

Sex Differences in Friendship  
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### **Abstract**

The Best Friend Questionnaire is a 22-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure how people describe the quality of their relationships with their best friend. The purpose of this study was to see if there were differences between males and females on any of the 22 items. A total of 416 (133 male, 283 female) undergraduate psychology students participated for course credit. We found that there were significant differences between men and women on 8 of the 22 items: open, friendly, giving, warm, rewarding, caring, satisfying, and loving. On each of these 8 items, women scored higher than men. There were no significant differences on any of the negatively-phrased items, such as unfulfilling, strained, or distant. We conclude that women view their relationships in more positive terms than men, on average. Future research should include a wider variety of adjective descriptions of relationships, and should also explore different kinds of relationships.

### **Sex Differences in Friendship**

The idea that sex and gender play important roles in the functioning of relationships is not a foreign proposal to any of us. According to Bell (1981), "When we look at friendship in society, we can see many variations. But there is no social factor more important than that of sex in leading to friendship variations" (p. 55). Studying sex differences in relationships may help people better understand how relationships work, and in turn help us in building healthy relationships with one another.

Several studies have examined sex differences in the nature of friendships, although most of this research has focused exclusively on young children. This research has found that girls tend to view their relationships in more positive terms than boys. For example, Berndt and Hoyle (1992) studied positive and negative characteristics of friendships, such as self-esteem and conflict, using a Likert-type scale to measure the frequency of certain types of interactions. They found that children described their relationship with their best friend in more positive terms than they described other relationships, such as close friendships and parental relationships. As well, females had a tendency to rate positive features more highly than males, while there appeared to be no gender differences with regard to negative features.

Parker and Asher (1993) also examined sex differences in friendships. They developed a Friendship Quality Questionnaire, which assesses six features of friendships in elementary-aged children: companionship and recreation, help and guidance, validation and caring, intimate exchange, conflict and betrayal, and conflict resolution. They found that females were more positive in describing their relationships than males, although they did not specify on which descriptors they found significant differences.

Third, Stocker and Dunn (1988) assessed elementary aged children's friendships using 5-point Likert-type items in interview form. Measures included questions about association,

intimacy, self-disclosure, and conflict, to name a few. This study failed to find any gender differences.

The above three studies all used young children. In the one study using college students, Mendelson and Aboud (1999) had participants identify a same sex best friend, and complete questionnaires regarding friendship satisfaction, specifically the features of stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation, and emotional security. They found that women's ratings were more positive than men's, and women were somewhat more satisfied with their relationships than men. However, this research did not attempt to replicate the findings from younger samples, which showed that there are sex differences in positive descriptions, but there are no sex differences in negative descriptions of relationships.

All of the research thus far seems to agree that females rate their relationships more positively than males. Research with young children has shown that these sex differences are to be found only on the positive descriptions of relationships. The purpose of this research is to replicate the previous finding that females report greater relationship satisfaction than males, but that these differences are to be found only on positive descriptors, using a college-age sample.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Our study included 415 students from the psychology subject pool attending the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Students participated in return for course credit.

There were 133 males and 283 females, ranging in age from 18 to 65, with a mean age of 20.5. Participants identified themselves as follows: 61.3 percent White, 11.8 percent Asian, 10.6 percent Hispanic, 9.1 percent Black, 0.7 percent Native, and 6.5 percent other. All participants either spoke English as their first language or had been speaking English for at least ten years and felt very comfortable reading and writing English.

### *Measures*

The Best Friend Questionnaire is a self-report questionnaire designed to measure the quality of best friend relationships, where one's best friend is "the person you feel closest to." Each of the 22 items is rated using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*). Participants are asked to rate how well each adjective describes their relationship as it is at the present time, not how it may have been in the past or how it will be in the future.

The Best Friend Questionnaire was administered along with other measures, as part of a larger study.

## **Results**

A one-way ANOVA was used to compare the average scores of males and females on each of the 22 items. There were significant differences between men and women on 8 of the 22 items: open, friendly, giving, warm, rewarding, caring, satisfying, and loving. On each of these 8 items, women scored higher than men. These 8 are all positive features of relationships. The most significant sex differences were found on the items loving, caring, and warm (see Table 1). There were no significant differences on any of the negatively phrased items, such as unfulfilling, strained, superficial, and tense.

## **Discussion**

Furman (1998) studied the differences between girls and boys in ratings of positive and negative features of relationships. He found "[g]irls give higher ratings of positive features than boys do, but no gender differences were found in negative features" (p. 43).

Our study showed that the differences in the way college-age males and females view their friendships parallel the differences found in younger samples: women viewed their relationships more positively than men did, and the differences were only found on the positive descriptors.

Several studies show that women display more intimacy in their friendships than men (Black, 2000; Fiebert and Wright, 1989; Aukett, Ritchie, and Mill, 1988; Furman, 1998; Youniss and Haynie, 1992). The three items with the largest differences between the sexes in our study (caring, loving, and warm) may all be considered to be of an intimate nature, or closely related to the concept. A study by Aukett et al. (1988) found that men have difficulty with emotional intimacy and expressiveness. Men may view their relationships as less intimate because of this difficulty with expressing emotions.

Future research should attempt to determine more precisely the nature and cause of these differences, using a wider variety of adjective descriptors and examining different kinds of relationships. In addition, future research should attempt to control for the length of the relationship, whether it is a same-sex or opposite-sex friendship, and whether the two people are romantically involved.

Because of the contributions that friendships make to our overall happiness and well-being

Friendships make important contributions to our overall happiness and well-being. Understanding the nature of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and the factors that contribute to the success of a relationship is important. However, as researchers we must also taken into account sex, ethnic, and age differences in friendships, so that we are not applying inappropriate standards to other people's friendships.

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Table 1  
 Analysis of Variance for Significant Characteristics on the Best Friend Questionnaire

<i>BFQ Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>		
Open	4.38	4.56	5.75*	.02
Supportive	4.59	4.60	0.02	.91
Tedious	3.57	3.59	0.03	.86
Fun	4.54	4.58	0.27	.61
Unfulfilling	4.36	4.47	1.47	.23
Friendly	4.57	4.70	4.15*	.04
Boring	4.42	4.45	0.13	.72
Giving	4.05	4.32	9.31**	.01
Superficial	4.09	4.31	3.69	.06
Warm	3.95	4.43	27.51**	.00
Rewarding	4.28	4.47	5.01*	.03
Awkward	4.35	4.35	0.00	.99
Caring	4.43	4.68	14.08**	.00
Distant	3.91	3.95	0.08	.78
Comfortable	4.66	4.65	0.02	.89
Tense	4.18	4.34	2.15	.14
Satisfying	4.23	4.43	5.35*	.02
Loving	4.06	4.63	37.76**	.00
Strained	4.03	4.17	1.46	.23
Trusting	4.60	4.64	0.25	.62
Relaxed	4.45	4.47	0.06	.81
Successful	4.51	4.54	0.17	.68

*Note.* *BFQ* = Best Friend Questionnaire

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .