THAT’S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR

Friends as family in the gay and lesbian community

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What is the good of friendship if one cannot say exactly what one means.

(Oscar Wilde)

In his collection of stories, Buddies, Ethan Mordden (1986:189) tells the story of a reunion between two old friends, one of whom is now married with children:

He asked me how I could live without a family and I said my family is all the guys I was telling him about. Isn’t it? But he didn’t get that. He said no—a family like playing with them and learning from each other and living with them inseparably, and I said that’s what we do. And finally he sort of got it, that my family is my buddies.

Mordden (1986:175) also observes: ‘What unites us, all of us, surely, is brotherhood, a sense that our friendships are historic, designed to hold Stonewall together.... It is friendship that sustained us, supported our survival. Not only are friends a form of family for gay men and lesbians, but friendships are also a political statement. And unlike most heterosexual friendships, gay friendships have a sexual dimension that calls into question not just the meanings of sexuality in society but also the constructions of gender roles in a culture. How friendship among gay men and lesbians affects the political, sexual, and familial dimensions of society is the focus of this chapter.

THE COMPONENTS OF FRIENDSHIP

Friendship is typically seen as a voluntary, egalitarian relationship, involving personal choice and providing individuals with a variety of psychological, social, and material support. Yet, patterned variations in how friendships are formed and maintained point to important social structural components. The
opportunities to meet others and initiate friendships, the content of the relationships, and the frequency of interactions are all a function of the limitations and freedom imposed by the nature and number of social roles people must enact (see Hess 1972).

Issues related to social psychological definitions of self and identity also motivate individuals to initiate and maintain friendships. Rubin (1985:13) points to the role friendship plays in reinforcing and shaping the self:

[I]t is friends who provide a reference outside the family against which to measure and judge ourselves; who help us during passages that require our separation and individuation; who support us as we adapt to new roles and new rules; who heal the hurts and make good the deficits of other relationships in our lives; who offer the place and encouragement for the development of parts of self that, for whatever reason, are inaccessible in the family context. It's with friends that we test our sense of self-in-the-world, that our often inchoate, intuitive, unarticulated vision of the possibilities of a self-yet-to-become finds expression.

These ideas of personal choice, social structural constraints, and the emerging self are clearly illustrated in an analysis of the role of friendship in the lives of gay men and lesbians. In particular, they are evident when focusing on the political, familial, and sexual aspects of gay people’s friendships. How gay men and lesbians socially construct friendship and what the impact of these friendships is on identity and society are examined in more detail in this chapter. Some of the discussion is based on data collected in a survey of gay men and lesbians (see Sherrod and Nardi 1988; Nardi 1992) and some is based on interpretations of and speculations about other studies on the role of friendship in people’s lives.

THE FAMILIAL

As Morrden’s quote illustrated, for many gay people, friends are frequently viewed as family. Certainly, in the past century with the rise of bureaucracies and the mobility of much of contemporary industrial and post-industrial society, modified extended families have become more important. Friendship groups fall structurally between the face-to-face contact of neighbours and the permanency of kinship groups (Litwak and Szelenyi 1969). Friendships provide ‘alternative ways for doing things when the formal structure of society is clearly inadequate...when the normative rules of society have come to appear especially artificial and fragile’ (Suttles 1970:135).

This is particularly so when the social institutions exclude certain kinds of interpersonal relationships. For gay men and lesbians, social approval of intimate relationships is typically absent or limited by legal, religious, and cultural norms. For some, their families of origin (parents, siblings, and other
close relatives) may not acknowledge or legitimize gay people’s friendships and relationships. In the context of these social constraints and the need to sustain a sense of self, friendship takes on the roles typically provided by heterosexual families (see Weston 1991). As Altman (1982: 190) wrote ‘what many gay lives miss in terms of permanent relationships is more than compensated for by friendship networks, which often become de facto families’.

One 30-year-old male illustrated the pull between family and friends at holiday time, such as Thanksgiving or Christmas. He said that he wants to spend time with both and often does, but that ‘I still go to my friends first’. As one 42-year-old male in our survey stated: ‘Friends to me are family. When people ask if my best friend and I are lovers, I say “No—we’re much closer than that”’.

