PART THREE
CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN MEN'S FRIENDSHIPS

9
Sex, Friendship, and Gender Roles Among Gay Men

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The connection between sexual orientation and gender roles has been confused by many people. Too often, assumptions about homosexuality or heterosexuality have led to assumptions about masculinity or femininity. Altman (1982, p. 55) states it succinctly:

[T]he belief that homosexuality is somehow a reflection of a blurred sense of masculinity/femininity remains central to the Western imagination, and to the extent that our concepts of gender have implied a heterosexual norm, this is important in understanding the development of homosexual identity.

Understanding the differences between sexual identity and gender roles is enhanced when focusing on the issues of friendship and sex among gay men. For many people, being gay has been interpreted in terms of not being masculine or, more specifically, being seen as feminine. In fact, this attribution is arguably at the core of why homosexuality in men is feared by many and why many men fear expressions of intimacy and emotional closeness (Segal, 1990). Not only does a culture ascribe certain traits to men and women and then label those traits in terms of masculine or feminine social roles, but those roles are also attributed to sexual desire, especially among homosexuals (Altman, 1982).

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Many of the ideas discussed in this paper came from conversations, collaboration, and friendship with Drury Sherrod, who helped design the questionnaire and collect the original data used in this article.
What results, then, is a belief that gay men can act in some areas in traditionally masculine ways (primarily in the sexual arena) and in other areas in traditionally feminine ways (such as emotional relationships, temperament, or sometimes body language). Over the past several decades, this belief has evolved as American society experienced the transformation of much of gay subculture from feminine to masculine to androgynous images.

Throughout the 1970s, as the contemporary gay movement developed, a new style of homosexual manliness was constructed (Humphreys, 1971). Partly in compensatory reaction to the stigma of femininity and passivity imposed on gay men, a macho and hypermasculine look evolved (Levine, 1988). But it was also partly an expression of traditional male gender roles that existed all along for most gay men who had been socialized into masculinity and lived in gender conformity as children. In fact, one could interpret the changes dialectically: Pre-Stonewall imagery of gay men was primarily feminine; post-Stonewall and pre-AIDS semiotics of gay men were primarily masculine; and the AIDS years have synthesized these images into an androgynous look, on one hand eschewing the iconography of masculine gay clones (no facial hair, less macho clothing), and on the other hand adopting a combination of both masculine and feminine images (earrings, ponytails, for some, and masculine but stylish clothes).

The distinctions between such concepts as masculinity and gay are highlighted when discussing the role of friendship in gay men’s lives. While evidence exists that many gay men relate to their friends in gender non-conforming ways that are not typical of the ways heterosexual men interact with their friends (Sherrod & Nardi, 1988), other data about the role of sex in their friendships support how much traditional male roles persist. In some ways, gay men’s friendships are a good example of a combination of traditionally defined masculine and feminine gender roles that appear to characterize some of contemporary gay male subcultures. And by focusing attention on the role of sex in friendship, many of these issues are highlighted.

**Sex and Friendship**

Perhaps the least studied area in the friendship literature is the role sex and sexual attraction play in the development of friendship, and when it is discussed, it is primarily about heterosexual opposite-sex friend-
be “continually monitored, contended with, and regulated through negotiation.”

An interesting test case of the role of sex, gender roles, and sexual attraction in friendship is available when studying the friendships among gay men. O’Meara (p. 529) boldly states (without data to support it) 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 sociocultural context (Allan, p. 15), the friendships of gay men might have a very different sexual component to them compared to cross-gender heterosexual friendships.

Sonenschein (1968), in an early ethnography of a gay male community, develops 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 nonsexual. Extended encounters (sexual affairs) were often unstable and not characterized by strong committed social support, while brief encounters were typically nonpermanent sexual relationships. Permanent partners (lovers) are homosexual relationships akin to heterosexual marriages in terms of commitment and stability. For the most part, Sonenschein concludes, gay men tend to separate those individuals who serve their social needs from those who serve their sexual needs.

A similar argument was made in an interview with a gay man in his twenties:

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 2 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.

On the other hand, sex and friendship may be more connected for other gay men. White (1983, p. 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 lifelong, romantic but sexless friend-

ship . . . [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.

In some cases, gay men are acquaintances first and then become sexual partners; in general, though, people seem to be clearly distinguished as sexual partners or social partners, but rarely both simultaneously. Sonenschein (p. 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 have had sex with their best friends, but many have been sexually attracted without sex taking place.

