



Picture: Howard Birnstlihi

Young Adults and Friendship

Friends, in contrast to kin, are chosen. The sense of self we develop in childhood, and the identifications we make, are crucial in our later choice of friends. At the same time, friends may have a powerful effect on the development of a satisfactory sense of self. Yet only in fairly recent times has the role of friendship in our lives been the subject of detailed enquiry.

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reports on findings from the Institute's Becoming Adult Study.

The notion of friendship is closely woven into mythology, folk tales and history, and descriptions of friendships great and small abound in literature. Together with kin ties, meeting and keeping in contact with friends forms a major part of the fabric of most people's lives.

Many parents are concerned that from childhood their children develop sociability and a capacity to get on with others, and the nature of friendships in adulthood is sometimes taken as a measure of personal development and adjustment. Certainly there is generally cause for concern when adults lack friends, or don't seem to be able to establish and maintain friendships.

The conventional wisdom is that we choose friends who are very much like ourselves, and to the extent that friends do generally mirror our social and demographic characteristics, general attitudes and interests, this is largely true (Bell 1981). However, we often seem to choose friends who are

demonstrably not like us and it is likely that we often unconsciously choose different people to develop different sides of ourselves (Rubin 1985). We also have different friends through life as we change, develop, expand our interests, move to new places and become involved in new activities.

The Institute's Becoming Adult Study, a study of 138 23-year-olds, confirmed that having friends and being with them were valued highly, with approximately 80 per cent agreeing that they were more than moderately important in their lives. There was very little difference between the responses of young men and women regarding the importance of 'being with friends' but a tendency for more women than men to regard friends as 'very important'.

Most people said they had friends who were connected with different areas of their life. The importance of the workplace as a source of close friends was apparent. Just over half of both males and females said that they had close friends associated with their work. Contacts through recreation activities, common interests, and from school were also important.

In her detailed study of friendships in the lives of 25–55-year-olds, Rubin (1985) found that women had more friends than men. She remarked that even though some studies showed that men reported more friends, this had more to do with men's propensity to name as friends many people with whom they associated, while women used the term more selectively.

In the Institute's study of 23-year-olds, there were no clear differences between the number of 'close' friends reported by women and men, although there was a tendency for women to report fewer (between one and four) and men to report between five and ten. Respondents were also asked how many people they would count as friends but who were not so close. The median was somewhere between 18 and 20. Overall, men were more likely than women to report 'not so close' friendship networks of larger than ten, although 40 per cent of women said their friendship network was larger than 20 people.

Rubin (1985) found that women's friendships are markedly and unmistakably more intimate than men's: she concluded that women's friendships are a sharing of *themselves*; men's are more a sharing of *activities*. In the Institute study, the proportion of men who said their close friends were connected with recreation activities was twice that of the proportion of women (57 per cent compared with 26 per cent). More men than women also had close friendships based on common interests.

A number of qualitative differences between women's and men's friendships

have been identified. Women's friendships tend to be holistic and undifferentiated while men's tend to be more specialised and differentiated; women tend to focus on nurturing, sharing, personal communication and general expressiveness while men emphasise instrumentality with a focus on shared activities; women's friendships tend to be of a longer duration than men's (O'Meara 1989).

One of our findings offers support for the last of these differences in that almost twice the proportion of women compared with men had close friends from school (46 per cent compared with 25 per cent). However, this particular example may relate to stage of life, as school days are not so very far in the past for 23-year-olds and it is possible that that there will be significant changes to these friendships as life circumstances alter. Nevertheless, it does seem that in this group, school friends are retained longer by young women than young men.

Most of the 23-year-olds (about two-thirds of both women and men) said they

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had close friends of both sexes. This compared with 22 per cent of women and 30 per cent of men who said their close friends were mostly of the same sex as themselves, and less than 10 per cent of the group who said their close friends were mostly of the opposite sex.

Perhaps this is as expected in a world where many of the barriers to communication and interaction between women and men have been challenged and dented,

if not completely broken down. However, the relatively small amount of research on same-sex and cross-sex friendship clearly shows that different dynamics are involved.

Men and Their Friends

Although two-thirds of the young men said that their best friends included both men and women, half of the total group of men said that they related more easily to their male friends. (The question asked was: Who do you get on best with?) For some, this seemed to be a circular process: they felt more comfortable with men, so they spent more time in the company of men, and because they spent more time with men, they felt more comfortable with them . . . Some said they got on best with males because of shared interests, either sport, work, or having fun and doing things together. Others thought it was the result of mixing mainly with boys as they grew up, at school and socially. Some talked about the importance of a shared history based on school experiences.

