Odd Couples

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I think straight people don’t get a chance to experience life outside their own little sphere unless they meet one of us. . . . You can have those little atomic relationships between straight people and gay people and you really break open the barrier between those two worlds by doing that.

—Sarah, a thirty-year-old white lesbian

LEYLA AND ETHAN

Leyla and Ethan met in Miss Beecher’s sixth-grade math class some thirteen years ago, but it was not until high school that they started spending more time together. Leyla, who is Iranian American, and Ethan, who is Latino, were both members of the debate team and were part of a clique who ate lunch together and took all of the classes for smart kids.

Ethan and Leyla are best friends. They speak on the phone nearly every day and see each other several times a week. The pair enjoys doing the same things; even though they have busy schedules, they find time to travel together once a year and often go to movies and the theater. They make even the most mundane aspects of life more enjoyable for each other. For example, they often accompany each other while running errands. Leyla has taken Ethan to hair appointments and has given him rides to his mechanic, while Ethan has taken Leyla to the doctor and to manicure appointments.

Leyla was the first person Ethan told he was gay. Three years ago, Leyla acted as a facilitator when Ethan came out to his family, because he was very nervous about coming out to them. In addition to being an important part of his coming-out process, Leyla “dragged” Ethan to gay clubs, gay bookstores, and gay pride events because he felt shy about being gay. In time, Ethan helped Leyla to be more comfortable with her sexuality by being very open about his own sexual activity. Leyla explained that Ethan told her how to kiss men; he explained, for example, that in most cases you should not bite a man while kissing him. (Leyla once decked a guy for trying to kiss her, so Ethan had his work cut out
for him.) But Ethan sometimeswithholds details about his sexual activity from Leyla because she is squeamish about physical affection. For example, Leyla covers her eyes when actors kiss in a movie.

While Leyla’s and Ethan’s friendship is solid, other people in their lives sometimes take issue with their close bond. Leyla’s boyfriend, for example, becomes jealous when she spends a lot of time with Ethan. And when Leyla, her boyfriend, and Ethan spend time together, the two men often jockey for her attention in what she calls “power plays.” The tension between Ethan and Leyla’s boyfriend is ironic, since Ethan played a key role in encouraging her to get into her current relationship.

The pair’s personalities balance each other out. Ethan helps to bring Leyla down to earth; she often has her head in the clouds, while he is more likely to have his feet firmly planted on the ground. Leyla is the optimist to Ethan’s pessimist. When Ethan is in a bad mood, Leyla is usually able to make him laugh and forget about feeling grouchy.

The friends clearly enjoy and value each other for all of their quirks. Leyla characterizes their friendship as being like the show I Love Lucy, where she is like Lucy and Ethan is like Ethel. Even though he swears that her ideas are harebrained, he goes along anyway. At the same time, the friendship allows Ethan to show his darker side and let down his guard. Leyla has been on the “front lines” in dealing with him when he has been depressed, and he feels less inhibited around her than around anyone else. Ethan admits that he is a much happier person because Leyla is a part of his life.

The Previous Chapters show the intersectional friendships in this study to be significant relationships that shape people’s lives. Intersectional friendships are meaningful bonds that in many cases constitute chosen family relationships and allow individuals to act outside prescribed social norms. According to the interviewees, the interaction within these dyads also serves to educate its members about each other’s social locations, which has outcomes that range from lessening prejudice to motivating activism. This chapter examines the extent to which intersectional friendships are bonds that can (but do not always) foster tolerance and acceptance, as well as politicize their members to challenge heterosexism. Following from Mills’s (1959) discussion of personal troubles as public issues, I address the extent to which the intersectional friend relationship reflects and propels larger social transformation.

The assertion that intersectional friendships are to some extent political is supported by previous research, which found that interaction between individuals is a context in which social inequalities can be resisted through contact. Prior studies have concluded that close contact between people of dominant
and oppressed groups reduces prejudice and perhaps promotes tolerance and
equality, as well (Allport 1954; Crosby, Bromley, and Saxe 1980; Dovidio, Gaert-
ner, and Kawakami 2003; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Miller 2002; Sherif, Har-
vey, White, Hood, and Sherif 1961; Stephan and Finlay 1999; Taylor 1999). Simultaneously, friendship interactions influence social identities and inequali-
ties, in some instances reinforcing and in others challenging oppression based
on sex and sexual orientation (Johnson 1996; O’Connor 1992; Swain 1992; Weinstock and Bond 2002).

As discussed in previous chapters, the data suggest that within the intersec-
tional friendships I studied, men and women interact in a context in which
normative expectations of heterosexuality can be relaxed. Hence, in their very
existence, intersectional friendships potentially constitute a political connec-
tion as they pose a challenge to normative expectations about bonds between
men and women. The potential of these friendships to promote social change
goes beyond challenging the norm of compulsory heterosexuality. Many gay
men and lesbians in the study, for example, attributed their sense of com-
fort interacting with straight people and their expanded social network be-
yond homosexual ghettoization to their intersectional friendship. However,
given the social and state regulation of same-sex intimate relationships (e.g.
laws prohibiting same-sex marriage), gay men and lesbians are likely aware of
the politicization of personal choices and are not reliant on friendships with
straight friends to create this awareness. The straight members of these friend-
ship dyads were more radically influenced. Straight participants credited inter-
sectional friendships with a range of transformative elements, from changing
their individual awareness and perceptions of the effects of heterosexism to
motivating direct political activism. Hence, the intersectional friendships high-
lighted in this book constitute not only a significant bond, but also a political
partnership.

BRIDGING WORLDS AND
EXPOSING HETEROSEXISM

Intersectional friendships allow gay men and lesbians to experience aspects of
straight life that may not be readily available to them otherwise. Previous stud-
ies of gay men and lesbian communities show their friendships to consist
primarily of other gay men and lesbians who shield each other from a largely
unwelcoming straight society (Nardi 1999). The limited access to various as-
psects of straight life is a result of the pervasive inequality based on sexual
orientation vis-à-vis heterosexism. Such inequalities persist at the institutional level, while social repression is waning at the personal and interpersonal levels, meaning that symbolic and social boundaries between gay men and lesbians and straight people have lessened (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999).

Institutional forms of heterosexism are present in employment, as well as in state regulation of family life. Twenty-nine states do not have legal protections against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation (Human Rights Campaign [HRC] 2011). Many employers do not offer domestic partnership benefits for same-sex couples, although 41 percent of Fortune 500 companies have enacted nondiscrimination policies that include gender identity or expression (HRC 2011). As discussed in previous chapters, heterosexist laws also limit the possibilities for family life among gay men and lesbians so that gay men and lesbians are largely prohibited from legally marrying and therefore do not receive the social, legal, financial, and religious benefits that come from participating in this institution (Oswald 2000). Hence, while tolerance with respect to sexual orientation may be increasing, lesbians and gay men are in many ways still second-class citizens (Seidman 2002).