One 34-year-old male we interviewed 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 upset me to realize that I cannot make new friends unless I work with them or have sex with them.

Given the dearth of studies on gay friendship, rather than develop research to test specific hypotheses, we designed an exploratory study to assess the relationship between sex and friendship among gay men. What follows, then, is both a speculative essay on the possibilities of sex and friendship among gay men and also a presentation of data from a survey of 161 gay men that explores these issues.

What guides this exploratory research is an attempt to understand the role masculinity plays in contributing to the relationship between sex and friendship among men. While a study of white, middle-class gay men does not directly answer such questions about heterosexual men or men in various ethnic and racial subcultures, it does introduce some insights and research questions about the interaction of gender, sexual orientation, and the structure of friendships.

Speculations and Possibilities

While there is evidence that some gay men recollect playing gender non-conforming roles and games as children (see Harry, 1982), there is
no reason to conclude that all gay men were socialized without the traditional and normative values and roles of what the culture defines as masculine. Those traditional norms typically include the expectation that men be sexually assertive in relationships and initiate sexual activity. Furthermore, evidence from research on teenage sexuality often indicates that boys are sexual before intimacy is achieved with a partner (in fact, they try to gain intimacy through the sexual act), while girls more often seek intimacy prior to a sexual act.

Whether such patterns hold among homosexual boys and girls is rarely studied. But if one assumes a typical male socialization pattern, then we might conclude that gay men—being true to their gender roles—are likely to have sexual experiences with friends, perhaps as a way of achieving friendship. On the other hand, if we assume that gay men as boys were different in the enactment of traditional gender roles, then friendship might precede sexuality as a pattern in their lives.

Another avenue of research might concern the topic of attraction and friendship, independent of sexual behavior. If instead attraction plays a part in the formation of all friendships, attraction (and the willingness to admit it) may emerge as an even more salient factor in gay men's friendships, since the potentiality for sexual interaction is much more likely.

In addition, the notion of falling in love with a friend can also be explored more directly with a gay male sample. Unlike any reluctance to discuss this subject among heterosexual cross-sex and same-sex friendships, gay friendships can address this topic clearly. In short, by using a sample of gay men, the issues of sexual attraction, being in love, and sexual behavior among friends can be investigated. In so doing, we can get a sharper understanding of the contextual nature of friendship and gender roles and the variations that exist among different subgroups of men.

Methodology

Subjects

One hundred and sixty-one gay men and 122 lesbians responded to a questionnaire survey, representing a response rate of 48% of the 620 subjects who were contacted through gay and lesbian organizations in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. For the purposes of this article, only the data from the gay men are discussed, except where information about gay men's friendships is clarified by comparison with the lesbians. (For further details about this study and additional data from the questionnaires, see Sherrod & Nardi, 1988.)

Because of the topic of this research, snowball sampling techniques—typically used in studies of stigmatized and hard-to-reach subjects where random sampling is impossible—was not used to obtain respondents. The built-in bias of sampling friends of friends with snowball methods might have produced a distorted picture of friendship patterns. Therefore, respondents were obtained by contacting gay and lesbian organizations, including political, social, religious, and professional organizations. Admittedly, the sample we obtained through this "social outcropping" technique may also be a biased sample of the population, but given the choices, we decided that the biases associated with the social outcropping technique would be less than those associated with the snowball method. As a result, the current study focuses on friendship among a sample of white, educated, middle- and upper-middle-class, urban gay men and lesbians who are open and attending gay-identified organizations. Consequently, the results may not be generalizable to urban, non-white, working-class, closeted gay men and lesbians who are not affiliated with gay-identified political and social organizations.

Questionnaire

A 19-page questionnaire was developed and piloted on a small sample of gay men and lesbians. A revised form took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Questionnaires were preaddressed and stamped for easy return. The questionnaire asked respondents to provide information about three types of friendship: casual friends, close friends, and a best friend. These three categories of friendship were selected because previous research had demonstrated that people typically employ such categories when describing their friends (Caldwell & Hblau, 1982; Wright, 1982). The questionnaire included the following definitions of each type of friendship: A casual friend is "someone who is more than an acquaintance, but not a close friend; your commitments to the friendship would probably not extend beyond the circumstances that bring you together; for example, a work friend or neighbor." A close friend is "someone to whom you feel a sense of mutual commitment and continuing closeness; a person with whom you talk fairly open and comfortable spending time." A best friend is "the friend to whom you feel the greatest commitment and closeness; the one who accepts you 'as you are,' with whom you talk the most openly and feel the most comfortable..."
spending time.” A question was also asked to determine whether the best friend was a current lover or partner of the respondents; if so, respondents were instructed to select another best friend for this section of the questionnaire, someone other than the lover/partner, if one existed. If someone had more than one best friend, respondents were instructed to select only one when answering this section of the questionnaire.