A minority (approximately one in six) said they got on better with women. Most commonly, this was because they found women easier to talk to or more open about feelings. Occasionally, this involved a rejection of 'macho' qualities:

I find that females don't put up a front, whereas when males get together in a group they all basically stick out their chests and do a lot of bragging about nothing. It's very boring. There are male friends I get along with, but predominantly that's what you find.

The remaining one-third of young men said that they got on equally well with their men and women friends. For most, this was a fairly straightforward statement of the way things were – they didn't discriminate between male and female friends, personality was more important than gender – but a minority offered further explanations. One young man could see the positive and negatives in his male and female friends:

When the guys come up with their macho stuff – it's bullshit, it really annoys me. But when they're just being themselves, having a good time, I get on as well [with men as women]. So it'd be a mixture. The girls can get a bit bitchy, but the guys can make a real fool of themselves trying to be the best man at the party or something like that, and the girls are just thinking, 'Idiot!'

When pushed for an explanation, another respondent said he related more easily with men, but he was concerned about the need for balance:

It's not that good a thing because you need to get on both with males and females, because females have just the same sort of consciousness as males, but they maybe do things in a different way.

In support of the general conclusion that men's friendships involve a lot of 'doing things together', many of the 23-year-olds mentioned shared activities with male friends – playing sport, drinking together, having good times together, riding motorbikes, laughing together. Nevertheless, there were other reasons why they liked their friends too; they talked of caring, openness, support, advice, and being able to be oneself.

Approximately half of the young men thought their friends were basically similar to themselves, one-quarter that they were not, and another quarter that friends were both similar to and different from them. Rubin's notion that we choose different friends to complement different parts of ourselves received some support in the Institute study. For example:

My best friends in general have parts of them like me but they're often different. One friend is a real rebel. He drinks and smokes a lot and rides motorbikes around in the bush and that part of him appeals to me. There's a small rebel inside of me.

Another young man was very aware that two of his best friends represented two different sides of himself – the socially concerned but very cynical political analyst and the more naive 'let's enjoy life and have a good time' side.

Women and Their Friends

Almost half of the young women thought that they got on better with their female friends than their male friends; a little under one-fifth said they got along better with opposite-sex friends, and one-third equally well with both sexes. In this regard then the findings for women parallel very closely those concerning men's same-sex and opposite-sex friends.

The positive aspects of female friendship were sharing of confidences and common interests, mutual understanding, acceptance, kindness and support. As with male friendships, enjoyment and the fun of being together were often mentioned. In fact, the elements of humour and happiness in friendships came across quite strongly in comments from both females and males. Friends are people you enjoy being with and doing things with.

Perhaps because more young women than men in the study were married, living with someone or had children, the importance of stage of life in structuring and deter-

mining friendships emerged. According to one young married woman:

Most of the people we see now are young married couples, perhaps getting ready to move into their home or purchase their first home. We've got a lot more in common than perhaps I would have with friends I grew up with, because they are still all single.

Living with a partner in a fairly remote area has influenced the pattern of one respondent's friendships:

Most people are married, they're couple-like, and the men tend to do their own thing and the women stick together. It's sort of fairly segregated.

Another said that her closest friends were young women who, like her, had



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experienced an unsuccessful marriage or a separation. It was from them that she received the most understanding.

A significant minority of women (about one in ten) mentioned 'bitchiness' of women as a reason for being wary of female friendships and for finding it easier to get on with men. (Several men referred to this too.) It has been suggested that 'bitchiness', particularly that between women, may result from women being socialised into not expressing directly their natural competitive feelings, or

from deep, unresolved psychological aspects of mother-daughter relationships (Rubin 1985).

Several women distinguished between the characteristic behaviour of men and women in the initial and later stages of friendship. They believed that men were more open and less wary than women in casual social situations, and women were more able to handle deeper intimacy as friendships developed over time.

Cross-sex Friendships

We have seen that one-third of both men and women said they got on equally well with the same and opposite sex, and one in six men and one in five women got on best with friends of the opposite sex. It is unlikely that this would have been the case until relatively recently. Speaking of America, Bell (1981) suggests that there were major restrictions on cross-sex friendships up until the 20th century (based on the belief that women were less capable of friendship than men!) and that while the pattern in this century has been acceptance of a high level of heterosexual interaction, it has been mainly restricted to the young and the unmarried. In his own research in Australia during the early 1970s, he found that friendship between men and women, especially after marriage, had severe limitations and (even more so than in the United States) that most Australian women were taught early in life that their world was separate from that of men. However, level of education was significant; the higher the level of their education, the more resistant women were to sex segregation in many areas, including friendship.

