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# Girls Will Be Girls: Perceptions of Sexuality and Friendship Based on Gender

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## **Note from the Editor:**

Most of the manuscripts that *Intuition* publishes are literature reviews and research papers. However, *Intuition* accepts a wide variety of manuscripts, including book reviews, essays, and psychology-themed creative works such as poetry. Thus, the following manuscript is an editorial article and will differ greatly in both content and tone from other pieces published in this issue.

When observing interactions between groups of all men or all women, it quickly becomes apparent that how women interact with women is different from how men interact with other men. Physical interactions especially are generally performed in very different ways between these groups. For example, when interacting with other men, men typically perform limited physical contact that has a degree of aggressiveness or playfulness to it. By contrast, women are typically much gentler and more liberal with their physical contact. An obvious observation is that women tend to interact physically with each other more frequently than men do.

What, then, is the reason for this discrepancy in behavior? Most human behavior, especially group behavior, is inextricable from social norms, and social norms come from current social attitudes. At present, I have observed through research that most Western attitudes toward gender are, in summary, as follows: men should be unemotional and hyper-masculine and only have romantic interest in women. They are sexual beings first and foremost. Women, on the other hand, are soft and gentle and affectionate. They should only have romantic interest in men, but not too much, as it is their job to be pursued. Unfortunately, these ideas have harmful effects.

One effect is the idea that men are sexual subjects (in full ownership and expression of their sexuality), while women are considered sexual objects (granted less access to their own sexuality, perhaps more acceptable when for the pleasure of a man). Another effect is the idea of compulsive heterosexuality: that women should only have romantic interest in men, and vice versa. Anything else is considered a threat to perceptions of not only sexuality at large, but gender itself. Paradoxically, another effect of these perceptions of gender is that certain types of non-heterosexual behavior are more socially acceptable than others. This paper will attempt to deconstruct some of these false perceptions.

With the help of research and a Sociology of Gender class, my eyes were opened to the idea that female sexuality is generally considered to be more fluid than that of males because of broader perceptions surrounding male vs. female homosexuality and how this contributes to “acceptable” gendered behavior. Essentially, the

behavior that is socially scripted (or expected) for females allows them to be physically close and affectionate with one another, while also allowing relatively more sexual freedom in terms of exploring their sexual identities. However, as a direct result of these imbalanced perceptions, women are simultaneously reduced to sexual objects who exist for the pleasure of others, as opposed to sexual subjects, who exist for themselves, and therefore have much of the ownership of their sexuality stripped from them.

In modern Western society, female sexuality is generally perceived as more fluid than male sexuality (Diamond, 2007). Whether as a cause or result of this perception, women are typically more willing to experiment sexually and use labels less frequently than do men. For example, if a woman were to have sexual contact with another woman, she is less likely to identify as bisexual or homosexual than a man would if he were to have sexual contact with another man (Diamond, 2007). Simply put, women may be more likely to experiment because they do not feel the same degree of pressure to conform to an identity label as men might feel. This could be in part because males may experience higher rates of discrimination for homosexuality than women do, so they fear labels more. The reason for this thinking, of the stigmatization of male homosexuality more than female homosexuality, could be due to the fact that women are seen as sexual objects to be acted upon and enjoyed by others to a much greater degree than their male counterparts. Essentially, the perception of female sexuality is a paradox: physical contact is seen as more acceptable because female homosexuality is perceived as more acceptable than male homosexuality. And because this contact is perceived as more acceptable if it did come with sexual meaning, physical contact between females is then less likely to be perceived as sexual because of the lack of stigmatization of female homosexuality relative to male homosexuality.

