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From the Bedroom to the Streets: Intimacy and the New Public Order

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Editor's Introduction

of new possibilities of friendship, love, and community, and yet inevitably facing circumstances that would jeopardize these moments.

It is our hope that "Thresholds" provides a thorough sense of the exciting depth and breadth intimacy studies has come to offer as a mode of social theory. With these new possibilities of social-theoretical engagement in mind, I welcome you to "Thresholds," the fifteenth issue of disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory.

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Lastly, thanks to all of the "Thresholds" contributors. We value the opportunity to present their intriguing and important work in this issue.

-SEAN DUMMITT

Jennifer Wilkinson

From the Bedroom to the Streets: Intimacy and the New Public Order

Many of us share a desire for intimate experiences. The possibility of truly connecting with others, in spite of our differences and in spite of ourselves, is what propels many of us to make friends and form relationships of many kinds. It was this possibility of "psychological intimacy," in the face of the increased individualization attending modernity, that propelled early-twentieth-century writer Georg Simmel to take up his pen and reflect pessimistically on our prospects of shared and close experiences with others. A full century later, intimacy continues to be important, but the forms it now takes often bear scant resemblance to the modern conceptualizations of intimacy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of the accounts of modernity within the social sciences see intimacy encompassing close forms of social relations which are family-based, mutual, private, and essentially heterosexual. The emergence of new subjectivities and identities throughout the twentieth century led to a politicization of intimacy and a rejection of many of these nineteenth-century ideals.

I will examine these changes in order to consider their broader impact on what might be called a changing analytics of intimacy. By focusing on the changing relationship intimacy has to the family, mutuality, and privacy, we can begin to get a picture of how intimacy is changing in the twenty-first century. As a starting point for this analysis, I will now turn to the conceptions of intimacy within the social sciences as it was framed against a broader theory of modernity. This will allow us to draw out some of the common themes and ideas about intimacy which have been questioned in contemporary settings.
Social Science and Modernity: Intimacy Then

Within the social sciences, conceptions of intimacy have taken shape against a background of theorizing about modernity and the development of new forms of association which mark a break with the older, pre-modern public order (Weintraub 1997). In this context, intimacy, defined as “any form of close association in which people acquire familiarity” (Jamieson 1998, 8), is typically contrasted with traditional communal association as well as the more anonymous and calculating relations thought typical of modern urban centers (Flanagan 2002). Other cultural ideas which have typically been associated with intimacy include the importance of the individual, the role of love in perceptions of intimacy, and the idea that intimacy is the means of enjoying a meaningful, self-defining personal life.

Intimacy in its modern formulations is presumed to be a type of sociality—or experience of a relationship—which is tied to a personal life. Within the discourses of modern social science, the focal point of this personal life, and of the forms of close association this is seen to entail, is the family or, more specifically, “marriage and the gendered family centred on children” (Jamieson 1998, 15). “In the story of the emergence of this modern period, intimacy in personal life was heightened greatly; with the family household at its core” (18). Moreover, as historian Philippe Ariès notes:

Ultimately the family became the focus of private life. Its significance changed. No longer was it merely an economic unit for the sake of whose reproduction everything had to be sacrificed. No longer was it a restraint on individual freedom, a place in which power was wielded by women. It became something it had never been: a refuge, to which people fled in order to escape the scrutiny of outsiders; an emotional center; a place where, for better or for worse, children were the focus of attention. (Ariès and Duby 1989, 8)

These accounts suggest that intimacy was a strictly private affair, whereas the public domain was considered a place of alienation and instrumentality. This was the reason, argues Eli Zaretsky, that people turned back toward the private realm of the family: it was there that people could truly find themselves, in their close relations with their intimates (1976, 30–33). The development of a personalized sense of intimacy was assisted by extending the liberal principles of free choice to the selection of partners (Beck-Gernsheim 1999). Changing attitudes toward love prompted a new valuation of privacy, as people sought out corners away from the eyes of others (Ariès and Duby 1989). At an institutional level, this modern appreciation of privacy was reflected in the separation of home and work as private and public spheres (Weintraub 1997). Within this already private sphere, intimacy was then doubly privatized within the architectural seclusion of the “master” bedroom, which encouraged sexual intimacy between couples to take place (Bittman and Pixley 1997). It was within this private sphere, where the positive experiences of intimacy were now freely enjoyed, that privacy acquired a positive value as a condition that makes intimacy possible: “Intimacy and privacy seem to go together. The vast majority of us seek isolation from outsiders for our experiences of intimacy and regard it as indecent for others to intrude upon them” (Gerstein 1984, 265).

