

Poly-Friendships

Esther (Polyester?) Rothblum

SUMMARY. In contrast to the monogamous model for sexual relationships (including those of lesbians) in western society, friendships are permitted to be polyamorous. However, friendships do not receive the level of salience and priority that sexual relationships do. This article focuses on three issues that keep lesbians from prioritizing friendships: (1) the culture of sex in the U.S. and western nations; (2) the way we define "sex"; and (3) the way we define friendships. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com]

Picture the following scenario.

You live on a planet on which Friendship is the most important issue in people's lives. Whereas you are expected to have lots of lovers (and

Esther D. Rothblum, PhD, is Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Vermont, and editor of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. She has edited the books *Lesbian Friendships* (New York University Press, 1996) and *Boston Marriages: Romantic But Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1993). A portion of this paper appeared in *Out in the Mountains*, the gay/lesbian newspaper of Vermont, in September 1997, and is used here by permission.

Address correspondence to Esther Rothblum, Department of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405.

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also co-workers, acquaintances, neighbors, etc.), these represent weaker bonds on your planet. Every adult is expected to have one Friend, a person who is her soulmate, intimate partner, and life companion.

Furthermore, your planet is basically "mono-affilious" about Friendships. Though you can express "friendliness" in order to find your true Friend, once you have become part of a Friendship, you are expected to remain committed to this Friendship. You and your Friend will have an extravagant Friendship Commitment Ceremony that takes months to plan and to which you will invite all your lovers, co-workers, and other people you know. They will hear you exchange vows about remaining faithful to each other "in sickness and in health" for the rest of your lives.

There are strict rules on your planet about friendliness with anyone who is not your Friend. Friendliness is frowned upon in the workplace or other situations in which you are expected to maintain a professional identity. If you spend too much time with one particular lover, people may wonder whether you are more than "just lovers" and suspect that you are "cheating" on your Friend. You can have fantasies of being friendly with lovers, but you're not supposed to "act on" these feelings without endangering your Friendship.

Ever since you were a child, lots of toys and games focused on themes related to finding a Friend in adulthood. Your story books ended with Friends living "happily ever after." Friendships in adolescence are not expected to last long, because everyone knows that to enter into a serious Friendship you have to have a degree of maturity. Teens are encouraged to experiment in developing friendliness skills. However, adults have a lot of control over which people are appropriate Friends for young people, and in the past you rebelled when family members thought they knew who would make a good potential Friend for you.

Most official documents ask about your Friendship Status—single, in a Friendship, separated, or having ended a Friendship. There are some unkind words to describe people who don't have a Friend. Whether you have a current Friend and how things are going in your Friendship is the first thing that people around you, like lovers or family members, want to know when they see you.

There are other constant reminders about the importance of Friendships. Just about every popular song, television show, and magazine,

as well as lots of books, focus on Friendship themes—people getting into and out of Friendships, finding the ideal Friend, losing a Friend through death or infidelity, or having Friendship difficulties. No matter what product you see advertised, it is somehow linked with your ability to get into and remain in your Friendship. In fact, it is hard to feel good about your Friendship because there are so many things you should be buying or doing to improve your friendliness. Scores of how-to books, many of them best-sellers, focus on ways to meet a Friend, to “work on” your Friendship, to keep your Friend from leaving you for another, or to keep a longterm Friendship from losing its spice. And everyone knows that the older you are when a Friendship ends, the harder it will be to enter into another Friendship because most people your age already have Friends and are thus “taken.”

Of course, census data indicate that many people end their Friendships at some point, and others are “nonmono-affilious,” often in secret. You know this because a sub-theme of most Friendship books, movies, or TV soap operas is about Friendships that are experiencing some difficulty. You are aware that spending too much time at work can interfere with your Friendship, and there were occasions when you told your lovers that you had less time to spend with them when you were entering a new Friendship.

Religious leaders on your planet are very concerned about the increasing rate of Friendships ending. Should you and your Friend decide to seek therapy for Friendship-related problems, you are likely to find a therapist who has been trained to view friendliness as one of the single most important themes underlying both healthy and maladaptive functioning. This is particularly true for followers of Dr. Freund (the German word for “friend”), although the general public finds his views controversial, particularly the idea that even young children can have fantasies of friendliness.

