

Close Friendship in Adulthood: Conversational Content Between Same-Sex Friends

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This study was designed to examine ongoing close friendships among same-sex adults. An analysis of frequency and depth of conversational topics was undertaken. The self-reports of female participants showed that they converse more frequently than the male participants about intimate topics and daily and shared activities. Sex differences on depth of topic discussion also emerged, with females reporting greater depth in topics involving personal and family matters. Sports was the only topic for which males, rather than females, reported both more frequent discussion and conversation in greater depth. The topic frequency data were factor analyzed for each sex group. The factor analyses indicated patterns for the males on "personal issues," "sociocultural issues," and "activity" and patterns for females on "domestic matters," "personal issues," and "worldly issues." The results of the study generally support sex-stereotypical assumptions about the nature of male-male and female-female conversations.

Systematic research has seldom been directed at the nature of close same-sex friendship in adulthood. Most studies of intimate relationships in adult life focus on either marriage or kinship. When friendship has been studied, the work is largely restricted to college-age populations who are readily available as research subjects and for whom the relationship is seen as crucial in the formation of late adolescent identity (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Friendships are thought to be sharply curtailed and less intense after marriage (Bott, 1971; Lopata, 1971; Lowenthal, Thurnher, Chirrboga, & Associates, 1976; Young & Willmott, 1957), yet all the authors who have studied marriage and kinship find that adults do have close friends. Bott (1971) concludes that investigators may have been too "bedazzled by kinship to take proper note of friendship" (p. 234).

Of the important interpersonal relationships that people have, friendship is unique in several respects. It has been characterized as the least "programmed" and socially defined of any important relationship (Suttles, 1970), and the definition of friendship rests on voluntary association and affective ties (Wright, 1978). One quickly learns by reviewing the literature on friendship that little is known about either the precise manner in which individuals do define and "program" their own friendships or the form and function of their voluntary ties. Instead, a bulk of the research clarifies why people are drawn together as friends. Similar personalities (Beier, Rossi, & Garfield, 1961; Izard, 1960; Pierce, 1970); similar cognitive construction systems (Duck, 1973a; 1973b; Duck & Spencer, 1972); and common attitudes, values, and interests (Black, 1974; LaGaipa & Werner, 1971; Lowenthal, et al., 1976; Olczak & Goldman, 1975; Secord & Backman, 1964) all appear to influence friendship pairing. Sullivan (1953) sees the friendship pairing as crucial in clarifying, correcting, and confirming one's perceptions, and providing consensual validation of all components of personal worth.

Past theory and research have clarified that socialized sex roles contribute in important ways to the type of friendships that adults have. Married adults tend to develop their closest friendships with members of the same sex. In the lower class, where sex-role differentiation is most pronounced, husbands and wives have been found to form sex-segregated networks of friends as well as kin (Bott, 1971; Komarovsky, 1967; Turner, 1967). Even in the middle and upper classes, where couples tend to form friendships with other couples, husbands are more likely to share confidences with husbands, and wives with wives (Babchuk, 1965). Daly (1978) postulates that sex-role socialization also influences the kind of sharing between friends: Male comradeship/brotherhood thrives on shared endeavor and the loss of personal identities; female friendship/sisterhood thrives on the enhancement of personal identities, on heightened self-discovery, and on self-awareness. Research supporting Daly's views shows that male friendship consists more of activity, while female friendship consists of a greater sharing of deep feelings and confidences (Lowenthal et al., 1976; Pleck & Sawyer, 1974).

The present study is directed toward specifying the nature of close friendship for adult males and females. While previous research has focused on the process of friendship formation and used college students as subjects, the present study seeks to examine ongoing close friendships among adults. In order to assess what constitutes a close friendship and to determine if adult male and female friendships are differentiated in consistent ways, an examination of conversational content between close friends was undertaken. Focusing on topics of conversation is helpful in revealing the degree of personal content and the intimacy afforded through the sharing of content (Johnson, Davis, & McNamee, 1978).

