Odd Couples

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Odd Couples: Friendships at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation.
Here I provide details about the composition of the participants and about the research methodology to give readers a full picture of how I conducted the study. Some of this material is presented in the introduction, but I repeat details, such as the demographic information and the process of collecting data, to give the clearest account of my methodological choices.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected in face-to-face interviews I conducted with fifty-three people who were engaged in twenty-six close intersectional friendship dyads and one triad at the time of the interviews, which occurred between October 2002 and August 2003. The participants were primarily residents of the San Francisco Bay Area and surrounding counties, although six of the interviewees lived in Southern California. The interviewees self-identified their gender as male or female and their sexual orientation as straight, gay, or lesbian (although one identified as “queer”). The total sample included twenty-eight women (thirteen lesbian, fourteen straight, one queer) and twenty-five men (thirteen gay, twelve straight). There are more women than men in the study because I was unable to interview the male halves of the dyads in two cases; also, the triad included in the study was composed of two women and one man. The participants ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-four, with a median age of thirty-two; the racial composition was 59 percent white, 17 percent Latino, 19 percent Asian, and 4 percent black. Appendix 1 contains a list of participants with corresponding demographic information and identifies her or his intersectional friend.

The participants were recruited using a convenience and purposive snowball sampling method, in which one participant refers the researcher to another, beginning with my contacts in the San Francisco Bay Area lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities and expanding through the participants’ social networks. These methods were ideal for sampling intersectional friends because the targeted population is not easily located using other methods of data collection. For example, building a random and representative population sample would have been exceptionally difficult, because the actual population size of intersectional friends is unknown. Some participants were
contacted through LGBT community organizations in the Bay Area and recruited when they received a flyer I had distributed, participated in meetings where I had made requests, or saw advertisements on community bulletin boards. In my efforts to find such friends, I distributed recruitment letters saying that, in order to learn more about friendship, I sought to interview adults who were part of a close friendship that included a gay man and a straight woman or a lesbian and a straight man and listed my contact information for those who might be interested in participating. The advertisements I placed on the community bulletin boards had two different taglines: “Any lesbian/straight male friends out there?” and “Will and Grace?” (in reference to the television show). The text of the advertisements was similar to that of the recruitment letters sent to the community organizations.

**THE INTERVIEWS**

I conducted each interview according to the same schedule (see appendix 3), although I did not strictly abide by the order of the prompts and added questions when relevant. The interview schedule asked questions about five primary areas: friendship formation and maintenance, the significance of these friendships, the role of the friendship within the participant’s larger social network, the role of gender and sexuality in the friendship, and the individual’s contributions to and experiences of the friendship. The questions were designed to prompt discussion about these friendships according to the listed themes, but other topics also emerged throughout each interview. Overall, the interviews flowed like structured conversations between participants and me. I attempted to create rapport with the participants from our first contact, whether it was by phone or by email. I first explained that my interest in studying intersectional friendships stemmed from academic concern, as well as personal significance, given my own significant intersectional friendship. The interviews lasted forty-five minutes to two hours and were tape recorded (with permission). All interviews were conducted in a convenient setting chosen by the participant. For example, some were in public settings, such as cafés and libraries, while others took place at the residence of the participant. I interviewed members of twenty-four friendships individually and maintained confidentiality about what one friend said about the other. In other words, I would not share what one friend had said about the other, even when asked directly. In one case, I interviewed both members of the friendship dyad together, at their request. In another instance, both members of a lesbian couple were present in the interview to discuss their straight male friend. Thus, I interviewed members of a total of twenty-six friendship units.

While I had easy rapport with most of the interviewees, a couple of interviews were awkward. The awkwardness seemed to stem from the interviewees’ uncertainty about my sexual orientation. Despite my attempts to be clear that my own intersectional friendship was with a gay man and, under the parameters of the study, it would follow that I identify as a straight woman, two interviewees perceived me as lesbian. In these cases, I clarified my identity so as not to mislead them into thinking they were disclosing information to someone from their identity in-group. I did not disclose my identity from the outset of the interactions as a general practice because I feared that doing so would be
viewed as a heterosexist distancing mechanism. When asked, I was always very clear about my identification.

In a few cases, the interviewees were either my acquaintances or were referred to me by a member of my social network, so such confusion was minimized. Creating rapport was easier with these interviewees, because we could start by talking about the person (or people) we knew in common. Occasionally, however, having a shared acquaintance seemed to make the participant more guarded about the information she or he shared with me. For example, one interviewee hesitated to tell me much about her intersectional friend’s reaction to a recent breakup, because she perceived me to be a member of her friend’s larger social network. Another interviewee asked me whether his frank discussion of the frustration he feels with his intersectional friend (a mutual acquaintance) made me uncomfortable. In addition, some individuals assumed that because I had been referred by an acquaintance, I knew more about their lives than I actually did, so I often needed to ask clarifying questions in the interviews.