One of the ways that social boundaries are relaxed in the intersectional friendships discussed in this book is by straight friends’ acting as informants for gay men and lesbians, which allows the counterpart to experience the world from a different perspective. For example, Ben, a twenty-eight-year-old Asian American gay man, explained one such contribution that Ming, a straight twenty-eight-year-old Asian American woman, makes to him: “It’s a window to see into a straight couple’s world of the same generation, people my age. It’s given me some perspective on how a couple functions, how they bounce off each other, what role they play in their relationship. Sometimes it’s interesting to make that comparison with a gay relationship.”

Other interviewees commented that the straight friend allowed them access to interactions with straight life and straight people. Connor, a thirty-seven-year-old white gay man, described this aspect of his friendship with Nadia, a thirty-year-old straight Iranian American woman: “Well, instead of just staying in the gay clubs, which I still did, we’d be in her apartment, and some guys would come over, and they’d be straight. It would give me a chance to talk to straight people and not be so gay, because you can get too gay, you can get too comfortable, and then you feel uncomfortable leaving [the gay community].” Connor’s explanation illustrated that, through his friendship with Nadia, he became more at ease interacting with straight people, which is consistent with
prior research showing that straight women sometimes are perceived by gay men to serve as their bridges between the gay and straight world (Grigoriou 2004). This is not to say that Connor did not have other connections to heterosexuals through his family, with whom he is close, but his connection with Nadia allowed interactions with straight peers with whom he otherwise might not have been comfortable interacting.

Many lesbians and gay male participants recognized that the intersectional friend provided a connection to larger society. As Sarah, a thirty-year-old white lesbian, explained: “[Hanging out with straight people is] new for me, at least since coming out. I came out when I was eighteen, and probably from eighteen to twenty-eight, I hung around nothing but gay people.” For the gay men and lesbians in the study, having positive contact with straight people broadened their perspectives. Melissa, a thirty-five-year-old Latina lesbian, explained the rewards she gained from the close friendship with her thirty-five-year-old straight white friend, James: “I think it gives me another perspective on the world, because I think sometimes we tend, in our lesbian and gay culture, [to] think that this is the right way or this is the only situation and blah, blah, blah. We kind of forget that there are other people outside the gay and lesbian culture, that there are some empathetic, thoughtful people. I know that my friendship with James has reminded me that there are conscious straight people who do care about justice, who care about people.” Thus, her friendship with James reminds Melissa that straight society is not just a place of oppression.

While many of the gay male and lesbian interviewees identified increased affiliation with straight communities as one of the perks of their intersectional friendship, some voiced concern that straight members of the dyad might disproportionately benefit from the friendship. Bruce, a thirty-four-year-old straight Asian American man, explained: “I think, based on heterosexist society, [that] straight guys would benefit more from the relationship with lesbians than the other way around. I don’t know if that’s the case with me and Vanessa. [I mean,] to what point does this lesbian woman become this informant for the straight guy about, like, this other world? And [is it a context] for him to come to terms with both [his] privilege and [his] role in society?” Here, Bruce raised the important issue of the gay male or lesbian friend acting as an informant for the straight friend. This is decidedly different from straight people acting as informants to straight society, given that lesbians and gay men are oppressed relative to the social positions of straight people. Such a perspective is related to those of hooks (1984) and Collins (1990), who explained that a position of marginal-
ization in society based on identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality provides a perspective obscured from those who occupy more dominant positions. Stated more simply, being oppressed provides an understanding of the social world that is not available to those who are not similarly oppressed. Thus, individuals who are part of an oppressed group are in a unique position to know and understand inequality; within intersectional friendship, knowledge is shared across groups with respect to an individual’s social location (i.e., knowledge of marginalization is shared with straight people).

In the particular case of Bruce’s and Vanessa’s friendship, Bruce is a straight Asian American man and Vanessa is a black lesbian. Thus, there were additional influences of marginalization from dominant society at work. Bruce referred to this power differential and the possibility that, in her position as someone who experiences race, gender, and sexual oppression, Vanessa served as an informant who teaches him about his heterosexual and male privilege. In some ways, such a function can be viewed positively as a means to foster a greater understanding across groups. Yet Bruce’s insight resonates with a larger discussion of intergroup contact as a context in which the marginalized person is called on to educate members of the dominant society about experiences of inequality (hooks 1984). As a result, not only do members of dominant groups enjoy heterosexual and sex privilege, but members from marginalized groups are given the added responsibility of exposing this privilege.

Alternatively, the particular subject position of the marginalized individual may offer knowledge that provides her or him with advantages in particular situations. For example, in his study of urban life, Anderson (1999) found that black male youths occupy a superordinate position vis-à-vis middle-class blacks and whites in certain interactional contexts because they have “street wisdom.” In such instances, there is a reversal of privilege, in which the normally subordinate becomes superordinate because he has inside knowledge about a particular subculture or situation. Applying this theoretical framework to intersectional friendships, it is likely that within interactional contexts that are coded as gay or lesbian, (e.g., gay or lesbian bars and neighborhoods), the lesbian or gay male half of the dyad may be at a greater advantage to navigate the experience.

This situation is further complicated with regard to intersectional friendships because a variety of dimensions of identity operate simultaneously within the dyad. In the pairing between straight men and lesbians, the power differential is obvious. Straight men occupy the highest positions in the social hierarchy, especially if they are white, middle-class, and able-bodied, while lesbians
are oppressed by virtue of sex and sexual orientation, as well as by race and class in many instances (Collins 1990). The case of gay men and straight women is more complex.

Inequality affects gay men and straight women in different ways. Gay men experience inequality because of their homosexuality and therefore have been denied many aspects of sex privilege. Straight hegemonic masculinity, which is based in a model of domination, is constituted in relation to and against other forms of masculinity and femininity (Connell 1992). Antagonism toward gay men is used to define hegemonic masculinity, which results in the oppression of gay men (Herek 1986; Connell 1995), both socially and legally. However, within these discussions, scholars caution against equating gay men’s challenges to the gender order with challenges to sexism (Ward 2000). Despite straight women’s access to heterosexual privilege, sexism at the societal level persists, with men (gay and straight) experiencing some degree of male privilege vis-à-vis women. Hence, sexism can be reinforced by gay men as well as by straight men (Ward 2000). Still, in being allowed to participate in institutions such as marriage and parenthood in a normative way, straight women are provided heterosexual privilege that is denied to gay men. Both gay men and straight women experience and enact oppression and privilege.

THE CONTINUUM OF STRAIGHT POLITICIZATION

The previous section addressed how heterosexism influences the lives of lesbians and gay men and teased out some ways in which power and privilege affect intersectional bonds. The straight members of intersectional friendships also are powerfully affected by these strong connections. The following sections address how intersectional friendships in the study have advanced the politicization of straight people along a continuum from shifting attitudes to inspiring activism.

