

Gender-Specific Pathways to Intimacy in Early Adolescence

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As part of a larger longitudinal study of psychosocial development, 148 girls and 130 boys were administered a series of questions regarding a close friend during their eighth-grade school year. Scales corresponding to shared experience, self-disclosure, and intimacy (defined as emotional closeness) were developed from these items. Path-analytic models tested the relative strength of the self-disclosure and shared experience paths to emotional closeness for boys and girls separately. The results indicated that the self-disclosure path to emotional closeness is significant for both boys and girls. No relationship was found between shared experience and emotional closeness in girls when controlling for self-disclosure. The relationship between shared experience and feelings of closeness was, however, significant for boys even while controlling for the effects of self-disclosure. Covariance structure analysis (LISREL) indicated that the covariance matrices for the three scales were significantly different for boys and girls. The results are considered in relation to the gender socialization and friendship literature. The potential importance of defining intimacy as emotional closeness is also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Previous theory and research in the field of early adolescence suggests that the biological, cognitive, and social changes common to this developmental period make it a critical time for formation of intimate friendships (e.g., Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Hunter and Youniss, 1982). Although most research suggests that girls develop more intimate friendships than boys (e.g., Crockett *et al.*, 1984), others report no such gender difference, and instead they suggest that the differences found are a function of qualitatively different friendship patterns among young adolescent boys and girls (Diaz and Berndt, 1982). To begin explication of these discrepancies, this current work focuses on the gender differences associated with intimacy development in early adolescence and proposes a more gender neutral definition of intimacy and a corresponding conceptual framework.

In Berndt's (1982) review of the early adolescent friendship literature, he concluded that the definition of intimacy most typically employed by researchers focuses on the sharing of personal thoughts and feelings. It is our suggestion, however, that these definitions are problematic in that not all personal disclosure, even of a private nature, needs to lead to the feeling of closeness that generally characterizes intimacy. Self-disclosure definitions of intimacy may be focusing on the process that can lead to the outcome of intimacy but are not focusing on the end state itself.

Sullivan (1953) identified this end state of intimacy as "closeness, without specifying what is close other than persons" (p. 246). It is clear, however, that this definition may be too broad. As Hinde (1981) suggested, most interpersonal constructs can be defined as either behavioral or cognitive/affectively oriented. Closeness in relationships can be both. H. H. Kelley *et al.* (1983) suggested that close relationships are best defined in terms of their interdependent nature. That is, a close relationship is one that is influential. This more behavioral focus on closeness is an important way to understand and categorize relationships. We believe, however, that intimacy is more appropriately understood as a cognitive/affective construct. In their review of interpersonal attraction, Huston and Levinger (1978) noted two elements integral to describing "close affective relationships": a favorable attitude and joint belongingness. These two cognitive/affective characteristics more reasonably encompass the construct of intimacy. It is not the actual behavioral closeness; rather, it is the *feeling* of closeness that characterizes intimacy. From this perspective then, intimacy can be understood to be the subjective experience of closeness toward another person. It is primarily characterized by feelings of connection or joint belonging. Intimacy is cognitive/affectively oriented and has a positive valence. In simpler terms, intimacy could be defined as emotional closeness (to contrast with behavioral or influential closeness).

Defining intimacy as emotional closeness has important implications in at least two related ways. First, if self-disclosure is a behavior that can lead to emotional closeness, then including it in either a conceptual or operational definition of intimacy blurs the ability of the researcher to understand the processes that may be involved in the development of the feelings of closeness central to the intimacy construct. Second, although it may be the case that gender socialization in our culture generally prepares females for greater emotional closeness than males (Fischer and Narus, 1981), including self-disclosure in the definition of intimacy may unnecessarily bias research results in favor of females, making it difficult to explicate the phenomenon of intimacy development as it actually occurs in either male or female.

If we begin with the axiom that emotional closeness is an outcome or end state that can be attained, then it logically follows that there are both processes or behaviors leading to emotional closeness and background variables or conditions that can influence its development. With this perspective, the present study examines gender as a condition (primarily as a function of gender socialization) that can influence the processes leading to emotional closeness in early adolescence.

