

Review:

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Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2001). *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation* (Ethnographic Alternatives Book Series, Series Editors, Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner). London: AltaMira Press, 416 pages, ISBN 0-7591-0111-6, \$22.95

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Abstract: Lisa TILLMANN-HEALY provides a journey into a world that is foreign to many people and looks at the elements that make it foreign. The book is an account and discussion of getting to know a group of gay men from her perspective as a heterosexual woman. It is predominantly conversational, with accounts of interviews, casual encounters, social gatherings and outings. TILLMANN-HEALY takes friendship as the paradigm for her study, allowing the meanings operating within and between sexual categories to be considered. The extent to which these meanings are able to be shared is limited, but the understandings that are offered are valuable. The approach taken is an important one in developing ways to look at shared meanings between disparate groups.

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1. Researcher and Friend

Through a predominantly gay men's baseball team, LISA TILLMANN-HEALY and her husband, Doug, get to know and become involved in a community of gay men. In her ensuing book, TILLMANN-HEALY gives an account of some of their interactions, including observations of baseball games, interviews and social gatherings. With friendship as the guiding paradigm of the research, she explores her feelings and perceptions in relation to these men and what she perceives as their observations of her presence and interactions with them. She does not want to be an outsider looking in, rather she chooses to play an active part in the community as a researcher and as a friend. [1]

It is evident that separate worlds meet in the course of the interactions involved and recounted in the book. Because it is unfamiliar, unknown and, therefore, judged from one's own (mis)understandings and knowledge as an "other", the world of gay men is, in a sense, alien to many heterosexual women, men and even some lesbians. As a reader, I often felt uncomfortable, and certainly unfamiliar, with the social scene of gay men, even though I have spent some time in gay bars. TILLMAN-HEALY reflects on her feelings of discomfort, particularly in entering gay bars. The rarity of friendships between gay and straight males is noted in the book and the literature (NARDI 1999, PRICE 1999, WERKING

1997). Gay male, straight female friendships are more common, but clearly not as common as heterosexual male to male and female to female friendships (NARDI 1999). There is not a lot of literature on lesbian and gay male friendships¹ and this issue fact is not covered in the book. To me, friendship, as a paradigm for research, suggests the opportunity for finding shared meanings and possible negotiation of meanings. TILLMANN-HEALY is accepted into certain aspects of this community of gay men's lives in an evolving way. Originally, she asked to study the baseball team as a researcher, but was able to go beyond that role by emphasising interactions and by offering and receiving friendship. [2]

I consider the notion of friendship as involving shared meanings, which, in the context of different sexual orientations and the accompanying group identifications and practices involved, seem more difficult to establish. The literature on friendships between gay men and heterosexual men and women is recent and inconclusive, particularly as to the extent and difficulty of such interactions. It is noted, however, that friendships between gay and straight men are rare (NARDI 1999, PRICE 1999) while those between gay men and straight women are more common; nonetheless, it is difficult to know how common (MALONE 1980, WERKING 1997, NARDI 1999). In this study, TILLMANN-HEALY takes on meanings from the community that she is coming to know. She tolerates the use of terms which she is uncomfortable with, such as "fish" as a reference to women (pp.48-49). The sharing of meanings is not necessarily reciprocal, however. The community does not appear to take on much in the way of meanings from her. Perhaps because it is not as important to them as it is to TILLMANN-HEALY herself or, perhaps, as a reflection of the insularity of the community itself. [3]

Her disclosure of her ordeal with bulimia demonstrates how much individual members of the community are effected by or respond to her identity (as well as her persona as a researcher and a heterosexual woman). She mentions this as a personal "coming out" story of her own to Al, whose response seems belittling: "I'd have no problem telling my parents something like that." (TILLMANN-HEALY 2001, p.119) [4]

The emotional engagement involved in this study does, nevertheless, effect not only the author herself, but also those within the community she came to know. In the words of David during the thesis defence recounted in the Epilogue:

"I never imagined that the dissertation would have such an impact on all of us as friends. My friendships with these guys were pretty solid before, but the project has brought us even closer. Reading the dissertation, we all learned about each other. Since then we've talked about the events Lisa wrote about, and those discussions have forged new bonds between us. This was a very, very unique experience that we all shared." (p.218) [5]

1 A search of men's and women's studies journals as well as gay literature has not revealed any significant studies. There seems to be a presumed alliance for political reasons between gay men and lesbians with little exploration of interpersonal relations.

David may be referring only to the relationships between the "guys" before their encounters with TILLMANN-HEALY, maintaining the community itself as separate from her interactions with them. Or, on the other hand, "friends" could refer to TILLMANN-HEALY, her husband and their developing friendship with the group. The experience that "we all shared" as inclusive of Lisa and Doug makes the paradigm of friendship a shared one. [6]

TILLMANN-HEALY refers to the "co-constructedness of the project" (p.177). Through this device, the characters and interactions encompassed within the study take precedence over theory. The discussion is conversational and includes insights into how TILLMANN-HEALY feels and what she finds herself thinking in the interactions. At times, this involves reflections on theoretical issues and explanations, which she adequately conveys in a conversational mode, particularly towards the end of the book. Thus, theory appears as an opportunity to reflect on her experiences. By drawing on theoretical points from the literature on friendship and gay communities, TILLMANN-HEALY uses the interviews to explore the men's relations within their families or at work—whether they have "come out" in these contexts or not and why and how it feels to them to have their families/work colleagues "know or not know". [7]