The Role of Contact

Many straight interviewees identified intersectional friendships as fostering a better understanding of, and promoting greater tolerance for, gay men and lesbians. This is consistent with previous studies that found social interaction to be a context in which prejudicial attitudes can be reinforced or reproduced. One particular theoretical perspective that informs how the intersectional friendships influence discriminatory attitudes is the contact hypothesis of prejudice
The contact hypothesis responded to the claim that ignorance is the cause of prejudice (specifically, between racial groups) and proposed that intergroup connection between dominant and oppressed groups is a means to lessen intolerance.

Contact alone, however, does not reduce intergroup prejudice; in fact, in some cases, more contact is associated with increased prejudice (Taylor 1999). Instead, the type of contact is an important determinant of reducing prejudice. According to Allport (1954), contact can reduce intergroup prejudice under five different conditions: casual contact, acquaintance, residential contact, occupational contact, and the pursuit of common goals and objectives (Allport 1954; Sherif et al. 1961). Other types of contact also lead to reduced prejudice and more favorable attitudes toward members of an out-group. For example, those individuals who have personal acquaintance with individuals whose characteristics defy stereotypical group expectations, as well as those who maintain a friendship with a member of an oppressed group, are less prejudiced (Miller 2002).

Findings about intergroup contact between whites and blacks are similar to studies about heterosexual intergroup contact with gay men and lesbians. Straight people who have interpersonal contact with gay men or lesbians, for example, reported more favorable attitudes toward same-sex-oriented individuals than those without any contact (Herek and Capitanio 1996). The effect of contact differed by sex; straight men indicated that they were significantly more uncomfortable around gay men than around lesbians, and straight women revealed that they were significantly more uncomfortable around lesbians than around gay men (Gentry 1987; Herek 2000, 2002). This suggests that straight people’s biased attitudes about same-sex lesbians or gay men may remain, despite contact with other-sex lesbians or gay men.

Many of the interview data support the contact hypothesis, with straight participants reporting that the close contact provided by their intersectional relationships has promoted a greater acceptance of lesbians and gay men. Before he met Jill, his thirty-one-year-old mixed-race lesbian friend, Paul, a thirty-seven-year-old straight white man, recalled that he had a limited understanding of homosexuality: “[I saw] San Francisco and all those extreme [images]—black leather—that’s what I always saw as gay. Then I met her, and she was no different than I am. Her dreams and desires are no different than mine.” Beyond challenging his stereotypes, Paul credited his friendship with broadening his perspective:
I used to see things that I interpreted as strange, or I’d be quick to say, “OK, they're freaks,” or something like that, whereas [Jill] has a talent for, whoever it is or whatever it is, kind of finding the good in that, and, you know, really looking at that rather than anything else and being intrigued by it and learning more about it. So I think I learned that piece of, like, everything I do now, even with work I notice it. Where I used to be quick to judge, now I’m like—I kind of look at it from a different angle.

Although Paul may never have held overtly prejudicial attitudes prior to his friendship with Jill, his comments expressed a limited understanding of the varying identities and experiences of gay men and lesbians. Such outcomes provide an example of how contact can positively influence attitudes in intersectional friendships even if to a somewhat limited extent (Herek and Capitanio 1996; Miller 2002).

Many of the straight interviewees identified their intersectional friend as their only close gay male or lesbian friend. As such, intersectional friends provided these straight individuals with their primary connection to lesbian and gay life. Antonio explained: “I had a few gay male friends before, and I had known lesbians before that, but [Justine] was the first one I got to know really well.” The closeness of the intersectional friendship bond has had a significant effect on how the straight participants understand lesbian and gay life. Accordingly, Patrick described how his friendship with Emily has influenced him:

Having an intimate relationship with a lesbian, and a lesbian couple, is another thing that I don’t have elsewhere—well, certainly not at this level of, you know, intimacy and history. I think it probably has helped to defuse whatever uncertainties or questions or presumptions about, you know—Like if that was totally unknown, and when I ran into other lesbians, say at the school or just in like general, I am probably, you know because of the friendship with Emily, more comfortable with all that. . . . [I] just wouldn’t have a sense of, well, how would this person feel about X because [she’s] a lesbian? You know? I wonder if [she] would feel different about this.

Patrick believed that his long-term, close friendship with Emily has made him more comfortable with lesbianism in general, something he carried with him into his other social interactions. According to several straight male interviewees, close contact with just one lesbian substantially and positively influenced attitudes about lesbians more generally, which is consistent with prior
research (Herek and Capitanio 1996; Miller 2002). This illustrates one facet of the contact hypothesis, which states that greater knowledge of oppressed groups can reduce both avoidance of interactions and uncertainty and discomfort in these interactions (Crosby et al. 1980).

In some cases, having one significant lesbian or gay male friend provided an opportunity for contact with extended networks of gay men and lesbians. Through her best friend, Ben, Ming (and her husband) had had opportunities to counter myths about gay men and lesbians:

[My husband and I] get to meet a lot of people who are gay. When I was [a student] at Sarah Lawrence, people around me, a lot of them [were] lesbians, but I don’t think I ever got to be their friend. But when Ben’s having a party and we’re invited, we get to meet a lot of gay people, who are just like us. I mean, they’re nothing different than what we are. They have the same problems, the same everything. So I just thought that was good to know, and that it’s very—in a way, it’s very comforting to know that they’re not weirdoes. It’s sort of confirming my belief that they’re . . . not weird and nobody he knows is weird.

By participating in Ben’s social circle, Ming recognized that she had commonalities with gay men and lesbians. This exposure debunked Ming’s interpretation of social expectations that gay men and lesbians are “weird.” Recognizing this potential of intersectional friendships, Cassandra, a twenty-nine-year-old white woman who self-identified as queer, explained, “It’s building bridges because straight people are socialized to be afraid of us and think that we’re going to affect their life or something, that there’s something abnormal about us.” In building the bridge between gay men’s and lesbians’ and straight people’s lives, some intersectional friendships provided an example of how straight people’s views of gay men and lesbians have changed beyond what they think only about their particular friend. In such cases, the one friend could have been viewed as the exception to the norm of same-sex-oriented individuals (Herek and Capitanio 1996). Instead, these contacts generated greater tolerance for and acceptance of difference.