Rubin (1985:17) similarly notes that ‘when people wanted to impress upon me the importance of their friendships and the quality of closeness, they invoked the metaphor of the family’. However, for gay people, it is more than a metaphor: The ‘friends as family’ model, in which friends actually provide the kinds of emotional, social, and psychological support families often do, makes sense in light of Allan’s (1989) argument that the more extensive and personal the help required, the greater tendency there is to use primary kin for assistance. For gay people, friends often provide the role of maintaining physical and emotional well-being, especially when difficulties arise when soliciting social support from their families and other kin (see Kiecolt-Glaser and Glaser 1988; Warren 1980). In fact, Kurdek and Schmitt (1987:65) found this to be the case only for the homosexuals in their study who ‘saw friends as more prominent providers of emotional support than family’.

In short, as a gay man in his 30s said:

Friends become part of my extended family. A lot of us are estranged from our families because we’re gay and our parents don’t understand or don’t want to understand. That’s a separation there. I can’t talk to them about my relationships. I don’t go to them; I’ve finally learned my lesson; family is out. Now I’ve got a close circle of good friends that I can sit and talk to about anything, I learned to do without the family.

The search for social support from friends rather than from family is also given some credence when looking at the ways men in particular socially construct their friendships. Typically, men (when categorically compared to women) are less intimate with same sex friends, less satisfied with their friendships, and perceive less social support from their friends (Sherrod 1987). In part, this is related to men’s position in the social structure which encourages ‘the formation of sociable relationships with others, but, at the same time ... restrict(s) the extent to which the self is revealed within them’ (Allan 1989:71). It is also related in part to the patterns of socialization which tend to encourage a limit on self-expression and emotional intimacy between men.
As a result, men often turn to women friends for emotional well-being and social support, while women seek such intimacy more often through same-sex friends (O’Meara 1989; Ruban 1985). For most heterosexual men, that woman is often a wife or a female romantic partner. The traditional family—or, at the least, the ideology of the family—is the major source of emotional support for most heterosexual men, not same-sex friends. Ironically, this was not always the case. For centuries, ‘the image of male friendship closely parallels that of romantic love. Both idealize a dyadic relationship and set expectations of undying loyalty, devotion, and intense emotional gratification’ (Hammond and Jabow 1987:242). But this idea of male friendship has since given way to one in which ‘men and women seek fulfillment of their emotional needs in the family. It is here that the most intense relationships exist, and friendship plays a secondary role’ (Hammond and Jabow 1987:256).

However, how gender influences friendship depends on the interaction with other factors that shape people’s sociability (Allan 1989). In particular, sexual orientation may play a salient role in mediating such gender differences in friendship. Whereas the gender differences in heterosexual friendship patterns illustrated the importance for men in obtaining social support from within the family context of female spouse or partner, gay men and lesbians equally seek emotional support from same-sex friendships (Sherrod and Nardi 1988).

A 35-year-old male said this about his very supportive friends:

My best friends and some of my close friends provide an outlet for my need to share my life and concerns with others. I also have a strong need to express affection, warmth, laughter, support and ideas with my friends.

This expression of intimacy and emotional support between men appears to be more typical of gay men than heterosexual men. Gay men and lesbians are equally disclosing, equally seeking of social support, and equally engaging in activities with their mostly same-sex friends (Sherrod and Nardi 1988). For gay men, expressive and instrumental support, as well as self-disclosing feelings and emotions, come from their friendships with other men, unlike what traditional male norms about friendship suggest.

The remarks of a 29-year-old male provide another good example of the importance of gay friendship as a primary source of intimacy and identity. He illustrates the transition from traditional learned male behaviour of being non-expressive to one of more intimacy, once he dealt with his gay identity and found other gay men to be open with:

Up till two to three years ago, I had great difficulty getting emotionally intimately close to friends of both sexes because I was thoroughly unsure of how to handle my sexuality.... I learned to cultivate and to
appreciate casual friendships, but did not often go much further. Since I started to accept myself and to bring more honesty and intimacy into my trusted friendships, my ability to deepen the friendships in my life has steadily improved and I am far more happy today than before about the reality of friendship in my life.... I have great difficulty in making close friends among non-gay people and especially non-gay males. I am fairly open... but that openness doesn't always evolve into close friendships and in the case of non-gays, rarely does.