In addition to this emphasis on the family and privacy, intimacy was also typically thought to be tied to an ideal of mutuality. As Jamieson observes, “Love and care between spouses was a more important dimension of intimacy than knowing and understanding an inner self” (1998, 18). Similarly, Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley describe the rise of intimacy explicitly in terms of “altered relations between husbands and wives,” which, they explain, fall midway between sex and companionship: “The novelty of the modern family lies in the fact that the figures of mistress and wife are combined. The modern family brings marriage, romance and sex together for the first time. A wife becomes more than a helpmeet, more than an economic resource. A wife becomes a lover and a companion as well” (1997, 51).

When viewed from the standpoint of this literature on the modern family, intimacy is tied firmly to an ideal of mutuality. For early-twentieth-century social theorist Georg Simmel, the possibility of mutuality was part of the legacy of friendship. He suggested that, although marriage might privilege the relations of lovers, intimacy depended on mutuality within a relationship, which meant a shared or common experience: “To the extent that the ideal of friendship was received from antiquity and (peculiarly enough) was developed in a romantic spirit, it aims at psychological intimacy, and is accompanied by the notion that even material property should be common to friends” (Simmel 1950, 35). Similarly, social theorists Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato note that mutuality presumes the integrity of the individual within an intersubjectively shared life (1992, 378).

Observations about the emotional content of modern intimacy, and the fact that it is widely understood to be a type of mutual social relationship, run through many of these accounts of intimacy. However, as we have seen, when such ideas about mutuality and the possibility of a shared life are framed against the background of theories of modernity, this shared life is centered firmly on the heterosexual couple and the nuclear family. This modern model of intimacy is then framed overall by a cloak of privacy and the possibility of a personal life. In the next section, I will begin to examine thresholds.
how this modern conception of intimacy has been contested. My general approach will be to consider the different ways that these normative foundations of intimacy have been challenged, focusing first on the family and then moving on to examine the ways mutuality and privacy have also been challenged by new research.

Researching the Changes—Challenging Modern Intimacy Norms

Modern perceptions of intimacy, with their links to the family, mutuality, privacy, and heterosexual relations, have now been challenged from several directions. Since the 1980s, there has been a proliferation of research on the family (Beck-Gernsheim 1999, 2003), on love and intimacy (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998; Luhmann 1986; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bauman 2003), on sexuality (Richardson 1996, 2000; Featherstone 1999), on sexual citizenship (Weeks 2003), on gender (Butler 1997, 1999; Lloyd 1999), on privacy (Cohen 2002; Boling 1996), and on queer studies (Bhattacharyya 2002; Richardson and Seidman 2002; Warner 1993; Berlant and Warner 2002), all pointing to a “transformation of intimacy.” In this vein, Anthony Giddens (1992) argued, now more than a decade ago, that throughout the late twentieth century, intimacy had been transformed by a process of de-traditionalization and individualization. Arguing for the increased importance of emotional communication in defining intimate relationships, he suggested that intimacy had become less bound to institutional forms of marriage. Others have argued a similar case. Arlie Russel Hochschild (2003) has drawn attention to the way the emotional resources of love and care, once anchored firmly in family relations and the domestic household, have become the new institutional markers of more global forms of intimacy. Zigmunt Bauman (2003) emphasizes the loosening grip of social ties on postmodern relationships and the era of shopping-trolley love in our network societies. Even Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1999, 2002; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 1996), who steadfastly defends a conception of love and commitment, has noted a basic shift in the type of intimacy centered on the family as part of a bigger process of detraditionalization and individualization. She argues the case for the emergence of what might be called a “post-familial” family, that is, one which is defined by affinity rather than by kin (Beck-Gernsheim 2003). Families of choice and, even more generally, friendship itself are now frequently cited as evidence of the new institutional context of intimacy in the twenty-first century, with friendship emerging as the intimacy ideal against which even family-based intimacy now has to be measured (Pahl 2000, 14).