GENDER PATHWAYS TO EMOTIONAL CLOSENESS

Considerable attention has been given to the gender differences between girls' and boys' friendship patterns. Sharabany *et al.* (1981), in their study of preadolescent and early adolescent children, found that girls in their sample expected to be more expressive towards their friends than did boys. Girls reported higher scores on frankness, knowing and sensitivity, attachment, exclusiveness, trust, and loyalty. In contrast, the boys expected to be more instrumental with their friends. They scored higher on giving and sharing materially, taking and imposing, and common activities. In Richey and Richey's (1980) study of older adolescents, they found similar distinctions made in the process of friendship selection. They reported that boys selected friends equally on the basis of being able to confide in them and being able to have fun with them. Girls initially chose friends because they could talk freely to them. Best friends were selected because they could be confidants, and all other reasons were of secondary importance. Lever's (1976) investigation of school-aged children's play suggested that girls' relationships centered around talking, whereas boys' relationships centered around large group activities and doing things together.

Given different friendship patterns and expectations about friendship, it is reasonable to assume that young adolescent boys' and girls' experience of intimate friendships may be different. Both boys and girls may feel emo-

tionally close to a friend but the path to that closeness might be different. That self-disclosure is linked to emotional closeness is evident from the fact that it is so often included in definitions of intimacy. Because girls' friendship patterns so heavily emphasize such expressive behaviors, it is logical to hypothesize that self-disclosure is their primary path to emotional closeness.

Given the general social discouragement against self-disclosure in boys, it becomes necessary to consider possible alternate pathways to emotional closeness for them. Although social penetration theory has generally been connected to self-disclosure, Altman and Taylor (1973) clearly acknowledged the potential importance of other "nonverbal and environmentally oriented behaviors" (p. 5) in the developing relationship. Some of the same information gained by self-disclosure could be gained by shared experience. Sullivan (1953) also argued that one learns much about a friend from behaviors and responses observed in shared experience contexts. He considered this to be sharing of a personal nature and suggested that it may be a potential way for friends to become closer. Shared experience is also similar to self-disclosure in that they both have quantitative and qualitative aspects. Self-disclosure can be divided into breadth and depth, and shared experience can be divided into depth and intensity (J. R. Kelley, 1983). It would be expected that an increase in the breadth and intensity of shared experience could lead to increased feelings of emotional closeness.

That shared experience can be connected to feelings of closeness is strongly suggested in the work of Brain (1976) and Fasteau (1974) who considered the emotional bonds of wartime buddies, isolated shepherds in the harsh Australian outback, and members of competitive sports teams. Self-disclosure does not seem to be the key to their feelings of closeness—an intense shared experience does. Whether it is due to some unspecified mechanism associated with sharing life experiences and adventure or to increased knowledge about a friend through observation, it is certainly possible that in the wide range of shared activities and experiences of the young adolescent male, emotional closeness between friends may develop apart from the processes involving self-disclosure.

On the basis of the preceding discussion, two substantive hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1. Gender differences in reported level of intimacy will vary as a function of the operational definition of intimacy used. That is, a definitional focus on reported feelings about a friend and the relationship (emotional closeness) should lead to smaller gender differences than a broader focus on both closeness and other aspects of the relationship (i.e., self-disclosure, shared experience).

Hypothesis 2. The relative strength of the behavioral pathways in predicting the end state of emotional closeness will be different for boys and

girls. Specifically, we expect the direct effect of shared experience on emotional closeness to be stronger for boys than for girls; in contrast, the direct effect of self-disclosure should be stronger for girls than for boys.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project which was begun to examine developmental change in early adolescent mental health (Petersen, 1984). A cohort sequential longitudinal design (Baltes, 1968; Schaie, 1965) was utilized, with two successive birth cohorts of young adolescents followed from sixth through eighth grade. Adolescents were interviewed and tested in the fall and spring of their sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade school years.

