Odd Couples
Muraco, Anna

Published by Duke University Press

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

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64100

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2279205
I think maybe, we all have different cultural experiences and perspectives and . . . the role of women in society is not a central part of the power structure and the role of gay people in general are not central in the power structure, might increase the ability to dialog around differences and similarities because you come from something that is not automatically rewarded.

—Ken, a thirty-five-year-old mixed-race gay man

The intersectional friendships that I have highlighted here exist in the shadow of both the social progress made toward acceptance of homosexuality and the legal battles to deny the civil rights of gay men and lesbians. As I completed this manuscript, the culture wars over same-sex marriage were being played out and rehashed in state referenda and political debates. For much of the 1990s and 2000s, propositions limiting the rights of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals have been placed on ballots, have passed, and have been followed in many states. New Hampshire, Iowa, and New York legalized same-sex marriage, while voters in California, Arizona, and Florida passed state propositions that serve as the most recent incarnations of Defense of Marriage Act prohibiting same-sex marriage. The proposition in California came about as a result of the California Supreme Court’s decision in May 2008 that judged the prohibition of same-sex marriage unconstitutional; as of this writing, the court battles are continuing. This issue likely will play out in the judicial courts and in the courts of public opinion for years to come.

Hence, despite Seidman’s (2002) observation that interpersonal relations and feelings of mainstream society toward LGBT individuals are more favorable and accepting than in past decades, those who oppose the civil rights of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals insist on trying to regulate family life by limiting access to it. This is the social context in which the intersectional friendships
presented here have thrived. On the one hand, the friendships are an extreme example of Seidman’s claim that interpersonal relationships have shaped cultural norms so that overt acts of homophobia are less tolerated than they were in previous eras. In fact, we could characterize intersectional friendships as being the model for how affinity across social categories leads to greater understanding and alliance. On the other hand, despite these overall positive feelings, gay men and lesbians face real legal obstacles to civil rights and protections as a result of those who believe same-sex-oriented individuals should not be allowed to marry, parent, and have equal employment protections under the law.∞

The existence of intersectional friendships within our contemporary social context raises two questions. What implications does this context have for the future of intersectional friendships? And what implications do intersectional friendships have for the future? In this final section, I address how we can look to intersectional friendships as a model for postmodern relationships and political alliance and discuss the potential for shifting social contexts to influence the future of intersectional friendships.

INTERSECTIONAL FRIENDSHIPS AS A MODEL
FOR POSTMODERN RELATIONSHIPS

It is almost a cliché to say that the world is globalizing at increasing rates. Yet the reality is that, as a result of global mobility, most of us interact with people very unlike ourselves at some point during the day, be it at the grocery store or at the post office, in the classroom, on the Internet, at the airport, or on the subway. In many cases, we form acquaintanceships, if not friendships, with some of these individuals. While demographic similarity is one of the most agreed-on components of friendship formation and maintenance (Brehm 1985; Weinstock 2000), friendships that bridge sexual orientation, sex, race, class, and religion provide close connection, as well as meaningful insight into the lives of others. Friendships across categories of difference can create strong social and political bonds that facilitate alliance and understanding (de Souza Briggs 2007; Miller 2002). Thus, intersectional friendships can provide insight not only into friendships between gay men and straight women and between lesbians and straight men, but also into social relationships between and among people from different social locations.

The data from the present study are consistent with these prior findings but also add a layer of complexity because stereotypes and conventional beliefs about gender, sexuality, and family are also reinforced within the intersec-
tional friendships. The tensions between convention and social progress are not unique to intersectional friendships. Prior research about friendships between gay and straight men show that there are limits to the straight men’s acceptance of different dimensions of gay men’s lives and identities (Fee 1996; Price 1999). These limitations—in particular, straight men’s avoidance of conversations about gay men’s romantic relationships (Price 1999)—are consistent with Seidman’s (2002) assertion that favorable feelings of acceptance on the interpersonal level have been stunted. Yet we do not know whether such limitations exist regardless of whether a friendship crosses categories of sex, sexual orientation, religion, or race. In other words, some dimensions of friendship itself, or of relationships more generally, may allow individuals to accept a person’s individual identity while ignoring, or even rejecting, aspects that are viewed as distasteful or that cause discomfort. In the intersectional friendships I studied, for example, Antonio did not discuss Justine’s devotion to a pagan religion with her because that caused conflict between them, given his Catholicism. In future research, a useful topic for study would be to focus on the positive and negative dimensions of various friendship types to see how people negotiate the distinctions. In particular, it would be helpful to know whether the tensions are related to differences in social locations, different individual expectations for behavior, or lack of tolerance for these differences more generally.

