police, faces a large, surly male officer who repeatedly interrogates Brandon with a pointed question: 'Well, what are you—a girl or a boy?' The fact that Brandon has no clear answer to this question sends the police officer into a rage, thus subtly illuminating how this simple question has enormous social, political, and psychological dimensions. This scene, in which actress Hilary Swank (who earned an Academy Award for the role) delivers an emotionally heart-wrenching performance, reveals the tortuous consequences that can be faced by those who do not have a straightforward gender identity, and why gender matters profoundly in social life.

The police officer in *Boys Don't Cry* is actually an excellent metaphor for how society more widely regards being a man or a woman as a basic, obvious, and taken-for-granted biological fact—end of story. When these assumptions are troubled or turned upside down, many people may find the resulting sense of turmoil difficult. This is certainly not the case for sociologists. Attuned to the limitations of setting up binary positions (man/woman, white/black, gay/straight) and open to the richness of diversity and complexity, sociologists have a different view. We regard maleness and femaleness, masculinities and femininities, as highly complex and rather indeterminate social accomplishments—and an apparently never-ending story.

In this book, we look in detail at sociologists' views about gendered identities and the complex relationships between them. We shall explore the many ways that the cities you live in, the families who raise you, the television shows you watch, the schools you attend, the computer games you play, and the friends you have shape your sense of who you are and what you are capable of as a girl, a boy, a woman, or a man. We shall also look at how both individuals and groups challenge and attempt to change ideas about what is appropriate male and female behaviour. We live our lives in particular historical and social contexts, and these contexts of laws, rules, conventions, and expectations set out life paths that many follow. While there are well-trodden paths, our lives are not predetermined. The choices we make, our determination to address the injustices we see, the ways we use opportunities that come our way, and the passions we have, can direct us down paths of life that forge new ground and establish new ways of being male and female.

Much of the history of Canada in the twentieth century, as elsewhere, has been about experimenting with and testing new paths of male and female experience. Sociology has been deeply involved in this interrogation of the old and experimentation with the new. It has made important contributions to understanding the need for, and the consequences of, change in our ideas about men and women and the relationships between them. In fact, sociologists were among the first to insist that *it is possible* for change to occur in how people understand and live being a man or a woman. They were also among the first to use the term 'gender' to refer to those socially produced differences between women and men that are open to debate, intervention, and change.

This book is organized to take you through some of the most significant contemporary sociological work on gender relations in Canada. We shall also draw on theoretical and research contributions in some international literature. We expect that you already have a basic familiarity with sociological ideas and concepts as well as some exposure to the sociology of gender relations. Our aim is to build on your foundational understanding by introducing you to the latest ideas and developments in the field.

Throughout this book, we feature areas of research and debate that are of current interest to sociologists. Moreover, since sociologists often respond to what is happening in their society, you will find that the issues we discuss are also featured in newspapers and magazines and debated on talk shows. In sum, we want to introduce you to the sociology of gender relations as an ongoing project of research addressing questions and experiences that people are grappling with today. As in sociology, our own ideas about gender have changed considerably over the years, and they continue to be challenged and explored.

To help make sense of this new and important material on gender relations in Canada, we have organized the book into chapters that follow the flow of an individual's life. We start with childhood and move on to adolescence and the transition to adulthood. We then focus on different aspects of adult life, beginning with the interrelationships between earning and caring and then examining how gender relations affect the way adult men and women engage in public life as citizens, as employees, and as individuals and groups who want social change. We do not take you any further along the life course than this, although significant work is being done in Canadian sociology on the gendered processes of aging and later life. However, we hope that by focusing on stages of life that you are more familiar with—through your own and your parents' experiences—you will be able to think about this sociological material in terms of your own life. That, after all, is the area in which many sociologists hope to make a difference—in the way individuals experience daily life.