Recently, you were at a work-related conference and you met a woman whom you really liked and acted friendly with. Though you couldn't be certain, you were pretty sure that she was friendly to you, too. Since then, thoughts of her have consumed your day, and you have even confessed this to some of your lovers. But you also have some serious concerns. How would you find time to spend with more than one Friend? What if your current Friend found out and it affected your Friendship with her, which has been comfortable (though not perfect) for so many years? The two of you would need to discuss the ground

rules of such a complicated Dual Friendship. Even if you decided to limit the new Friendship to out-of-town trips, wouldn't it affect your ability to be 100% committed to your current Friend?

If only Friendships weren't so complicated! Take your lover relationships, for example. Your lovers aren't jealous of each other and you're not jealous when they have sex with other people. Nobody cares about how many lovers you have. In fact, it's even hard to know who is and isn't a "lover" in your life right now because that term is used so loosely on your planet to describe anyone with whom you have sex. After all, sex is not well-defined and can describe all kinds of thoughts, behaviors, and relationships, so who could even begin to have criteria around lovers the way your planet does around Friendships? If only everyone weren't so obsessed with Friends, Friends, Friends! At times, it's enough to make you feel like an alien.

I have certainly felt like an alien in my own passion for my friends and friendships over my lifetime. Nothing quite matches the electricity of finding a friend who is a kindred spirit—someone with whom I can share my innermost thoughts. Going on a trip with a close friend—whether to the racquetball club or across the country—is better than eating chocolate. Getting letters, e-mail messages, or audiotapes from friends are delightful breaks from the routine of the day and I can't wait to respond. My favorite way of coping with stress or adversity is to phone up a friend for a sympathetic ear. Though I consider myself somewhat of a workaholic, most of my time is spent working around my friends; when they are free, I drop everything to spend time with them.

As a resident of Planet Earth, and in particular the United States, my passion about friendship coexists with the reality that most other women's passion focuses on sexual relationships. Surprisingly, this has some advantages. Unlike the women on the fictional planet described above, I have permission to be extremely "non-monogamous" in my friendships, and I do in fact relate intimately to a number of close friends. Many of my friends know one another; quite a few are friends with one another, too. Certainly I am "closer" to some friends than to others, though it is not so easy to define what closeness means in friendships—is it level of self-disclosure, hours spent together, number of years that we've known each other, being there for each other during hard times? I usually can't say definitively when friendships begin and end, and this feels comfortable to me, so different from the

emotional summits of beginning and terminating relationships with lovers. The drifting in and out of friendships is not static, so that friendships may pick up at certain times when we need or want the togetherness. The major disadvantage in prioritizing friendships in a world that romanticizes sex is that friendships are not validated in the way that lover relationships are. So I rarely get the kind of attention for talking about friendships that others do when they talk about a new romantic/sexual relationship. In this article I will focus on three issues that I find keep lesbians from prioritizing friendships: (1) the culture of sex in the U.S. and western nations; (2) the way we define "sex"; and (3) the way we define friendships. I will also argue that friendships *are* polyamorous and this permission to love more than one friend is in contrast to the way we conceptualize romantic relationships.

THE CULTURE OF SEX

In the scenario that begins this article, the planet has developed into a culture of friendships—the friendship is the core method of relating. In contrast, women in the United States and other western nations live in a culture of sex. Being female in our society means being sexualized and objectified. Girls' toys and products for female adolescents focus heavily on their future roles as sexual beings. Susanna Rose (1996) has described how books and magazines intended for girls and women have a romance narrative, in contrast to the adventure narrative for boys and men. An enormous amount of attention is focused on women finding the ideal male romantic/sexual partner, celebrating this with a lavish ceremony (the wedding), and staying with that same partner for a long time, preferably "forever." (Of course, since women live longer than men and tend to marry men who are somewhat older, "forever" means that women will be alone in their old age anyway). Sex and romance are the themes of songs, movies and television programs, and how-to books and advice columns, especially those intended for women. There is never enough that women can do to feel secure in their sexual attractiveness, even after they are married. Even violence against women often takes a sexual form.

