

Exploring Sexual Orientation in Same-Sex Friendships:

The Effects of Sexual Diversity on Social Tolerance

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May 18, 2014

Harvard University: Expos 20 Unit 3 Paper

### Abstract

This paper explores the development of same-sex cross-orientation friendships and their effects on society. By same-sex cross-orientation, the paper refers to friendships in which both friends are the same gender (same-sex), but in which their sexual orientation or identifying gender-role differ. Specifically, the paper focuses on friendships between straight men and gay men and straight women and lesbian women. It does not delve deeply into other friendships (such as those between bisexual women and men, but despite these limitations, much of the research found therein should be applicable to most same-sex cross-orientation friendships. In order to accomplish the research, this paper first examines the current literature on the subject of diverse friendships and utilizes that as a launching pad for the exploration of same-sex cross-orientation friendships and their effect on society (and vice versa). The paper then proceeds to draw parallels between inter-racial and same-sex cross-orientation friendships where necessary in order to highlight how unique same-sex cross-orientation friendships, and to reach the conclusions that more *active* societal intervention is necessary to foster an accepting environment for the LGBTQ community. The onus should not be on them.

### Exploring Sexual-Orientation in Same-Sex Friendships

As any friend knows, friendships are never as simple as they appear. Often times, complications in the friendships arise for the simple and unavoidable fact that each individual comes from a different background and has had different experiences. These different complications, especially those that arise because of differences in race, gender, sexual orientation and class (among others), fit neatly into what Vela-McConnell labeled “social boundaries” (2011). Their shared commonality is that of social norms reinforcing them— people are encouraged by society to remain within their own class, their own gender, etc. Despite this, successful friendships have proven extremely effective at overcoming most of these boundaries, in the sense that they create strong bonds between individuals that trump societal stigmatization (Cook, Calcagno, Arrow & Malle, 2012). An interesting fact, though, is that the process necessary to overcome each of the social boundaries can vary widely, not only from boundary to boundary but also from friend to friend (Vela McConnell, 2002). This variance makes the analysis of the effects of certain social boundaries difficult and extremely problematic. Nonetheless, there exist ample research into social boundaries such as race, gender, and ethnicity along with multiple theories that attempt to explain the effects of these boundaries on friendships and vice versa (Vela McConnell, 2002; Fischer, 2008).

Surprisingly, there exists much less research into the boundary of sexual orientation and very little research pertaining to the effects of sexual orientation on friendships as a whole. Particularly, the research into same-sex different sexual orientation friendships is strikingly lacking. Interestingly, these types of friendships are on the rise because of the changing social attitudes towards homosexuality, so the exploration of their effects on society and of society’s

effects on them is imperative. While most same-sex cross-orientation friendships had to be swept under the rug in years past due to the lack of wide acceptance by society, today and tomorrow these friendships will likely become increasingly more widespread and hopefully more accepted. The lack of research does point towards a problem that has faced the LGBTQ community since its inception – that of passive invisibility.

An important fact to notice is that the changes in social attitudes seen today (a slow drift from retribution to acceptance) are reminiscent of the changes in social attitudes seen in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concerning inter-race friendships. These changes followed the Civil Rights movement's successful campaign to grant African-Americans full and true equality under the law. This is very similar to what the LGBTQ movement seeks to accomplish today. For this reason, it might be tempting to assume that the leaps in tolerance that occurred between the 60s and 80s concerning race might come about in a similar way today when it comes to sexual orientation. As this paper will show, this is a false assumption. While race and gender are certainly similar in many ways and analogies drawn between the two can often be helpful to understand the dynamic between each of their respective social boundaries and society (Vela-McConnell, 2011), there exist important and significant differences. These differences, such as visibility and level of residual stigmatization, are what warrant a *significant* and *unrelenting* level of support for LGBTQ individuals that certainly exceeds the level that was necessary to accomplish the diversification of race across the nation. Members of the heteronormative section of society cannot be passive and rely solely on the efforts of the marginalized movement, but must instead actively provide a support structure for same-sex cross-orientation friendships.

In order to understand the differences and similarities inherent to both of the aforementioned social boundaries in friendships, though, it is necessary to have a working

theoretical background. To begin, we can categorize social boundaries into four distinct groups: visible and changeable, visible and unchangeable, invisible and changeable, and invisible and unchangeable (Vela-McConnell, 2011, p121). Under what category would sexual orientation fall? Naively, we can begin by pondering about the category gender might fall under, since gender identity and sexual orientation are so closely related. Schwalbe demonstrated (as cited in Price, 1999, p 10), that from birth people learn to base their sense of identity on their gender: self-esteem, efficacy, and coherence are all factors directly affected by one's sense of gender. While, Schwalbe's research focused exclusively on the gender differences between men and women, it is clear that gender (the biological type) is, in most cases, unchangeable. Male and female are two distinct terms.

