

## **Sex Differences in Same-Sex Friendship<sup>1</sup>**

**Mayta A. Caldwell<sup>2</sup> and Letitia Anne Peplau**

*University of California, Los Angeles*

*Two studies examined sex differences in the same-sex friendships of college men and women. In a questionnaire study, self-reports were obtained of number of friends and frequency of interaction, typical and preferred kinds of interactions with friends, and emotional intimacy. A role-play study provided more direct information about conversations between friends. Men and women did not differ in quantitative aspects of friendship such as number of friends or amount of time spent with friends, nor in the value placed on intimate friendships. However, clear sex differences were found in both studies in the nature of interactions with friends. Women showed emphasis on emotional sharing and talking; men emphasized activities and doing things together. Results are discussed in terms of life-cycle constraints on friendship, and the possibility of sex differences in standards for assessing intimacy in friendship is considered.*

“Friendship must be taken as seriously as sex, aggression, and marriage,” argues Robert Brain (1976, p. 264). For many people, friendship is a major source of assistance, comfort, emotional sharing, and just plain fun. Friendship allows people to be themselves, less constrained by role expectations and obligations than in their relations with family and co-workers (Suttles, 1970). As a homemaker told Myron Brenton (1974) “I love my husband and I adore my children, but it’s when I sit down for lunch . . . with a good friend that I feel most relaxed” (p. 50). Despite its importance, psychologists have been slow to investigate friendship.

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<sup>2</sup>Correspondence should be sent to Mayta A. Caldwell, Department of Psychology, University of California, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90024.

One area of considerable controversy concerns possible differences in the same-sex friendships of women and men. Stereotypes about same-sex friendships abound, but are often contradictory. Lionel Tiger (1969, 1974) emphasizes male superiority in friendship; men are better able than women to form lasting bonds with same-sex partners. Donelson and Gullahorn (1977) observe, "Some people believe that women are incapable of friendships, and some women themselves accept this view" (p. 167). A contrasting view proposes that men's friendships are superficial and lack the intimacy and emotional richness of women's friendships: "The friendships of women are more frequent, more significant, and more interpersonally involved than those commonly found among men" (Bell, 1979, p. 137). Unfortunately, the empirical evidence documenting such sex differences is very limited.

It is helpful to distinguish three aspects of relationships in which women and men might differ. Sex differences or similarities might occur in quantitative aspects of friendship such as number of friends or frequency of interaction with friends. They might also occur in the degree of intimacy in the friendship or in the types of interaction friends engage in or prefer. The general purpose of our research was to investigate sex differences and similarities among college-aged adults in each of these areas of friendship.

### *Quantitative Aspects of Friendship*

Existing data concerning the number of friends of adult women and men are inconsistent. For example, Booth (1972) found that white-collar husbands reported having more friends than did their wives, but blue-collar husbands and wives did not differ in number of friends. In contrast, Weiss and Lowenthal (1975) found that women reported more friends than men. In a recent survey of a large representative sample of northern Californians, Fischer (Note 1) found that sex differences in friendship were strongly affected by age, employment, and marital status. Among younger unmarried adults, sex differences in the number of friends and associates were small. Among younger married persons, husbands consistently reported more friends than wives; but with increasing age and lessening demands of the homemaker role for women, this pattern reversed. Among older adults, women had significantly more friends and associates than men. These results suggest that global generalizations about sex differences in friendship may be unwarranted; closer attention should be paid to specific subgroups differing in age and other variables. The present research focused on the friendships of unmarried college students. This group is of particular interest, since students are in a situation where both the opportunities and constraints on friendships for women and men may be most comparable.

Another factor that may contribute to inconsistencies in data on sex differences in friendship concerns problems of definition. Research on friendship has seldom provided participants with definitions of the term, or made distinctions among different types of friends. Some people may use the term "friend" broadly to include anyone with whom they are vaguely friendly; others may have a more restricted usage in which only intimates are defined as friends. If men and women define friendship differently, then reported sex differences in friendship may simply reflect sex differences in language usage, not in actual behavior. The present study sought to refine the measurement of friendship by providing participants with definitions of three types of friends: intimate, good, and casual. It also seemed plausible that overall sex differences in total number of friends might obscure underlying patterns in numbers of different types of friends. Thus, men might have more casual friends than women, but women might have more intimate friends than men. Our research examined this possibility.