The subjects for the larger study were drawn randomly from two suburban school districts near a large midwestern city. Both communities were predominately white and middle to upper middle class as indicated by educational training and current occupations of subjects' parents. Over three quarters of fathers had earned a college degree with a full half of them reporting additional professional or graduate school training. The majority of fathers reported employment in white-collar jobs. Over half of the mothers had earned a 4-year college degree or more and two thirds were employed outside the home. One community had a large Jewish population; the other was evenly divided between Catholics and Protestants. The combined sample size of the two cohorts was 335. The dropout rate over the 3 years was 6% with 4% of the adolescents moving over this time. These groups did not differ from the total sample. Note that the sample information offered here is important for framing the context of the study; however, because the present concern is with general gender-typed patterns, SES and religious affiliation were not included in the present analyses. Additional information regarding the possible influence of community characteristics on the experience of adolescents in this sample can be found in Richards *et al.* (1990).

The present study focuses on adolescents data collected during the eighth-grade year of each cohort. Although attempts were made to obtain data from each individual at each point there were sometimes unavoidable scheduling conflicts, particularly with the group assessments. Therefore, of the 335 subjects who began the study in sixth grade, 83% (130 male and 148 female) had the eighth-grade data needed for the present analyses.

The constructs included in the model were assessed through both interview and questionnaire responses of the adolescent. Aspects of emotional

closeness, self-disclosure, and shared experiences were drawn from a set of questions developed to assess various dimensions of adolescent relationships (Blyth *et al.*, 1982). Although these questions were administered differently in each cohort (interview vs. questionnaire), the patterns of response were the same.

Emotional Closeness

The relationship questions (Blyth *et al.*, 1982) ask the adolescents to think of "a close friend" and to evaluate a variety of aspects of that relationship. The four questions dealing with the adolescent's feelings about his or her friend and the perceived quality of their relationship were combined into a scale used to assess the level of emotional closeness (Table I). The items asked the subject to respond to statements about his/her friend using a 5-point scale with responses ranging from (1) *not at all* to (5) *very much*. The scale score was derived by taking the mean of the item responses and reflects the level of acceptance, understanding, importance, and satisfaction associated with the relationship. Because of our conceptualization of intimacy as an end state characterized by feelings of closeness, all items representing the behaviors and conditions that might facilitate these feelings were excluded from this scale. Although the emotional closeness scale consists of only four items, the coefficients of internal consistency are quite high (boys' alpha = .81 and girls' alpha = .76).

Self-Disclosure

A second subset of three questions focuses on the communication aspect of the relationship (Table I). The adolescents were asked to evaluate how much they shared feelings and advice with their close friend by using the same response scale just described. The internal consistency of the three-item scale was high (boys' alpha = .86 and girls' alpha = .80).

Shared Experience

A final subset of questions deals with the frequency of interaction with the close friend in a variety of contexts. According to our conceptualization, time spent together engaged in activities and experiences is a potential pathway leading to emotional closeness.

Using a 5-point scale ranging from *never* to *daily*, the adolescents were asked to rate how often they saw or talked to their friend in various settings.

Table I. Relationship Questions Used to Construct Emotional Closeness, Self-Disclosure, and Shared Experience Scales^a

Scale and relationship questions
Emotional closeness ^b
1. Does this person accept you no matter what you do?
2. Does this person understand what you're really like?
3. How important is this person to you?
4. How satisfied are you with the relationship you have with this person?
Self-disclosure ^b
1. Do you go to this person for advice?
2. Do you share your inner feelings or secrets with this person?
3. Does this person come to you for advice?
Shared experience ^c
How often do you see or talk with this person?
1. At organized, nonschool activities (the Y, church group, lessons, etc.)?
2. At other places ^d (parks, restaurants, shopping, movies)?

^aQuestions answered with regard to "a close friend."

^bResponses on a 5-point scale from *not at all* to *very much*.