Therefore, if we expand Schwalbe's gender to *gender identity* in general, it seems safe to assert that sexual orientation is also unchanging since, for most people, their gender identity *once solidified* will define most aspects of their life. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, but the main take away is that an individual does not chose his gender-identity at random. Since gender identity plays such a crucial role in their lives, it is usually a decision that takes careful and thoughtful consideration, and is therefore *mostly* unchanging. Vela-McConnell (2011) agrees with this in spirit, but adds a small complication to the idea, clarifying that gender identity is unchangeable as long as "the gay or lesbian individual is already out of the closet" (p 120). This is a minor point, though, since the perceived changeability only occurs due to lack of knowledge; a change in sexual orientation only occurs when an individual "comes-out," but the change is only superficial in the sense that the individual has already decided his gender identity personally but chose to conceal it from others. As can be seen, race and sexual orientation are similar in the sense that they are both unchangeable. Therefore, a solution to the stigma surrounding same-sex

cross-orientation friendships will probably take a similar form to the acceptance of inter-racial friendships.

Yet, the idea of revelation brings up a further and important distinction when it comes to sexual orientation. As Vela-McConnell (2011) made clear, social boundaries can be classified not only by mutability, but also by visibility. At first glance, the visibility of sexual orientation is not readily apparent. For example, it could be argued that the way and individual carries him or herself indicates his sexual orientation, but aside from being a stereotypically shortsighted view, this is blatantly false. Friendships, such as the one between Mark and Dave (Vela-McConnell, 2011, p. 190), exemplify the fact that even a close friend can remain “closeted” without the other realizing it. This idea garners further support when Tillman-Healey’s (2001) life rule of being careful not to make assumptions about another person’s sexuality comes into play. Tillman-Healey’s research focused on a gay softball team she and her husband accidentally joined when moving to a new town (Tillman-Healey, 2001). This mere fact reveals that sexual orientation is difficult to see from the perspective of the heteronormative group.

Of course, maybe this was just an artifact of Tillman-Healey’s lack of familiarity with a specific minority. As Cook, Calcagno, Arrow, & Malle (2012) have demonstrated in their research, the lack of inter-group interactions between the heteronormative section of the populations and the homosexual section can lead to not only discomfort and distrust, but also a high level of unfamiliarity. What would be truly informative would be if a member of the heteronormative group incorrectly mistook another member of the same group as gay. Then there would be no way to account for the mistake through an appeal to unfamiliarity. Yet, this is exactly what Tillman-Healey (2001) recounts:

“Are you staring at Anna?”

“Maybe,” I confess.

“She wouldn’t be interested in you anyway,” he says.

“And why not?” I ask, a bit defensively. Doesn’t she like girly girls?

“She’s *straight*,” Tim says, offering a wry grin. (p. 68-9)

Clearly, a member of the heteronormative group has mistaken another member for, in this particular case, lesbian. While short, this conversation highlights just how difficult telling whether a person is straight or gay can be. While some might point to what is colloquially known as a gaydar – possessing the ability to tell whether an individual is gay or not through simple visual cues – research has shown that this is not the case (Shelp, 2002). This is *not* to say that there are no differences between straight and gay individuals. To the contrary, many studies such as those by Bogaert, Blanchard, Hershberger, and Linville, have shown that differences in both personality and physical appearance do exist (as cited in Shelp, 2002, p. 3). The main fact to take away from this is that there are no obvious outward and readily apparent distinctions between gay and straight individuals. Unlike race, which one has no choice but to reveal, sexual-orientation is more easily subjected to societal pressures because it *can* be hidden.

Therefore, the social boundary between friends of sexual orientation is different from most other boundaries. Sexual orientation, as can be seen above, is neither changeable nor readily visible. What about the social boundary to which we are attempting to draw parallels? The boundary between blacks and whites, as opposed to that of sexual orientation, is definitely visible (though, it can be argued, that *other* racial boundaries are not necessarily as visible, the focus of this paper is on drawing parallels to the social boundary crossed by the Civil Rights Movement). An inter-race friendship can be seen from afar (figuratively and literally). Yet, just like sexual orientation, race is unchangeable in most, if not all, cases. This dual immutability invokes the frequent analogy “that one does not choose homosexuality, just as one does not choose the color of his or her skin” (Tillman-Healey, 2001, p. 72). Here we have a very clear distinction

