

The Effect of Gender Socialization on Mixed-Gender Friend Dynamics

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INTRODUCTION

A severely under-studied topic in the sociological discipline, mixed-gender friendships can provide fascinating insights into the ways that gender socialization can have a direct impact on the connections a person may be able to create and maintain with others throughout their life. It has been established that generally speaking, cisgender women and men express friendship in different ways (Bonhag & Froese, 2021; Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Fehr, 2004) and that juxtaposition continues to be interesting as societal expectations about mixed-gender friendships evolve. The purpose of this narrative study was to explore whether interpersonal strains are experienced in mixed-gender friendships due to differential experiences of and expectations placed on friendships between women and men. I also worked to provide clarity around these differing friendship styles and expectations so as to shed light on how different people may approach friendships, and to provide a deeper understanding as to why certain friendships may or may not be considered successful, reciprocal, and quality from the female perspective.

With this in mind, the research question for this project was: How does gender socialization affect styles of communication and friendship, and what impacts might this have on mixed-gender friendships between cisgender women and men who are in their early twenties? More specifically, I looked at whether women's emotional needs are met in mixed-gender friendships, and whether that has an effect on the perceived quality and perceived level of closeness for the woman. To clarify, the analysis of differences between gendered friendship patterns is not meant to suggest that these behaviours are immutable or definitive, nor is the purpose of this research to reproduce essentialist notions of gendered behavior. Rather, this research explores the role and impact that gender socialization has on relationships, with the understanding that these behaviours are not inherent but rather socially and culturally constructed.

I begin this paper by outlining the history of gendered friend dynamics and move on to review relevant literature on the subject. In reviewing available literature I found three key themes: **friendship**

styles; genderlect theory and socialization; and mixed-gender friendship dynamics and emotion work. I discuss the data found from the selected literature, explain the relevance of these themes, and synthesize these ideas to thoroughly back my research project with established evidence. Following this will be the results gathered from the interview process, with common themes being: **what makes women feel close to their male friends; support provided by male friends; and emotional intelligence as a key determinant for connection.**

HISTORY

Mixed-gender friendship dynamics are a facet of social and cultural life that are continuously evolving, so it is important to keep in mind that what we understand about friendship dynamics in contemporary Western society are neither stagnant nor definitive. The social construction of friendship is dynamic and dependent on historical and cultural factors. Throughout history, friendships between men have been constructed in Western philosophy as being the only true form of friendship (Fox, 2024). This idea was pervasive until relatively recently, as qualities such as emotionality and care became increasingly feminized and the nature and dynamics of friendships shifted, ultimately leading to “straight white men [...] collectively disinvest[ing] in close friendships” (Fox, 2024, p.4) by the latter half of the 20th century in Western society. With this process of development in mind, it is clear that the topic of friendship cannot be properly studied without the consideration of pervasive socialization patterns and dominant social and cultural values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Friendship Styles

Studies of the gendered aspects of socialization reveal broad trends in the ways that women and men are taught to show up in the world. Reinforcements of behavior, beginning in infancy, go on to affect women and men’s sense of mattering, their interactions, and communication throughout their lives, including in their friendships (Bonhag & Froese, 2021; Fox, 2024; Lott, 1981). There are a number of

general trends that have been found in numerous studies on friendship styles. To begin, women's style of friendship is often described as intimate, empathetic, and emotionally open (Aukett et al., 1988; Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Hall, 2010). Women tend to prefer self-disclosure and conversation as a method of bonding and take up a nurturing, therapeutic role for those close to them (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Hall, 2010). In contrast, men are described as preferring activity- and shared interest-based bonding as the basis for friendship (Aukett et al., 1988; Elkins & Peterson, 1993). There is broad consensus that same-gender friendships between men are less emotionally supportive and are therefore described as less intimate and trusting, being characterized as the least fulfilling in comparison to cross-gender friendships and same-gender friendships between women (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Elkins & Peterson, 1993; Hall, 2010). In sum, these characterizations generally funnel into the understanding that women's friendships are expressive, while men's friendship styles are instrumental (Aukett et al., 1988; Safilios-Rothschild, 1981).

However, this conclusion isn't without contestation. One study presents the findings that women's friendships are both expressive *and* instrumental (Wright & Scanlon, 1991), adding a layer of complexity and nuance to the conversation around women's friendship styles not found in the majority of studies.

Of course, these findings are more broad generalizations than definitions that can be applied to every friendship. However, keeping in mind the social expectations of how women and men are to show up in their friendships is valuable in proceeding with this topic, as it provides an understanding and context about the behaviors exhibited within friendships.