Women's sexuality is portrayed in the media as lighthearted and trivial, yet billions of dollars are at stake. The U.S. economy alone consists of an annual \$33 billion diet industry, a \$20 billion cosmetic

industry, a \$300 million cosmetic surgery industry, and a \$7 billion pornography industry (Wolf, 1991). The culture of sexuality and its correlates, the cultures of fashion and pornography, portray women almost overwhelmingly as Caucasian, young, extremely thin, middle- or upper-class, able-bodied, and heterosexual. For the majority of women who do not fit this narrow demographic profile, privilege is attained by mimicking this image as closely as possible.

It is vital for the appearance-related economy that women feel responsible for our own sexual attractiveness, so that we will purchase products and engage in practices (e.g., dieting, cosmetic surgery, exercise) to enhance sexual appeal (see Rothblum, 1992; 1993; for reviews). The economy would have much to lose if women stopped being influenced by its messages. This culture of sex, not surprisingly, prioritizes sexual activity, sexual attractiveness, and sexual relationships to the exclusion of all other ways of relating.¹

How does the culture of sex affect lesbians? Lesbians, too, are socialized as girls and women to value sexual attractiveness. Most lesbians work and socialize with heterosexual people, and are influenced by the sexual messages in the media. Lesbian books and magazines, like those for heterosexual women, focus on the romance narrative (Rose, 1996). For example, in the Naiad Press novel *Never Say Never*, two co-workers, Leslie who is a lesbian and Sara who is heterosexual, become close friends. Though it is obvious to the reader and to both women that they are sexually attracted to each other, the suspense builds as to whether or not Leslie and Sara will “consummate” their relationship—that is, become genitally sexual. Whether or not the women do “it” will affect the reader’s perception as to whether the book had a happy ending (they became lovers) or an unhappy one (they remained “just friends”).

WHAT IS LESBIAN SEXUAL ACTIVITY?

“Sex” is commonly defined as heterosexual intercourse. JoAnn Loulan (1993) has described how adolescents who have engaged in a number and variety of sexual activities but have not had intercourse will say that they haven’t “gone all the way.” Sexual activity, as defined by lesbians, is greatly affected by heterosexual definitions of sexual activity. Two women are considered to have engaged in sex if they performed mutual genital stimulation. A lesbian who has never

engaged in this activity will probably not believe that she has “gone all the way.” The first time women have genital sex has a powerful definitional value, because it distinguishes the relationship from other, non-sexual relationships (e.g., friend, colleague, acquaintance, neighbor) that symbolize weaker bonds in Western society. Women may recall their first experience of heterosexual intercourse as somewhat disappointing, but they knew that the experience “counted” (and in fact, most people can count the number of sexual relationships they have had in a way they don’t count numbers of friends, relatives, and co-workers).

Often women tell me that I am using a very narrow definition of “sex,” and say that they define sex in broader terms. Surveys also indicate that lesbians, being women, placed more focus on love, affection, and romance, than on genital sexual activity (e.g., Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). Nevertheless, ask any lesbian couple that is celebrating the anniversary of their relationship what in fact they are celebrating—that is, what happened on the day they are counting as the anniversary—and the majority (but not all) will say it was the day they first had genital sex (actually, they say sex, not genital sex, but we have a very specific social construction of what we “allow” to be included in the word “sex”). Furthermore, if I come back from a sabbatical year and rave about a new, close friend with whom I spent all my time there, friends are less interested than if I casually mention a one-night sexual encounter with a relative stranger. If I further describe the brief sexual encounter as consisting only of mutual kissing, for example, friends will feel betrayed—this is not “real” sex. If I add that the close friend is sexually attracted to me, this immediately changes the valence of the relationship, because now it includes sexual possibility. In fact, friendships may include a level of flirtatiousness and sexual energy, but if genital sexual activity is absent then the friendship is probably considered to be “nonsexual.” What does this say about the narrow definition of sex? What does this say about the salience of sexual encounters—even brief anonymous ones—over friendships—even long-term close ones? If you ask your friends about the number of sexual relationships they have had, they will not count, for example, friends who have been sexually attracted to them unless this friendship became genitally sexual.

This sex-focused definition of a partnered relationship has a number of implications for lesbians in relationships. It focuses on an aspect

that may not be what is most important to lesbians in a relationship. Lesbians may feel pressure to have genital sex in order to provide a definition for their romantic feelings for another woman. They may feel pressure to continue having sex in order to view themselves as still being partners. If genital sex ceases, and if one or both partners tells close friends about this, the lesbian community may view the couple as having ended their relationship, and the members of the couple may be considered sexually available by other women (this is different from legal marriages, in which the heterosexual couple is considered to be married even if they have stopped having sex or are having sex with other people). Lack of sexual activity may be interpreted (by the couple, their therapist and the lesbian community) as a sign that something is seriously wrong with the relationship, even if all other aspects of the relationship are satisfying.