There have been significant changes in both men's and women's role expectations since this research was carried out, but cross-sex friendships still face some difficulties and ambiguities. One writer has described such friendships as being of a quite specific type – a non-romantic, non-familial, personal relationship between a man and a woman. Bem (1983) argues that our culture is so gender-based and so heterosexually-based that there is an inbuilt tendency for people to see all cross-sex interaction in sexual terms and all members of the opposite sex in terms of sexual attraction.

O'Meara (1989) notes there are four main areas which cross-sex friends must continually negotiate as they attempt to construct a shared identity as friends: determining the type of emotional bond represented by the relationship, contending with the issue of sexuality, dealing with relationship equality within a cultural context of gender inequality, and presenting the relationship as authentic publicly.

Both men and women commented on the aspect of sexuality in cross-sex relationships, but in somewhat different ways. A

married woman said she didn't feel very comfortable about close male friendships because she didn't want her husband to feel threatened or to hear comments from other people, which he may misinterpret. She had had the experience of thinking of a male friend as 'only a friend', then having the 'hard word' put on her. Another woman put it quite succinctly:

Often, if you start getting too close in a friendship with a man, they jump you or try to, and if that's not what you want, it ruins the whole thing.

She believed a woman couldn't have a perfectly platonic relationship with someone of the opposite sex because of the ever-present possibility of one person wanting it to be sexual.

Men were not concerned about being 'jumped', but rather about partners being jealous:

If I go along with the females too much, my partner would get a bit suspicious.

Another respondent said he could talk more with male friends without getting himself into trouble with his girlfriend, implying that he would 'get into trouble' spending a lot of time with female friends.

These responses reveal some of challenges in and the barriers to close cross-sex friendships. They also show the strong influence of gender and heterosexuality in shaping friendships. These influences become clearer when the dynamics of the cross-sex friendships of gay men and women are explored. The literature indicates that a considerable number of gay men have close female friends, both straight and gay. Rubin (1992) found that friendships between gay men and straight women are not troubled by many of the complications mentioned above in relation to cross-sex friendships. Intimacy and feelings of mutual ease were important components of such friendships, 'bringing a kind of comfort and companionship that neither can find easily in the world of heterosexual men where both have been devalued so consistently and for so long' (p.173).

Friendships between lesbians and gay men are also sometimes close and based on mutual understanding and equality. However, Rubin found that such friendships were less common than those between gay men and straight women. Based on her own, and other research, she concludes that lesbians do not feel as isolated from other women as gay men do from their straight brothers. Hence friendships with men, gay or straight, are not a compelling priority for lesbians. More research is needed to clarify the dynamics of such friendships.

The cross-sex friendships of the small number of young adults in the Institute study who identified their primary relationship as homosexual, were consistent with Rubin's conclusions. One young man said he had close male and female friends and made no distinction between them. A young woman explained she was 'going through a separatist period' and was not particularly interested in male friends; her female friends were all important to her. Another, who lived with her female partner, had very close friendship bonds with her own brothers,

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the group tending to form a buffer for the couple against the outside world.

Calling on Friends for Help

Friendship implies support and 'being there' for someone, but young adults distinguished between different situations of need. We asked respondents to rate the likelihood of calling on various people for help, first if they had a personal problem and were feeling depressed and confused about it, and second if they needed to borrow \$200 in an emergency.

Overall, it was highly likely that friends of the same sex were turned to for support with personal worries (more so than a range of other people including friends of the opposite sex and parents). Not surprisingly, all but one of the marrieds were highly likely to turn to their spouses, and the

findings were similar for those with partners and lovers. Women were significantly more likely than men to say they would call on a same-sex friend for emotional support. This is in accord with the various discussions so far concerning the ways women and men handle emotional issues and intimacy in friendship. Consistent also is the finding that men were more likely to say they would call on a female friend, than women were on a male friend. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that despite the significant difference between men and women, three-quarters of the men said that they would be quite likely or highly likely to seek help and emotional support from a male friend.

Borrowing money from friends is clearly different from seeking support in an emotional crisis. In the hypothetical situation of having to borrow \$200, it was more likely for young adults to say they would turn to parents (particularly mothers) and to spouses and partners when they were present, than to friends of either sex. This may be because many young adults cannot afford

to lend friends money, or it may imply different obligations between friends and kin where money is involved. The different expectations are reflected in such social beliefs as 'friendship and business shouldn't be mixed'. Friends of the same sex were more likely to be approached for a loan than friends of the opposite sex. Men were more likely than women to say they would borrow from a same sex friend, and as likely as women to say they would borrow from an opposite-sex friend (although only one in five of all respondents thought it was likely that they would).

Findings from the Institute's Becoming Adult study throw some light on the way in which friends are regarded by young adults, confirm the importance of friends as confidants and in social life, and support some broad differences between women's and men's approaches to friendship.

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