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# LOOKING TO HAPPY TOMORROWS WITH FRIENDS: BEST AND CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS AS THEY PREDICT HAPPINESS

ABSTRACT. Friendships are an important source of happiness. The present study ($n$ = 280) investigated the role of friendship quality and conflict in happiness and examined the feature of friendship that best predicted happiness. Information was gathered about the quality and conflict of the best, first and second close friendships of the individual. Results revealed that best friendship quality was the only significant predictor of happiness; however, individuals were happier when they experienced high quality first close friendships in conjunction with a high quality best friendship. Results also revealed that first close friendship quality buffered the negative impact of first close friendship conflict. The companionship feature of the best and first close friendship appeared as the strongest predictor of happiness. Findings were discussed in light of the literature and suggestions for future research were made.

KEY WORDS: best friendship, buffering effect, close friendship, companionship, happiness

## INTRODUCTION

Friendships are an important source of happiness (Myers, 2000; Reis et al., 2000; Argyle, 2001). Even though half of the variance in happiness is attributable to genetic factors, recent research suggests that close relationships contribute to happiness above and beyond the influence of one's personality (Demir and Weitekamp, 2006). Findings such as these encourage further empirical investigation of relationships and their role in happiness. In the present investigation our first aim was to investigate the role that friendship quality and conflict play in happiness. Different from most studies, we collected relationship quality information about best friendship and the first two

close friendships of the participants and tested their contribution to happiness. Our second aim was to investigate the relationship specific and cross-domain buffering effects of friendship quality and conflict. Our final aim was to identify the feature of relationship quality that most strongly predicted happiness. This aim was conditional upon finding a significant association between relationship quality and happiness.

## Friendship: Dimensions and Features

Friendship has been defined multiple ways in the literature and we believe the following definition encapsulates all previous attempts. Accordingly, friendship is a ''voluntary interdependence between two persons over time, that is intended to facilitate socio-emotional goals of the participants, and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection and mutual assistance (Hays, 1988, p.395).'' As the definition suggests, friendship is a qualitative relationship. Scholars also recognized that friendship is a mixed blessing that can involve varying degrees of conflict (Hinde, 1997). Thus, friendship has two major dimensions: friendship quality and conflict.

The friendship quality dimension, as the above definition suggests, consists of different features, or provisions. Theoretical work in this area suggested that individuals seek and/or experience certain provisions in their friendships (Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, 1974; Furman and Robbins, 1985). These features include companionship, help, affection, intimacy, sense of reliable alliance, emotional security and self-validation. As the above definition suggests, individuals experiences these features to varying degrees in their friendships. As reviewed by Furman (1996) and displayed by recent research (Mendelson and Aboud, 1999); available instruments in the field assess these features. In the present study, we relied on the Network of Relationship Inventory (NRI) (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985) to assess friendship quality. More information about this instrument is provided in the method section.

The common practice in the literature is to sum the means of different features, with this overall score labeled as friendship quality (Hussong, 2000; Bagwell et al., 2005). We relied

on this overall score when testing our first and second research questions. Overall, relationship quality might be important for well-being, but it could be that certain features of friendship make more important contributions than others in predicting well-being outcomes. Considering this possibility, we investigated the most important feature of friendship that predicted happiness.

As the second dimension of friendship, friendship conflict has been mainly conceptualized as the frequency of conflict experienced with the friend (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985; Bukowski et al., 1994). Others focused on how friends resolved conflicts (Parker and Asher, 1993) and how conflicts experienced in the friendship might offer an opportunity to improve the relationship (Laursen, 1993). However, most of the instruments that assess friendship conflict focus on the frequency of conflict (see Furman, 1996). In the present study, we assessed the frequency of conflict experienced within the friendship.

Studies investigating the relationship between friendship and happiness mainly assess the quality of one friendship; however, individuals are likely to have several friends. Number of friends has been considered important in some theoretical models as well (Bukowski and Hoza, 1989). Important to note, however, is that individuals make clear distinctions between best, close and casual friendships (Fehr, 1996). Studies done with college students reported that on average individuals have three friendships (Blieszner and Adams, 1992). Considering this, in the present study we gathered relationship quality information from the best and first two close friends of the individual. Of course there could be variability in number of friends among adults, but our aim was to gather information for the three closest friends in order to be able to make comparisons.

One final point pertains to the difference between best and close friends. Studies comparing the quality of friendships documented that overall quality of friendship varies with the degree of closeness of the friendship (Davis and Todd, 1985; Wright, 1985; Mendelson and Kay, 2003) such that best friendships were always higher in relationship quality as compared to close friendships.

**Friendship and Happiness**

Friendship has been argued to be an important source of happiness (Myers, 2000; Argyle, 2001). Research supported these arguments in three ways: by focusing on overall quality, features of friendship (e.g., supportiveness) and number of friends. Demir and Weitekamp (2006) and Hussong (2000) reported that quality of best friendship and conflict were related to happiness among young adults and late adolescents. The study of Demir and Weitekamp (2006) also showed that the companionship and self-validation features of friendship were the most important predictors of happiness. As for the features of friendship, Baldassare et al. (1984) reported an association between support received from a friend, companionship, and happiness and found that perceived companionship was the best predictor of happiness. Gladow and Ray (1986) also reported that support from friends was related to happiness. Diener and Seligman (2002) and Lyubomirsky, Tkach and DiMatteo (2006) showed that closeness and satisfaction with a friend was associated with happiness. It is important to note that the studies cited above focused either on best friendships or friends in general.

