

Gender, Friendship and

DIANE H. FELMLEE

Pennsylvania State University, USA

CRYSTAL E. PEOPLES

Duke University, USA

Friendship represents a close relationship that can be taken for granted, especially in a society that privileges the bonds of work, marriage, and romance over informal ties. Yet individual friends can be revered, and these connections add an invaluable element to one's sense of personal security in a world in which established friendships may well outlast many marriages and shifting jobs. Here we summarize several ways in which gender intersects with this noteworthy and vital social bond.

Definitions of friendship vary by gender, and also by age and culture (Adams, Blieszner, and De Vries, 2000); but they typically refer to a voluntary, personal relationship between two people characterized by mutual affection. With regard to friendship, women tend to emphasize self-disclosure and the verbal sharing of information about oneself more than men, and they place particular value on intimacy and emotional bonding. Men, on the other hand, stress shared activities. Females' same-gender friendships provide more emotional and informational support, and female friends engage in a variety of positive maintenance behaviors that involve openness and being supportive. Accordingly, some claim that women's friendships are expressive whereas men's are instrumental. Debates continue regarding the possible advantages and disadvantages of these gendered friendship variations and the degree to which gender bias exists in measures (e.g., Giordano, 2003).

Social norms – that is, expectations that a certain behavior be backed by sanctions – characterize people's interpersonal interactions, including those within friendships. Sometimes contradictory in nature, these norms shape the friendships that emerge in our society. Women

and men often respond differently to the violation of friendship norms, with women reacting more negatively than men to betrayals of trust and intimacy (Felmlee, 1999; Felmlee, Sweet, and Sinclair, 2012). For example, women disapprove more than men of a friend who cancels plans or who fails to defend them publicly.

Women generally have higher expectations from their friends than do men. For instance, women invoke norms twice as often as men when evaluating illustrations of friendship behavior and use words such as “should,” “should not,” and “ought” (Felmlee, 1999). According to a meta-analysis by Hall (2010), women hold higher normative expectations from their same-gender friendships with respect to communion (e.g., self-disclosure), symmetrical reciprocity (e.g., loyalty), solidarity (e.g., companionship), and overall friendship. Men on the other hand had higher expectations from their same-gender friends with respect to agency (e.g., the friend's status and wealth). The largest gender differences, with modest effect sizes, concerned communion and agency. According to Hall, the higher value placed on communion by females developed because of their extensive involvement in child-rearing and their need to maintain ties with other females, who may assist in this process.

At the same time, societal constructions of gender help to shape the norms and values that people develop, and these constructions vary widely for males and females. Even from birth, parents, peers, social institutions, and the media repeatedly encourage girls to be co-operative, expressive, and aware of their interpersonal world, whereas boys are urged to be independent, competitive, and agentic. Moreover, males and females face different opportunities and constraints in our society that then influence their social relationships. Men, for example, encounter more situations in the workplace and in the world of sports that require them to interact in an instrumental and competitive manner. Having greater responsibility for emotional and household labor than men, women on the other hand often engage in situations that focus on nurturance and caretaking. Therefore both

sociocultural and contextual structural factors likely combine to contribute to the formation of friendship norms, values, and expectations that differ for males and for females.

Nevertheless, there exists a tendency to exaggerate and reify gender differences in friendship. Jokes about gender proliferate in society, typically emphasizing the “divide” between males and females. Yet men and women remain similar in many ways when it comes to friendly affiliations, a point that can be lost in the never ending scholarly search for difference. Social context (e.g., the reason why a friend cancels plans) accounts for much more of the variance in evaluations of norm violations, for example, than does gender alone (Felmlee, 1999). Moreover, although women express higher expectations related to friendship than do men, the overall effect size for that difference is small (Hall, 2010). And, although women value self-disclosure more than men, both rate disclosure and intimacy as important characteristics of informal bonds. Gender differences in friendship remain a matter of degree, in other words, not of kind. Thus, it is important for scholarship to document substantial departures in friendship behavior and expectations between males and females, but it is equally of value to attend to commonalities.

Extensive research on friendship and gender demonstrates that friendship ties are often characterized by gender homophily or gender segregation – that is, the tendency for people to affiliate with those of the same gender. This pattern of mostly same-gendered friendships remains consistent throughout the life course. Males also typically have more friends, primarily male, and form larger clusters of friendship networks than do females (Kirke, 2009). The same-gender friends of married women empower them, but nevertheless provide hidden support for commitment to their marriages (Oliker, 1989). Furthermore, gender homophily in friendship networks can be central to the socialization of gender-stereotyped interests and skills, which then contributes to segregation in other arenas, such as the workplace (Mehta and Strough, 2009). Thus the study of gender and friendship patterns exposes the ways in which males’ and females’ homophilous affiliations contribute to gender inequality in society.

There is nevertheless a growing body of literature that explores friendships that defy traditional

gender divides (e.g., Monsour, 2002). Cross-gender bonds, for example, importantly confront the widespread notion that men and women are necessarily different from each other and that bonds between them can only form when romantic interests are involved. Some friendships further challenge stereotypes by traversing the boundaries of sexual orientation, as lesbians and gays forge close affiliations with heterosexuals. Unique advantages characterize such bonds. Men and women in cross-gender and cross-orientation friendships feel more authentic and believe that they can express more honest feelings in these relationships, due to relaxed social norms (Muraco, 2012).

The Internet represents the latest frontier for friendship research. Friends are added and “unfriended” on Facebook and communicated with regularly via text messages, chat rooms, instagrams, and so on. Questions worthy of investigation include the extent to which gender interacts with the emerging social norms for virtual modes of communication and their consequences for interpersonal ties. Finally, although not always realized, this crucial interpersonal bond contains the potential to spark needed change in our gendered world by forging friendships across a variety of social boundaries and by providing fodder for valuable future investigations.

SEE ALSO: Cross-Sex Friendship; Friendship during the Later Years; Friendship: Interpersonal Aspects; Friendship, Social Inequality, and Social Change; Friendship: Structure and Context; Friendships of Adolescence; Friendships of Children; Friendships of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual People

References

-
- Adams, R.G., Blieszner, R., and DeVries, B. (2000) Definitions of friendship in the third age: age, gender, and study location effects. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 14 (1), 117–133. doi: 10.1016/S0890–4065(00)80019–5.
- Felmlee, D.H. (1999) Social norms in same- and cross-gender friendships. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 62, 53–67. doi: 10.2307/2695825.
- Felmlee, D., Sweet, E., and Sinclair, S.C. (2012) Gender rules: same- and cross-gender friendships norms. *Sex Roles*, 66, 518–529. doi: 10.1007/s11199–011–0109-z.

- Giordano, P.C. (2003) Relationships in adolescence. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 257–261. doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100047.
- Hall, J.A. (2010) Sex differences in friendship expectations: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 28 (6), 723–747. doi: 10.1177/0265407510386192.
- Kirke, D. M. (2009) Gender clustering in friendship networks: some sociological implications. *Methodological Innovations Online*, 4 (1), 23–36.
- Mehta, C.M. and Strough, J. (2009) Sex segregation in friendships and normative contexts across the life span. *Developmental Review*, 29 (3), 201–220. doi: 10.1016/j.dr.2009.06.001.
- Monsour, M. (2002) *Women and Men as Friends: Relationships across the Life Span in the 21st Century*, Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.
- Muraco, A. (2012) *Odd Couples: Friendships at the Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Oliker, S. J. (1989) *Best Friends and Marriage: Exchange among Women*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.