Friendships Between Men Across Sexual Orientation: Intimacy and the Uses of Social Inequality Within Friendship

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Abstract

Research was conducted examining friendships between gay and straight men using qualitative interviews in an attempt to examine the gendered and sexual opportunities and tensions that these relationships encounter. This article specifically discusses these relationships using the paradigm of intimacy. While the friends under study, in many ways, did not replicate the often-valorised ideal of the self-disclosing, emotionally supportive relationship, they nevertheless reported that their friendships were close and characterised by deep affection. In opposition to conceptualisations of gay-straight male friendship that emphasise the role competing sexual orientations play in establishing interpersonal distance, I document how heterosexual interviewees experienced their co-participants as offering respite from the patterns of competitiveness and gendered surveillance characteristic of their friendships with other straight men.

Keywords: friendships between men across sexual orientation, intimacy, dyadic interviewing

Introduction

Friendships between men across sexual orientation have rarely been the object of academic enquiry. Theorisations of both sexual identity and normative gender roles have tended to prioritise examinations of conflict between these two groups. The consideration of these friendships, however, allows us to explore the mediation of socially-structured inequalities within interpersonal contexts. This article examines seemingly contradictory findings surrounding the concept of “intimacy” within friendships between gay and straight men. While the friendships under study, in many ways, did not replicate the often-valorised ideal of the self-disclosing, emotionally supportive relationship, they nevertheless reported that their friendships were close and characterised by deep affection. In opposition to conceptualisations of gay-straight male friendship that emphasise the role that competing sexual orientations play in establishing interpersonal distance, I document how heterosexual interviewees experienced their co-participants as offering respite from the patterns of competitiveness and gendered surveillance characteristic of their friendships with other straight men.

Intimacy, Gender, and Friendship

Within contemporary Western societies, the concept of “intimacy” has become a central metric used to measure the depth and quality of friendship, familial and romantic relations. This concept, as it is applied within quotidian contexts, potentially refers to a number of distinct, if related, relational virtues, with Jamieson (1998: 7-8) relating intimacy to close and regular contact between individuals, detailed knowledge of another’s life, understanding, empathy for another’s experiences and values, and a generalised disposition towards loving, caring and sharing. These attributes are a historically specific reflection of Western modernity, and are open to change. In particular, recent years have witnessed the prioritisation of a specific type of intimacy, what Jamieson (1998: 75) terms a “disclosing” intimacy. This claim demonstrates an affinity with what Silverman and
Atkinson (1997) term the “interview society”, within which individuals are continually implored to reveal the depths of their “authentic” selves through dialogue. The most highly valued relationships, with this particular social context, become ones in which the risks associated with self-revelation, such as rejection, humiliation or abuse, are transcended by a depth of trust, and the desire to provide emotional support (Hacker 1981, 385-6).

A substantial empirical literature has examined the intersection between intimacy, gender and friendship. Within this body of work, the central questions have become whether same-sex male and female friendships involve meaningful revelations of an authentic self, the mutual expression of affect, and the exchange of tangible and intangible resources. The literature broadly offers the following conclusions: women are more likely to describe their same-sex friendships as highly important, to spend more time engaging in dialogue, to be more self-disclosing, to orient interactions towards the revelation of personal experience, to offer and seek guidance and support, and to express verbal and physical affection (Nardi 1999: 32-47; Hall 2011). Same-sex male friendships, alternatively, are understood to involve large, impersonal social networks, to discourage expressions of affection, to orient dialogue towards external activity, to be characterised by an ethic of competitiveness, and to involve a preference for dealing with problems individually, rather than seeking support (Bank and Hansford 2000; Migliaccio 2009). These narratives surrounding male-male and female-female friendship dyads generally do not overtly consider sexual identification. For instance, a distinct trajectory has arguably existed within gay male subcultures, where strong and intimate interpersonal relationships have often flourished in response to patterns of social exclusion, and particularly the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (e.g. Hayes et al. 1990).

Several critiques of these depictions of male and female same-sex friendship have been posed. Firstly, some have suggested the existence of a “masculine” style of intimacy, achieved through instrumental activity or a jocular form of humour, that is neglected due to the “feminine” definition of intimacy prioritised by friendship researchers (Cancian 1986; Kaplan, 2005). Secondly, some recent research suggests that these gender differences have become less substantial within recent decades. Karina Butera (2008), for instance, in a comparative qualitative study based on interviews with different generational cohorts of Australian men, contends that younger males may be increasingly willing to reveal vulnerability and engage in open dialogue with male friends. Finally, differences between male and female same-sex friendships have often been exaggerated. As Paul Wright (1988) argues, the construction of these relationships as opposites is rarely justified, with researchers identifying relatively small empirical disparities between male and female friendship patterns, and proceeding to offer categorical conclusions about absolute gender difference. Further, the construction of male and female same-sex friendships as opposites renders patterns of internal differentiation invisible. Subsequently, the question of how differing sexual orientations may inflect the intimacy of same-sex male friendships remains largely unexplored.