As for friendship conflict and happiness, we identified one study that documented a negative association between the two among late adolescents (Rathur, 2004). Research investigating the link between conflict and other adjustment indices (e.g., depression) also reported a negative association (Oldenburg and Kerns, 1997). Thus, a considerable amount of research has established that friendship quality and conflict are related to happiness.

As for the quantity of friendships, studies in the literature documented that number of friends was positively related to happiness (Burt, 1987; Lee and Ishii-Kuntz, 1987; Requena, 1995; Myers, 2000). These findings implicitly suggest two points. First, the more friends one has the happier she/he is. Second, one benefits from all the friends they have. However, we do not know if this is the case. One might have three friends, but do all of these friendships contribute to happiness equally or does one benefit more from one of the friendships as compared to others? In the present study, gathering relationship quality

information from the best and first two close friendships offered an excellent opportunity to test these questions.

To our knowledge, no previous study among adults collected relationship quality information from multiple friendships and investigated their role in well-being. On the other hand, one study gathered relationship quality information from the best and good friends of children (Erdley et al., 2001). Results showed that boys, but not girls, benefited only from quality of their best friendships but not from the quality of their good friendships.

Also related to the aim of the present investigation is a study that collected support and hindrance received for personal goals and projects from the three most important people in individual's life (Ruehlman and Wolchik, 1988). It was found that only the support received from the first most important people predicted well-being. The authors concluded ''that people make even finer distinctions within the category of intimate ties, assigning greater weight to the most important person (p. 299).'' Important to note is that this study did not explicitly focus on friendship, but included all relationships that people considered most important in their lives. Considering this point and the sample of the Erdley et al. study of children (2001), we did not have any specific predictions as to the number of friends that would predict happiness among adults. Nevertheless, we expected best friendships to emerge as a significant predictor of happiness. Our study offered an opportunity to investigate whether other friendships of the individual also contribute to happiness.

**Buffering Effects of Friendship Quality and Conflict**
Social support research has documented that supportive exchanges could offset the detrimental impact of negatie exchanges on well-being. There are two types of buffering reported in the literature: relationship specific and cross-domain buffering. The former is the classically studied buffering effect where the support received from someone (e.g., mother) offsets the negative impact of conflict experienced with the same person. The latter is investigated when multiple relationships are studied simultaneously and is observed when a supportive relationship with someone (e.g., romantic partner) buffers the

negative influence of conflict experienced with others (e.g., mother). Empirical studies have found support for both types of buffering (Abbey et al., 1985; Jackson, 1992; Lepore, 1992; Walen and Lachman, 2000; see Okun and Keith, 1998 for a review). To our knowledge, no prior study investigated whether relationship quality with one friend buffered the negative influence of conflict experienced with another friend. The closest research to date investigated support and conflict received from roommates and friends and reported a cross-domain buffering effect (Lepore, 1992). It was reported that roommate support buffered friendship conflict and friendship support buffered roommate conflict for psychological distress. It is important to note that roommates were not considered as friends even though certain roommates could become friends (Hays, 1985). In the present study, we tested for relationship specific and cross-domain buffering.

In addition to examining buffering effects, we also sought to explore whether the benefits and costs associated with a friendship are dependent on the quality and conflict experienced in another friendship. That is, whether the benefits received from the best friend were related to the quality of another friendship. As it was described, individuals have several friendships and best friendships hold a special place among this network of friends. Sometimes the relationship quality with best friends might not be as high as one would expect and it is during these times that the quality of other friendships could become important. Alternatively, one could have a high quality relationship with a best friend and the relationship quality of other friendships may be impacting happiness. We know of no prior study that tested these possibilities and thus we are left without any specific hypothesis. In other words, our analyses pertaining to possible interactions between quality-conflict of different friendships were exploratory in nature.

**Gender, Happiness and Friendship**
Several reviews (Diener et al., 1999) and recent research (Demir and Weitekamp, 2006) showed that gender is not an important variable in predicting happiness, but nevertheless accounts for about 1% of the variance (Fujita et al., 1991; Myers and

Diener, 1995). As for friendship, there is considerable research suggesting that women's friendships are higher in quality as compared to men's friendships (see Fehr, 1996). This difference has been qualified by the use of different scales to assess friendship quality. Considering the weak relationship between gender and happiness and the ratio of men and women in our sample (see the method section), we only controlled for gender while testing our hypotheses and research questions.

## Hypotheses
Considering the available research, we made the following predictions:

(a)  Best friendships would be higher in quality as compared to the first and second close friendships.
(b)  Best friendship quality would be positively and best friendship conflict would be negatively related to happiness.
(c)  The companionship feature of best friendship would be the strongest predictor of happiness.

