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*Odd Couples: Friendship at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation* by Anna Muraco

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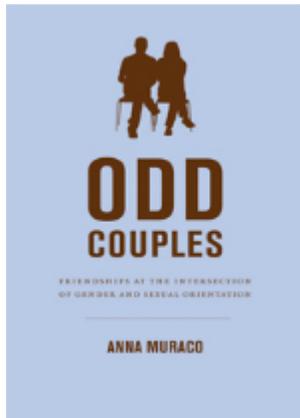
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# ***Odd Couples: Friendship at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation* by Anna Muraco**

by Rachel Wexelbaum

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## **Odd Couples: Friendship at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation**

By Anna Muraco

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For centuries, straight women have confided in and bonded with men who would have identified as “gay” or “queer” in the twenty-first century. In many cultures, men who pursued the more feminine arts of cooking, decorating, dancing, and hairdressing were more likely to come into contact with women than other men, either as colleagues or clients. In Eastern cultures, eunuchs (most likely queer men) served as companions and protectors to women in harems. Few records, if any, exist of the initiation and development of these past friendships, let alone the sexual orientations of the friends. In many cases, early bonds between gay men and straight women were often master-servant relationships; recorded gay-straight friendships between “equals” have existed since the nineteenth century. Less is known about friendships between straight men and gay women due to the historical “invisibility” of lesbians. Contemporary heterosexual men often have a fascination with lesbians due to common attractions and interests, but only in the twenty-first century has the “lesbro” become an object of Internet fascination. In *Odd Couples: Friendship at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Sociology Professor Anna Muraco of Loyola Marymount University strives to find out why we believe that friendships between gay men and straight women seem to form “naturally,” while friendships between lesbians and straight men seem harder to imagine.

So how do straight and queer people of different sexes meet, become friends, and sustain their friendships? Since 2001, people have written popular and scholarly books on the subject, often about their own friendships with gay people. In *Odd Couples*, Anna Muraco of Loyola

Marymount University has provided the results of her formal research study on the formation and sustenance of intersectional friendships. Over the course of her career, Muraco has published various studies on straight-gay friendships among older adults, high school students, and family members. In *Odd Couples*, Muraco focused on close intersectional adult friendships “not of a biological, legal, or romantic nature.”

Muraco conducted a study of twenty-six pairs of gay -lesbian- straight “dyads” (what she calls friendship pairings) primarily from the San Francisco Bay area. The research sample is well-balanced between lesbian-straight male and gay male-straight female pairings, significant due to lack of information on lesbian-straight male friendships. Unfortunately, white friendship pairings compose the majority of those studied. Thirteen dyads were composed of two white friends, nine dyads included one white friend and one friend of color, and four dyads contained two friends of color. This means that, of the fifty-six individuals in the study, more than half of the individuals studied were white. Muraco employed what she called a “snowball sampling method” to recruit participants; this means that she asked the initial participants of this study to recruit others. She identifies these first participants as her “contacts,” which she did not define. They could have been Muraco’s own friends, which may have biased the study, since Muraco herself is white and straight. She also claims to have recruited participants from “local gay and lesbian organizations,” which she did not identify.

Considering the population of San Francisco, Muraco could have made a more concerted effort to recruit a more diverse research sample in order to determine whether or not the formation and sustenance of such friendships has common threads across racial and cultural lines.

All of the participants were eager to share their stories with Muraco. In order to acquire honest interview responses from the participants, Muraco interviewed each subject privately. Most of the participants felt comfortable enough with Muraco to express any frustration or concerns about their friend as an individual, as well the dynamics of the friendship. Muraco did not expect the participants to disclose these challenges, and did not expect the friendships, on average, to be wrought with concerns about mental illness, substance abuse, employment status of the other, and the friends’ intimate relationships with others (or lack of them). She acknowledged that her surprise stemmed from popular culture’s presentation of “idealized” gay-straight friendships which appear problem-free. It is also possible that the participants “unloaded” on Muraco because, to this day, few spaces exist where people can talk openly about challenges with a friend of a different sexual orientation without judgment.

*Odd Couples* presents a wealth of information on the initiation, development, and sustenance of intersectional friendships. While the book addresses common phenomena observed across all of the dyads, each chapter contains a “vignette” of an intersectional friendship. Six of the dyads from the study are featured, balanced among gay male-straight female and gay female-straight male friendships, as well as friendships between people of different races. The vignettes allow readers to form their own conclusions about intersectional friendships, and perhaps see some similarities between their friendships and those featured in the book. The vignettes also lighten the academic tone of the book, and will provide a great deal of conversational material for non-academics. People in gay-straight friendships living outside of urban areas with large LGBT

communities would especially appreciate this book. They need confirmation that they are not alone, and that their friendships are probably stronger than others.