

**Our friends and our actions:  
Sexuality, influence, and  
perspective**

- Anne Ray

Community Literacy  
Professor Linda Flower  
Dr. Jennifer Flach  
Submitted May 5, 1999

## **Our friends and our actions: sexuality, influence, and perspective**

Let me set the scene for you. Imagine that you are a member of a coed high school dance team. Half are men, half are women. Because of practice, you spend a great deal of time with the other members. They're your friends, they're your working partners. You all get along, both on the stage and off.

One practice, a new member shows up - he's a talented dancer, and some of the other members already know him. His name is Chris. He's popular, good-looking, every body likes him, but rumor has it that he has a girlfriend, so he's off the dating market.

You like Chris too - he's funny, he's a great person to have on the dance team, and he's a trustworthy friend. Chris has some mannerisms, though, that make some of the other members of the team think differently about him. Some people think that Chris may be gay.

How do you react? Do you still like Chris? Do you spend your time with him? Who do you spend your time with, and what do you spend your time doing? What are your beliefs?

These are some of the questions that Julia, a 15-year-old tenth grader, faced in her high school, when confronted with this same situation. The way she dealt with the situation intrigued me, because we are very different - I am a 20-year-old student from a liberal suburb in Maryland, she is a high school student from Pittsburgh's Black community. I wanted to find out how she learned to deal with the perception of difference in sexuality - gay and lesbian - in her own community.

So the purpose of this inquiry is to attempt to understand some of the varying ways in which teens form their ideas of what it means to be of a different sexuality. I listened to her stories, and together, we tried to ask and find the answers to questions about the way we perceive others of a different sexuality, and why we thought that way: How do people react to others who are gay? What clues does society give us to tell us that a person might be gay? What messages are we sent about how we should react to gay people? Where do those messages come from, and in what form? How are we influenced by those messages, and how does that shape our actions? What do messages, actions, and clues say about the networks of support that our lives contain? Bios:

Julia and I come from very different places. Here is some of the basic information about each of us.

### **Julia: Age: 15**

Home: Pittsburgh, PA. Population 500,000. Born in Georgia, lived in Pittsburgh since she was a young child. Pittsburgh as a whole is considered conservative in relation to her other cities in the country. The population of Pittsburgh is older than many other cities. Julia lives in an area of Pittsburgh called the Northside. The community is mostly Black, with strong ties to Black churches and community centers. Many of the residents commute to other parts of the city, work in the local Allegheny County General Hospital, or commute to the suburbs. The Northside has a

larger concentration of unemployment than other areas of the city, but not the worst. Crime, gangs, suffering school districts, and race relations are also considered problems.

Family: Parents married for over 15 years. She has one younger sister, and many close cousins and grandparents.

School: Local Pittsburgh high school. Population is racially mixed. School has a reputation for being one of the better (also more snotty) high schools in the area.

Church: Active member of a local Black Baptist church. She sings in the choir. Her parents attend the church with her.

Friends. Numerous close friends, fewer acquaintances. One of her best friends is a Black male.

### **Anne: Age: 20.**

Home: Columbia, MD. Population 100,000. Born in Baltimore. Lived in Maryland her whole life. Columbia is a suburb south of Baltimore, north of Washington, and west of Annapolis, located in Howard County, one of the wealthiest counties in the country. Columbia is a textbook example of planned communities, with a high concentration of children, youth and families. Community centers around small public schools, churches, and businesses. Many of the residents either work in Columbia or commute to one of the nearby cities. Several of the best-ranked public high schools are located in Columbia. High taxes and development are considered problems.

Current residence: Squirrel Hill neighborhood in Pittsburgh. Current school: Carnegie Mellon University, a private technology-oriented university with a strong program in writing.

Family: Parents married for over 25 years. She has one older brother, no local extended family. School. Top ranked public high school in Maryland. School is not racially mixed at all.

Church: Non-active member of a local Methodist church. Was heavily involved in youth programs there. Parents attend semi-regularly.

Friends: Numerous close friends, especially two current housemates in Pittsburgh, one male, one female.

## **The story**

The scene from Julia's dance team is one that is essentially resolved in her mind. It happened to her in a very similar way to the scene depicted above. She says that she likes Chris, and will continue to. "He's real nice. He has a good reputation. People that think he's gay are still his friends. I think he's a nice person. I had to get to know him. Then as I got to know him, I found that he was real nice. I don't like gay people. It wouldn't change anything if [I found out if he was gay.] I'm not living his life, and if I found out he was gay, I would still be his friend."