Altman and Taylor (1973) suggest that as a relationship develops, there is a gradual progression towards discussion of more areas of information and

towards disclosure about deeper, more intimate material. The literature on self-disclosure provides some basis, however, for speculating that females disclose more intimacies than males. Cozby's (1973) review of the literature indicated mixed results on sex differences, but did establish that no researchers found men to be more self-disclosing than women. Jourard (1971) is often cited as providing support for the conclusion that females disclose more to the same-sex friends than do males, but Morgan (1976) found that males and females are differentiated only on high intimacy topics, on which females disclose more than males. Rands and Levinger's (1979) work on "implicit theories" of pair relationships establishes that female pairs are perceived as more likely to disclose intimacies than are male pairs. Aries' (1976) study of same-sex laboratory groups is generally consistent with the self-disclosure research. By content analyzing discussions that members of the same sex had in order to get to know one another, she found that women share more about themselves, their feelings, homes, and close relationships; men share more about sports and amusements; competition and aggression; and things they have seen, read, or heard.

In order to assess the verbal informational exchange between close friends, the structured questionnaire method was selected. An open-ended questionnaire format was attempted by Phillips and Metzger (1976) in order to assess what close friends talk about, but the responses obtained were too incomplete and imprecise to categorize and content analyze. Although analysis of actual conversational content would provide a rich data base, it would be extremely difficult to collect such data with any assurance that the data were representative. In order to construct the questionnaire, it was first necessary to specify topics that close friends are likely to discuss. Therefore, a pilot study was conducted with 40 adults (20 males and 20 females) randomly selected from a New England community and interviewed about a close friendship with a member of their own sex. As part of the interview, participants were asked to name the topics of conversation that they discussed with their close friends. These topics formed the basis for a questionnaire used in the present study. Subjects were presented with these topics, which involved different degrees of personal content, and were asked to assess both the depth and frequency of discussion on each of these topics.

METHOD

Respondents

Participants included 158 parents of students at the University of Massachusetts. Students from a large undergraduate course volunteered to give a questionnaire to one of their parents to be filled out; half were instructed to give it to their mother, half to their father.

Of the 158 questionnaires completed, 22 were excluded from the data analysis (11 males and 11 females) because they indicated that they had no same-sex close friends. The analysis is thus based on 136 adults, 62 men and 74 women.

The sample can be characterized as predominantly White (93%), middle aged ($x = 49.87$ years, $sd = 6.48$), well educated ($x = 14.58$, $sd = 2.68$), and middle class (80% report themselves to be middle class, 7.4% to be upper class, and 12.5% to be working or lower class). Incomes ranged from 21.2% earning under \$12,000 to 35.4% earning over \$30,000. Of the sample 83% were currently married. While the sample is not random, it is representative of the population: Marital status percentages are comparable to those for the 45-54-year-old group in the 1977 U.S. Census; income level is also comparable to White families with heads of household having completed 1-3 years of college (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1978).

Instrument

In the friendship questionnaire, respondents first completed a section on demographic characteristics. They then received the following instructions for completing the major portion of the questionnaire: "We would like you to pick *one* person of your sex whom you consider to be your close friend. If there is no one person whom you feel is a close friend, pick the person of the same sex whom you feel closest to currently and check the box to the right." Questions centered on the frequency and nature of subject's communication with their close friend, and on the frequency and depth of topics of conversation which they discuss. For each of 17 topics listed on the questionnaire, participants were instructed to rate the topics as "frequent," "infrequent" or "never discussed." If the topic was ever discussed, participants were asked to rate the discussion as "in-depth," "somewhat in-depth," or "not in-depth."

RESULTS

Three descriptive approaches were taken to analyze the data in order to provide an understanding of close same-sex friendships. First, an overall description of close friendships was derived from the frequency counts on proximity and contact between friends, and from percentages of friends who discuss each topic and who discuss it in-depth. Second, differences between male and female friendships were determined by applying chi-square tests of independence to both frequency and depth data for each topic. Finally, factor analyses were carried out separately for each sex to see if underlying patterns or intercorrelated clusters of topics were discussed by each sex.

Frequency and Nature of Communication

Responses to questions about frequency and nature of communication between close friends were analyzed for sex differences. No differences between men and women emerged for either proximity or frequency of contact. Participants reported that their close friends lived anywhere from next door to across the country. However, in response to the question "My friend lives close enough so that we can see each other often," 76% of the sample agreed. Furthermore, 45% of the sample reported that they see their close friend either daily or weekly, and another 27% at least monthly. Both sexes report, then, that a close friend tends to be a person who lives nearby and is seen frequently.