## METHOD

### Participants
The sample consisted of 280 (192 women, 88 men) college students attending a Midwestern university. The mean age of the sample was 22.56 ($SD$ = 4.61), with a range from 18 to 44 years of age. The ethnic distribution of the sample was as follows: 41% Caucasian ($n$ = 115), 38% Black ($n$ = 106), 7% Asian ($n$ = 20), and other 14% ($n$ = 39). In the sample, 5% ($n$ = 13) of the participants were excluded because they did not report having a best friend and 16% ($n$ = 43) were excluded because they only listed either one or two friends. Our final sample consisted of 224 (163 women) adults who had at least three friends and completed the relationship quality questions for all three friends.

### Procedure
A psychology student pool was used to recruit participants. Announcements were made in classrooms and flyers were posted in the psychology department. Those who wanted to

participate in the study either took the survey with them to complete on their own time or completed the questionnaire packet in our lab. The packet included a consent form, a basic demographic information sheet and a battery of questionnaires. To ensure privacy, participants were given envelopes to enclose the completed surveys. Those taking the surveys with them placed the envelopes in a designated location or turned them in directly to the researcher. Completion of the survey lasted approximately 40 min and participants earned extra credit for their psychology classes. The participants completed several questionnaires other than the ones reported below (e.g., emotion regulation abilities), but, only the constructs relevant for the purposes of the present investigation are discussed.

## Measures
### Assessment of Number of Friends
After reviewing the available literature on definitions of friendship and with an attempt to provide the participants with a clear, an easy to interpret definition, we developed the definition of friendship given below. Our definition is based on the empirical literature and is consistent with definitions found in the literature. Our aim in doing so was to provide the participants with an easy to interpret definition of friendship in contrast to the theoretical definitions (see Hays, 1988; Fehr, 1996).

Participants were first provided with the following definition of friendship: "A friend is someone who you enjoy doing things together with, count on to support you when you need it, provide support when he/she needs it, talk about your everyday life, problems, concerns, ideas, and intimate thoughts." Following this, participants were first asked to write the initials of their close friends and rank them in degree of closeness (e.g., best friend, first close friend, second close friend, etc). They were cautioned not to consider their romantic partner as a friend or to include any close friend they had any type of sexual involvement with or romantic interest in. In addition, they were also asked to specify the gender of their friend. Ten spaces were provided to gather information about the participant's friendships.

A close examination of the responses indicated that participants did not have difficulty in following the instructions. Moreover, all of the participants differentiated the degree of closeness of their friends. This suggests that the instructions were clearly understood.

*Friendship Quality and Conflict*

The NRI (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985) was used to assess friendship quality and conflict (see Furman, 1996 for validity information). The scale has been used in previous research to make comparisons across relationships (Furman and Buhrmester, 1992) and was used among adults as well (Bagwell et al., 2005). In the present study, the participants were asked to rate their best friends, first and second close friends. Following common practice (Furman and Buhrmester, 1992) all friendship ratings were made on the same page, that is, the respondent did not receive separate questionnaires for the three friendships. This method of presentation has been argued to be effective because it forces the individual to make comparisons across friendships simultaneously.

We relied on a shorter version of the NRI and assessed companionship, intimacy, reliable alliance and affection. Companionship refers to spending time and doing things together. Intimacy refers to talking about personal issues and involves self-disclosure. Reliable alliance refers to the belief that the relationship is a lasting dependable bond. Finally, affection refers to the feelings of being cared about and liked.

Four subscales from the NRI were administered to measure friendship quality. These four subscales were companionship, intimacy, reliable alliance and affection and each was assessed with three items. Similar approaches to assess positive friendship quality have been observed in the literature (Hussong, 2000). A sum of these 12 items was used to create the friendship quality composite score for all friends rated. Respondents were asked to rate how much each feature occurred in their relationship on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (little or none) to 5 (the most). Sample items include "How much do you tell this person everything?" and "How much free time do you spend with this

person?'' The three-item version of the conflict subscale of NRI was used to assess the amount of conflict in the friendships. A sample item includes ''How much do you and this person get upset with or mad at each other?'' The three items were summed to create the friendship conflict score. The internal consistencies for the features of friendship, overall friendship quality and conflict across friendship are reported in Table II.

*Happiness*
Following the literature, we assessed happiness with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson et al., 1988). Cited works also provide information about the validity of the scales.

The SWLS assesses the global cognitive evaluations of one's life. The scale consists of five items and respondents are asked to rate their agreement with the items on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. The mean scores for the five items were used to obtain a satisfaction with life composite score. The reliability of the scale for the present study was high ($\alpha = .89$).

The PANAS was used to assess daily positive and negative affect. The PANAS consists of ten mood states for positive affect (PA) (e.g. attentive) and ten for negative affect (NA) (e.g. hostile). Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they feel each mood on a 1 (very slightly or not all) to 5 (extremely) scale. The mean scores for the ten PA and NA scores were used to create a composite PA and NA scores. Reliabilities for the scales were satisfactory ($\alpha = .86$ for PA; $\alpha = .85$ for NA).