Respondents were asked to report whether they (a) had ever been sexually attracted to their best friend, (b) were sexually involved with their best friend, and (c) were ever in love with their best friend both “in the past” and “currently.” We also asked them if they had sex with their casual friends and with their close friends (using a 5-point scale from “None” to “Most.”)

In addition, respondents were asked to indicate (using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = lowest and 5 = highest): (a) how much they have actually discussed their own sexual behavior with their casual, close, and best friends, and (b) how important it is to talk about sexual issues or concerns with their casual, close, and best friends.

**Results**

When we asked respondents to rate how important it was to have friends who they can talk with about sex, the percentage who answered “very important” or “extremely important” (4 and 5 on the scale) increased as they referred to casual, close, and best friends. As Table 9.1 (A) illustrates, 18.6% of the gay men said they felt it was either very important or extremely important to talk to their casual friends about sex; 56% said so about their close friends; and 76.2% said that about their best friend. Conversely, the percentage of those who feel it is not at all important (1 on the scale), decreased across the three categories of friendship from 32% to 4% to 2%. In brief, gay men expect to be able to talk about sex with their friends, especially their best friend and close friends.

Likewise (see Table 9.1, B), we find that 71.2% of the gay men have discussed with their best friend all or almost all details about sex; 53.4% have with their close friends; and fewer than 18% have with their casual friends. Fewer than 1% responded that they never discussed anything about sex with their best friend, around 10% said that about their close friends, and 36% of the gay men did not discuss sex at all with their casual friends. In short, one of the characteristics about best and close friends is that they are the people gay men talk to about sex.

### Table 9.1 Discussing Sex with Friends (N = 161)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Casual</th>
<th>Close</th>
<th>Best</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. How important is it for you to talk about sex with your friends?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>39.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely important</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (scale of 1 to 5)</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. How much have you discussed sex with your friends?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not discussed at all</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed almost all</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed all</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (scale of 1 to 5)</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. With how many of your casual and close same-sex friends have you had sex?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or two</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When respondents were asked to indicate with how many of their casual and close same-sex friends they actually had sex over the years, 37.5% said with none of their casual friends, and 24.2% said with none of their close friends (see Table 9.1, C). In comparison to lesbians, gay men were much more likely to have had sex with their casual friends (66.4% of the lesbians said they did not have sex with any of their casual friends) and to have had sex with their close friends (41.3% of the lesbians said with none of their close friends).

Despite some popular literature that suggests that gay men have many straight female friends, about 82% of our sample said their best friend was a gay or bisexual male, and fewer than 10% said their best friend was a straight female. This lends support to Altman’s (1982, p. 60) observation that the gay male proclamation that “all my friends are women” is more likely today to be “None of my friends are not gay”: the new identity/community/culture is producing a separatism that tends to isolate gay men from straight men, from women, and from children.”

With this in mind, the following responses for the questions about best friend are tabulated only for those whose best friend was a gay or
bifexual male. Recall, also, that subjects in relationships were asked to select a person other than their lover.

As Table 9.2 shows, almost 80% of the gay men said they were attracted to their best friend in the past, and 52% continue to be attracted to him. Around 60% said they had sex with their best friend in the past, and 20% continue to do so. About 57% were in love with their best friend in the past, and 48% still are. Thus, in this particular sample, attraction clearly plays an important role in selection of a friend, and sex was once a part of that early friendship, as were feelings of love. Over time attraction and love have diminished for many, but almost half still maintain those emotions. However, few remain sexually involved any longer with their best friend. Approximately 20% of the gay men also said their current best friend is an ex-lover (in contrast to 45% of the lesbians).