2In referring to relationships as “postmodern,” I mean that they are various and fluid (e.g., Stacey 1996); one size does not fit all in terms of norms and expectations of the contemporary social context, which also is continually shifting. Friendship may be the most postmodern of relationships; typically, people maintain a multiplicity of friendships, none operating just like any others. Thus, all friendships are remarkable. Ultimately, the intersectional friendships examined here are remarkable particularly because the individuals in the relationships view crossing identity categories as unremarkable, which is similar to findings about interracial marriages (Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995). When asked to characterize how identity affects their intersectional friendship, most of my study participants indicated an awareness of how their own social locations differed from that of their intersectional friends. Gay male and lesbian interviewees were the most likely to identify the intersectional nature of their friendships as presenting challenges, which ranged from straight friends’ expecting them to embody stereotypes to having different access to normative family life. In general, most of the participants admitted during the interviews that they rarely thought about the friendship as crossing sex or sexuality catego-
ries and that they had thought about the implications of this difference more during our conversation than they ever had before—and then only because I prompted them with questions. When considering their relationships, the interviewees clearly saw their intersectional friends first and foremost as friends, and secondarily as a bond that crossed categories of sex and sexual identity. Yet we cannot overlook that sex and sexual-identity categories affect how these friendships operate. It is precisely because of their intersectional nature that the friendships uniquely navigate the strong social norms of compulsory heterosexuality and social scripts that dictate male–female interactions be romantic. In other words, identity matters.

The intersectional friendships in the study also are instructive in showing how people have assembled postmodern families. In these friendships, people unrelated by origin or by law formed family ties. While this is not a new concept, particularly for immigrant communities and for economically oppressed and LGBT communities (Chatters, Robert, and Jayakody 1994; Ebaugh and Curry 2000; Stack 1974; Weston 1991), choosing to integrate gay and straight people into one family structure reinforces Stacey’s (1996, 1998a) definition of the postmodern family as varied and fluid. More significant is the inclusion of straight people in chosen family structures. Many straight interviewees had access to normative family structures and yet also chose to add their lesbian or gay male friend to their families. Likewise, the lesbians and gay men in the study saw fit to incorporate their straight friend into their chosen families. Contrary to conservatives’ contemporary attempts to limit definitions of family, individuals involved in intersectional friendships define family according to the durability and significance of relationships.

Shifts in the contemporary social context have made alternative or postmodern family structures all the more significant. Marriage is not compulsory, even for childbearing. Those who marry wait longer to do so. In the past decade, we have seen the rise of the “urban tribe” (Watters 2003) and the “quirkyalones” (Cagen 2004), labels applied primarily to urban young adults of all sexual orientations, sexes, and races, who construct family relationships from friends as a way to foster community without formal commitments. These informal family structures rub shoulders with single-parent families, same-sex-parented families, multigenerational families, immigrant families, grandparent-headed families, military families who experience deployment of a loved one, and other variations of family life. The constellation of these various structures represents postmodern relationships; intersectional friendships are one point in the web
of social connection that can help us understand how to navigate intimate connections across categories of difference.

OTHER AVENUES FOR INTERSECTIONAL RESEARCH

The work presented here does not address the constellation of possible friendship combinations across sex and sexual orientation. When I started this project, my goal was to develop a greater understanding of friendships between gay men and straight women, and between lesbians and straight men, to see how men and women interact in the presumed absence of sexual tension and expectations. Thus, I limited the sample to the intersectional friendships included in the book: friendship pairs between gay men and straight women and between lesbian women and straight men. This limitation, while necessary for the scope of this project, excluded other pairings, such as the same-sex friendships of lesbians and straight women; the same-sex friendships of gay men and straight men; same-sex and other-sex bisexual friendships; and so on. To develop the fullest possible understanding of how sex and sexual orientation affect close friendships and social relationships more generally, and to improve the current state of knowledge, future research should be expanded to include these dimensions and provide a direct comparison of friendship types.