Alternative Intimacy Cultures

A familiar theme in these discussions concerns how intimacy has been derailed from its modern family structures and how its normative underpinnings might be questioned. Central to Giddens’s claims about the transformation of intimacy in the late twentieth century was the suggestion that the possibility of mutuality could be realized in a different context. As we saw earlier, in modern accounts of intimacy, mutuality was presumed to depend on “altered relations between husbands and wives,” but Giddens suggested that this had been overtaken by the new possibilities of a pure relationship, an idea actually modeled on homosexual relationships. Such observations and critiques of familial and heterosexual intimacy have been intensified and politicized in the wake of the new subjectivities and increasingly visible sexual identities since the second half of the twentieth century. In this vein, contemporary commentators like Michael Warner (2002) have criticized the tendency to idealize “the intimacy of the family” and to present the family as “the universal basis of human culture.” Not surprisingly, then, claims that the family is a site “of the deepest and most resonant human ties, the most enduring hopes, the most intractable conflicts, the most poignant tragedies and the sweetest triumphs human life affords” (Jean Bethke Elshtain, quoted in Dietz 1998, 47) are viewed with extreme caution. Similarly, feminists have long pointed out the tendency to ignore the darker side of intimacy, where women have no power. The problems with familial intimacy, they suggest, are rooted in the gendered relations of the patriarchal family.

Much of the research fueled by new sexual politics raises questions about the basic categories typically used to describe social relations in modern societies. In particular, this research contests categories like public and private, once used exclusively to define complementary realms of social activity such as politics and intimacy: “Feminist theorists have long argued that ‘the personal is political,’ meaning that the apparently ‘natural’ private domain of intimacy (the family and sexuality) is legally constructed, culturally defined, and the site of power relations. For the most part, the emphasis has been on the critical deconstruction of privacy rhetoric as part of a discourse of domination which legitimates women’s oppression” (Cohen 1997, 136). For feminists and queer academics alike, the idealization of the family model of intimacy is problematic, not only because it glosses over the gendered dimensions of family life where women are often exploited, but also because it invests the heterosexual family with moral primacy. However, these critics suggest that the heart of the problem is that intimacy is traditionally seen as part of one’s private life. When intimacy is tied down to a
Wilkinson

privatized set of social relations, privacy operates as a type of protective screen or form of privation which closes off aspects of intimacy to the public, preventing the public scrutiny of violations on the one hand, and denying public recognition on the other. As Warner notes, privatized intimacy sets up a heteronormative model of intimacy against which alternative intimacy cultures are seen as illegitimate: “Like most ideologies, normal intimacy may never have been an accurate description of how people actually live but privatized intimacy prevents recognition of non-standard ‘intimacy’ elsewhere” (Berlant and Warner 2002, 200). In its modern formulations, intimacy is seen to be part of our private lives; this provides a context for understanding its other foundations in mutuality and the heterosexual family. As these critics suggest, it is this link with privacy which needs to be severed if changing forms of intimacy are to receive recognition. Giving intimacy some public visibility can make explicit, and can perhaps contest, its relationship to the other normative foundations—also acquired in the context of modernization. What is more, as we will see in the next section, the possibility of experiencing intimacy in a public way also allows us to focus on its changing relationship to other modern ideals, such as mutuality.

Challenging Mutuality: Celebrity

One area of research which allows us to give further consideration to the ways intimacy has changed is media research. Research into the media and the opportunities for social change which exist within a technologically mediated public realm provide another take on how modern intimacy ideals are being challenged. As we have seen, modern theories of intimacy commonly emphasize a mutuality ideal or a set of assumptions about the shared or common ground between intimates. Yet, as contemporary social theorist Jean Cohen suggests, these properties can be fully realized only in a context of a private life. It is only when mutuality is protected by privacy that it equates with “the special bondedness inside” our intimate relations (Cohen 1997, 143).

