Friendship between Gay Men and Heterosexual Women:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

This working paper explores the friendship dynamics between gay men and heterosexual women. Many studies have investigated cross-sex friendships without taking into account the sexual identity of the participants (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Fehr, 1996; Gaines, 1994; Monsour, 1992; O'Meara, 1989; Parker & de Vries, 1993; Reid & Fine, 1992; Rubin, 1985; Sapadin, 1988; Swain, 1992, Werking, 1997) and therefore draw conclusions about cross-sex friendships and negotiation of sexual boundaries (O'Meara, 1989; Reid and Fine, 1992; Swain, 1992). This paper makes an attempt to discuss and interpret the specific experiences of the participants by taking into account the parameter of their sexuality.

For the purposes of this research, sixteen semi-structured interviews with eight dyads of friends were conducted. The data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, a qualitative approach stemming from phenomenology. Sharing similar principles as phenomenology, IPA focuses on participants' perceptions in an attempt to understand how individuals make sense of their world. For this reason, IPA is a particularly appropriate means of analysis for an exploratory study examining close friendships between gay men and heterosexual women in a detailed, contextualised way.

The paper begins with a review of the relevant literature, discussing issues related to non-heterosexual people's support networks and the 'families of choice' thesis (Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Weston, 1991). It continues with a methodology section, where the principles and the underlying assumptions of IPA are presented in a concise but informative manner. This section also includes information on the sample, the interview schedule and the analytic strategy adopted. The criteria used in order for this study to be evaluated and the researcher's own reflections are also presented.

The analysis section, where a detailed analysis of the data is demonstrated, then follows. It looks at:
- definitions of the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women. This theme offers a general understanding regarding the scene of the specific friendship under investigation;
- friends as family. This theme explores whether the participants regard friends as family;
- the characteristics of the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women that are valued by them. This theme looks into those characteristics that participants believe contribute towards the maintenance of such friendships;
- comparisons of this friendship with other forms of friendship. Here, the benefits and the costs of the participants' friendships with people of the same or different sexualities are evaluated and compared; and
- participants' understanding of their social network's perception of the friendship between them. This theme investigates the dynamics between the friendships under investigation and other close relationships of the participants.

An overview and conclusions drawn from the analysis are presented within the last section. Finally, suggestions for future studies and recommendations for therapeutic interventions are offered at the end of this paper.

Previous Research in the Field

Research into cross-sex friendship is growing, with most studies and literature emanating from the USA (for example, Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Fehr, 1996; Gaines, 1994; Monsour, 1992; O'Meara, 1989; Parker & de Vries, 1993; Reid & Fine, 1992; Rubin, 1985; Sapadin, 1988; Swain, 1992, Werking, 1997) and being mainly quantitative. Most of this research focuses on the challenges that cross-sex friends need to negotiate in terms of sexual attraction, equality and gender differences (Gaines, 1994; O'Meara, 1989; Reid and Fine, 1992; Swain, 1992). Other studies have investigated the affective qualities of cross-sex friendships, concluding that men are more satisfied with their cross-sex friendships than women (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Rubin, 1985; Sapadin, 1988). Following the heterosexual context that characterises most academic research, most studies use a heterosexual sample and ignore the cross-sex friendships developed between heterosexual and non-heterosexual people (i.e. gay men - heterosexual women, lesbians - heterosexual men).

Despite the importance of friendship for gay men, little past research examines friendship in their lives. This comes as no surprise if we consider the fact that research follows a heterosexual context, mistakenly assuming that findings of studies on heterosexual relationships could also apply to lesbian and gay relationships (Kitzinger & Coyle, 1995). Such an assumption has no theoretical support generally or specifically in research regarding friendship, as we cannot predict gay men's cross-sex friendship patterns simply by extrapolating from existing literature on heterosexual people (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994). This point is supported by Nardi and Sherrod's (1994) study on same-sex lesbian and gay men's friendships. Their findings do not support the traditional dichotomy of female expressiveness and male instrumentality that shape and characterise the friendships of heterosexual men and women. Their evidence suggest that lesbians and gay men tend to define and enact friendship similarly, as they are equally disclosing, equally seeking social support and equally engaging in activities with their same-sex friends. It could therefore be assumed that sexual orientation influences friendship practices.

Past research and relevant literature on gay men's friendships has revealed that friendship is salient for gay men, as it can be a central organising element for their identity and their emotional well-being (Nardi, 1992a, 1992b,1999; Nardi & Sherrod, 1994; Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Weinstock, 1998; Weston, 1991). As Nardi has suggests, non-heterosexual friendships are "the avenues through which gay social worlds are constructed, the sites upon which gay men's identities and communities are formed and where the quotidian dimensions of our (their) lives are carried out." (1999, p.13). Such friendships are powerful as they sustain the non-heterosexual world and challenge the traditional societal norms associated with conventional family life (Weeks *et al.*, 2001).

Specifically, it has been suggested that friends can be considered family by non-heterosexual people, as friends often provide them with support and reassurance regarding their stigmatised identities and relationships (Nardi, 1992b; Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996; Weeks *et al.*, 1996, 2001; Weston, 1991). The 'friends as family' or 'families of choice' concept has various and diverse meanings for different researchers however, with friends being viewed either as a replacement for, or an extension of, families of origin (Weeks *et al.*, 1996; Weinstock, 1998). A diversity of researchers including anthropologists, sociologists, social service providers and psychologists suggest that, because of the heterosexist and homophobic context of our society, it is less likely for

gay people to receive emotional and material support from their families of origin and society in general. For gay people, this support is usually provided by friends who also provide them with opportunities for expressions of intimacy and identity (Nardi, 1992b). In Berger and Mallon's (1993) study, close friends constituted the main emotional resource for most gay male participants; however the sexual identity of these close friends was not stated. Similar results were reported in Kurdek's (1988) and Kurdek and Smith's (1987) studies, where friends and partners appeared to be the primary providers of support for gay men and lesbians.

In addition, it has been argued that 'friends as family' may pose a political challenge to traditional families, because the latter are not based on freely chosen and achieved relationships but on blood and ascribed ties (Weston, 1991). Weston's (1991) research in the Bay Area of San Francisco on 'families we choose' indicates that only a small proportion of her sample viewed friendship as a surrogate for family of origin. The discussions she had with gay men and lesbians indicate that friendship is not a competitor but an extension of kinship. Weston argues that 'families of choice' are not mere replacements for biological families but comprise a historic transformation of kinship relations and a chronological successor to families of origin. According to Weston's study, and to Weeks *et al.*'s (2001) research on a British sample, gay 'families of choice' have no rigid boundaries as they include friends, lovers, a lover's biological or adoptive parents, family of origin, children, lover's children, people who shared a residency and ex-lovers. These families provide love and support and consist of people who empathise with one another as they share similar histories and experiences. Friends would usually use the kinship terms of brother or sister for their friends and, if children were included in the family, adults who were not co-parents could be called aunts or uncles. These new forms of family pose a political challenge to traditional family and the societal norms and rules related to it (Weston,1991) by promoting non-traditional but possibly effective family structures in times when the traditional family is in crisis. Such structures are based on mutual commitments and negotiations that are driven by the need to make these relationships work. For Weeks *et al.* (2001) these friendship practices are specific to non-heterosexual people, following a friendship ethic that is built on moral and reciprocal values.

It would seem from the literature and empirical studies examining gay men's friendships, that gay men establish most of their close and supportive friendships among other gay men; they often develop friendships with heterosexual women, but they rarely form friendships with heterosexual men (Nardi, 1992a; Nardi & Sherrod, 1994; Rubin, 1985; Weinstock, 1998). Specifically, in Nardi's study (1992a) of gay men's friendships, 82% of the sample said that their best friend was a gay or a bisexual male, and fewer than 10% said their best friend was a straight female. This finding may be explained by Weeks et al.'s (2001) argument that gay people may experience a different agenda operating between them and heterosexual people, no matter how liberal the latter are. In addition, in Rubin's (1985) work, gay men talked about the negative responses they get from heterosexual people, a fact that leads them to socialise with other gay people. Nevertheless, some non-heterosexual participants in this study complained that, in an effort to maintain the gay identity that is mainly supported within the gay community, they ignored some other aspects of themselves. This illustrates the extent to which gay men's friends 'are not all together "freely" chosen, but are often dictated by sexuality and the desire to be around people who can be trusted and reflect a strong sense of themselves' (Weeks *et al.*,1996, p. 22). Similarly, Allan argues (1989) that friendships, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, are not only a matter of personal and free choice since social class, occupation, age, race, gender interests and general interests seem to influence the structure of people's friendships. This point is supported by K. Weston's (1991) research in

which friends listed as family did not seem to be randomly selected but were mainly other gay men or lesbians of the same gender, class, race and age cohort.

So far, it has been suggested that gay men's best and close friends are usually other gay men with whom they can share an understanding of their sexual identity in a society that often oppresses and marginalises people who prefer non-traditional, non-heterosexual relationships (Nardi, 1999). Despite the fact that one would expect the friendship pattern of lesbians and gay men to be quite similar, since they probably encounter similar problems stemming from their stigmatised sexual identity, such friendships rarely happen. As Weeks *et al.* (2001) report, 'while there is an intertwined history between the two groups, the stories of male and female non-heterosexuals are often distinctive legally, socially, culturally and emotionally' (p.64). Their study indicates that lesbians and gay men have strong perceptions of their differences because they inhabit different social worlds. It seems that the reasons that keep them apart are mainly political, since research has indicated that they equally value and enact similarly in their friendships (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994).

