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Michelle A Beaulieu
Stigmatizing Will & Grace:
A Theoretical Exploration of
Gay Male Straight Female
Fictive Kin Relationships

ABSTRACT

Alternatives to heterosexual or homosexual partnerships, such as non-sexual relationships between gay men and straight women, constitute an understudied yet important source of social support for the people in them. This study is an exploration of one specific manifestation of such a relationship, specifically between gay men and straight women, utilizing the concept of “fictive kin” as a way of understanding these relationships. Using interdependence theory and social construct theory to elucidate the ways GMSF relationships have been, and continue to be, stigmatized, this paper offers a lens for understanding the implications of this stigmatization.

STIGMATIZING WILL & GRACE:
A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF GAY MALE STRAIGHT FEMALE FICTIVE
KIN RELATIONSHIPS

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010

Paradiso

There is no way not to be excited
When what you have been disillusioned by raises its head
From its arms and seems to want to talk to you again.
You forget home and family
And set off on foot or in your automobile
And go to where you believe this form of reality
May dwell. Not finding it there, you refuse
Any further contact
Until you are back again trying to forget
The only thing that moved you (it seems) and gave what you forever will
have
But in the form of a disillusion.
Yet often, looking toward the horizon
There—inimical to you?—is that something you have never found
And that, without those who came before you, you could never have
imagined.
How could you have thought there was one person who could make you
Happy and that happiness was not the uneven
Phenomenon you have known it to be? Why do you keep believing in this
Reality so dependent on the time allowed it
That it has less to do with your exile from the age you are
Than from everything else life promised that you could do?

Kenneth Koch

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For millions of Americans, the popular TV show “Will & Grace” (1998-2006) introduced the gay male straight female (hereafter referred to as the GMSF) dyad to mainstream culture. Will & Grace challenged many common classification binaries, offering a reconceptualization of the idea of ‘partnership.’ While researchers and the average person often distinguish between “just friends” and romantic relationships, or between friends and family, Will and Grace’s relationship exposed the difficulty of those types of traditional distinctions in a contemporary world. Over the course of the show, as many factors shifted (such as whether Will and Grace lived together or separately, whether they were in romantic relationships with others or not, and even whether they would have children together), what remained clear was the primacy of the relationship between the two. The relationship portrayed on the show, and in the narratives of real life gay men and straight women in relationship with one another, demonstrates a powerful alternative to traditional homosexual or heterosexual partnership. Social support, specifically in the form of close, long-term relationships, has been shown to predict positive physical (Clark and Reiss, 1988) and mental health (Reis, 2001). Alternatives to heterosexual or homosexual partnerships, such as Will and Grace’s relationship, constitute an understudied yet important source of social support for the people in them. This study is an exploration of one specific manifestation of such a

relationship, specifically between gay men and straight women, utilizing the concept of “fictive kin” as a possible way of understanding these relationships. Specifically, this paper seeks to answer the question: How can interdependence theory and social construct theory elucidate the way this relationship is, and has been, stigmatized and offer a lens to understand the implication of this stigmatization?

I argue that GMSF relationships are triply affected by stigma: first (and second) are the separate identities of the GM and the SF, subject to homophobia and sexism, respectively. The third layer of stigma that will be explored in this thesis has to do with the way the GMSF relationship itself, as a non-traditional permutation of couplehood, is marginalized, rendered invisible, and renounced. Clinical social workers are likely to provide services to individuals whose relationships can be understood to be nonsexual but primary. Unfortunately, little research or writing has been done on how these kinds of primary but non-traditional relationships are stigmatized and/or not taken seriously in contemporary culture. Some researchers have tackled the issue of passionate, non-sexual friendships between women in the context of feminist and lesbian studies (Diamond, 2002), while other researchers have looked in-depth at male (and specifically gay male) friendships in other contexts (Nardi, 1999). However, there has been limited empirical research that explores the issue of cross-gender, cross-orientation relationships, with a few notable exceptions. In their exploratory studies of GMSF relationships, Muraco (2004); Gregoriou (2004); Tillman-Healy (2001) and Gaiba (2007) have found that the dyad members often serve ‘familial’ functions in one another’s lives. Despite the findings that GMSF relationships provide invaluable sources of support for the people who

comprise them, what remains missing from the existing knowledge about the phenomenon of straight women and gay men in fictive kin relationships are the ways that the GMSF dyad is stigmatized and what the implications of this stigmatizing are. Wiseman (1986) explores the issue of the 'fragility' and specific stressors of friendships as opposed to romantic partnerships, reporting that "the voluntary aspect of friendship means that it has little of the societal support that other relationships enjoy" (Wiseman, 1986). Focusing on the fragility of relationships lacking formal structure, legal legitimacy, or language (either an identity label or more generally the language people might use to describe their experiences), it seems likely that despite the very real ways GMSF relationships offer the same benefits of many other relationships, they are also subject to more stigmatization than their sexualized counterparts (heterosexual and homosexual romantic partnerships).

The implications of this study for the field of social work are significant. One area of importance is how these types of relationships, when nurtured, supported and recognized, can provide protective factors for oppressed people. For example, a recent study found that distress and depression associated with lack of a domestic partner and high levels of community alienation were two primary factors leading to a 17.2% higher rate of depression in men who have sex with men than in adult U.S. men in general (Mills, Paul, Canchola, Moskowitz and Catania, 2004). Research has also demonstrated that gay men who report more emotional support from friends are less psychologically distressed than those who report less emotional support from friends (Kurdek, 1988). Even when partnered with another man, gay men have been found to rely more on friends as a source of support as compared to heterosexuals, who tend to rely more on family of

origin (Kurdek, 1987). Bandura (1982) found that peer relationships are significant influences in the development and validation of a sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Rubin & Mills (1988) found that the quality and closeness of peer relationships become integrated into an individual's self-concept and personal identity. An understanding of the stigma the GMSF experience will provide insight into what threatens the survival of the relationship, potentially cutting individuals off from this important protective factor.

In this vein, clinical social workers will benefit from understanding the fictive kin nonsexual relationships between gay men and straight women for a number of reasons. First, the prevalence of this emerging phenomenon means that issues particular to these kinds of relationship most likely will emerge with more frequency in clinical settings. Second, this study will help clinicians increase our ability to empathize with our clients so that we can better normalize and validate clients' experiences. Third, by examining the ways these relationships may have been historically pathologized, we can explore what biases and assumptions, informed by the larger culture in which we practice, might be impacting our clients, allowing us to better recognize our clients' experiencing of stigma and prejudice. This study contributes to a clearer understanding of the boundaries and intersections between homosexual and heterosexual communities, between romantic relationships and friendships, and between men and women. It also serves to give voice to the experience of prejudice from the target's perspective, particularly as the lives of gay men, consistently equated with promiscuous sexuality, HIV/AIDS, hedonism, and mental illness are often studied, if at all, from a deficit perspective. With many instances of homophobic violence in the U.S., it is imperative to develop a practical and theoretical understanding of nonviolent relations between gay and straight people. My main premise

is this: an understanding of the stigma faced by GMSF dyads helps us understand how to support and protect the creative ways that people get their needs met outside of traditional relationship configurations.

Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

Three aspects of stigma will be explored: homophobia, sexism, and the marginalization of the GMSF relationship itself. These dimensions of stigma will be examined from two theoretical perspectives: interdependence theory and social construct theory.

Interdependence theory focuses on the extent to which individuals need their relationships (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis and Hannon, 2001). Attributing relationship dependence to two primary factors, satisfaction level (one's subjective evaluation of a relationship) and quality of alternatives (one's subjective evaluation of who else might be out there), interdependence theorists posit that individuals become dependent on their relationship to the extent that they feel good about their relationship (i.e. satisfaction is high) and perceive that they do not have appreciably better options to their relationship (i.e., quality of alternatives is low) (Lehmiller and Agnew, 2006, p. 42). Interdependence theory will provide a useful lens to consider the ways external stigmatizing impacts the GMSF dyad. Looking at the gay male's and straight female's perception(s) of satisfaction and perception of quality of alternatives in the context of stigma can allow us to make sense of how others' views of one's relationships have direct implications on 1) how people feel about their relationships and 2) whether or they choose to stay in them. Etcheverry and Agnew (2004) found that subjective norms, the perceived views of others

regarding one's relationship, are significantly associated with both relationship commitment and relationship stability, making it especially important to analyze what the external views of those outside the GMSF relationship are and how those views impact the GMSF.

Social Construct Theory

The theory of social construction delineates the process by which individuals collectively create social constructs, how these constructs become institutionalized, and how these constructs shape our lives and experiences. From the perspective of social construct theory, every aspect of the "GMSF dyad", including gender, sexual orientation, and relationships, can be viewed as socially constructed. By exposing the ways that these constructs are collectively created, I will show how the constructs we have inherited contribute to the stigmatizing of the GMSF dyad. The main objective of this theoretical study is to extend the limited research on marginalized relationships, on cross-sex, opposite orientation relationships, and on non-sexual passionate friendships by considering the GMSF dyad as fictive kin. In the following chapter, I will elaborate on the theoretical orientation and methodology of the study. Chapter Three will provide a comprehensive representation of the phenomenon of GMSF relationships. Chapters Four and Five offer in-depth renderings of interdependence theory and social construct theory. Finally, in Chapter Six, I will apply interdependence and social construct theories to the ways GMSF relationships are stigmatized and the implications of this stigmatization.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTUALIZATION AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I will present a theoretical framework for the exploration of one specific manifestation of a “fictive kin” relationship, specifically between men who identify as gay and women who identify as straight. The study takes as its starting point, based on a review of the findings of qualitative data from the research of Muraco, (2004) Gregoriou (2004), Gaiba (2007), and Tillmann-Healy (2001) that non-sexual but significant relationships between gay men and straight women constitute a marginalized relationship. A *marginalized relationship* is defined as a non-traditional relationship in which couple members experience social disapproval as a result of their relationship (Lehmiller and Agnew 2006). In this thesis, working with the findings from the previous studies, I contend that this type of marginalized relationship provides an important source of support, connection and resilience, but that the relationship is neither well understood nor accepted within contemporary U.S. culture. I am interested in looking at the causes of, and impact on, heterosexist and other stigmatizing views towards the GMSF dyad. How and in what ways do such views shape the relationship, as well as the perceptions of individuals within such relationships? I attempt to answer these questions by using two theoretical perspectives: interdependence theory and social construct theory. After a brief introduction of both theories, I will present the rationale for choosing each theory to examine this phenomenon. I also describe in greater detail the concept of ‘fictive kin’ and ‘chosen family’, particularly as it relates to the experiences of the GMSF dyad.

Before introducing the fundamental concepts from each theory that will guide the discussion, let us explore in greater detail the important terms that will be used in this paper.

Definition of Terms

Focusing specifically on the experiences of GM and SW in relationship with one another, certain terms should be defined for clarity. The first term has to do with the *sexual orientation identity* of each member of the dyad. Although it is possible (and even probable) that individuals' gender identities and sexual orientation can be perceived as more fluid than fixed, for the purposes of this thesis I am specifically talking about men and women whose biological sex is consistent with their gender identities. Further, I am specifically interested in individuals who have identified with a single, consistent sexual orientation identity for a period of time, with sexual experiences for the men occurring primarily with other men and for women with primarily men. With regard to terminology, Trieschmann (1988) has emphasized the important distinction between the three components of sexual function: sex drives (interest), sex acts (behavior), and sexuality. She defines sexuality as “. . . the expression of a sex drive, through sex acts, within the context of the personal identity of the individual: the maleness and femaleness of the individual that is so heavily influenced by past cultural learning, one's self-image, and the expectations that others have of the person” (p. 92).

In the previous chapter I introduced how a GMSF relationship might defy the types of binaries and constructions to which we are accustomed. In this thesis, I posit the concept of *fictive kinship* as a potentially helpful means by which we can situate and understand the GMSF relationship. The term, fictive kin, was first used by

anthropologists to recognize relationships that serve familial functions in the absence of legal or blood relationships (Schneider, 1984). Fictive kinship has been applied to various relationships, from helping professionals who work with the elderly, to refugee communities. Wagner (1995) argues that in postindustrial societies, fictive kinship ties have become more important than ever. Further, Wagner contends that social and geographic mobility, soaring divorce rates, and nontraditional family forms are producing social networks based more on voluntary ties than on traditional bonds of blood and marriage. Part of my argument that many of these GMSF relationships constitute ‘fictive kin’ or ‘chosen familial’ relationships has to do with thinking about the functions people serve in each others’ lives, and the language we ascribe to the people who perform those functions. Moncure (1997) interviews Ahern, a kinship scholar:

The fragmentation of the traditional American family also has created an exciting possibility for people to choose their own families....Our modern society, with its dysfunctional families, easily dissolved marriages, scattered relatives and exploding population, is forcing us to become increasingly skillful in developing ‘kin-like’ relations with an ever-increasing range of individuals. (pp. 1)

Picking up on Ahern’s idea of our increasing skillfulness in developing kin-like relationships with different types of people, queer theorists and other academics coined the term *chosen family* to expand on the idea of fictive kin (Weston, 1991; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). *Family of choice* emphasizes the aspect of intention in these relations, which may be attributed to a historical context of heterosexual men and women being cut off from their family of origin and then reclaiming and reconstructing family. As some researchers and scholars have noted, gay and lesbian individuals can experience severe rejection, even violence, from loved ones when their sexuality is

disclosed (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pickington, 1998). In addition, other researchers have found that the same may be true for heterosexual people who disclose that they have a gay or lesbian loved one (Herdt & Koff, 2000). Oswald (2002) uses the word *intentionality* to refer to the “strategies used by gay and lesbian people and their heterosexual loved ones to create and sustain a sense of family within a societal context that stigmatizes homosexuality and fails to provide social or legal recognition for a variety of family network relationships.” (p. 375). For Oswald, intentionality includes choosing kin, managing disclosure, building community, ritualizing, and legalizing.

Finally, one of the central concerns of this thesis has to do with the idea of *stigma*, which for the purposes of this paper is defined as the social disapproval of a way of being that goes against cultural norms (Stangor and Crandall, 2000). In the next section I will explain how this working definition of stigma relates to the conceptual and theoretical framework of this paper.

Conceptual & Theoretical Framework

Link and Phelan (2001) offer a four step conceptual model to explain stigma. According to their model, people begin by identifying and labeling human variations, differentiating between prevalent cultural beliefs and everything that falls outside of those beliefs. Second, the label creators associate their constructed labels with negative attributes. Third, the labeled individuals are grouped together, creating an "us" vs. "them" dichotomy. Finally, labeled individuals experience “status loss and discrimination” that leads to unequal circumstances. In the context of the GMSF dyad, I am arguing that the

dyad experiences stigma in triplicate because of the separate identities of the gay male and straight female, subject to two forms of stigma, homophobia and sexism. The third form of stigma relates to the non-traditional nature of the relationship itself. I use two theories, social construct theory and interdependence theory, to get at the nature of the stigma the dyad experiences, and to explore the implications of this stigmatizing.

Social Construct Theory

Social constructionism explores how social phenomena develop in social contexts. In their introduction to the seminal text *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckman (1966) maintain that: “social order is ...an ongoing human production” (p. 51). As this quotation suggests, the theory of social construction specifically seeks to explore the process by which individuals collectively create social constructs, how these constructs become institutionalized, and how these constructs shape our lives and experiences. In the context of the GMSF dyad and the argument that the GMSF dyad experiences three types of stigma, social construct theory offers an important lens for understanding Link and Phelan’s (2001) stigma model. Particularly, social construct theory offers useful ways of seeing how people identify and label human variations, how labels get associated with positive or negative attributes, how we use constructs to create groups and categories, and the implications of these constructed ideas.

Social construct theory allows for an explication of the ways in which every aspect of the GMSF dyad is a construct, revealing how gender is constructed, how sexual orientation is constructed, and how models of relationships are constructed, based upon

our ideas about what types of relationships are possible and/or recognizable. By exposing the ways that these constructs are collectively created, I will show the dialectic between the GMSF dyad and the culture in which the relationship exists. My argument is that whatever identity (or lack of identity) the dyad has, in addition to the identity of the individuals within the dyad, is shaped by and continually shaping the culture in which it exists.

Interdependence Theory

Central to interdependence theory is the idea that partners affect each other and that the partnership impacts both people's lives (Le and Agnew, 2001). With roots in Gestalt theory, interdependence theory sees the relationship between two people as something in and of itself, distinct from the identities and motivations of the individuals who comprise the relationship. In this theory, the nature of the interaction between partners is perceived as the core of a close relationship and is viewed in degrees of interdependence, or, the extent to which each partner influences the other partner's positive and negative outcomes derived from the relationship. Generally, a person is satisfied with the relationship to the extent that perceived rewards from the relationship are high, perceived costs to being in the relationship are low, and the relationship is seen as meeting an internalized standard of what a good relationship should be (Rusbult, 1983). Applying an interdependence theory analysis to the GMSF dyad allows me to explore the dialectical relationship between the GMSF dyad and the culture in which the relationship takes place. I will examine what kinds of investments the GMSF make in their relationships, and what drives the GMSF to decide how much, or how little, of an investment they

should make in one another. In addition, because interdependence theory is concerned with perceived rewards and costs, and whether or not the relationship is viewed as meeting internalized standards of a good relationship, I will demonstrate how the stigmatizing of the GMSF relationship impacts the GMSF's perceptions of their own relationship.

Methodology

This theoretical thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the purpose, the population, and the phenomenon. The second chapter defines important concepts, including the organizing concept of non-sexual significant relationships between Gay Men and Straight Women, and outlines the structure of the study. In the third chapter, I provide a detailed description of the phenomena of GMSF relationships, with particular focus on how changing cultural mores might be impacting how many men are openly identifying as gay, people getting married later in life, and more flexibility and acceptance around conceptualizations of 'family'. In the fourth chapter, I discuss social construct theory, with an emphasis on how social construct theory offers a lens for understanding where the stigma the GMSF dyad faces comes from. Chapter five explores interdependence theory as a means to understand the implications of the stigmatizing of the GMSF dyad. Finally, the sixth chapter uses social construct theory and interdependence theory to discuss the experiences of GMSF in fictive kin relationships. This discussion will consist of an exploration and analysis of the results of previous qualitative data to show examples of ways the dyad is stigmatized, followed by a discussion of the implications of this stigmatizing, using an application of social construct theory and interdependence theory.

