

**Caring, Trusting, Superficial, Strained: Sex Differences in Ideal Relationships**  
**Shatoyia S. Burns, Holly E. Walker, Saira S. Haseebullah, Stephanie L. Rojas & Kimberly A. Barchard**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

**Reference:** Burns, S. S., Walker, H. E., Haseebullah, S. S., Rojas, S. L., & Barchard, K. A. (April, 2010). *Caring, trusting, superficial, strained: Sex differences in ideal relationships*. Poster presented at the 2010 Western Psychological Association Annual Convention, Cancun, Mexico.

**Contact Information:** Kimberly A. Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, P.O. Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, barchard@unlv.nevada.edu

---

### Abstract

This study examined whether men and women value different characteristics in their friendships. Previous research has examined sex differences in ideal romantic relationships. That research has found that men and women value different positive characteristics in a romantic partner, but they want to avoid the same negative characteristics. Therefore, this study examined the hypothesis that men and women prefer different positive traits in their ideal friendships, but no differences were expected for the negative characteristics.

A total of 829 undergraduate students completed the Best Friend Questionnaire (Barchard, 2001) as part of a larger study. This measure includes 22 adjectives: 14 positive and 8 negative. Participants were asked to indicate how accurately these adjectives describe their ideal friendship.

Both men and women found all positive characteristics desirable and all negative characteristics undesirable. However, there were sex differences in terms of how well the characteristics described the ideal friendships. Women rated their ideal friendships as being more open, supportive, friendly, giving, warm, caring, comfortable, satisfying, loving, and trusting. Men rated their ideal friendships as being more unfulfilling, superficial, tense, and strained. Future research should examine whether the sex of the individual or of the best friend influences characteristics of ideal friendships. For example, individuals may have different expectations for opposite sex friendships compared to same sex friendships. Additionally, future research should compare the traits that men and women want in their ideal friendships to the ideals they want in their romantic relationships. Do people want the same characteristics in romantic relationships as they want in friendships with people who match their sexual preference? For example, do heterosexual men want the same characteristics in their platonic friendships with women as they want in their romantic relationships with women?

### Introduction

When forming interpersonal relationships, humans make judgments about an individual based on what that person has to offer to the relationship (Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007). Since individuals often desire favorable characteristics in potential companions, these judgments are especially important in mate and friend selection. What is it that men and women seek in their relationships? Do men and women differ in what they are looking for? To what extent are these expectations reflected in the relationships in which they are involved?

Men and women seek many of the same things in their romantic relationships. For the most part, males and females seek romantic mates who match their personalities (Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006). When considering a casual sex partner, males and females were not willing to compromise on how physically attractive their partners were (Regan, 1998). In contrast, men and women preferred long-term ideal romantic mates to possess higher degrees of such characteristics as agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and mate value when compared to their own levels (Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006). Men and women both believed that an ideal mate would have a good socioeconomic status and be dependable, affectionate, and good-looking (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). Men and women also believed that an ideal romantic relationship consists of an adoring, faithful, and personal bond (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). These are all similarities between men and women.

Although there are similarities in what men and women want in an ideal romantic relationship, there are also differences. Consistent with the evolutionary perspective, women want males who were older, financially stable, and well educated, while males place more importance on having a youthful, more physically appealing mate (Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). Distinctions were also discovered in the perception and application of these ideals in actual romantic relationships. Women often believe that their romantic partner possesses qualities that were the opposite of what they want in an ideal partner (Sieg, 2007). For example, a woman may want to be involved with a male who is sensitive, but will settle if he is not the most sensitive man. Women were also more likely to alter their ideals to make up for previous relationship failures (Sieg, 2007). For example, if a previous mate was not honest, a woman might be more willing to date a new male who is not honest. Finally, compared to men, women believe that their ideals are not satisfied as much as men believe their ideals are satisfied (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Thus, there are many differences in what men and women want in ideal romantic relationships.

Although there is a substantial amount of research that suggests that both similarities and differences exist in what males and females in ideal romantic relationships, previous research has not examined what men and women value most in their friendships. This study examines whether there are gender differences in the characteristics that men and women value most in relationships with their best friends. Based upon the research on romantic relationships, we hypothesize that there will be no differences between genders in negative traits (e.g., "Superficial," "Tense"), but that men and women will differ in regards to the importance of positive traits (e.g., "Friendly," "Loving").

### Method

#### *Participants*

A total of 829 undergraduate (532 female and 297 male) students received course credit for participating in this study. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 65 years (mean 20.69, standard deviation 5.26). Ethnicities were reported as follows: White 61.1%, Asian 12.3%, Hispanic 10.7%, Other 7.9%, Black 7.2%, and Native 0.7%.

#### *Procedures*

The participants completed the Best Friend Questionnaire as part of a larger study, which involved two 90-minute supervised testing sessions.

#### *Measures*

The Best Friend Questionnaire (Barchard, 2001) was used to measure the characteristics of ideal best friend relationships. It includes 22 adjectives (14 positive and 8 negative), which are each rated on a 5 point scale, where 1 indicates that the characteristic is a "Very Inaccurate" description of the ideal best friend relationship, and 5 indicates "Very Accurate".