^cResponses on a 5-point scale from *never* to *almost every day*.

^dOther than phone, to and from school, at school, and at home.

The wording of the question is problematic for our conceptualization since "talk" is included. This is related to the conceptual problem of trying to isolate shared experiences from self-disclosure because any two people sharing activities are also likely to talk. To diminish the power of this confound the two items that are most clearly experience- or activity-oriented were chosen to assess this construct.

The items, "at home," "on the phone," and "to and from school" were not included due to the nature of the interactions likely to take place in these contexts. The items, "at organized activities" and "other places" (parks, movies, etc.), were therefore chosen a priori for the shared experience scale since it is in these two contexts that a clearly separate component of shared activity or experience, consistent with our own conceptual frame and hypotheses, is most likely to occur. The internal consistency for this two-item scale is considerably lower than the other scales (boys' alpha = .58 and girls' alpha = .43). Given the limited number of items these lower alphas are to be expected.

Content Validity

As should be obvious from the preceding discussion, the items for each construct (emotional closeness, self-disclosure, and shared experience) were

Table II. Mean Gender Differences and Effect Sizes of Three Different Operational Definitions of Intimacy

Intimacy variable ^a	Sex	Mean	SD	Mean difference	Effect size
Emotional closeness	M	3.93	0.74	0.48	0.51
	F	4.41	0.56		
Emotional closeness Self-disclosure	M	3.45	0.75	0.73	0.73
	F	4.18	0.67		
Emotional closeness Self-disclosure	M	3.40	0.71	0.60	0.65
	F	4.00	0.62		

^aDimensions of close relationship with friend defined as intimacy.

selected a priori on conceptual grounds; however, to empirically validate the particular scales developed in terms of their content, the relationship among the scale items was examined by means of factor analysis. The results of the analyses lend support to the conceptually derived scales. In all cases, for both boys and girls, the item loadings on the factors associated with conceptually derived scales were salient.

RESULTS

Mean Gender Differences

Both boys and girls overwhelmingly indicated that their responses about their close friend were directed toward a same-sex friend. Only 2% of boys and 3% of girls chose to respond about an other-sex friend. Due to the small size of the other-sex sample and our focus on the gender of the responding adolescent, no distinction was made between same- or other-sex friendships in subsequent analyses. The gender composition of the friendship dyads does, however, make our results interpretable primarily in terms of same-sex friendships.

In order to statistically evaluate the effect of defining intimacy differently, mean gender differences were compared using three separate operational definitions of intimacy. The first corresponds to our definition of emotional closeness. The second includes both emotional closeness and shared communication (self-disclosure). The final one includes emotional closeness, communication, and shared experience aspects of the relationship. These three combinations of constructs were chosen because they generally correspond to the three definitions of intimacy most commonly found in the literature:

Table III. Means, Standard Deviations, and Tests of Mean Differences for Variables in Intimacy Model

Variables ^a	Male		Female		<i>T</i>	<i>p</i> value
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>		
Intimacy	3.93	0.74	4.40	0.56	-6.05	.0001
Self-disclosure	2.81	0.98	3.89	0.96	-9.26	.0001
Shared Experience	3.21	1.07	3.38	0.98	-1.39	ns

^aScore on a 5-point scale, 1 = low to 5 = high.

(1) emotional closeness, (2) emotional closeness and self-disclosure, and (3) all aspects of a relationship that make it close.

In order to control for potential bias due to differential scale length, effect size was used as a means of examining the magnitude of gender differences with each definition. As is clear in Table II, girls report greater levels of intimacy with a close friend than boys according to all three operational definitions; however, the magnitude of the difference depends on which definition of intimacy is used (see Table II). The most restrictive definition (emotional closeness) has the smallest effect size (0.51) whereas the definition with both closeness and self-disclosure has the greatest (0.73).