In response to a question regarding the frequency of phone conversations lasting 10 minutes or more, females indicated a substantially greater tendency to talk to their friends for this period than did males, $\chi^2(2) = 29.05$, $p < .0000$. Half the women reported having phone conversations lasting 10 minutes or more with their friend daily or weekly, and another quarter at least monthly. On the other hand, only 19% of the men reported daily or weekly phone conversations of 10 or more minutes, and an additional 14% reported such conversations at least once a month.

Frequency and Depth of Conversational Content

Nine of the 17 topics were discussed by over 90% of the subjects: community/civic affairs, daily activities, family activities, family problems, hobbies/shared activities, social/political issues, personal problems, reminiscences about things done together in the past, and work. About one-third of these subjects reported they discuss these topics in-depth (the percentage of subjects reporting in-depth discussion of these topics ranged from 26% to 44%). The least frequently discussed topics (discussed by 60% of the sample or less) were secrets about the past, and sex and sexual concerns. These were also the topics that were discussed least often in-depth.

Topics of conversation vary in their degree of personalness. The more personal topics provide one measure of difference between male-male and female-female friendships.

Data on frequency of topics (see Table I) demonstrate that close female friends converse more often than do close male friends about the personal topics of personal problems, $\chi^2(2) = 14.89$, $p < .007$, doubts and fears, $\chi^2(2) = 18.56$, $p < .002$, family problems, $\chi^2(2) = 14.49$, $p < .0008$, and intimate relationships, $\chi^2(2) = 8.55$, $p < .02$. Personal problems, doubts and fears, and family problems were discussed by at least 94% of the females, compared to 76% to 87% of the men, and were discussed frequently by nearly half of the

Table 1. Relative Frequency of Conversational Topics by Sex of the Friends (Percent)

Topic ^a	Female-female (n = 74)				Male-male (n = 62)			
	Frequently	Infrequently	Never		Frequently	Infrequently	Never	
Personal problems ^d	45	50	5		14	73	13	
Doubts and fears ^d	46	49	5		16	60	24	
Daily activities ^c	78	18	4		50	45	5	
Family problems ^d	47	51	1		26	56	18	
Intimate relationships ^b	26	45	30		8	44	48	
Hobbies/shared activities ^b	60	39	1		45	45	10	
Religion and morals	38	53	10		24	61	14	
Reminiscences	49	50	1		37	58	5	
Family activities	78	22	0		68	32	0	
Personal Finances	18	57	26		10	63	27	
Sex/sexual concerns	10	50	41		5	50	45	
Friendship itself	26	54	20		21	50	29	
Social/political issues	46	45	10		45	52	3	
Secrets about past	7	46	47		7	41	52	
Community/civic affairs	52	45	3		53	44	3	
Work	51	45	4		56	42	2	
Sports ^d	18	42	41		45	40	14	

^aTopics are arranged according to the difference between males and females in frequency of discussion, from more frequent discussion by females to more frequent discussion by males.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

^d $p < .001$.

females, compared to less than 26% of the males. Both sexes discussed intimate relationships less frequently than the other three personal topics; 26% of the females, compared to 8% of the males, reported that this topic was frequent.

The reported depth of conversation about these same personal topics revealed a less pronounced difference between female-female and male-male pairs (see Table II). The one striking difference is in depth of talk about personal problems, with women reporting more depth than men, $\chi^2(2) = 15.67$, $p < .0004$. Of the women, 46% rate this topic as covered in-depth, while only 13% of the men report the same. On the other three topics, there is a trend ($p < .10$) for women to discuss them more in-depth than men.

Sex differences in frequency and depth of conversation emerged not only for topics involving personal content but also for topics involving activities. Female friends report more frequent conversation about daily activities, $\chi^2(2) = 12.48$, $p < .002$, and hobbies and shared activities, $\chi^2(2) = 6.13$, $p < .05$. While over 90% of both sexes indicated the presence of these topics, daily activities were discussed frequently by 78% of females, compared to 50% of males; and hobbies and shared activities were discussed frequently by 60% of females, compared to 45% of males. The only topic that men said they discussed more frequently than did women was sports, $\chi^2(2) = 16.51$, $p < .0001$; 86% of the men and 60% of the women indicated this topic, but 45% of the men said it was frequent, while only 18% of the women did so. The male participants also reported more depth to this topic, $\chi^2(2) = 16.11$, $p < .0004$.