In order to simplify the presentation of happiness, we created an aggregate happiness score by standardizing the satisfaction with life, PA and NA scores and subtracting the standardized NA scores from the sum of standardized satisfaction with life and PA scores. This procedure resulted in scores that ranged from −4.99 to 4.60. Creation of aggregate scores of happiness has been reported by others as well (Kasser and Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon et al., 2005). We wanted to compare the range of happiness score to other studies, however, not every study reports

this information. Nevertheless, the range found in the present study was comparable to what we found in our own studies (Demir and Weitekamp, 2006).

The practice of allowing some participants to complete the surveys at home might introduce some confounds to the study. In the present study, 138 participants completed the surveys at our lab and 84 participants took the survey with them and returned it later. In order to test if this practice presented confounds we compared the two groups on the variables of the study. The two groups did not differ from each other on any of the variables in the present study. This suggests that the way the data was collected did not present any confound.

## RESULTS

As explained above, 5% ($n = 13$) of the participants did not report to have a best friend, 5% ($n = 13$) had only one friend and 11% ($n = 30$) had only two friends. These individuals did not fill out the relationship quality surveys for all three friends and were excluded from the analyses. In the final sample, the mean number of friends reported was 4.27 ($SD = 2.29$) and majority of the participants (57%, $n = 128$) reported having three friends, 19% ($n = 43$) had four friends, and the rest (24%, $n = 53$) reported having five or more friends). Even though the mean number of friends was higher than what the literature suggested, finding that the majority of the participants had three friends increased our confidence in terms of assessing only the best, and first two close friendships of the participants.

We also examined the gender composition of friendships. Analyses showed that 14% ($n = 32$) of the best friends, 15% ($n = 33$) of the first close friends, and 25% ($n = 55$) of the second close friends were of opposite sex.

### Differences Across Friendships

It is important to note the differences between friends on reported quality and conflict (see Tables I and II) before we move on to the predictive ability of friendships. We relied on paired sample *t*-tests to examine the differences between

friendships. Considering the fact that multiple comparisons might increase the likelihood of Type I error, we relied on the Bonferonni correction to set the alpha level. Since there were three comparisons to be made for both quality and conflict, we set the alpha level to .017 (.05/3). That is, the alpha has to be smaller than $p < .017$ in order for the comparisons to be considered significant.

The analyses revealed that the quality of best friendship was significantly higher than the quality of first ($t(220) = 12.877$, $p < .001$) and second close friendships ($t(220) = 18.131$, $p < .001$). Also, the quality of first close friendship was higher than the quality of second close friendship ($t(220) = 10.208$, $p < .001$). As for conflict, best and first close friendship did not differ f0rom each other ($t(220) = 1.081$, $p > .05$). However, the conflict for best ($t(220) = 3.068$, $p < .002$) and first close friendships ($t(220) = 2.761$, $p < .006$) was significantly higher from the conflict reported for the second close friendship.

TABLE I

Means and standard deviations of friendship quality and conflict scores across friends

|  | Quality | Conflict |
|---|---|---|
| Best friendship | 4.04 (.73) | 1.72 (.88) |
| First close friendship | 3.50 (.79) | 1.67 (.77) |
| Second close friendship | 3.12 (.89) | 1.56 (.73) |

TABLE II

Reliabilities of the overall friendship quality and subscales across friendships

|  | Best friend | First close friend | Second close friend |
|---|---|---|---|
| Friendship quality | .88 | .85 | .89 |
| Companionship | .84 | .84 | .84 |
| Intimacy | .87 | .86 | .91 |
| Reliable alliance | .90 | .87 | .90 |
| Affection | .89 | .85 | .91 |
| Friendship conflict | .86 | .83 | .84 |

**Friendship and Happiness**

The correlations between the study variables are reported in Table III. As seen in Table III, gender was related to the quality and conflict of best friendship and to conflict of the first close friendship. Of the friendships assessed, only the best friendship quality and first close friendship quality were related to happiness. Important to note was the finding that quality and conflict were not related across all friendships assessed. Considering the fact that gender was related to friendships, we controlled for it in the analyses to be reported.

**Friendships Predicting Happiness**

As seen in Table III, only the best and first close friendship qualities were related to happiness. Following the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), variables were centered before regression. Even though best and first close friendship conflict was not related to happiness at the bivariate level, they were entered in the regression since this was necessary to test for the relationship specific and cross-domain buffering effects. In the regression, gender was entered in the first step as a control variable. The second step consisted of best and first close friendship quality and conflict. In the third step, we entered the relationship specific buffering interactions (e.g., best friendship quality × best friendship conflict); cross-domain buffering interactions (e.g., best friendship quality × first close friendship conflict); and our exploratory interactions (e.g., best friendship quality × first close friendship quality).