Although there is clearly still an important place for such private forms of mutuality between individuals, the assumption that intimacy necessarily depends on mutuality is called into question by new research on the media and popular culture. A common viewpoint in the analysis of celebrity, for instance, is that it signifies a new capacity for making strong social connections with others within a technologically mediated public setting (Lumby 1999; Marshall 1997; Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000).

The idea that we could feel connected—even emotionally connected—to celebrities and to other people we have never met was first systematically explored by Meyrowitz (1985) in his classical account of mediated social interaction. As its title No Sense of Place emphasized, Meyrowitz argued that the media enabled interaction between watchers and viewers, between public and celebrities, by eliminating the sense of distance which would otherwise exist between strangers and friends, between extraordinary media personalities and ordinary members of the public. “The evolution of media has begun to cloud the differences between stranger and friend and to weaken the distinction between people who are ‘here’ and people who are ‘somewhere else’” (122).

The media created new possibilities for intimacy and “media friends” since it allowed celebrities to adopt a personal lounge room style (in the mode of the talk-show host) within a mediated context. “These . . . people . . . have traditional performance skills . . . the content of their ‘performance’ is mostly small talk and running gags. Yet they are likeable and interesting in the same way that a close friend is likeable and interesting” (119). Even though celebrities connect with the public through performance and are therefore engaged in performative sociability rather than a mutually engaging closeness, the viewer experiences the relationship as a real one. In this mediated context of interaction, performers are able to establish “intimacy with millions” (119). “Viewers come to feel they ‘know’ the people they ‘meet’ on television in the same way they know their friends and associates. In fact, many viewers begin to believe that they know and understand a performer better than all the other viewers do” (119).

Celebrity attachments exhibit some of the features of emotional intimacy, but, as Meyrowitz suggested, these are what might be called “para-social” relationships. The “intimacy with millions” can exist only in a technologically mediated context where each viewer experiences it in isolation. Contrary to Simmel’s assumptions about intimacy and its grounding in the “more concrete” relations of lovers and friends, media research suggests that intimacy in some form can be experienced in a far more abstract way.

A more recent analysis of celebrity also notes its potential to generate a feeling of community with others but explains its potential in terms of popular culture and the thesis of everyday life. The author, Ben Highmore, notes, “everyday life is a vague and problematic phrase . . . not simply the name that is given to a reality readily available for scrutiny, it is also the name for aspects of life that lie hidden. To invoke an ordinary culture from below is to make the invisible visible, and as such has clear social and political resonances” (2002, 1–2). Although celebrity is primarily described in terms of its potential for transforming and even democratizing the public domain, it is also thought to be significant because it brings these ordinary life issues into public awareness (Lumby 1999). One of the main ways this
happens is through the tabloid press, where celebrity gossip, feature interviews, and true confessions are the main features (Lumby 1999). Media researcher Catherine Lumby commends the personalizing effects of celebrity as a significant development for democracy. However, she also argues that these personalizing tendencies have real consequences for building emotional connections—consequences, moreover, which derive from assumptions about everyday life. In this context, she notes in the public reaction to major media events like the deaths of public figures a new capacity for real emotional engagement on a massive scale. In Lumby’s analysis, this capacity for public engagement with celebrities ultimately springs from the realization of our shared commonality, which technology makes possible to achieve on a massive public scale.