Expanding studies of intersectional friendship to include a multitude of sex and sexual-orientation pairings is complicated, however, by the fluidity of sexual orientation—and, sometimes, sex (Butler 1990). In some ways, sexual orientation has a temporal quality in that someone who identifies as a lesbian today may begin to identify as bisexual, which means that her relationships may also be affected by shifting identities. Likewise, sample participants who identified as heterosexual at the time of the interview could become involved in same-sex relationships or engage in same-sex sexual behavior or begin to identify as gay men or lesbians, or, alternatively, a gay man or lesbian in the sample might decide that he or she is bisexual or straight. Each of these shifts would affect whether friendships and relationships are defined as intersectional and might require a different strategy or degree of navigation of attraction and expectations within the friendship.

Gender identity is another dimension in these friendships that deserves further exploration. Much of the discussion in this study relied on easily understood stereotypical or conventional expectations of gender to illustrate how gender operates in intersectional friendships. We know, however, that gender identity and expression, like sexual orientation, is a fluid construct (Butler
A future study that included an examination of the influence of gender identity and expression on friendship interactions would provide a new layer of understanding. A more nuanced examination of the distinctions between gender expression by gay men, straight men, lesbians, and straight women would also be informative, because it would provide greater knowledge of how sex and gender are and are not connected to close social relationships. Specifically, in a study of friendship between lesbians and straight men, gender expression for both individuals may affect how they interact together and are perceived by others. A femme gender expression in a lesbian may increase outsiders’ perception that the friends are a heterosexual couple, whereas a butch gender expression would likely signal other interpretations of the relationship. Similarly, a gender-nonconforming straight man might be a more interesting candidate for friendship with a lesbian because he might seem less concerned about preserving his masculinity through thoughts and actions. The differences between and among gender variations for gay men, lesbians, straight men, and straight women would provide an even deeper understanding of how gender, as a fluid category that does not necessarily co-occur with sex (Ponse 1978), influences social interactions and relationships.

A related issue is the lack of research about transgender friendships and relationships more generally. We know virtually nothing about transgender men’s and women’s relationships beyond the dramatized stories of how they and their loved ones have dealt with transitioning or being transgender in a gender-normative society (see Witten 2004). Very little research exists about transgender individuals’ relationships beyond their romantic partnerships. An exploration of friendships amongst transgender individuals and between transgender men and women and those of other gender identities is needed to provide evidence for how gender, shifting and non-normative, shapes and affects friendship ties and relationships more generally.

The present research provides a glimpse of how these intersectional friendships operated at one point in time. We do not know, therefore, whether the gay men’s fears that their family ties with straight women would sever when the women married came to fruition. We do not know whether the pairs continue to grow old together. And we do not know how these friendships navigated time and distance. Because they are like other friendships, intersectional friendships must also break up or experience conflict over time (Duck and Wright 1993; Rose and Serafica 1986). I wonder, for example, whether these friendships are
still intact today. If not, what caused the rift? Was it the “darker side” of friendships that I discussed in chapter 2 that severed ties? Was it parenthood and the long-term commitment of one (or both) of the friendship members that made her or him less present in the friendship? Another possibility is that the friendships are still intact but over time have become less intense or intimate. If this is the case, I wonder: do the friends still consider the relationships family? Do straight women still regard themselves as gay men in straight women’s bodies? Are the straight friends still acting as allies to gay men and lesbians? These lingering questions can, to some degree, be attributed to the nature of cross-sectional research: if we conduct interviews at one point in time, we only can address the information provided by the individuals in that specific context. Conducting longitudinal research that follows the intersectional friends over several decades would be a useful strategy to address many of the questions that remain about intersectional friendships, including the shifting of identities and evolution of the relationships.

**SHIFTING SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND THE FUTURE OF INTERSECTIONAL FRIENDSHIPS**

As I have mentioned, one of the most hotly contested contemporary issues is same-sex marriage. While other nations (e.g., Argentina, Canada, the Netherlands, Spain) have granted equal rights of marriage to same-sex couples, same-sex marriage remains an issue controlled at the state level in the United States. Despite the ongoing battles, it seems inevitable, given that state courts consistently have upheld the denial of same-sex marriage as unconstitutional, that same-sex marriage eventually will be legally sanctioned in the United States. The provision of equal access to marriage would be a positive civil-rights decision for gay men and lesbians that likely will have ramifications for intersectional friendships.

As I discussed in chapter 3, intersectional friendships often are familial connections. Gay male participants perceived their familial ties with straight women to be more transient or in jeopardy as a result of her entrance into heterosexual marriage and family life. What, then, will happen when same-sex marriage becomes more commonplace? If gay men and lesbians gain access to formalized family life through marriage and parenthood, will intersectional friendships still play significant roles in family building? While we cannot predict the future, if we take straight people’s family lives as a basis for com-
parison, intersectional friendships may be difficult to maintain if they are competing for attention and commitment with marriage and children (Pogrebin 1987; Werking 1997).

