

## CLOSEST FRIENDSHIPS OF NONCONFINED AGED MALES

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Scholars have suggested that the elderly need close, intimate relationships to enhance the quality of their lives. These relationships can be found in closest friendships. In the present study, we aimed to determine self-perceived variable patterns in the closest friendship relational network of both, one, or neither gender among nonconfined aged males. Specifically, we examined the most frequently perceived variable patterns with reference to the particular structural friendship unit, then reported on the similarities and/or differences among the groups.

*Keywords:* close friendships, intimate relationships, quality of life, nonconfined males, elderly males.

The loss of friends, associates, and/or contemporaries is unavoidable as one ages. Friends die or move, and elderly individuals find themselves alone and unable to cultivate the necessary kinds of intimate relationships. Just when friendship becomes most important in one's life, friendship opportunities are fewer than ever before (Blau, 1973; Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst, & Goldhammer, 1949). Retirement from work, especially for males, can have a devastating effect on their intimate, social relationships, whereby the companionship of associates, colleagues, and contemporaries, which has long been taken for granted, is suddenly removed. Further, continued interaction with these peers can be severely restricted and limited (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953).

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Over one-fourth of all people aged 65 or over live alone, and this figure increases to over one-half as socioeconomic class decreases. Isolation, loneliness, and withdrawal are major individual and social problems among this age group (Cottrell, 1974; Loether, 1975). Many elderly people do not know how or are unable to break out of their isolation and develop friendships. They typically live in single rooms or small apartments, have few—if any—visitors, and perform only necessary errands outside the home (Cavan et al., 1949).

Elderly individuals need meaningful interaction and intimate relationships to maximize the quality of their lives (Moriwaki, 1973), and there is no substitute for social interaction. Activities that do not involve other people are likely to fail as sources of basic satisfaction and gratification (Graney, 1975). Tobin and Neugarten (1961) and Peretti and Wilson (1976) found social interaction and social activity to be significant in satisfaction with life among retirees. Peretti and Wilson found that being alone, with few interpersonal relationships decreased satisfaction with life for retirees and also greatly increased contemplated suicide.

Friendship is an effective buffer for the elderly against demoralization produced by social losses of widowhood, retirement, and diminished social participation (Lowenthal & Haven, 1968). Older people need opportunities to meet and associate with members of their own generation, and peer friendships determine morale in old age (Blau, 1961, 1973). Lack of friendships can lower morale, and increase demoralization and psychological problems (Lowenthal, 1964; Spencer & Dorr, 1975).

In this study, we aimed to determine self-perceived variable patterns in the closest friendship relational network of both, one, or neither gender among nonconfined aged males. Specifically, we examined the most frequently perceived variable patterns with reference to the particular structural friendship unit.

## Method

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### Participants

Participants were 116 retired males, ranging in age from 66 to 74 years, all of whom were either single or widowed, and living in nonconfined quarters. They were randomly selected from among elderly individuals frequenting Lincoln Park, Chicago, IL.

### Materials

A closest friendship diagram consisted of a sheet of paper on which the participants were asked to diagram their closest friend(s). Lines were drawn between the participant and other(s) and the gender of each person

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was noted. This produced a modified sociogram (see Peretti, 1976, 1977), where participants and friend(s) were presented as a group structure.

An open-ended questionnaire was used to determine which self-perceived variable patterns emerged in the closest friendship relational network of both, one, or neither gender for the participants. Participants wrote response regarding their perceptions of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors associated with the closest friendship diagram. For those men having a closest friendship with neither gender, the responses were based on their self-perceptions related to an absence of closest friendships.

### **Operational definitions.**

**Closest friend:** One with whom you have your most intimate, personal contact. S/he is one in whom you confide your most private and personal affairs.

**Nonconfined:** Lacking in restrictions, limitations, and/or restraints.

### **Procedure**

By selecting participants frequenting Lincoln Park during the daylight hours, an attempt was made to find a random sample of single or widowed, aged males not confined to retirement, rest, or nursing homes and the like. Males were approached as they sat on the park's benches, strolled in the different park areas, or observed activities, such as chess, checkers, card-playing, boating, in designated park areas. Potential participants were personally contacted and asked if they would like to participate in the study. They were told that the study centered around closest friendships of elderly males, anonymity was ensured, and all data gathered would be kept confidential.