### *Intimacy*

Previous research has generally supported the view that women's same-sex friendships are more intimate than those of men. In studies conducted with adults of various ages, researchers have found that women's friendships are affectively richer (Williams, 1959); that women are more likely to have intimate confidants (Booth, 1972; Booth & Hess, 1974; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968); and that women report having more "intimate friends" than do men (Powers & Bultena, 1976). It has been suggested that men have difficulty with emotional intimacy (Lewis, 1978; Pleck, 1975) and are emotionally inexpressive (Balswick & Peek, 1971; Komarovsky, 1967). Compared to women, men do disclose less personal information (Cozby, 1973) and also receive less personal information from others (Jourard & Richman, 1963; Komarovsky, 1976). Men appear to be as open as women on nonintimate topics such as hobbies and favorite sports, but are less likely to disclose intimate matters such as love and loneliness (Morgan, 1976). Some research indicates that fewer interpersonal situations stimulate emotions for men (Allen & Haccoun, 1976) and that intimate disclosure is less likely to facilitate men's friendships (Walker & Wright, 1976). It has frequently been suggested that the male sex role limits emotional sharing in male-male relationships (David & Brannon, 1976; Pleck, 1976).

### *Types of Interaction*

If women are more oriented toward emotional intimacy in friendship than men, are men more activity oriented than women? Some research

suggests that this is the case. Wheeler and Nezlek (1977) found a difference in the same-sex interactions of college women and men. Women more frequently shared their feelings or perceptions about themselves and others; men more frequently shared an activity such as a sport or hobby. Wright and Crawford (1971) found that agreement on preferences for specific day-to-day activities was more important for men than for women in forming strong friendships. When Weiss and Lowenthal (1975) analyzed the content of descriptive statements about friends, they found that women stressed reciprocity with an emphasis on help and support, and men stressed similarity with an emphasis on shared experiences. The present research predicted that women's same-sex friendships would be more emotionally intimate than men's. While women's friendships are oriented toward emotional sharing, we expected that men's friendships would be more oriented toward shared activities.

Our research was designed to extend previous research on friendship in several important ways. First, we sought to clarify sex differences in quantitative aspects of friendship by asking questions about three different types of friends. Second, to permit a clear comparison of interactions with friends, we also asked both men and women questions about their single "best friend." By looking at a best same-sex friendship, we investigated the possibility that men and women might have very similar relations with a best friend, even though women's friendships might, as a whole, be more intimate and less activity oriented than men's. Men's friendships might be more specialized than women's, in the sense that intimacy is reserved for a few or perhaps only one best friend, while other friendships are based on the sharing of activities. Komarovsky (1976) has hypothesized that men may self-disclose in fewer relationships than women, but that intimate disclosure is similar for both sexes in their closest relationships. Third, in addition to inquiring about typical interactions with friends, we also assessed individuals' preferences for intimacy and shared activities with friends, and examined the activities individuals considered most important in their best friendships. Our research examined the possibility that men and women might differ in their behavior with friends, but not in what they consider important. For example, men may self-disclose less than women, but consider their revelations to be very important. Finally, our research went beyond self-report data on friendship to include observations of behavior in a standardized role-play situation where women and men were confronted with identical interactional opportunities.

Two studies examined possible sex differences in intimacy and in the quantity and type of interaction with same-sex friends. The questionnaire study used self-reports to assess number and types of friends, frequency of interaction, preferences for interaction with friends, and typical patterns of interaction with a best friend. The role-play study used simulated telephone

conversations to investigate in more detail the verbal interaction between same-sex friends.

## QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY

### *Method*

Participants were 49 women and 49 men undergraduates, enrolled in introductory psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Participation partially fulfilled a course research requirement. Students individually completed a nine-page questionnaire during one of three group testing sessions. Approximately equal numbers of women and men were present at each session.

To investigate possible sex differences in types of friendships, participants indicated how many same-sex friends they had in each of three categories by writing the initials of their friends under each category definition. An *intimate friend* was defined as a very close friend with whom one can really communicate and in whom one can confide about feelings and personal problems. The friendship is valued because of the warmth, caring, and emotional sharing it provides. A *good friend* was defined as person with whom one enjoys doing things and talking about important interests, but not a person with whom one discusses very personal thoughts and feelings. A *casual friend* was defined as a person with whom one mainly does activities; conversation centers on these activities. Interactions are pleasant but need not be regular or frequent. Additional quantitative questions assessed the frequency of interaction with same-sex friends during an average week, and the frequency of interaction with a best friend of the same sex who lived near the respondent.