Physical affection is not typical scripted behavior for heterosexual males. If males display any more physical contact than a casual handshake or pat on the back, it could have been perceived as “gay,” which is then perceived as less desirable. Part of this skewed perception of female homosexuality being more acceptable than

male homosexuality is, unfortunately, a result of fetishization, i.e., the hypersexualization of females being intimate with each other, particularly perpetrated by men (Puhl, 2010). Indeed, there is a large market for lesbian pornography, generally consumed by heterosexual men. This is an example of men being considered sexual subjects (autonomous agents with power over their own sexualities) who then enjoy the sexual objectification of women, thereby considering women as objects rather than subjects (Ryle, 2012). As demonstrated, a *sexual object* here refers to less-than-autonomous agents with no power over their sexuality and who exist solely to satisfy others.

Perhaps another reason that physical contact/physical affection between females is more acceptable is because it is the gender composition least likely to have sexual meaning. This is another example of (1) homophobia and how it negatively affects more than just those to whom it is directed, and (2) where men are seen as sexual subjects while women are sexual objects. Men are perceived as the pursuers of sexual activity, while women are the passive receivers. If there were two girls and one boy platonically sharing a bed, it still would have been seen as more sexually charged than three girls, equally so if the composition was two boys and one girl, no matter how nonsexual the intentions. The idea that a bed of three women is somehow less sexual than a bed of three men, or that adding a man also adds sexual intent, takes away sexual power from women. I am not suggesting whether there *should* be sexual meaning here, merely pointing out that it is disproportionate to consider men sharing a bed as automatically sexual, while simultaneously considering three women sharing a bed as automatically platonic. It also has an unfortunate effect on men: reducing them to sexual beings who cannot be trusted not to engage in sexual behavior with a woman, no matter the situation or intention.

Another reason that women expressing close physical contact is considered an acceptable behavior is because of how female friendship differs from male friendship. One theory of gendered friendships proposed by Robin Ryle (Ryle, 2012, p. 214) is that female friendship is characterized by “face-to-face” interaction, meaning that there are emotional connections and feelings involved. When

female friends are emotionally close, they may enjoy the bonding experience of physical closeness.

Male friendship entails “side-by-side” interaction (Ryle, 2012, p. 214), characterized by objective-based interactions, such as playing a game or working on a project. If one puts stock into Ryle’s theory, they may find it strange to find boys bonding in the face-to-face—or female—way instead of side-by-side. Cuddling or being physically close would constitute face-to-face friendship, since the focus is on emotional bonding and not completing an activity.

To clarify, this theory does not posit that only females have face-to-face friendships or that males only have side-by-side friendships, but merely that the performance of these friendship scripts tend to line up with other qualities that we perceive as female and male, respectively. This theory becomes especially fascinating when observing female-to-male interactions and finding which types of friendship take precedence in different situations.

The influence of hegemonic masculinity (rigidly hypermasculine, narrowly defined by traditional gender norms) cannot be ignored here. This concept that there is one correct way for men to express friendship or closeness while maintaining the society-requisite masculinity is toxic. Worse is the idea that being gay is the worst thing a man can be and that by doing so he sacrifices ownership of his masculinity. This expected gender performance encourages boys—whether gay or straight or anything in between—to avoid anything that would make them “look” gay. This idea—that men touching other men is bad—is problematic in so many ways: it teaches boys that the worst thing they can be is gay, it teaches men that all touch is inherently sexual and therefore gay, and it discourages healthy bonding and physical connection.

This theory also clearly explains why females expressing physical affection to one another is the most acceptable instance of physical contact. Women are seen as sexual objects and are thus stripped of any sexual power, while also being allowed more fluidity in their sexual identities, though often at the cost of fetishization. And because women are seen as naturally more affectionate than men, they more often experience face-to-face friendship.

The idea that men and women have different natures that require them to perform in social situations differently is not based on any empirical data and is a manifestation of harmful gender performance norms. I believe that men and women should be held to the same sexual scripts: all genders viewed as sexual subjects with agency and able to evenly enjoy androgynous (both side-to-side and face-to-face) friendships that encompasses all types of companionship. No one deserves to be put in a labelled box or have unfair assumptions made about them. Let girls be girls and boys be boys and people be themselves, however they are.

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