In addition to providing opportunities for expressions of intimacy and identity, friendships for gay men and lesbians serve as sources for various kinds of social support (ranging from the monetary to health care) and provide them with a network of people with whom they can share celebrations, holidays, and other transitional rituals (see Sherrod and Nardi 1988). In addition, an emerging global connection has developed, as gay subcultures, political and social, appear in many countries and cities around the world. Interconnected by a network of customs (clothing styles, for example), social institutions (such as bars and AIDS organizations), and even language (the word ‘gay’ is used in many languages), the globalization of gay subculture has resulted in an international family of friends who provide travellers with places to stay, eat, and socialize. It’s as if one is visiting members of the family from the ‘old world’ or who have moved away.

THE SEXUAL

The sexual component in friendships typically emerges when discussing cross-sex friendships among heterosexuals. As Harry said to Sally in the movie When Harry Met Sally, ‘Men can never be friends with women. The sex thing always gets in the way’. O’Meara (1989) argues that cross-sex friendship is an ambiguous relationship in our culture since it must continuously resolve the tension created by the ‘sex thing’ as well as the absence of roles, rituals, and terminology in a context which often treats such friendships as deviant or threatening.

When a sexual relationship does occur, ‘the basis of the solidarity of the friendship is altered and usually it is difficult to revert to the previous state once the sexual relationship ends’ (Allan 1989:83). O’Meara (1989:534) similarly reports that for many men sexuality in friendship often destroys the friendship and, thus, passion and sexual attraction must be ‘continually monitored, contended with, and regulated through negotiation’.

An interesting test case of the role of sexuality and sexual attraction in friendship is available when studying the friendships among gay men and among lesbians. Rubin (1985:179–80) argues that ‘most friends come together out of some combination of attraction to the other and their internal psychological needs and desires’. Yet, O’Meara (1989:529) states (without
much supporting evidence) that 'this factor of sexual attraction appears nonexistent in friendships among gays'. But given the sociological argument that 'different “boundaries” are constructed around friendships' in part due to personal choice and the socio-cultural context (Allan 1989:15), the friendships of gay men and lesbians might have a very different sexual component to them than cross-gender heterosexual friendships.

Sonenschein (1968), in an early ethnography of a gay male community, developed a typology of relationships based on duration and level of sexuality. Essentially, he argues that first-order friendships (best and really close friends) and second-order friendships (good friends but not permanent) were entirely non-sexual. Extended encounters (sexual affairs) were often unstable and not characterized by strongly committed social support, while brief encounters were typically non-permanent sexual relationships. Permanent partners (lovers) are sociosexual relationships akin to heterosexual marriages in terms of commitment and stability (see Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). For the most part, Sonenschein (1968) concludes, gay men tend to keep those people who serve their social needs separated from those who serve their sexual needs.

A gay man in his 20s told us:

I will not and have never had sex with any friend. I've either dated the person or became friends with them. Once I went out with this guy for two months and there was no physical relationship yet. We had agreed to take it slowly. But one day I realized I didn't want to sleep with him, so we talked about it. He's now my closest friend in the city.

Although some individuals were acquaintances first and then became sexual partners, people were clearly distinguished as sexual partners or social partners, rarely both. Sonenschein (1968:72) speculates as to whether the category of ‘friends’ is ‘really a residual category of individuals who did not work out as sexual partners or whether there are differential expectations through which individuals are initially screened to become either “friends” or “partners”’. The evidence from his observations and from our own data indicates that both processes operate: many gay men and lesbians have had sex with their best friends, but more have been sexually attracted without sex taking place.

One 34-year-old male said:

The best close friends I had were from when I was sexually active.... I would date for a few weeks and when they got too ‘amorous’, I was very good at stopping the sex and turning it into a friendship.... It upsets me to realize that I cannot make new friends unless I work with them or have sex with them.

In our study of 161 gay men and 122 lesbians, we asked if they were sexually attracted, sexually involved, or in love with their best friend, either
in the past or currently. (Best friend does not include one's lover.) It is important to establish first that the majority (82 per cent) of gay men have a gay or bisexual male best friend and the majority (76 per cent) of lesbians have a lesbian or bisexual best friend.

Of those who have a best friend who is of the same gender and sexual orientation, 79 per cent of the men and 77 per cent of the women had been at some point in the past at least minimally sexually attracted to their best friend. Currently, 52 per cent of the men and 31 per cent of the women say they still are sexually attracted to their best friend.

In the past, 59 per cent of the men and 59 per cent of the women had sex at least once with their best friend. Currently 20 per cent of the men and 19 per cent of the women are sexually involved with their best friend.