Results of the regression analysis are reported in Table IV. As seen in Table IV, gender was not a significant predictor of happiness ($F(1, 219) = .817$, $p > .05$). Of the second step, only best friendship quality was a significant predictor of happiness ($F(4, 215) = 4.664$, $p < .01$) and accounted for 8% of the variance in happiness. The final step involving interactions was significant ($F(6, 209) = 2.996$, $p < .01$) and accounted for an additional 5% of the variance. A closer look at the interactions revealed that relationship specific buffering effects for first close friendship quality and best friendship quality × first close friendship quality interactions were marginally significant. We

TABLE III

Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Gender[a] | — | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Best friendship quality | .22** | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Best friendship conflict | -.17* | -.05 | — | | | | | | | | |
| 4. First close friendship quality | .11 | .66** | -.12 | — | | | | | | | |
| 5. First close friendship conflict | -.18** | -.05 | .57** | .01 | — | | | | | | |
| 6. Second close friendship quality | .06 | .58** | -.12 | .79** | -.08 | — | | | | | |
| 7. Second close friendship conflict | -.13 | .01 | .50** | .01 | .68** | .01 | — | | | | |
| 8. Life satisfaction | .03 | .20* | -.07 | .19** | -.04 | .17* | -.10 | — | | | |
| 9. Positive affect | .03 | .12 | -.13 | .08 | -.08 | .09 | -.02 | .39** | — | | |
| 10. Negative affect | .09 | -.19** | .14 | -.16* | .10 | -.08 | .03 | -.35** | -.29** | — | |
| 11. Happiness | -.06 | .26** | -.04 | .19** | -.04 | .10 | -.04 | .77** | .67** | -.62** | — |

*Note:* $*p < .05$; $**p < .01$.
[a]Male = 0, Female = 1.

TABLE IV
Hierarchical multiple regression predicting happiness ($n = 224$)

| | $\beta$ |
|---|---|
| *Step 1* | |
| Gender (1 = male, 2 = female) | −.11 |
| | $R^2 = .00$ |
| *Step 2* | |
| Best friendship quality | .30* |
| Best friendship conflict | −.05 |
| Close friendship quality | .07 |
| Close friendship conflict | −.02 |
| | $\Delta R^2 = .08*$ |
| *Step 3* | |
| Best friendship quality × Best friendship conflict | −.08 |
| Close friendship quality × Close friendship conflict | .17* |
| Best friendship quality × Close friendship conflict | .06 |
| Close friendship quality × Best friendship conflict | .09 |
| Best friendship quality × Close friendship quality | .15* |
| Best friendship conflict × Close friendship conflict | .06 |
| | $\Delta R^2 = .05**$ |

*Note*: $\beta$ weights are for the final model.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

computed two additional regressions in which the variables making up the interaction (e.g., first close friendship quality and first close friendship conflict) were entered in the first step and their interaction terms were entered in the second step.

As for the relationship specific buffering effect, the first step of the regression ($F(1, 218) = 4.310$, $p < .05$) and the second step involving the interaction ($F(3, 217) = 5.014$, $p < .01$) were significant. The interactions were plotted following the suggestions of Aiken and West (1991).

As can be seen in Figure 1, high levels of first close friendship quality were protective of high levels of friendship ($t(218) = 2.436$, $p < .01$). In other words, the individual had higher levels of happiness at high levels of conflict provided that he had high quality friendship. On the other hand, there was not a linear relation between happiness and first close friendship conflict at low levels of friendship quality ($t(218) = -1.502$,
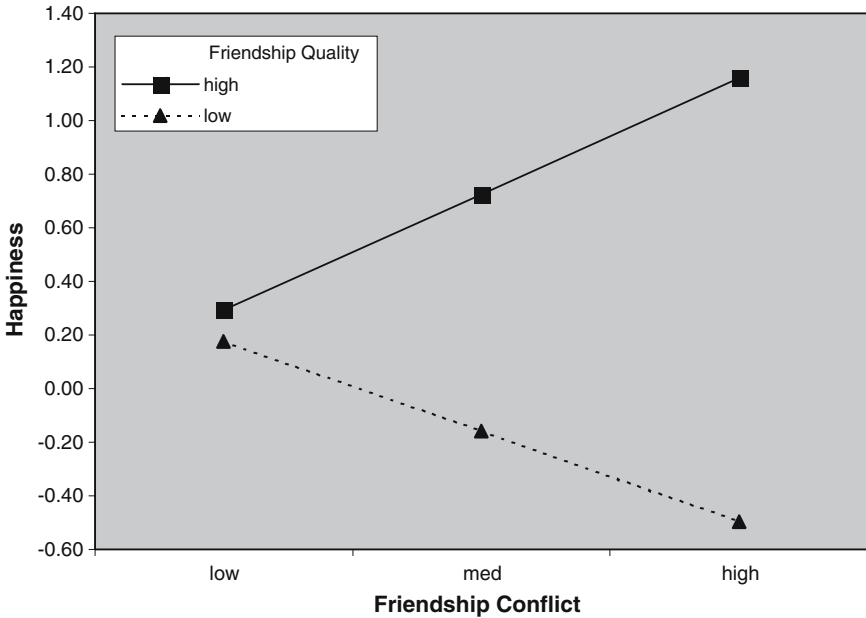
*Figure 1.* Relationship specific buffering effect for first close friendship.

$p > .05$). To examine this moderator effect in another way, we also divided the sample at the median (3.66) into low and high friendship quality groups and computed correlations between happiness and friendship conflict. For adults low on friendship quality, friendship conflict was not related to happiness ($r(105) = -.15$, $p > .05$). However, friendship conflict was positively related to happiness among adults high on friendship quality ($r(112) = .20$, $p < .05$), confirming the interaction effect. Moreover, $r$ to $Z$ transformations and significance tests indicated that the correlations across the two groups were significantly different (.20 vs. $-.15$; $Z = 2.57$, $p < .01$).