In contrast, other empirical evidence shows an increasing number of friendships developing between gay men and heterosexual women. Rubin (1985) argues that there is a natural alliance between gay men and heterosexual women; an alliance that brings comfort and companionship that neither find in the world of heterosexual men that devalues and marginalises both these groups. According to the philosopher Aristotle, equality is a prerequisite of friendship formation and maintenance. In this case, gay male and heterosexual female quasi-equal status appears to bring them together, enabling them to offer mutual support in developing a new and valued sense of self.

Apart from the political and self-affirmation aspects of the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women, the participants in Rubin's (1985) study seemed equally to enjoy their friendships, as these were based both on shared activities and intimacy. Heterosexual women said that gay men were intimate in similar ways to women and that their friendships with gay men enabled them to understand a different male view of the world. In turn, gay men talked of feeling respected in this form of friendship, in ways they did not feel respected by heterosexual men. Rubin concludes that these friendships across the gender line seemed to afford the greatest equality and the fewest tensions.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that an increase in friendships between gay men and heterosexual women has been noted during the last ten years. In Berger and Mallon's (1993) research on gay men's supportive networks, 3 out of the average 8.5 people who constituted these supportive networks were women. In Nardi's study (1999), 10% of gay men reported a heterosexual female as best friend. It should also be noted that the mean age of his sample was 40 years old, but such friendships appear to increase rapidly amongst younger participants (Nardi, 1999). These gay men and their heterosexual female friends were matched in age, educational level and current living arrangements. In general, Nardi's findings support the idea that younger gay men were more likely to have heterosexual female friends.

Weeks *et al.* (2001) have argued that detraditionalising forces are reshaping heterosexual life, bringing the heterosexual and non-heterosexual world closer together. This social change has also been reflected in the media, with television series based on friendships between gay men and heterosexual women being central to the plot of their stories and being widely accepted in western

societies ('Will and Grace', 'Sex and the City'). In addition, two more popular books addressing friendships between gay men and heterosexual women have been published recently (Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999; Tillmann-Healy, 2001). In Hopcke and Rafaty's (1999) book[1] based on interviews with a US sample, friendships between gay men and heterosexual women were very compatible in terms of equality, intimacy, acceptance and shared activities. The interviewees reported discussing everything with their friends, apart from their sexual life. They also presented their friendships as platonic without excluding the possibility of attraction and flirtation between them. Other issues discussed in this book were outsiders' perception of such friendship and the homophobic reactions of their social networks.

Tillmann-Healy's (2001) book is an ethnographic study, again with US sample. The researcher uses narrative ethnography in order to explore the friendship between herself, as a heterosexual woman, and gay men. Having spent three years within the gay community, she concludes 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 reported that even if her friendship with gay men was playful, active and stimulating, it lacked nurturance and emotional support. Moreover, she suggests that sexual attraction is possible between gay men and their heterosexual female friends. As she explains, she personally experienced the crossing of the line between friendship and a more explicit sexual relationship.

As we have seen, the above literature and studies mainly stem from the USA. Moreover, when friendship between gay men and heterosexual women is reported in the academic literature it is presented as a minor part of studies, mainly referring to gay men's supportive networks (apart from Tillmann-Healy, 2001). The study presented in this paper specifically examines close friendships between gay men and heterosexual women in a detailed, contextualised way. The participants' definitions and evaluations of their friendships are considered in the context of comparisons they make between this friendship and other forms of friendship they may have. In addition, the analysis of the participants' reflections on their social networks' perceptions of their friendships aims to examine the systemic dimension of friendships between gay men and heterosexual women. This qualitative examination of participants' accounts better enables us to understand this form of friendship by tackling it from various dimensions. The research does not begin from any specific theoretical framework, since this would be against the IPA methodology that I adopted (discussed below). During the analytic process, however, interdependence theory, systems theory and the concept of families of choice proved useful.

Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a method stemming from phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach focusing on the world as it is subjectively experienced

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[1] Hopcke and Rafaty's (1999) book does not constitute academic evidence; it is based on interviews whose extracts are quoted in order to support the authors' conclusions.

by individuals within their particular social, cultural and historical contexts. Phenomenology's interest in individuals' experiences of the world appeals to psychological research, as it enables the researcher to investigate the diversity and variability of human experience (Willig, 2001).

Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA) shares the aims of phenomenology in terms of aiming to capture individual experiences. IPA moves one step beyond phenomenology, however, in recognising the researcher within the research and analytic process. In this sense, the analysis is a product of the interactions between the participants and the researcher, and it is considered to be both phenomenological (participants' accounts) and interpretative (researcher's interpretations of participants' accounts). In order for analysts to unravel the meaning of participants' experiences, they need to interpret meaningfully how the participants make sense of the world. Such interpretations are based on the researcher's own conceptions, beliefs, expectations and experiences (Smith *et al.*, 1999). In this respect, IPA requires reflexivity from the researcher who is expected to explicitly present his or her own perspectives, thus illuminating the analysis (Willig, 2001).

IPA is undertaken with some fundamental assumptions regarding the individual and the world (for an extensive discussion see Willig, 2001: Chapter 4). Firstly, IPA adopts a realist approach to knowledge, considering people's narratives to be products of cognition. While IPA does not support a view that such narratives are accurate reflections of individuals' conceptions, analysis relies upon the assumption that meaningful interpretation of such conceptions can be achieved (Smith *et al.*, 1997). Secondly, IPA only recognises the representational validity of language overlooking the possibility of language constructing reality. Thirdly, experience is viewed as a product of cognition and perception. According to this assumption, there is no such thing as objective reality because experiences are perceived differently by different people. However, IPA accepts that subjectivity can be affected by social interactions between social actors (symbolic interactionism). Finally, IPA is influenced by hermeneutics, suggesting that one can gain understanding of the participants' experiences through the interpretations of the researcher.

According to Jonathan Smith (IPA seminar at the University of Surrey, 2002), IPA enables the researcher to establish connections of predominant themes within and across cases. In this sense, IPA is an idiographic approach, allowing the researcher to speak about the groups under investigation as well as the individuals comprising the group. Moreover, IPA permits the researcher to open a dialogue with the existing literature, an interrogation that aims at the illumination of the theories. At the same time, IPA is inductive, allowing the unanticipated to emerge. Smith believes that being inductive is a central feature of IPA.

IPA was initially adopted within the domain of health psychology (Flowers *et al.*, 1997; Osborn & Smith, 1998; Senior *et al.,* 2002; Smith, 1996) in order to analyse qualitative data reflecting participants' experiences. However, IPA has also been used in social and counselling psychology research (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999; Macran *et al.*, 1999; Touroni & Coyle, 2002; Turner & Coyle, 2000) because it allows researchers to explore participants' experiences, cognitions and accounts. The IPA approach is a particularly appropriate means of analysis for this research because it focuses on friendship, which has proven to be subjectively defined according to an individual's experiences (Hinde, 1997).

Participants

I aimed to recruit participants as dyads of gay men and heterosexual women who were close friends. Participants had to meet three criteria in order to be eligible to participate in the study: a) they had been friends for more than one year, in order to have substantive shared experiences to draw upon;
b) they should define their particular friendships as close. I did not provide them with a definition of closeness, as closeness is defined differently by different people (Hinde, 1997; Pahl, 2000); and
c) they should be both British. Sharing similar cultural backgrounds was regarded as facilitating some homogeneity in the sample.
I recruited the participants using the 'snowballing' technique starting from friends and colleagues. This access technique may have resulted in an overly homogeneous sample, but the objective was not to recruit a representative sample. Rather, the aim was to recruit a homogeneous sample that shared the experience of the particular friendship.

Recruiting participants as dyads proved unexpectedly difficult because the consent of both people involved in the friendship had to be sought. Even when both friends agreed to be interviewed, arranging a convenient time and place for an interview often seemed to pose a problem because the participation of both interviewees had to be ensured. I believed that recruiting participants as dyads who had formed a specific friendship would enable them to concentrate on experiences and feelings stemming from their specific friendships. This avoided generalisations throughout the interview process. Moreover, by interviewing both people who were party to the friendship, I overcome the individualistic approach that characterises previous research on friendship. As Werking (1997) notes, when researchers investigate friendship, they often rely just on reports of one party in order to draw their conclusions.

Ultimately, eight dyads of friends were interviewed. The interviews took place either in my or participants' homes. None of the participants were present when their friends were being interviewed.

Given the topic of interest, all eight of the male participants identified as gay men. Out of these, five stated that they were open about their sexuality, while three said that they were partially open. All eight female participants identified as heterosexual women. All the participants described themselves as white and British. Participants' mean age was 28.5 years (range 21-42; SD 6.9) and the mean duration of their current friendships with each other was five years (range 1.16-15; SD 5).. Four participants were partnered and 16 participants were single at the time of the interview, but all participants had been partnered at some stage in their lives. None of them had any children. The demographic details of this study are compatible with Nardi's (1999) research conclusions suggesting that gay men and their heterosexual female friends were matched in age, educational level and current living arrangements. In general, Nardi's (1999) findings supported the idea that younger gay men were more likely to have heterosexual female friends. This notion is also reflected in the age of this study's sample.