This chapter introduces two conceptual shifts in the work on gender in sociology in Canada and elsewhere. The first shift occurred throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. It involved accepting that gender mattered and had profound implications for sociological theory and research. We review four insights that form the main contours of this conceptual shift in part 1 of the chapter. This review will help you to appreciate the radical impact that work on gender has had on the discipline of sociology. It will also help you to understand what is new in the second conceptual shift.

In part 2, we introduce you to the revision and development of these four insights during the second shift in sociological theory and research on gender relations. This shift began in the 1980s, took hold in the 1990s, and is currently ongoing. It brought changes to thinking about gender itself, as well as changes to sociology more generally. The shift involved a move to interrogate the conceptualization of gender more closely and to treat gender in a more relational, contextual, specified, and contingent manner. This reconfiguration of how we think about and do research on gender has, to some extent, led the way in moving sociology towards the development of post-positivist research practices. In reviewing the main elements of recent theoretical and

methodological developments, we bring you to the edge of where thinking is today on the conceptualization of gender.

We also use the four main insights of the second shift to ground the presentation of life course events and issues in subsequent chapters. In each of these chapters, we highlight and further elaborate aspects of the main insights of the second shift. Throughout the text, we also highlight how our own thinking and research around gender relations has been intertwined with these conceptual shifts. In this regard, we locate ourselves in the sociology of gender to highlight the issues—political, professional, and personal—that have been important to us over the years.

As educators, we believe that you will learn more deeply and more meaningfully if you can relate the material in this book to your own life. We hope to help you in this process by including short reflective pieces written by us and a number of students currently in or recently graduated from the sociology graduate programs at Carleton University. These reflective inserts are in all of the chapters. They show you how we, a diverse collection of women and men, think about gender in our own lives and in our academic research—and how we often find strong linkages between the two. We invite you to contemplate the meaning and relevance of the material in the book generally, but in the inserts especially, for how you are living your own life. You will understand the significance of gender relations and how they are articulated in multiple ways, in both social structure and agency, if you can begin to see and engage with gendered patterns and connections in the social world around you. We are convinced that the question posed by Nancy K. Miller, an American professor of English literature, is an important one: ‘How is the narrative that unfolds in the book describing a story that is “like me,” or “not like me”?’ (Miller 1997). By sharing our own experiences with you, we want to demonstrate to you how the sociology of gender relations came to matter in our lives and how it came to occupy such a central place in our sociological work. In showing you how the narrative in this book is ‘like us’, we hope that you will be able to make similar though unique connections that link this sociological narrative on gender relations with your own personal life.

PART 1: THE FIRST SOCIOLOGICAL SHIFT— ACCEPTING THAT GENDER MATTERS

If we date the women’s movement in Canada from the late 1960s, it becomes possible to speak about ‘before’ and ‘after’ on virtually every topic that has been raised by feminists. This does not mean that everything changed in the way that the participants and supporters of the movement intended. But there was a sea change . . . (Hamilton 1996, 42)

Whenever we teach gender studies within sociology or in women’s studies, we detect a sense among many of our undergraduate students that the battle for gender equality happened quickly and easily and that the issue is now passé. It takes some work to convince them that at one time in Canadian society, women as persons, as well as issues of importance to women, were largely invisible, absent, or devalued. Students

do not realize that tremendous changes occurred during the twentieth century and, perhaps most significantly, since the 1960s. As the quote above indicates, the impact of the women's movement and feminist thinking on sociological knowledge and the everyday practices of gender relations resembled a massive 'sea change'. The 'before' and 'after' topics that have been raised by feminists make up a long list, including fashion, health research, body care, music, media, sport, sexuality, housework, child care, employment, violence, war, politics, education, sex work, domestic architecture, dating, food, smoking, pornography (. . . we could go on!).

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, feminist sociologists and other scholars interested in gender continually pushed at the boundaries and foundations of sociological knowledge, looking for ideas that could be used to study the social organization and experiences of masculinity and femininity. Four insights had the most profound impact on shifting and shaping the sociological understanding of gender during that period. They are:

1. Gender is a vantage point of critique.
2. Gender is a social construction.
3. Gender is realized in social roles and institutions.
4. Gender is a relation of power and inequality.