**Discussion**

Since this was an exploratory project, it is difficult to answer specific questions about the reasons why these findings exist. What does emerge, however, illustrates that sexual attraction and sexual involvement are salient components in the early stages of friendship for most gay men in this sample. This should not be too surprising since many gay men meet their potential friends in situations where sexual attraction is a relevant factor for initiating interactions. Furthermore, sexual involvement is often the next step for men in getting to know someone, in contrast to a model, especially for women, where sex follows a period of getting to know a person. As the men get to know each other, decisions are made to continue in a romantic manner or to “let’s just be friends”—a statement that signifies the end of a sexual relationship and the start of a nonsexual friendship relationship.

While attraction and feelings of love may still persist, sexual involvement ceases, suggesting the emergence of an “incest taboo” among the “family” of friends (see Nardi, 1992; Weston, 1991). If the men continue to see each other, a friendship may develop, evolving from a casual one to a close one and, perhaps, into a best friendship. This would explain the higher percentage of men (in comparison to women who, in general, tend not to initiate interactions sexually) who said they had sex with casual friends. One might argue (given the percentage of lesbians whose best friends are ex-lovers and the fewer number who had sex with casual friends) that gay men are more likely to have had sex first and then develop a social intimacy with their friends. As they become more intimate and disclosing, sexual involvement decreases. So that when the sex ends, the friendship can continue if some degree of closeness and sharing has been established. But if the relationship was based primarily on sex, when that ends, the friendship does also. The fact that lesbians are significantly more likely to continue to maintain friendship with an ex-lover might suggest that their relationships were established first on a basis of intimacy and sharing, rather than on one of sex.

Again, since the data don’t address these questions directly, they are provided as hypotheses for future research. What needs to be explored further, then, is whether sexual orientation or traditional gender roles prevail in explaining how gay men connect sex and friendship. As men, they see sex as the way to intimacy. But as gay people, they develop a strong emotional intimacy with other men, unlike what research shows about how heterosexual men relate to other men (Sherrod & Nardi, 1988).

So while gay men are often seen as challengers to the hegemonic masculinity of white, heterosexual men (Segal, 1990), perhaps when it comes to sexual behavior they are conforming to traditional masculine gender roles. While same-sex friendships among gay men are not directly comparable to other-sex friendships among straight men, they do illustrate the potential for both breaking down traditional gender roles and maintaining them. They show how men perpetuate the traditional masculine image of sex as the means to intimacy while, at the same time, they subvert the norm of masculinity by showing that men can be intimate with one another at an emotional, sharing level.

This contradiction may not be all that unusual. An examination of extraordinary social conditions and crises often allows men a wider range of behaviors than regularly expressed. Segal (1990, p. 103), for example, argues that, in the “constant pressure to confirm masculinity in its difference from femininity,” when men are at their most powerfully masculine

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**Table 9.2** Sexual Behavior and Attraction with Same-Sex Best Friend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>In the past</th>
<th>Currently</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Sexually attracted to best friend</td>
<td>79.4%</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Sexually involved with best friend</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. In love with best friend</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Best friend is an ex-lover</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
selves, such as in combat, "they can embrace, weep, display what Western manhood depicts as more feminine feelings and behaviour."

With gay men, the social conditions of marginalization, oppression, and exclusion have contributed to this duality of traditional masculine roles and expressive, caring intimacy with friends. Or, in other words, sexual orientation and gender roles do not necessarily predict one another with consistency.

Thus, it is in the area of friendship and sex that one can seek some answers to how gender and sexual orientation are constructed in our culture and, in particular, how concepts of masculinity are shaped by concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Owens (1987, p. 230) quotes Foucault, who said in an interview: "The disappearance of friendship as a social institution, and the declaration of homosexuality as a social/political/medical problem, are the same process." This is so, Segal (p. 139) agrees, because masculinity has been defined by its opposition to femininity and homosexuality: "The possible imputation of homosexual interest to any bonds between men ensures that men had constantly to be aware of and assert their difference from both women and homosexuals." And it is with the emergence of concepts of homosexuality in terms of a social identity and not just a sexual act that Rotundo (1989, p. 21) concludes that "Romantic male friendship is an artifact of the nineteenth century."

Thus, by understanding how gay men today organize their friendships and the role it plays in their lives, the tenuous connections between gender and sexual orientation grow even weaker and the various ways masculinity is constructed in a culture get uncovered. For it is in the area of sex and friendship among gay men that the issues of traditional masculine roles and traditional feminine roles are clarified for all people in contemporary American society.

References


White, E. (1983, June). Paradise found: Gay men have discovered that there is friendship after sex. Mother Jones, pp. 10-16.