Further, the genitally sexual definition of what constitutes a lesbian relationship ignores the reality of women's ways of relating. Certainly romantic love as it has traditionally been conceptualized is a way for women to relate closely to men. Yet for centuries, women have felt strong love, affection, and intimacy for other women, even when both women were married to men. When two unmarried women lived together as "spinsters," they were considered to be in a "Boston marriage," a term that reflected the presumed asexual nature of the relationship (the city of Boston was home of many colleges and universities, and thus some highly educated women). Lillian Faderman (1993) has described the passion and love between U.S. women in the nineteenth century. She stated (1981, pp. 17-18): "It became clear that women's love relationships have seldom been limited to that one area of expression, that love between women has been primarily a sexual phenomenon only in male fantasy literature. 'Lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be a part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent."

One group that continues to have close, passionate, and nonsexual relationships today are female adolescents. Lisa Diamond (1997) has described what she terms "passionate friendships" among adolescent and young adult women. These friendships are portrayed as "love affairs without the sexual element" (p. 5), with elements of romantic love, idealization, obsession, exclusivity, possessiveness, and sexual

desire. Nevertheless, such relationships may be viewed (by the young women and by those around them) as a prelude to a future partnership with a man.

Similarly, Janice Raymond's (1986) book *A Passion for Friends* includes descriptions of women's intimate friendships in non-western cultures in which women, even if married, spend most of their lives in close contact with other women. Oliva Espin (1993) has portrayed close, intimate but nonsexual relationships among unmarried women in Latin American cultures.

WHAT IS FRIENDSHIP?

What is a friend? Unfortunately, the term "friend," particularly in the U.S., has come to mean almost anyone we know who is not a lover. There are four categories of people: (1) lovers (usually one lover); (2) enemies (hopefully none or few); (3) people we haven't met; and (4) friends (that is, everyone else). The *American Heritage Dictionary* definition supports this claim; a friend is defined as: "(1) A person whom one knows, likes, and trusts. (2) An acquaintance. (3) A person with whom one is allied in a struggle or cause; comrade. (4) One who supports, sympathizes with, or patronizes, a group, cause, or movement. (5) A member of the Society of Friends; Quaker." Thus, friends include acquaintances, co-workers, fellow activists, and people who belong to the same groups that we do. Nowhere in this definition is a sense of the friend as soul-mate, or the long-term friendships we have carried on for decades, or the best friend we had as young girls.

In contrast to a sexual relationship, a friendship is presumed to be independent of sexual behavior, and to a great extent, of sexual feelings and fantasies. Friendships are so secondary in importance to sexual relationships that many women (including lesbians) have had the experience of a friendship decreasing in intensity when one or both women became sexually involved with someone else. When friendships between women are especially close or intense, outsiders suspect the presence of sexual feelings or behavior.² One reason for the greater acceptance of non-monogamy in sexual relationships in the women's communities of the 1970s was the idea that feminists could be close to several other women in the spirit of "sisterhood."

These definitions of sexual relationships and of friendships, respectively, focus on genital activity as a definition (lovers do "it" whereas friends don't) and thus ignore other, nongenital, sexual experiences that women may have had (Loulan, 1993; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). We have no terminology for the early sexual crushes that some girls develop on other people, usually a female friend. We have no language for the sexual feelings that arise between adult friends, even when both friends are in sexual relationships with other people. In contrast, if the friends engage in genital sexual activity with each other, we immediately have language; they are having an affair.

Furthermore, friendships and sexual relationships are not separate entities. Lesbians often feel that their lover is their friend, even their best friend. Similarly, friends may have sexual feelings for one another, though they may or may not acknowledge these feelings to each other (or even to themselves). Discussion of sexual feelings between friends may interfere with the friendship, given the high salience of sex over friendship in our society. Lesbian ex-lovers often remain friends (see Becker, 1988, for a review), and the passion of the friendship may have the eroticism of the prior genital sexual relationship.