Respondents first completed the closest friendship diagram. There was no time limit for completion of this instrument, and participants could ask questions of the researcher while working on the form. Those with closest friendships of neither gender did not have to complete this form. After completion of the initial instrument, participants were asked to complete the open-ended instrument regarding their perceptions of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors associated with the closest friend(s) shown on the diagram. Participants with closest friendships of neither gender gave responses based on the absence of such friendships in their present lives. Again, no time limit was given for the questionnaire's completion.

## **Results**

Self-perceived variable patterns in the closest friendship relational network of both genders among aged males are shown in Table 1. Of the participants, 68 (59%) stated that they had at least one male and one female closest friend. The total number of closest friends for the

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participants in this structural friendship unit was 112 individuals of the same gender ( $M = 1.6$  per 5) and 75 of the opposite gender ( $M = 1.1$  per 5). The basic structural network was either dyadic or double dyadic.

The self-perceived variable patterns for the relational network among these participants with members of the same gender included loneliness, companionship, social identity, self-image, and common experiences, whereas those with members of the opposite gender were sociability, interested, loneliness, sexual relations, and feel younger. For the former network, the most frequently perceived variable was loneliness, and for the latter network, the most frequently perceived variable was sociability.

Table 1. *Self-Perceived Variable Patterns in the Closest Friendship Relational Network of Both Genders Among Aged Males*

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<b>Relational network of both genders</b>					
Same gender ( $N = 68$ )			Opposite gender ( $N = 68$ )		
<i>Self-perceived variable patterns</i>					
Criteria	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	Criteria	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Loneliness	59	87	Sociability	57	84
Companionship	48	71	Interested	43	63
Social identity	44	65	Loneliness	38	56
Self-image	29	43	Sexual relations	17	25
Common experiences	15	38	Feel younger	12	18

*Note.* Full sample  $N = 68$ .

Table 2 shows the self-perceived variable patterns in the closest friendship relational network of either one gender or neither gender among aged males ( $n = 48$ , 41%). The latter group of participants stated that they had no closest friends. Sixteen men had 21 same-gender closest friends ( $M = 1.4$  per 5); seven had nine friends of the opposite gender ( $M = 1.3$  per 5); and 25 had closest friends of neither gender or no closest friends. The foremost group of participants comprised 14% of the total number of participants, the middle group 6%, and the lattermost group 22% of the total participants. Among the aged males, 22% maintained that they did not have any closest friend. Of the four possible response areas (both genders, same gender, opposite gender, neither gender), the lattermost classification was the second most frequently given relational network.

Self-perceived variable patterns for the relational network among those respondents with members of the same gender only were loneliness, confidant, common interests, availability, and companionship. For participants with members of the opposite gender only, the variable pattern was companionship, sociability, mutual dependency, loneliness, and feel younger. For participants with a relational network of neither gender, the variables included suspicious, apprehensive, indifferent, depressive, and social withdrawal.

Table 2. *Self-Perceived Variable Patterns in the Closest Friendship Relational Network of Either One Gender or of Neither Gender Among Aged Males*

Relational network of either one gender or neither gender								
Same gender (n = 16)			Opposite gender (n = 7)			Neither gender (n = 25)		
<i>Self-perceived variable patterns</i>								
Criteria	N	%	Criteria	N	%	Criteria	N	%
Loneliness	14	88	Companionship	6	86	Suspicious	22	88
Confidant	13	81	Sociability	5	71	Apprehensive	20	80
Common interests	11	69	Mutual dependency	4	57	Indifferent	17	68
Availability	9	56	Loneliness	4	57	Depressive	16	64
Companionship	8	50	Feel younger	2	29	Social withdrawal	11	44

Note. Full sample N = 48.