As for the second interaction, the first step consisting of best and first close friendship quality ($F(1, 218) = 7.682$, $p < .01$) and the second step involving the interaction ($F(3, 217) = 6.513$, $p < .01$) were both significant. As can be seen in Figure 2, high levels of first close friendship quality was related to higher levels of happiness only at high levels of best friendship quality ($t(218) = 3.278$, $p < .01$) whereas this was not true
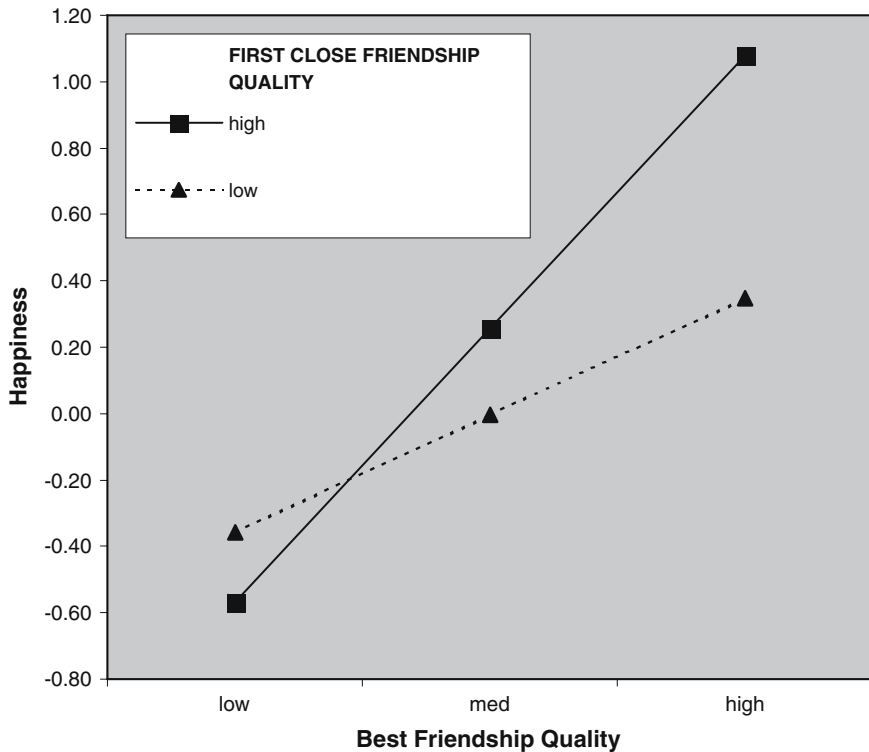
*Figure 2*. Interaction between best and first close friendship quality.

for low levels of first close friendships quality ($t(218) = 1.986$, $p < .05$). We also examined this moderator effect in another way by dividing the first close friendship quality at the median (3.66). For those low on first close friendship quality, best friendship quality was not related to happiness ($r(105) = .06$, $p > .05$). However, best friendship quality was related to happiness among adults high on first close friendship quality ($r(112) = .34$, $p < .01$). This interaction suggests that the individual is happier when he/she experiences high quality relationships with best and first close friends. Finally, $r$ to $Z$ transformations and significance tests indicated that the correlations across the two groups were significantly different (.34 vs. .06; $Z = 2.13$, $p < .05$).

## Which Feature of Friendship Strongly Predicts Happiness?

As it was made clear before, our analyses pertaining to the feature of friendship predicting happiness was dependent upon finding an association between friendship quality and happiness. Even though only best friendship emerged as a significant predictor of happiness, we computed additional analyses for the features of first close friendship as well. There were two reasons for this; first, quality of first friendship was significantly related to happiness at the bivariate level. Second, the interaction reported above showed that the individual was happier when the quality of first close friendship was high in addition to high quality best friendship. Thus, we examined the features of best and first close friendship in attempting to identify the strongest predictor of happiness. In doing so, we relied on zero-order correlations, beta weights and semi-partial correlations as obtained from the regression analyses. In its squared form, semipartial correlation is the percent of full variance uniquely accounted for by the independent variable in the dependent variable when other variables are controlled. Squared semipartial correlation has been suggested to be the more useful measure of importance of an independent variable (Tabachnik and Fidell, 1999). Even though there are different ways to assess importance (e.g., dominance analyses, epsilon) we focused on the three reported below since one recent study showed across several studies that traditional ways (e.g., beta weights) of assessing the strongest predictor were in perfect agreement with other relative importance indices (Baltes et al., 2004). Considering the fact that our interest was to identify the most important predictor of happiness, reliance on the correlations, beta weights and squared semipartials seems justified.