## Results

We analyzed our data using a series of independent sample t-tests. All positive characteristics received high scores from both men and women and all negative characteristics received low scores from both men and women. However, there were small differences between men and women. Compared to the ideal friendships of men, the ideal friendships of women were described as being higher on 10 positive characteristics. Conversely, the ideal friendships of men were characterized by higher scores on four negative characteristics. See Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Means, Standard deviations, and Independent Sample t-test Values between Men and Women*

Ideal Friendship Trait	Men		Women		<i>t</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
<b>Positive</b>					
Open	4.73	.52	4.85	.38	$t(479) = -3.63, p = .000$
Supportive	4.82	.42	4.93	.28	$t(463) = -4.06, p = .000$
Loving	4.33	.91	4.84	.43	$t(370) = -9.11, p = .000$
Giving	4.44	.77	4.68	.58	$t(485) = -4.70, p = .000$
Warm	4.39	.83	4.75	.52	$t(446) = -6.81, p = .000$
Caring	4.68	.58	4.89	.36	$t(427) = -5.75, p = .000$
Comfortable	4.76	.53	4.90	.39	$t(479) = -3.91, p = .000$
Friendly	4.77	.52	4.88	.36	$t(455) = -3.16, p = .002$
Trusting	4.87	.43	4.95	.25	$t(409) = -3.16, p = .002$
Satisfying	4.65	.63	4.77	.53	$t(531) = -2.94, p = .003$
Fun	4.79	.52	4.85	.40	$t(491) = -1.67, p = .095$
Rewarding	4.55	.75	4.61	.69	$t(827) = -1.24, p = .217$
Relaxed	4.71	.61	4.75	.59	$t(827) = -0.95, p = .340$
Successful	4.71	.62	4.71	.66	$t(827) = -0.15, p = .877$
<b>Negative</b>					
Superficial	1.66	1.03	1.40	.88	$t(536) = 3.71, p = .000$
Tense	1.44	.84	1.31	.68	$t(515) = 2.40, p = .017$
Strained	1.41	.78	1.29	.71	$t(565) = 2.15, p = .032$
Unfulfilling	1.31	.74	1.21	.65	$t(547) = 1.99, p = .047$
Distant	1.50	.79	1.40	.80	$t(827) = 1.79, p = .074$
Awkward	1.38	.81	1.29	.72	$t(557) = 1.69, p = .092$
Tedious	1.85	1.18	1.81	1.13	$t(827) = 0.48, p = .633$
Boring	1.32	.66	1.30	.64	$t(827) = 0.29, p = .769$

*Note.* When Levene's test for equal variances was statistically significant, we used Welch's procedure to determine the appropriate degrees of freedom for the t-test.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine if men and women have differences in their ideal friendships. Both men and women described their ideal relationship with their best friend as being characterized by all of the 14 positive characteristics and none of the 8 negative characteristics. However, there were small differences in how well these adjectives described the ideal best friend relationships. Women gave higher ratings to the following positive characteristics: open, supportive, friendly, giving, warm, caring, comfortable, satisfying, loving, and trusting. Also, men gave higher ratings to the following four characteristics: unfulfilling, superficial, tense, and strained.

Future research should explore whether the traits that an individual treasures most in a friendship are affected by their gender or the gender of their best friend. Depending on the gender of the best friend, an individual may have different expectations for the friendship and thus different characteristics that they value most.

In addition, future research should compare ideal friendships and ideal romantic relationships. Our study did not explore whether individuals describe their ideal friendships the same way as they describe their ideal romantic relationships. For instance, heterosexual women may desire different traits in their romantic relationships with men than they do in their platonic friendships with men. Heterosexual women may want financial stability in their romantic relationships, whereas this factor may not be as important to them in their friendships.

## References

- Barchard, K. A. (2001). *Best Friend Questionnaire*. Unpublished psychological test: University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Available from Kimberly A. Barchard at Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, P.O. Box 455030, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, NV 89154-5030, barchard@unlv.nevada.edu
- Cottrell, C. A., Neuberg, S. L., & Li, N. P. (2007). What do people desire in others? A sociofunctional perspective on the importance of different valued characteristics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92*, 208-231. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.92.2.208
- Figueredo, A. J., Sefcek, J. A., & Jones, D. N. (2006). The ideal romantic partner personality. *Personality & Individual Differences, 41*, 431-441. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2006.02.004.
- Fletcher, G. J. O., Simpson, J. A., Thomas, G., & Giles, L. (1999). Ideals in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 76*, 72-89. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.76.1.72
- Regan, P. C. (1998). What if you can't get what you want? Willingness to compromise ideal mate selection standards as a function of sex, mate value, and relationship context. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 24*, 1294-1303. doi:10.1177/01461672982412004
- Sieg, E. (2007). 'What you want, or what you get?' Young women talking about the gap between desired and lived heterosexual relationships in the 21st century. *Women's Studies International Forum, 30*, 175-186. doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2007.01.007.
- Sprecher, S., Sullivan, Q., & Hatfield, E. (1994). Mate selection preferences: Gender differences examined in a national sample. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 66*, 1074-1080. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.66.6.1074
- Vangelisti, A. L., & Daly, J. A. (1997). Gender differences in standards for romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships, 4*, 203-219. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.1997.tb00140.x