Certain questions investigated emotional sharing and joint activities. General questions asked about students' preferred type of interaction with friends. For example, respondents indicated whether they would prefer "doing some activity" or "just talking" with a same-sex friend. More specific questions focused on the individual's best friend. Respondents were asked to list the three most important things they frequently did with their friend that "helped form the basis of their friendship". Each response was coded into one of three categories: talk, activity, and other. A *talk* response included words such as "talk" and "discuss," or otherwise indicated talking in the absence of some concomitant activity such as playing cards. An *activity* response indicated that something was done or some action took place. The activity could be general, such as "do things together," or specific, such as "play tennis." Responses that included both talking and an

activity were coded in the activity category. Finally, responses which were unclear or which did not fit the categories (e.g., "help each other" or "respect one another") were coded as *other* responses. Two judges, one of whom was blind to the purpose of the study, independently coded all responses. Initial agreement between judges for all responses was 95%. For the few responses on which there was initial disagreement, judges tried to reach consensus. In rare cases where agreement was not possible, responses were coded into the other category.

Finally, respondents listed three topics that they most typically discussed with their best friend. Responses were coded into one of four categories: personal, activity, people, and other. *Personal* responses indicated a discussion of feelings, problems, or something else of a personal nature (e.g., goals and aspirations). *Activity* responses indicated a discussion of an activity or mutual interest (e.g., sports, parties, music, cars). *People* responses indicated a discussion of individuals (e.g., family, friends, dating partners) where there was no reference to problems, feelings, or an indication that the discussion was personal. (Such cases were coded as personal responses.) A response was coded as *other* when it was unclear in which of the first three categories it belonged (e.g., "past experiences"). The coding procedures were the same as for the previous question; initial agreement between two judges for all responses was 82%.

### Results

Analyses first investigated possible sex differences in quantitative aspects of friendship. No statistically reliable sex differences were found in the total number of friends nor in the number of intimate, good, or casual friends. As shown in Table I, men consistently reported slightly more friends than did women for each type of friend; however, none of these differences reached statistical significance. The large standard deviations indicate a great deal of variation for both women and men in the number of friends reported.

**Table I.** Mean Number of Same-Sex Friends<sup>a</sup>

Type of friend	Women		Men	
Intimate	3.39	(2.21)	3.61	(2.31)
Good	6.45	(3.81)	7.00	(4.06)
Casual	6.40	(5.07)	7.90	(5.83)
Total	16.53	(9.14)	18.51	(8.36)

<sup>a</sup>None of the sex differences is significant (for all,  $p > .10$ ). Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Analyses of self-reported interactions with friends indicated that men and women did not differ significantly in the number of hours (about 13) they spent with friends in an average week. However, men did report "getting together" with a significantly greater number of friends in an average week than did women. Men reported getting together with an average of 6 friends per week, while the mean for women was 4.4 friends,  $t(96) = 2.54, p < .02$ . Turning to reports about a best friend, both men and women said that in an average week they saw their best friend about three times and spent a total of about six and one-half hours with their best friend. A sex difference did emerge, however, in reports of getting together with the best friend "just to talk." For women, this happened about three times a week; for men it occurred only about twice a week,  $t(96) = 2.11, p < .05$ . It appears that men typically get together with more friends than women, while women more often meet their best friend just to talk. To the extent that talking is a prediction for the sharing of personal information, women's greater frequency of getting together to talk may indicate greater emotional sharing in female friendships.

Other questions provided a more direct assessment of emotional sharing and activities with friends. Results indicated that both women and men wanted "intimate" friendships, according to our definition. A majority of both sexes (73% of men and 82% of women) preferred to have a few intimate same-sex friends, as opposed to having many good but less intimate friends. Similarly, most men (61%) and women (63%) preferred to spend a lot of time with their intimate friends, instead of seeing all types of friends but being able to spend less time with any one friend.