If another person said something bad about Chris because he was gay, Julia says "they're making a stupid choice, but that's their action. He's there for you, he's always there to help you no matter what. He'll stay after school that extra hour just to help you."

When she met him, she says she knew he was gay because of what others told her, and then her assumptions were confirmed by his mannerisms when she met him in person. She looked at the way he dressed, and the way he held his hands, and the way he acted around other women. Chris gets along well with other women, and he dresses well - traits that are commonly associated with gay men.

Julia is friends with him, and likes his company. She says that she had to get to know him before she liked him, that she wasn't drawn to him as best friends tend to gravitate toward each other. She was also glad that she got to know him in the context of the dance team, because they are all friends and acquaintances there. She says he works hard - a trait that garners respect from everybody on the team, not just Julia. "If you need help, he's quick to help you. "

Proximity also, plays a part in how they get to know each other. "We see each other every day, you can't just not talk to that person. He's one of the captains of the dance team, and one of the instructors, so I had to learn how to get along with him."

When people joke around, Julia says that Chris will start "[yelling] like a girl," and that other people perceive him the same way too. "[Another boy] was imitating Chris and he started screaming like a girl, because that's what Chris does."

I noticed, though, that any physical action associated with being a gay man had never been confirmed to Julia's knowledge. They had never seen him holding hands, or touching another male, not even in any way that might be associated with heterosexual male friends. He has made comments, however: "One time he said that [a male singer] looked good. No boy should say that another boy looks good." The rumor mill, though, told Julia that Chris had a girlfriend. "Somebody said that he had a [relationship] with a girl." That too, however, was not a fact that Julia had witnessed on her own.

### **What beliefs do we enter the situation with? Where did they come from?**

Julia has already established in her mind that she doesn't like gay people, but she likes Chris. Her reasons for making that statement have their roots partly in her belief in the same values of her church. "It's against the rules in the Bible to be gay," she says. "God created men and women," Since she was brought up as a member of the church, she places value on adherence to those principles. One of those is that gay people are not allowed. The Bible, she simply states, does not allow gay people. Men and women were created separately, and to her, sticking to God's principles is important.

The community that the church creates is also important to Julia. Her parents are a part of that community, and she is very involved - she sings in the choir, and many of her closest family friends are from the church. Even professionally, she considers many of her best references to be from the church. Losing the connections she has there would decrease the stability of the network of support that Julia has built for herself. She feels like a member of the community there, and she feels like she has a place to go as an extension of her family. And she thinks that being gay would cut her off from that community, because it is not in line with the church's overall system of beliefs.

But, Julia also enters the relationship already holding the values of hard work and trusting friendships. Chris, she says, also holds both of those values in high esteem. She says he works hard at practice, and that he's a good listener. He makes people feel comfortable talking with him, and she knows that he can be trusted with confidential information. So, even though Chris's "gayness" conflicts

In addition, Julia expressed how the community of the dance team is also important to her. In the same way that the church is an extended family, the dance team is a close-knit community that Julia feels supports her. They all share common values - hard work being one of them - in the same way that Julia shares values with the church community.

In contrast with Julia's belief that being or a different sexuality is not the right way to be, I enter the situation with my roots in a community that is considered very liberal in comparison with Julia's. The suburb where I grew up is diverse in terms of ethnicity, but homogeneous in terms of class. In my mind, that translates to an outward tolerance of race and sexuality. I feel as though my parents and friends support the idea of tolerance toward those of a different sexuality, and for the same reasons as Julia, I support it as well.

I also come from a different church background than Julia. When I attended a Methodist church in my home town, the issue of sexuality was rarely, if ever, discussed, unlike Julia's Baptist church. So I had to form my ideas and opinions about different sexualities from other sources.

Now, I attend another school that is considered more liberal than many others in the area. Carnegie Mellon University has an open and involved gay and lesbian community. There is an organization devoted to the gay and lesbian community at our school. Like Julia's dance team, some of the social circles I am in overlap with that community, so I have friends that are gay and lesbian - they are open about who they are.

One key difference between Julia and me is that she says that she doesn't like gay people, but she likes Chris. On an individual level, she likes her friend who exhibits traits of "gayness," but as a group, she thinks that being gay is wrong. She has a distinct force in her life sending her those messages - the church. I didn't have that force; instead I have other strong forces telling me that being gay is acceptable - the community where I grew up, and the school community where I now live.