Before presenting our findings it is important to note the correlations between the features for best and first close friendship. Considering the fact that they make up the broad friendship quality, they should be correlated with each other to some extent. As seen in Table V, the correlations between the features within each friendship were as high as .70. This might raise multicollinearity issues. In the regression reported below, we examined whether this presented a problem. The tolerance (best

TABLE V

Correlations between features of friendship among best and first close friendships

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Companionship | – | .44 | .34 | .33 |
| 2. Intimacy | .36 | – | .52 | .49 |
| 3. Reliable alliance | .25 | .50 | – | .70 |
| 4. Affection | .34 | .56 | .69 | – |

*Note:* All correlations are significant at the .01 levels. Values below the diagonal are for best friendship and values above the diagonal are for first close friendship.

friendship range: .40–.84; first close friendship range: .40–.79) and variance inflation factor (VIF) (best friendship range: 1.186–2.251; first close friendship range: 1.272–2.565) values for all predictors were within acceptable ranges according to Menard (1995) and Myers (1990), indicating that multicollinearity was not a problem.

As it can be seen from Table VI, all features of best friendship except reliable alliance were related to happiness at the bivariate level. When subjected to regression while controlling for gender, results revealed that the companionship feature of best friendship quality was the only, and thus most important predictor of happiness. As for the features of first friendship quality (see Table VI), only companionship and affection were correlated with happiness. When entered into regression, companionship emerged as the most

TABLE VI

Features of best and first close friendship predicting happiness

|  | Best friendship | | | First close friendship | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | *r* | $\beta^a$ | Semipartial$^2$ | *r* | $\beta^a$ | Semipartial$^2$ |
| Companionship | .29*** | .26*** | .05 | .22*** | .21*** | .04 |
| Intimacy | .13** | .05 | .00 | .05 | .03 | .00 |
| Reliable alliance | .11 | .01 | .00 | .13 | .05 | .00 |
| Affection | .19*** | .16 | .01 | .18*** | .17* | .01 |

*Note*: *p < .10; **p < .05; ***p < .01.
[a]Controlling for gender.

important feature of first friendship quality that predicted happiness. Important to note was that affection feature was marginally significant in the regression, however, squared semipartial correlations suggest that affection was not as important as companionship. Overall, analyses revealed that the companionship feature of best and first close friendship was the most important predictor of happiness.

## DISCUSSION

The present investigation aimed to understand the role of best and close friends in happiness. In doing so we gathered information on the relationship quality and conflict of a participants' three closest friendships. Analyses revealed theoretically interesting findings and these are reviewed below.

### Differences Across Friendships

Consistent with our hypothesis, results revealed that best friendships were higher in quality when compared to other friendships and higher in conflict when compared to the second close friendships. These findings confirm the theoretical arguments and are in line with prior research (Wright, 1985; Mendelson and Kay, 2003). Apparently, results suggest that the more important the relationship the higher the overall quality of the relationship. As for conflict, one might expect individuals to report less conflict with best friends as compared to first and second close friends. Our findings revealed that this was not the case. This finding could be explained with the time spent with friends. Individuals are likely to spend more time with their best friends and this would inevitably give rise to situations that may lead to more conflict. In a related manner, when individuals are with their first and second close friends, they might refrain from conflict and focus more on the positive experiences during the limited time they enjoy each other's company. Overall results suggests that even though one might have several friendships the quality and conflict experienced within the friendships are likely to change as the degree of closeness changes.

**Friendships and Happiness**

The majority of the participants in the present study had three friends: a best friend and two close friends. We gathered relationship quality and conflict information from all these friendships. Our hypothesis for the link between friendship quality-conflict and happiness was partially supported. At the bivariate level, only the best and first close friendship qualities, but not conflict, were related to happiness. The finding that quality and conflict were not related across all friendships suggests that these two dimensions are independent from each other, at least in the present study. Even though this was not consistent with the literature in general, Lepore (1992) reported similar findings. When best and first close friendships were subjected to regression, only the best friendship quality significantly predicted happiness. This result is to some extent consistent with research done with children (Erdley et al., 2001). This finding is important since previous research documented an association between the number of friends and happiness, which implicitly suggested that one benefits from all of his/her friendships. Findings in the present study suggest that this is not the case. Even though one might have several friendships, it is the best friend that contributes to happiness. Best friendships hold a special status in the network of friends. Best friends serve as a constant companion, a reliable confidant and supportive person. They are the friends who know us best and they are the friends one is likely to share positive or negative experiences with. Considering the characteristics attributed to best friends, it is not surprising that individuals benefited only from their best friendship.

The finding regarding best friendship quality was qualified by an interesting interaction. We were curious to explore whether the benefits and costs associated with a friendship were dependent on the quality and conflict experienced in another friendship. The interaction found suggests that this might be the case. Specifically, we found that when the best friendship was low in quality, high quality first close friendship did not make a difference in the happiness of the individual. This might stem from the fact that best friends hold a special place

in our lives. A low quality best friendship may have an over-riding negative impact on happiness since by definition a best friend is supposed to be your best companion and confidant. The negative impact then of the low quality best friendship may make it so that even having a high quality close friendship will not significantly affect happiness. On the other hand, the interaction revealed that when the best friendship was high in quality, having a high quality close friendship resulted in higher levels of happiness. In other words, the individual is likely to experience a higher level of happiness when he/she experiences high quality close friendships in conjunction with a high quality best friendship. Previous research on number of friends and happiness implicitly suggested that the more friends an individual has, the happier the individual will be. Considering the findings of the present study, we modified this argument and argue that the individual is likely to experience higher levels of happiness when he/she experiences high quality relationships with the best and first close friends.