Fifteen participants described their friendships as close, but one woman described her friendship as borderline between casual and close but more than casual. The following table gives some details about the eight dyads of friends:

NAME	AGE	EDUCATION	MARITAL STATUS	DURATION OF FRIENDSHIP
1. MARTIN - ANNE	23 21	A-LEVELS A-LEVELS	SINGLE SINGLE	14 MONTHS
2. ANDREW - LAURA	24 23	A-LEVELS DEGREE	PARTNERED SINGLE	18 MONTHS
3. ANTHONY - Joanne	37 37	A-LEVELS DEGREE	PARTNERED PARTNERED	10 YEARS
4. JAMES - SYLVIA	24 30	A-LEVELS O-LEVELS	SINGLE SINGLE	3 YEARS
5. HUGH - HELEN	42 39	A-LEVELS PH.D.	PARTNERED SINGLE	15 MONTHS
6. STEVE - SABRINA	23 23	DEGREE DEGREE	SINGLE SINGLE	5.5 YEARS
7. MIKE - LUCY	31 29	O-LEVELS DEGREE	SINGLE SINGLE	2.5 YEARS
8.THOMAS - MIRANDA	26 26	A-LEVELS A-LEVELS	SINGLE SINGLE	15 YEARS

Interview Schedule

The sixteen participants were each interviewed face-to-face about their close friendships with the other half of the dyad. I conducted semi-structured interviews as they enable the researcher to make interventions, asking the participants either to clarify or to expand on areas of interest (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Moreover, in IPA studies the researcher aims to enable participants to share their personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation. For this reason semi structured interviews are regarded to be the most appropriate form of data collection for IPA studies (Smith *et al.,* 1999). Before the actual interviews, participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and their consent was sought for the interview to be audio-recorded.

The interview schedule started with demographic questions, which were followed by questions regarding the initiation, maintenance and qualities of their friendships. Participants were then asked questions about the roles of their friends and families in their lives and the feelings they had towards them. The schedule continued with questions regarding the perceptions of others in their social networks about this friendship. Those participants who were single at the time of the interview were asked to reflect upon their previous partners' conceptions of this friendship, Finally, the participants were asked to compare friendships between gay men and heterosexual women with other forms of friendship they might have (see appendix A for interview schedule).

The interview schedule was based on a review of the concerns in relevant literature, and my experiences. At that time I was a twenty six year old heterosexual woman involved in friendships

with gay men. I also drew on my supervisors' experiences with whom I discussed the rationale for the interview content[2].

The first interview was conducted as a pilot interview and the participant was asked to give feedback on the questions, the content and the ethical aspects of the interview. As the pilot did not raise any need for changes in the interview schedule, the data gathered in this first interview was used in the analysis. I did, though, continue to ask all participants to give feedback on their interview experience.

The interviews lasted about one hour on average. All were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analytic Strategy

As a starting point for the analysis, I read each transcript thoroughly a number of times in order to become as familiar as possible with the participants' accounts. Each reading resulted in notes about key phrases, preliminary interpretations and any connections or contradictions within each participant's accounts being made in the left hand margin. On the right hand margin, I noted emergent themes. These themes were associated with key words that captured the essential meaning of some passages. Then, I used a separate sheet to list all the emergent themes so that I could identify any connections or contradictions between them. Sometimes, emergent themes were clustered together creating a superordinate theme. Categorising emergent themes together, however, required me to check the source material again in order to make sure that the superordinate themes were consistent with the participants' accounts (phenomenology). By following this process, a table of master themes was produced for each transcript. The master themes of each transcript then were compared to master themes of other transcripts so that I could identify connections or contradictions. This process produced the final superordinate themes of the study, whose consistency with the source material was checked again. Finally, I ordered the themes so that they produced a coherent narrative account. Themes that did not fit well into the structure of a logic narrative or were not well supported by the data, were dropped.

The analytic process described above, appears to be similar to the process adopted by researchers using grounded theory. As Willig (2001) explains, there is one basic difference between grounded theory and IPA. Grounded theory enables the researcher to study social processes whilst IPA allows the researcher to gain an insider's view into individual participants' making sense of the world. In this sense, grounded theory is more appropriate for addressing sociological research, while IPA is a specifically useful research method within the domain of psychology.

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[2] Dr Adrian Coyle, Senior Lecturer and Co-Course Director at the Department of Psychology at University of Surrey and Dr Xenia Chryssochoou, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences.

Criteria of Evaluation and Reflexivity

Researchers adopting the IPA approach recognise that their analysis is characterised by subjectivity, as their main task is to offer their own interpretations of participants' accounts. In this study, my interpretations of participants' accounts may have been influenced by my own experiences as a heterosexual woman who is also involved in friendships with gay men. An IPA approach, though, sees the researcher's own assumptions and explanations as a necessary precondition for making sense of participants' thoughts and feelings (Willig, 2001). Another consideration is that participants' accounts may have been influenced by my presence as part of the interview process, since they were informed that I was a heterosexual woman who had friendships with gay men, and that these had motivated me to examine these particular relationships. This could be one of the reasons why most gay male participants presented their female friends positively. The same factor may have influenced the heterosexual female participants as they did not report any negative feelings towards gay men or heterosexual women in any respect. Nevertheless, some gay men described the drawbacks and problems regarding their friendships with other gay men in a way they may well not have done if they were interviewed by a gay man. Overall, as I have said, the conclusions of this study are a product of the interaction between the participants and the specific researcher. The research findings, therefore, should be considered as tentative and limited to the specific group of people involved in this study (i.e. participants and researcher).

Most researchers who adopt qualitative methodologies believe that human knowledge and experience of the world cannot comply with an objective reality, as reality is shaped by one's own subjective experiences and accounts (Yardley, 2000). This perspective uses different criteria for the evaluation of qualitative studies, as compared with the criteria evaluating quantitative studies (i.e. replicability, reliability, large samples etc.). Nonetheless, in terms of subjectivity, my interpretations of the participants' accounts were examined by and discussed with my supervisors, two social psychologists, who checked that themes/subthemes and interpretations were grounded in the data (see Elliot *et al.*, 1999 on credibility check). I hoped that, by virtue of their different speaking positions they would be able to identify any overly idiosyncratic interpretations. One was a heterosexual woman in her thirties who is an experienced social psychologist and is familiar with some aspects of the gay world. The other was a gay man, also in his thirties and also an experienced social psychologist. These people's feedback sometimes resulted in my modifying my analysis, which was then based on three different bodies of experience. The extracts from the transcripts given in the analysis section below also allow readers to assess the consistency between the data and my interpretation (Elliot *et al.*, 1999). In these quotations, empty brackets indicate where material has been omitted; material in square brackets is for the purpose of clarification, added by me; and ellipsis points (three dots) indicate a pause in the interviewee's speech. The names of the participants, the people they refer to and location names have been changed to preserve confidentiality and anonymity.

Analysis

Analysis of the data in the interviews revealed a variety of themes, the predominant five of which will be presented in this paper. These themes and their subthemes sometimes overlap, as I did not

wish to impose an artificial distinctiveness upon what was a complex data set with constantly overlapping and interrelated themes, concerns and motifs. The themes presented in this paper are:

- Defining the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women.
- Friends as family.
- Valued characteristics of the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women.
- Comparing this friendship with other forms of friendship.
- Participants' understanding of their social network's perception of the friendship between them.

The first theme provides us with the scene of the friendship, while the following themes and subthemes offer new or important insights in contextualising participants' accounts on their friendships.

1) DEFINING THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN GAY MEN AND HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN

Different forms of relationships are characterised differently by the people involved in them. Previous research on relationships has followed a heterosexual context, assuming that the findings from studies on heterosexual relationships also apply to non-heterosexual relationships (Kitzinger & Coyle, 1995). This first theme presents how the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women was perceived and defined by the participants themselves.

A close friendship: The participants defined 'closeness' according to their own evaluation of their friendship. Past research has shown that people's perception of the closeness of a relationship may differ significantly, suggesting that closeness may mean something different in relationships of different sorts (Hinde,1997). Both gay men and heterosexual women in the sample seemed to value and define their friendship similarly. Participants' narratives indicated that their friendship was defined as close in terms of openness, self-disclosure, trust, support, mutuality, availability, understanding and feeling comfortable with each other. Some of these qualities can be identified in the following accounts:

> *Um, [Helen is a close friend] because she was there for me when I was going through a very difficult time, and I felt that I could speak to her, and she' d help me   through some of my thought processes and stuff like that, to help me understand the way I was feeling about certain sort of things, and that she'd give me an unbiased opinion. And I just felt able that I could phone her and really open up to her.* (Hugh)

> *I think he is a bloody good friend, he's always there for me, and I think he can always see things from my point [ ] He's really understanding.* (Sylvia)

Apart from the above qualities, 'quantitative' aspects such as frequency of contacts, proximity of the participants' residences and duration of friendship were encountered as determinants of a close friendship. For example:

> *Um, we see each other a lot of the time, speak to each other almost every day.* (Andrew)

Yes, we lived together for two years at university and the other year we spent a year   in halls together erm, we got close from that. (Sabrina)

A different friendship: The friendship between the gay male and heterosexual female participants was characterised by some qualities that could be observed in other forms of friendship (between gay men or between heterosexual women). However, they portrayed their friendships as more intense, supportive and trustworthy than other forms of friendship they may have had. For example Anne reported it as a different friendship:

> *I do have trust with my heterosexual friends, but Martin, um, I'd give my life to, I'd trust him with my whole life and maybe not other friends.. Martin is... I've only known him a year. Martin is very kind, very, he's got a heart of gold, he's always been there for me and I have for him, but my other friends I've known for years and years, haven't stuck with me at all, not through the bad times, but Martin has. And I think that's why, he's not like a friend I've ever had before. He's very, it's a very different friendship.*

When Anne was asked if she attached the same qualities to her friendships with other gay men, she replied positively, thus showing that not only her friendship with Martin but all her close friendships with gay men were different. Similarly, when male participants were asked to draw similarities between their friendships with heterosexual women and other forms of friendship they had, their reaction was often quite a strong assertion that their friendship with heterosexual women was a different sort of friendship. For example, when Mike was asked if his friendship with Lucy was any similar to his friendships with other gay men, he replied:

> *Erm, how is it similar? I think it is different because I would rather talk to Lucy and ask her advice on really very-very personal things that I wouldn't actually ask gay men for.*

The way in which friendship between gay men and heterosexual women in this study is different will be discussed later in a more detailed way under the theme 'comparison of this friendship with other forms of friendships'.