between these two major social boundaries. This distinction is made clearer if we look at Vela-McConnell's data. When asked what type of impact different social boundaries had on their specific friendships, participants overwhelmingly responded that orientation had a *negative* impact (49%), as opposed to race, which had one of the lowest negative impacts (9%) (Vela-McConnell, 2011, p. 104). If we analyze the statistics more deeply, it becomes clear that the negative impact arises mostly because there appears to be some level of discomfort inherent to cross-orientation friendships (Vela-McConnell, 2011, p. 116). Stoltenberg (as cited in Price, 199, p14) further clarifies this idea by making it clear that gay men are probably the most blatantly subordinated group in society today. The idea of subordination of a group can be expanded effortlessly to encompass the entire gay community; the community as a whole is definitely one of the most subordinated groups today.

This subordination of the gay community appears to arise from the social stigma associated with being gay. While society is slowly shifting away from this intolerant point of view, there nonetheless remains a large section of the populations, especially in America, which views homosexuality as unnatural (Ryan & Lewis, 2003). As Ryan & Lewis (2003) found, though, the stigma is, luckily, in decline there seems to be a small but vocal support for LGBTQ in the general community (p. 116). Yet, this decline seems to be painstakingly slow. As Ryan & Lewis acknowledge in their paper, while the lives of LGBT individuals have vastly improved, especially in countries such as the US and the UK, many of the youth's closest leaders are unprepared and unwilling to discuss issues of sexuality. It is almost as if the issue of sexuality, while existent and unchanging, remains hidden in society. Almost as if sexual orientation was invisible. In order to see the possible effects and paths that the development of cross-orientations might have in society, it is necessary to acknowledge their lack of visibility and therefore lack of



effectiveness in directly demonstrating ubiquity. Now that we have established the defining characteristics of racial and sexual orientation boundaries, it is necessary to look at what the effects of friendships that cross those boundaries might have on society. Will initially marginalized friendships between cross-orientation friendships have the same effect on society, as did the inter-racial friendships?

As stated, race is much more visible than sexual orientation. Anyone can see when a black friend walks down the street with a white friend, but this is much more difficult to witness if instead one person is gay and the other is straight. Both situations are set in stone, but while the inter-race friendship might create an environment of acceptance, it seems that the inter-orientation friendship might find itself lacking the necessary support from society. Racial diversity in college campuses has proven a great predictor of racial diversity in friendships (Fischer, 2008), and therefore can be seen as creating a support structure for those individuals in inter-race friendships. When you are no longer the only one with a friend from the other race, the tension between the two of you decreases and the benefits of diversity are realized. This explains Vela-McConnell's (2011) findings that race as a social boundary rarely has a negative impact on inter-race friendships.

Following the hypothesis that having a visible set of others in a similar situation provides reassurance to the individual in marginalized friendships, one might predict the reasons for the negative impact of sexual orientation of friendships. The discomfort and initial hesitation in same-sex cross-orientation friendships is no necessarily due to the lack of diversity in college campuses, but instead to the lack of visibility of this diversity. Cross-sexuality friendships are particularly vulnerable because of the anxieties that already surround sexuality, but due to the lack of visible *group* of similar friendships, same-sex cross-orientation friendships have a much

more difficult time finding a welcoming and nurturing environment in college campuses. This is not to imply that a community does not exist, for as Nardi (1999) described, the gay community is usually lively and receptive, but instead that the community is inherently less evident. This lack of clear and unsought support, coupled with the still present social stigma, explains the “initial hesitation” and “discomfort” felt in friendships when it is disclosed that a friend is gay (Vela-McConnell, 2011, p. 117). The friendship suddenly changes from an intra-group friendship to an inter-group friendship and therefore the discomfort level rises, as Cook, Calcagno, Arrow, & Malle’s (2012) research showed. Eventually the discomfort does decline in the friendships that are successful, but more research is necessary to declare definitely how many friendships actually succeed in the transition from closeted to openly cross-orientation.

Despite the lack of clear research into this particular topic, inferences can still be drawn. Turning to Rawlins (2008), we see that individuals tend to associate easily with particular, predefined groups (p. 187). These associations present a challenge to the friendship, as happened when Dave came out to Mark. “Mark’s own attitudes toward gay men were challenged...,” (Vela-McConnell, 2011, p. 190) meaning that his prejudices about gay men were put into question. Eventually, this led to him becoming more tolerant of homosexuality because his friendships with Dave allowed him to “interact on a level playing field” and see each other as simply people (p. 190). Optimistically, Mark makes the comment that “if he could change...then [others] should be able to as well” (p. 191). We might hope for something like that to occur in every friendship, but Mark and Dave are clearly exceptional – they had been friends for years before and had already developed a close bond with one another. What about shorter friendships, or friendships in which the gay individual comes out rather prematurely?