Study Biases and Limitations

The study's methodological biases include my own experience of GMSF relationships and my clinical experiences working with gay identified men and straight identified women who often bring up issues pertaining to their non-sexual relationships. In addition to my reviews of the literature, my personal experiences have influenced the direction and focus of the study. I think about the inevitable influence of my personal background, my age, and my assumptions about the meaning of relationships and the formation of identity, as these have led me to the types of questions I have been interested in exploring. When I think of the axiom "the answers you find depend on the questions you ask", part of me thinks about articles such as Stephanie Coontz's 2006 NYTimes op-ed titled "Too Close for Comfort". In her article, Coontz, a historian and family studies professor and former Director of Research and Public Education for the Council on Contemporary Families, wrote:

Ever since the U.S. Census Bureau released figures last month showing that married-couple households are now a minority, my phone has been ringing off the hook with calls from people asking: "How can we save marriage? How can we make Americans understand that marriage is the most significant emotional connection they will ever make, the one place to find social support and personal fulfillment? I think these are the wrong questions. Indeed, such questions would have been almost unimaginable through most of history. It has only been in the last century that Americans have put all their emotional eggs in the basket of coupled love. Because of this change, many of us have found joys in marriage our great-great-grandparents never did. But we have also neglected our other relationships, placing too many burdens on a fragile institution and making social life poorer in the process. (p. 2)

I am a 30 year-old female whose major frame of reference has been internalizing what Coontz laid out as the "fallout" of the "insistence that marriage and parenthood could

satisfy all an individual's needs" which she contends "reached a peak in the cult of "togetherness" among middle-class suburban Americans in the 1950s" (Coontz, 2006). I have grown up experiencing the backlash of what happens when people realize that marriage might not offer complete fulfillment. As Coontz (2006) says, perhaps we should be exploring how not to place too many burdens on a fragile institution, instead focusing on making social life more rich and supportive.

Intuitively, I reach the same conclusion as Coontz: that people will be better off not putting "all their emotional eggs in the basket of coupled love." To me, the GMSF dyad presents an opportunity to explore a non-traditional relationship that by its very existence challenges the idea that we can get all of our emotional needs met within one relationship.

Another major limitation of this study is that it is being undertaken through analysis of the findings from previous studies, and therefore subject to the philosophical and methodological errors of the previous research. Part of the challenge has been in how understudied many of the central elements of my research question are: cross-gender, opposite orientation friendships are very rarely studied, as are "significant non-sexual" relationships." So even though I am using the data from empirical studies involving interviews with GMSF participants, the studies vary in terms of their interest in interviewing people who have self-identified their relationship as being 'significant,' not to mention that the term 'significant' is itself subjective.

The central constructs that I am working with in this paper, including an idea of GMSF relationship being 'central to one's life', 'sense of identity' or of the relationship having a 'significant' impact on lifestyle are quite nuanced and most likely would be

defined differently by different people. The concept of ‘chosen family’ itself is laden with nuance. Past research has exposed researcher bias even in how one frames a question about whether these kinds of relationships might constitute a ‘social movement’ or evidence a shift from nuclear family to chosen friendships as organizing principles. Previous research supports the idea that ‘families of choice’ are not replacements for the traditional family (Weston, 1991), and writers like Weinstock (1998) have noted that researchers should be cautious when adopting the ‘friends as family’ terminology as they could stress the privileged status of the traditional family over friends. Similarly, a major challenge of studying the GMSF dyad is that this type of relationship does not have a specific ‘identity’ label that has already been articulated. Thus a central task for me as I undertake this research has been remaining open-minded about what might contribute to an individual using ‘kinship’ language to describe a non-sexual but significant relationship, especially in the context of considering the advantages and disadvantages of conceptualizing another individual as a ‘partner’ or ‘family’ member.

In the next chapter, I will explore what might be exposed in this shift away from ‘traditional’ relationship to a GMSF relationship, analyzing the essential ties that bind the SF and the GM, tackling the question of whether the GMSF dyad is kept outside of the culturally privileged family form, whether their relationship is rendered invisible, and how our culture’s social constructs contribute to the continual stigmatization of the GMSF dyad, perhaps to suppress the challenges that this kind of relationship poses to some of the illusions our culture perpetuates and holds dear, such as the idea that we can, and should, get all our needs met by one person.

CHAPTER III

GAY MALE STRAIGHT FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

Many have argued that the straight woman/gay man dyad has recently become a familiar duo in contemporary American popular culture. A rash of movies such as *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *The Object of My Affection* (1998), *The Next Best Thing* (2000) and perhaps most recognizable, the TV show "Will & Grace" (1998-2006) feature gay men and straight females as the protagonists. Other than offering increased visibility to this particular dyad, the range of conflicts, motivations, and depictions of the men and women represented also gesture to the various ways that gay men and straight women come together to form unique relationships. Indeed, it is this very complexity and variability that challenges a researcher studying this dyad. In her 2007 thesis, Francesca Gaiba addresses this difficulty, explaining:

There is not one single type of relation between straight women and gay men. The literature is not limited to friendships between gay men and straight women, but encompasses other relations, such as marriages (failed and successful), sexual and/or loving relationships, work relations, and economic and parenting partnerships. At any time and place, the relations between gay men and straight women are different and varied; they differ in the reasons and motives of the relation, in the level of satisfaction from the relation, in the types of activities the friends/partners engage in and the physical space in which they occur, just like any other type of relation. In other words, there is not one reason why straight women and gay men interact with each other. Thus, this broad category of relations cannot be reduced to one motive. I stress this because media representations of these relations often reduce them to one motive: the woman's inability to perform correct heterosexuality. (p. 15-16)

In light of this challenge, the objective of this study is to analyze one specific type of GMSF relationship, conceptualized as a “fictive kin” relationship, paying particular attention to what social construct theory and interdependence theory can help us understand about the stigma experienced by the GMSF dyad. In this chapter I will review literature on cross-sex friendships, explain how shifting demographics contribute to increases in GMSF friendships, outline the tripartite stigmatizing of the relationship, and situate these relationships in historical and cultural context.

Cross-Sex Friendships

Swain (1992) situates “cross-sex friendships” in historical context, proclaiming them a recent phenomenon in Western culture emerging from the 20th century shift from *homosociality* (same-sex relationships that are not necessarily of a sexual nature) to *heterosociality* (social relations with persons of the opposite sex). In Swain’s view, the “majority of friendships for both men and women are still same-sex” and “cross-sex friendship is neither clearly defined nor socially expected, and it is often interpreted in terms of heterosexual coupling or sexual relationships” (Swain, 1992, p. 154). Drawing on research from the 1960s to the early 1980s, Swain notes that throughout that period:

[C]lose cross-sex friendship occurs less frequently than close same-sex friendship (Babchuk & Bates, 1963) and has a shorter longevity. Also, cross-sex friends tend to be less homogenous in their interests and attitudes than same-sex friends (Booth & Hess, 1974). . . Also, employed women are more likely to have a greater number of cross-sex friends than homemakers, and highly educated women are more likely to attribute a greater value to cross-sex friendships than do less educated women (Bell, 1981). (Swain, 1992, p. 154)

As Swain's research indicates, perhaps these GMSF relationships can be viewed as a result of shifting demographics. According to national statistics, the level of education that working women age 25 to 64 are achieving went up substantially between 1970 and 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In 2005, about 30% of working women held college degrees, compared with only about 10% in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Another demographic shift has to do with both men and women delaying marriage. For instance, in the year 2000, one in four individuals aged 35 years and older had never been married (Egelman, 2004). Fields (2000) stated that "The postponement of marriage has led to a substantial increase in the proportion of young, never-married adults... in the past three decades, the proportion of those who had never married doubled for women ages 20 to 24, from 36 percent to 73 percent, and more than tripled for women ages 30 to 34, from 6 percent to 22 percent" (p.1). In addition to the shifting demographics relating to the SF in the dyad, there has also been a shift in the social acceptability of openly identifying as gay.

Demographic Overview

According to the 2000 U.S. census, approximately 2,000,000 men identify as gay, which amounts to .7 percent of the total population. Certain empirical evidence shows an increasing number of relationships developing between gay men and heterosexual women. Berger and Mallon's (1993) research on the supportive networks of gay men and heterosexual women found that 3 out of the average 8.5 people constituting these supportive networks were women. Nardi's (1999) study found 10% of gay men reporting a heterosexual female as their best friend. Because the mean age of Nardi's sample was

40, it also seems important to note that these friendships appear to be rapidly increasing amongst younger participants (Grigoriou, 2004, p. 6). Many have read Nardi's 1999 study and a 1978 study by Bell and Weinberg as evidence that gay men, like their straight male counterparts, generally prefer to socialize with other men. It remains interesting, then, that at the time of his study, Nardi commented that there was "no more persistent stereotype about gay men's friendships than the notion that gay men and straight women make good friends" (Nardi, 1999, p 114). There are also personal and demographic variables associated with individuals who exhibit lower levels of homophobia, indicating what kind of women are more likely to enter into GMSF relationships. These include: non- acceptance of traditional gender roles; infrequent church attendance; non-membership in a conservative or fundamentalist religious denomination; being highly educated; and/or liberal political affiliation (Lock & Kleis, 1998). It remains to be seen as to 1) whether GMSF relationships constitute detraditionalising forces that are bringing the heterosexual and homosexual worlds closer together (Weeks, Heaphy, Donovan, 2001), 2) whether their increased visibility in the media has led to them becoming more common in real life, or 3) whether changing demographics are affecting the prevalence of fictive kin ties both in straight and queer communities (Muraco, 2004).

Tripartite Stigma

Returning to the three forms of stigma--homophobia, sexism, and the stigmatizing of the relationship through heterosexism--introduced in the first chapter, we can begin to understand the phenomenon of the GMSF dyad through analyzing the stigma they experience. *Homophobia* literally means "fear of homosexuals." More

generally, homophobia means irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals (Webster Dictionary, 1996, p. 331). *Sexism* is defined as discrimination or devaluation based on a person's sex, especially directed against women. *Heterosexism*, generally, is the "cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma" (Herek, 2009, p. 6). Although each form of stigma can be understood as a recognizable entity, I will also show how the forms of stigma are interrelated. I will now demonstrate 1) that the GM is subject to overt, individual-level, homophobia 2) that the SF is subject to sexism, through portrayals of her as being weak, needy, and predatory and 3) that both members of the dyad and the relationship itself is subject to structural stigma, or heterosexism.

Homophobia

The word *homophobia* was coined by Weinberg (1972), referring to "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals—and in the case of homosexuals themselves, self-loathing" (p. 4). Examples of homophobia include: 1) making assumptions about a person being lesbian or gay based on dress, behavior, or personality 2) feeling repulsed by displays of affection between same-gender couples, but accepting affectionate displays between different-gender couples 3) thinking of people who are lesbian and gay only in terms of their sexuality, rather than as whole, complex persons 4) assuming that lesbians and gay men will be attracted to everyone of the same gender. The GM in the GMSF dyad is subject to homophobia in many ways. Some of those that will be explored here are 1) through a denial or minimization of his sexuality 2) through a

hypersexualization of his sexuality and 3) through assumptions having to do with dress, behavior and personality.

Homophobia Applied to the GM of the GMSF Dyad

Shugart (2003) offers an excellent and thought-provoking analysis of *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *The Object of My Affection*, *The Next Best Thing* and *Will & Grace*, convincingly outlining how these media portrayals of gay men make gayness palatable to mass audiences, who, by definition, are assumed to be largely heterosexual. One technique that Shugart highlights is how these portrayals often “skirt the realities and implications of homosexuality by desexualizing the characters... never depicting them in romantic or sexual situations” (Shugart, 2003, p. 68). Shugart contends that “gay characters are presented devoid of gay social and political contexts, thus ...being wholly grafted onto established heterosexual communities and contexts” (Shugart, 2003, p. 69). Further, Shugart explains, “gay identity is made legitimate only through assimilation into the dominant heterosexual gestalt” (Shugart, citing Walters, 2001, p. 18). Shugart’s argument is that because of homophobia, mainstream audiences choose to view the gay men in relationships as straight men, which they are able to do because of how the people behind the renderings portray them.

Holleran (2009) writes about the ways that gay writers often changed the gender of their characters in literature to obscure the homosexual content of their narratives, showing a two-part process in which men’s gayness is kept invisible until it is allowed to be seen, at which point it is problematized:

For some reason, Modern American and European writers tend to think of the late 19th century as the moment when homosexuality re-emerged as a subject—via Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, Thomas Mann and Oscar Wilde—and their oeuvre produced a certain view of homosexuals...a “cursed race,” Proust called them, doomed like Charlus to consort with streetcar conductors, Arab youths, and in Wilde’s case, a rent boy who turned against him in a court of law. (Holleren, 2009, p. 21)

Gay men in Western culture have been, and continue to be, rendered invisible and unacknowledged until they become visible and problematized, portrayed as a “cursed race.” Battles and Hilton-Marrow (2002) argue that renderings of the GM in TV shows such as *Will and Grace* use a common comedic convention for addressing homosexuality, equating gayness with a lack of masculinity (p. 89). Defining *gender inversion* as “the commonly held belief that homosexuals are oppositely gendered”, Battles and Hilton-Marrow explain how, through gender inversion, the gay man is considered “more feminine than a straight man” (p. 90).

Sexism and the Stigmatizing of Women

Swim, Aikin, Hall and Hunter (1995) outline what they term Old-Fashioned Sexism and distinguish it from Modern Sexism. The authors define *Old-Fashioned Sexism* as consisting of “obviously unequal treatment of women and the questioning of women’s intelligence (p. 209). Sorsoli, Ward, & Tolman (2007) conducted a study evaluating sexual content of popular TV shows from a feminist perspective. Sorsoli et al found three important sexist themes. The first has to do with the women being judged (differently than men) for sexual conduct. The second had to do with women objectifying

themselves. The third had to do with women being told that their physical appearance was more important than their intelligence, personality, and other attributes.

Modern sexism is seen as people having less sympathetic responses toward women's issues. One example of modern sexism faced by women has to do with the stigma of being an unmarried woman. Ganong and Sharp (2007) found that though more and more women are staying single or waiting to marry these days, stigma against 'spinsters' has not lessened. Findings from Ganong and Sharp's (2007) study revealed that the social environments of women who have never-married are characterized by pressure to conform (p. 840). Subjects often felt people expected them to justify or explain their singlehood. The women also reported other difficulties tied to their social status, including: 1) awareness of shifting realities as they become older, such as a shrinking pool of eligible men 2) sense of being on different life paths than most women 3) feelings of insecurity and displacement in their families when parents and siblings remark about their singlehood and make jokes or rude comments. Ganong and Sharp (2007) found that dealing with the stigma of being single is most pronounced for women in their mid-20's through mid-30's who feel scrutinized by friends, family members and others for their singlehood. Speaking to the ways that mainstream media reinforce these ideas, Ganong and Sharp noted the popularity of shows like *Sex and the City*, which portray female protagonists hyper-focused on finding men and getting married. In the next paragraph I will demonstrate how the SF in the GMSF dyad is subject to both forms of sexism. The SF is subject to old-fashioned sexism, or overt inequality and the questioning of female intelligence, and modern sexism, including lack of sympathetic responses toward women's issues.

Sexism as it Applies to the SF in the GMSF Dyad

From Shugart's (2003) critique of *Will and Grace*, we see evidence of overt sexism directed at the SF in the GMSF dyad. Shugart argues that the men in the relationships are portrayed as having unlimited sexual access to the women, while the women do not have the same access to the men. Shugart cites examples of the gay men touching their naked female friends, slapping their asses and pushing them out of their beds. All this being done while the men are fully dressed and not given permission for these sexist behaviors. Furthermore, Shugart sees the SF as having "relatively insignificant status beyond their function as defining agents of male sexuality" (Shugart, 2003, p. 88). Finally, gesturing to the element of modern sexism in *Will and Grace*, Shugart describes the modern sexism found in *Will and Grace* as an enactment of paternal relationships. She writes:

These texts suggest that gay men reinforce patriarchal paternalism better than heterosexual men precisely because their control is predicated on their relationships with other men. Furthermore, these gay men are articulated as the otherwise ideal partner against whom the women—and the audience—measure their romantic prospects. (p. 86-87)

Shugart notes that these portrayals result in "parodic" stereotypes of women who are "without exception needy, vulnerable...often predatory, in terms of their barely camouflaged, sometimes overt desire for their gay male best friends (p. 89).

This rendering of the SF also conjures up a familiar social construct, namely, the "fag hag". Moon's (1995) findings demonstrated that:

Like younger respondents, older respondents see the term 'fag hag' as referring to "fat" and/or "unattractive" women who stereotypically "can't get a date"—women who somehow fail to perpetuate the sexist, heterosexual ideal. These women may be "friends", "confidantes" and "mother figures" but they are also often seen as women who, like gay men, have been rejected from or have rejected

the heterosexual mainstream. Indeed, mainstream culture's rejection of these women is mirrored by this particular use of the term 'fag hag'. (p. 492)

Moon's last sentence, demonstrating how both the GM and SF in the dyad are seen as having been rejected by or having rejected "the heterosexual mainstream" is an important one. The idea of mutual rejection connects to Shugart's (2003) argument, that the sexuality of both parties of the GMSF dyad are controlled through representations in which the women perform weak femininity while the gay men are rewritten as sexually harmless but nonetheless sexist and paternalist "straight-acting" men. Both of these arguments link the two forms of stigma discussed thus far in this chapter. The stigmatizing in tandem portrayed in this rendering is by no means the first time that scholars have linked homophobia and sexism. Pharr (1997) sees heterosexism and homophobia working together to enforce compulsory heterosexuality, writing:

The central focus of the rightwing attack against women's liberation is that women's equality, women's self-determination, women's control of our own bodies and lives will damage what they see as the crucial societal institution, the nuclear family. The two areas they have focused on most consistently are abortion and homosexuality. To resist marriage and/or heterosexuality is to risk severe punishment and loss. (p. 182)

Pharr's point helps us situate the homophobia and sexism we have seen directed towards the GMSF dyad as weapons in the battle to protect what is at stake for the politically conservative, the construct of the nuclear family. This shift from homophobia to sexism takes us to the final form of stigma, the stigmatizing of the dyad.