A complete friendship: Literature suggests that friendship between heterosexual men could be defined as instrumental, while friendship between heterosexual women could be defined as expressive and intimate (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Parker & de Vries, 1993; Sapadin, 1988; Wright, 1982). The gay men and heterosexual women interviewed for this study, however, appeared equally to enjoy intimacy and instrumental activities - thus posing a friendship in which they could express all aspects of self. Andrew gave an example of how he and Laura spend their time together:

> *Um, well it could be anything, it could be just coming round, going round to each other's houses and seeing each other, sort of just us two or with a group of friends, see if there's anything good on the television. Or we can, you know, go to the cinema, go to a theme park, you know, like Thorpe Park or something, anything. We went on holiday together [ ] we can do whatever we want or then have another night when we just chat-chat-chat [ ] I guess because we just get on so well that we can talk about anything with each other really, anything, whatever, whatever we feel like talking about really [work, relationships, TV, personal problems etc.].*

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Andrew's narrative is not consistent with sociological views that suggest that modernity has forced specialised roles upon individuals, resulting in them having difficulty in relating to other individuals in a holistic way, thus developing different friendships for different occasions (Simmel in Pahl, 2000; p.36)

A friendship for sad and happy times: The participants interviewed reported having both fun and supportive friendships. From going for drinks at the pub to facing death, relationship break up and other serious problems, the gay men and heterosexual women in this study showed that they were highly supportive of each other. Cheering their friend up, giving a piece of advice or offering emotional support; both heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants seemed to be supportive of their friends during difficult phases and critical moments in their lives:

> *We share our sad moments with each other. My grandparents recently died and she was there for me, and when she's upset...* [tails off] (Martin)

> *It was very hard [my coming out] for them [my parents] to deal with, so Sabrina was always, Sabrina was good at helping me through those times. So we help each other through bad times as well. So that's a good issue, we're always there to help each other that way.* (James)

A friendship free from pressure: Many participants said that they felt comfortable and relaxed in this form of friendship. They reported no pressure in terms of acting in a specific way or contacting each other at certain times because one had to. They presented a friendship where 'must do's' were limited, thus giving participants a chance to be genuine and to avoid pretence and fake excuses:

> *If I phone her seven days a week, it's great, if I phone her once in two weeks it still doesn't matter.* (Anthony)

The lack of pretence appeared to be specifically valuable for Andrew who could openly express most aspects of his identity without fears of being judged:

> *This friendship is just generally brilliant, it's a really good friendship, and...we can be so relaxed with each other and be who we want to be, we don't have to put on any pretence at all [ ]. A genuine general feeling of being relaxed with her and being who I am with her.*

One friendship element frequently mentioned by participants was the comfortable silence that could exist in their friendships. This element was also used to describe how close their friendships were:

> *[A close friend is] somebody who you can go to with any problems, um, somebody who you speak to on the phone like even if you just ring them up and you really don't have much to say to one another, somebody who you just really not have to speak, if you got a comfortable silence I think you've genuinely found a new friend.* (Laura)

Both the gay men and the heterosexual women who participated in the study reported that their friendships were free from any underlying sexual agenda. They felt that they could be more open, honest and intimate with their friends since they were not worried about offending them or hurting their feelings. The lack of sexual tense was highly valued, especially by the female participants:

> *With Keith [her heterosexual friend] there was always an underlying agenda, so that I always felt that even though we were close friends he wanted more from the relationship [ ] but I didn't want that so I was always frightened of upsetting him or offending him, whereas with Anthony, that wouldn't happen anyway because that was never there, it was just the friendship.* (Joanne)

> *I think there's an element of comfort and non-threateningness in being friends with him [her gay friend, Hugh] because there's no underlying sexual tension at all.* (Helen)

As noted earlier, previous research on cross-sex friendships between heterosexual people (Reid & Fine, 1992; Rubin, 1985) or on friendships between gay men (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994; Nardi, 1999) has shown that the people involved in the friendship may feel sexual attraction or sexual tension. Similarly, the latest more popular literature on friendship between gay men and heterosexual women reports that there could be attraction and flirtation between these two (Hopcke & Rafaty, 1999; Tillman-Healy, 2001). However, the data in this study do not provide evidence for such a conclusion:

> *I know that friendship will be there, I think it will always be very-very truthful, perhaps a lot more truthful than if it's heterosexual on heterosexual or gay on gay. I think because I can tell her things and because she can be totally honest with me, because she is not affected by me, and she knows that I don't fancy her and I know that she doesn't fancy me.* (Anthony)

A friendship that is defined with kinship terms: Most participants defined their friendship using family terms or by attaching the same qualities to both friends and family. Friends were characterised as sisters, brothers, surrogate family, surrogate mum, surrogate sister, mum, couple without the sex, siblings. An extensive discussion follows in the next theme, which deals with friends as family.

2) FRIENDS AS FAMILY

Many participants used kinship terminology in order to describe their friendships' functions, importance and meaning. Some gay men used the terms surrogate or extended family when they were talking about their friendship networks, without explicitly being asked if they could classify their friends as family (see Appendix A). This lends support to previous research (Nardi, 1999; Weeks *et al.,* 2001; Weston, 1991) that claims that gay men could consider friends as a 'chosen family'. However, the data collected for this study from the gay men shows that by using the term family for both family of origin and family of choice, the participants do not necessarily perceive them to be similar or equal. Kinship terminology was also adopted to a lesser extent by heterosexual women. However, the findings indicate that the roles of friends as family are perceived differently between the gay male and heterosexual female participants.

First, the subthemes that stemmed from the interviews with gay men will be discussed, followed by the differences noticed in the interviews with heterosexual women.

<u>Gay men</u>

Functions of 'families of choice': Some participants reported having 'a surrogate' or 'an extended family' as well as their family of origin. The use of the aforementioned terms did not seem to be adopted as a metaphor in order for them to stress how valuable their friendships were. Neither did they try to present their 'chosen families' as substitutes for their families of origin. This finding is consistent with previous research which supports the idea that 'families of choice' are not replacements for the traditional family (Weston, 1991). The data for this study suggest that friends could constitute a family that serves different functions from the traditional family. The participants created 'families of choice' based on two criteria: fun and/or support.

1) A fun family
Some gay male participants who were open about their sexuality agreed that they had a supportive family of origin which would sometimes be the first line of support for them. When they were asked what family meant to them, however, they would report having two families. This undermines the prevalent content of the 'families of choice' thesis, which suggests that friends serve as replacements for the loss of support from their families of origin. Martin's 'bubble' (see below) or extended family was constituted by heterosexual and non-heterosexual people who would mainly group together in order to have some fun. This is how Martin defined both his families:

> *Can I say I've got two families? I've got my mother, my father, my close, close family, what do they mean to me? It means love, it means hate, good times, bad times, all rolled into one word: family. And then I've got my sisters [other gay men], Anne, and all my gay friends that come and stay with me in my flat as my other little bubble family where we have, where we create a world of our own. And we sit inside in this bubble family [ ] One's for fun, one's for love. Love between the both but um, I've got my fun little family and my serious family. Family back home for family lunches, marriages, funerals. Pulls together when you need help, whatever you need to do. And then I've got my family up in [ ] where it's fun, lots of dancing, very serious sometimes but not to the point of marriages.*

Martin feels that he has two families that serve two different functions. Later in his interview, he stated that his family of origin had always been his 'backbone'. However, his 'bubble' family consisted of people with similar interests who seem to be bonded by the factor of fun. Martin continued though, saying that he included his female heterosexual friend in both families, lending support to and overlapping with what was argued above concerning a friendship which is complete, both fun and supportive.

2) A supportive family
Some participants reported having their families' support on issues relating to their sexual identity. There were, however, interviewees whose families were disapproving of their sexuality. For those

gay men, 'friends as family' served a supportive role in such major life events as their 'coming out'. James, who characterised his friend Sylvia as a 'surrogate' sister, explained:

> *They [his parents] found out [that he was gay] about three years ago, and ... at first they didn't talk to me for three months … and they didn't want me to go and visit them for six months, so it was very hard for us ... it was very hard on me [ ] so it was very hard for them to deal with, so Sylvia was always, Sylvia was good at helping me through those times [ ] she's always helped. [ ] she's been a good rock to me in certain circumstances like when I came out to my family, um, she was there, she sort of spent time with me, made sure that I was all right because [ ] I wasn' t eating, I was worried, I was still in shock.*

Apart from the 'fun' and 'supportive' functions, 'friends as family' were a relational phenomenon for some of the participants, depending on how far away their parents lived. Ray Pahl (2000) has suggested that 'friends may be taking over various social tasks, duties and functions from family and kin, simply out of practical necessity' (p.8). This view was supported by some participants:

> *She is like my surrogate mum [not Sylvia but another close heterosexual female friend], my real mum's sort of in [she lives far]. I don't see them much, so she does stand in like my surrogate mum.* (James)

> *I would say that my close group of friends I look upon as my extended family, I suppose because my family don't live in this area.* (Hugh)

She is like a sister but ..: Behind the term 'family' there is a social representation according to which family members are people tied through blood or marriage relations, at least this is the cultural norm in our societies. While some participants managed to transcend this norm and anchor a new meaning and structure to the term 'family', others found it hard to express verbally the link between family members and friends, showing ambivalence about their friends' status as quasi-family members. Participants would attach similar qualities to both their friendships and families, but they would only consider their family of origin as family. For example:

> *I don't have any sisters, I've got [ ] brothers and I'd look upon Joanne, I don't know, I don't look upon her as being a sister or any form of my family, I look upon her as being a great friend, but I'd treat her as well as I would treat a sister if I did have a sister [ ] I would still say that my family is my real family, I wouldn't say that these pockets of friends are my family, no.* (Anthony)

Both Anthony's relationships with his friend Joanne and with his family were characterised by the qualities of availability, honesty, support and fun throughout the whole interview. However, he was ambivalent about the use of term 'sister'. Some of the participants seemed hesitant to use kinship terminology when they were referring to their friends. Even if they thought of friends as equally important and valuable, they would still make the verbal distinction that friends are friends and family is family.

