Odd Couples
Muraco, Anna

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Odd Couples: Friendships at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation.

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IN THE LATE 1990S, Will and Grace, a television sitcom about a gay man and a straight woman who were best friends, was one of the most watched and awarded shows. I watched the show and compared it to my own twenty-plus-year friendship with Mike, a gay man (I am a straight woman) who is my best friend. I related to how Will and Grace made each other laugh and finished each other’s sentences. And whenever I was introduced to the few of Mike’s friends I had not met previously, they nearly always characterized me as his “Grace.”

Through my casual conversations with friends and acquaintances, it seemed that “Wills” and “Graces” were everywhere. As both a scholar who studies relationships and interaction and someone with this kind of friendship, which I refer to as “intersectional,” I paid close attention to television and cinematic representations of relationships that looked similar to my friendship, at least on the surface. These friendships also were portrayed in such feature films as My Best Friend’s Wedding (1997), The Object of My Affection (1998), and The Next Best Thing (2000), just to name a few. Yet television and other media portrayals of these friendships were distorted and exaggerated in ways that seemed to mock the significance of these ties. They also focused on gay men and heterosexual women; there was a conspicuous absence of portrayals of friendships between lesbians and straight men. I knew that these relationships existed. At the time, my roommate was a lesbian with a best friend who was a straight man. Her girlfriend at the time also had a straight male friend whom she talked about incessantly. Yet none of us could recall a single depiction of the lesbian–straight man friendship on television. The more I thought about these differences, the more interesting the topic became. Why were friendships between gay men and straight women portrayed as “natural,” while a similar expectation was lacking
for lesbians and straight men? Over time, my initial curiosity grew into a full-fledged sociological examination of these friendships.

*Odd Couples* examines intersectional friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men to show how these friendships serve as a barometer for shifting social norms, particularly with respect to gender and sexual orientation. More than simply an examination of changing social norms, *Odd Couples* explores intersectional friendships as they challenge the idea that gender differences are indelible and can never be fully bridged. What I mean is that we, as a society, have a set of social norms that guide our behaviors and social relationships. Inter- and intra-personally, with rare exceptions, men and women are expected to have different emotional lives, interests, goals, and expectations. Relationally, men and women are expected to interact in known ways: they are romantic or sexual partners, co-workers, or relatives, and rarely do these roles intersect. These social norms are based on an assumption of heterosexuality. The question that has continually interested me was how differences in sexual orientation may alter these expectations, both behaviorally and in relationships. From media images and from my own life, I know that bonds between a gay man and a straight woman break some social norms but also bring new expectations. This is the dynamic that I explore throughout *Odd Couples*.

Intersectional friendships, most profoundly, challenge two widespread assumptions about friendships between men and women. First, these relationships challenge the idea that men and women are fundamentally different from one another; and second, they challenge the widespread understanding that men and women who are not related by biology or law can forge significant bonds only within romantic relationships. Intersectional friendships also challenge us to think through a spectrum of other ways that social norms are taken for granted or are challenged in our everyday interactions.

In *Odd Couples*, I argue that intersectional friendships represent a resistance against social norms that define and regulate gender, sexuality, and social institutions. Intersectional friendships often are strong bonds that provide support and companionship, like many other types of friendship. What distinguishes them from other relationships is the way that intersectional friends allow each other to embody identities that feel more genuine than those allowed by social norms, particularly those norms related to gender and sexual orientation. These friendships highlight what is unsatisfying about the limited roles that men and women are expected to play in one another’s lives, as they offer an
alternative. Throughout this book, I propose that individuals who are dissatisfied with the limited expressions of gender and sexual orientation dictated by social norms hold dear their intersectional friendships when they allow flexibility in gendered behavior. I acknowledge, however, that social norms, particularly those related to gender and sexual orientation, are difficult to resist because they are built into nearly every aspect of our lives through the processes of socialization and interaction. As a result, people's behavior is often conflicting with respect to being able to wholly resist or embody norms. In rewriting possibilities for gender and sexuality, individuals behave inconsistently. The friendships I highlight thus are neither entirely revolutionary nor entirely normative. They are both.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERSECTIONAL FRIENDSHIP