Perhaps, gay men and lesbians will be better than their straight counterparts have been at maintaining intersectional friendships by balancing the demands of marriage and parenthood. The history of gay men’s and lesbians’ creation of family formations and social networks that exist outside social norms—in other words, the building of queer family networks—suggests creativity in and commitment to managing and blending family and friendship ties (Weston 1991). Yet as is true for straight men and women, not all gay men and lesbians wish to marry and parent and thus will continue to build and maintain chosen-family structures. Still, as gay men and lesbians gain the rights of equal marriage and parenthood, their chosen-family bonds with intersectional friends may not be as significant because of commitments to formal, nuclear family life. In other words, just as Ben and Connor voiced concerns about how their friendships with Ming and Nadia, respectively, would weather the women’s entrance into straight marriage and parenthood, many more intersectional friendships may feel, and be, tenuous.

Norms of sexual behavior are another dimension of the social context that appear to be ever evolving. Here, again, a culture war exists in the tension between “abstinence only” as the federally mandated and funded form of sex education in public schools and the sensationalized public panic over teenagers’ “hooking up” and entering into casual, rather than committed, sexual relationships (Curtis and Hunt 2007; Irvine 2006; Manning, Giordano, and Longmore 2006). These public tensions affect how people conduct their personal relationships in myriad ways. Currently, the norms dictate that sex and friendship are mutually exclusive, as I discussed in chapter 5. Yet the terms “friends with benefits,” “hooking up,” and “fuck buddies” are commonplace descriptors of friendships that are close and that include sex but not commitment and interactions whose purpose is sex that are perhaps friendly, but fleeting.

One issue to emerge from the regulation of sexual and relational life is a social norm that dictates the mutual exclusivity of sex and friendship. This friendship norm certainly reflects a social order that gives primacy to monogamous, married families headed by straight men. The social norm of friendship’s and sexual behavior’s being mutually exclusive also shapes intersectional
friendships, not necessarily in the dynamic between the friends, but through its influence on the greater social context. In particular, there is a pressure for individuals to be either friends or romantic partners. Also, these friends must not be seen as a barrier or threat to an existing or future romantic relationship, which is socially valued as the most important kind of relationship. These unwritten rules are expected to translate into consistent behavior between friends; clearly, such expectations are difficult to navigate. Because these dynamics are not expected to be relevant in intersectional friendships, such friendships seem ideal to their members despite the challenges that the friends themselves voiced throughout my study.

All categories of the friends who were interviewed also discussed lack of competition between themselves and their intersectional friends as a great benefit of the relationships. Most straight men and women in the study turned to lesbians and gay men, respectively, to provide intimate bonds that did not come with pressure to conform to compulsory heterosexuality and normative gender behavior. Gay men identified unconditional love free from sexual pressure and interpersonal competition as a benefit of their friendships with straight women. Lesbians valued, among many other attributes, straight men’s company in public situations to deflect unwanted sexual attention from men. Thus, several of the listed benefits of intersectional friendships were related to freedom from managing sexual tension or expectations of a romantic relationship that might be present in other friendships or interactions.

To a certain extent, intersectional friendships may have emerged as way to cope with repressive social norms that regulate sex, sexual orientation, and gender. Without question, the interviewees involved in these friendships have forged meaningful and intimate bonds in myriad ways, and these friendships might have emerged in any social context. Yet the friendships emerged and were maintained in a contemporary social context in which one of the highest-rated television shows was the sitcom Will and Grace, about the friendship between a gay man and a straight woman, and one of the most popular daytime talk shows was hosted by Ellen DeGeneres, who openly identifies as a lesbian and has been involved in highly publicized same-sex relationships. These friendships also emerged as same-sex marriage was beginning to be hotly contested across the United States. Much like the tensions within the intersectional friendships, a tension exists in the surrounding social context. On the one hand, gay men and lesbians are part of our cultural consciousness and, for some of us who are
heterosexual, fully integrated into our everyday lives in the roles of best friend, brother, aunt, co-worker, mother, or neighbor. On the other hand, gay men and lesbians continue to be subjected to repressive social regulation and viewed as “other” by many heterosexuals. In righting some of the injustices experienced by gay men and lesbians, both historically and in the present, we have come far, but we still have a long way to go.