**Ordinary Lives on Show—Intimacy and the Media**

Through the media, celebrities are able to thematize the aspects of the mundane that we all have in common; this builds a bridge right across the public. Because this process is enacted publicly, celebrity accounts of their ordinary lives facilitate a sense of commonality, mutuality, and what seems like intimacy. In his analysis of mediated sociality, Meyrowitz (1985) reached a similar conclusion about the significance ofordinaryness for creating a sense of intimacy. TV allowed the ordinary and mundane aspects of performers’ lives to be shared with viewers. For Meyrowitz, this was possible because TV broke down the distinction between “backstage” and “frontstage” behavior that Goffman (1959) had attributed to our private and public lives. Whereas “frontstage” behavior refers to the way we present ourselves publicly to others when we know they’re watching, backstage behavior offers clues to our private selves: “Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forego speaking his lines, and step out of character” (Goffman 1959, 19, 97). With all the resources of backstage management, television created the appearance of intimate realism whereby performers seemed to communicate the sort of “true” information that usually was communicated in private. Because we are exposed to the most ordinary aspects of the lives of others in this way, we acquire an impression of sharing an intimate relationship with them (Meyrowitz 1985, 135). Indeed, it is this impression of having access to the backstage that accounts for the particular character and effectiveness of reality television.

These studies show that the media allow us to engage closely with celebrities and form intimate relationships without ever becoming friends or even meeting. What makes this new type of connection possible is that it can happen publicly, in a context where the normative links with intimacy, such as mutuality, appear to matter less than the cultural recognition that we are connected to one another. As I will discuss in the next section, some social groups derive this sense of connection with others as much from performing their identities as from closely interacting with intimates.

**Identity and Performativity**

Developments in cultural studies and queer theory raise further questions about modern intimacy ideals by marking out an increasingly strong link between sociality and performativity (Bell 1999; Fortier 1999; Cowlishaw 2004; Bhattacharyya 2002; Farrer 2000). Research on dance clubs, for instance, highlights the way sociality is experienced through forms of display undertaken by individuals within large public groups, rather than through sociable interaction:

As soon as the disco music began, young dancers rushed forward to the mirror that covered the entire wall. There they danced, watching and studying themselves in the flashing colored disco lights. In larger discos daring city youth mounted stages to position themselves to be seen by the crowd. In both kinds of places, the logic of participation seemed to be display; the gaze was self-centered and being watched and seeming desirable were the reasons for being there. (Farrer 2000, 226)

Such observations suggest a new potential for intimacy in a public setting where performativity breaks down the boundaries between what is considered public and what is considered personal. Queer academics and intellectuals have questioned these universalistic assumptions of modern social sciences, asking why fixed assumptions about what should be private or public have been able to screen the politics of marginal sexualities from view: “Yet it remains depressingly easy to speak of ‘social theory’ and have in mind whole debates and paraprofessional networks in which sexuality figures only peripherally or not at all—to say nothing of manifestly homophobic work” (Warner 1993, viii). In the last decade, research aimed at increasing the visibility of sexualities and what Warner has described as nonstandard intimacies has blossomed. Research on gender, sexuality, and queer culture highlights other ways in which social groups “perform” their sexual identities in public, suggesting a new link between intimacy and performativity in the forms of sexual engagement which are now being explored in a public context. In this connection, Gargi Bhattacharyya notes that “shifts in the global order have shaped new forms of flexible being including a flexible staging of sexuality” (2002, 82). Here, sexuality is de-
fined as performative rather than as mutual interaction: “In this position, pleasure comes from the style of being rather than from any technique. This is a matter of sexual engagement that loves theatre and spectacle” (80). Similarly, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that sexual intimacy has not always been “knit up in a web of mutuality … in ancient times sex was viewed as something not tied to personhood and identification with other persons” (2002, 195). Whereas intimacy in modern liberal thought was conceived as a mutually absorbing experience that took place in private, queer scholars argue that some types of intimate experiences now take place in public settings as a type of performance. Since performativity in the context of sexual identities is tied to the way we represent ourselves, it thus breaks free from older ideas of finding ourselves through our relations with others. However, it has also been argued that performativity opens the way to a more general process of identification with others. In this connection, I will now examine the link between performativity and belonging.

Intimacy as Performative Sociality
According to Erving Goffman, a performance is “all the activity of an individual . . . marked by his [or her] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (1959, 19). A performance is a social action of a dramaturgical type and is thus expressed through demonstrations and display. This emphasis is evidenced in Goffman’s writings through the use of terms such as theater, set, stage, and so on (Highmore 2002, 50), which Goffman deploys in his construction of a “rhetoric of conduct” and the meaning of social action. Similarly, Moya Lloyd argues that “performance is characterized . . . as a form of theatricality” (1999).