### **What's the local context for the situation?**

Recently, a lesbian woman brought a lawsuit against the University of Pittsburgh for not offering health benefits to same-sex domestic partners - gay and lesbian couples who live together, and consider themselves married, even though gay marriage is not legal in Pennsylvania. The lawsuit was denied, and the result was an outcry from local couples. Outside of the William Pitt Union, Pitt's student center, some local women staged a hunger strike in protest, which is still continuing today.

To me, the strike, and the outcry, shows Pittsburgh's reputation as a city that is not prepared to deal with difference as it pertains to sexuality. The hunger strike shows is one way that the local gay and lesbian community is trying to speak out against that reputation. The city - the community where Julia and I both live - sends a message that gay people are not as welcome as others. Even

though that message is not as immediate as those sent by the communities where Julia and I both spend our time, it is another factor in shaping our opinions and thoughts. We may not spend time at the William Pitt Union, and we may not know anyone whose same sex domestic partnership benefits affect, but we still take in those cultural messages. In Julia's case, what the city says confirms what her immediate community tells her - that being of a different sexuality is wrong.

Some of the components for that message come from legal precedents. In Pennsylvania, the marriage of two people of the same sex is illegal. Common law marriage is "tolerated, not encouraged." In the city of Pittsburgh, a piece of legislation in 1990 prevented discrimination against people "for ... their sexual orientations in most housing, employment, and public accommodations situations within Pittsburgh limits." Although this code exists, Pitt's regulations come from the state Human Relations Committee, which does not prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation.

### **What clues are we sent that tell us people are of a different sexuality?**

Julia thinks that Chris is gay based on a set of signals that he sends. "He dresses really nice, he can dance really good. He can do splits and everything. He has good handwriting. To me, that's not normal for a boy." She and her peers perceive Chris as being gay, because he exhibits a different set of traits than the other males they interact with. He dresses nicely, he's "sensitive," and he holds his hands that way. They perceive him not just as being gay, but as being different. Gilbert Herdt discusses the preconception that teenagers who are homosexual are automatically perceived as different, and they feel different as well. "There will always exist a discordance between the homosexual youths' feeling of being 'different' when growing up in a heterosexual environment, and their eventual place in a homosexual world."<sup>2</sup> So Chris is not only perceived as different by his peers, but he may also feel different. But, again, Julia has never seen any action to confirm Chris as being gay—she and her peers perceive him that way. He is not masculine as they think of masculine, therefore, they perceive him as being gay, because many of the characteristics that they associate with gayness are also considered feminine.

### **Popular Culture.**

Another part of the messages that we are sent about different sexual orientations comes from the broader media. In both national news and in outlets for popular culture, such as television shows and music, we see other communities, and our own, dealing with sexual orientation. These occurrences end up in our collective memory, but it's up to Julia, and me, and each individual to synthesize those messages into one opinion. Here are some of those recent occurrences which you may remember: 1998 - A gay college student named Matthew Shepherd in Wyoming is brutally murdered. The crime is classified by the nation as a hate crime against gays, an example of "gay bashing" that turned tragic. 1996 - President Clinton rules in favor of gay marriage, several nationwide ceremonies take place. Many states, including Pennsylvania still have decried the practice illegal. 1993 - Gays and lesbians march on Washington, President Clinton allows gays in the military.

## **What role can schools play?**

Where my school community tells me that being of a different sexuality is acceptable, the messages that Julia's school community sends are informal - her peers obviously talk about it when the subject comes up, but area schools have no set curriculum for the subject, and no specific guidelines for what educators can and cannot say on the subject.<sup>4</sup> While she is in school, she learns about what it is to be gay informally - from a synthesis of many different sources.