Another aspect of the contact hypothesis is that it associates the reduction of intergroup bias to an increasing recognition of injustice (Dovidio et al. 2003). Learning about the discrimination suffered by oppressed groups while empathizing with members of those groups leads to the perception that those in the oppressed groups do not deserve to be the targets of prejudice (Stephan and
Finlay 1999). Attitudes developed within the context of friendship, however, do not necessarily motivate people to behave in ways that would lessen social inequality based on race or sexual orientation. Studies of whites’ attitudes toward blacks, for example, complicate the connection of friendship with reduced prejudice and discrimination. Such research found that with intergroup contact through friendship and acquaintance, whites’ feelings of closeness or warmth toward blacks changed more easily than negative character assessments of qualities such as dependability and intelligence (Jackman and Crane 1986). Such attitudes extended to the realm of social policy. For example, one study found that between two-thirds and three-quarters of white individuals with black friends persisted in opposing government measures to promote racial equality (Jackman and Crane 1986). Thus, while contact may cause whites to have more positive feelings about blacks, it does not necessarily inspire whites to advance structural change.

In fact, maintaining friendly relations among dominant and subordinate groups may reproduce inequality. According to Jackman (1994: 10), affinity is not antithetical to domination: “Affection, far from being alien to exploitative relations, is precisely the emotion that dominant groups wish to feel toward those whom they exploit. The everyday practice of discrimination does not require feelings of hostility, and, indeed, it is not at all difficult to have fond regard for those whom we subordinate, especially when the subject of our domination accedes to the relationship compliantly. To denote this phenomenon of discrimination without the expression of hostility, I use the term paternalism.” In turn, subordinates are kept complacent by the coercive love of the dominant group.

Jackman did not address how such intergroup relationships might affect sexual orientation, but the potential implications of her argument are that intersectional friendships could serve to reinforce social inequalities. In other words, it is possible that this coercive intergroup process of paternalism is one by which heterosexism may be reinforced. There was no clear evidence in the data that suggested paternalism influenced these intersectional friendships as individual entities, which was Jackman’s unit of theoretical focus. Yet, the tone of inter-group relations across sexual orientation may indeed lead to the perception that social inequalities are less significant because individual straight people and an individual gay man or lesbian carry on amicable, if not emotionally intimate relationships. Given that gay men and lesbians still do not enjoy many of the benefits of full citizenship in our society (e.g., same-sex marriages).
marriage, equal employment protection), the use of such relations as a barometer for a shrinking gap in social inequality is spurious.

Intergroup relationships, according to Seidman et al. (1999), have had positive outcomes for gay men and lesbians. Positive interpersonal relationships that cross categories of sexual orientation are key elements that enable gay and lesbian people to be open about their sexuality. As a result, gay men and lesbians, as a group, are more willing to disclose their same-sex identification to others, date and form relationships, and make their intimacies public. Yet as with race, these interpersonal gains do not always translate to the level of structural change (Seidman et al. 1999).

The Wisdom of Friendship

According to Goffman’s (1963) discussion of stigma, interaction links issues of interpersonal prejudice to larger social inequalities. Goffman theorized that a stigmatized identity such as a same-sex orientation shapes the nature of all social interaction, which extends to those enacted within the bonds of friendship. Because homosexuality is socially stigmatized, individuals who are same-sex-oriented experience their stigma through the process of interacting with others. Goffman based the majority of his discussion of stigma on “mixed contacts,” or interactions between those with a stigmatizing condition and those without, whom Goffman termed “normals.” This perspective is particularly relevant in the case of intersectional friendships, where, using Goffman’s characterization of identity, the gay male or lesbian member of the friendship is stigmatized. In such case, the straight half of the dyad is what Goffman (1963: 28) calls “wise,” which he defined as “persons who are normal but whose special situation has made them intimately privy to the secret life of the stigmatized individual and sympathetic with it, and who find themselves accorded a measure of acceptance [in the stigmatized group], a measure of courtesy membership in the clan.” Thus, the wise are individuals who do not carry the stigma of the individual with whom they are sympathetic, but their close connection to a stigmatized person causes them to be accepted to some extent by the stigmatized subgroup. A wise status emerges from this sense of understanding, empathy, and inclusion.

In reflecting on their intersectional friendships, straight women and men can be characterized as assuming the position of the wise. The straight interviewees’ comments suggested that the straight friend perceived himself or herself as having gained insight into lesbian and gay male life and felt a sense of
empathy with and connection to large gay male and lesbian communities. Carrie, a thirty-year-old straight white woman, discussed how her friendship with her gay roommate Ken, a thirty-five-year-old mixed-race man, has influenced her both personally and professionally:

I think I’ve learned a lot about what it would mean to be a gay male living in the Castro [district] in San Francisco and what comes up with how he’s had to position himself at [work]. I’ve definitely gotten, you know, just him talking through that. He taught middle school for a number of years and high school and [made] choices [about] coming out or not coming out to faculty and staff, and I think . . . [I] have more of an understanding of what goes on inside his head. . . . I mean, it’s probably made me a better teacher or better able to address the needs of kids who are gay or lesbian or questioning in terms of what they are going through or maybe what they need.

In being intimately privy and sympathetic to Ken and the challenges he has faced, Carrie occupied the position of the wise.

Other straight interviewees assumed a wise status in a broader sense by participating in social networks that included large numbers of lesbians and gay men. These relationships influenced their perceptions of and reactions to the intersectional friendships. For example, Dan, a forty-one-year-old white straight man, explained, “The culture and that kind of thing I know fairly well, and there’s a certain level of normalcy that has occurred with just sort of being accustomed, being used to, being exposed to it . . . . There was a period of time when one of my friends who was a lesbian worked on sets for plays in San Francisco venues. . . . I wanted to invite Brenda to these lesbian types of shows, and that was very ironic.” Dan’s comment illustrated how his network of lesbian and gay male friends has given him access to lesbian social life that Brenda did not have. Such contacts have also served to normalize lesbian relationships and culture for Dan.

Another straight male interviewee who felt very connected to and comfortable within LGBT communities was Stuart, a thirty-five-year-old straight white man. Stuart’s friend Cassandra characterized him as having a queer survival mentality (meaning that he creates community with others based on his feelings of having an outsider status) and a chosen family, both of which reflected his connection to lesbian and gay male community. Stuart partly credited his history of political activism with influencing his understanding of lesbian and gay male life:
I came from a political background of doing organizing and activism and examining a lot of stuff about myself, as well as society, and I think that I was able to—I mean, I’ve always had queer friends, but I think that because I have examined my own heterosexuality, I think that’s one thing that makes it easier to be friends with queer people. I think I know queer culture to some extent. You know, there are references that I get, whatever. I’m used to it. I also had a women’s studies minor when I went to college, so I know all that lesbo talk. I do know the history of dykes in the women’s movement, for instance. . . . I think that it’s hard to be friends with people if you don’t know the history they’re coming from. . . . I think there are also a lot of unexamined queers out there who would be happy to hang out with unexamined straight people, so, you know, it’s not like a prerequisite.

Stuart’s participation in queer communities, in addition to his awareness of his own relationship with heterosexual privilege, has given him an insider view into gay male and lesbian life. Thus, he recognized that, just as some straight people are not self-reflective about their positions, some gay men and lesbians also do not look at the world in a critical way. Occupying the role of the wise allowed for such an insider understanding.