These friendships are of particular importance because, not only do they reveal the shortcomings of a passive approach to promoting sexual diversity, but are also far more common in the youth. When one is young one is only beginning to learn the complexities of friendships and is therefore most vulnerable to disruptions (Ryan & Rivers, 2003). Not enough time has elapsed allowing young individuals the ability to create strong bonds before they are forced to reveal their sexual identity and face the intolerance of society. “Degrading comments by kin and peers” often lead the youth to hide their sexual identity (Seidman, 2004, p. 93). Evidently, this places some undue stress on the individual, and while this stress might be similar to that felt within the first inter-racial friendships, the lack of visibility in cross-orientation friendships complicates the issue further. While openness and public visibility of “gayness” has certainly increased in the last decade (Seidman, 2004), young gay and lesbian individuals still suffer from undue peer pressure and stigmatization. How does the gay youth currently deal with the lack of quick, visual support usually available other minority groups?

Studies (Collier, van Beusekom, Bos & Sandfort, 2013) have shown that the formative years of adolescence are the most important to the creation of a gender-identity and to the management of societal pressures. Efforts to increase tolerance and acceptance will likely have the strongest and most positive effect if we focus on youth. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how these friendships develop during this particular period. During the 1990s, an explosion on the number of youth identifying as gay or lesbian occurred, along with a steady decline in the “coming out” age (Evans, Herdt & Boxer, & Ryan as cited in Schneider, 2000, p. 239). This sudden change in the demographics of the gay and lesbian communities likely led to an increase in young same-sex cross-orientation friendships. No longer are older friends, like Mark and David, the only ones encountering the issues faced by the social boundary of

orientation, but so are younger individuals. Friendships must deal with this specific boundary from the beginning.

While comparing the friendships networks of gay and lesbian youth to those of straight youth, Schneider (2000) found that the main differences laid not in the number of friends or in the frequency of contact, as one might naively expect, but in the physical proximity. The data revealed that gay and lesbian youth had only 30% of their close friends attending the same school (compared to 39% for straight youth) (Schneider, 2000, p. 242). While the difference appears small, it points towards a larger trend because this relationship is not restricted to the school level. Schneider found that distance between friends was on average 30 minutes for gay and lesbian youth, significantly more than the 20 minutes of their straight counterparts (Schneider, 2000, p. . This reveals that gay and lesbian youth do not have as many friends physically *nearby*, neither at the school level nor the community level. Gay and lesbian youth are evidently further apart physically and therefore the support structure that the LGBTQ community itself can provide is limited.

Gay and lesbian youth find themselves in a catch-22. In order to feel comfortable around friends they must reveal their sexual identity, but revealing their sexual identity will likely add discomfort to their blooming friendships because of the dwindling but still present homophobia. That is not the only issue, though. If a gay or lesbian youth befriends their same-sex heterosexual counterpart, due to the lack of visibility of sexual orientation, the societal assumption will be that they are straight friends and therefore pressure will exist to act as straight friends. Not only will the youth have to come out to the friend, but in order to feel comfortable, he or she must also come out to every frequent acquaintance of the friendship block. The only escape to this would be finding friends in a community in which the societal assumption is that of *gay or lesbian*

friendships as opposed to straight friendships. This idea neatly explains the data found by Schneider about the physical distance between gay and lesbian friends. To find friends with which they feel comfortable, gay and lesbian youth must travel further distances. Otherwise, they face the stigmatization of society and run the risk of encountering homophobic individuals as they attempt to open up the nature of their friendship.

Clearly, same-sex cross-orientation friendships are not as common as one might hope. The social stigma combined with the friendships discomfort leads to an increase in friendships between same-sex *same-orientation* friendships. In itself, this fact is not detrimental. What is detrimental is the separation that this causes (the *self-segregation*) of the gay and lesbian individuals from straight individuals. Again, this self-segregation itself is not necessarily troublesome. The problem arises when we take into consideration the relatively small size of the LGBTQ community. As Fejes and Petrich (as cited in Vinke & Van Heeringen, 2004, p. 35) showed, there exists relatively few positive gay or lesbian role models. While the community as a whole is very supportive (Nardi, 1999), its relatively small size poses a problem of outreach. Lacking access to this communal support (either due to distance or societal stigmas), many gay and lesbian youth have a higher risk of “suicidal ideation and behavior” (Vinke & Van Heeringen, 2004). What can be done to resolve this problem, then, if, as shown previously, the problem has very little opportunity of resolving itself? Vinke & Van Heeringen (2004) conducted a study in which gay and lesbian youth were taken to an exclusively gay camp for the summer. As soon as they arrived, personality tests measuring, among other things, their level of depression, hopelessness, and self-esteem were administered. During the time at the camp, the youth were encouraged to interact with one another, often times given group activities that specifically dealt with LGBTQ rights. Other than that, the researchers left the camp mostly