Heterosexism

Heterosexism involves 1) the assumption that everyone is heterosexual 2) the belief that heterosexuality is normal and natural and therefore right 3) the belief that only a heterosexual partnership can form the basis for a family 4) a consistent tendency to exaggerate the role of sex in queer relationships 5) the structuring of institutions so that heterosexual relationships are legitimated and privileged, while queer relationships are marginalized and oppressed. Herek (2009) proposes a way of seeing *heterosexism* as two processes:

First, because everyone is presumed to be heterosexual (a tacit belief often referred to as “The Heterosexual Assumption”), sexual minorities generally remain invisible and unacknowledged by society’s institutions. Second, when sexual minorities become visible, they are problematized; that is, they are presumed to be abnormal, unnatural, requiring explanation, and deserving of discriminatory treatment and hostility (p. 32).

Muraco (2004) argues that the GMSF dyad transgresses social norms of gender and sexuality, thus posing a threat to the heterosexual paradigm. Let us now examine the heterosexist tactics deployed on the GMSF dyad that attempt to 1) render the relationship invisible and 2) problematize and delegitimize the relationship.

Heterosexism and the Stigmatizing of the GMSF Relationship

Having discussed sexual and sexist stigma, and uncovered the relationship between these two forms of stigma, I will now outline the third form of stigma faced by the dyad, using a case example. Now that we are aware of the first two forms of stigma facing the GMSF dyad, I will also point out where we can see instances of the two forms of stigma that I have already delineated, showing how all three forms of stigma reinforce

one another and work together. One “pre-*Will & Grace*” example of a GMSF relationship took place between Simon Callow, a British playwright, and Peggy Ramsay, his literary agent. Captured in Callow’s (1999) memoir, *Love Is Where it Falls: The Story of a Passionate Friendship*, Callow and Ramsay’s relationship is a clearcut expression of the phenomenon covered in this chapter. Because I am particularly concerned with the dialectic between these GMSF relationships and the culture(s) in which they take place, analyzing the way others have reviewed Callow’s memoir illuminates how critics try to appropriate, label and define Callow and Ramsay’s relationship. In Reitz’s (1999) *Salon* review of Callow’s book, he writes:

[Callow and Ramsay’s relationship] was an enviable 11-year run of gift giving (everything from soup to an apartment), literary collaborations, dinners, concerts and serving as front-and-center witnesses to each other’s fruitful careers (his on the ascent, hers already long established) -- in short, about as complete a friendship as a gay man and a straight woman 40 years his senior can have. The tragic element in this “Account of a Passionate Friendship” derives from the presence of Aziz Yehia, Callow’s Egyptian-Turkish lover. Although Callow describes the relationship as a “tragic ménage a trois,” it’s clear that Yehia was a supporting player who just happened to be around... While his personal story is truly sad, its most emblematic aspect is the minor role to which he was relegated in the Simon and Peggy Show. Callow and Ramsay first met in 1980... Thus the whirlwind friendship began. Ramsay quickly fell in love with Callow, and Callow fell in love with Ramsay’s charisma, her élan, her eminently quotable remarks, her subtle and profound wisdom. When they weren’t together, they wrote each other letters full of gossip, humor, recriminations and declarations of love, sometimes at the rate of several a day, until Ramsay’s death in 1991. Callow is frank about the ups and downs of loving a woman who was hopelessly in love with him. Her jealousy of the various men in his life and the futility of her physical desire for him sometimes wreaked havoc on their great friendship. There was also her uncompromising honesty to contend with. But he never stinted on his devotion to her, and this book is his last, best gift. (p. 1)

Pulling out some of the themes that emerge even within this short excerpt, we find 1) confusion and distress about the role of partners outside of the GMSF dyad, 2) a common stereotype of the GMSF dyad, namely that the SF is in unrequited sexual lust with the

GM and 3) potential functions and roles the GM and SF carry out in each others lives, such as generosity, caretaking, artistic collaboration, witnessing, and shared humor.

With regards to the stigmatizing of the relationship, it is important to consider what appears to be Reitz's preoccupation with Aziz Yehia, Callow's lover. Calling him "the tragic element" in Callow's memoir, Reitz questions Callow's priorities, citing "the minor role to which [Yehia] was relegated in the Simon and Peggy Show."

A feminist reading of this review would surely lead to examining the way Reitz sets up a patriarchal construct, subtly wielding sexist stigma on Ramsay, the woman in this GMSF dyad. For instance, let us closely look at the sentence, "Ramsay quickly fell in love with Callow, and Callow fell in love with Ramsay's charisma, her élan, her eminently quotable remarks, her subtle and profound wisdom" (p. 1). While Ramsay is seen as being *completely* in love with Callow, his love for her is bound and limited, focusing on specific pieces of Ramsay's character. Indeed, Ramsey is portrayed as being "*hopelessly* in love" with Callow, with the stated implication being that Callow had to contend with the "ups and downs" of her feelings for him. Ramsey is also portrayed as "jealous" and her physical desire is framed in terms of "futility" which "wreaked havoc on their great friendship." From this example we can see how sexual stigma, sexist stigma, and the stigmatizing of the relationship all work together to reinforce a not-so-subtle devaluation of Ramsey and Callow's relationship.

Gussow, in his 1999 *New York Times* review titled "The Odd Couple," has a similar but slightly different slant on Callow and Ramsay. He writes:

Although Peggy could claim the widest range of admirers, including almost all her clients and many she did not represent, her relationship with Simon Callow was unique. It was, in short, a love affair. One does not hesitate to use those

words, although Callow was gay and Peggy, more than 40 years older when they met in 1980, was heterosexual. The playwright Martin Sherman once described them as sort of a literary Harold and Maude. As Callow recalls in his passionate and poignant memoir, "Love Is Where It Falls," this was a romance in every sense other than sexual. On other levels, the affair was consummated: they were confidants, helpmates, music lovers and keepers of each other's secrets. (p.1)

Gussow's review leads to another way that the relationship is stigmatized, through overlaying it onto a heterosexual context. Returning to Swain's point, about how cross-sex friendships are "neither clearly defined nor socially expected, and ... often interpreted in terms of heterosexual coupling or sexual relationships" (Swain, 1992, p. 154), we can see Gussow's attempt to interpret Callow and Ramsey's relationship in terms of a heterosexual relationship. Referring to the relationship as "a love affair", "a passionate friendship," an "odd couple," and "a romance in every sense other than sexual," Gussow and Reitz both attempt to get at what the relationship is by suggesting what it is not (a sexual relationship), and by invoking (heterosexual) constructs recognizable to the reader.

GMSF friendships have been represented in many movies and television shows, which in turn has produced a number of academic media studies on the topic. Pillion (2000), Allan (2003), and Shugart (2003) agree that in most of these representations, the gay man is rendered "safe" for the audiences by being presented as a respectable, straight-passing, asexual confidante to the straight female heroine. Allan's (2003) dissertation includes a historical dimension, analyzing movies from 1959 to the present, in which he argues that most media representations of the straight female/gay male duo, including "mother-and-son, perfect-couple, gals-and-pals," re-circulate stereotypes about

power and cultural capital, with only a few offering alternative models that exist outside of the familial or romantic models of relations between men and women (p. vii).

Taking into account all of Shugart's (2003) objections about the media representations of the GM and SF in the dyad, we can see how the stigmatizing of the individual members leads to an overall devaluing and delegitimization of the relationship itself. We can also see how homophobia and sexism are the weapons used to delegitimize the dyad. Homophobia leads to the belief that that the GM is using the SF for a sense of family and legitimacy. Sexism leads to the belief that the SF is unable to perform correct heteronormativity. Instead of a subversive or new vision of a relationship, Shugart (2003) argues that we are essentially getting the same old story, of "frustrated romance and thwarted desire" which "render[s] secondary the emotional and psychological needs that do constitute the intimacy of these relationships" (Shugart, 2003, p. 88).

The Mixed Blessing of Increased Visibility

Whether it's the TV show *Will and Grace* or Callow's memoir, these representations offer increased visibility of the GMSF dyad, but also perpetuate the stigmatizing of the relationship. Cautioning people to remain skeptical of rejoicing too quickly over increased visibility, Gross (2001) argues that increased visibility is no guarantor of legitimacy:

When previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda. And they are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle and upper-middle class, and overwhelmingly heterosexual (p.4).

Essentially, the argument (made by many before me) is that even though the GMSF relationship seems inherently subversive of heteronormativity, what happens is that because of heterosexism, the gay men's sexual orientation identity has been completely manufactured by, and rendered invisible by, the people behind the representation (Allan, 2003; Battles and Hilton-Marrow, 2002; Pillion, 2000; Shugart, 2003;) Ultimately, this thesis is concerned with how the "emotional and psychological needs that *do* constitute the intimacy of these relationships," are obscured by social stigma.

The Cycle of Internalization and Representation

Rubin (1985) argues that the GMSF constitutes a natural alliance, bringing comfort and companionship that neither find in the world of heterosexual men that devalues and marginalizes both groups. Richard Dyer (2002) discusses the cycle of internalization and representation, saying:

How social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life. . . How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation. (p.1)

As media studies have roots in social construction theory, let us now turn to an exploration of how our constructs, with historical and cultural roots, influence how we see the GMSF dyad, and how these views determine how the GMSF dyad gets treated.

Marriages of Convenience

Historically, men whose sexual proclivities and behaviors correlate with a modern day gay identity often chose to marry straight women for child-raising reasons, political

aspirations, or other forms of protection that came with 'passing'. In an op-ed piece for the *New Statesman*, Riddell (1999) uses the scandal of married British politician Tom Spencer (who was found with a briefcase of gay pornography and drugs coming through customs) as a point of departure to argue that straight British women have seen the allure of relating to gay men since the days of Oscar Wilde, if not before. Riddell writes that entering into relationships with gay men:

...stems from a class-based mating system traditionally focusing less on Mr. Right than on Mr. Right Specification. Princess Marina of Greece married the former Duke of Kent; on paper the perfect spouse and in reality a man with whom, according to one acquaintance, "no one, of either sex, was safe in the back of a taxi." The relationship was successful. Long after the duke died, his wife retained - as the centrepiece of her salon - his former gay associates, such as Noel Coward. English women like gay men. As friends, they are engaging. As husbands, they are unthreatening; unlikely ever to betray one with another woman. (p. 128)

Homophobia runs rampant throughout this excerpt. The Duke of Kent is portrayed as a sexually predatory, oversexualized person from whom "no one is safe." The oversexualization tactic is an age-old homophobic strategy that insinuates gay male sexuality to be unfocused, equally threatening to all individuals, male or female. Returning to Weinberg's (1979) definition of homophobia, Riddell could not more clearly express that the Duke of Kent is a man with whom one should fear to be in close quarters. Riddell (1999) also hits on two elements central to cultural beliefs about the GMSF dyad. First, there is the idea that gay men make good ("engaging") friends for straight women, echoing Nardi's (1991) findings that there is no more persistent stereotype about gay men's friendships than the notion that gay men and straight women make good friends. This can be seen as homophobia if we consider this stereotype to constitute an emasculation and desexualization of the gay male.

The construct Riddell writes about, often referred to as a “relationship of convenience,” is a familiar one. Let us explore the ways the underlying assumptions about relationships of convenience incite social disapproval, and how these deep-seated cultural beliefs and biases contribute to the continued stigmatizing of the GMSF dyad.

For example, one does not need to go to Britain to find evidence of extreme homophobic stigmatizing of GM and SW in relationship with one another. In the U.S., a single Google search of “gay sex scandal” produces an article entitled “Top Five Republican Gay Sex Scandals,” (Marcotte, 2007) which outlines 5 of the most sensationalized Republican gay sex scandals that occurred in the 12 months prior to August 2007. Three out of five of the men involved in these scandals were legally married to women, including Ted Haggard, a married bigwig from the evangelical movement, who met weekly with President George W. Bush and gave spiritual advice to Bush and his advisors. Although Haggard proclaimed homosexuality to be “an abomination” and actively lobbied against gay rights, he was discovered paying male prostitutes for sex and snorting crystal meth. Larry Craig, married former U.S. Senator and liaison for Mitt Romney’s Presidential campaign, was arrested for soliciting sex from an undercover cop in an airport bathroom. Married anti-gay Florida Republican state senator Bob Allen was convicted of offering an undercover male police officer twenty dollars to perform oral sex.

Speaking to the way the Spencer scandal unfolded in England, Riddell writes:

In any standard-issue political sex scandal, Tom Spencer would be the butt of newspaper revulsion... A suitcase containing pornographic magazines and drugs; a gay “superstud” friend who is HIV-positive; a loving wife and three daughters.

Instead Spencer emerged as a bluff, Falstaffian figure and a genial paterfamilias who nobly relinquished his Conservative MEP candidature without any Hoddleish hanging about. For this image he must thank his wife - staunch in her assertion that there was nothing bizarre about her marriage. (p. 128)

With this sentiment, Riddell implies that it was precisely his wife's prior knowledge of her husband's sexual preference, and her acceptance of it, that allowed Spencer to weather the storm of the scandal, although stripped of his political title, with his dignity intact. Further, Riddell's logic here seems to be that it is a uniquely British ability to reach a compromise wherein this kind of attachment would be formed between two people. Riddell explains:

In more stigmatized times, the benefits were obvious for men: a mugshot for the election pamphlet, a tableau of family values for shockable voters. The allure for women was presumably the framework of marriage - friendship, children, hearth, home - stripped of excess sexual and emotional clutter. The English, through repression, realism or a dearth of romanticism, are good at making such compromises work. The pragmatism required flows from a general lack of national fussiness: evident among a Bridget Jones generation bewailing the fact that suitable partners are as rare as wide-mouthed tree frogs and, alas, less gorgeous (p. 1)

For Riddell, the logic is that for a man with ambition there are benefits to "passing" as straight, while for the (presumably straight) woman there is the "framework of marriage: friendships children, hearth, home—stripped of excess sexual and emotional clutter". Current scholars such as Rust (2000), concur with Riddell's logic, arguing that "it is likely that fewer marriages involving partners with same-sex inclinations will be made in the future but that these marriages will be more successful than those in the past"(p. 299).

In rather stark juxtaposition to Riddell's contention in the Spencer op-ed, that openness and honesty on the part of husband and wife side-stepped major controversy in Britain, these American gay sex scandals seem to garner so much attention and

outrage precisely because of the underlying hypocrisy of men in positions of power who use their power to argue against homosexuality when they themselves are not only engaging in homosexual activity, but also covering up their homosexuality by marrying women. These scandals also involve substance abuse, solicitation, and political corruption, reinforcing a strong link between gay men and criminal and moral wrongdoing. As Holleran (2009) so eloquently explained, these (closeted) homosexual men are depicted as a “cursed race,” doomed to consort with criminals. Public opinion about these GMSF sex scandals in America seems to center on two elements: the first being the distance between appearance and ‘what’s really going on,’ and the second being the perception of aberration in the act itself. In Riddell’s Britain it appears that a dialectic relationship exists between the British public’s sophistication-- which results in minimal shock over Spencer’s behavior-- and the Spencers’ honesty with one another and staunch insistence that there was nothing wrong with their lifestyle.

Riddell seems to be arguing that because British culture has a construct wherein the public can easily grasp how this relationship works, the private individuals can be honest and open about what is really going on, which in turn allows for the British public to not become outraged when evidence comes to light. However, it is significant that even in the case of the Spencers, the gay male involved was forced to relinquish his political title and was publicly scorned simply for being unmasked as a gay man. Looking at the various instances of blatant homophobia and judgment that stand out even in these few sex scandals it becomes evident that from country to country, state to state, people’s attitudes about homosexual behavior and GMSF relationships vary. These marriages and sex scandals demonstrate that sexual behavior

does not always align with sexual orientation identity. The scandals also demonstrate high levels of sexual prejudice. Finally, the scandals reveal the heterosexist ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma, reflecting public opinion about relationship standards and assumptions. The motivations attributed to the people in relationships by the people outside of the relationships indicate extensive heteronormativity.

Mixed-Orientation Relationships

When viewed in a linear fashion, one begins to see a trend appear, wherein these marriages are becoming less common wherever homosexuality becomes more socially accepted. Rust (2000) summarizes:

Over time, men with same-sex experiences have become less likely to marry, probably because social changes facilitate coming out and reduce pressure on men to marry in an attempt to conceal, deny, or eliminate their same-sex desires (Rust 2000, p. 298)

As is clear from the dates of the literature that take a critical look at these unions (Buntzly 1993; Clark 1977; Gochros 1989, Kleinberg 1980; Warren 1976) critical analyses of these types of arrangements seem to be flagging, and present day scholars seem to be focusing on the point that Riddell's op-ed ultimately makes: 1) that Liz Spenser, Tom's wife, had known of her husband's "bisexuality" for 26 years, 2) that "His extramarital sex did not bother her", and 3) that one could easily imagine the benefits to both people in the arrangement they reached. Unions where both partners are open, and come to an agreement that is mutually satisfying to both, despite their individual sexual orientations, are called "mixed-orientation" relationships in the literature (Heckert 2005; Rust 2000).

GMSF and Procreation: An Unlikely Marriage?