From the perspective of modern intimacy ideals, it seems odd that intimacy can be generated through a type of performance, or that it might involve a spectacle. For one thing: “Intimacy is first of all an experience of a relationship in which we are deeply engrossed” (Gerstein 1984, 265). Being observed (or, alternatively, being the observer) disturbs this sense of engrossment and, thus, changes one’s experience of intimacy into something else: “What we mean by ‘observation’ is perceiving things while maintaining our independence of them. We may observe understandingly, even sympathetically, but we must remain somewhat aloof from that which we are observing. If we lose ourselves in the experience, we relinquish our role as observers and become participants” (266). Similarly, Cohen notes:

Intimate relations are characterized by a particularly vulnerable, fragile sort of interpersonal communication which would fall apart or become seriously distorted if the principles of publicity (open access, inclusion, availability of information) were applied to them. In other words, information, access and internal communication, crucial for the special trust involved in intimate relationships, must be under the control of the special associates themselves. Intimacy requires privacy. (2003, 143)

Cohen is right in the case of interpersonal intimacy in which control over one’s privacy seems essential, but in at least two of the examples examined above, it is the awareness of being watched, or even of sharing a public spectacle, that is integral to the intimate experience. As we recall, in disco dancing, the full glory is in “being watched,” and “opening the full body to the gaze of others” is everything (Farrer 2000, 234). Though clearly a more narcissistic experience than the mutual sense of intimacy typified in modern thought, the performance still seems to guarantee that the performer feels like a wanted and desirable part of the social group.

How, then, can we resolve this dilemma? Can intimacy exist only in a private setting that allows us to be engrossed in the experience, or can we get the same effect through a type of performance? This problem is even more complex when viewed against the background of current theories of performativity.

Current interest in performance as a type of social action, as Highmore notes, has spilled over from “a more recent interest . . . in performativity” (2002, 50). According to Goffman, when we engage in a performance, we use expressive skills to negotiate a social order symbolically. It is also this emphasis on the symbolic and the potency of gesture and style which is the defining aspect of Judith Butler’s notion of performativity. However, in Butler’s analysis of performativity, this emphasis on the symbolic also involves a denaturalization of the social, and it is this which distinguishes it from a bounded performance. According to Anne-Marie Fortier, Butler’s approach to gender and sexuality denaturalizes sex and shows that it is a product of particular discourses. It has been suggested that performance “is not theatre of self display” but “the performance of . . . signs” (Lloyd 1999, 202) whose outcome or effect is the construction of identities and gender. What counts here is the meaning of the acts, rather than the acts themselves. When we apply this idea to an understanding of subjectivity in contemporary settings, the whole question of how we define ourselves and others, which was a central preoccupation of the modern liberal individual, moves up a level of abstraction. No longer dependent on the actual exchanges between intimates, performativity suggests that how we find out who we are comes down to the cultural meaning that is ascribed to them. Thus, as Fortier (1999) explains, “performativity is not merely about the routinization or thresholds"
reiteration of practices within one individual life . . . [but] rather . . . about
the way acts confer a binding power on the action performed.” On this
account, then, the significance of performativity does not end with the signs
themselves. Rather, it is concerned with the production of identities and the
sense of cultural identification this generates, or “how different displays of
presence . . . produce an effect of material and naturalized cultural belong­
ing” (43-44). All the same, it is hard to see from these clues how we might
move from a “performance of signs” to sociality and a sense of together­ness—and harder still to conceptualize intimacy in these terms.