Studying intersectional friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men can help us to better understand how our expectations about gender and sexual orientation shape the assumption that gay men and straight women make the best of friends. The same expectation fuels the belief that friendship between a lesbian woman and a straight man is a rare occurrence. Both assumptions are mired in conventional norms about gender and sexual orientation. A friendship pairing between a lesbian and a straight man rarely enters the public consciousness as a feasible bond because these groups are not perceived as having anything in common (aside from an attraction to women). Also, people may perceive straight men as having romantic or sexual feelings about the lesbian friend (i.e., the film *Chasing Amy*), which motivates his pursuit of a friendship. On the other end of the spectrum, gay men are expected to be feminine or female-like and to embody a conventional version of femininity; as seen in their images on television and in film, they enjoy shopping and gossiping and are focused on appearance and making everything fabulous. The friendships gay men share with straight women are perceived of as ideal because they are expected to provide a context in which men and women can interact as equals, without sexual tension. Throughout the book, I explore the varied embodiments and expectations of gender; ultimately, intersectional friendships allow us to see the nuances in gendered behaviors and identities.

Intersectional friendships challenge gender and sexual orientation norms by virtue of their existence. Nardi (1999) found that gay men’s friendships chal-
lenge the heterosexual norms implicit in the dominant culture, a dynamic that Warner (1991) defines as heteronormativity. He explains heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (Warner 1991: 3–17). Extending this principle to intersectional friendships, we see how these bonds give friends the opportunity to construct identities and a sense of belonging that runs counter to heteronormativity. In particular, intersectional friendships defy expectations of what men and women can be to each other. Intersectional friendship provides a space where not only gay men but also straight women, straight men, and lesbians may reject social norms of gender and sexual orientation, not only in their own identities, but also in their ways of relating to each other, without losing support.

MORE THAN “JUST FRIENDS”

In this work, I also tackle how social interaction is imbued with assumptions about compulsory heterosexuality, which Rich (1980) describes as the dominant cultural expectation that women will be innately sexually attracted to men and men, to women. The norm of compulsory heterosexuality structures our social perceptions of all social relationships, including friendships. As Shepperd, Coyle, and Hegarty (2010: 208) explain, “Not only are men and women expected to be sexually involved with one another, but non-sexual relationships often have difficulty justifying themselves as psychologically important. . . . Friendships are treated less seriously than romantic relationships by the general public, by social scientists, and by society.” Gender and compulsory heterosexuality thus shape not only our social expectations of interactions and relationships, but also our relegation of friendship itself to less importance than romantic interactions and, by extension, biological family relations. By making friendship between men and women, gay, lesbian, and straight, the focus of study, this work challenges the assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality.

In addition to showing how gender shapes and is challenged by intersectional friendships, I incorporate the goal proposed by the queer theorist Steven Maddison (2000: 71), which is to better understand the “structural nature of affiliations between women and gay men so as to foreclose purely frivolous understandings of their relations and to validate the institutional difficulties that such bonds endure, as well as the dissent potential they hold.” Accordingly, I highlight the potential that these friendships have to challenge and change the way we understand gender, sex, sexual orientation, and friendship. (In chapter
I address how our cultural understanding of family represents what Madison identifies as an “institutional difficulty” that intersectional friendships face, as family life is given primacy over friendships, both structurally and interpersonally. I explore how, in some cases, the friendships provide alternative ways to view and experience family life.

In making intersectional friendship the focus of the study, my intent is to raise awareness of friendship in analytical discussions. A gap exists in social science research: the friend relationship has been largely ignored as an important influence on the social behavior of adults and the organization of social life because it does not fit with the norms that place family at the center of adult life. Prior research has focused on the role of adolescent and young adult friends as a socialization influence (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995) and in adulthood, on the principle of substitution, which is the idea that when people lack conventional family relationships, they often turn to friends as a form of chosen kin (Stack 1974; Townsend 1957). Yet rarely is friendship considered as a way to organize adult lives. This work serves as a case study about how gender and sexual orientation operate within a specific context (intersectional friendship), elucidating the potential of friendships to challenge social norms and create alliances.