Genderlect Theory and Socialization

Deborah Tannen is a sociolinguist whose work has significantly contributed to the discourse on gendered communication styles. She posits that the way women and men communicate is fundamentally different. Tannen refers to this phenomenon as genderlect theory (Tannen, 1990). Her observations on the ways that women and men communicate are insightful, pointing out key differences such as how women tend to value connection and intimacy in their interactions, whereas men tend to value status and

independence (Tannen, 1990). However, her theory lacks any deep exploration as to why this might be the case.

Contemporary sociological work and a feminist framework specifically concerned with gender socialization complement Tannen's work well, as they pick up genderlect theory's slack by accounting for its missing social and cultural context. Contemporary sociological literature on the subject of friendship addresses the construction of gender roles and norms as having a significant impact on friendship patterns and experiences (Bonhag & Froese, 2021; Flannery & Smith, 2016; Fox, 2024). Gender socialization theory backs this up by explaining the phenomenon of socialization and the role it plays in sculpting how people communicate, bond, show up for each other, and what they value and seek out in relationships. The theory maintains that there are no fundamental biological differences between women and men (Butler, 1990; Curran et al., 2015), rather that certain behaviors are reinforced from very early on in people's lives through deeply embedded social structures (Curran et al., 2015) and various mechanisms such as toys, media, parental influence, and imitation of modeled behavior (Lott, 1981). A powerful force of socialization is the expectations that are placed on girls to be more thoughtful and sensitive of others, with a sense of empathy and concern instilled in them from a young age that is not prioritized to the same extent with boys (Flannery & Smith, 2016; Lott, 1981). These expectations are produced through the reinforcement of gender-aligned behavior and activities, as well as the punishment of behavior that does not align with the prescribed definitions of binaristic gendered behavior (Fox, 2024; Lott, 1981). With this information as context, it is possible to understand genderlect theory in a more holistic way. In summary, sociolinguistic theory explains that women and men are taught to communicate differently from one another, while gender socialization theory describes why and how this occurs.

Mixed-Gender Friendship Dynamics and Emotion Work

Importantly, it is widely agreed upon in the literature that men consider their mixed-gender friendships to be closer than do women (Buhrke, R. A., & Fuqua, 1987). It has also been found that though men's same-gender friendships do not have an emotional element to the same extent as do

women's same-gender friendships, and that men are not socialized to be emotionally supportive in the way that women are, men still value receiving emotional intimacy and support (Fehr, 2004; Flannery & Smith, 2016). Because of this, women often play an expressive, emotional, and supportive role for men without reciprocation (Safilios-Rothschild, 1981) which could explain why men find mixed-gender friendships to be more fulfilling than women do. It is imperative to consider the role that emotion work plays in this dynamic. Emotion work is defined in feminist literature as the work that someone partakes in to ensure that another's emotional well-being and needs are taken care of. Emotion work can have a positive effect on relationship quality when it is reciprocal (Curran et al., 2015; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993). However, if emotion work is carried out unequally, it can emotionally and mentally drain the person who is providing it (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993). In playing the expressive and nurturing role in their friendships with men, women expend unreciprocated energy to the extent that one study even states that "women are sustained in their relationships with men by their relationships with women" (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987, p.350). These dynamics are vital to keep in mind when analyzing perceived quality for each party in a mixed-gender friendship.

LIMITATIONS AND GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

The popularity of research on friendships peaked in the 1980s and 1990s and was primarily done from within psycho-social theoretical frameworks (Fox, 2024). There is very little sociological research to be found on the topic of mixed-gender friendships and the way that they are constructed within a social and cultural context (Fox, 2024; Reeder, 2016). Because of this, a number of the sources reviewed in this paper are outdated, not primarily sociological in nature, or don't focus specifically on the topics of gender and friendships but on peripheral topics such as emotion work. The outdated nature of the literature is significant, as gender relations are not fixed and continue to evolve over time (Connell & Pearse, 2015) so to rely on information based on research done so long ago likely does not accurately depict contemporary gender dynamics. Additionally, social and cultural mores and expectations about mixed-gender friendships similarly evolve as time goes on (Connell & Pearse, 2015), as what is considered a common

mixed-gender dynamic in contemporary times may not have been considered common, or even acceptable, in the 1980s or 1990s. Because my project employs a sociological perspective, holding the understanding that broader social systems impact individual interpersonal connections, my research provides a set of updated and sociologically relevant data that can contribute to the discourse on mixed-gender friendships.