Another way that intersectional friends in the study became privy to the lives of stigmatized individuals was through their own family lives. Barbara, a fifty-nine-year-old straight white woman, had a very close relationship with her lesbian daughter and was involved in a close intersectional friendship with Manuel, a forty-two-year-old gay white man. Having gay male friends and a lesbian daughter “helps me,” Barbara said. “I experience their lives and their frustrations, and it helps me to understand what gay people go through.” Manuel also connected Barbara’s sensitivity to her relationship with her daughter: “I can look to Barbara to be nurturing in a way my mother never would have been, not to say that I want to set her up as my mother. But there is the fact that she is a mother and she understands what rejecting a child would mean; there’s an empathy there. And I do believe that there is an empathy between us, with me being a gay man from an unsupportive family and her being a mother of a lesbian and very supportive. It would be impossible for me to say that that doesn’t affect the relationship.” In becoming wise in her relationship with her daughter, Barbara developed a connection to and understanding of gay male and lesbian life that she brought into her friendship with Manuel.

Barbara’s position as someone who was wise in the lesbian and gay male
community transcended beyond her friendship with her daughter and Manuel. She and her sixty-four-year-old white and straight husband, Bob, were both actively involved in Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gay Men (PFLAG) and met Manuel through the organization, which was set up specifically to advocate for straight people to become “wise” and provide support and empathy for LGBT individuals. Barbara and Bob joined PFLAG more than a decade ago when Barbara’s daughter came out to them as lesbian. Bob described how his relationships with gay men and lesbians in general, and with his thirty-year-old lesbian friend Sarah in particular, affected his awareness about LGBT issues: “My self-description is I am a recovering homophobe and find it very hard for any straight person to say, ‘Oh, I’m completely over all of that.’ I like to think that I’m on the road to becoming completely over all of that, but I’m going to have to admit that I’m a recovering homophobe trying to become over it. . . . But in that way, it does good for me to talk to Sarah. It helps me as much as I hope it helps her.” Bob’s comment reflected his awareness that, although he was in a wise position with respect to LGBT communities, he understood that homophobia is a deeply rooted belief system that needed to be actively resisted. Thus, his statements suggested that for straight people who have access to and benefit from heterosexual privilege, complacency is incompatible with being wise.

Sarah, who maintained meaningful friendships with both Bob and Barbara, explained their unique approach to serving as wise: “The reason they know I’m gay is that they came out as parents of a queer kid before I ever [came out to them as a lesbian], so it was like they opened up before I even had to say anything, and that’s not something I get very often, definitely [not] from grown-up straight people. It’s like, wow—they actually know how to come out [laughs].”

Sarah further reflected on Bob and Barbara’s support for the lesbian and gay male communities. For example, “[Barbara] went to San Francisco Pride,” she recalled. “I think [Barbara and Bob] have been parade monitors for the last two years, and this year she saw the dykes on bikes contingent, and she knows I have a motorcycle. She came to me and was like, ‘I want to ride on the back of your motorcycle next year.’ My mother would never—I mean, I couldn’t even tell my mother I had a motorcycle, and to have somebody like that, who’s sixty or something like that, want to be on the back of my motorcycle with a sign that says, like, ‘I love this person’—it’s huge.” Barbara’s desire to declare her love and support of Sarah publicly by participating in the pride parade alongside representatives of the larger LGBT community was a powerful moment of activ-
ism. Such involvement with the gay male and lesbian communities extended beyond casual interaction and achieved an integration of social worlds.

Expressions of Activism

Having gained an awareness of the marginalized social location that gay men and lesbians occupy through their intersectional friendship, many straight interviewees reported significant changes in their consciousness; some described themselves as willing to actively fight inequality. In such instances, straight participants recognized their intersectional friendship as a source of new insight into how heterosexism affects the lives of lesbians and gay men. Some straight members of intersectional dyads became acutely aware of how heterosexism affects lesbians and gay men when they either were mistaken for homosexual or were present when harassment occurred. Paul recalled a situation that arose when he borrowed Jill’s car:

I borrowed [Jill’s] car and didn’t realize it had the rainbow sticker thing on it. I had no idea it was on the car; nor would I have known what the hell it meant. But anyway, I came out, and somebody had—They didn’t write on the car, they had stuck [stuff] just all over it, and then [Jill] goes, “Oh, no. Not the sticker.” “What sticker?” But then I’m thinking, OK, well, even if they saw the sticker, how would they know—how the hell would they know? Then I’m thinking, well, shit, somebody actually sees me get out of the car, that sort of thing, then just—[They must have] actually sped back [to vandalize the car]. So then I guess that brought it home. I was pretty pissed. That was the first time—a small piece of experience that I’m sure she’s had to deal with.

Paul situated his anger in realizing not only that he had been the target of vandalism, but also that this intolerance was something Jill encountered or feared regularly. This insight gave Paul a greater degree of awareness and sensitivity toward lesbians and gay men. Paul explained that had he not experienced this, he probably would still be fairly intolerant, “just like all my other jock friends.”

Straight women in the study described themselves as more likely than straight men did to be motivated to take action on behalf of their gay male friends. Their own experiences with sexism may in part account for this, because it allows them to identify more easily with heterosexism (Rubin 1985). Many straight women described feeling compelled to act when they understood their friend to be the perceived target of attacks. In other instances, straight
women took on struggles because they considered how their gay male friend would be affected by the intolerance of some actions. Karyn, a thirty-one-year-old straight white woman, explained how her friendship with Pete, a thirty-two-year-old Asian American gay man, shaped her reaction to a situation that arose when she was working as a teacher at the same high school she and Pete had attended as students:

I went back to the same school that [Pete and I] went to, and there was this whole big issue that the drama teacher had chosen a play that was gay-themed, and it got censored by the administration, and . . . it started this whole ball of wax where I turned into a gay rights spokesperson. It was very much because of Pete, you know, because any time anybody said anything, I just took it very personally. I was like, there are other students in this school just like Pete who are listening to these kinds of things. . . . I just [took] it very specifically as though they were saying it specifically about him.