Three topics accounted for sex differences in depth but not in frequency. Women discussed both family activities and reminiscences about their past together in more depth, $\chi^2(2) = 6.98$, $p < .05$ and $\chi^2(2) = 9.58$, $p < .009$, respectively. Men discussed work in greater depth than women, $\chi^2(2) = 6.31$, $p < .05$, which may be due to sex differences in the degree to which work is integrated into all aspects of everyday life (40% of the female participants were housewives).

Factor Analysis of Topic Frequencies

In order to characterize topic frequencies for friendship pairs more parsimoniously, factor analyses for females and males separately were conducted on the 17 topic frequency variables. The topic depth variables were not submitted to factor analysis because of large differences in sample size for each measure. All subjects answering "never" on the frequency variables would have been eliminated, and doing so resulted in sample sizes of males or females ranging from 30 to 74 (see Table III).

The 17 topic frequencies were factor analyzed using the principal components method. Five factors for males and six factors for females emerged with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. Oblique rotations were done first. The inter-

Table II. Relative Depth of Conversation by Sex of the Friends (Percent)

Topic ^a	Female-female				Male-male			
	In-depth		Somewhat		In-depth		Somewhat	
	(n)	in-depth	Not in-depth	(n)	(n)	in-depth	Not in-depth	
Personal problems ^d	(69)	46	38	16	(54)	13	59	29
Reminiscences ^c	(72)	42	39	19	(58)	21	64	16
Family problems	(72)	49	39	13	(51)	29	49	22
Family activities ^b	(73)	53	44	3	(60)	33	57	10
Doubts and fears	(69)	43	42	14	(47)	26	47	28
Friendship itself	(58)	40	40	21	(45)	24	47	29
Daily activities	(70)	37	53	10	(57)	23	54	23
Sex/sexual concerns	(44)	18	45	36	(34)	6	38	56
Intimate relationships	(52)	23	56	21	(32)	16	41	44
Religion and morals	(67)	34	48	18	(53)	28	42	30
Hobbies/shared activities	(73)	36	56	8	(54)	30	57	13
Secrets about past	(40)	13	43	45	(29)	14	48	38
Personal finances	(56)	14	41	45	(45)	16	49	36
Social/political issues	(68)	26	51	22	(59)	29	42	29
Sports ^d	(45)	16	22	62	(52)	21	56	23
Community/civic affairs	(71)	23	63	14	(58)	29	52	19
Work ^b	(69)	29	49	22	(60)	38	55	7

^aTopics are arranged according to the difference between males and females in frequency of discussion, from more frequent discussion by females to more frequent discussion by males.

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

^d $p < .001$.

Table III. Varimax Rotation of Factor Patterns for Females and Males

Topic	Females			Males		
	Factor I	Factor II	Factor III	Factor I	Factor II	Factor III
Community/civic activities	.45	.09	.14	-.06	.75	-.18
Daily activities	.59	.09	.13	.38	.25	.26
Doubts and fears	.48	.31	-.12	.65	.27	-.13
Family activities	.59	-.12	.23	.36	.23	.61
Family problems	.67	.22	-.14	.78	.11	.19
Hobbies/shared activities	.29	.09	.36	.28	.38	.25
Intimate relationships	.37	.60	.03	.52	-.06	.05
Personal finances	.71	.34	-.05	.57	.18	-.04
Social/political issues	.06	-.08	.45	.05	.77	.08
Personal problems	.41	.32	-.18	.67	.20	-.08
Religion and morals	.03	.11	.66	.32	.78	.04
Reminiscences	-.04	.37	.19	.03	-.07	.61
Secrets about past	.24	.56	-.03	.64	-.02	.29
Sex/sexual concerns	.28	.65	.52	.03	.03	.02
Sports	-.08	.01	.59	-.07	-.01	.55
Friendship itself	-.17	.34	.36	.29	.08	.13
Work	.25	.29	.37	.38	.34	.06
Eigenvalue	4.217	2.212	1.575	4.837	2.126	1.746
Percent of variance	24.8	13.0	9.3	28.5	12.5	10.3