Friends as family or family as friends? Weinstock (1998) notes 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. Most participants reported valuing both friends and family as equally important, rating family of origin and friends similarly.

In this study, some participants seemed to adopt kinship terminology in order to show the intensity and the importance of their friendships. However, Thomas conveyed the importance of the successful relationship with his family by comparing it with a good friendship. So far, I have discussed participants' accounts that present 'friends as family' as the norm. For Thomas though, a 'family as friendship' is what he needed in order to have a good relationship with his foster parents:

> *I feel that my foster parents are like good friends that I can talk to about most things [] I would compare her [Miranda]..., my relationship [with Miranda] is closer to the relationship with my foster parents cause I open up to them and tell them similar things as well, and they know about my sex life and my personal life and drugs, anything like that, I can just talk to them about anything.*

Thomas's overly open relationship (talking about sex and relationships) with his foster parents was the only one reported. The majority of the participants talked about the lack of openness in their relationships with their families. It is worth mentioning that even the interviewees who were open about their sexuality and whose families were accepting, could not discuss some aspects of their personal life with their families of origin. This realisation indicates that gay men's vertical-family relationships may be less intimate than those of heterosexual people. Therefore, horizontal and egalitarian friendships may be of special importance for gay men as these are required to fulfil the need for intimacy that is not met by their family. As Andrew said:

> *I think a lot of female friends fill that role in talking to them about things, because my mum's not there* [she is dead], *although having said that if she was here I probably wouldn't be able to talk to her about a lot of things, my relationship with my mum wasn't like that, although I was very close to her, there were things I couldn't talk about with her. So, probably my female friends like Laura are important to me as - and I get support from them too.*

Within gay male participants' accounts, female heterosexual friends seem to enable them to develop intimate and supportive friendships by embracing those 'forbidden' aspects of their gay friends' self that are 'taboo to talk about', as Hugh remarked earlier. Such friendships were presented as offering gay male participants great support in their 'coming out', relationships and break ups. I will analyse this issue in more detail under the theme 'valued characteristics of this friendship' as it overlaps with the subthemes of 'openness' and 'social support'.

Heterosexual women

Different use of kinship terminology for gay men and heterosexual women:
The heterosexual women participating in this study appeared to value highly their friendship with gay men. By using kinship terminology they attempted to describe the important roles fulfilled by their gay friends and the strong feelings they had for these men. This is illustrated in Laura's reply when I asked her to compare the feelings she had for Andrew with the feelings she had for a family member:

Um, God ... well I'd say that I love him in a sort of brotherly or sisterly way, I care what happens to him, share an interest in his life, what happens to him ... be there to give advice at any stage it's needed, which is exactly what I do for my brother.

In this study, gay men were generally characterised as brothers and less frequently as fathers or partners. Heterosexual women never used the term 'sister' that is sometimes used between gay men.

While gay men referred to their friends as family, the terms 'surrogate' or 'extended family' were not used at all by the female participants. Indeed, they did not mention any surrogate family networks at all. It could be concluded that, although the female participants have strong feelings for their gay friends, they probably only view them as very good friends. They may care for them as they would care for a family member, but this does not mean that these women create what they would recognise as 'families of choice'. Of course, this observation does not undermine their friendships with gay men but it does confirm that gay men may need to create chosen families in order to express some aspects of self related to their sexual identity. Such aspects may not be shared with their traditional families of origin.

Alternatively, it could be proposed that the limited use of the 'families of choice' discourse suggests that the societal norm regarding the prevalence of traditional family may be still strong – despite the sociological literature supporting the demise of nuclear family - at least at a discursive level.

3) VALUED CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN GAY MEN AND HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN

Within the narratives of the gay male and heterosexual female participants in this study, I identified some characteristics that make this form of friendship important and valuable for the people involved in it. Both the gay men and heterosexual women presented 'openness', 'social support', 'trust' and 'having fun' as valuable characteristics of their friendship. In addition, 'feeling more rounded' (see below) was highly valued by some gay male participants. The female participants also talked about 'being valued for their personality and not their sexuality' and the role of 'gay male friends as substitutes for heterosexual partners'.

<u>Gay men and heterosexual women</u>

Openness: The majority of participants (gay men and heterosexual women) reported having very open and intimate conversations with their friends. Openness appeared to be a central characteristic of their friendships, as participants appeared to share most aspects of their personal (work, family, illness) and intimate (relationships) lives as well as their thoughts and feelings with their friends. When Anthony was asked to talk about the conversations he had with Joanne, he replied:

I often ask her about her health [ ] I like her husband very much, we talk about him and how that's going. We talk about problems we have [ ] and she'll often talk to me about the problems that I've had [ ]. Um, Joanne was the very first person that I told to that there was something wrong with me and Dave [his ex-boyfriend], so I think for me to open up like

that, because I don't find it that very easy to open up, just spill the beans, with-with Joanne I thought I could sit down, I could tell her everything [ ].

The 'openness' reported, seems to be supported by the lack of sexual tensions between gay men and female heterosexual interviewees. As participants explained:

You can say things to Mike [her gay friend] that you could not say to a straight guy without thinking 'he might think I'm coming on to him', [ ] you can really open up to him. (Lucy)

[ ] I'm perhaps able to be more open myself with him because there's no underlying sexual tension at all. (Helen)

The sex life of participants was the least discussed subject between them. Some gay male interviewees justified this in terms of personal choice to keep their sexual life private. For example, Steve explained why he wouldn't speak to Sabrina about his sex life:

But that's not because [Steve is gay], it is more because of me and I think it is a private thing rather than I don't want to talk about it.

Some gay male participants reported not feeling comfortable discussing their sex life with their heterosexual female friends. It was sometimes implied that it was due to their gay sexuality. As Andrew said:

With Laura - we discuss anything. Thinking about it, I think we've probably never discussed the nitty-gritty of sex, probably just more in a jokey fashion, we've never gone into it in an in-depth way [ ]. I'm not really sure. I don't know - whether maybe we'd be embarrassed to speak about it, not feel comfortable [ ]. Perhaps we don't feel that we would feel right talking to each other in that depth about sex and stuff.

In addition, some heterosexual female participants reported not feeling comfortable discussing their gay friends' sex-life. When Sylvia was asked if she and James discussed their sex-lives, she responded positively. However, she was not interested in hearing the graphic details of her gay friend's sexual activities:

Yeah, but, at the end of the day, him talking about, you know [his sex-life] ... he doesn't really get into what they get up to, cause to me it's like - I've got no problem with you being gay but what you get up to I'd rather not know.

Trust: The openness that characterises the friendships of the participants seems especially supported by the trust developed in this form of friendship. Despite the fact that both the gay men and heterosexual women interviewed talked about their trusting friendships, the gay interviewees expressed the centrality of trust, as a precious and sometimes exclusive characteristic of this form of friendship more often than their female friends did.

Gay male participants stressed the importance of trust with their female friends by comparing it with the lack of trust they experienced in their friendships with other gay men. They explained this

by reporting their gay friends' tendencies to gossip and be sarcastic about one's intimate life. As Anthony said:

> *I wouldn't be able to speak to them [gay men friends] intimately, because I know what I would say to them would go to other people or they would laugh or they would bitch about it [].The main difference I think is that I can totally-totally trust Joanne.*

Some gay men interviewed, said that they believe their heterosexual female friends provided them with honest and unbiased opinion and advice. In contrast, they reported doubting their gay male friends' motives and honesty in issues that involved their romantic life. As Martin explained:

> *If I liked somebody and I had advice from my gay friends, saying to me 'no, I don't like him', I'd think about it and think - well, why not - does he want him for himself? And I've had boyfriends taken off me in the past by a best friend, and that's why I'd never trust them, never. [Anne, his heterosexual friend] she wouldn't step on my toes because she's heterosexual and very honest.*

Social support: The qualities of openness and trust that characterise the participants' friendships enable the formation of supportive relationship between them. Social support appeared to be very frequently presented and highly valued by both gay men and female heterosexual participants. Mutuality of support was portrayed by most participants who talked about being there for each other at difficult times (family, work, financial and relationship problems) or milestone events (i.e. gay men's coming out). Support would either take the form of emotional support (companionship and sympathy) or advice. For Steve, Lucy was the first person to 'come out' to. By using the metaphor 'comfort blanket', he showed the emotional support she provided:

> *And [ ] I told her first before I told anyone else [that he was gay]. [ ] And it was nice to have a friendly face and a friendly voice saying 'people aren't going to judge you and our friends are not going to feel differently [ ]'. It is like a comfort blanket, I knew what she was going to say anyway, but it is just nice to hear her say it.*

For Anne, it was the advice Martin provides:

> *Martin gives me good advice, if I've got a problem he'll, he'll advise me on what to do [ ]. He does give very good advice, he's very strong headed really. You know, he knows what he's doing.*

The mutuality of support expressed by participants contradicts Tillmann-Healy's (2001) recent findings which showed that heterosexual women do not receive as much emotional support from their gay male friends as they would receive from their female friends.