In the past, 57 per cent of the men and 54 per cent of the women were in love with their best friend. Currently 48 per cent of the gay men and 28 per cent of the lesbians say they are at least somewhat in love with their best friend. Remember that best friend excludes current lover.

Clearly, the data indicate that sexual attraction has played a role in the friendships of gay men and lesbians. Sexual activity and love were also important elements in the early stages of their friendships. Although attraction and love are still strong emotions in their current friendships, a decline in sexual activity with friends is more evident, perhaps suggesting the emergence of an ‘incest taboo’ among the family of friends. Other interesting finding is that for lesbians, 45 per cent said their best friend is a former lover, while only 19 per cent of the men said so. (For additional findings from this study, see Sherrod and Nardi 1988; Nardi 1992; and the report in Out/Look, Spring 1990, Number 8.)

These findings tie into traditional gender-role research which emphasizes the more instrumental view men have about intimacy and sexuality and the more expressive view women have about them. For many women, intimacy is achieved first, then sexuality evolves from that. For men, intimacy is often achieved through sexuality. When the sex ends, often the intimate relationship does also. For women, when the sex ends, the intimacy is still there. Gay men and lesbians appear to reinforce some of these traditional gender differences as can be seen by the greater percentage of women who continue to see their ex-lover as their best friend. Yet, unlike cross-gender heterosexual friendships, sexuality among gay people does not appear to be an impediment to the formation of friendships with potential partners. And gay men seem to continue with an intimate friendship even after the sexual relationship has ended.

Such findings raise additional issues about the dialectical role of friendship, sex, and attraction in gay people's lives. White (1983:16) discusses the role of sex and friendship in his essay about gay men in the 1980s by comparing it to Japanese court life of the tenth century:
Friendship...intertwines with sexual adventure and almost always outlasts it; a casual encounter can lead to a life-long, romantic but sexless friendship.... [S]ex, love and friendship may overlap but are by no means wholly congruent. In this society, moreover, it is friendship that provides the emotional and social continuity, whereas sexuality is not more and no less than an occasion for gallantry.

Another approach is to consider what the role of sexual attraction might be in the formation of all friendships, not just those involving potential sexual partners. Seiden and Barr (1975:220) have speculated that ‘There is probably an erotic component in most close friendships...but this appears to be disturbing to many people and is denied or repressed’. Rubin (1985:179) similarly argues:

More than others, best friends are drawn together in much the same way as lovers—by something ineffable, something to which, most people say, it is almost impossible to give words.... People often talk as if something happened to them in the same way they “happened” to fall in love and marry.

Although Rubin (1985:180) also says that in friendship ‘the explicitly sexual is muted, if not fully out of consciousness’, she does acknowledge the ‘appeal of the physical’ in the process of friendship initiation and development. The data from gay men and lesbians, on the other hand, point to the powerful role sexual attraction and sex itself have in the structuring of friendships. Sex is often the way to achieve casual and close friends, especially for gay men, but once friendship is established, the sexual no longer remains the main organizing activity among best friends. But even if sex did not occur between best friends, sexual attraction is an even greater and more lasting dimension to the initiation and development of that friendship.

THE POLITICAL

Mordden’s notion of ‘friends is survival’ (quoted in the beginning of the article) has a political dimension that becomes all the more salient in contemporary society where the political, legal, religious, economic, and health concerns of gay people are routinely threatened by the social order. In part, 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 many people, the need to belong with others in dissent and out of the mainstream is central to the maintenance of self and identity (Rubin 1985). 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. Raymond

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(1986:8–9) makes a strong argument for the political power of female friendships, or what she terms ‘Gyn/affection’, that is, the ‘personal and political movement of women toward each other.... The best feminist politics proceeds from a shared friendship’. Jerome (1984:698) also believes that friendships have economic and political implications, since friendship is best defined as ‘the cement which binds together people with interests to conserve’. Suttles argues that

The very basic assumption friends must make about one another is that each is going beyond a mere presentation of self in compliance with ‘social dictates’. Inevitably, this makes friendship a somewhat deviant relationship because the surest test of personal disclosure is a violation of the rules of public propriety. (Suttles 1970:116)

Friendship, according to Suttles (1970), has its own internal order, albeit maintained by the cultural images and situational elements that structure the definitions of friendship. In friendship, people can depart from the routine and display a portion of the self not affected by social control. That is, friendships allow people to go beyond the basic structures of their cultural institutions into an involuntary and uncontrollable exposure of self-to-deviate from public propriety (Suttles 1970).