Another gap in the available literature is that while there is some available information on mixed-gender friendship dynamics, friendship styles, and the ways in which women and men are socialized to connect, there doesn't seem to be any cohesive data on the *effect* that these differences have upon friendships. The subject that most closely addresses the effect of emotional support in relationships is that of emotion work, which was discussed in the previous section. However, all literature on emotion work focuses on the dynamics of romantic partnerships. While much of this information can be applied to friendships, it would be beneficial to have data that specifically addresses mixed-gender friendships as friendships contain different dynamics than those of romantic partnerships. Once again, my project works to address this gap in the literature by seeking out information as to possible impacts that differential friendship and communication styles have on people in mixed-gender friendships.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The methodology used for this project was that of semi-structured interviews, which allowed for the flexibility needed to illuminate the experiences of mixed-gender friendships for those within them and to explore the complexities and nuances that come with being friends with a person who has been socialized in a different manner from oneself. Interviews lasted about 50 minutes each and were held in quiet, private locations on campus. Convenience sampling was used to recruit members for the interview portion of this project through a call-out post on the class Brightspace platform, which outlined the aim of the research as well as the criteria for participation including the request for the participation of one cisgender woman and one cisgender man. However, due to the sampling process for this project, I was unable to recruit any cisgender males to interview. Consequently I interviewed two cisgender women and

in doing so, the scope of my project shifted from understanding the impacts of gender socialization on friendship styles from both a female and a male perspective to only focusing on the topic from a feminine point of view. Ultimately, I feel this shift in focus was beneficial to the project as it allowed me to identify common themes between both participants' answers, rather than simply relying on one respondent to cover everything from either a female or male perspective. In addition, my position as a woman helped to provide insight at points within the project as I understand, from an insider perspective, what it is like to be a woman within mixed-gender friendships. My personal experience with most, if not all, of the themes addressed in this paper, provided me with a valuable understanding of the nuances in the interview and data analysis processes. In sum, while my intentions at the beginning of this project were to focus on both female and male perspectives, I ultimately believe that the pivot to focusing solely on the feminine perspective deepened my data and allowed me to come to fuller, richer conclusions.

What Makes Women Feel Close to Their Male Friends

A common sentiment addressed in both interviews was the role of listener and advice-giver that the participants described taking up. They both discussed providing their male friends with a safe space to be emotionally vulnerable. Being in a position where their male friends came to them for advice, support, and the space to process emotions played a large role in how close participants felt to their male friends.

A striking similarity in both interviews was that both women discussed specific instances where they were an emotionally supportive presence for their male friends when their male friends were going through a difficult period. One participant described introducing the concept of "trauma dumping" (colloquially understood as the process of sharing very personal details of one's life with another as opposed to unloading traumatic experiences on others without warning or invitation) to her male friend during a wine night, which her friend was enthusiastic about because opening up in an emotional manner was not something he had ever done. Both participants described their male friends as "victims" of the system of patriarchy which maintains that men should not be emotionally expressive. However, both of their male friends were willing to express emotion when given the space and safety to do so. They also

described how being able to be emotionally vulnerable with another person was not something either of their male friends had experienced much, if ever, in their lives.

Interestingly, even though these instances of emotional support were unreciprocated by their male friends in the moment, both participants reported these experiences as being key moments in which their friendships became significantly closer. The process of their male friends opening up to them emotionally helped both participants feel much closer to their friends, even though in these instances neither participant was, herself, being emotionally vulnerable or supported. Ultimately, it is clear that emotional openness from their male friends played a significant role in how close both participants felt toward their male friends. As illustrated in further sections, neither participant felt the need to be emotionally supported in the same way they had provided support to feel satisfied with their friendships.

Support Provided by Male Friends

The tendency outlined in the literature of women placing value in mutual disclosure and conversation as a form of intimacy within friendships was clearly illustrated in a discussion with one participant about a friendship with a man that has been developing over the last few months. Though the two of them have not known one other for very long, the participant described their friendship as far closer than a friendship with another male that she has maintained for five years. This closeness is due to the extent to which she and this new friend have opened up, have had deep and meaningful conversations, and have been vulnerable with one another. The participant described a feeling of validation she receives from interactions with her new friend, as well as an appreciation of being able to broach “deeper” conversation topics.

While the opportunity for this participant to share vulnerable and emotional conversations with her new friend has created a close bond, it was also explored that this is not the only way through which she creates close connections within her mixed-gender friendships. In fact, both participants reported feeling satisfied with the ways that their male friends show up for them, even if the ways they show up are not necessarily the same as how the participants themselves would show up for their friends. One

participant described that even though her close male friend does not take the active role of advice-giver like she does, she still feels emotionally supported because of his capacity to understand when the participant is having a difficult emotional time and works to support her through it, which for him usually looks like some form of distraction (i.e. going out for ice-cream). This is something that she really values in her friend.