Having fun: Apart from developing supportive friendships, all participants talked about the fun aspect of this form of friendship, thus forming the complete friendship that was discussed in the first theme. Both gay male and heterosexual female participants reported enjoying similar interests and having a good time in each others' company. Most of them described the fun aspect of their friendships in relation to going out for dinner and drinks, having parties, socialising in a big group of

people, dancing, going to the theatre and concerts etc. Some participants also talked about enjoying themselves to the degree that they would act 'silly' or like children:

> *We do stupid things, like when we were in Corfu, everyone was sitting there looking beautiful - we ran into the sea and I took my bikini top off and he came out of the sea, me with nothing on and him in the bikini top. So, silly things like that and throwing sand at each other and just being silly.* (Joanne)

Gay men

Feeling more rounded: Some gay male interviewees, talked about their need to socialise with heterosexual people so that they do not cut themselves off the non-gay world. As Nardi (1992b) has argued, non-heterosexual friendships rely upon the idea of 'being oneself' in a cultural context that does not approve of the non-heterosexual identity. The fact that the female participants in this study conform to the norm of heterosexuality and are also accepting of gay, non-traditional identities may be particularly important to gay men. The acceptance of gay men by heterosexual members of our society may enhance their self-esteem and enable them to develop a positive and proud self-identity. Galupo and St John (2001) similarly argue that 'understanding that acceptance is possible' was one of the main advantages of cross-sexual orientation friendships in their study.

When Hugh was asked why a gay man would chose to have a heterosexual female friend, he replied:

> *I guess to make them [gay men] a bit more rounded, I think. I think for me, living an exclusively gay life, just gay friends, going out to gay bars, [having heterosexual friends] it's more of a natural way of living your life, because you haven't cut yourself off from certain elements of the society. [ ]And the qualities you get from that sort of friendship [with heterosexual women], I think for me, just makes you feel more normal-normal!*

Hugh's account is consistent with Tillman and Healy's (2001) evidence that heterosexual females could be a bridge between the gay and heterosexual world.

For Steve, variety was important as he needed to mix with people of different sexuality to his as well as with gay men:

> *[ ] If a gay guy's just got gay friends and gay male friends, it must be a bit boring. What else would you talk about? Where it is nice to have someone who is, you know ... different.*

Heterosexual women

Being valued for their personality and not their sexuality: As was discussed under the first theme, participants presented their friendships as free from any sexual pressures. None of the participants reported being sexually attracted to their friends. Neither did they believe their friends to be sexually attracted to them. For some female participants this was very important, as they felt valued and appreciated by their male friends for their personality and not their sexuality. As Helen explained:

I think the other important thing to say about that [the lack of an underlying sexual agenda] is that I think it's important that I know Hugh values that [ ]. He values me for things he likes about my personality, not because he might fancy me or want to do anything else with me, so that, that feels good and important.

Gay male friends as substitutes for heterosexual partners: For some heterosexual female participants, having a gay man as a friend may fulfil similar emotional needs as heterosexual partners, without the stresses of an intimate relationship. They argued, that their gay friends were still men and they could fulfil a woman's demands for security and affection without the sexual involvement and dependency that characterise intimate relationships. Their descriptions of their friendships with gay men were in line with Gidden's (1992) concept of the 'pure relationship'. Gay male participants appeared to be substitutes for male romantic partners, as the latter were unable to provide some female participants with intimate, close and continuing emotional ties. As Joanne described, her gay male friends were an alternative to an unacceptable heterosexual male presence. Her gay male friends appeared to fulfil those aspects of intimacy that most heterosexual men could not provide for her:

[ ] they are so caring and look after you and protective, Anthony's extremely protective over me, because of that, you can feel that role for you is already being fulfilled, this man loves you, looks after you, and is protective towards you, but is your best mate. [ ] you don't have a need to go out to meet these one night stands late in the pub who aren't sensitive, who just get the beer down them and just want a quick shag, basically. So, I think having my gay friends, I've always felt independent but I've also got that security there as well.

To conclude the examination of this theme, all the above characteristics of this form of friendship could be viewed as the rewards provided by such a friendship. When participants were asked if they would like to change anything in their friendships, they all replied that they were very happy, although some of them added that they would like to see more of their friends. It can thus be concluded that participants were very satisfied with this form of friendship.

According to interdependence theory (Kelley and Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), the participants may be satisfied with their friendships for two reasons:
a)   because the rewards (support, trust, fun etc.) outweigh any possible costs; and
b)   because this friendship seems to offer them more rewards and less costs compared with other forms of friendship they may have.
The next theme refers to the participants' comparisons of the friendship under examination with other forms of friendship (i.e. between gay men, between gay and heterosexual men, between women and heterosexual men, and finally between heterosexual women).

4) COMPARING THIS FRIENDSHIP TO OTHER FORMS OF FRIENDSHIP

Every relationship is embedded in a network of other relationships. The friendship between gay men and heterosexual women is constantly evaluated by the participants, as they compare its outcomes to the outcomes provided by other forms of friendship in their social network (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Most participants drew similarities between this friendship

and other forms of friendship they had. However, they referred to certain qualities that would only define the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women, showing that this friendship is also different and special for the participants.

First the comparisons made by the gay male participants will be presented, followed by the comparisons made by the heterosexual female participants.

<u>Gay men</u>

Comparing this friendship to friendships with gay male friends: The gay male participants positioned their friendship with gay men closer to their friendships with heterosexual women than heterosexual men. However, they also portrayed some main differences between their friendships either with gay men or heterosexual women.

Under the theme 'valued characteristics of this friendship', Anthony's and Martin's accounts in relation to lack of trust in gay men's friendships were presented. Most gay male participants expressed a similar viewpoint on this matter, arguing that their friendships with other gay men cannot be as supportive and open as the ones with their heterosexual female friends, because of lack of trust and honesty. Moreover, some participants talked about pretence, sarcasm and 'bitchiness' in the gay world and they described their friendships with other gay men as affected by these characteristics. For example:

> *I don't have that many close friends that are gay guys. [ ] There is a lot of pretence sometimes in the gay world, I find that people try to be something that they are not []. So ... you know, I do find it, I find it easier to speak to girls in general really, about anything.* (Andrew)

> *I think I would warm to a woman because I think they would listen and respect more whereas a gay man would maybe laugh it off [ ].* (James)

> *What's different [between his friendship with Anne and his gay friends] ... less bitchy. Gay guys, I am very bitchy, can be very bitchy.* (Martin)

Moreover, arising from the aforementioned characteristics and drawing from past experiences, the gay male participants viewed their friendships with other gay men as a potential threat to their relationships. This is what Mike advised other gay men:

> *[It is good to have a heterosexual female friend] because they won't go chasing after your boyfriend.*

In addition, some gay men participants talked about having only skin deep conversations with other gay men, revolving around sex and men; thus friendships with other gay men were sometimes characterised as 'shallow' and 'superficial'. In contrast, their friendships with heterosexual women were characterised as 'deep' and 'meaningful':

> *Friendships I have with other gay guys is sort of superficial [ ]. Generally I think that my relationship with her [Laura] is more deep and meaningful than with gay guys.* (Andrew)

Some participants, however, reported that there were some things that could not be understood and appreciated by their heterosexual female friends as they were not familiar with gay culture. As Hugh explained:

> *Well, with another close gay friend I've probably got more in common in a way [than with his friend Helen], because we can understand how things go about when you go out to bars to meet people or you can talk about relationships together, about two men being together.*

In terms of having fun, the participants reported having as much fun with both their heterosexual female and gay male friends.

The above findings are not consistent with previous research on gay men's friendships. Previous research argues that, as gay people integrate into the gay community, they tend to make close friendships within the community (Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Weinstock, 1998). This is said to be because people from the in-group can better empathise with them and relate to their problems, thereby providing them with emotional support (Vincke & Van Heeringen, 2002). However, the gay male participants in this study described their friendships with heterosexual women as more supportive and closer than with other gay men, diminishing the importance of the gay community as the primary source of emotional support for gay men. At this point it should be noted that most of the gay male participants who expressed their dissatisfaction regarding their friendships with other gay men come from a specific location that is widely considered to be a gay community site in the UK. The last conclusion, therefore, could be related to the specific culture cultivated within this community.

Comparing this friendship to friendships with heterosexual men: The friendship between gay men and heterosexual men was not described as equally as intimate and supportive as the one with heterosexual women. In fact, most participants reported that there was no shared intimacy between gay men and heterosexual men; they would rarely form close friendships with heterosexual men. This finding is consistent with previous research which has shown that men's same-sex friendships lack emotional expressiveness (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Davidson & Duberman, 1982; Fehr, 1996; Williams, 1985). For many of the participants, the lack of openness and self-disclosure were also a result of homophobia. Participants reported that they preferred not to discuss their intimate life with heterosexual men as they sometimes found them intimidated, uncomfortable or offended. For example:

> *I wouldn't tell as much detail, because I would be scared in case they'd be offended. On the odd occasion they've told me. They've said 'Anthony, too much information, I don't want to know any more'.*

Some gay male participants reported that they did not have similar interests as heterosexual men, as opposed to sharing similar interests with other gay men and heterosexual women. As Martin said:
> *I always find it harder to converse with male heterosexuals. We've got nothing in common. At all. [ ] I've got nothing to speak about and they've got nothing to say to me because if*

they speak about football I'm not interested ... and if I talk about going out dancing and soap operas, then they are not really interested. [ ] Gay men can talk about anything and get along with them all. Heterosexual women, exactly the same.