In personalizing expressions of heterosexism to imagine the effects on a close friend, many straight participants were motivated to attack expressions of prejudice. Monique, a thirty-one-year-old straight white woman, discussed how having Jesse, a thirty-one-year-old gay Latino, as her best friend has caused her to speak out against intolerance, not only on his behalf, but on behalf of all gay men: “To me, it’s the anger and the violence and the hatred that [gay men] are subjected to just makes no sense, and that’s what drives me absolutely crazy. It makes no sense—I mean, having a gay best friend has definitely increased my sensitivity. . . . I really hate injustice, know what I mean? And unfortunately there’s not a lot I can do about [stopping genocide in] Rwanda, but I can definitely do something when fifty-year-old conservative assholes make gay jokes in a derogatory way.” She continued:

I’ve tried to explain it to [people]. I’m like, look, even if you’re not standing outside of the Westboro Baptist Church holding up signs that say “God Hates Fags” or something, your little jokes and all that stuff, you’re just as responsible for Matthew Shepard’s death because you create an atmosphere in which . . . gay people are less than human or they have to make some kind of fucking apology to you for who they are. And, you know, [they say], “Oh, it’s OK as long as you keep it in the closet. Why do you have to be so up front about it?” So I would definitely say that my relationship with Jesse has brought that home to me in a very concrete way, not just a theoretical but a
concrete way, you know? The people who have the nerve to say to me that he’s going to go to hell or that God hates him or that he should hide some part of himself or that he should apologize in any way for the way God has made him or whatever, fuck that. 6

Whether in struggles to change school practices or by challenging those who make ignorant comments, these women used interactions to resist heterosexism. Monique’s comments, for example, demonstrate that she understands that heterosexism on the individual, interactional level is related to systemic heterosexism. Thus, she showed critical insight in connecting heterosexist attitudes to larger social inequalities; however, merely challenging interpersonal discrimination—either in attitudes or in actions—does not necessarily prompt widespread institutional change. According to Seidman et al. (1991: 27):

There has been a considerable relaxing of social repression at the personal and interpersonal levels. Many individuals have fashioned affirmative gay identities; the symbolic and social boundaries between gays and straights has lessened considerably . . . It is equally clear, however, that the U.S. remains a nation organized by the institution of heterosexuality. If it operates less through repression, and if it is less directed at regulating individuals at the interpersonal level, it remains embedded at the institutional level as manifested in law, social policy, civic disenfranchisement, institutional practices, and public culture.

Hence, as previously discussed, movement toward equality at the interpersonal level intervenes with prejudicial attitudes and helps to foster a greater acceptance of sexual difference. In addition, these interpersonal gains promoted a greater degree of freedom in living as an openly gay man or lesbian. Despite such advances, many effects of heterosexism remain at the institutional level. More formal efforts aimed at policy and systemic social reforms have emerged to address the persisting social inequality based on heterosexism.

The mission of PFLAG is to fight heterosexism on the individual and systemic levels. As noted, two straight members of the intersectional dyads in the sample, Barbara and Bob, were active PFLAG members. Barbara explained that she became an activist through her participation in PFLAG:

It’s helped me to be a better advocate for equal rights for gay people. We learned they have to have protection in employment—they can be fired for being gay or perceived as gay. When [the conservative right] tried to get the end
of the Employment Nondiscrimination Act, we went to Washington to lobby for that bill to pass. It still hasn’t passed yet [at the federal level]. So through their frustration, [I have become] a better advocate. I might not have paid any attention [to] things like domestic partnership, [but] we worked with PFLAG to get people signed up for domestic partnerships. It was quite a joy.

The political actions that occur through groups such as PFLAG are part of a growing contemporary movement of alliance across sexual orientation. Many of the other articulations of such alliances are based in schools, with thousands of chapters of the Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) forming throughout the country over the past decade (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub 2009; Sweat 2005). The organizations based in high schools (Herdt, Russell, Sweat, and Marzullo 2004) explicitly promote tolerance and diversity and seek to counter heterosexism, sexual prejudice, and gay bashing in school settings. GSAs encompass a range of activities, from social events to political organizing, and reflect a grassroots movement to promote sexual justice that relies on alliance across sexual orientations (Herdt et al. 2004). Within the context of the GSAs, it is common for teenaged women to become straight allies for their gay male friends (Herdt et al. 2004), a finding that is also consistent with the intersectional friendship data.

Beyond the high-school context, straight women have been active advocates on behalf of gay men. As discussed, this may be due to their own experiences with oppression based on sex and gender. One manifestation of this alliance was the organization Straight Women in Support of Homos (SWISH), founded in 2003 by a small group of straight women who wanted to participate in New York City’s Gay Pride Parade to support their gay male friends. According to the organization’s website, SWISH is “a gay–straight alliance [that] provides opportunities for straight women and men to contribute their time, energy, and talents to furthering the gay rights movement.” The stated mission of SWISH involved creating strategic partnerships with other organizations that promote education, advocacy, and antidiscrimination activities for LGBT communities. SWISH described its membership as made primarily up of “straight, savvy, cosmopolitan women and our dearest gay male friends. We have the pink, feminine aesthetic and the martini glasses and the kitschy chatter. But our pride for our gay friends, both men and women, runs deep. Politically and socially we are gay, through and through.” While SWISH may have relied on conventional images of gay men and straight women to promote the group, its goals were
political and intersectional alliance. It should be noted that none of the interviewees discussed any affiliation with, or awareness of, SWISH, yet the organization’s existence reflected a larger trend of straight women’s interest in the political well-being of their gay male friends. The process of straight women’s social bonding to gay men has been characterized by other scholars as a form of political resistance (Maddison 2000; Thompson 2004).

In the context of organizations such as Gay–Straight Alliances and SWISH, straight women (as well as some straight men) engage in acts of resistance to heterosexism. Some expressions of activism are limited to conversations, while others assume a long-term commitment to political and social change. All of these expressions are significant, however, in that they originate from or are shaped to some degree by intersectional relationships.

The most common way for straight people to become politicized in activist ways is by participating in mostly straight-defined organizations such as these. Yet many of the straight participants have been involved in events that were focused primarily on gay men or lesbians. As mentioned earlier, Barbara and Bob served as parade monitors for the San Francisco Freedom Day Parade, an LGBT pride event. In earlier years, Ruth, a 46-year-old straight white woman, rode on a float in the same parade with the members of her punk band, who were mostly queer. Leyla also led the way in helping Ethan feel more comfortable in the gay male community by introducing him to gay dance clubs and bookstores when he was newly out. At a gay pride event to which she says she “dragged” Ethan, Leyla had a run-in with protesters:

I created a scene with picketers, which I guess is weird, because the only heterosexual person who was there was the one who was getting mad and yelling at them. . . . I started prancing around [the picketers]. I kind of acted like I was a lunatic. And I basically said—You know, ’cause they were saying derogatory things about “places you would go to if you lived that lifestyle,” you know, “h-e-double hockey sticks”—So I told them, “I’d rather go to h-e-double hockey sticks than be on earth with you [the picketers].” And they left. Then the comment of the lady in front of us in line was, “That was intense.” And, you know, Ethan’s just sitting there laughing, covering his eyes, ’cause he was so embarrassed. But I knew he was kind of happy that I did it. He’s my best friend. Like I said, if anybody ever did anything to him, I don’t believe in violence, but if pushed or provoked, if somebody does something to him, I’m coming to his defense. That’s it. Period.
What prompts Leyla and other straight individuals in intersectional friendships to engage in gay-themed events while others remain involved in more straight-centered organizations is unclear. Many of the straight participants voiced similar devotion to their gay or lesbian friends but did not take part in any form of activism. Yet clearly, when faced with overt heterosexist actions, Leyla felt compelled to fight on Ethan’s behalf. In recognizing that she, as the only (perceived) straight person present, was the person who confronted the picketers, Leyla hinted at the possibility that her status as a heterosexual and its accompanying privilege—even at a gay-themed event—gave her a greater sense of entitlement and then outrage when she realized that her friend was one of the targets of the protest. Since Leyla was not the target of gay oppression, she was given the choice to act (hooks 1984), which subsequently may have made her the most likely person to speak out.