I also aim to highlight the significance of friendship as a central means of understanding personal connection in light of the ways that family life continues to evolve in the twenty-first century. Contemporary heterosexual family life is in flux, with lower rates of marriage, higher rates of cohabitation, and greater acceptance of divorce (Musick 2007; Stacey 1998a); these demographic shifts suggest that normative family life is not necessarily a stable means for organizing adults’ lives, yet it remains the focus for policymakers, extended family members, and even much of social science analysis. Odd Couples offers a lens to examine all friendship as intersectional by focusing on the hierarchy of different relationship forms and the different structural position of those within them.

This work also connects the realms of the personal and the political by exploring how power and representation play out in close interpersonal relationships. Prior research supports the idea that power differences are reinforced in social relationships (Cancian 1987; Cohen 1992; O’Connor 1992). Specifically, styles of relating in which women do the often invisible relationship work of maintaining emotional intimacy disproportionately benefit heterosexual men and reinforce their position at the top of the societal hierarchy.
In addition to interaction dynamics, structural inequalities that place women below men in terms of employment hierarchies (Acker 1988) still affect women’s earnings and economic independence; as of September 2010, the wage gap showed women earning 77 percent of every dollar earned by men (Institute for Women’s Policy Research [IWPR] 2010). These structural inequalities color the romantic relationships and marriages between straight men and women such that men typically have greater earning power and women provide greater unpaid and, often, unacknowledged emotional and domestic labor (Hartmann 1981; Hochschild and Machung 1989).

Through this research I sought to understand whether inequality between men and women in close relationships was mitigated by sexual orientation. Prior scholarship about friendships answered parts of this question. Werking (1997), for example, addressed how cross-sex friendships between straight men and women navigated sexual tension and to some extent defied traditional gender norms. Tillmann-Healy (2001) discussed the various ways that she, as a straight woman, developed and maintained intimate friendships with a group of gay men. Yet these previous studies did not answer the question that most interested me: in the absence of socially sanctioned sexual tension and expectations of a romantic relationship, can men and women maintain egalitarian relationships? Furthermore, I wanted to know how gender norms would operate in contexts in which sexual orientation seemingly ruled out or prohibited sexual relationships.

**Intersectional Friendships and Terminology**

For the sake of clarity, it is important to explain some terminology used throughout the book. I refer to the friendships between people of different sexes and sexual orientations—in particular, the bonds between gay men and straight women and the bonds between lesbians and straight men—as “intersectional” because they create contexts in which multiple identities converge, the most salient in my study being gay and straight, male and female. There also are dialectical tensions that influence these relationships: the pairings of friendship and family, feminine and masculine, sexual and platonic.

Intersectionality is a concept that calls for an integrated approach to examining interlocking systems of oppression (i.e., race, class, sex, and gender oppression, among other social categories) as they influence everyday life (Col-
lins 1991, 1998; Dillaway and Broman 2001). An intersectional approach considers inequalities to be components of social structure and interaction (Zinn and Dill 2000) and examines how sexuality and sexual orientation are intertwined with the cultural creation of other categories of inequality (Gamson and Moon 2004). The specific focus of this book is intersections of sex and sexual orientation, but throughout I consider gender, race, and class, because they are significant components of one’s identity and experiences, as well.

Terminology, with respect to identity and social location, can be tricky because naming is imbued with political meaning. In this study, I use the term “sex” purposefully, to indicate that the friendships are between women and men. I discuss the norms of behavior in terms of “gender.” Sex and gender are not synonymous categories; sex is a biological category, while gender is a socially determined and reinforced category that is produced and reproduced through interactions with others (West and Zimmerman 1987), and I treat these terms accordingly. In general, I also address whether or not someone is straight, gay, or lesbian as one’s “sexual orientation.” While “sexual orientation” is a sufficiently common term, for the sake of clarity, I use the definition offered by the American Psychological Association (2008: 1): “An enduring emotional, romantic, sexual, or affectional attraction toward others. It is easily distinguished from other components of sexuality including biological sex, gender identity (the psychological sense of being male or female), and the social gender role (adherence to cultural norms for feminine and masculine behavior).” Thus, straight people; gay men; lesbian women; and bisexual, transgender, and intersexed individuals all have sexual orientations. Sexual orientation is not equal to sexual behavior. Sometimes a lesbian may have sex with a man and still consider herself a lesbian; in other cases, a man identifies as straight even if he has had sexual contact with other men. These identities can fluctuate over time and in varying contexts.