Dissimilarity and lack of emotional expressiveness meant that the friendship between gay men and heterosexual men appeared to be rare and least satisfying for the gay male participants.

Heterosexual Women

Comparing this friendship to friendships with heterosexual women: Most heterosexual female participants reported valuing both their friendships with gay men and heterosexual women as close and similar. They claimed that both these friendships were the same in terms of support, openness and fun. The female participants reported discussing everything with their heterosexual same-sex friends including sex issues. Their sex life was the only subject they would not talk about with their gay male friends. As Sabrina said:

It's pretty, well it is very much similar [her friendship with Steve to the one with her heterosexual female friend] in the sense that we will still do the same things together ... the only thing that is different is talking about sex really. I don't do it with Steve but I would do it with my girlfriends, but that's it.

Within the female participants' accounts, the main difference between the two forms of friendship under discussion was the male viewpoint on things that gay men could offer to heterosexual women. In considering advice on relationships and men, gay men's opinion was greatly appreciated as the female participants found their viewpoints more objective and less stereotypical than female viewpoints. Despite the fact that most female participants positioned their gay friends alongside with their girlfriends, they would still mention that their gay friends were males or at least a male and female blend. As Joanne reported:

I think as women you can generalise too much about men and they say 'ooh, mine did that' or analyse everything too much. [ ] Anthony, even though he's homosexual, because he's a man, I just felt, well he understood, he would understand far more than me talking to a woman about it [a relationship problem].

Comparing this friendship to friendships with heterosexual men: The heterosexual participants in the study described their friendships with heterosexual men as lacking in intimacy, unsupportive and affected by sexual tensions. The underlying sexual agenda (see above) characterising the cross-sex friendships between heterosexual men and women was frequently mentioned as a barrier to emotional expressiveness and intimacy. Female participants also reported feeling devalued by their heterosexual male friends and having no similar interests with them. As a result, most heterosexual female participants did not regard their friendships with heterosexual men as close friendships. They admitted them to be fun relationships but nothing more than that. These findings are consistent with previous research on cross-sex friendship (Aukett *et al.*, 1988; Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Gaines, 1994; Hegelson *et al.*, 1987; Reid and Fine, 1992; Rubin, 1985).

In contrast, as already discussed, the gay men and heterosexual women in this study form close and supportive friendships based on mutuality, emotional expressiveness and trust. This is how Miranda described her friendships with heterosexual men as compared with her friendship with Thomas:

> *Very different [friendships] I think, I think with [heterosexual] male friends I wouldn't tell them half as much, you know if you go down to pub is more of a superficial conversation. [ ] I'd skim over things more, I wouldn't go into as much depth as I would with Thomas. I think because he is easy to talk to really [ ]. I trust him as well and he is quite sort of understanding really. And I suppose a lot of my male friends they can't be bothered to listen, they don't really want to know I suppose. [ ] they are a bit 'whatever too much information or something now get me a drink'.*

To sum up the comparisons of this theme, the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women was presented as quite similar to same-sex friendship between heterosexual women. It was also presented as partially similar, but quite different at the same time, to the friendships between gay men. Finally, both gay men and heterosexual female participants described their friendships with heterosexual men as very different to the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women.

5) PARTICIPANTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR SOCIAL NETWORK'S PERCEPTION OF THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN THEM

The friendship between gay men and heterosexual women is nested within a network of other relationships. This friendship influences the participants' social network which itself bears influence upon the friendship. So far, I have discussed how the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women is perceived and evaluated by the dyads who are involved in it. Now we are going to see, through the narratives of the participants, how they think that this friendship is perceived by their social network and particularly by their families and partners. Moreover, the 'fag hag' label attached to heterosexual women involved in friendships with gay men will be discussed.

The family's perception of the friendship: The family's perception of this friendship was described as a relational phenomenon depending on whether the families of the gay male participants were aware of the gay men's sexuality. Most gay male participants said that before their 'coming out' their families believed their heterosexual female friends to be their partners. Some of them reported explicitly exploiting the friendship in order to pass as a couple. Others would implicitly pass as a couple by avoiding correcting their parents' belief that they were in a romantic relationship with their female friends. As James reflected:

> *Initially before I came out ... my family did think that Sylvia was my girlfriend, that I was seeing her, purely for the fact that it made it easier for me when I went home that I wasn't questioned so much. So Sylvia did become my sort of temporary girlfriend until I came out [ ].*

Some participants said that members of their family and relatives who were not aware of their sexuality, were led to believe that their heterosexual female friends were their girlfriends. This was facilitated by them acting as a couple. As Anne said:

> *A lot of people think we're a couple [ ] and Martin's auntie thinks we're a couple because she doesn't know he's gay [ ]. It's convenient for Martin not to get in trouble, if I sort put my arm around him, stand together, it doesn't cause any trouble.*

Those family members who were aware of the gay male participants sexuality were presented as approving of the gay men's friendship with their heterosexual female friends. Most male participants reported that their female friends were welcomed by their families and sometimes it was believed that their families harboured a wish for their female friends to be their girlfriends. As Steve said:

> *She [his friend Sabrina] does get on with them [his family], so it easy for them to have like a female friend of mine who they really like and think 'oh potentially '...*

Most female participants reported that their families approved of their friendships with gay men. Some female participants said that their gay friends were invited to family events and were treated as members of the family by their families of origin. Only one female participant said that her father expressed dissatisfaction with his daughter's friendship as he felt it could affect her own sexuality. She explained:

> *I think he finds it difficult that I'm friends with someone who has a different sexual orientation than him [ ] and I think he worries about possibly me getting into a gay culture and my sexuality.* (Helen)

Partners' perception of the friendship: Both gay men and heterosexual female participants reported that their friendships were approved of by their partners. They said that their partners preferred this form of friendship to other forms of friendship, since they did not regard it as a potential threat to their relationship. The lack of any underlying sexual agenda between the participants – which was presented in previous subthemes - seems also to be appreciated by their partners. This is illustrated by the following comments:

> *He's probably more relaxed about it [Andrew being friends with a woman] I think he'd feel slightly threatened if I had a close relationship with a gay guy [ ].* (Andrew)

> *And I think now he'd probably prefer me going out with gay men who aren't a threat than if I had lots of male friends that were straight.* (Joanne)

Some female participants stated that their partners approved more of their friendships with their gay male friends than other heterosexual women. As Anne explained:
> *He [her partner] was quite homophobic, and he didn't really like gay men, but he, he'd rather I go out with Martin on a night out than go out with the girls, because he'd trust Martin. He knew that Martin was going to take me out to a gay bar, he didn't like me going out with the girls because I was going to straight clubs [where there was the possibility of flirtation].*

On the whole, the participants' narratives suggest the viability and intensity of their friendships is augmented by recognition and acceptance from other members of their social networks, i.e. their families and partners.

The 'fag hag' label: Throughout the interviews, a number of participants referred to the derisive term 'fag hag', which was adopted by their heterosexual or gay friends in order to describe a heterosexual woman involved in friendships with gay men. This was an incidental finding as this study did not aim to investigate the meaning of the 'fag hag' label for the participants. Participants who used this term either expressed their disavowal of the 'fag hag' label or were not affected by the use of it because they had not attached any negative meaning to this term. When Anthony was asked to reflect on his gay male friends' perceptions and evaluations of his friendship with Joanne, he replied:

> *There might be the odd comment about a fag hag, but I think that's only people that don't know us very well. I certainly don't look at her as a kind of fag hag at all. My friends are, are just not jealous about our friendship, but admire our friendship and are happy for us.*

Miranda did not feel offended when her friends referred to her as a 'fag hag' because she believed that her heterosexual friends were only joking:

> *Some people call me a fag hag just cause they are joking around[ ]. It doesn't bother me cause I know they are only joking [ ] and I don't think that anyone has any negative thoughts about it.*

Some participants appeared to adopt the use of this term themselves. However, they did not use the 'fag hag' label within a negative context: As Martin claimed:

> *Beautiful, very fashionable single females - they are like gay men. We [gay men] call them fag hags, but very-very good friendships.* (Martin)

The participants' accounts concerning the use of the term 'fag hag' when characterising heterosexual women who befriend gay men, do not indicate that they have attached a negative meaning to this term. This finding is not consistent with previous research which suggests that the term 'fag hag' has negative connotations and describes heterosexual women who provide gay men with emotional support in exchange for male affirmation (Nardi, 1999; Tillmann-Healy, 2001).

Overview and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to describe the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women. In particular, it focused on how this friendship is perceived and evaluated by the people involved in it. This was achieved by examining a number of factors that could lead to the formation of a specific evaluation of this friendship (i.e. perceived rewards, comparisons with other forms of friendship, social network's influence on this friendship).

The sample taking part in the study cannot be seen as representative of dyads of gay men and heterosexual women generally, partly because I used a 'snowballing' technique in order to recruit the participants. As I have explained, however, achieving a representative sample is not the aim of IPA work, since the emphasis is on thoroughly analysing the specific participants' accounts. The findings from this study only refer to the sixteen participants and so the conclusions must be viewed as limited to the particular population and as tentative. In addition, the conclusions drawn are an outcome of both participants' thoughts and the my own interpretations during the analysis. This is another reason for considering the research findings as tentative and limited to the specific group of people involved in this study (i.e. participants and researcher).

Nonetheless, the research presented here can claim originality on the basis of its specific examination of friendship between gay men and heterosexual women within an interpretative phenomenological framework. Indeed, it is the first time that a British sample has been interviewed on this theme; previous similar research has been undertaken only in the USA using narrative ethnography (Rubin, 1985; Tillman-Heally, 2001). In comparison with that literature, this study and Tillmann-Healy's study often reported contradictory findings. In both cases, however, the findings are limited to the population under investigation and can only be tentatively compared to the findings stemming from studies on other groups. Future research, could build towards a more cumulative knowledge, enhancing our understanding of friendship between gay men and heterosexual women.