One aspect unique to an opposite-sex dyad is the couple's capacity for having children. Those familiar with representations of the GMSF dyad in popular culture will recognize the popularity of child-making as a theme. In fact, in three out of the four pop culture representations I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the GM and SW either have a child together or discuss the possibility of raising children together. In *The Object of My Affection* (1998), the SF protagonist becomes pregnant with her ex but forges her relationship with the gay male providing her emotional support throughout her pregnancy because of her GM friend's ability to be there for her and her child. In *The Next Best Thing* (2000), the main characters, a GM and SF, get drunk and 'accidentally' have sex, which results in the SF becoming pregnant and keeping the baby. The TV show *Will & Grace* offers a different configuration, in which Will and Grace, in season 5 (of 8), decide to have a child together via artificial insemination. Will and Grace then face a major conflict when Grace meets and falls in love with a straight man, thus losing her resolve to uphold her commitment to have a child with Will. Higgins (2002) found that the two most frequent reasons gay men entered into heterosexual marriages had to do with the men's perception that getting married "seemed natural", and a desire for children and family life. The findings of the study also demonstrated that internalized homophobia is a factor that leads men into mixed-orientation marriages.

Summary

In recent years a number of dissertations, some of which have just been published as academic articles and in some instances as full-length books, have been written about

this specific topic. The empirical studies (all qualitative) most relevant to this topic and from which case material in the form of excerpts from the interviews will be drawn have been conducted by Muraco, (2004) Gregoriou (2004), and Gaiba (2007). Muraco (2004) examines friendships across gender and sexual orientation, focusing on straight women/gay men and lesbians/straight men friendships. She explores the ways these friendships transgress social norms of gender and sexuality, leading some to critique and activism, while on the other side of the spectrum she finds that these relationships often reinforce conventional understandings of behavior and identity (Muraco, 2004).

Findings from Gregoriou's (2004) study demonstrate that the salient characteristics that emerge from the dyad in describing their relationships are a sense of closeness, difference from other friendships, a sense of completeness, the friendship's ability to support each person through sad and happy times, a freedom from pressure, and the use of kinship terms to define the friendship.

Gaiba (2007) uses a grounded theory approach to find out how gay men and straight women feel, think about, and make meaning of their relationships, ultimately arguing that her subject's narratives "reify and essentialize the boundary separating gay and straight identities and gay and straight communities" (Gaiba, 2007, p. 2)

In addition to these qualitative studies, Tillmann-Healy (2001) wrote an ethnographic study with a US sample, using narrative ethnography to explore the friendship between herself, a heterosexual woman, and gay men. Having spent three years within the gay community, Tillman-Healy concluded that heterosexual women can be "the bridge between the gay and heterosexual worlds, because they lack the anxieties associated with masculine identities." In terms of friendship qualities, she claims that her

gay male friends were more similar to her heterosexual male friends than to her heterosexual female friends. She also argues, similar to Friedman (1993), that friendship has the potential to transform homophobia and sexism.

A single quantitative study of 154 heterosexual women examined two hypotheses: that women with gay male friends have poor body esteem and are rejected by heterosexual men, and that more contact with gay men is positively related to body esteem. Results supported the hypothesis that women's body esteem, specifically feelings of sexual attractiveness, is positively associated with friendships with gay men (Bartlett, Patterson, VanDerLaan, Vasey, 2009).

Given the literature reviewed above, which points to a chasm between the GMSF dyad as represented in pop culture and the data found through interviews of actual GMSF in relationships with one another, this thesis seeks to explore the question of how the GMSF dyad has been, and continues to be, stigmatized, and what the implications of that internalized stigma might be. Utilizing findings from previous studies to explore the GMSF relationship, I will then analyze this material from the point of view of two theoretical orientations. The two theories that will be used, social construct theory and interdependence theory, offer complementary ways of conceptualizing the stigmatizing experienced by the GMSF dyad and examining the impact of such stigmatizing. The NASW outlines the social work code of ethics as the aim "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty." (NASW code of ethics). Thus, the importance of studying the GMSF dyad emerges as a multifaceted one. Since the GMSF dyad is subject to three forms of oppression,

homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism, it is deserving of particular attention with regards to needs and empowerment. In the next chapters, I will continue to explore and parse out the emotional and psychological needs salient to the GMSF dyad by analyzing what the GM and SF in these relationships say about themselves, paying particular attention to how these needs are thwarted by the internalization of stigma.

CHAPTER IV

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism is a sociological theory of knowledge that explores how social phenomena develop in social contexts. In their introduction to the seminal text, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckman (1966) wrote: “social order is a human product. Or more precisely, an ongoing human production. It is produced by man in the course of his ongoing externalization.” (p. 51) As this quotation suggests, the theory of social construction specifically explores 1) the process by which individuals collectively create social constructs 2) how these constructs become institutionalized and 3) how these constructs shape our lives and experiences. In this chapter, I will introduce social construct theory, discuss its philosophical underpinnings to explain the social and historical context from which it emerged, outline some empirical studies that were undertaken from a social constructionist stance, and introduce how this theory can be applied to the GMSF dyad, specifically in the realm of how stigma emerges from and acts upon social constructs. Schwartz (2009) contends that, owing largely to Freud’s legacy, social work’s understanding of human behavior and development has placed primary emphasis on individualist discourses that essentialize the self. The social constructionist perspective helps situate human development, consciousness, behavior, identity, and selfhood as emerging from social and cultural contexts (Schwartz, 2009, p. 6).

Background of the theory

Social constructionism became prominent in the U.S. with Berger and Luckmann's 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckmann contend that the basic, taken-for-granted knowledge of everyday life is derived from, and maintained by, social interactions. When people interact, they do so with the understanding that their respective perceptions of reality are related, and as they act upon this understanding they reinforce their common knowledge. As this common sense knowledge is negotiated by people, human typifications, significations and institutions emerge as objective reality. McKinney (1969) defines *typification* as perceiving the world and structuring it by means of types and typologies, used primarily to identify, simplify, and order perceptions for the purposes of comparison. *Signification* refers to the established meaning of a word. *Institutions* are patterns of social interaction that persist over time (Social Sciences Dictionary, n.d.). Institutions have structural properties and are shaped by cultural values. The 'institution of marriage' in western society, for instance, can be seen as structurally located in a cohabiting couple and regulated by norms about sexual exclusiveness, love, and sharing.

To explain how this process of construction works, Berger and Luckman (1966) wrote:

It is important to keep in mind that the objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity... it is important to emphasize that the relationship between man, the producer, and the social world, his product, is and remains a dialectical one. That is, man (not of course, in isolation but in his collectivities) and his social world interact with each other. The product acts back upon the

producer. Externalization and objectivation are moments in a continuing dialectical process, which is internalization (p. 59).

In this conceptualization, *internalization* is the process “by which the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization.” (Berger and Luckman, 1966, p. 60) This complex language forces the reader to think through the ways that the individual subject is both shaping and being shaped by the external world. Reality can be said to be socially constructed in that we are constantly engaged in this “*dialectical* process” wherein individuals, collectively and over time, shape mental representations that eventually become habituated. According to social construct theory, these habits become *roles*, available to us and to other members of society, such that these reciprocal interactions become institutionalized. Within social construct theory, *meaning* emerges from this process of institutionalization. Knowledge of, and people’s belief about reality become embedded in the institutional fabric of society.

During the 1970s and 1980s, social constructionist theory underwent a transformation as the philosophical and theoretical insights offered in prior years began to impact social science research and practice. In particular, scholars used social constructionism to relate what science characterized as objective facts to the processes of social construction, with the goal of showing that subjectivity imposes itself on those facts we take to be objective, not solely the other way around. Gergen (1994) further elaborates how some of Berger and Luckman’s (1966) ideas (such as the relativity of perspectives, the linking of individual perspectives to social processes, and reification through language) remain central in constructionist dialogues, while their ideas of “individual subjectivity” and “social structure” have “moved to the margins” (Gergen,

1994, p. 67). Frable (1997) points to research that suggests that gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and class identities are fluid, multidimensional, personalized social constructions that reflect the individual's current context and sociohistorical cohort.

Reflexivity

One example of a scholar whose work has roots in social construct theory is Barbara Myerhoff (1982). She is a visual anthropologist who explored the dialectical process that Berger and Luckman (1966) laid out to deepen our understanding of how identity can be formed through performance, employing the language of *reflexivity*. The notion of reflexivity comes from symbolic interactionism. Stryker and Serpe (1982) explain the process of reflexivity:

We come to know who and what we are through interaction with others. We become objects to ourselves by attaching to ourselves symbols that emerge from our interaction with others, symbols having meanings growing out of that interaction. As any other symbols, self-symbols have action implications: they tell us (as well as others) how we can be expected to behave in our ongoing activity ... Persons acting in the context of organized behavior apply names to themselves... These reflexively applied positional designations, which become part of the 'self,' create in persons expectations with respect to their own behavior. (pp. 202-203)

Myerhoff's articulation of the process of reflexivity helps unpack one aspect of how we construct our identity through social and relational means. As Schwartz explains, for Myerhoff,

The stories we tell about ourselves, the roles we play, the artifacts we construct, and the relationships we negotiate continually generate and revise who we are... identity is social and relational because personal "demonstrations and performances" have audiences that necessarily reflect back the images and statements carried in those personal expressions... the "reflecting back" is interpretive, a "mirroring" process in which people can bring about the very

existence they prefer by engaging in a performance of a preferred identity that is then taken up by the audience (Schwartz, 2009, p. 7).

In terms of the GMSF dyad, the issue of this reflective process emerges as an important area for analysis. In the context of “demonstrations and performances” for the GMSF couple, what opportunities are there for the couple to demonstrate their relationship in such a way that an audience might receive it, or mirror it? Rituals, for instance, the celebration of formal unions (such as marriages), are one way in which people in significant relationships often present themselves to an ‘audience’, and the audience then sanctifies their approval or welcomes the dyad into the community with gifts, invitations including both members of the couple, and other expressions of recognition and acceptance.

Language

Language is one arena that later social constructionists, such as Gergen, elaborated on and that is important to consider in the context of the GMSF dyad. For example, Gergen (1994) writes:

The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people. For constructionists, descriptions and explanations are neither driven by the world as it is, nor are they the inexorable outcome of genetic or structural propensities within the individual. Rather, they are the result of human coordination of action. Words take on their meaning only within the context of ongoing relationships (p. 49).

One example of the ways this linguistics process might be impacting the GMSF dyad is in providing a framework for the GMSF within the dyad and those outside the relationship to conceptualize the relationship. As has been discussed in the previous

chapter, when looking at how writers have labeled and understood GMSF dyads, with terms ranging from “a love affair”, to “a passionate friendship,” to an “odd couple,” or “a romance in every sense other than sexual,” the language used can define and shape experiences, carrying with them rules, norms, and expectations. Two issues emerge in the area of language as it applies to the GMSF dyad. The first issue is that when individuals are in GMSF relationships, they might not get to experience cultural mirroring precisely because of a lack of ‘audience.’ The second issue is that these expectations might reinforce behavior, leading to certain choices. An excellent example of this complicated process can be seen in the following excerpt. Quimby (2005) introduces a dialogue from *Will and Grace* noting that it constitutes one of “the more thoughtful meditations on what relationships between women and men mean if they are not the sanctified ones privileged and supported through the institution of marriage.” Quimby provides context for this dialogue, explaining how in this episode, Grace runs into a friend from college who, like her, had a primary relationship with a gay man:

Grace: It’s been so long! How are you? How’s Charlie?

Heidi: Oh, ya know, I don’t know. We kind of drifted apart. He moved to San Francisco a couple of years ago, met a guy at a Pottery Barn, had a glass of Chardonnay and . . . poof, instant couple.

Grace: What? You guys were best friends. You did everything together. What happened?

Heidi: Nothing happened. You know—gay man, straight woman— it’s not like we had anything holding us together, you know like a house or kids. You must have been through something like that with Will?

Grace: Uh, no. We’re still together. Roommates, having fun, doing stuff. No offense sweetie, but I know how to keep my gay man (with bravado).

Heidi: Well good for you. I guess you and Will are the exception. (p. 721)

This exchange demonstrates 1) Heidi’s construct of relationships between GM and SF, wherein GM and SF don’t have anything holding them together 2) that GMSF dyads who

do “stay together” are the “exception” rather than the rule, meaning that ‘drifting apart’ is natural for GMSF dyads, particularly when one or the other person in the relationship finds another romantic partner. The exchange also demonstrates that Grace 1) had conceived of Heidi and Charlie as a unit, displayed by her questioning “How are you? How’s Charlie?” and 2) has a different set of assumptions and expectations about relationships between GMs and SFs than Heidi. Grace’s social construct emerges as her belief that when people are “best friends” and “do everything together”, something specific must “happen” for the friendship to change. Applying social construct theory to this dialogue, we can see how Heidi’s constructs and Grace’s constructs differ. This difference immediately reinforces the social constructionist point that “The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people” (Gergen, 1994, p. 49). In addition to reinforcing that different people can and do have different social constructions, the most salient aspect of this exchange has to do with the impact it has on Grace. As Quimby (2005) describes, Grace leaves this encounter with Heidi looking visibly agitated. In the next scene, Grace picks a fight with Will, and has an emotional outburst where she tearfully discloses to Will that she is worried about the future of their relationship. We can see how Heidi’s construct and her opinion that Will and Grace are “the exception” rather than the rule cause Grace to question her own set of assumptions and beliefs, directly impacting Grace’s emotional state and actions, which in turn have direct impacts on Will and Grace’s relationship.

How and Why Social Construct Theory Came into Being

As Gergen (1994) explains, “constructionist views can be traced to recent explorations in ideological critique, literary and historical processes, and the social basis of scientific knowledge. A full elaboration of constructionist roots would thus invite an exploration of the history of each of these enterprises—the roots of ideological critique in Hegel, for example” (p.66). Next, I will briefly cover some of the related intellectual traditions to which, as Gergen says, “Constructionism bears an important intertextual relationship” (p.67).

George Kelly and Personal Construct Theory

George Kelly’s theory, developed in the 1950’s, most often called Personal Construct Theory, contains the idea of *constructive alternativism*. which is the notion that, even though there is only one true reality, it is always experienced from one or another perspective or “alternative construction.” Kelly’s theory, organized into a central postulate and eleven corollaries, states that a person's processes (i.e., experiences, thoughts, feelings, behaviors) are psychologically channeled according to how the individual anticipates events. Thus, for Kelly, experiences and perspectives are determined not simply by external reality, but by our efforts to anticipate what will happen. Thus, we construct our anticipations using, in part, our past experiences. According to Kelly, “A person’s construction system varies as he successively construes the replication of events.” When things do not happen the way we expect them to or the way they have in the past, we learn to adapt and to reconstruct in order to modify our future anticipations. Kelly says that we will choose to do what we anticipate will most

likely improve our understanding and our ability to anticipate. Reality places constraints on what we can experience or do, but we choose how to interpret that reality, and we normally choose to interpret that reality in whatever way we believe will help us the most.

In their 2006 elaboration of George Kelly's personal construct psychology, Winter and Walker argue that Kelly was ahead of his time, and posit that personal construct psychology "is not, as sometimes described, merely a cognitive psychology of the individual, but is concerned with the whole person, including the person in relation to others." Winter and Walker stress that Kelly rejects the unitary notion of a self as the essence of a person, instead considering the self as one pole of a construct. Echoes of Meyerhoff's (1986) 'reflexivity' clearly can be traced to Kelly. His position emphasizes the importance of contrast and the view that the construction of self occurs in comparison with others, as we construct our view of self through our understanding of others' views of us (Bannister 1983).

Kelly's idea of 'bi-polar' constructs feels like a very useful one when analyzing the GMSF dyad, as Kelly had the idea of individuals as 'personal scientists' who make sense of the world by situating objects within these bipolar constructs. For example, if an individual holds a personal construct of "good" or "bad", the individual navigates the world by encountering the object and placing the object more towards the good pole, or more towards the bad. One of Kelly's insights, though, is that these personal constructs are not necessarily universally agreed upon opposites. For the GMSF dyad, we can see how people might look at the relationship with some consternation, trying to decide "Are these people 'just friends' or 'in a relationship'". Since the relationship is neither 'gay' nor

‘straight’, is the relationship therefore ‘romantic’ or ‘platonic’?

Further, Kelly’s theory offers a mechanism by which we can understand how the views of people external to the relationship, trying to categorize the relationship according to their own personal constructs, might interact with the views of the people within the relationship. Walker and Winter (2006) highlight the critical stance of the individualistic approach of Western society and psychology that Kelly’s theory led his predecessors to take up, writing:

A “community of selves” metaphor moves away from an interpretation of the person as the intellectual controller, dispensing constructs, to one of “patterned movement,” of “a remarkably powerful sense of actions, interactions, transactions and counteractions” (Mair 1977, p. 142). Disparities between different self-constructions, including “self,” “ideal self,” and “self as others see me,” are more predictive of self-esteem (Moretti & Higgins 1990) and neuroticism (Watson & Watts 2001) than are those individual selves.

For the GMSF dyad, who may be continually encountering discrepancy between how they see themselves and how the world sees them, Moretti and Higgins’ (1990) findings could point to an important protective factor contained in one’s ability to use reflexivity to hold the inevitable contradictions of self-concept and external views of self.

Philosophical Underpinnings of Social Construct Theory

Social constructionists follow a phenomenological approach. Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher writing at the beginning of the 20th century, founded the branch of philosophy called Phenomenology. As Hewitt (1994) explains,

Unlike a more objectivist approach, which views the social world as a reality that exists independently of any individual’s perception of it, phenomenology sees that reality as constituted by our view of it. There is, therefore, not a single, objective social reality than can be analyzed in the same manner that scientists might

analyze physical reality. Rather, there are multiple realities; indeed, pushed to an extreme, one might say that there are as many social realities as there are perspectives from which to view them (Hewitt, 1994, p. 16).