untouched for the extent of the summer. The last day of the camp, the exam administered at the beginning of the study was given out again. Comparing the results of the two exams, Vinke & Van Heeringen (2004) found that the youth had slightly more self-esteem, lower levels of depression, and a smaller sense of hopelessness (p. 40). This data gives some hope to the possibility of helping and caring for this troubled youth. While the stigma associated with being gay might not decrease as naturally as the stigma associated with being black, there are many opportunities to provide gay and lesbian youth with the opportunity to accomplish intra-group bonding.

Yet, the focus of society should lie on providing a safe and comfortable environment for all members, no matter their identifying group. In order to accomplish this, much like inter-racial friendships, cross-orientation friendships must increase. As this paper has discovered, there is much difficulty with the propagation of tolerance when it comes to same-sex cross-orientation friendships. The lack of visibility of the social boundary coupled with social stigma and a relatively small community creates an unwelcoming environment for gay and lesbian youth. This environment causes these youth to be at a much higher risk of depression and other mental illnesses, and leads to a certain uneasiness that prevails even in close same-sex cross-orientation friendships. This discomfort, despite being dismissed by some friendships such as Mark and Dave's, is revealed almost omnipresent in society. If it were not, there would be no reason to no reason for gay and lesbian youth to have an overwhelming majority of their friends live further away as Schneider (2000) found. There would also be no real reason to expect the significant improvement in well-being that Vinke and Van Heeringen (2004) found when gay and lesbian youth were placed in an exclusively gay summer camp. The strongest explanation lies in the idea that society creates an unwelcoming environment for the gay and lesbian community, much as

the environment that existed in the late 1960s for the African-American community, but unlike that situation, the complexities underlying sexual orientation complicate the friendships that might foster an environment of tolerance. Same-sex cross-orientation friends are much more difficult to notice, and therefore the effects of each individual friendship on society is far less direct than that of inter-racial friends. It comes about less passively. Friendships have to go out of their way to make their sexual diversity known. We can expect, then, for the acceptance of these kinds of friendships to be much slower than the acceptance of inter-racial friendships. Therefore, for the near future, it seems that the LGBTQ community, especially the younger members, will require much direct support in order to promote their overall well-being. This support is likely to come not only from friends, but also from community sponsored camps/groups/etc.

The idea the heterosexual section of society will have to devote more of its resources to promote the happiness of the LGBTQ community is certainly not novel, but the extent of its necessity had not been thoroughly analyzed. Further research is still necessary into the broader LGBTQ community and into the ways that society can promote tolerance. While this paper focused exclusively on same-sex cross-orientation friendships, the findings can be extended to other groups, in particular the bi-sexual and transgender community. Of course, each of those groups will have their own specific difficulties which are not addressed in this paper and which require further research. For example, the bi-sexual community might not face as large of a discomfort level as the gay and lesbian community, though there might still exist some confusion and awkwardness created by the sexual versatility of a bisexual individual. To conclude, the current effects of society on the LGBT community are detrimental, at best, and the necessity of societal involvement in the well-being of today's gay and lesbian youth is extensive. In order to

maximize most effectively the acceptance of homosexuality into mainstream society, particular focus needs to be paid to friendships during the formative years of young adulthood. Same-sex cross-orientation friendships during this time are crucial to a decrease in discomfort and tension felt by peers towards homosexuality. Yet, this decrease will not come about easily. The heterosexual community will also need to provide not only passive support (in the sense of *accepting* homosexuality), but active support (in the sense of *advocating* for the acceptance of homosexuality). The visibility brought about by this activity will provide young same-sex cross-orientation friendships reassurances of acceptance, and they will in turn provide society with a more diverse population and, hopefully, a more tolerant outlook. The steps that need to be taken are not yet finalized and more research needs to be conducted. One possibility is that of summer camps and/or school groups similar to the one studied by Vinke and Van Heeringen, but this paper does not provide enough data to make any conclusion other than social support being necessary to a level not before required by any other minority group.



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