correlation of factors was very low to negligible, and orthogonal rotation was thus warranted. Initial varimax rotation established that for males, Factors IV and V had loadings of .50 or more on only 1 variable (neither of which was intercorrelated with any other variable); thus, these factors did not reveal true dimensions of judgment and were dropped. The retained first three factors accounted for 51.2% of the variance. For females, the final three factors presented a similar situation and did not add considerably to the variance accounted for. Again, the first three factors were retained, accounting for 47.1% of the variance. Three factor solutions with varimax rotation were then conducted for both males and females. Each factor was defined by topics with loadings of .50 or more. By this criterion, no topic loaded on more than one factor. The factor loadings are presented in Table III.

For males, Factor I represents Personal Issues, and the topics of family problems, personal problems, doubts and fears, secrets about the past, personal finances, sex and sexual concerns, and intimate relationships have high loadings on this factor. Factor II is labeled Sociocultural Issues and consists of religion and morals, political and social issues, and community and civic affairs. Factor III, Activity, is defined by reminiscences about the past, family activities, and sports.

The factor patterns that emerged for female friendship pairs differ in focus. Factor I, Domestic Matters, involves personal finances, family problems, daily activities, and family activities. Factor II is Personal Issues, but has a simpler pattern than the same dimension for males. Here the loadings are for secrets about the past, sex and sexual concerns, and intimate relationships. Factor III seems best labeled as Wordly Issues, a dimension involving religion and morals and sports. Of the 17 topic variables, 13 appear in the three factor patterns for males, and 9 appear in the three factors for females.

DISCUSSION

Three different types of information were obtained from this study. First, a general profile of the makeup of close relationships in adulthood tells us something about the commonalities that appear to define this relationship. Second, frequency and depth of specific conversational topics allow not only a general profile but also contribute information on sex differences in adult friendship. Third, factor analysis provides a vantage point on the data in that the topic frequency patterns for each sex can be inspected for underlying dimensions of conversational content.

The commonalities in topics discussed by all participants suggest at least some regularity and "program" in the nature of close friendship in adulthood. The 9 topics discussed by 90% or more of the sample include one's

daily web of activities and concerns (daily and family activities, hobbies/shared activities, work, family and personal problems), a sense of continuity of one's identity with the past (reminiscences about things done together in the past), and one's relationship to the outside world (community/civic affairs and social/political issues). The specific commonalities present in the data might be explained by Sullivan's (1953) view that a person needs friends in order to clarify and confirm perceptions and to establish some type validation for personal identity and worth.

The data support Altman and Taylor (1973), who argue that one would find both depth and breadth of exchange between close friends. The topical areas discussed by close friends in this study include frequent disclosure about intimate topics (personal and family problems), and cover a broad range of content. The data also support Altman and Taylor's beliefs that persons will continue to discuss some topics involving less depth (e.g., hobbies/shared activities) while moving into discussion of other more intimate areas, and that once more intimate topics have been opened for discussion, not all discussion takes place in-depth. In fact the pattern for all participants was not to discuss topics in-depth. This pattern conforms to what contemporary slang labels "touching base" with a close friend, even though extensive depth discussion is sometimes achieved.

Of the 17 topics, sex/sexual concerns and secrets about the past are both the least frequent and the least likely to be discussed in depth. As preoccupied with sex and meaningful relationships as our society has become, topics tapping these preoccupations seem not to have permeated the boundaries of friendship for the middle-aged group. A comparison of this age group with a younger sample would be helpful in clarifying whether the lack of candor about sex and personal secrets is generational or still a general social norm.

Analysis of the conversational content of close same-sex adult friends reveals that females exchange information more frequently and more in-depth about their doubts and fears, personal and family problems, and intimate relationships. This supports previous findings that women are more self-disclosing about intimate matters. It is clear, however, that the majority of men discuss these topics, although infrequently and only somewhat in-depth. This suggests that males may see a close friend as someone to confide in about personal matters, but sex-role pressures restrict the frequency and depth with which they can express themselves to other men.