Although both sexes valued intimate friendships, they preferred engaging in different activities with friends. When given the choice between "doing some activity" or "just talking" with a same-sex friend, almost twice as many men (84%) as women (43%) preferred to do an activity. Over three times as many women as men (57% vs. 16%) preferred just to talk,  $\chi^2(1) = 15.85, p < .001$ . In addition, more men than women (57% vs. 39%) preferred a same-sex friend who "likes to do the same things" rather than a same-sex friend who "feels the same way about things",  $\chi^2(1) = 2.2, p < .11$ .

Further evidence for sex differences in interaction with friends comes from a question asking respondents to list the three most important things they did with their best friend that "helped form the basis of their friendship." Women more frequently than men mentioned talking,  $t(96) = 2.80, p < .01$ . In contrast, there was a tendency for men more frequently than women to mention an activity,  $t(96) = 1.48, p < .07$ , one-tailed test.

A final test for sex differences in type of interaction with friends was provided by students' reports of three topics they typically discussed

with their same-sex best friend. Consistent with the view of women's friendship as more intimate, personal topics such as feelings and problems were listed twice as often by women as by men,  $t(96) = 2.91, p < .01$ . Women were also significantly more likely to talk about other people than were men,  $t(96) = 3.83, p < .001$ .

To summarize, no sex differences were found in number of friends, amount of time spent with friends, or preference for having intimate friends rather than good or casual friends. Sex differences were evident, however, in typical interactions with friends. Compared to men, women showed a greater preference for "just talking" with friends, were more likely to indicate that talking was an important thing to do with a best friend, and reported talking about more personal topics with a best friend. In contrast, men were more likely to prefer doing some activity with friends, were more likely to engage in activities with their best friend, and were more likely to talk to their best friend about activities. Women's friendships appeared oriented toward personal sharing of information; men's friendships showed an emphasis on joint activities.

### ROLE-PLAY STUDY

A second study was undertaken to extend findings concerning sex differences in interaction between friends. In the questionnaire study, women's self-reports of conversations with a best friend showed emphasis on personal feelings and discussions about other people; men's self-reports showed emphasis on discussions of activities and interests. In order to investigate whether actual conversations would mirror self-reports, role play simulations of conversations between friends were conducted. While the questionnaire study investigated "best friend" conversations, the role-play study examined simulated conversations with a "friend." We used simulations rather than naturally occurring conversations to eliminate the effects of previously developed conversational habits, variations in length of relationships, and so on. We were interested in comparing the behavior of women and men in situations as similar as possible. One conversation was analyzed for sex differences in the expression of feelings, and a second conversation for the mention of people.

#### *Method*

As part of a larger dyadic interaction study, 52 University of California, Los Angeles, undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses participated in role-play conversations. Participation provided partial



course credit. Men were paired to form 10 male-male dyads; women were paired to form 16 female-female dyads. All dyads consisted of students who were unacquainted.

The two students in each dyad role-played telephone conversations between friends. After reading and signing an informed consent sheet, participants were shown to separate rooms equipped with a telephone on which they could talk to each other. In the first "friendship conversation," one member of the dyad was instructed to role-play calling a friend he or she had not talked to in several weeks. In a second "success conversation," one person called to congratulate the other on a recent success. In both role plays, the students improvised a conversation that was limited to three minutes. The conversations were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Content analyses of the transcripts were then conducted.

The success conversation was coded for the number of times the successful person *expressed feelings* (e.g., "happy," "excited," "feel scared"). Whether the congratulating person *solicited feelings* from the successful person was also coded. For example, after talking about the success, one congratulating friend asked, "Doesn't it make you feel good?" In addition, the number of congratulatory or *supportive statements* made by the caller was coded; these included expressions of happiness for the person, well wishing, being proud of the person, and so on. The friendship conversation was coded for the number of times various types of people were mentioned. Separate counts were made for *friends*, *dating partners* or spouses, and parents or other *relatives*. All conversations were independently coded by two judges, one of whom was blind to the purposes of the study. There was 83% agreement between judges on the number of feelings expressed, feelings solicited, and supportive statements. There was 95% agreement on the number of people mentioned. An average of the judges' estimates was used in all analyses.