“Queer” is another term that the participants in this project and scholars use to describe identities, theories, and analytical frameworks. Jagose (1996: 3) provides a useful definition of the term:

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability—which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect—queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally,
queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any “natural” sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as “man” and “woman.”

When individuals use the term “queer” to describe their identities, they may be identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, straight but gender-ambiguous, the partner of someone who has undergone sexual reassignment, or countless other possibilities. “Queer” is a term used purposely to identify oneself as not aligning with norms of gender, sex, or sexual orientation. Queer theoretical positions or frameworks are used to make problematic the assumptions that heterosexuality is the central defining feature of everyday life. In other words, people or groups who identify themselves as queer do so as a means to show that they reject the social norms that define them as marginal.

THE STUDY

Odd Couples is based on interviews with individuals engaged in close intersectional friendships, which I conceived of as affectionate and ongoing relationships between individuals that are not of a biological, legal, or romantic nature. I relied on the participants’ self-identification of being in a close intersectional friendship as sufficient to include them in the study and during our interviews, I asked them to characterize what “close” friend meant to them. The closeness of friendship bonds is an important element in this study for two reasons. First, it is unlikely that the interactions in casual friendships will have the same degree of impact on an individual’s everyday life as more significant ones. Second, previous research has shown that mere casual contact between individuals from different sexual orientations does not necessarily bring the same sense of understanding and affiliation as close bonds (Fee 1996; Price 1999). Consequently, I focus on close friendship bonds because my interest centers on the relations between those individuals whose friendship has an impact on the ideology and identity of their members.

My interest in researching intersectional friendships originated from my own personal biography. I am a straight woman who has a very close friendship with a gay man, and I consider this relationship central to my life. Thus, I
approached this research as an exercise in “starting from where you are”—in other words, subjecting matters that are relevant in the life of the researcher to sociological analysis (Lofland and Lofland 1995). O’Connor (1992) critiques that, while discounted by some as a frivolous or an insignificant topic of scientific inquiry, the study of friendship is a means of examining the everyday experiences and interactions that make people’s lives meaningful. In fact, as more and more individuals create adult lives outside traditional family norms (Cagen 2004; Watters 2003; Weston 1991), friends increasingly serve the roles of surrogate parent or sibling and fulfill the many domestic functions necessary in contemporary life: daycare provider, handyman, taxi service, career counselor, and therapist. Studying intersectional friendships, then, not only contributes to our greater understanding of friendships across categories of difference, it also adds to sociological knowledge about the relationships people rely on to build and support their lives.

The people at the center of this book are those engaged in intersectional friendships. In 2002 and 2003, I interviewed fifty-three people involved in twenty-six close friendship dyads and one triad primarily in the San Francisco Bay Area and surrounding counties. My interviews with the intersectional friends provide the foundational data for the research; thus, it is important to provide a brief explanation of how I went about studying them here. A more detailed discussion of my research methods is in appendix 1. Using a convenience and purposive snowball sampling method, I recruited the study participants beginning with my contacts in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities of the San Francisco Bay Area and expanding through participants’ social networks. I also targeted LGBT community organizations in the Bay Area for recruitment by distributing electronic and paper fliers describing the study and ran free advertisements on electronic community bulletin boards.

From my recruitment, I found the fifty-three participants. Of the people included in the study, twenty-eight were women (thirteen lesbian, fourteen straight, one queer) and twenty-five were men (thirteen gay, twelve straight). There are more women than men in the study because I was unable to interview the male halves of the friendship pairs in two cases; also, the triad included in the study was composed of two women and one man. The age range of study participants is twenty-one to sixty-four, with a median of thirty-two. The racial composition is 59 percent white, 17 percent Latino, 19 percent Asian, and 4 percent black. Appendix 2 contains a more detailed list of participants.
with corresponding demographic information and identifies their intersectional friend.