Insight 1: Gender is a vantage point of critique

The history of sociology in Canada, as in many other countries, is a history of contestation about gender. While the analysis of women's circumstances and gender inequalities is now fairly well accepted as an important part of the discipline today, it was not so long ago that sociology was a male-centred discipline, undertaken overwhelmingly by men and focused on areas of social life where men were dominant and women absent or invisible. The impact of this world on female sociologists was twofold. First, they had to confront the fact that the daily lives of most women were not represented in the discipline. Marylee Stephenson justified her 1973 collection of articles on *Women in Canada* by stating that both were underdeveloped areas of academic work. She said (1973, xiv), 'We don't know yet what it is to be a Canadian for many of the same reasons we don't know what it is to be a woman. Canada . . . like women, has traditionally been defined by others.' Canadian sociology was not alone in thinking the world was a masculine world. Ann Oakley, one of the (grand)mothers of British feminist sociology, observed that women were simply a 'side issue' within sociology: 'The male orientation may so colour the organization of sociology as a discipline that the invisibility of women is a structured male view, rather than a superficial flaw. The male focus . . . reduces women to a side issue from the start' (Oakley 1974b, 4). In the United States too, similar frustrations with the absence of women's experiences in sociological theory and research were being expressed. Reflecting on this time, Joan Acker comments about an area in which she taught and researched: 'I had been teaching courses on class and stratification and on organizations; these were the areas in which I began to see inconsistencies, contradictions, and absences of women. How, then, could these theories pretend to conceptualize society-wide economic and status structuring?' (Acker 1997, 34).

The second impact, closely related to the first, was that women found being in the discipline an alienating experience. Whether as students or professors, women found themselves immersed in very male academic environments. Feminist sociologists realized that the debates and struggles they were studying in the daily lives of other women were reflected in their own marginalized experiences within sociology departments and within the Canadian professional association. Women were a small minority within the sociology profession. In the early years of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association (founded in 1965), women comprised about 10 per cent of the membership. In the association's first 15 years, only one woman (Gillian Sankoff) had been elected as president, the highest executive office, and only one female sociologist (Aileen Ross) had been entrusted with the important job of coordinating the annual conference (Eichler 1992, 75–6). Eventually, women's participation and representation would pick up, but in those early days, it was not unusual for a woman to be either alone or among only one or two other women in her sociology department.

Dorothy Smith was among those who wrote about the disjuncture women sociologists experienced between wanting to engage with women's everyday lives, including their own, and having no conceptual basis or institutional support within sociology with which to do so. Smith's book, *The Everyday World As Problematic* (1987), grew out of this sense of marginalization and disconnection. It is one of the best sources for learning about the ways by which women were made invisible in the discipline of sociology and ways that women-centred domains (housework, child care, informal work, community work) were absent from sociological knowledge. The subtitles in her first chapter alone are highly revealing: 'A Peculiar Eclipsing: Women's Exclusion from Man's Culture'; 'Text, Talk and Power: Women's Exclusion'; 'Men's Standpoint Is Represented As Universal'; and 'The Brutal History of Women's Silencing'.

Smith identified this disconnection as one of *bifurcated consciousness*, a concept that captures how women in academia were compelled to learn and to think in ways that erased what they knew from their everyday experiences, with no vocabulary or language to capture the texture and nuances of women's lives. Yet from this place with no language or words to speak, feminist academics like Smith, Oakley, Eichler, Acker, Stephenson—and many others—began to 'talk back' to sociology (DeVault 1996). In challenging the discipline, they also offered the possibility of something exciting and new. They were not just tinkering with the edges of sociological knowledge. They were asking questions and assessing answers that were fundamental to the core of the discipline. Smith captured this sense of possibility and importance when she wrote: 'Thinking more boldly . . . might bring us to ask first how a sociology might look if it began from the view of women's traditional place in it and what happens to a sociology that attempts to deal seriously with that. Following this line of thought, I have found, has consequences larger than they seem at first' (1974, 7).