The other participant discussed that though her close male friend does not fulfill every role she would need for support in her life, he fulfills an important role nonetheless. She described that what her friend brings to the table is emotional support in the form of action. For example, she outlined her male friend's support in the participant getting together with her now-boyfriend of three years. The participant's male friend played a large role in facilitating the beginning of their relationship through being involved in many of the action-based milestones. An example of this type of support was the participant's male friend ensured that her boyfriend would swipe right on her Tinder profile, which ultimately was the first step in the process of the two of them beginning their romantic relationship. The participant's male friend also helped her decide whether her love interest was the right person for her through action-based "scheming", i.e. coming up with a plan to test his intelligence through asking him a series of simple questions.

While it is true that the participants seemed to value emotional connection as a means of bonding, it also became clear in our interviews that other forms of connection, such as humour, shared inside jokes and experiences, and largely action-based comfort were also important in the formation and maintenance of their mixed-gender friendships. Though neither participant described the ways that their male friends supported them as necessarily emotional in the same way that the participants themselves show up for their male friends, both described a willingness and consistency with which their male friends show up to support them in other ways. Both participants expressed a deep satisfaction with the ways that their male friends show up to support them in their friendships. While men's tendency towards action-based bonding might be discussed in the literature as something that fails to satisfy the emotional needs of the woman in mixed-gender friendships, in both cases with participants of this study it seemed that action-based support is greatly appreciated and does fulfill their emotional needs. This challenges the narrative that women's

supportive efforts in friendship are not reciprocated - the participant's male friends do emotionally support their female friends, just not in the same way. This finding aligns with Wright & Scanlon's (1991) finding that women's friendships are both expressive and instrumental, not just expressive, as much of the other literature indicates.

Emotional Intelligence as a Key Determinant for Connection

While perhaps expressive male friends were not as important to the participants as the literature indicates, something that was necessary for at least one of the participants to be able to feel close to her male friends is a certain level of emotional intelligence, described in the seminal text on the subject as “a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and other's emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and action” (Mayer & Salovey, 1990, p. 433). This participant made it clear that she values when she doesn't feel the need to ‘mother’ the men in her life or put excessive energy into explaining certain social and emotional cues, which is something, in her experience, she has found herself doing a lot with men. She appreciates a male friend who is emotionally tuned in and has values that align with hers without her having to explain why these values are important. The participant outlined that while she acknowledges that relationships take work on both ends and that she is happy to do the work in a friendship, it is important to her that that labor is reciprocated, or else the relationship feels like a weight that she alone must carry. This aligns with the literature discussing the draining effect that emotion work can have upon a person when it is not reciprocated (Buhrke & Fuqua, 1987; Curran et al., 2015; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993).

CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Present Study and Directions for Future Research

This study has limitations which point to directions for future study. The nature of this study only allowed for the participation of two people from my research methods class, which significantly limited the project's scope and general applicability. Future research on the topic would benefit from a larger and

more diverse sample than the one used in this study in order to obtain data that is applicable to a broader population. For example, I focused solely on cisgender women and men because the inclusion of the diversity of gender expression would require far more space, time, and number of participants than the length of this project allowed. However, further research along the lines of what is being explored in this project would benefit from the perspective of trans and gender-queer people as the gendered dynamics within trans and gender-queer communities exist inherently outside of cisnormative dynamics (Halberstam, 2005). As well, there are facets of identity that are also products of social construction, or at least are influenced by social and cultural structures, such as race, ethnicity, class, age, religious background, and sexual orientation that likely have impacts on the construction and experience of friendship, similar to how gender impacts friendships.

This is an important direction for further research as a deeper understanding of the ways that social structures manifest in and have an impact on friendships can provide insight into what makes friendships successful or not, and can help in moving towards friendships that are more egalitarian for those involved.

Summary

In sum, many of my participants' experiences in their mixed-gender friendships aligned with what the literature describes. Both women described the way that they show up for their friends as fitting within the emotional, expressive role discussed in much of the literature on friendship styles. However, though much of the literature implies that women's style of friendship is solely expressive forms of bonding, experiences described by both participants illustrated that a variety of forms of bonding and support, such as action-based support, also worked to satisfy their emotional needs in their mixed-gender friendships. Ultimately it was clear in both interviews that the way the participants' male friends bond, communicate, and connect did differ from how the participants themselves show up in their friendships. It is clear that socialization does play a role in how the women and men discussed in this study show up in their friendships, because much of their behaviour aligns with what is described in the gender

socialization literature. However, this did not seem to negatively impact feelings of satisfaction or the quality of the friendships. What did have an impact on the level of perceived quality in mixed-gender friendships for at least one of the participants is whether or not her male friends possess emotional intelligence, as she values the experience of being met halfway and not having to “mother” her male friends.

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