Enlightenment Interrupted

Overwhelmingly, the interviewees reported that through their intersectional friendship they had gained greater awareness of and sensitivity to the inequalities experienced by their lesbian and gay male friends. Many of the straight interviewees said that their friendships reduced their prejudice, provided them with a greater understanding of inequality, and motivated them to take political action on the behalf of gay men and lesbians. Even with these important benefits, however, involvement in an intersectional friendship does not necessarily promote the idea of liberation for all people. Nor does membership in an oppressed group always promote a greater understanding of inequality rooted in systems other than sexuality, such as class and gender (Ward 2000). Some comments reflected a class bias. For example, Mark, a twenty-year-old mixed-race gay man, commented that his relationship with Cristina, a thirty-year-old straight Latina who had many contacts in the beauty industry, gave him greater access to a social network to which he aspired. He described the network as “very much older, more sophisticated, non-trash. No spam-eating trailer-park trash, not that I hang around with those people. Very business-oriented. Different types of people. We went to a party the other night and it was, you know, good people.” Here Mark distinguished “good people” from “spam-eating trailer-park trash,” both of which clearly indicate social class. In addition, he clarified that he did not associate with people in the latter category and thus distanced himself from poor or working-class people. As a gay man, Mark is
subject to heterosexist oppression; however, his comments suggested that he did not have tolerance for those who suffer from class-based inequalities.

Class bias was conflated with gender bias in comments Antonio made about his lesbian friend, Justine. “My brother Milton saw [Justine] and, like, obviously she was dressed in rags,” he said, “so he knew [she was a lesbian].” This comment reflects a conflation of class and gender with lesbianism. To be clear, Antonio’s comment expressed his perception of his brother’s impression of Justine’s appearance. Yet Antonio was complicit in the assumption that dressing in “rags” equated with lesbianism. Antonio felt that Justine did not meet straight society’s expectations of gender, as such manifestations are class-conscious; thus, in Antonio’s eyes, his brother instantly could identify Justine as a lesbian.

More commonly encountered than class bias were straight participants’ comments that reflected either some degree of heterosexism or a method of distancing oneself from homosexuality. While some straight interviewees were very supportive of their intersectional friend, their words suggested they were not entirely comfortable with gay male or lesbian same-sex individuals. Throughout the interviews, comments by several participants indicated that their tolerance for people from traditionally disadvantaged communities has limitations.

Some straight interviewees expressed support of an other-sex gay or lesbian friend but were less comfortable with same-sex gay men or lesbians, a finding consistent with previous studies of attitudes about friendships that cross sexual orientation (Herek 2000, 2002). For example, although they supported their friends’ same-sex attractions and relationships, many straight participants admitted that they are uncomfortable thinking of themselves engaging in same-sex behavior. Paul, who is straight, said that although he is “pretty open-minded,” he is uneasy at the prospect of “two guys together.” Yet Paul’s lesbian friend, Jill, explained that when they went to gay clubs, Paul played around and flirted with other men. “He just eats it up,” she said. “He’ll dance with the guy. It’s very, very cool. And he’s very comfortable, until they touch him. You know, he doesn’t like to be touched by some guy or whatever, but he’s very comfortable with the whole gay thing.” Here, Jill presents Paul as free of bias. Given Paul’s own comments that he is uneasy at the thought of “two guys together,” along with Jill’s explanation that Paul is comfortable with gay men until they touch him (even though he reportedly has danced with them), this depiction does not seem entirely accurate. Paul took a clear line with regard to how
comfortable he felt with attention from gay men: he participated in interactions that were marked as gay until they included a physical dimension perceived as sexual. Feeling discomfort with unwanted physical attention is not necessarily an expression of heterosexism, yet it is difficult to ascertain what the implications or motivations for Paul’s behavior were, given the limited information on this topic provided by the interview.

Intersectional friendships’ potential to challenge social norms may be limited in the way that some dyads criticize other out-group members and thus reinforce certain stereotypes and inequalities. This was present in the way Mark, who is gay, and Cristina, who is straight, talked about lesbianism. “I joke around with her: ‘Cristina, you’re a lesbian,’ ” he said, “and she’s like, ‘Ew, no.’ She’s so not. . . . We’ve joked about her [sexual orientation], like, ‘Cristina, you want her,’ and Cristina’s like, ‘Ew.’ ” While Cristina seemed genuinely comfortable having a very close friendship with Mark and identified herself as having close lesbian friends during the interview, she was not comfortable with images of herself sexually involved with another woman. Because she is straight, this is consistent with her orientation. In responding to Mark’s teasing that she’s a lesbian by saying “Ew,” however, Cristina effectively distances herself from same-sex sexual behavior.

Perhaps the gay man–straight woman dyad acted as a unit that reinforced expectations of gender and sexuality more generally, so that women who acted in gender-nonconforming ways were viewed negatively and perceived as an out-group. In a previous chapter, I addressed how intersectional friendships in some instances served to police gender norms (although they also encouraged gender outlaw behavior). Particularly relevant was the case of gay men’s praising their straight female friends for successful accomplishments of conventional femininity (West and Zimmerman 1987). Lesbians are often perceived as gender-nonconforming because their choice of sexual object is another woman (Ponse 1978). Hence, in the case of Mark and Cristina, a dyadic influence may have been at work so that these friendship members colluded to deride lesbian culture because it does not abide by traditional gender norms. The data are not sufficient to support or refute this possibility. I did not ask specific questions about homosexuality in general; nor did I ask straight women questions about lesbians or straight men questions about gay men. Yet future research that qualitatively examines processes of reproducing inequality as the dyadic level would benefit this discussion.

Discriminatory attitudes sometimes persisted in intersectional friendships
in this study, although the more common result of such mixed contacts was growing awareness of inequality. According to many participants, having a deep intersectional friendship promoted a wider sense of open-mindedness overall simply through understanding how inequality affected a friend. Many gay men who felt limited by heterosexism in their lives described how they came to recognize gender inequality, as well. For instance, Pete discussed how his friendship with Karyn made him more politically astute with regard to sexism: “I do find myself standing up to other people is when it’s more related to women’s issues in general. I don’t think I’m capable of being a feminist, but I can certainly understand women’s issues and women’s studies. I don’t want to say I was very aware of things, but I wouldn’t have been at the level where I am now without what Karyn has brought in.”