A sociology that 'began from the view of women's traditional place in it', and with 'consequences larger' than anticipated, was evolving into a sociology in which gender was a *critical vantage point* from which to view the development of the discipline itself. Yet there would be many challenges ahead for feminist scholars as they

began to attempt to make women visible within sociology and to think about how to transform sociology with perspectives drawn from women's lives.

One of the greatest challenges at the time was attempting to fit women into already developed theoretical concepts and arguments. British sociologist Hilary Graham captured this dilemma eloquently when she observed that women's experiences were being researched with surveys designed for men's lives and asked, 'Do her answers fit his questions?' (Graham 1983). Also in Britain, sociologist Rosalind Edwards commented some years later that the oft-repeated attempts to fit women's lives into male theories were much like trying to 'fit a round peg into a square hole' (Edwards 1990).

A good example of the round peg/square hole phenomenon was, as Acker's comments earlier suggest, the awkward fit between women and existing analyses of social class. Social class classifications were constructed largely on the basis of male occupational groupings and hierarchies. Further, if class was analyzed at the level of households, it was the man's occupation (as head of the household) that was taken to be the determinant of the household's class position. Thus, women's own occupational experiences were marginalized in social class classifications and ignored altogether in studies of class structure based on households. Because housework was not part of the paid economy, it was difficult to know how this form of work fit into hierarchies of social class. Several attempts were made to try to connect housework with class schema, but the need to do so was more an illustration of the problem of women's exclusion than a longer-term solution to it.¹ While claiming to be *general* theories, these sociological approaches were in fact *gendered* theories in that they systematically foregrounded men's experience. It is not surprising, then, that many aspects of society that interested students of gender were simply not being captured by conventional sociological analysis. At the time, these aspects included issues of sexuality, the medical domination of women's reproductive health, their experiences of violence, and the silencing of women's creative and political voices.

Arguments in the first sociological shift challenged what counted as important sociological phenomena and the adequacy of existing sociological concepts to explain gender patterns. As identified by Heather Jon Maroney and Meg Luxton (1987, 9, 11), there was a need to move 'beyond the stage of "adding women on" to make a genuine attempt to theorize gender'. Thus, a key challenge for sociology was *how* to include women's experiences within the discipline and *how* gender could be theorized and researched.

Insight 2: Gender is a social construction

Sociologists have had a lot to say about the role gender relations play in organizing the daily lives and fundamental social structures of society. How they have thought about gender, however, has gone through some transformations. Traditional sociological analyses in the 1950s and 1960s presented being male or female as an 'ascriptive' characteristic: that is, as a 'natural' attribute beyond the influence of individuals or societies. Today, it is quite extraordinary to think that a discipline devoted to the social construction of human experience would section off some aspects of that experience as beyond reach. But such was the state of sociological thinking at the time that several aspects of personal identity were treated in this way—not only gender but race

and age as well. 'Ascriptive' characteristics were contrasted with other attributes such as class position or professional status, which were regarded as 'achieved' characteristics. One of the earliest developments in thinking about gender in sociology was to challenge this notion of 'ascribed' status and to insist that gender was 'achieved' or socially constructed.

Where you sit on a bus, who you start conversations with, who your friends are, what you wear, how late you stay out at night, what sports you play, whom you dance with, whom you have sex with, how old you are when you first have sex, whom you marry, whom you have children with—these are all activities structured by societal conventions concerning appropriate female and male behaviour. In some cases, the activities are also regulated by more formal procedures, rules, and laws about which relationships between men and women are socially sanctioned and which are not. Both the more informal and the formal regulation of appropriate gender behaviour varies according to the wider structural context, be it at the level of, for example, neighbourhood, religious group, social class, or nation.