Some schools used what is referred to as the "Rainbow" curriculum in order to teach children about what it means to be of a different sexuality. The 1994 book *Heather Has Two Mommies*, a component of the curriculum, caused some controversy across the country. The use of the curriculum, though, depends on the level of understanding in the individual community, and in Pittsburgh, the curriculum is not used. Some common cultural signs of "gayness," and some stereotypes. Men: 1. Holds hands pointed down. 2. Dresses nice, or in a slightly feminine way. 3. Cross-dresses. 4. Speaks with a lisp. 5. Has more female friends than male friends. 6. Would rather go shopping than a football game. 7. Concerned with fashion. 8. Very outspoken. 9. Gossip Women: 1. Has a short haircut. 2. Wears masculine clothes, such as suits, or t-shirts and jeans. 3. Tough persona, angry. Signs of transgendered personas: These can include cross-dressing comedians, drag routines, and even people that appear on popular talk shows, such as Sally Jesse Raphael in the early 1990's, or the newer Jenny Jones. MacKenzie talks about popular culture as an influencing factor: "Popular culture, simply defined as 'mainstream culture,' includes the everyday world of television, films, music, fads, celluloid heroes, advertising, entertainment, consumer products and the mass media. What we do, where we go, as well as personal and corporate definitions of who we are or should be, what we believe or should believe, and what we desire or should desire constitute some of the basic components of popular culture."<sup>3</sup> Klinger on *MASH*, *The Church Lady* on *Saturday Night Live*, RuPaul on MTV, the 1993 film *Mrs. Doubtfire*, pop singers Boy George, Elton John, David Bowie, the film *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

## **How can friends (and peers) play a role in forming our beliefs?**

Although Julia says that she likes Chris's company, and that he's "really funny," she says that she has to watch herself when she's around him, because she doesn't want to be gay. "I'm not gay, I don't wanna be gay," she says. He might do something that would influence her, and make her into a gay person, and she doesn't want that, because being gay does not match up her personal values.

Can friends cause us to make that drastic of a change in our life? How much do friends actually influence us? To Julia, friends are one of the most important networks of support that exist in her life. Like she shares values with her church community, she shares values with most of her friends. Chris's sexual orientation, though, is not one of the values that she shares. But how much can friends actually change our actions?

Julia says that part of the reason why she thinks that Chris might be gay is because of what her friends say. "I never really thought he was gay. I just thought he was - feminine - but everybody thinks he's gay."

Julia once told me a story about how she got caught stealing from a discount store when she was with some friends. She doesn't consider those people friends anymore, but at the time, she

thought that she wanted to continue to be friends with them. She thought what she was doing was wrong, but she went along with them anyway, and she got caught. She wanted to be a part of the group, and she wanted to have friends. In Julia's mind, the power of influence that friends have over each other is strong. If she thinks that Chris could do something - she's not clear what, maybe have a boyfriend, or make comments, or ask her to take part in something - to turn her into a gay person, it's because she knows it could happen. Before, when she let her friend influence her, she became a thief.

According to Willard Hartup, adolescent friendship is based on "equality, reciprocity, and commitment."<sup>5</sup> In this case, part of the reciprocity that Chris and Julia share for each other comes from their shared values, and their shared community. When Julia was caught stealing with her friends at the time, she wasn't able to separate her own beliefs from the beliefs of the group. Now, she has developed more of a sense of individuality. Julia says that she isn't as close with Chris as she is with other friends. As the scholar above points out, part of the prerequisite for a close friendship is commitment - Julia is willing to make the trade-off between committing to the relationship with Chris, and maintaining the individuality that she has worked to establish.

### **Conclusions (of sorts)**

Julia's friendship with Chris is one where she constantly has to make trade-offs that for her, come easily. She must decide how much to devote to a friendship, and how much to let him influence her. She must decide how to hold onto the values that she has established for herself - she wants to be a member of the church community, but the church community thinks that being gay is wrong. To her, though, the choice to hold onto those established networks of support is clear. The community that Julia lives in is made up of networks of support. The ways that she makes her decisions about her own life are the product of a synthesis of messages: her family, popular culture, the city and national attitudes toward gayness, and her friends. Julia has a clear idea in her mind of what principles she values the most - so do I, so do many of us. If any conclusion can be made, it is that the ideas we develop are related to our own communities, and the boundaries we set up for ourselves when crossing into other communities. Our ideas are a synthesis of other ideas and influences, not just our own. When we develop a network that makes us comfortable, we must hold on to it.

### **Endnotes:**

\*All quotes from Julia are from taped interviews on April 4 and 6.

1 "The Layperson's Guide to Lesbian and Gay Legal Issues in Pennsylvania."

Elizabeth E. Wachsman. 1994, 45. Quoted from Pittsburgh code, Article V.

2 Herdt, Gilbert, ed. *Gay and Lesbian Youth*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1989. 5.

3 MacKenzie, Gordene Olga. *Transgender Nation*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994, 104.

4 Interview with a teacher at Langley High School on April 10

5 Hartup, William. "Adolescents and Their Friends." *New Directions for Child Development* Summer 1993: 6.