For this, we will first need to turn back to the theoretical resources of
modern sociology. According to Goffman, the fact that performances might
also be seen as forms of impression management was less important than
the fact that this assisted us in getting on with others. In this respect, the
frontstage behavior that was implicit to a performance might also be under­
stood as a type of tact—or discretion about one’s differentiated person—
which one exercised in the course of public social interaction. As such, the
idea of tact is close to what Simmel argued was going on at most sociable
public gatherings in early-twentieth-century Europe. For Simmel, the way
we connected with strangers was quite different from intimacy itself, which
was a far more personal experience. Thus, the playful forms of sociality
possible within large public gatherings of strangers were sharply contrasted
with the dyadic intimacy of the couple, where the individual was implicated
more deeply. There was a sort of freedom possible in the large public gath­
erings, for a member of the public, that wasn’t possible in a more intimate
setting. This allowed us to experience a sort of togetherness as members of
the public, which couldn’t happen in smaller gatherings, where we felt more
personally involved:

At an intimately personal and friendly meeting a lady would not
appear in as lowcut a dress as she wears without any embarrass­
ment at a larger party. The reason is that at the party she does not
feel involved as an individual to the same extent as she does at the
more intimate gathering, and that she can therefore afford to aban­
don herself as if in the impersonal freedom of a mask: although be­
ing only herself she is yet not wholly herself, but only an element
in a group that is held together formally. (Simmel 1950, 46)

In these descriptions of public gatherings, Simmel suggests that it is only
because of our desire to get on with others that we are willing to behave
tactfully in public. However, importantly, in these accounts, the sense of
being bound together and belonging to a social group comes from the par­
ticipation itself. Such theories can give us some sort of benchmark for
evaluating how a performance might build a sense of togetherness in a large
public group, but the context is clearly very different today. For one thing,
the civil ambiance within Simmel’s accounts of public gatherings is cer­
tainly a far cry from the affective experiences that Berlant and Warner de­
scribe as being part of a public sex performance in contemporary New
York: “We realize that we cannot leave, cannot even look away. No-one
can. The crowd is transfixed by the scene of intimacy and display, control
and abandon, ferocity and abjection” (2002, 195). Moreover, the suggestion
here that “displays” can generate such an immediate and absorbing sense of
social connection stands in stark contrast to modern theorizations of inti­
macacy, where observation in any form disturbs the engrossment that is part
of an intimate experience: “We cannot continue to be immersed in the ex­
perience of intimacy if we begin to observe ourselves or other things around
us. We become aware of ourselves as observers separate from the object of
observation. The fragile unity of the experience is broken. . . . We cannot at
the same time be lost in an experience and be observers of it” (Gerstein
1984, 266). And yet it is precisely this consciousness of oneself and others
as “watchers” and as “witnesses” at a homoerotic public performance that
seems to facilitate and intensify the sense of intimacy that develops within
these public settings. As these theorists argue, queer types of intimacy
“combine witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public
world of belonging and transformation” (Berlant and Warner 2002, 199).

From the standpoint of queer scholars, the apparent contradiction be­
tween observation and intimacy within modern theories of intimacy can still
be resolved. According to Goffman, performing is a type of social action
that has socializing effects. Defining performance as a type of ceremony, he
argues that, through the performance, we present idealizations of social
values that ritualistically reinforce our sense of social connection in public
situations (Goffman 1959, 30-31). Similarly, Fortier tells us that the forms
of performative belonging maintain affect in religious communities, a claim
that is confirmed by the recent funeral of Pope John Paul II: “The highly
normative movements that one performs in Catholic Mass are the
incorporation of norms, ‘a stylized representation of acts’ that cultivates
the signs and the sense of belonging” (1999, 1). Making the sign of the cross
or taking communion ritualistically places Catholics within the Catholic
community and produces an affective relationship among its members.

These accounts suggest that the real link between performativity and
intimacy may be found in the concept of performative belonging. The term
is important, argues Vikki Bell, because it “allows an affective dimension”
to performative experiences. Butler explains her own concept of performa­tivity as a style of being, but when performativity is linked to the term “be­
longing,” it becomes possible to understand these experiences as more than “just be-ing but longing” (1999, 1).