The reason for these differences becomes more apparent with separate examination of gender differences associated with each aspect of the close relationship (emotional closeness, self-disclosure, and shared experience). From Table III it is clear that there are highly significant differences by sex in the mean scaled scores of each variable except for shared experience, where the difference is not significant. That the greatest mean gender difference was found in self-disclosure highlights the significance of its exclusion or inclusion from definitions of intimacy in studies that consider gender issues.

Behavioral Paths to Emotional Closeness

In the proposed model, both self-disclosure and shared experiences are offered as behavioral paths to emotional closeness. In order to test the hypothesis that the importance of these pathways to emotional closeness is different by gender, several analyses were performed.

Using procedures from covariance structural analysis (LISREL), the effects of the behavioral paths on emotional closeness were calculated for boys and girls separately. The results of this analysis are shown in Fig. 1. The findings suggest that when both behavioral paths are entered into the equation, self-disclosure remains strongly associated with emotional closeness for both girls and boys. Although this path is somewhat stronger for girls, as predicted, the difference is not statistically significant. In contrast,

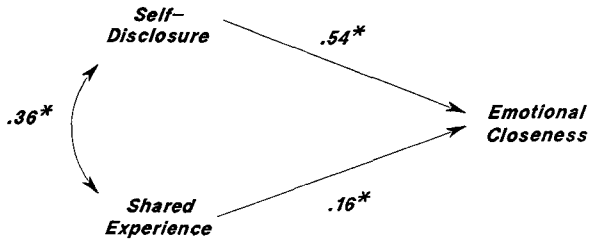
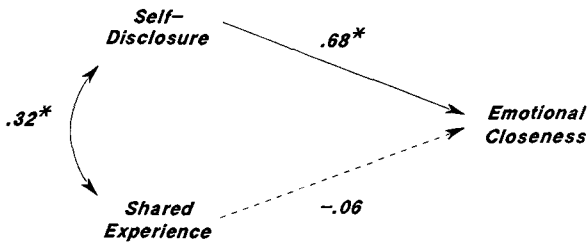
Boys' Model***Girls' Model**** $p < .05$

Fig. 1. Coefficients for behavioral paths to emotional closeness for young adolescent boys and girls.

while the pathway between shared experiences and emotional closeness is negative and nonsignificant for girls, it is statistically significant in the boys' model.⁴

Note that the purpose of this analysis was to test a specific effect, not to identify a model. Nevertheless, we did examine the fit of logical alternate models (e.g., emotional closeness and shared experience to self-disclosure). None of the models compared presented a better fit than the models currently used for either boys ($\chi^3(2) = 17.94$; Goodness-of-Fit Index = 0.92) or girls ($\chi^3(2) = 16.60$; Goodness-of-Fit Index = 0.94).

⁴Correlations between constructs for boys and girls, respectively: emotional closeness/self-disclosure .60 and .66; emotional closeness/shared experience .34 and .15; self-disclosure/shared experience .36 and .32; all correlations $\geq .16$ significant, $p < .05$.

In order to more directly test our inference from the previous analysis showing that the three intimacy-related constructs are organized differently in boys and girls, LISREL analysis was also used to test whether the covariance matrices of the three scales were significantly different for each sex. For our analysis, the model for girls was constrained to that for boys and tested for equivalence.

The results of the covariance structure analysis indicate that there is a significant gender difference in emotional closeness and its correlates. The relevant statistics on the model are as follows: $\chi^2(9, N = 278) = 194.64$; Goodness-of-Fit Index = 0.71; and root mean square residual = 0.21. The resulting Critical N (Hoelter, 1983) is 25.63, which is much smaller than the criterion $N(400)$; therefore, we can conclude that the matrices are not equivalent. The covariance among the relationship variables for girls does not fit the model for boys, with the greatest difference coming from the relationship between shared experience and emotional closeness.

Although these analyses confirm the presence of sex-related differences in the paths to emotional closeness, the magnitude of these differences remains unclear. Evidence from a parallel set of regression analyses provides useful information in this regard. Specifically, the increment to R^2 was tested for significance with shared experience added to the self-disclosure to emotional closeness model. The results support the previous analyses in that the change in R^2 was significant for boys ($F = 4.47, p < .05$) but not for girls ($F = 0.94, ns$). The magnitude of R^2 change, however, reveals that although the shared experience path is statistically significant for boys it only accounts for an additional 2% of the variance in emotional closeness compared to 0.4% for girls.