Considering the interaction reported above, it is plausible to argue that one needs to have the capacity to form additional close relationships and be able to benefit from them to some extent. This point highlights that there are differences in how individuals experience friendship. Available literature suggests that, for instance, extroverts have many friends and closer relationships with their friends (Hills and Argyle, 2001). Likewise, self-monitoring has been reported to have implications for friendship such that high self-monitors are reported to have several friends (Gangestad and Synder, 1985). However, we do not know if extroversion and self-monitoring also makes a difference in benefiting from friendships. We believe this point is important and future research might greatly benefit from considering whether certain individuals in the social world not only have several close relationships but also benefit from them to differing degrees. This could be a theoretically interesting line of research that would enhance our understanding of the relationship between friendship and happiness.

## Relationship-Specific and Cross-Domain Buffering

The present investigation also explored the possible buffering effects that might be observed within and across friendships. The only significant interaction was found for the relationship-specific buffering and for first close friendship. Specifically, the quality of first close friendship buffered the negative impact of conflict experienced with first close friends in predicting happiness. This finding is consistent with previous research (Abbey et al., 1985; Okun and Keith, 1998). Our analyses failed to find an effect for relationship specific buffering for best friendship and cross-domain buffering. How could one explain these null findings? First of all, not every study documented specific or cross-domain buffering effects (Walen and Lachman, 2000; for a review see Okun and Keith, 1998). Second of all, we investigated buffering effects across friendships whereas previous research focused on different relationships (e.g., relatives, partners). It could be that the quality and conflict experienced with friends might interact with other relationships. It is the task of future research to consider multiple relationships and multiple friendships in testing buffering effects.

## Most Important Feature of Friendship in Predicting Happiness

The final aim of the present study was to identify the feature of friendship that was the strongest predictor of happiness. Considering the bivariate relationship and interaction reported above, we investigated the features of best and first close friendship quality. Supporting our hypothesis, results across two friendships showed that it was the companionship feature of best friendship that predicted happiness. This finding is consistent with previous research (Baldassare et al., 1984; Demir and Weitekamp, 2006). It might be surprising at first not to see intimacy as an important feature in predicting happiness. Intimacy received considerable empirical attention regarding its ability to predict well-being (Reis et al., 2000). However, the findings of the present study and prior research (Baldassare et al., 1984) suggest that conceiving friendship as simply consisting of intimacy and support might be misleading. Finding that the companionship feature was the strongest predictor of happiness

across best and first close friendships is impressive and we believe the companionship feature of friendship deserves further empirical attention.

How could one explain companionship being the most important feature of friendship in predicting happiness? Before providing the explanations it is important to note that Americans rate companionship as the most important feature of friendship (Parlee, 1979). We offer two explanations for our finding. First of all, one does not always engage in self-disclosure or seek help from a friend but rather spends considerable amount of time with the friend. Supporting this argument are a series of studies documenting that companionship was more important than social support, especially during non-stressful times, in predicting well-being (Rook, 1987). Second of all, friendships involve activities and doing things together (Hinde, 1997). Recent theoretical advances in the field suggest that activities are an important source of happiness (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon and Schkade, 2005). Since one engages in different activities with a friend, then, it is no surprise that companionship was the most important predictor of happiness. Of course individuals differ in terms of what they do when they spend time with their best friends. It is the task of future research to investigate whether certain activities or actions under the rubric of companionship make a difference for happiness.

One final note is on the variance accounted for by best friendship in happiness. The present study relied on the NRI to assess friendship quality, and best friendship accounted for 8% of the variance in happiness. It is important to note that other scales to assess friendship quality might explain more variance in happiness (see Demir and Weitekamp, 2006). As such, it is the task of future research to assess the quality of multiple friendships with other established scales in order to enhance our understanding of the role of friendship in happiness.

**Limitations**

The theoretically important findings pertinent to friendship notwithstanding, this study was not free of limitations. First of all, the design of the study precludes one from making cause and

effect arguments. It could be that happy people have high quality friendships, however, our interpretations were consistent with the current conceptualization of the relationship-happiness link. Future longitudinal studies might provide a clearer picture. Second of all, we did not investigate the other close relationships an individual might have (e.g., romantic partners). Future research might greatly benefit by gathering relationship quality information from other close relationships of the individual as well. When investigated together with other close relationships, this could provide an important test of the role friendships plays in happiness. Third, our sample consisted of young adults who are attending college and were relatively easy to access. This prevents us from generalizing to other age groups and young adults who are not attending college. Relationship dynamics and the features of friendship important for happiness might be different for different age groups and it is the task of future research to extend the findings of the present investigation to other age groups.

The present study investigated the relationship between the quality of multiple friendships and happiness. Our results showed that it was only best friendship quality that predicted happiness and young adults experienced greater happiness when the quality of their best and first close friendships were high. It was also found that the companionship feature of best friendship and first close friendship was the most important predictor of happiness.

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