We can see how social construct theory takes up the question of how the subject is both shaping and being shaped by the object. However, the basic formulation of social construct theory stops at the point that “there are as many *social* realities as there are perspectives to view them.” As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the transformation of social construct theory in the 1970’s and 80’s by those who applied its central tenets to various disciplines led to a further enumeration and questioning of whether or not we can actually consider *everything* to be socially constructed.

John Searle, a philosopher and linguist, wrote *The Construction of Social Reality* in 1994, where he set out to elucidate a theory of mind “to answer the question, How does a mental reality, a world of consciousness, intentionality and other mental phenomena, fit into a world consisting entirely of physical particles in fields of force?” (Searle, 1994, p. xi) Searle explains his conceptualization of social construct theory by using the example of money. He writes:

As an illustration, consider the case of money and specifically and especially the evolution of paper currency. Standard textbook accounts of money identify three kinds: commodity money, such as gold, is regarded as valuable, and hence as money, because the commodity itself is regarded as valuable; *contract money* consists of bits of paper that are regarded as valuable because they are promissory notes to pay the bearer in valuable commodities such as gold; and fiat money consists of bits of paper that are declared to be valuable as money by some official agency such as a government or central bank. (pp. 41-42)

As Searle demonstrates, at one time people used actual gold coins, and then, in medieval Europe, bankers accepted gold and stored it for safekeeping, issuing paper certificates to the depositors of the gold. He points out:

A stroke of genius occurred when somebody figured out that we can increase the supply of money simply by issuing more certificates than we have gold. As long as the certificates continue to function, as long as they have a collectively imposed function that continues to be collectively accepted, the certificates are, as they say, as good as gold. (Searle, 1994, p. 43).

We get to the situation we are in today, with “fiat money”, from what Searle calls another stroke of genius, namely when somebody figured out that we can forget about the gold and just have the certificates. Using the language of brute facts vs. institutional facts, we would say that the fact that a certain piece of paper *is* money cannot be ascertained outside of a given society’s ‘construct’, since the piece of paper only counts as money as long as the members of that society believe in it. Being money is an institutional fact, while being a piece of paper is a brute fact.

Weak Social Construction

Searle’s conceptualization has come to define what is called “weak” social construction, wherein objects are ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective. This phenomenon can be understood from an example such as a migraine—an individual can go to the doctor, explain that they are having symptoms for migraines, and receive a prescription for migraine medication. The fact that they have a diagnosis of migraine is epistemologically objective, while their experience of their migraine pain is ontologically subjective. “Strong” social construction gets rid of this distinction, essentially insisting that “brute” facts do not exist. To a strong social constructionist, a migraine is a migraine only because we share the belief, concept, and language of ‘migraine.’ Even if the concept of migraine is universally admitted in all human languages, reflecting near-universal human consensus, this does not mean “migraine” is a

brute fact. This conceptualization leads to the view that all reality is a social construction, which is close to the view of many post-modernist philosophers who contend that our view of reality is really a narrative, a discourse rooted in consensus. As social workers, it seems important to pick out what, from all this philosophy, matters to us.

The Problematizing Capacity of Social Construct Theory

Powell (2001), in his review of Ian Hacking's *The Social Construction of What?* attempts to frame the "factional schism" between the strong and weak social constructionists (and the critics of both) as a philosophical disagreement. Powell writes:

[Hacking's] interest in re-framing the debate suggests the kind of content he wants the phrase to have: he wants to get at what it is that people are in disagreement over. So, for him, any conceptualization of 'social construction' must take its form from how people are actually using the phrase, not how they might ideally use it, and yet must reveal and clarify what is at stake in the muddiness of that actual usage. He must ask not 'what does it mean?', but 'what's the point?' (p. 301)

Powell outlines Hacking's argument, saying that the 'point' of social constructionist claims is critique. Powell shows how Hacking uses the example of feminist critiques of gender that argue "[gender] is constructed; [gender] is bad; [gender] needs changing" (Powell, 2001, p. 301). In Powell's reading of Hacking, "The point of social constructionism, it turns out, is to shake us up; to make us stop taking something for granted, to problematize the unproblematic." (Powell, 2001, p. 301). Thinking about the difference of what is at stake when thinking about Searle's example of money, vs. my example of a migraine, vs. other constructs such as gender or sexual orientation, it becomes clear that there is usefulness to the argument that sexual orientation is a

construct, especially if people believe that a given culture or society holds a problematic stance towards a given sexual orientation identity.

Another word for when a culture or group holds a problematic (or negative) stance towards a given feature is stigma. Stangor and Crandall (2000) explain how stigmas are social constructions, writing: “Stigmas exist primarily in the minds of stigmatizers and stigmatized individuals as cultural social constructions, rather than as universally stigmatized physical features” (p. 63). Part of the work of a critique, as with the example Hacking uses of feminist critiques of gender, is to make a compelling case for *why* something is bad and for *why* it needs to be changed. Link and Phelan (2001) point out that “because there are so many stigmatized circumstances and because stigmatizing processes can affect multiple domains of people’s lives, stigmatization has a dramatic bearing on the distribution of life chances in such areas as earnings, housing, criminal involvement, health, and life itself” (p. 363). Taken together, we see 1) a reason why stigma is bad and 2) an argument for why it needs to be changed. Returning to the tripartite stigma experienced by the GMSF dyad outlined in Chapter 3, we can now look at how stigma, borne of social constructions, impact people’s self-identity using the conceptual framework of reflexivity.

Exposing the Impact of Heteronormativity: Internalized Homophobia

Definitions of *internalized homophobia* indicate the relationship between the individual’s experience of stigma and the individual’s beliefs about him or herself. Plummer’s (1996) definition explores how the awareness of stigma that surrounds homosexuality leads the experience to become an extremely negative one, wherein “shame and secrecy, silence

and self-awareness, a strong sense of differentness—and of peculiarity—pervades the consciousness” (p. 89). Meyer and Dean’s (1998) definition is: “the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (p 160). Locke (1998) writes: “the self-hatred that occurs as a result of being a socially stigmatized person” (p. 202).

Williamson (2000) offers a critical investigation of the concept of internalized homophobia, noting:

Few lesbian and gay academics, therapists or health professionals would dispute the importance of internalized homophobia. Indeed a number of valuable and sophisticated models exist which coherently outline the mechanisms and potential consequences of the internalization of anti-lesbian and gay oppression [e.g. (Bremner and Hillin, 1993)]. (p. 97)

Williamson argues that many individuals within lesbian and gay communities may internalize significant aspects of the prejudice experienced within a heterosexist society. Seeing this process as consistent with Allport’s (1954) theory of ‘traits due to victimization’, Williamson outlines how Allport believed that stigmatized individuals engage in defensive reactions, either extroverted, including exaggerated and obsessive concern with the stigmatizing characteristic, and/or introverted, including self-denigration and identification with the aggressor, as a result of the prejudice they experience. Many writers believe that this is a normative or inevitable consequence because all children are exposed to heterosexist norms, and research suggests that most gay men and lesbians adopt negative attitudes towards their homosexuality early in their developmental histories (Davies, 1996; Isay, 1989).

Williamson also cites work by Margolies, Becker and Jackson-Brewer (1987) and Malyon (1982) that suggest that internalized homophobia affects intra-psychic

functioning by generating various defense mechanisms that may result in difficulties with intimacy, commitment or other aspects of relationships. For example, one study reports significantly lower levels of sexual satisfaction in high scoring homonegative gay participants compared to low scorers. Equally, homonegativity may lead to the development of self-defeating personality traits that reflect internal representations of the stereotypical dysfunctional homosexual. Meyer and Dean (1998) see internalized homophobia as the most insidious of the minority stress processes. They argue that despite stemming from heterosexist social attitudes, it can become self-generating and continue even in the absence of direct external devaluation.

Problematizing Sexism

Empirical studies have also been done that analyze the effects of sexism (and objectification) on women, and specifically about young women's internalization of messages from the media. Dohnt and Tiggerman (2006) found that girls begin to internalize messages from the media regarding their bodies from the age of 7 on (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Grabe and Hyde (2009) explain how Bandura's social learning theory describes the process by which viewers adopt specific behaviors. Objectification theory has argued that within a culture that is infused with sexualized representations of women, girls learn to treat and experience themselves as sexual objects (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996). According to objectification theory, women exposed to high levels of sexually objectifying media 1) internalize the viewpoint of women as objects, and 2) begin to *self-objectify*, to see themselves as objects valued for appearance. Grabe and Hyde (2009) argue that according to both social learning theory

and objectification theory, if girls observe that sexualized behavior and appearance are highly valued, they are likely to internalize this perspective and engage in higher levels of objectification of their own bodies. Furthermore, the implications for this self-objectification are severe. Grabe and Hyde (2009) find that self-objectification has been related to a host of negative psychological outcomes among girls and women. They write:

Chief among those are poor body esteem and eating-disordered symptoms (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; McKinley, 1999; McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Noll & Fredrickson, 1998; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). Research has also demonstrated that self-surveillance is related to depression and anxiety in college (Miner-Rubino, Twenge, & Fredrickson, 2002; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002) and adolescent samples (Grabe, Hyde, & Lindberg, 2007). Moreover, experimental investigations have demonstrated that self-objectification negatively affects cognitive performance on standardized math tests, as well as tasks that assess logical reasoning and spatial orientation (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003). (pp. 2842-2843)

We can see how homophobia leads to internalized homophobia, which has significant negative effects such as lower levels of sexual satisfaction in high scoring homonegative gay participants, the development of self-defeating personality traits which reflect internal representations of the stereotypical dysfunctional homosexual, and increased likelihood of depression and suicidality. Likewise, we see how objectification leads to self-objectification, which has implications on far-reaching areas, from body esteem and eating-disorders, to depression and anxiety, to performance on math tests. Now let us turn to an examination of the stigmatizing of the relationship.

Problematizing Heterosexism: The Effects of Stigma on the GMSF Relationship

Because a significant amount of psychological research has concluded that people involved in traditional relationships have negative attitudes toward nontraditional pairings, these findings have led researchers to begin to examine relational processes in nontraditional relationships (Christopher and Kelly, 2004; Gaines and Leaver, 2002; Herek, 2000). It is important to note, however, that these findings have focused on analyzing ‘couples’ in same sexual orientation relationships (meaning, straight men with straight women, or lesbian women with lesbian women, or gay men with gay men). Researchers have begun to demonstrate some understanding of the relationship workings of certain types of nontraditional couples, such as interethnic couples (Gaines & Agnew, 2003; Gurung & Duong, 1999; Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998) and same-sex couples (e.g., Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1991, 1992, 1995).

Troy, Lewis-Smith and Laurenceau (2006) conducted a study on interracial relationships, exploring the belief that the relationship quality of interracial couples is lower than in romantic couples where both partners are of the same race. The authors’ investigation cast doubt on the belief that interracial relationships are burdened with more problems than intraracial relationships, since the study’s findings indicated that interracial couples reported no differences in relationship quality, conflict patterns, relationship efficacy, coping style, and attachment. The exception was one finding that interracial couples reported more relationship satisfaction than intraracial relationship satisfaction. Although this empirical study contradicts the hypothesis that stigma negatively affects marginalized relationships, it does not necessarily mean that stigma doesn’t play a problematic role in the lives of interracial couples, but might indicate instead that

increased resiliency allows individuals in such relationships to compensate for the negative effects of stigma on their relationships, producing a side effect of increased relationship satisfaction.

Blair and Holmberg (2008) studied perceived social network support and well-being in same-sex versus mixed-sex romantic relationships. Blair and Holmberg's findings indicated that better perceived social network support, specifically for a romantic relationship, predicted higher relationship well-being which, in turn, predicted more positive mental and physical health outcomes for relationship partners. Support specifically for the relationship hugely impacted relationship outcomes, even when general social support and support for sexual orientation were controlled.

Summary

In this chapter, we have seen how stigma exists in the minds of stigmatizers and stigmatized individuals as cultural social constructions, rather than as universally stigmatized physical features. In the context of the GMSF dyad, we can see how many aspects of the stigma that the dyad faces exist because of cultural social constructions. For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, Gaiba (2007) stated that representations of GMSF often focus on the woman's inability to perform correct heterosexuality (Gaiba, 2007, p. 15-16). Social construct theory offers the means by which we can analyze the idea of a "correct heterosexuality." Social construct theory, specifically Kelly's precursor, personal construct theory, also offers us the ability to juxtapose this socially constructed "correct heterosexuality" with an implied 'incorrect homosexuality.' In addition, social construct theory helps us to make sense of how the GMSF in fictive kin

relationships, as well as those outside of their relationship, ascribe meaning to the relationship.

Finally, social construct theory offers the perspective that the relationship itself might be a site at which each individual in the dyad actively shapes his/her identity, within a specific cultural context, wherein language, roles, rituals and performances allow us to find out who we are, in Myerhoff's (1986) language "to show ourselves to ourselves" (as cited in Swartz, 2009, p. 7). As Nardi (1999) points out "[f]riendship is not simply a personal, psychological enterprise of unlimited choices; it is a social process, embedded in a culture of meaning and delimited by a society's gender, sexual and political scripts" (Nardi, 1999).

Searle's explanation of money also can help us understand how we might have begun with an idea of 'relationship' or 'family' defined as one man and one woman, who came together for the purpose of reproducing. Similar to how money began as the commodity itself (gold coin), in Western society, family was comprised of 'mother', 'father' and 'offspring'. Over time, as with money, certain representational leaps were made, such that people might be in relationship for reasons having to do with things other than sex, children, or physical safety. If an individual sees gender or sexual orientation as a "brute fact", this greatly impacts one's willingness to grant a 'non-traditional' relationship the same privileges as a traditional relationship, or even to allow that relationship to occupy the same mental space as a relationship that might look very different from the 'gold coin' version of the relationship. And yet, as social construct theory tells us, it matters very much whether people decide to agree on a given construct, and how they act upon their 'understandings' and reinforce their 'common knowledge.'

Coontz (2000), a historian and family scholar, writes: “Almost every known society has had a legally, economically, and culturally privileged family form that confers significant advantages on those who live within it, even if those advantages are not evenly distributed or are accompanied by high costs for certain family members” (p. 286). Further, Coontz contends that individuals who are unable, or unwilling, to participate in the favored family form confront powerful stigmas and handicaps. She states:

History provides no support for the notion that all families are created equal in any specific time and place. Rather, history highlights the social construction of family forms and the privileges that particular kinds of families confer. (Coontz, 2000, p. 286).

D’Emilio (1998) echoes Coontz, while posing the provocative argument that the “ideology of capitalist society has enshrined the family as the source of love, affection, and emotional security, the place where our need for stable, intimate human relationships is satisfied” (p. 137). For D’Emilio, the privatized family fits well with capitalist relations of production, meaning that he sees the elevation of the nuclear family to a position of preeminence in the sphere of personal life as a natural consequence of capitalism. And yet, what alternatives are there for those individuals within contemporary U.S. culture to whom the nuclear, traditional family form does not present an appealing or even possible option?

CHAPTER V

INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY

Given that this thesis is interested in the question of how stigma affects the GMSF dyad, central to undertaking this question is figuring out how to examine not only the GM and SF as individuals within a relationship, but also the relationship itself. Of critical importance is making sense of the behavior of the GMSF in relationship with one another. Theories of close relationships usually explain behavior by reference to properties that reside within actors, referring to cognition (Baldwin, 1992), dispositions (Hazan & Shaver, 1994), motives (Aron & Aron, 1997), or biology (Kenrick & Trost, 1997). Interdependence theory, on the other hand, explains behavior by looking at the interactions that take place within the relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Kelly and Thibaut (1978) contend that interdependence shapes interaction, meaning that you cannot decouple the behavior of the individuals in a system from the unique properties of the system. Therefore, interdependence theory provides a uniquely interpersonal analysis of relationships. In this chapter, I will present a background on interdependence theory, provide a summary of empirical studies that address this theory, talk about how this theory came into being, and explain how it can be applied to the GMSF dyad, particularly in terms of how the stigmatizing of the dyad is understood by interdependence theory.

Background of Theory

Interdependence theory was developed as an antidote to what many have referred to as the “actor-focused” bias of previous psychological research (Rusbult and Van Lange, 2008). As most psychological theories continue to adopt a within-person perspective, analyzing human behavior by reference to individual-level biological processes, personal dispositions, or cognitive experiences, interdependence theory was able to offer a comprehensive analysis of how the situation (or relationship) impacts intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. To interdependence theorists, situation structure is so important because the situation is seen as the reality within which motives are activated, toward which cognition is oriented, and around which interaction unfolds. In the 1970’s, Kelley and Thibault began to explore real life applications of interdependence theory and attribution theory, examining topics long ignored in social psychology such as attraction, love, commitment, power and conflict in relationships. Schopler (1997) contends that Kelley has made considerable contributions to the field of social psychology, influencing diverse areas of study including interpersonal influence and conflict, social values, abusive relationships, bases of interpersonal power, and relationship satisfaction and termination. Interestingly, interdependence theory has also been utilized in disciplines other than psychology, particularly in International Relations, Economics, and Education.

Interdependence Theory

Interdependence theory is a social exchange theory attributed to two social psychologists, John Thibaut and Harold Kelley. In their (1978) seminal work,

Interpersonal Relations: A Theory of Interdependence, Thibaut and Kelley defined *dependence level* as the degree to which each of two interacting individuals needs their relationship, or the extent to which each individual's personal well-being rests on staying in the relationship. The basic premise of interdependence theory is that for people to be satisfied in a relationship, the rewards must outweigh the costs. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) conceptualized *relationship dependence* as being determined by two measures: level of satisfaction and quality of alternatives. According to interdependence theory, people come to decide how satisfied they are in a relationship based upon measuring how satisfying their previous relationships were, and how satisfying other relationships might be.