DISCUSSION

Our aim in the present investigation was to examine the nature of gender differences in the pathways to intimacy in early adolescence. The importance of our a priori decision to conceptualize intimacy as emotional closeness distinct from the behavioral paths which promote such feelings was confirmed in each set of analyses.

The comparison of means using varied definitions of intimacy showed that gender differences could be either inflated or deflated by choosing alternative operational definitions of intimacy. Intimacy operationally defined as emotional closeness showed smaller gender differences than other measures of intimacy which included additional features of the close relationship. The significance of this finding is not to be understated since the majority of studies in this field focus on defining intimacy by characteristics of close relationships other than emotional closeness, usually with a focus

on self-disclosure (Berndt, 1982). Since self-disclosure was the construct with the greatest mean difference between boys and girls, it is clear that its inclusion in the definition may have led to an unnecessary bias in favor of girls. This stands in contrast to Fischer and Narus (1981) who suggested that the inclusion of self-disclosing behaviors in their definition of intimacy merely reflects the bias inherent in the culture. It is our position that focusing on intimacy as self-disclosure not only inflates gender differences but also creates confounds making it difficult to examine the paths that lead to the feelings of closeness which are central to the intimacy construct.

Our focus on emotional closeness as the defining characteristic of intimacy (Mitchell, 1976) allowed us to consider the potential paths that lead to such feelings. Our results clearly support the importance of the link between self-disclosure and emotional closeness for both boys and girls. Furthermore, although the difference was not statistically significant, the power of the self-disclosure path to closeness was somewhat stronger for girls. These findings are consistent with other studies which suggest that sharing and talking are generally valued in girls' relationships together (Douvan and Adelson, 1966).

Although boys also rely on self-disclosure as a means of developing intimate friendships, our results suggest that an alternative path may exist in the form of shared experiences and activities. This finding is important since previous work on friendship patterns in adolescent boys indicates that these aspects of relationships are highly valued (Sharabany *et al.*, 1981). It is important to note, however, that although the variance accounted for in the direct path from shared experience to emotional closeness (controlling for self-disclosure) was significant, it was not large. It is possible that correlated variables not included in the model may be responsible for the relationship or that the observed effects could be, in part, a function of measurement error or other error variance associated with the data. Even while acknowledging the limitations of the study, the clear support of the predicted hypotheses is encouraging and serves to reinforce the significance of clear conceptualization with regard to the relationship constructs under consideration.

It should be recognized, of course, that during the early adolescent period cross-sex intimacy issues are not as salient to the individual as they are during other developmental time periods (e.g., late adolescence or young adulthood). Specifically, as Sharabany *et al.* (1981) reported, while same-sex affiliation is definitely in operation by preadolescence, cross-sex affiliation is still in a very early stage. Sullivan (1953) suggested, however, that it is this early same-sex experience that validates one's perceptions of oneself and provides practice in the behaviors necessary for later relationships with the other sex. Given that our results indicate different relationship styles for

male and female same-sex relationships in early adolescence (e.g., different behavioral paths to emotional closeness), it is natural to question whether these styles will be evident when cross-sex relationships do become prominent. Future research which further considers the conditional and behavioral paths to emotional closeness may well inform us on this issue.

Finally, it is important to note, that although the major focus of this paper is on gender, it is not our intention to further concretize stereotyped differences regarding male and female. Rather, it is our hope that by teasing out background variables, processes, and end state, it may become easier to consider under what conditions (personal and situational) the behaviors that elicit feelings of closeness are likely to occur both within and across gender for both male and female. The end result may be an increased understanding and ability to intervene in and enhance performance in an area of great concern to young adolescents, with potential outcomes to be realized throughout the life-span.

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