

Gendered Intimacies (Kimmel, chapter 10)

Major differences between men and women in intimacy patterns and attitudes are part of the “interplanetary theory of gender.” Kimmel claims that the actual patterns aren’t what we expect and that “the gendering of intimate life—of friendship, love, and sex—is the result of several historical and social developments” (p. 259).

Women are considered friendship experts, while men’s friendships are seen as deficient. But this wasn’t always the case. Until recently men’s “way of loving” was seen as superior and women were viewed as incapable of true friendship. The reversal of attitudes in the 20th Century happened because “the definitions of friendship, love and intimacy have been transformed from glorifying the more ‘masculine’ components at the expense ‘feminine’ ones, to the reverse.” Men’s ways of “creating and sustaining intimacy” have been problematized.

“[M]ost studies that measure interpersonal skills, friendship styles, or self-disclosure, find few, if any significant differences between women and men when it comes to friendship.” Some differences may be due to non-gender factors, like working outside the home.

Race, ethnicity, age, class and sexuality also affect friendship styles. “Homophobia is one of the central organizing principles of same-sex friendships for men, and virtually nonexistent for women. Homophobia is more than simply the irrational fear and hatred of gay people; it is also the fear that one might be misperceived as gay by others” (p. 267).

Historical trends that shaped gendered intimacy patterns include: the development of the two spheres, the “triumph of autonomy as the highest goal of individual development, along with the ascendant ideal of compassionate marriage—marriage based on the free choice of two people who devote themselves emotionally only to each other,” and the “birth of the modern homosexual” (p. 225).

As with friendship, women have defined as love experts, while men's ways of loving have been devalued. "[L]ove as we know it—the basis for marriage, sexuality, and family—is relatively recent. Nor is it the foundation of marriage and/or sexual expression everywhere else in the world. As the basis for sexual activity, love turns out to be relatively rare" (p. 271).

Although we expect men and women to experience love very differently, "[t]he empirical research on the gender of love reveals fewer differences, and of less significance, than we might otherwise expect" (p. 272).

The differences have also been narrowing. In the 1960s women were much more likely than men to report that they would marry someone with whom they weren't in love. But "[w]omen's economic independence now affords women, too, the luxury of marrying for love alone" (p. 274).

Marriage transforms men's and women's experiences of loving the being in love. Before marriage men know they love (and women know they are loved) because the men are willing to sacrifice to demonstrate love in visible ways. Women know they love (and men know they are loved) because women care for and nurture. But after marriage, men doubt they love and women doubt they are loved because men "no longer have many opportunities to go well out of [their] way to do extraordinary things to demonstrate [their] love.... By contrast, the nuclear family in the suburban single-family home enhances women's style of loving as domestic nurturing and caregiving" (p. 275).