Satisfaction in this theory is defined as the subjective evaluation of a relationship, or how well a relationship partner fulfills an individual's needs. The idea is that the more one's needs are met, the more he or she will be satisfied. Fehr (1996) calls the *comparison level* "the yardstick" used to evaluate the satisfaction level in a relationship (p. 25). According to interdependence theory, satisfaction is assessed by looking at the factors of 1) one's perception of other people's relationship satisfaction, and 2) comparison of the current relationship with one's own past relationships. The theory posits that if one's sense of the current relationship meets this standard, then the individual will be satisfied with the relationship. The second yardstick, called the *comparison of alternatives*, or the *quality of alternatives*, measures whether people will remain in the relationship or not based on their subjective evaluation of who else is out there. Being social psychologists, Kelley and Thibault (1978) came up with a formula to express the comparison of alternatives, which they define as "the choice with the highest

benefits relative to costs” (p. 22). By differentiating the two standards, of satisfaction and quality of alternatives, interdependence theorists were able to answer the question of why someone might choose to stay in a relationship that was not wholly satisfying, or choose to leave a good relationship (if the person felt that there was the possibility of being even happier with someone else).

According to interdependence theory, individuals become dependent on their relationship to the extent that they feel good about their relationship (i.e., satisfaction is high) and perceive that they do not have appreciably better options to their relationship (i.e., quality of alternatives is low) (Lehmiller and Agnew, 2006, p. 42).

Transformation of motivation is a term used in interdependence theory to describe the psychological process by which individuals forego self-interested behavior for the sake of the relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). In interdependence terms, transformation of motivation involves moving from given preferences, impulses based on self-interest, to effective preferences, based on broader values and considerations (Finkel and Cambell, 2001, p. 264).

When applied to friendships, interdependence theory suggests that we develop a standard for what we feel we deserve in relationships, and that an individual is satisfied with a relationship that exceeds this standard, or, contrarily, dissatisfied with relationships that fail to meet this standard. Further, according to the theory, our level of commitment to the relationship should be determined by our evaluation of alternatives. When applied to the GMSF dyad, interdependence theory would predict that the GM or SF would determine how satisfied they were in the relationship using the yardstick of comparison level, measuring how satisfied each person was in former relationships and

comparing how happy other people in other relationships seemed to be. To measure commitment in the GMSF dyad, the researcher would analyze each person's evaluation of their alternatives. Agnew, VanLange, Rusbult and Langston(1998) explain these concepts with an example:

John's dependence on Mary is greater to the extent that he relies uniquely on Mary for the fulfillment of his most important needs; John's dependence is reduced to the extent that his needs could be gratified elsewhere. (p. 940)

In the context of the GMSF dyad, and particularly in the context of the stigmatizing of the dyad, it becomes interesting to think about the way our cultural constructs, as discussed in the previous chapter, might contribute to each person's perceptions, if John is a gay man and Mary a straight woman. For instance, what would John identify as "his most important needs" and would there be a relationship between the needs he prioritized and the needs prioritized in the larger culture where his relationship takes place? What might Mary identify as hers? What does it mean to rely on someone "uniquely"?

One reading of this in the context of the GMSF dyad, particularly with a relationship such as Will and Grace's (or Callow and Ramsey's, or Sharper and Rico's) is that the dyad uniquely relies on one another for all their emotional needs, while getting their 'other' (perhaps sexual) needs gratified elsewhere. Given how interdependence theory seems to me to be an inherently 'two-person' model, I am particularly curious about the GMSF dyad in light of the ways that the dyad inherently subverts the "all-in-one package" idea that Sharper (2009) invoked. Fehr (1996), for example, explains the quality of alternatives aspect of interdependence theory, writing "If a number of attractive people are clamoring to be friends with us, we might abandon an existing friendship, even if we were relatively happy with it" (p. 26). When I read Fehr's example, the first

thing that comes to mind is why would we have to abandon an existing friendship to be friends with more attractive people? Why couldn't we be friends with everyone? To me this indicates a potential critique of interdependence theory, which is that it's based on the idea that you can only have one primary relationship at a time.

Rusbult's Investment Model

Rusbult (1980) elaborated on Thibault and Kelley's (1978) interdependence theory in the *investment model*, which describes the process by which individuals become dependent on, and committed to, their relationships. The investment model adds to the earlier framework of satisfaction and quality of alternatives by introducing the idea of investments, which take the form of time and effort, joint possessions, communal friends and/or other metaphorical investments in the relationship. In this reformulation, dependence increases when investment size is high, or numerous important resources become directly or indirectly linked to the relationship. Going back to the now familiar John and Mary, Agnew et al (1998) explain:

John becomes increasingly dependent—that is, he comes to need his relationship—to the extent that he wants to be in his relationship with Mary (feels satisfied), is bound to the relationship (has high investments), and has little choice but to be in the relationship (has poor alternatives). (p. 940)

Investment model researchers also saw a relationship between the perception of available alternatives and investments, namely, alternatives might seem more impoverished when the individual takes into account the significant resources he/she has already invested in a given relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Academics utilizing the investment model began to see that robust commitment not only makes individuals more likely to remain

with their partners, but also promotes a variety of relationship maintenance behaviors, including: “adaptive social comparison and perceived relationship superiority, derogation of attractive and threatening alternatives, effective management of jealousy and extra-relationship involvements, willingness to sacrifice for the good of a relationship, and tendencies to accommodate rather than retaliate when a partner behaves poorly” (Rusbult and Buunk, 1993, p. 175).

The second way that the investment model elaborated on interdependence theory was to suggest that dependence produces the psychological experience of commitment. *Commitment* is defined as “long-term orientation toward a relationship, including feelings of psychological attachment and intentions to persist through both good and bad times” (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, Gaines, 1997, p. 80). Agnew et al (1998) flesh out three components of commitment, including conative, cognitive, and affective components. The *conative* component, intent to persist, means that an individual feels intrinsically motivated to continue the relationship. The *cognitive* component, long-term orientation, means that the individual sees him or herself as staying in the relationship, and weighs how his or her actions might impact the relationship in the future. The *affective* component, psychological attachment, means that the individual conceives of life in dyadic terms, such that emotional well-being is influenced by the other person and the relationship. Agnew et al (1998) contend that the three components of commitment “are theoretically and empirically discriminable but tend to co-occur, and collectively are distinct from the three bases of dependence” (p. 940).

Summary of Empirical Studies

Numerous studies have demonstrated that people who have high level of satisfaction, low quality of alternatives, and high investments are more committed (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Simpson, 1987). In addition, these studies have shown that these three factors of commitment collectively account for 40% to 80% of commitment variance. Furthermore, the studies indicate that each factor accounts for unique variance in commitment. Simultaneously, depending on the circumstances, these three factors do not have the equivalent influence on commitment. Weiss (1980) found that in short-term or new involvements, satisfaction is sometimes an especially powerful correlate of commitment, which can be attributed to ‘sentiment override.’ Another example is that in abusive relationships, satisfaction can be irrelevant to commitment (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Other empirical evidence supports the idea that while accommodative behavior promotes couple well-being, it is frequently costly and effortful to the self (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik and Lipkus., 1991; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Finkel and Campbell (2001) found that people with high levels of self control were more likely to employ accommodative tendencies.

In their 2006 study, Lehmiller and Agnew chose to examine whether targeted couples experience relational phenomena differently than couples who are not the targets of such bias, focusing their research specifically on factors that promote or prevent commitment in marginalized romantic relationships (p. 41). Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) used, as a point of departure for their study, findings from research showing that subjective norms, the perceived views of others regarding one’s relationship, are

significantly associated with both relationship commitment and relationship stability (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). Lehmiller's and Agnew's findings were that marginalization is a considerable negative predictor of commitment. They also found that individuals in marginalized relationships invested appreciably less than individuals in non-marginalized relationships. Perhaps surprisingly, Lehmiller and Agnew found that in spite of investing less, individuals in marginalized relationships are actually more committed to their relationships than their non-marginalized counterparts. Lehmiller and Agnew (2006) speculated that marginalized partners compensate for less investment through compensation that occurs from lowered perception of relationship alternatives, rather than through increased perception of relationship satisfaction.

How Interdependence Theory Applies to the GMSF Dyad

To apply the Investment Model to the GMSF dyad, one need only reflect back to Sharper's (2009) sentiment from Chapter 3, in which Sharper writes about her and her GM partner's "back up plan."

All through our teens, Rico and I had a deal: if we weren't dating anyone come prom time, we would go to prom together. And we did. Now that we're in our thirties, we have another deal: if I don't meet the future Mr. Becky Sharper by the time my biological clock starts to wind down, Rico and I are going to have some babies together. And why not? If you can't have a child with your loving, caring, faithful best friend of 20+ years, who can you have one with? Now, granted, this is a backup plan. I'd like to find the all-in-one friend/lover/baby daddy package. Even if I do, I suspect I'll be a little disappointed that getting married will mean I miss my chance to reproduce with one of the most amazing people I know (also, we'd have some gorgeous, brilliant little Salvadoran-Jewish hybrids). But for the record: gay or straight, a life partner is a life partner!

It is possible, and in fact not at all difficult, to apply interdependence theory and investment model ideas to each element of Sharper's writing. As Sharper herself lays out, she desires and yearns for "the all-in-one friend/lover/baby daddy package," signifying that from her perspective, the most important needs she would like to be filled by her partner are 1) friendship 2) sexual needs 3) a father for her child. As we know, to measure how satisfied an individual is in a relationship, we would use the formula of how satisfied the person was in previous relationships, and how their perception of how satisfying other people's relationships appear to be. Interdependence theory predicts that the more a person's needs are met within the relationship, the more satisfied they are likely to be. To measure whether the individual will remain in the relationship or not, based on their subjective evaluation of who else is out there, we would apply the second yardstick, or assess the quality of alternatives. Since this means the choice with the highest benefits relative to costs, we can see how Sharper and Rico's agreement, that they would go to prom together if neither of them had a date, signifies that both people weighed the benefit (having an enjoyable person to go to prom with) against the cost (not having the person accompanying you to prom being able to satisfy all your needs).

Adding in the component of investment, we can analyze how Sharper's dependence on Rico appears to increase when her perception of her investment in her and Rico's relationship is high. With the question "If you can't have a child with your loving, caring, faithful best friend of 20+ years, who can you have one with?" Sharper demonstrates that she sees important resources, such as time (the 20+ years), and consistent caretaking as linked to her and Rico's relationship. With this sentiment, Sharper is also alluding to the ways that these qualities of Rico's, his ability to be loving,

caring, and faithful are for her highly regarded. In the language of cost vs. benefit, we see high benefit and relatively low cost.

In addition, the aspect of commitment that the investment model delineates, including conative, cognitive, and affective components, all seem to come through in Sharper's writing about her and Rico's relationship. With regards to the conative component, or the intent to persist, I see strong evidence that Sharper appears intrinsically motivated to continue her relationship with Rico. In terms of the cognitive component, long-term orientation, it appears that Sharper is weighing how her actions might impact her and Rico's future together. She states "Even if I do [get married to someone else], I suspect I'll be a little disappointed that getting married will mean I miss my chance to reproduce with one of the most amazing people I know", once again demonstrating the cost benefit aspect of her thinking. The cost of getting married to someone else will mean she misses out having a child with Rico. From this excerpt it is challenging to measure the affective component, psychological attachment, except to note Sharper appears to be conceiving of life in dyadic terms, especially with her last sentence, when she states "gay or straight, a life partner is a life partner!"

Finally, it is also highly interesting to apply Lehmiller's and Agnew's (2006) findings that marginalization is a considerable negative predictor of commitment, that individuals in marginalized relationships invest appreciably less than individuals in non-marginalized relationships, but that despite investing less, people in marginalized relationships are more committed, which they speculate comes from compensation. Interdependence theory research findings point to compensation occurring by means of

reduced perception of relationship alternatives, rather than through increased perception of relationship satisfaction. Therefore, we would predict that Sharper is compensating not through increased perception of relationship satisfaction (not by pretending that Rico is able to meet all her needs) but rather based upon Sharper's perceptions of her 'quality of alternatives. Quimby (2005) argues that *Will & Grace*, by acknowledging the significance and primacy of those "common and consequential intimacies developed between straight women and gay men," tackles "straight women's dissatisfactions with traditional—marital—definitions of male-female love, commitment, and desire" (Quimby, 2005, p. 714). It seems that there is a way to make sense of Quimby's claim in light of Lehmiller and Agnew's Investment Model language. Quimby appears to be contending that the GMSF relationships is situated in a unique symbolic space in the dependency equation, with the SF presumably having experienced low satisfaction with SM partners, and therefore choosing a "consequential intimacy" with a new, high quality alternative to the SM, the GM. Finally, in applying the idea of relationship maintenance behaviors to Sharper and Rico, we see evidence of 1) adaptive social comparison and perceived relationship superiority (Sharper refers to Rico as "one of the most amazing people [she] know[s]") and 2) derogation of attractive and threatening alternatives (she clearly sets up the idea that getting married poses a threat to her reproducing with Rico.

It becomes interesting to consider another relationship maintenance behavior, effective management of jealousy and extra-relationship involvements, in the context of the critique of the theory I outlined above, wherein the GMSF dyad inherently subverts the idea of all of one's needs being met within one relationship. Another relationship

maintenance behavior, accommodating rather than retaliating when a partner behaves poorly, can be applied to what I outlined earlier in the Will & Grace baby example. Even though Grace abandons her and Will's plan to have a baby together, resulting in Will being hurt and angry, he does not retaliate and eventually forgives Grace, clearly indicating that their relationship is more important to him than getting back at her for hurting him. Ultimately, Sharper's writing brings us to the only relationship maintenance behavior that I have not yet covered, one's willingness to sacrifice for the good of a relationship. To me the question raised by her writing is whether or not Sharper is willing to sacrifice the hope of the all-in-one package for her relationship with Rico.

Sharper's meditation on whether or not she and Rico will decide to have a baby together takes on a new significance in the context of this idea of "investment." If they did choose to have a baby, according to Rustbult's findings of "investment," we presume that it would be more likely that they would continue to stay in relationship with one another. And yet, the very factors that would determine whether or not they would choose to make this kind of investment in their future would most likely be impacted by their perception of how those external to the relationship, and they themselves, would view this choice and their relationship.

Just as Lehmiller and Agnew's (2006) driving hypothesis in their study of marginalized relationships was that the individuals in the relationships responded to their perception of social stigma aimed at their marginalized relationship by choosing to invest less in the relationship, I am interested in exploring the impact that the internalization of stigma has, both on the individuals within the GMSF dyad and on the GMSF relationship

itself. In the next chapter, I will examine how the relationship's persistent visibility in popular culture challenges our cultural constructs about what is possible or desirable in relationships and how these cultural constructs impact the dyad's perceptions of satisfaction, commitment and willingness to invest in their relationship. Does Becky Sharper, for instance, feel like she would be settling, or foreclosing on happiness, if she never finds the all-in-one package she says she wants and chooses to have a baby with Rico? Likewise, what emotions might Rico have? One would imagine that if Rico decided he wants children, and Becky is his primary choice of a partner to do so, waiting to see whether she finds someone to satisfy her all-one-needs might be difficult, frustrating, and anxiety-inducing.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Given that this thesis is interested in the question of how stigma affects the GMSF dyad, in this final chapter, I begin by reviewing the three aspects of stigma to which the GMSF dyad is subjected. I then review how social construct theory offers a lens for understanding where the stigma the GMSF dyad faces comes from. Having shown how stigma impacts the dyad, I introduce macro and micro interventions that support maintaining healthy relationships. In terms of macro interventions, I explore how the GMSF dyad, as a relationship crossing traditional heterosexual and homosexual boundaries, is a site of resistance to heteronormative culture. I also discuss the literature on education, sensitivity training programs, and their possible utility in serving to undermine heteronormativity. I will also discuss how clinician's biases, informed by the larger culture in which we practice, perpetuate the stigmatizing of non-traditional relationships. With regards to micro level, or clinical interventions, I gesture to narrative therapy as a potentially effective modality for individuals in marginalized relationships. Next, I formulate how the constructs that lead to stigma, and to the marginalization of the GMSF dyad, impact the decisions made by the GM and SF in relationship with one another through an application of interdependence theory and the investment model. These formulations are demonstrated through findings from previous qualitative studies and through use of a clinical vignette that is a composite of material about GMSF

relationships. In conclusion, I will demonstrate how the field might adapt to new, post-modern familial and relationship formulations.

Stigma in Triplicate

Before exploring stigma from social constructionist and interdependence theory perspectives, I review the ways that GMSF dyad experience three forms of stigma: homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism. Homophobia is aimed at the GM of the GMSF dyad, operating to render his sexual orientation invisible or to problematize it through such tactics as feminization. Sexism is aimed at the SF of the GMSF dyad, serving to delineate an image of a woman who is unable to perform correct heterosexuality. The SF of the GMSF dyad, sometimes called a ‘fag hag’, is often portrayed as ‘needy, vulnerable...often predatory, in terms of their barely camouflaged, sometimes overt desire for their gay male best friend (Shugart, 2003, p. 89). Heterosexism impacts both the GM and the SF in the dyad and serves to devalue and delegitimize the relationship itself, using the weapons of homophobia and sexism. In Chapter 4, I explained how these three forms of stigma—homophobia, sexism, and heterosexism—are all social constructions. Stangor and Crandall (2000) write: “Stigmas exist primarily in the minds of stigmatizers and stigmatized individuals as cultural social constructions, rather than as universally stigmatized physical features” (p. 63). Just because these forms of stigma can be identified as social constructions rather than inherent or essential realities, however, does not mean they do not have severe consequences.

Goffman (1963) notes that for the stigmatized individual, “shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his own attributes as

being a defiling thing to possess” (p. 7). As has been demonstrated, we can clearly see how homophobia leads to internalized homophobia, which can lead to self-defeating personality traits and increased likelihood of depression and suicidality. Likewise, we see how objectification leads to self-objectification, which has implications on far-reaching areas, from body esteem and eating-disorders, to depression and anxiety, to performance on math tests. The discussion of the effects of internalized homophobia and internalized sexism in Chapter 4 also foreshadowed how heterosexism leads to internalized constructions of what relationships are recognized and privileged in contemporary American culture. Since the GMSF dyad is excluded from the privileges afforded to other, more traditional relationships, we can see how this exclusion influences both the members of the dyad, and everyone they interact with, to hold and act upon the constructs that keep the dyad excluded.