Little (1989) similarly argues that friendship is an escape from the rules and pieties of social life. It’s about identity: who one is rather than one’s roles and statuses. And the idealism of friendship ‘lies in its detachment from these [roles and statuses], its creative and spiritual transcendence, its fundamental skepticism as a platform from which to survey the givens of society and culture’ (Little 1989:145). For gay men and lesbians, these descriptions of friendship illustrate the political meaning friendship can have in their lives, in their society, and in a global context. They also illustrate how powerfully gay friendships can restructure the social forces that seem to constrain the nature of friendships for many men in our culture. And, through friendships, women can ‘affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to full power’ (Raymond 1986:229).

The political dimension of friendship is summed up best by Little:

the larger formations of social life—kinship, the law, the economy—must be different where there is, in addition to solidarity and dutiful role-performance, a willingness and capacity for friendship’s surprising one-to-one relations, and this difference may be enough to transform social and political life. Perhaps, finally, it is true that progress in democracy depends on a new generation that will increasingly locate itself in identity-shaping, social, yet personally liberating, friendships. (Little 1989:154–5)
The traditional, nuclear family has been the dominant model for political relations and has structured much of the legal and social norms of our culture. Raymond (1986:11) argues that this is especially the case for women: ‘we live in a hetero-relational society where most of women’s personal, social, political, professional and economic relations are defined by the ideology that woman is for man’. People have often been judged by their family ties and history. But as the family becomes transformed into other arrangements, so do the other political and social institutions of society, including friendship and romantic relationships. For example, the emerging concept of ‘domestic partnerships’ has affected a variety of organizations, including insurance companies, city governments, private industry, and religious institutions (see Task Force on Family Diversity Final Report 1988, and Henning Bech’s article elsewhere in this book).

For many gay people, the ‘friends as family’ model is a political statement, going beyond the practicality of developing a surrogate family in times of needed social support. It is also a way of refocusing the economic and political agenda to include non-traditional family structures composed of both romantic and non-romantic non-kin relationships.

In part, this refocusing has happened by framing the discussions in terms of gender roles. The women’s movement and the emerging men’s movement have highlighted the negative political implications of defining gender roles according to traditional cultural norms or limiting them to biological realities. The gay movement, in turn, has often been one source for redefining traditional gender roles and sexuality. So, for example, when gay men exhibit more disclosing and emotional interactions with other men (see Sherrod and Nardi 1988), it demonstrates the limitations of male gender roles typically enacted among many heterosexual male friends. By calling attention to the impact of homophobia on heterosexual men’s lives, gay men’s friendships illustrate the potentiality for expressive intimacy among all men.

The assumptions that biology and/or socialization have inevitably constrained men from having the kinds of relationships and intimacies women often typically have can readily be challenged. The questioning of the dominant construction of gender roles is in itself a socio-political act with major implications for the legal, religious, and economic order.

White also sees how gay people’s lives can lead to new modes of behaviour in society at large:

In the case of gays, our childlessness, our minimal responsibilities, the fact that our unions are not consecrated, even our very retreat into gay ghettos for protection and freedom: all of these objective conditions have fostered a style in which we may be exploring, even in spite of our conscious intentions, things as they will someday be for the heterosexual majority. In that world (as in the gay world already), love
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will be built on esteem rather than passion or convention, sex will be more playful or fantastic or artistic than marital—and friendship will be elevated into the supreme consolation for this continuing tragedy, human existence.

(White 1983:16)

If, as White and others have argued (see Plummer 1988), gay culture in the post-Stonewall, sexual liberation years of the 1970s was characterized by continuous fluidity among what constituted a friend, a sexual partner, and a lover, then we need to acknowledge the AIDS decade of the 1980s as a source for the restructuring of gay culture and the reorganization of sexuality and friendship. If indeed gay people (and men in particular) have focused attention on developing monogamous sexual partnerships, what then becomes of the role of sexuality in the initiation and development of casual or close friendships? Clearly, gay culture is not a static phenomenon, unaffected by the larger social order. Certainly, as the moral order in the AIDS years encourages the re-establishment of more traditional relationships, the implications for the ways sexuality and friendships are organized similarly change.