The interviews took place as structured conversations guided by my questions; typically, the discussions lasted forty-five minutes to two hours and were held in a location chosen by the participant. The vast majority of participants were interviewed separately, though in one case I interviewed both members of the friendship dyad together at their request, and in another case, both members of a lesbian couple were present to discuss their straight male friend. My questions covered a range of topics, from how the friends met to how often they communicate, the types of activities they enjoy together, and the significance of the relationship in their lives. To make analytical sense of their accounts, I transcribed the interviews and qualitatively analyzed the data transcripts to look for prevalent themes under the principles of grounded theory, which uses a systematic set of procedures to develop and inductively derive theory about a phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). In other words, I used the words of the people I interviewed to create a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics of intersectional friendships.

I sought to examine the issues that interested me in two distinct ways: by constructing the interview questions and by coding the interview transcripts. First, I created interview questions that addressed some of the aspects of these friendships that interested me most and then scrutinized the interviewees’ responses to those questions. The particular areas that I wanted to explore were the processes of the friendship (what the friends do, how often they talk and see each other, how they met), the meanings of the friendship (the salience of the friendship in each individual’s life, how the individuals describe and characterize the friendship), and what the friendships provide that other relationships do not (targeting issues of gender and sexual orientation). I include a list of the questions that guided the research in appendix 3.

I identified themes in the process of coding the interview transcripts in several ways. First, I kept a journal that noted interesting observations I had throughout the process of conducting face-to-face interviews and transcribing the recorded interviews. Second, once I completed the interview transcription, I reviewed the transcripts repeatedly, looking for repetition of phrasing. Some of the themes that emerged from this process were “a gay man trapped in a straight woman’s body” and “chosen family is better than biological family,” whose meanings I explored more fully. I conducted a third type of coding by identifying several concepts that I saw as central to the discussion of intersec-
tional friendship: gender, family, identity. I thought about the data in terms of what they could tell us about these concepts by looking at them holistically—that is, rather than examining specific phrasing, I sought to glean the interviewees’ perceptions and experiences of these areas by examining the entirety of the interview transcript.

As a whole, the work provides a glimpse into the lives of a particular sampling of intersectional friends, as well as a framework for thinking about friendships more broadly. Thus, the study is not intended to be representative of all intersectional friendships. Rather, it provides insight into the bonds that I studied, which also may be applicable to many types of social relationships.

THE ORGANIZATION OF ODD COUPLES

The chapters of this book explore the issues that arise in these friendships in more detail, drawing on the voices of those interviewed. Each chapter but the last begins with a brief vignette of one of the friendships in the study in order to help the reader get to know a bit more about the intersectional friends included in the book.

Any good study of a sociological phenomenon rests on the work that came before it. Chapter 1 discusses the theoretical foundation and prior literature on which this work is built. In this chapter, I outline the various theoretical perspectives that create the backbone of research on intersectional friendships. The chapter outlines the general findings about friendship as a social relationship and addresses the unique dimensions of “bridging” friendships (de Souza Briggs 2007), or those that cross various categories of difference. By outlining what we already know, I situate this study at the intersection of several literatures on inequality, friendship, sexual communities, and gender.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to three pairs of intersectional friends. I use these friends to highlight some of the common themes present in many of the pairs in the study.

In chapter 3, I explore the notion of the intersectional friendship as a chosen family connection. Challenging the notion that friends are less important than family, I demonstrate how friends often act as families. In chapter 4, I specifically analyze the gender dynamics in these friendships. I look at how power and privilege operate in these friendships around meanings and experiences of gender and how friends understand each other’s identity. I also highlight the tensions between these friends that reinforce and resist traditional gender norms. In chapter 5, I examine the role of sexuality and sexual orientation in
shaping intersectional friendship processes. Again, we see how friends understand each other’s identity but also challenge the notion that friendships that cross sexual orientation would be free of all sexual tension. In each of these chapters, I not only analyze the respective topics but also address the tensions present between the friendships’ tendency to both subvert and reinforce traditional expectations of gender, family, and sexuality.

This study also explores various political dimensions of befriending someone from a different social location. Chapter 6 analyzes the extent to which intersectional friendships constitute political bonds. I analyze the liberatory potential of these friendships, a possibility that is inherent in the ways they challenge categories of privilege and oppression. I highlight the promise in intersectional friendships’ ability to transform social life and promote equality and analyze the ways in which dyads can fall short of this possibility.

Finally, Odd Couples concludes with chapter 7, which connects each of these empirical discussions to identify the implications of these friendships for those in the relationships, as well as for those around them, and considers the future of intersectional friendships.