Macro Vs. Micro Interventions

This thesis has sought to display that non-sexual significant relationships, such as GMSF fictive kin relationships, serve as protective factors for the individuals in them. Having analyzed the ways in which the GMSF dyad faces at least three distinct forms of stigma—stigma that makes the relationship more fragile and the individuals in them more vulnerable—it might seem logical to simply argue that stigma is problematic and the prescription is 1) to work to reduce and eradicate stigma from a macro level and 2) to identify effective micro level (clinical) strategies for working with stigmatized individuals. Certainly, a social constructionist lens, which has been explained in Chapter 4, calls for macro-level interventions, such as analyzing public policies that continue to

privilege certain forms of relationships while rendering others invisible. As Hacking (2001) argued, “The point of social constructionism is to shake us up; to make us stop taking something for granted, to problematize the unproblematic” (Powell, 2001, p. 301). In many ways this thesis is a defense of the GMSF dyad as an important, legitimate relationship that serves the individuals in it. Beyond the defense of the GMSF dyad, and an articulation of the stigma the dyad faces, this thesis is interested in using social construct theory to analyze how our constructions continue to shape what gets privileged, what questions get asked, who is left out, and how to “shake up” our thinking about how to support individuals in maintaining healthy relationships.

Logically, there are two ways of approaching how to think about supporting individuals in maintaining healthy relationships. One way is to examine what goes wrong with relationships—what leads to conflict, relationship termination, and dissatisfaction. Another is to explore what goes well in relationships—what leads to effective communication and problem-solving, to the relationship enduring over time, and to the individuals in the relationship getting his/her needs met within the relationship. Because this thesis has approached the GMSF dyad from the perspective of the stigma they face, it may make more sense to speak more directly to what puts strain on, or what can go wrong with, relationships. However, it is important to note that the research specifically about GMSF relationships ultimately finds that relationships between straight women and gay men are not remarkably different from other relationships, especially in the type of activities carried out, and in the level of support that they receive from each other (Gaiba, 2007, p. 241). Gregoriou (2004) found that many participants in her study of gay male and straight female relationships used kinship terminology in order to describe their

friendships' functions, importance and meaning (p. 16). Grigoriou interpreted her findings as lending support to previous research (Nardi, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991) that found gay men often consider friends as 'chosen family'.

Whether or not the GMSF dyad is considered similar to other friendships, or other familial relationships, what remains important about GMSF relationships is what they have to teach us about how individuals creatively connect with one another and get their emotional needs met. As Doggart (1998) argues, scholars and critics are conditioned to appropriate, label and define. Doggart contends:

This desire stems from a cultural rigidity, a way of thinking that is rooted in dualism. We are programmed to see things in terms of good and bad, right or wrong, heterosexual or homosexual, single or married, male or female, inside or outside and so on. Anything that challenges this kind of thinking represents a threat to the illusion of stability that our culture perpetuates. There is little difference between the interpretation of a conservative or a lesbian critic in terms of the underlying need to define a person as one thing and not another. (p. 1)

It is important to note that much is at stake in maintaining the 'illusion of stability.'

General consensus now exists that until the early 1970s, homosexuality, or any divergence in sexuality, was viewed as a form of psychopathology. Even with the contemporary abandonment of the 'illness model' of homosexuality, research indicates that social stigma associated with non-heterosexuality remains prevalent, revealing that heterosexuals' negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians are thought to be a tolerable norm in American culture (Herek & Glunt, 1993). Belief Systems theory (Hamilton & Mineo, 1996, 1999) argues that such negative attitudes are results of justification processes that lead to negative beliefs and attitudes toward groups practicing unconventional behaviors. In this thesis, having presented and explored a relationship

that seems to challenge precisely this kind of dualistic thinking--neither friends nor blood-relations, gay nor straight, 'just friends' nor romantic partners—it is important to think about how the labels we use inform the type of research that gets undertaken, the policies that are created, and how these products then act back upon the individuals.

GMSF Relationship as Site of Resistance to Heteronormativity

Much research has focused on reducing homophobia and heteronormativity. With regards to reducing and eradicating the three forms of stigma experienced by the GMSF dyad, research demonstrates that relationships that span the boundary line between straight and queer communities themselves lead to a reduction in homophobia and heteronormativity. For example, Muraco (2005) found evidence that GMSF friendship is a context in which heterosexism is resisted simply because the relationship subverts traditional ideas about the boundaries between males and females and gay and straight. Berkman and Zinberg (1997) found that levels of homophobia and heterosexism in social workers were negatively correlated with amount of social contact with homosexual men and women. According to contact theory, intergroup contact has been proposed as a way of reducing prejudices and fears by showing that myths, stereotypes and fears are unfounded (Farley, 1982, p. 41-47). It is also important to consider how seeing the GMSF relationship as one of many types of marginalized relationships constitutes another type of resistance to heteronormativity, by challenging our assumptions about what relationships look like. Researchers have argued that it is the knowledge of how sexism and heterosexism serve as barriers to human development that serves as the impetus for clinicians to engage in social justice advocacy at the micro, mezzo and macro levels

(Lewis & Arnold, 1998). This thesis, as a theoretical study that seeks to show how sexism and heterosexism serve as barriers to the healthy development and growth of gay men, straight women, and all who are in marginalized relationships, serves as first step in understanding the phenomenon of GMSF relationships in a new way, calling for social justice advocacy on multiple levels.

Applying Theory: Macro Interventions

The first macro intervention explored in this chapter has to do with education and training. Within this area, one important component to consider is clinician bias. Bermudez (1997) cites (Perls, 1978 and Satir, 1987) in maintaining: “If the therapist is denying, distorting, projecting, or masking, and more importantly, is unaware of his or her own inner process, then this is being communicated to others regardless of how one tries to disguise it. This, in turn, is dangerous for the client who is in a potentially vulnerable position” (p. 254). Considering the pervasive heteronormativity already discussed, it seems likely that many therapists would be experiencing heteronormative bias when working with individuals who are in relationships that are not privileged or recognized in contemporary culture. Berkman and Zingner (1997) examined the extent of homophobia and heterosexist bias in 187 social workers, and their findings were that 10% of social workers were homophobic and that the majority of social workers were heterosexist. Fell, Matiske and Riggs (2008) studied how to challenge heteronormativity in psychological practice with lesbian, gay and bisexual clients. Their findings demonstrated that “A practitioner’s presumption of a client’s heterosexual identity may result in failure to adequately understand how normative assumptions contribute to the

client's marginalization, and thus prevent the client from receiving optimal service" (p. 127). There is consensus that cultural competence, including LGB sensitivity, is important for clinicians who will likely be working with clients with varied sexual orientation identities.

Programs have been developed to increase clinician sensitivity to queer issues. Unfortunately, many of the existing programs that attempt to challenge heteronormativity, as Fell et al (2008) explain, may be ineffective for clinical training because these programs tend to focus on overt prejudice. Fell et al (2008) cite research by Peel (2002) that suggests that students aspiring to enter a helping profession typically hold progressive rather than prejudiced views against same-sex attracted people. Fell et al (2008) contend that focusing upon prejudice and homophobia could be perceived as accusatory by the students, and interfere with their ability to engage with and learn from the program's materials. Importantly, Fell et al (2008) point to what is missing from existing programs, saying:

Existing programs take an individualized focus to addressing prejudice. That is, they focus on the impact of direct actions by heterosexual individuals towards same-sex attracted people, and are thus aimed at helping dominant group members 'change their attitudes' by 'learning about the other'. This implies that anti-LGB prejudice is only enacted by 'bad homophobic people' and ignores the effect that living in a heteronormative society has on the lived experience of same-sex attracted people (Peel, 2002). It may be beneficial to instead focus on how heteronormativity functions to produce both privilege and disadvantage (i.e., unearned benefits that accrue to heterosexual people through living in a heteronormative society), and how this may shape the experiences same-sex attracted clients bring to therapy. (p. 129)

In terms of the "unearned benefits that accrue to heterosexual people living in a heteronormative society", it is helpful to think about how our social constructions reinforce and act upon heteronormative society.

Unchartered Territory

It is tempting to argue that GMSF relationships and other relationships that provide positive benefits to the individuals in them should be considered as equal to traditional romantic relationships or close long term friendships. However, the attempt to position GMSF relationships as the same as other romantic relationships is problematic. Taking a cue from the debate over same-sex marriage, we can see how attempts to make a “same as” or “equal to” argument often backfire, especially in terms of social justice values. As Ettelbrick (1989) points out:

By looking to our sameness and deemphasizing our differences, we don't place ourselves in a position of power that would allow us to transform marriage from an institution that emphasizes property and state regulation of relationships to an institution which recognizes one of many types of valid and respected relationships (p. 483).

Many would argue that the goal should not be “transforming marriage” but rather decoupling relationship legitimacy with legal sanction. Warner (1999) states:

Because gay social life is not as ritualized and institutionalized as straight life, each relation is an adventure in nearly unchartered territory—whether it is between two gay men, or two lesbians, or a gay man and a lesbian, or among three or more queers, or between gay men and straight women whose commitment to queer culture brings them the punishment of the ‘fag hag’ label. There are almost as many kinds of relationship as there are people in combination...queers have an astonishing range of intimacies. Most have no labels. Most receive no public recognition. Many of these relations are difficult because the rules have to be invented as we go along...the impoverished vocabulary of straight culture tells us that people should be either husbands and wives or (nonsexual) friends. Marriage marks that line. It is not the way many queers live. If there is such a thing as a gay way of life, it consists in these relations, a welter of intimacies outside the framework of professions and institutions and ordinary social obligations. Straight culture has much to learn from it (p. 116)

As Warner's remarks indicate, one of the central differences between gay and straight relationships relates to the ways that within queer relationships (and it is possible to situate the GMSF dyad as a queer relationship, as Warner himself does) "each relation is an adventure in nearly uncharted territory" (p. 116). And yet, as media studies scholars such as Pillion (2000), Allan (2003), and Shugart (2003) agree, most representations of GMSF dyads re-circulate stereotypes about power and cultural capital, failing to offer alternative models to the familial or romantic models of relations between men and women. To understand why this might be the case, we can now turn to an analysis of how our constructions about relationships inform policy and practice, which in turn act back on the creators of the constructions.

"Family Values"

In 2004, a team of researchers reported that within the Bush administration, leaders and policy makers earmarked money to promote the availability of community-based programs to strengthen marriage. Promoting these programs was seen as empirically supported, since empirical evidence demonstrates that healthy marital relationships are beneficial to the adults involved and to the children growing up in the context of these relationships (Parke & Ooms, 2002). Already we can see what Gergen (1994) would refer to as a "conceptual cul de sac", wherein marriage is a clear construction that can be studied, studies demonstrate that supporting marriage has positive benefits for society, and policymakers have empirical evidence to posit that resources should be distributed towards upholding the institution. In 2002, a report on "State Policies to Promote Marriage" was issued by the Assistant Secretary for Planning

and Evaluation, an office within the U.S Department of Health and Human Services. The report, a short-term policy review, analyzed potential state policy areas that promote and support marriage. Focusing on policies directly affecting marriage, and not on the many policies that may indirectly affect marriage, ASPE selected 10 topics for inclusion in the study, including 1) campaigns, commissions and proclamations 2) divorce laws and procedures 3) marriage and relationship preparation and education 4) state tax policies 5) state cash assistance policies 6) state Medicaid policies 7) state vital statistics 8) marriage support and promotion 9) youth education and development. I include these identified topics in such detail because I think it demonstrates the process Berger and Luckman (1966) and other social constructionists identify. The construct of marriage leads to the construct of the “modern nuclear family”, which then leads to the creation of institutions, the reinforcement of mores that validate and privilege the recognizable form, and then the institutions act back upon the creators. In addition, the range of topics identified and covered by the ASPE indicate the grand scope of how problems and issues get framed, what policies are developed and implemented, and how those policies in turn impact the original construction(s).

Taking into account the political climate surrounding these marriage-bolstering efforts, it is helpful to remember that George W. Bush was president of the U.S. during the years discussed above - from 2001 to 2009. Before the Bush administration addressed “family values” and focused efforts on strengthening marriage, the Clinton administration faced a slightly different relationship to policy and family values, one more centered on gender roles and childrearing. Stacey (1998) compellingly outlined “it is not often that the social construction, or more precisely here, the political construction of knowledge is

quite so visible or incestuous as in the reciprocal citation practices” of politically right-wing social scientists. Stacey (1998) traces how, through “social scientific sleights of hand” such as resting claims on misleading comparison groups, no comparison groups, using statistical tricks, pretending that correlation proves causality, ignoring mediating variables or treating small and relative differences as though they are “gross and absolute” (p. 863). These techniques, Stacey argues, allowed social scientists such as Popenoe to convince President Clinton and most of the public that “it is a confirmed empirical generalization” that non traditional families are “not as successful as conventional two parent families” (p. 862). Stacey cites the researcher David Demo who concluded that consequences of maternal employment, divorce, and single parent family structure had been grossly exaggerated. According to Demo:

The accumulated evidence is sufficiently consistent to wonder whether we, as researchers, are asking the most important questions, or where we, like the families we are trying to study, are more strongly influenced by traditional notions of family formality.

Demo’s language, of the importance of the questions that get asked, and how the research that emerges from those questions is used to inform policy and practice, directly relates to the issues raised in this thesis. I am not, therefore, trying to argue that non-sexual significant relationships (such as the GMSF dyad) should be seen as equal to marriages, homosexual romantic relationships, or to other more, or less, traditional dyads. What I am arguing is that it is important to look at the types of questions that get asked, where those questions come from, and the potential benefit of conceptualizing relationships differently. Analyzing the significance of pre-existing constructs on how research gets undertaken, the following paragraphs outline one respected researcher’s framing of a

specific issue, allowing us to see how social constructions reinforce themselves.

Gottman (1999) outlines his perspective of the climate of marriage in the U.S. and then outlines his thinking regarding how to approach supporting couples in trouble. Gottman writes that current estimates of 1st marriages ending in divorce in the U.S range from 50-67%. Because of these statistics, Gottman argues that “divorce can be said to have reached epidemic proportions in our own time” (p. 3). Further, Gottman cites other scholars who have studied the negative effects of marital dissolution, including 1) increased risk of psychopathology 2) increased rates of automobile accidents, some of which end in fatalities 3) increased incidence of physical illness, suicide, violence and homicide, 4) decreased longevity 5) significant immunosuppression, and increased mortality from disease. Gottman’s logic is that divorce is an epidemic with severe consequences, and therefore, marital therapists must help solve the crisis. However, and perhaps surprisingly, marital therapy actually appears to be a reliable predictor of divorce. Gottman reports:

Our current best estimate is that for about 35% of couples marital therapy is effective in terms of clinically significant, immediate changes but that after a year about 30-50% of the lucky couples who make the gains relapse. This means that all we can claim is that in the best studies, conducted in universities with careful supervision, only between 11% and 18% of couples maintain clinically meaningful initial gains when treated with our best marital therapies. We must conclude that we have an intervention methodology that nets relatively small effects (p. 5).

What Gottman ultimately articulates is that marital therapy is at a major impasse because it is not based on solid empirical knowledge of what is actually predictive of marital dissolution (what is ‘dysfunctional’) and what real couples do to keep their marriages happy and stable (what is ‘functional’) (p. 6). Looking at Gottman’s thought process on a

meta-level, we can see how he has isolated a variable (married couples), articulated a clear problem (high divorce rates), shown the empirical negative impact of the problem on individuals and society, and devised a strategy for conceptualizing an approach to a solution. When we consider that both marriages and divorce are public and legal realities, and thus easily defined and tracked, we begin to see how Doggart's (1998) earlier point about the conditioning which leads us to label and define our constructs influences how we frame issues. In addition, Gottman's (1999) findings indicate to me that micro interventions are not always up to the task of fixing macro problems. Yes, we can, and should, as Gottman suggests, explore what real couples do to keep their marriages happy and stable, and we can explore what is predictive of marital dissolution---and, to extrapolate this recommendation to non-married couples, we can and should analyze other relationship configurations and use similar methods to figure out how to support healthy relationships. But perhaps the question is not merely how to keep people together, but rather, how to shift public thinking about where, how, and in what ways people get their emotional needs met.

The Role of Myth in Relationship Dissatisfaction

It is important to consider two central myths that undermine satisfaction in relationship. The first has to do with the myth of the nuclear family, and the second has to do with couple self-sufficiency. Sharpe (2000) explains how "cultural influences are often overlooked by therapists, couples, and the psychological literature on ...relationships" (p. 31). Some of these cultural influences can be conceptualized as cultural myths, often believed in by members of a couple to their detriment. Sharpe refers

to one of these cultural myths as “the myth of the nuclear family as the source of all love” (p. 32). Sharpe (2000) cites Miller, who states: “We are taught that the family is supposed to fill virtually all our early needs for love, romance with an enchanting stranger our middle ones, and a family once again our later ones” (1995, p. 93). Sharpe points out how this idealization of the nuclear family can lead to a couple’s disillusionment, wherein partners attempt to rely on each other for “all of their emotional needs” and put “too much strain on a system that was only meant to do part of the job” (p. 32). Stacey (1994) articulates that when anyone refers to the crisis of marriage or of family life, “it is not ‘the family’ but one, historically specific system of family life (the ‘modern nuclear family’) that has broken down, and that this has had diverse effects on people of different genders, races, economic resources, sexual identities, and generations” (p. 70). Stacey’s (1994) point about what is meant when people use the language of “the family” also demonstrates that when Miller (1995) explains how “we are taught that the family is supposed to fill virtually all our needs”, although it is not stated, “the family” being referred to is the heterosexual, nuclear family. A two-part construction emerges: 1) that we are conditioned by society to believe that we will get our needs met within the confines of the modern, nuclear family, and 2) that, as Ettelbrick (1989) states “marriage provides the ultimate form of acceptance for personal intimate relationships in our society, and gives those who marry an insider status of the most powerful kind” (p. 481).