In another such instance, Frank, a thirty-two-year-old white gay man, identified his lifelong friendship with Rebecca, a thirty-two-year-old mixed-race straight woman, as inspiring him to challenge sexism:

My relationship with Rebecca . . . has made me a very staunch feminist. One example I’m thinking of particularly [was] in grade school and junior high school, when she was really involved with the . . . whole beauty pageant scene, which I had no interest in. Unlike the typical fag who’s totally into that, I had no interest whatsoever. The only reason I was involved at all was because she was, and I knew it was important to her, and so I, you know, I got to sort of see the inside of that sometimes and frankly found it really disturbing. But, you know, I knew it was important to her, so it was something I kind of paid attention to as a result. . . . I think I had fairly feminist attitudes before that, but kind of being involved and seeing what it did to her as far as reinforcing her attitudes about self-image and beauty and what’s actually important to her life, you know, my reaction was to put those even farther away, to actively seek other ways of verifying myself.

Frank’s friendship with Rebecca provided him with a greater awareness of the effects of sexism vis-à-vis her childhood participation in beauty pageants. Thus, Frank developed a feminist awareness of how women’s worth is tied to appearance and has consciously decided not to perpetuate that bias in his own life.

Frank’s friendship with Rebecca also affected his understanding of racial oppression. “[Rebecca] was always the minority,” he said. “She is half-Japanese and was the only non-white child in our grade school—certainly in our grade level, and sometimes in the entire school—which is certainly not true [of the
town] anymore. The town has changed a lot since then. But that for her was always a challenge, and I think that being with her as she’s experienced a lot of the difficulties that [prejudice and discrimination] involved has given me a much deeper appreciation for any kind of otherness or differentness and helped me to understand what it meant to be gay and to be a minority.” Through his secondhand experience of Rebecca’s status as the only mixed-race person in her town, Frank developed greater sensitivity about living as an “other” in a social context. This understanding has helped Frank shape his understanding of his own gayness in the heteronormative social context. While this recognition did not necessarily motivate Frank to engage in political activism, the awareness brought about by his connection to Rebecca was a politicized one with respect to creating a sense of alliance across categories of difference.

Many gay men in the sample addressed how exposure to sexism through close friendships with straight women has made them resist gender norms more actively. Such revelations, however, were largely absent in the straight men’s comments. None of the straight men reported having become a feminist because of a close friendship with a lesbian, although two of the straight men in the sample stated that they had long histories with radical politics more generally. Several straight men identified their lesbian friend as having sensitized them to issues of lesbianism; however, none discussed the sex and gender oppression the friend faced as a woman. Because the straight men did not address gender as an issue in the friendship, it is difficult to ascertain whether they did not see lesbians as suffering from gender oppression or whether straight male privilege allowed them to ignore sexism altogether.

THE POLITICS OF INTERSECTIONAL FRIENDSHIP

As shown throughout this chapter, the potential for intersectional friendships to be political was realized along a continuum. Interactions with straight people gave gay men and lesbians a greater sense of security in participating in the larger straight society. In addition, the shared history and affinity present in intersectional friendship, and bred through contact, led to the lessening of prejudicial attitudes for straight individuals. In more significant cases, straight individuals served the role of the wise in gay male and lesbian communities, which resulted in a blending of social worlds across sexual orientation. In many cases, the wise became activists, either momentarily in response to heterosexist comments or in longer-term organizational commitments to institutional change through participation in PFLAG or Gay–Straight Alliances.
Although intersectional friendships often broadened consciousness of heterosexist discrimination, many individuals remained unaware of other forms of oppression and may have reinforced social inequality through their comments and actions. Hence, many intersectional friendships advanced political outcomes, but despite the gains made within and because of these bonds, these relationships were not utopian.

By participating in intersectional friendships, the interviewees engaged in bonds that can be characterized as political. By challenging the social order through the creation of unlikely alliances, friendship bonds to some degree are political. For example, friendship among and between gay men and lesbians takes on a political dimension when situated in a contemporary social landscape that threatens their access to equal political, legal, and social rights and privileges. According to Nardi (1992: 116), “Gay friendship can be seen as a political statement, since at the core of the concept of friendship is the idea of being oneself in a cultural context that may not approve of that self. For some, the need to belong with others in dissent and out of the mainstream is central to the maintenance of self and identity (Rubin). The friendships formed by a shared marginal identity thus take on powerful political dimensions as they organize around a stigmatized status to confront the dominant culture in solidarity.”

While Nardi’s findings suggest the strongest of friendship bonds are likely to occur between those with a common marginal identity, friendships between those without a shared marginalized identity do also form. In this study, participants maintained strong bonds without a shared marginalized position. Participants demonstrated how strong bonds emerge in friendships that cross categories of oppression. Thus, while the individuals in intersectional friendships did not share the same marginal identities and thus did not organize around that stigmatized status, the bonds of friendship in which they engaged do confront aspects of the dominant culture and create a sense of solidarity.

In building a strong connection across sex and sexual-orientation categories, these intersectional friendships challenge the idea that gay men and lesbians are fundamentally and universally different from straight people. Such a move debunks any possible explanation for differential treatment, both socially and politically. Furthermore, through their close connection to gay men and lesbians, straight members of social networks may develop understandings of heterosexism, which may motivate them to become activists for LGBT rights. Perhaps, then, one of the most radical aspects of intersectional friendships is simply that they bring groups from different places in the social hierarchy
together. Such an act complicates one of the primary expectations of friendship: that it is essential that people who enter into this voluntary bond be social equals (Jerrome 1984; Wiseman 1986). Defying this expectation suggests that friendship is a context in which it is possible to contest social inequality on the interpersonal level, a finding consistent with the tenets of contact theory and Goffman's discussion of stigma.

Thus, intersectional friendships have both progressive and repressive tendencies. On the one hand, through close and mixed contacts, the intersectional friendships that I studied promoted awareness and tolerance on the interpersonal level. On the other hand, the friendships showed a limited ability to create social change at the societal level, despite the actions of many straight individuals motivated by gay male and lesbian friends. In addition, while these intersectional friendships reportedly provided both a greater appreciation for difference and a context in which heterosexism was challenged, discriminatory attitudes coexisted with movement toward social progress.

Analyzing the inner working of the intersectional friendship, particularly with regard to moments of activism and unrealized political potential, is an important avenue for understanding how and why inequality persists at the level of interaction. While blending the social worlds of gay men, lesbians, and straight people is one means to fight oppressive conditions, the full potential of these bonds remains unrealized. Yet the knowledge that friendship sensitizes some individuals enough to fight discrimination at both the interactional and the institutional level provides hope for wider social change.