In relation to this study's substantive findings, it is apparent that both gay male and heterosexual female participants were satisfied with this form of friendship. Despite the fact that previous research suggests that heterosexual women are not satisfied with their cross-sex friendships (Buhkre & Fuqua, 1987; Gaines, 1994; Rubin, 1985; Sapadin, 1988), the data discussed here suggest that this may only be the case for the female participants' friendships with heterosexual men. A lack of sexual tension was portrayed by most female interviewees, indicating that the friendship between heterosexual women and gay men may be privileged by the lack of an underlying sexual agenda. Female participants reported feeling free to express their emotions and inner thoughts to their gay men friends; they believed that they achieved open, intimate and affectionate friendships with them. These reported characteristics position heterosexual female friendships with gay men along with female same-sex friendships that previous literature had defined as deep, intimate and satisfying for heterosexual women (Buhkre & Fuqua, 1987; Reisman, 1990; Rubin, 1985; Sapadin, 1988). Some female participants claimed that they gained more from their gay male friends than their heterosexual female friends. This is because their friendships with gay men could offer them a male presence in their lives as well as a male viewpoint on various matters. Moreover, gay male participants appeared to contribute to female participants' positive self-esteem, as women reported feeling good about themselves because they were valued for their personality and not their sexuality.

Gay male participants frequently reported their disappointment with regard to friendships within the gay community. This finding is not consistent with previous research which argues that gay men benefit from their friendships with other gay men and therefore they prefer to form friendships within the gay community (Nardi, 1992a; Nardi, 1999; Vincke & Van Heeringen, 2002; Weeks *et al.*, 2001). Most participants reported a lack of trust in the gay world which was described as 'back stabbing' and 'bitchy'. According to Pahl (1998), trust is a very significant element of friendship especially valued in the modern or 'risk' society. In order for people to form meaningful and pure

friendships they need to trust their friends and expose most facets of their selfhood. In this sense, a trusting friendship can provide individuals with a secure base where identity reshaping and self-affirmation can occur. The lack of trust characterising the gay male participants' friendships with other gay men was reflected in their reporting a lack of close and intimate friendships of this kind. Indeed, most gay male participants claimed that their needs for intimacy and closeness were fulfilled by their friendships with heterosexual women as they could trust them and rely upon them.

Bearing in mind that the findings of this study are only limited to the particular participants, it may be that in the future we may see more friendships developing between heterosexual and non-heterosexual people for two main reasons:
a) The gay community as the main support for gay people may now appear as a non-intimate and risky social network that needs to be revaluated. In this sense, an increasing number of gay men may seek to form one-to-one friendships with heterosexual people and specifically women, whom participants described as supportive and intimate.
b) As more gay men become open about their sexuality, heterosexual society may become more accepting of and familiar with their gay identity. In a less heterosexist society, people might more easily form friendships across the sexual spectrum.

Social exchange theories and more specifically interdependence theory enable us to better understand the above substantive findings regarding the participants' evaluations of their friendships. A basic premise of social exchange theories is that in order for people to be satisfied in a relationship, the benefits should outweigh the costs. Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) interdependence theory additionally proposes that people compare the outcomes of a relationship to the outcomes stemming from other relationships. There are two standards of comparisons, the comparison level (what people feel they deserve in a relationship) and the comparison level for alternatives (which determines how committed people could be in a relationship). As discussed, all participants reported being satisfied with their friendships under investigation, focusing on the rewards provided by such friendships and rarely referring to any costs stemming from them. Moreover, when comparing the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women with other forms of friendship, they presented the alternative friendships as less rewarding and satisfying. Therefore, it could be concluded that the friendships between gay men and heterosexual women are highly valued by the participants because of the actual rewards stemming from them and the lack of better alternatives.

In addition, the participants' reports of their social network's positive perception of the friendship between gay men and heterosexual women appears to support and strengthen such friendships. This could be explained within a systemic theory approach, according to which each dyadic relationship forms a system that both influences and is influenced by other systems that relate to one another, forming a person's social network. Previous research has shown that a close relationship may be in competition with one's other relationships or may be strengthened by the recognition of third parties (Hinde, 1997; Milardo & Allan, 1997). In this study, it would seem that the viability and intensity of participants' friendships is augmented by recognition and acceptance from other members of their social networks, i.e. their families and partners.

The analysis of the non-heterosexual participants' accounts also sheds some light on the 'families of choice' thesis. As previous research has suggested (Nardi, 1999; Weston, 1991; Weeks et al., 2001), friends can be viewed as family by some gay men. In this study such a view was not

associated with disappointment with the families of origin, as both the families of origin and 'families of choice' were highly valued by the participants. A commonality within participants' accounts was the lack of openness and support from their families of origin regarding aspects related to their sexuality. As reported, their need to talk and get advice about their relationships could not be easily fulfilled within their families of origin. Some gay participants claimed to be accepted by their families only in terms of not being 'chucked out of the house'. However, emotional support was provided by their friends and specifically by the heterosexual female participants. It could be postulated that the blood families of gay men could learn from looking into the friendships between gay men and heterosexual women in order to provide their gay family members with more effective emotional support. As the data shows, when issues concerning their intimate life were considered, gay men would rather have a family that is like their friends than friends who are like their families of origin.

In terms of therapeutic interventions, the findings suggest that the participants found it therapeutic to talk intimately to someone who they could trust and who would understand them without being judgmental. The characteristics of openness, trust and support were highly valued by all participants. The aforementioned valuable characteristics could be beneficial for gay men because they could enable them to deal with adverse life conditions related to their sexual minority status (Vincke & Van Heeringen, 2002). Therapists should try, therefore, to promote the development of these characteristics in gay men's relationships with their families. This could be achieved by therapists adopting a systemic approach (Dallos & Draper, 2000; Malley, 2002)) with their gay male clients when it comes to stresses stemming from problematic non-supportive behaviours displayed by the gay men's families. Gay men, their families, close heterosexual female friends and the therapists could be encouraged to interact all together. This could be facilitated by the fact that heterosexual female participants also appeared to be appreciated by gay men's families of origin. The adoption of a systemic framework would enable problematic interactions (between gay men and their families) to be identified and supportive interactions (between gay men and their heterosexual female friends) to be highlighted and communicated to the families of gay men, thus encouraging open and supportive relationships between gay men and their families. It may, however, be difficult to get a whole family network and heterosexual female friends to commit to therapy together. Alternatively then, the findings of this study could be used in order to expand family and systemic therapists' knowledge about gay men's valued relationships and the dynamics and qualities that contribute to the formation of such relationships. As Malley and McCann suggest (2002), therapists need to adapt their theory and practice when they work with clients who are not heterosexual, since special knowledge of gay sexuality is needed in order for the appropriate therapeutic techniques and interventions to be applied.

In the future, it would be interesting to explore the effects of age on this form of friendship. Most of the participants in this study were single (not married) in their twenties and early thirties, and none had children. Life course transitions (career, marriage, parenthood etc.) may affect these friendships, as the participants may no longer be so available to their friends. In these circumstances, the implications for gay men's 'families of choice' and the perceived stability of such families could be explored. Finally, possible future studies investigated by other researchers using a different sample, may offer new understandings and further enhance the picture of gay men's friendships with their heterosexual female friends.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Demographic Questions: Age, legal marital status, sexual orientation (openness about sexuality), educational level, occupation.

Friendship Initiation:
For how long have you been friends with...?
Where did you meet?
How did this friendship start?
Where you aware at the moment about your friend's sexuality? How did you feel about it? (question for females)

Friendship Development and Maintenance:
How did your friendship develop?
Why do you define this friendship as close?
What do you do when you are together?
Are there any particular activities that you enjoy doing with ...? Why?
If you could take a moment to think about your conversations with ... could you tell me what you generally talk about?
What do these conversations offer you?
Do you speak about men? How do you think that you contribute to each other's knowledge about men?
Do you talk about relationships?
Do you discuss your sex lives?
Do you think you can understand each other's sex-life?
Are there any things that you would only discuss with...?
Are there any things that you would never discuss with...?
What do you like the best about this friendship?

Friends and Family:
What feelings have you got for ... that you could possibly compare to the feelings you have for a family member?
What does family mean to you?
What do you think that family means to...?
What place does ... have in your life? What place do you think you have in his/her life?
Do you feel that you fulfil certain roles for...? Which?
Does ... fulfil any roles for you? Which?

Social Network's Perception of this Friendship:
What does your partner think of...? How does he feel about this friendship compared to other friendships that you have?
Is your family aware of your sexuality? (males)
What does your family think of this friendship?
How does his/her family perceive this friendship?
What do your heterosexual friends think of...? (females)
What do your gay friends think of this friendship? (males)

Do you think that some people may perceive your friendship as a romantic relationship? Why?

Comparing This Friendship to Other Forms of Friendship:
In what ways is your friendship with ... similar/different to your friendships with other women? (females)
Do you find any similarities/differences between your friendship with ... and a friendship with a heterosexual man? (females)
Is your friendship with ... closer to the friendships you have with heterosexual women or heterosexual men? (females)
In what ways is your friendship to ... similar/different to your friendships with other gay men? (males)
In what ways is it similar/different to your friendships with heterosexual men?

Final Clarifying Questions:
Is there anything special about your friendship with ...?
Is there anything that you would like to change in this friendship?
Why would a gay man choose a heterosexual woman as a close friend? (males)
Why would a heterosexual woman choose a gay man as a close friend? (females)