Friends become more salient as primary sources of social and emotional support when illness strikes; friendship becomes institutionally organized as ‘brunch buddies’ dating services or ‘AIDS buddies’ assistance groups; and self-help groups emerge centring on how to make and keep new friends without having ‘compulsive sex’. While AIDS may have transformed some of the meanings and role of friendship in gay men’s lives from the politicalization of sexuality and friendship during the post-Stone wall 1970s, the newer meanings of gay friendships, in turn, may be having some effect on the culture’s definitions of friendships.

Interestingly, the mythical images of friendships were historically more male-dominated: bravery, loyalty, duty, and heroism (Hammond and Jablow 1987; Sapadin 1988). This partly explained why women were typically seen as not being capable of true friendships. But today, the images of true friendship are often expressed in terms of women’s traits: intimacy, trust, caring, and nurturing, thereby excluding the more traditional men from true friendship. However, as discussed above, gay men appear to be at the forefront of establishing the possibility of men overcoming their male socialization stereotypes and restructuring their friendships in terms of the more contemporary (‘female’) attributes of emotional intimacy.

To do this at a wider cultural level involves major socio-political shifts in how men’s roles are structured and organized. Friendships between men in terms of intimacy and emotional support inevitably introduce questions about homosexuality. As Rubin (1985:103) found in her interviews with men: ‘The association of friendship with homosexuality is so common among men.’ For women, there is a much longer history of close
connections with other women, so that the separation of the emotional from the erotic is more easily made. However, women need to be liberated from a world view that places women’s existence primarily in relation to men; they need to create a feminist politics through friendship with other women (Raymond 1986).

Lehne (1989) has argued that homophobia has limited the discussion of loving male relationships and has led to the denial by men of the real importance of their friendships with other men. In addition, ‘the open expression of emotion and affection by men is limited by homophobia…. The expression of more tender emotions among men is thought to be characteristic only of homosexuals’ (Lehne 1989:426). So men are raised in a culture with a mixed message: strive for healthy, emotionally intimate friendships, but if you appear too intimate with another man you might be negatively labelled homosexual.

This certainly wasn’t always the case. As a good illustration of the social construction of masculinity, friendship, and sexuality, one need only look to the changing definitions and concepts surrounding same-sex friendship during the nineteenth century (see Richards 1987; Rotundo 1989; Smith-Rosenberg 1975). Romantic friendships could be erotic but not sexual, since sex was linked to reproduction. Because reproduction was not possible between two women or two men, the close relationship was not interpreted as being a sexual one: ‘Until the 1880s, most romantic friendships were thought to be devoid of sexual content. Thus a woman or man could write of affectionate desire for a loved one of the same gender without causing an eyebrow to be raised’ (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988:121).

However, as same-sex relationships became medicalized and stigmatized in the late nineteenth century, ‘the labels “congenital inversion” and “perversion” were applied not only to male sexual acts, but to sexual or romantic unions between women, as well as those between men’ (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988:122). Thus, the twentieth century is an anomaly in its promotion of female equality, the encouragement of male-female friendships, and its suspicion of intense emotional friendships between men (Richards 1987). Yet, in Ancient Greece and the medieval days of chivalry, comradeship, virtue, patriotism, and heroism were all associated with close male friendship. Manly love, as it was often called, was a central part of the definition of masculinity (Richards 1987), just as Whitman has written in his poem, ‘A Song’, about the ‘love of comrades…the manly love of comrades’.

It is through the gay, women’s and men’s movements that these twentieth-century constructions of gender are being questioned. And at the core is the association of close male friendships with negative images of homosexuality. Thus, how gay men structure their emotional lives and friendships can affect the social and emotional lives of all men and women. This is the political power and potential of gay friendships.
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CONCLUSIONS

Emerson wrote in his essay on friendship that ‘A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud’. This characterization is clearly one that describes the role of friendship in the lives of gay men and lesbians. In search of a context that contributes to and maintains identity, gay people have elevated friendship to an importance perhaps not matched by any other group. Friends are family; friends are like the romantic friendships of nineteenth-century Britain and America; and friends are a political force redefining gender and sexual roles on an international scale.

As Whitman wrote in ‘A Song’:

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble;
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever yet shone upon;
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades….
I will make inseparable cities, with their arms about each other’s necks;
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.

NOTE

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