**Performative Sociality as a Challenge to Modern Intimacy**

Writing after the turn of the twentieth century, Simmel argued that “complete intimacy becomes more and more difficult as differentiation among men increases” (1950, 326). There were so many differences between us that finding any commonality or mutuality was far from easy. Exactly one century later, when the differences are even more pronounced, we are still striving for connections (Warner 2002). This awareness of difference might explain our continuing search for intimacy in the twenty-first century, but, as I have argued above, the settings where this is taking place have changed. In the mediated publicity of celebrity where everyday lives are on show, it has become possible to sweep differences aside and find a sense of commonality in our shared human frailty. In the disco, the “dance floor is engineered for democracy. The rhythmic pulse of the strobe lights makes everyone a good dancer. The visual confusion makes everyone exotic and alluring” (Farrer 2002, 234). According to Berlant and Warner, “Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (2002, 199).

The emphasis within our examples on the link between performativity and belonging raises questions about the “grand dichotomy” of a public sphere and a private sphere (Weintraub and Kumar 1997) that was constitutive of modern social thought. Celebrity, clubbing, and queer culture all take place in public settings, and in each instance a sense of togetherness, even intimacy, occurs through a type of performance. There are other examples, too, of challenges to the modern contrast between a personal sphere of intimacy, sex, and connection on the one hand, and the anonymous, desexualized public arena of politics on the other (Weintraub and Kumar 1997). Henning Bech (1999), for instance, suggests that it is the modern, urban context of strangers, rather than the hearth of home, that is conducive to sexualized encounters. Instead of expecting intimacy to flow from particular knowledge of individuals, he emphasizes “citysex” as a new type of intimacy with generalized others. Sex in the city takes place in the social world of strangers, where people are only surfaces to one another, “evaluated and styled according to aesthetic criteria” (220). With a different emphasis again, Kathleen Erwin (2000) notes a radical restructuring of public and private domains in the post-consumer revolution city of Shanghai. The expansion of the market, the technological revolution, and the sudden availability of mobile phones have all created new possibilities for a public dialogue about sex. Erwin shows that a private company sponsors the new intimacy hotlines, where callers feel comfortable discussing their sex lives. For the Shanghai locals, discussing sex with close associates and family members would be embarrassing, if not dishonorable. But in both these examples, it is because of the particular properties of the public arena, which affords the individual some freedom, that a type of intimacy is able to develop.

**Intimacy and Its Public Face**

According to Jeff Weintraub, the emergence of modern intimacy is part of a bigger story of modernity, marked by the triumph of privacy in the organization of social life. Drawing on the insights of Philippe Ariès, Weintraub explains intimacy as a changing and increasingly privatized set of social relations that distinguish it from the “broader web of communal ties and sociability” of the older, premodern public order (1997, 18). He tells us:

> The heart of the story [lies in the] reconstruction of the public life of the society of the old regime and its gradual decay. The decay of the older public world and the emergence of the modern family (along with other relationships committed to creating islands of privacy and intense intimacy) form a mutually reinforcing process. The result is a drastic transformation of the relationship between “public” and “private” realms, and of the character of each. (18)

For Simmel, people found a way around their individualized personalities and differences by being civil and emotionally detached in public life, but as Weintraub suggests, they also turned to their families, their friends, and their lovers for closeness, sex, and companionship. People looked for privacy so they could experience these connections, and this is why intimacy as a type of private association flourished. In the local types of intimacy based on the modern family, sociability was turned inward and required reciprocal engagement and the boundary of relational privacy that protected the special bondedness modern forms of intimacy entailed. However, as I have suggested, it seems possible today that public behavior may also generate opportunities for experiencing very close social connections, and a new type of intimacy, but in ways that bear little resemblance to the urbane commonalities of the ballroom. Moreover, where Simmel linked social belonging to the way we relate to others in public and to sociability itself, performativity leads to belonging only through cultural identification.
And, indeed, where Simmel emphasized the need for putting differences aside in order to acquire a sense of group membership, in the contemporary examples we have just considered, there can be no belonging without the recognition of differences shared. New opportunities for intimacy today are thus being found well beyond bedrooms and private houses, in the public arena. These are not the publics of the village square or even the ballroom of the old public order, but the new public of the television, the clubs, and the streets.

Works Cited


Erwin, Kathleena. 2000. “Heart to Heart, Phone-to-Phone: Family Values, Sexuality and the Politics of Shanghai’s Advice Hotlines.” In Davis 2000, 145–70.

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