### Results

It was predicted that women would express more feelings and be more emotionally supportive than men. Several findings from the success conversation supported this hypothesis. Women who role-played the successful person expressed over twice as many feelings as did men,  $t(24) = 2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed test. Women who role-played the congratulating person made more supportive statements than did men,  $t(24) = 1.84$ ,  $p < .05$ , one-tailed test. For instance, women were more likely to say they were happy for the successful person and to express enthusiasm for the friend's success with such statements as "That's great." Although not statistically

significant, women who role-played the congratulating person frequently asked about the friend's feelings: nearly 40% of women asked the successful person how she felt; no men asked their successful friend how he felt.

As predicted, in the friendship conversation, women talked more frequently than did men about friends, dating partners, and relatives,  $t(24) = 2.10, p < .05$ . Women talked two and one-half times as much about these persons as did men. More specifically, women were more likely to talk about members of their family at least once during the conversation,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.96, p < .05$ . Only 10% of the male-male dyads mentioned a parent or other relative; 62% of the female-female dyads did. Mention of friends was more highly variable. Men and women were equally likely to mention a friend at least once in the conversation. A count of lines of typed transcript in which friends were mentioned revealed a range from never to 38% of the conversation. Using this measure, women talked about friends six times as much as men did,  $t(24) = 1.18, p < .12$ , one-tailed test. Men and women did not differ in the frequency of mentioning a dating partner or spouse, nor in the amount of time spent discussing romantic partners.

Frequency and duration data do not capture some of the qualitative differences in the way men and women discussed personal relationships. For instance, while the ending of a dating relationship was a frequent topic for both sexes, the men always made a comment such as "It's springtime, and there are lots of other dames out," or "I'd rather play the field." Women never made such comments. These statements by men could be interpreted as a way of sidestepping a personal discussion by denying that the break-up had any real impact. In general, data from the role-play conversations supported the earlier questionnaire data. In both, women talked about feelings and people more than did men.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

We found no evidence that one sex has more friends than the other. The college men and women in our sample reported similar numbers of intimate, good, and casual friends, and reported spending about the same amount of time with friends. These results are consistent with those of Fischer (Note 1), and suggest that among young unmarried adults, sex differences in quantitative aspects of friendship are minimal. Young adulthood is probably the time of life when men's and women's friendships are least constrained by sex-linked differences in status and role responsibilities. College women and men occupy the same student role, are likely to have similar opportunities for forming friendships, and are in situations where opportunities for socializing are high. Later in life, however, marriage may lead to different opportunities for friendships for women and men. Fischer's data (Note 1) indicate that "during early marriage and

parenthood, women's friendships shrink relative to men's" (p. 6), presumably due to the constraints of homemaking and child rearing. A more careful charting of life-cycle changes in friendship and greater understanding of the reasons for such changes are needed.

Men and women in our sample were also quite similar in the value they placed on intimate friendship; both sexes preferred having and spending time with a small number of intimate friends, rather than a larger number of less intimate friends. Where the sexes differed was in the nature of their interactions with friends. Women showed a greater interest in emotional sharing. Women preferred talking to activities, and, on several measures, women indicated spending more time talking to a best friend and revealing more about their feelings, problems, and personal relationships. In contrast, men appeared more interested in shared activities. Men preferred activities to talking; they more often got together with a best friend to engage in a particular activity such as a sport; and their conversations with a best friend more often centered on shared activities and interests. Contrary to Komarovsky's (1976) suggestion that men's and women's intimate disclosure is similar in their closest relationships, we found that emotional sharing played a lesser role in men's than women's best same-sex friendships.

Our data reveal an interesting discrepancy between subjective reports of intimacy in friendship and objective measures of intimate interactions (see also Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). Both women and men in our sample said they valued intimacy, and reported equal numbers of intimate friends, defined as someone "with whom one can really communicate and in whom one can confide about feelings and problems." Yet actual self-disclosure of feelings and problems—a common measure of intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Derlega & Chaikin, 1975)—indicated that men's interactions with a best friend were less personal and intimate than women's. Men and women may be equally likely to define friends as intimate; however, men and women may have different standards for assessing the intimacy of friendship. Because the male sex role restricts men's self-disclosure to other men, small degrees of personal revelation to a male friend may be taken as a sign of considerable intimacy (cf. Suttles, 1970). In contrast, since women commonly reveal personal information to female friends, greater levels of self-disclosure may be needed for a relationship to be construed as intimate. Future research might fruitfully examine the meaning of intimacy in the same-sex friendships of women and men.

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