In general, my identity and presentation seemed beneficial to the interview process. Although heterosexual, I am comfortable maneuvering in and out of gay male, lesbian, and straight communities, because I have an extensive social network of close relationships that includes individuals from all of these groups. Also, I am relatively young and female, and I lived in an urban neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area while I was conducting the interviews. These characteristics, combined with my experiences in an intersectional friendship, which I shared with participants during the interview process, gave me a fair amount of access to the intimate details of the participants’ lives.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEW DATA

To preserve the confidentiality of the participants, I use pseudonyms as identifiers. Also, throughout the book I identify the ages and occupations of the individuals or industries in which they worked only when that is relevant to the details of the analysis. In such cases, I slightly alter the age and occupation so they coincide with the individual’s general age range and area of employment. In doing so, I make every attempt to make it difficult to identify which participant said what, particularly because detailed descriptions of situations or incidents could make the statements easily identifiable, especially to a close friend. It goes without saying that as someone who studies friendships, I feel that it is important to protect participants and avoid potentially damaging those relationships.

Data were coded into the most prevalent themes and then qualitatively analyzed under the principles of grounded theory, which uses a systematic set of procedures to develop and inductively derive theory about a phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Initially, I noted the themes that emerged from participant responses to interview questions and then reviewed each interview transcript line by line with these themes in mind (Muraco 2006). As I coded, I electronically cut and pasted the pieces of the interview data into thematic files (see, e.g., Lofland and Lofland 1995), which eventually became the chapters of this volume.

Throughout the coding process, participants generally were treated as individual cases rather than as dyads. To gain the fullest possible understanding of individuals'
perceptions and meanings of similar experiences; however, particular responses from both members of the dyad were paired during the analysis process. For example, in the examination of the kinship functions fulfilled by friends, I compared the responses of both dyad members to see whether there were differences by sex and sexual orientation in the types of assistance provided.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In addition to improving our understanding of intersectional friendships, this study presents a model for examining social relationships more generally. Rather than simply asking participants about their social network and identifying when they had friends of different sexualities and gender from themselves, I sought to examine one significant social pairing to investigate the inner workings of this relationship with a degree of depth. To this end, I interviewed both members of the friendship to understand both sides of the relationship from the perspective of each member, but I interviewed them separately in an attempt to remove the dyadic effect that interviewing the individuals together might have had.

In the one case where I interviewed the friends together—a situation that was presented to me when I arrived to conduct an interview with what I had understood to be only one of the friends—the interview process was much different from the others. Watching that particular dyad interact gave me greater insight into the dynamics of the friendship and allowed each of the friendship members to build on recollections, correct inaccurate memories, and tell each other how much they valued the relationship. While examining interactions between all participant dyads would have further illuminated the dynamics of these bonds, such a methodological approach would also have produced a study that focused more on the processes than the individual meanings of interaction.

Conducting the research with friends interviewed separately, however, provided information that likely would not have been disclosed in contexts in which both friends were present. Many individuals, for example, expressed frustration about the friend to me as way to explain the challenges these friendships face. Some frustrations emerged in reaction to "bad" decisions the friend had made, while others surfaced as one friend described past struggles or some negative patterns of behavior in the relationship. For example, I probably would not have learned about the sexual tension present in some of the intersectional friendship bonds if I had interviewed the participants in each other's company, because while describing those tensions interviewees referred to the fact that they and their friends did not discuss it. Moreover, I suspect that most of the individuals in the study would not have discussed a friend's compromised mental health and past suicidal feelings in their presence, as many of these conversations were preceded by, "He won't hear this, will he?" I have also chosen not to include some of these confidences in my analyses, because they were said "off the record" and could be hurtful to participants' friendship. It is my greatest goal to avoid damaging the friendships I study by carefully monitoring the ethical ramifications of sharing particular material.

Interviewing the friends separately also allowed me to get at some of the challenging issues operating in intersectional friendships. It is common for researchers of friend-
ship to talk about friendships in idealized ways since friends often describe their own relationships in ways that reflect a wish for such a relationship more than their actual experiences of such bonds (Rubin 1985). Although I did not set out to focus on the negative aspects of these relationships, I did want to portray friendships with all the complexities they hold, particularly when they cross social locations. Differences in social power and privilege influence significant and intimate relationships, and it is valuable to understand how these elements affect intersectional friendships.

Throughout the interviews, most of the intersectional friendships were described in primarily positive ways, despite the disclosure of sometimes painful and difficult periods of time the friends had experienced together. Conducting the interviews, with very few exceptions, was a wholly positive experience for me. Most people I approached about participating in the study were enthusiastic about being interviewed about their friendship. The intersectional friendship is a relationship that lacks social recognition except in stereotypical depictions of gay men and straight women; making these friendships the focus of study implies that they are important and worthy of time and attention. In turn, the study participants opened up their lives to me in unexpected ways. In several instances, people I had never previously met prepared food for me so we could talk more casually over a meal. Others, recognizing that my status as a graduate student likely meant that I was struggling economically (which was true), insisted on buying me coffee and snacks when we met in cafés. Not one of my interviewees canceled or failed to show up—a rarity in interview research. Instead, participants repeatedly worked their schedules around mine, even though I made it clear to them that they were doing me the great favor of opening their lives to me. Overwhelmingly, participants’ actions indicated that they shared my belief that intersectional friendships are an important topic of study.