**Methodology**

This study sought to gain an understanding of the gendered and sexual tensions and opportunities encountered by participants within friendships between men across sexual orientation using qualitative interview methods. Informants were recruited using publications from Monash University, online social forums, and GLBTQ newsletters, and were asked to engage in the study as gay male/straight male friendship pairs. Twelve individual participants engaged in two semi-structured interviews each; both a one-on-one interview, and an interview in which both friends were present. Research participants all possessed an undergraduate degree, all identified as middle class, and all but one (Heath) described himself as ethnically “white”. Participants broadly fell into two age groups. Six of the twelve participants were aged in their mid-twenties; the remaining six
were aged between forty-five and sixty-four. The technique of interviewing two subjects simultaneously, termed “dyadic interviewing” (Sohier 1995), can be productively employed whenever the unit of analysis under study is a relationship, rather than an individual. Interviewing friends together offered several opportunities, allowing the researcher to see how they interacted, giving interviewees the ability to qualify or challenge claims made by their co-participant, and generally creating a more convivial atmosphere than in one-on-one interviews (Sohier 1995). Particular attention was paid to how being interviewed by an openly gay male researcher may influence dialogues, and how research participants framed responses in light of their co-participant’s presence or absence (Hollander 2004: 620-2). All interviews were analysed both as separate textual events to capture the broad contexts from which individual quotations or narratives emerged, as well as using more traditional approaches to coding that group interviewee responses into specific thematic categories (Boeije 2002). Respondents are referred to as gay (G) or straight (S) throughout.

**Judging From Above: Not Doing Intimacy?**

How did research participants position themselves in terms of emotional support provision and self-disclosure? Interviewees generally suggested, at an abstract level, that a defining characteristic of a “good friend” was the willingness to offer unconditional support in times of need. Further, all interviewees suggested that they would be comfortable requesting support from their co-participant, and that the unconditional willingness to provide assistance was an informally assumed component of the relationship. However, generalisations about the importance of support provision were coupled with the persistent difficulty research participants experienced when being asked to offer accounts of specific episodes involving help seeking and receiving. In an interview with Simon (G) and Jeff (S), for instance:

> Interviewer: So can you think of any specific times when you’ve engaged in providing assistance to one another?
> Simon: Oh, just, giving advice, and being a sounding board.

Heath (S) and Ben (G) respond to a similar question:

> Heath: I know that the help from him is available if I wanted it...
> Ben: I think basically we help each out by giving each other company when we’re stressed out.

This inability to recall specific instances of help provision may reflect problems associated with memory. However, the responses generally tended to lend the impression that particular moments of help provision were not remembered as being central to the way these friendships were valued. Further, when the issue was pursued, interviewees commonly resorted to offering instances of incidental practical assistance, rather than emotional support or guidance:

> Zach (G): Can it just be, like, providing each other lifts to places?
> Interviewer: Yeah, it can be whatever comes to mind.
> Zach: Giving lifts...giving each other beer money (*laughs*).

This prioritisation of instrumental help giving is in accordance with previous studies of men in relationships (eg. Cancian 1986; Duncombe and Marsden 1993). However, whereas previous research has constructed male-male friendship dyads as orientated towards external activities, research participants tended to prioritise the importance of interpersonal dialogue within their relationships. Jeff (S), for instance, when asked about how he engages with his friends, states: “It’s
social. Activities are just the excuse we use to get together”. However, the importance ascribed to the act of talking is not particularly insightful with regards to the question of intimacy. Dialogue is not synonymous with revelatory self-disclosure. Lynne Davidson and Lucille Duberman’s (1982: 809-13) contention that same-sex male friends primarily engage in dialogue at the topical level, focusing on subject matter external to the friendship, rather than a discussion of the relationship itself or the personal experiences of its constituent members, was broadly supported by this research. Robert (G), talking about his friendship with Michael (S), states:

Robert: There are not many people that I can talk about architecture with actually, and we talk about architecture, we talk a lot about it.

Boris (S) and David (G) also reflect the tendency for the majority of dialogue within their relationship to remain at the level of what they regard as “bullshit”:

Interviewer: So when you get together, what would be...the primary topics that you’d talk about?
Boris: Oh. I think that could be lumped under the heading of “total bullshit”. We just talk bullshit.

Attempts to examine the friendships between men across sexual orientation under study using the metrics of self-disclosure and emotional support provision proved relatively unfruitful in determining how the relationships were valued. Although not without a degree of ambivalence, research participants seemed to reproduce the interpersonal ethics associated with “masculine” patterns of sociality in this regard.

**Judging From Below: Closeness Without Intimacy?**

Interviewees nevertheless experienced and represented their friendships as high in both importance and quality. Two heterosexual participants invoked the concept of the “best friend” to describe their co-participant; two homosexual participants described their friend in terms of family; while one talked about their relationship as involving a type of love. Interestingly, these terms tended to be deployed within the context of one-on-one interviews, which perhaps reflects the taboos surrounding male-male “intimacy” discussed above. At a less easily verifiable level, research participants within dyadic interviews appeared to interact with relative spontaneity and ease. Dyadic interviews tended to involve more joking, extended story-telling, and participant-directed patterns of discussion than one-on-one interviews.