This observation was a very early insight in the first shift that has shaped all subsequent sociological thinking about gender. It was argued that views in society about masculinity and femininity, and about appropriate behaviour for women and men, boys and girls, have a social foundation independent of biological necessity. 'Gender' was introduced as a term distinct from 'sex': sex referred to biologically based differences, primarily related to differences in chromosomes and reproductive functions, while gender referred to socially produced differences, primarily of character, ambition, and achievement.

Ann Oakley was the first to bring a sustained analysis of the differentiation between sex and gender to the attention of the sociological community. In her classic 1972 book *Sex, Gender and Society*, Oakley drew on anthropological, psychological, biological, psychoanalytic, and sociological evidence to make the case that distinctions of sex are not as clear-cut and straightforward as people typically think and that the cultural and psychological features of gender are so variable historically and cross-culturally that it is impossible to map these features onto biological sex difference.

In Canada, the social construction and inequalities of gender were initially studied as 'sex roles' and 'sex stratification' (Stephenson 1973). However, it was not long before the concept of gender was established as the more common conceptual language for sociologists.² One reason that people were so keen on this particular way of thinking about men's and women's experiences of masculinity and femininity was that it put the possibility of change in the forefront.

First and Lasting Impressions

Janet Connects with the First Shift in the Sociology of Gender

Sociology's willingness and ability to problematize gender is the basis of my attachment to and respect for the discipline. As an undergraduate in Toronto and then Waterloo in the 1970s, I was drawn to the study of sociology. In the beginning,

I didn't know much about the subject except that it had something to do with 'people', and in all honesty, I found the endless definitions about social roles, institutions, the family, and bureaucracy in first-year sociology more than a little boring. But there were parts I found very exciting. My sociology professors were speaking about large, exciting things—social change, social conflict—that were important and happening in the world around me. But the biggest thing I encountered in sociology as an undergraduate, and the thing that motivated my study of sociology from that point on, came in a second-year course on 'sex roles' taught at the University of Waterloo by Professor Margrit Eichler.

Encountering the idea that as a girl, there was a social script for me, an identity and an appearance that I was expected to embrace and fulfill—no matter how well it suited my own talents, inclinations, and ambitions—struck home hard. It made sense of all those fights I'd had with my parents and schoolteachers about what I wanted/what they expected me to do, how I wanted/was allowed to look, and how I did/should behave. It helped me to have the courage to examine things that had, or had not, happened to me and to wonder whether the politics of gender was at the heart of these experiences. Why was I sent home in grade 8 because I wore a necktie to school? Why were the smokers at the edge of the school property mainly girls? Why did only boys get invited to participate in special extracurricular science experiments? Why were girls at my high school required to wear skirts, even in the middle of winter? Why did the Royal Bank hire female university students as tellers for summer employment and male students as management trainees? Why did no one ever come out to watch the University of Waterloo girls basketball team, and yet the boys' games were always packed? Why did we go in mixed groups to watch the female stripper at the Kent Hotel in downtown Waterloo? Why were young women who went to the university medical service for birth control fitted with the Dalkon Shield? That there existed within sociological thinking the means to answer all of these questions, and the inspiration to ask even more, was a revelation and a liberation.

While the study of gender in sociology has moved on enormously since those early days in Professor Eichler's sex roles class, there remains in sociology a critical impulse to assess how, for what purpose, and with what consequences gender continues to structure our personal lives and our society. Feminist sociologists in the 1970s in Canada battled the prevailing winds, cleared the ground, and set up a safe house for those who came after, eager to hear more about a sociology that spoke to women's experience and challenged social arrangements that systematically discounted women's hopes and concerns. I have benefited, in my personal and professional life, from their determination to be heard and from the sociological space they created for critical reflection and action on gender inequality. In return, I have tried in my own sociological teaching and research, and in my day-to-day life with colleagues, family, and friends, to honour their efforts by doing what I can to help further enlarge and enrich the social space for a critical engagement with gender.