It is important to note that verbal exchange is only one dimension of possible exchange that might take place between close friends. Behavioral exchange, such as mutual activities or help in time of need, may be more important to the maintenance of close friendship among men. Douvan and Adelson (1966) have reported that the sharing of activities was more important than the sharing of intimacies in male adolescent friendships.

Women also speak more frequently about their daily activities and their shared interests and hobbies. It appears that close female friends share more not only about who they are personally but also about what they do on a daily basis. The only topic where men exceed women in their reports that the topic occurs frequently between the friends is sports—again, sex-role stereotypic.

The sex differences on conversational topic and depth are all generally consistent with sex-role norms, particularly the tendency for women to be more disclosing on intimate topics. These norms have previously been confirmed in adolescent populations and in some cases among strangers, but the data provide a basis for extending these findings to close adult relationships. Women's more frequent and in-depth discussions about intimate matters may contribute substantially to the enhancement of personal identities, self-discovery, and self-awareness which Daly (1978) notes. Through more frequent sharing about a broad range of topics, the lives of female friends are potentially more interconnected than is the case for males.

The factor analysis of topic frequencies for males and females brings to light several dimensions of gender-typical conversations between friends. The Personal Issues factor (Factor I) for men when considered in connection with the frequency data for each topic with high loading on the factor, seems to reflect a dimension associated with topic avoidance. When topics for the male participants are ranked according to the percent who report that the topic is discussed "frequently," 6 of the 7 topics loaded on the Personal Issues factor are also those least often discussed frequently by males. With the exception of family problems, which 26% say they discuss frequently, no more than 16% reported frequent discussions on any of the other topics in this factor.

The Personal Issues, Sociocultural Issues, and Activity factors that emerged for men can be taken as a construal of the domain of friendship conversation. If men tend to avoid frequent discussion of personal issues, then they must focus on one of the other dimensions, since the factors have low intercorrelations. The stereotype of the male as oriented in expression toward nonintimate topics and topics centered on activity and public issues seems to emerge in the factor patterns.

For females, the factor patterns are less easily interpreted in relation to the frequency data. The Personal Issues factor (Factor II for females) seems to reflect, as with the males, a dimension of topic avoidance. Although fewer topics load on this factor for females than males, the three that do are never talked about by approximately 40% of the females. While one-quarter of the women frequently discuss intimate relationships, neither sex nor secrets are discussed frequently by more than 10% of the women. The Domestic Matters factor is very consistent with the cluster of issues usually associated with women's talk. Factor II, composed of morals and religion and sports, is labeled Worldly Issues, but what the factor represents is simply not clear.

The emergent factor patterns for males and females in this study offer support for several conclusions. The dimensions underlying topical frequency for women can be seen to reflect a more interior orientation. All items in Factor I and II revolve around the immediacy of home, family, and personal considerations. The factor patterns in relation to the frequency data demonstrate that personal issues that tend to be avoided in discussion with a close friend are much more broadly defined for males than females. Perhaps men see a greater number of issues as strictly private than do women.

Any firm conclusions based on the factor analyses must be tempered for the following reasons. First, there are methodological problems with the use of factor analysis on these data. There are only three response categories, and for many items the actual response patterns are essentially dichotomous. Furthermore, points on the response scale do not represent equal intervals. Second, for both males and females, the three-factor solution accounts for only about 50% of the variance in topic frequencies.

One final point is necessary in relation to the sex differences seen in topic frequency, topic depth, and dimensionality of topic frequency. The data indicated no sex differences for frequency of contact among close friends. What is not known is the amount of time that female friends and male friends spend together when they are in contact. It is possible that female friends, although they see each other no more often than male friends, actually spend more time together. Women do talk more on the phone, and if they also spend more time in each other's company, they may quite naturally have a greater opportunity than men to discuss a variety of topics, discuss more personalized topics, and discuss more topics in greater depth.

It may also be that females are involved together in situations with friends that support more personal, in-depth conversations than males. For example, interview data from the pilot study suggested that females spend more time alone with their friends, while males spent more time with friends in group situations. Differences in absolute amount of contact, as well as the context of contact, may contribute to differences between males and females in the conversational fabric of their friendships.

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