Situations in which one woman has sexual feelings for another, but these feelings are not reciprocated, are not viewed as "real" sex; in fact, the term "unrequited love" reflects the lack of legitimacy of these feelings. The woman who is sexually attracted to her friend has less power than the one who is the object of the crush. In the Naiad Press novel I described earlier, Leslie and Sara gain power and lose power relative to each other as they deny and admit their sexual feelings for each other, respectively. Similarly, the person who initiates the break-up of a relationship has more power than the one who wants to remain in the relationship. Yet relationships where feelings of sexual attraction exist—requited or not—are no longer viewed as legitimate friendships.

Lesbians may become sexually attracted to heterosexual women who do not reciprocate the desire for a genital sexual relationship. As part of my interviews for a previous book on lesbians involved in romantic but nonsexual relationships, one of the interviewees, Laura, moved to San Francisco and became attracted to her heterosexual roommate Violet. Violet seemed to encourage the relationship in multiple ways, such as having heart-shaped tattoos made with each other's names and telling Laura it was okay that people mistook them for

lovers. Laura refers to their relationship as: "When we were whatever we were: Whatever it was that we had." When Laura suggested they become lovers, Violet said she couldn't do it; Laura was devastated (from Rothblum & Brehony, 1994).

CONCLUSION

What would be some components of a women-focused not sexual revolution, but friendship revolution? First, I think we need to celebrate friendships in equivalent ways to the ways in which we celebrate sexual relationships. For example, for twenty years I have talked on the phone every Sunday with Nancy. We met in 1976 in graduate school; I was in love with Nancy but she was heterosexual and we never became lovers (though she married a man called Nestor which I think bears an interesting resemblance to my name, Esther). In 1986, to celebrate ten years of friendship, I flew to Denver where Nancy was doing her post-doc and we each pierced one ear (I guess our ears symbolizing the part of our bodies that was most connected by our ten-year weekly telephone conversations) and split a pair of ear studs.

When I was doing the interviews for my book *Boston Marriages: Romantic but Asexual Relationships Among Contemporary Lesbians*, I began to feel like an imposter because most of my friends told me that they and their partner had sex often, "all the time." Then, when a few of these friends broke up with their lovers, they told me it was because they had "never had sex." These were the same women; how could their stories have changed so much? Marny Hall has written about this phenomenon in her forthcoming book entitled *The Lesbian Love Companion: How to Survive Everything from Heartthrob to Heartbreak*—she argues that we create stories to make sense of our lives and then change these stories when our lives change. I think it's important to change the stories of our lives so that they don't revolve around our sexual relationships to the exclusion of all other ways of relating. Instead, we need to honor our friendships, and also those relationships in which it is not clear whether we were friends or lovers; "when we were whatever we were."

In a non-patriarchal way of relating, perhaps we can de-emphasize power, including the power of genital sex. What does it matter if one friend has sexual feelings for, or is in love with, another who does not view the friendship in this same way? In reality, no two women view

any mutual relationship in the same way, whether they are friends, lovers, co-workers, acquaintances, etc. Think of all the ways our women's communities would be strengthened if there were fewer misunderstandings or even outright hostilities due to power imbalances.

What would it mean if friendships became the core of our relationships, and other forms of relating (including lovers) became secondary? Similarly, what if we had more socialization in friendship skills, so that sex and romance were not as important, or interesting, or we accepted erotic feelings in friendships but didn't view this as problematic? Given the polyamorous nature of most friendships, we can co-exist with several close friends and not have to choose among them. Could polyamorous friendships serve as a model for sexual relationships? We need to be aware, however, that this will cause a vicious backlash from the economy and the media if women do not need to focus on sex and sexual attractiveness to the overwhelming extent that we do currently.

In Audre Lorde's (1984) classic article "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," she discusses the need for women to recognize the erotic in all aspects of our lives. Sexual activity can be independent of genital activity, so that "sex" can truly encompass all aspects of women's bodies, spirituality, love, and passion. Sexual relationships are so influenced by patriarchal definitions that we cannot truly conceive of women relating in ways that feel authentic to us. This is an area of tremendous power, and one in which we do not even know what our questions are, let alone our solutions.

NOTES

1. One other permissible way for women to relate passionately to others is in the role of mothering children.

2. This suspicion is even more salient when heterosexual women become friends with heterosexual men.

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