Likewise, the “myth of couple self-sufficiency” involves idealizing independence from parents and ties to established institutions (Sharpe, 2000, p. 33). As Coontz (2006) argues, “How can we save marriage?” might be the wrong question to ask. And yet, it is

a question that gets asked often from many quarters. Even Sharpe points out:

The myth of romantic love has discouraged development of adequate psychological theories of love relationships. Pervasive attitudes that love either happens and lasts or becomes sick and dies are so embedded in our culture that the idea of love as involving multiple aspects of relating that develop over time, and that a love relationship needs to be nurtured so that it can develop and flourish, are topics that rarely come to mind for investigation. (p. 31)

When the question of how to support or ‘save’ love relationships does get asked, it gets asked about in the context of marriage.

Narrative Theory: The Micro Side of the Social Construction Coin

As has been discussed in the chapter on social construct theory, social construct theory is a departure from the positivist tradition, which assumes a single, knowable version of reality. Social constructionism, on the other hand, assumes multiple possible realities. Although social construct theory is a sociological theory of knowledge, it has informed narrative theory, which has more direct implications for clinical practice at the micro level (Freedman and Combs, 1996). Within narrative therapy, the therapist’s role is viewed as that of collaborator. The therapist works with the client to discover richer narratives that emerge out of disparate descriptions of experience. Through uncovering these narratives, the therapist and client destabilize the hold that negative, or “thin”, narratives can exert on the client. Narrative therapy contends that our identities are shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves, and what examinations of these stories can show us about the meaning we make of our lives. Meaning-making takes place through social interactions and is influenced by our cultural contexts (Botella & Herrero, 2000). Meaning-making is also a cumulative process; the creation of new meanings or

understandings is shaped by how we have already come to understand the world.

One technique used by narrative therapists is called *externalizing*. Externalizing refers to focusing on the effects caused by problems in people's lives, rather than situating the problem within individuals (White, 2007). Through externalization, the narrative therapist helps the client create distance from the problem, enabling investigation and evaluation of the influence the problem is having on the person. Another type of externalization has to do with individuals reflecting on, and connecting with, their intentions, values, hopes, and commitments. Once values and hopes have been located in specific life events, they help to "re-author" a person's experience (White, 2007, p. 61).

A narrative approach sees identity as shaped by stories. Identity conclusions and performances that are problematic for individuals or groups signify the dominance of a *problem-saturated* story. Problem-saturated stories gain their dominance at the expense of preferred, alternative stories that often are located in marginalized discourses (White, 2007, p. 267). These marginalized discourses and identity performances are disqualified or rendered invisible by discourses that have gained hegemonic prominence through their acceptance as guiding cultural narratives. An example of a subjugating narrative that impacts the GMSF dyad is heterosexism. Narrative therapy involves a process of deconstruction and "meaning making" that gets achieved through questioning and collaboration with the client.

Case Vignette

Katherine is a 25-year-old woman who identifies as white and heterosexual. She came into session reporting relationship difficulties, severe depression and difficulty making a major life decision. Before coming in to therapy, she left a prestigious job in publishing in a major east coast city to move in with her gay male friend, Greg. Greg, age 23, recently graduated from an intensive undergraduate program where he was celebrated as a talented and promising writer. Katherine and Greg, who had been friends for over 10 years, moved in together and planned to spend the year living together while Greg pursued his writing and Katherine returned to school. Right before moving, Katherine began a relationship with a straight male, Jason. She also ended a serious two-year relationship just weeks before beginning her relationship with Jason. She reported a strong sense of dissatisfaction in her previous romantic relationships. Greg had one college boyfriend whom he dated for a few months but no serious or long-term romantic relationships.

Katherine reported that from the first time Jason visited her, she felt extreme tension between Jason and Greg. Greg said that he did not like Jason, and did not think Jason was right for Katherine. Katherine felt pressured by Jason to return to the city where he still lived, as he expressed this was the only way to give their relationship a chance. Katherine felt that she had made a commitment to Greg that she could not abandon, but she also felt that she might be compromising her relationship with Jason if she stayed with Greg.

Katherine reported that she was tired and worn out from commuting to visit Jason on weekends. With school, a job, and traveling on weekends, Katherine appeared

physically exhausted when she came into my office. She told me that she recently had to go to the Emergency Room for a kidney infection, which began as a severe UTI that had gone untreated for over a month since she had not recognized the early symptoms until suddenly running a high temperature.

Katherine reported that her family did not support her relationship with Greg, which they did not understand. Her religious parents were worried that because Greg was gay, maybe Katherine was a lesbian or that being around Greg might 'make' her gay. She also reported that her parents continued to ask her if Greg was her boyfriend, or if they might get married in the future. Katherine perceived her parents as being in an unhappy marriage that would never be terminated. Katherine reported that she did not feel close to her family and believed that Greg felt more like family than her blood relatives. Greg was not close with his family because of their reaction to his coming out. Katherine was the first person Greg came out to, and Katherine expressed pride in how well she had supported Greg through his coming out process and through the resulting conflict with his family. Greg's parents had gotten divorced when he was in middle school.

Katherine stated that she needed help figuring out what to do. Jason had made it clear that he felt the situation was untenable, and had (imaginatively) come up with a conservation of happiness equation, where he said it felt like only 1.5 people in the triad could be happy at any one time. His argument was that Katherine could be happy all the time, since she was 'getting her cake and eating it too' but that either Greg or Jason could only be half happy, since they knew their time with her was limited. Greg told Katherine that this arrangement was not what he had anticipated and that he did not understand how their life together could work with Jason dominating so much of Katherine's time and

attention. Greg had taken Katherine to the ER and stayed with her as she was put on IV antibiotics and a saline drip, had driven her home, taken care of her during her recovery, and expressed outrage when, after sleeping for 24 hours, the first thing she had done upon reaching consciousness was to call Jason. Jason told Katherine that she was “selfish” and “hurting everyone” and asked her if she was “really” in love with Greg. Katherine reported feeling guilty, frustrated, and unable to come up with a solution that would be good for everyone, because she felt it would be wrong not to honor her commitment to Greg, but she also did not think it was fair of Greg to pressure her to end her relationship with Jason.

In one session, Katherine was visibly upset because of something Jason had recently told her when he broke up with her in a fight, which was that he worried that she would someday “end up alone, living in Greg’s walk-in closet, forever an accessory to his worry-free existence.” Jason said he would hate to see her waste her life that way. Katherine expressed that she loves and trusts Greg, who has been her primary source of emotional support since her mother became severely ill when she was 15. She made a point of saying how Greg can make her laugh harder, think more, and feel more alive than in any other relationship in her life. She summarized how she feels about Greg by saying that she thinks he sees her more than any other person has been able to. Katherine stated that she felt an intense physical connection to Jason and finds him to be incredibly compelling, intelligent, sensitive and funny. She expressed that she is not certain what the future would look like if she ends her relationship with Jason to placate Greg.

Discussion of Case Vignette

The three elements that will be covered in the discussion of the case vignette are 1) the role of stigma 2) application of interdependence theory and 3) recommendations for clinical work with Katherine based on a narrative therapeutic approach.

The Role of Stigma in the Vignette: With regards to the three forms of stigma faced by the GMSF dyad—homophobia, sexism and heterosexism---we can see elements of all three in this vignette. First, Katherine’s account of her and Greg’s families’ reactions to Greg’s sexual orientation identity demonstrates a narrative of familial disapproval and rejection, either through overt fear of, or a more subtle lack of understanding about, Greg’s gay male identity. In addition, Jason’s comment to Katherine about his fear that she will someday find herself “living in Greg’s walk-in closet, forever an accessory to his worry-free existence” also evidences homophobia, with its implication that Greg is frivolous, closeted (meaning that he must be using Katherine to pass as a straight male), and that Katherine’s role in Greg’s life is as minor and as disposable as “an accessory”.

With regards to sexism, Katherine clearly seems to see herself as being pulled between two powerful male forces. On the one hand, Jason insists that she is “getting her cake and eating it too”, casting her as gluttonous and getting more than she deserves. On the other hand, Jason implies that she is failing at a central task of traditional womanhood, namely, taking care of the people around her and privileging the needs of men above her own. He articulates that through her misplaced desire to “have it all,” she overlooks the impact of her actions on the other two people in the situation, hurting them in the process. Greg also indicates elements of sexism in his condescending stance that he

knows Jason is wrong for her, and his outrage that she is unable to pay attention to him because of how much of her attention is directed towards Jason.

The way that heterosexism is woven throughout this clinical vignette is more complex than the first two elements of stigma. First, the dominant narrative that gets invoked has much to do with a familiar heterosexual romantic trope: that of two male suitors fighting for one woman. Katherine's framing of her problem demonstrates that she feels she must "choose" between the two important men in her life, and exposes various strategies employed by both men to get her to choose them (via shaming, claims of "knowing her better", offers for the future). Second, both Katherine and Greg, while clear on the ways that they are important to one another, express confusion about what it would look like, or mean for them, to continue sharing their lives. Greg's statement to Katherine that this was "not what he had anticipated", and his confusion about their life together given Jason's dominating much of Katherine's time and attention, evidence Greg's unwitting participation in the dominant heterosexist narrative of the nuclear couple. Jason's comment to Katherine about his concern that she will end up "an accessory" to Greg demonstrates a devaluing of the intimacy and connection between Greg and Katherine, making it seem like Katherine must be "in love" with Greg to willingly take on a minor role in another person's life. In addition, Katherine's perceptions of her family's confusion about her and Greg's relationship reveals the ways that all of the people involved struggle from a lack of precedent or language to be able to mirror what Greg and Katherine represent to one another. In other circumstances, especially if two heterosexual or homosexual individuals were moving in together, family and community support might take the form of housewarming presents, shifts in

relationship terminology, or a set of expectations about the meaning of ‘moving in together.’ Katherine states that she feels like she made a commitment to Greg. Jason, however, does not seem to recognize this commitment, which is displayed by his insistence that she move back to the city where she was living to move in with him and “give their relationship a chance.”

Application of Interdependence Theory: Applying interdependence theory to this case vignette is slightly more complex than the application found in Chapter Four, as we are essentially looking at two distinct relationships: the relationship between Katherine and Greg, and the relationship between Katherine and Jason. To measure how satisfied an individual is in a relationship, we would use the formula of how satisfied the person was in previous relationships, and their perception of how satisfying other people’s relationships appear to be. Interdependence theory predicts that the more a person’s needs are met within the relationship, the more satisfied they are likely to be. In this case, Katherine has alluded to her parent’s ongoing conflicted relationship, and has also expressed dissatisfaction with her past romantic relationships. In contrast, Katherine and Greg’s relationship seems highly satisfying from Katherine’s rendering: she appreciates how long they have known one another, how Greg makes her laugh, how he challenges her intellectually, provides emotional support, and is able “to see her more than any person ever has.” Likewise Katherine expresses a physical connection with Jason, and expresses that he has many qualities she values, making it seem like she sees the possibility of being able to have a satisfying relationship with him.

To measure whether the individual will remain in the relationship or not, based on their subjective evaluation of who else is out there, we would apply the second yardstick,

or assess the quality of alternatives. Assessing the quality of alternatives means evaluating which choice carries the highest benefits relative to costs. What becomes complicated about applying this quality of alternative yardstick is that Katherine's framing of the situation makes it clear that she perceives staying with Greg as potentially costing her the opportunity to pursue her and Jason's relationship.

The realm of investment is where we see the most difference between Katherine's relationship with Greg and her relationship with Jason. Katherine appears cognizant of how long she and Greg have known one another, and how much he has taken care of her and "been there for her" over the course of their relationship. Along this vein, Katherine also alludes to the ways that these qualities of Greg's-- his ability to be loving, caring, and faithful over time--are highly regarded by her. In contrast to the many investments she and Greg have already made in one another, Katherine and Jason have not made those same investments. Yet, in terms of Katherine's framing of her decision, we see that Katherine is also taking into account the difficulty of "choosing" Greg, given that there is no model for what her relationship with Greg. It is also clear that she cannot possibly get all of her needs met in her relationship with Greg.

Using a Narrative Therapeutic Approach with Katherine: Focusing on elements of narrative therapy introduced in this Chapter, such as 1) destabilizing the "problem-saturated" narrative, 2) externalizing and 3) uncovering of disparate, neglected narratives, I will now examine how one might use techniques from narrative theory to work with Katherine. White (2007) says that:

People consult therapists when they are having difficulty in proceeding with their lives. In these circumstances, they have usually been doing what is known and familiar to them in their effort to address predicaments and concerns: They have

engaged in actions that are in keeping with familiar conclusions about their lives and relationship and with customary knowledges about life (White, 2007, p. 263).

Katherine comes into therapy with a clear sense of difficulty about how to proceed with her life. She offers a “problem-saturated” narrative steeped in traditional homophobic, sexist and heteronormative discourses. For example, Katherine perceives herself as being pulled between two compelling men, unable to find a solution that would make everyone happy. On the one hand, Katherine expresses that she feels “guilty” at the prospect of not honoring her commitment to Greg, while on the other hand, she does not want to have to give up on her relationship with Jason for Greg. Themes of selfishness, guilt, and being in a “double-bind” emerge in Katherine’s presentation of her situation.

In addition, the heteronormative narrative of two suitors pursuing one woman generally carries the idea that while one suitor might appear to be the right choice, the other, less obviously appealing, suitor is actually the ‘right’ choice. Analyses of this trope find it in as far-ranging places as Verdi's *Il Trovatore* to *Dirty Dancing*, the classic 80’s movie with Patrick Swayze (<http://tvtropes.org/>, n.d.). According to the moral lesson of the discourse, the heroine is tested through her ability to choose the ‘correct’ suitor. Much is at stake in the choice: if she chooses incorrectly, she is doomed to a miserable existence.

Using externalization with Katherine would involve focusing on the effects caused by the problems in her life, rather than situating the problem within the individuals. Although it might be tempting for Katherine to wish that Greg would change, or that Jason would change, thinking about the effects of what she perceives to be the problem could allow her to think about her physical exhaustion, her feelings of guilt, fear,

and her perception of being stuck, as opposed to blaming herself or the other two people in the situation. Through externalization, the narrative therapist could help Katherine create distance from the problem, enabling investigation and evaluation of the influence the problem is having on her life. In addition, allowing Katherine to reflect on, and connect with, her intentions, values, hopes, and commitments, might afford her the opportunity to “re-author” her experiences.

Finally, the therapist would work with Katherine to uncover richer narratives that emerge out of disparate descriptions of experience. Through the uncovering of these marginalized narratives, the therapist and client destabilize the hold of the negative, or “thin”, narrative. With regards to Katherine, we can see the hold of the “thin” narrative of two suitors on Katherine. She appears to feel “powerless” and thinks of herself as being in an impossible situation, where no choice is a good choice. By asking Katherine to think through the ways that this heteronormative narrative fails to explain or offer coherence to describe Katherine’s situation, the therapist might enable Katherine to articulate disruptions of this ‘thin’ narrative, thus freeing her from her feeling of being stuck. Having asked Katherine to focus on her intentions, values, hopes and commitments, some of the therapeutic work might involve reframing her previous choices (her choice to move in with Greg, her choice to create a long-term relationship with him, and her refusal to give in to either Greg’s or Jason’s pressure) as courageous acts of resistance to what is socially and culturally expected for women.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed the stigma in triplicate experienced by the GMSF dyad, spoken of macro interventions informed by an application of social construct

theory, introduced narrative theory, and used a case vignette to further explore how stigma, interdependence theory and narrative approaches all intersect at the micro level. The theories discussed—social construct theory at the macro level, narrative theory at the micro level, and interdependence theory-- all emphasize the dialectical relationship between the individual and the larger culture in which the individual resides. As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, the privileged narratives of nuclear family tend to fail many people, while leaving others out entirely. In addition, our dominant paradigms and narratives actively oppress those they leave behind through the construction of stigma. Stigma, in turn, impacts our decisions about what types of relationships we get into, what types of relationships we invest in, and whether or not we commit to relationships over time. Beyond these rather clear-cut instances of how stigma impacts individuals and groups, this thesis also explores opportunities for people to see around our culture's dominant narratives about family and relationships, particularly through celebrating the creative ways that people get their needs met outside of dominant paradigm configurations. Ultimately, this thesis suggests that finding ways to support people in maintaining healthy relationships is an important consideration, especially in the context of the “problem-saturated” field of social work.

Virginia Woolf famously signed her suicide letter to her husband Leonard with the words “I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been” (Rose, 1986). Cunningham's *The Hours*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 and was turned into a feature film in 2003, weaves quotations from Woolf's life with one of her most famous novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*. *The Hours* subtly pursues many of the questions that Woolf posed, both in her life and in her work, in the early part of the 20th century. The

novel features a relationship between Richard Brown, a gay male poet suffering from AIDS, and Clarissa Vaughn, his lifelong female friend. While musing to herself about her relationship with Richard, Clarissa wonders:

Couldn't they have discovered something larger and stranger than what they've got? It is impossible not to imagine that other future, that rejected future ... as being full of infidelities and great battles; as a vast and enduring romance laid over friendship so searing and profound it would accompany them to the grave and possibly even beyond. (Cunningham, 2000, p. 97)

In one of the most poignant moments in the film, right before Richard commits suicide, he turns to Clarissa and speaks the words from Woolf's suicide letter, saying "I don't think two people could have been happier than we've been." The emotional resonance, beauty, and radical nature of these words seem just as remarkable now as in 1941.

Whether uttered by a woman who many have argued was in a 'marriage of convenience' in pre-World War II-Britain, or by a fictional man dying of AIDS in NYC in the beginning of the 21st century, the idea that two people of opposite sex, in a non-primarily-sexual relationship, could be happy together over a lifetime opens us to the possibility of something "larger and stranger than what we've got".

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