She includes observations of her experiences in gay nightclubs where she feels very out of place and yet, fruitful interactions ensue. TILLMANN-HEALY offers all of these accounts to the men themselves to review in order to check details with them and "take down their responses and incorporate their recollections into the text" (p.177). [8]

The interactive tone of the research is expressed by one of the men, Pat, when he gives his take on the benefits, of TILLMANN-HEALY's research;

"I think I have benefited more from Lisa writing her dissertation than she has ... Becoming involved with Lisa and the work she was doing ... enabled me to deal with my coming out. It helped me combine my old athletic, fraternity-brother self and my emerging gay self. I saw that I could be a gay athlete, a gay man with gay and straight friends." (p.218) [9]

2. The Challenge of Identity—"Gay" and "Straight"

The terms "gay" and "straight" are used throughout the book. While theory may offer other possibilities such as "queer" (which aims to disrupt sexual categorisations), "gay" and "straight" are the terms used within this community. TILLMANN-HEALY brings up the issue of sexuality and its categories several times—her own views being unsettled and resettled on different occasions throughout her experiences with the community. She does make an issue of the constructed nature of the terms of sexual differentiation on a number of occasions in the book. In her theoretical chapter, "Talking through Meaning," she notes, for example, that the terms "heterosexual" and "homosexual" were invented in the nineteenth century; "heterosexual originally referred to "a pathological fixation on someone of the opposite sex". She continues:

"... prior to the invention of these terms, sexual behaviours were practices engaged in. They did not confer a status, an identity that defined who we were. Since then, the terms have become reified, making this humanly constructed distinction appear 'natural' ... Instead of hetero- and homosexual, we could classify people as male-oriented or female-oriented." (p.184) [10]

Many of the gay men themselves did not wish to question categorization, even though they may be "bisexual", because "gay" has certain meanings with which they clearly wish to identify. This has to do with the community that they have entered into as gay men, and the lifestyle implications involved. [11]

The book aims to bring people into the world of gay men and the issue of friendship across sexual orientation. It is written as much for gay men as for heterosexuals unfamiliar with the worlds of gay men. The book takes the reader on a journey facilitated by its conversational and self-conscious style, prickling at times, because it makes us feel the awkwardness of being in a place where our presence is not required or predefined. [12]

The challenge of homosexuality as a challenge to identity comes out in TILLMANN-HEALY's account of her own feelings and responses as well as those of her husband and of the group. The study itself is challenging in that it does not merely involve choosing an object and then "studying" it, but takes friendship as its guiding framework. This is at odds with the idea of research in the positivistic sense as well as disruptive to ideas of friendship and how it functions in varied contexts. While TILLMANN-HEALY undertakes and presents a study, she also carefully documents intense and personal interactions, delving into their meanings—for herself as well as the reader. Thus, the interactions are the study and more than communications between separate objects where meanings are fixed from an "objective" standpoint. In this case, meanings are established and influenced by all involved, including the researcher and those participating in the research. [13]

One of the most interesting aspects of the book for me, aside from the insights into a world with which I am not familiar, is the issue of intimacy and how it is affected or even determined by sexual categories, masculinity and male ownership etc. The book brings out the difficulties of intimacy in friendship in such a sex-typed world. Sexual categories, such as they are, help to keep us "estranged" from each other. TILLMANN-HEALY and her husband found that their own understandings of the intimacy involved in friendship were questioned, bringing about a recognition of a same-sex "attraction" in long-term friendships for each of them (p.185). TILLMANN-HEALY makes the case that friendships between straight men and gay men are "unconventional" not only because they are rare, but also because they challenge the taboos against intimacy between males (p.190). Masculinity can appear more emotionally and physically vulnerable in the presence of gay men. The impenetrability thesis of THOMAS and MACGILLIVRAY, "... explains some of the anxiety many heterosexual men feel in the presence of gay men, who remind them that men, like women, are penetrable." (p.191) [14]

With masculinity, to a certain extent, out of the equation in relations between lesbians and straight women, some features of intimacy in the sex-typed world of heterosexuality are not so present. Masculinity is very much a part of the issue in gay-straight friendships, as some of the reported incidents in the book suggest. Having originally thought that the "ways of experiencing relationships and expressing emotions would be more like female friendships than straight cross-sex friendships" for gay men and straight women, TILLMANN-HEALY finds that "the gay men we've befriended are strikingly similar to my straight male friends". She adds, "My relationships with them are playful, active, and intellectually stimulating, but I find myself, as Wood says many female friends do, giving more emotional support than I receive." (p.194) [15]

Dawn MOONE (1995), in a paper on the use of the term "fag hag," explores some of the tensions in dominant discourses of gay male culture and the negotiation of relations with women. She highlights the changing and diverse meanings of relations between straight women and gay men, emphasising the diversity of gay communities themselves. TILLMANN-HEALY's book allows and appreciates the diversity in ways of relating between herself and the community of gay men she comes to know. The variety within ideas of female/female friendship, male/male friendship and the different possibilities of being "gay" or "straight," female or male, however, are more limited. There is some generalising of female to male friendship and female to female here, but that does not take away from the significant experiences explored by the book. Sexualities are more complex than is perhaps expressed in this book; nonetheless, it does discuss a particular community and a particular woman's responses to it. It is not an attempt at generalising in the way that readers might expect of more typical research. The book does not deal with the political issues, but stays with the personal and interpersonal, wherein lies its strengths. [16]

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