Interviewees commonly referenced substantial levels of comfort and mutual understanding. Both Tarquin (S) and Craig (G), for instance, offered similar comments about being able to read the other’s mind. The friendships were generally understood to be easy and comfortable social ties that were valued precisely because they were lacking in overt drama. Several of the friendship pairs had experienced periods within which a shared institutional context (such as at the school, the university or the workplace) was not facilitating regular interaction, a friendship phase that researchers have identified as commonly instigating the demise of relationships (Rose and Serafica 1986). However, the friendships under study were sustained by the shared willingness of both participants to voluntarily ensure regular interaction.

The data subsequently implied a conceptual distinction between intimacy and closeness. Acts of self-disclosure and support provision do not inherently require or engender feelings of trust or affinity. Providing too much information, within a context or time frame that is regarded as inappropriate, can have precisely the opposite effect (Fehr 1996). Sociological understandings of
“intimacy” that foreground support-provision and self-disclosure primarily emphasise a particular set of *behavioural mechanisms* through which the *subjective feeling* of closeness may be established (Camarena et al. 1990). Within the context of these friendships, however, it seemed that the subjective feeling of closeness was readily apparent, without being acquired through behaviours conventionally associated with “intimacy”.

**Sexualising Closeness**

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985: 1-27) argues that homophobia is central to the creation of interpersonal and physical boundaries between men, as these relationships are required to counter the possibility that their content will be misinterpreted as “too close”, or homosexual rather than homosocial. Was the apparent absence of self-disclosure and emotional support encountered during interviews the consequence of concerns that overly emotive forms of engagement might obscure the boundary between friendship and romantic/sexual relationships? In terms of how research participants consciously articulated the nature of their relationships, precisely the opposite seemed to be the case. Heterosexual participants suggested the existence of a greater level of comfort with their same-sex desiring male friends. Jeff (S), for instance, states:

> I feel comfortable around gay guys... I like the company of gay men. I feel very comfortable, like I do with women as well. More than I do with straight guys.

While Tarquin (S), along similar lines, suggests:

> I find gay men and women to be much more accepting than straight men... I think that, because most gay people are viewed as being different from the norm, they more readily accept people who are a bit different.

Boris (S), relatedly, contends that gay men largely avoid the components of hegemonic masculinity that create boundaries within friendships between men, such as physical violence, social reticence and competitiveness; while Michael (S) believes that gay men have more license to express emotion in public than heterosexual men, and expresses a degree of jealousy about these opportunities.

Associations between gay men and femininity are a familiar trope, positioning same-sex desiring males as the harbingers of a thoroughly modern interpersonal ethic characterised by openness, emotion and co-operation. Gay men, within these discourses, were understood to be less invested in the competitive world of patriarchal manhood, and subsequently were experienced as offering their co-participants respite from the patterns of surveillance and control associated with heterosexual male friendship (Price 1999: 5-6). While gay male research participants tended to believe that, in general, straight men were less sensitive, tolerant and open to dialogue than gay men, they understood their particular heterosexual male friends as a “distinctive breed”, less beholden to orthodox masculinities.

**Conclusion**

Given the data examined earlier, we should remain wary of the way the friendships between men across sexual orientation participating in this research positioned themselves as external to the norms of masculine sociality. Yet, simultaneously, this positioning was central to the representation and valorisation of these relationships. I would like to conclude this article by considering some of the ambiguities this data raises with regards to the question of equality/inequality within friendship relations more broadly.
The experiences of openness and comfort described by heterosexual research participants when interacting with gay male friends revolved around discourses that contribute to the marginalisation of gay men within the gender order. Michael Kimmel (2003) has described the performance of masculinity as the paranoid management of the possibility that the male self will be identified as less than a “real man” by other men. As a consequence of associations between male homosexuality and femininity, gay men were experienced as “safe” audiences for gender non-conformity. At one level, we might subsequently regard this discourse as complicit in the reproduction of intra-male hierarchies. Yet, while these experiences arguably reproduced structural inequalities between hetero- and homo-sexualities, it is important to be clear that heterosexual interviewees did not appear to employ this distinction to define themselves as “better than” their gay male friends, but rather identified with, and sought to participate in, the open and non-competitive relationships that gay men were associated with.

This article subsequently demonstrates some of the complexities involved in notions of equality/inequality within the context of dyadic friendship relations. Within both social theory and philosophy, the friendship relation has been described as one that is either empirically or ideally characterised by equality (Epstein 2006). The data collected for this research suggests that a more complex understanding is needed. While equality certainly has a strong normative relationship with ideals of friendship, concrete interpersonal interactions will almost invariably transgress this ideal within particular contextually defined moments. More strongly than this, however, I have attempted to demonstrate the extent to which discourses that contribute to structurally defined social inequalities between hetero- and homosexualities can be positively valued within friendship relations between men across sexual orientation, rather than only being a source of tension.

References