### Discussion

On the basis of the data collected, we determined self-perceived variable patterns in the closest friendship relational network of both, one, or neither gender among nonconfined aged males. Results suggested that the most frequently stated closest friendship relational unit was that of both genders. Self-perceived variable patterns of participants were found to be different within these units by same or opposite gender of the closest friend. With reference to the unit with same-gender (male) members, participants maintained that loneliness was the most important variable in the development and maintenance of the closest friendship. Alone, the men felt useless and isolated, leading them to seek others with whom they might be active and develop different levels of social and personal intimacy. The participants perceived other men as companions in their life situation, who would fulfill the participants' social functions in their daily activities, particularly those centering on leisure time. A number of participants stated that same-gender closest friends, when the relational unit did include both genders, were their peers of the same generation and at a similar stage in life. Within this framework, each individual was more likely to develop a comparable social identity. As each of the men had various similar interests and experiences in common, especially in areas dealing with occupational pursuits, the closest friendship was perceived as a chief source of participants' self-image. Within the friendship unit, having common experiences with same-gender friends tended to increase reciprocal sharing of ideas, attitudes, and intimacies, as well as increasing the ease of communication between the participants.

Sociability was the most frequently expressed self-perceived variable in the relational network of both genders, as regards the unit with opposite-gender (female) members. The men perceived women as individuals that allowed them to increase their range of social activity. When accompanied

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by female friends, participants felt freer to accept social invitations from elderly couples. Some of their friends and acquaintances were married, and the men stated that having a female closest friend made them feel better around such persons. Many of the participants said they were interested in members of the opposite gender for various reasons, such as companionship, having someone to go out with and to eat with, having someone to talk to, and having someone with which to engage in sexual activity. Loneliness was the third most frequently stated variable, and was perceived by the participants as being able to be averted with opposite-gender closest friends by increasing the variety of actions and interactions for the men. Participants said they had a need for different kinds and levels of interaction to help avert loneliness and isolation, and that women aided them in satisfying such needs. Interest and activity in sexual intercourse were frequently expressed by the males, and female friends were said to be useful as outlets for these. The abilities of psychologically, physiologically, and socially "feeling younger" were expressed by the respondents when there were female members in relational networks of both genders. A closest friendship with the woman was often said to increase the satisfaction, quality of life, and well-being of the male respondents.

When the relational network of the closest friendship unit was composed of only one gender (either same or opposite), some of the same self-perceived variables present in the unit composed of both genders were mentioned. In these instances, some responses were similar and others differed. Those differing will be considered when applicable.

Regarding the same-gender responses, in the one-gender relational network, loneliness was the most frequently expressed self-perceived variable. Participants often found their days becoming empty, and they sought friends to help relieve their boredom. They felt that same-gender friendships had somewhat greater flexibility in the range of possible activities in which the individuals might engage. Same-gender friends were more likely than opposite-gender friends were to be considered a confidant for the participants. Respondents had the need and desire to confide in someone and talk about themselves and/or their problems, and male closest friends seemed to fulfill this role. Having perceived common interests and experiences, the participants stated that male closest friends understood them and could relate to their own problems better than women could. Respondents mentioned availability in relation to there being generally more men and fewer women available in their social environments. Elderly males seemed to go outside the home more frequently than did the elderly females, and this availability tended to increase the probability of friendship formation. Within same-gender units, companionship was perceived as the physical presence of others being a

vital source of obtaining social stimulation and forestalling demoralization in old age.

The least frequently stated closest friendship relational unit was that of only one gender, when the gender was opposite (female) for the closest friend. Companionship, which was the most frequently stated self-perceived variable in the opposite-gender unit, was often believed to result from mutual or one-way attraction. When mutual, participants considered that each member of the closest friendship unit was attracted to each other member; however, when the attraction was not reciprocal, the friendship continued to endure. Participants said that female closest friends increased their range of acquaintances as well as to allowing them to cultivate new contacts. Mutual dependency in the one-gender relationship with an opposite-gender member was perceived with regard to the fulfillment of mutual needs and the solution of mutual problems. Participants also stated that there was a mutual dependency associated with psychological and emotional support, with some respondents feeling loneliness when they were without the closest friendship of a female. For them, opposite-gender friendships alleviated feelings of loneliness, isolation, and emptiness. Within the opposite-gender unit, feeling younger was associated with going out, dating, and having sexual relations with women friends. Each of these behaviors was said to be related to earlier periods of life for the participants, and the cognitive connections formed positively reinforced participants' motivation to react and respond in similar ways.

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Suspiciousness was the most frequently expressed self-perceived variable in the neither-gender relationship network. Participants stated they had no closest friend because they were suspicious and distrustful of others, and commented that they watched others closely for associated cues. Their vigilance and guarded behaviors around potential closest friends was generally accompanied by little to no humor, spontaneity, or positive feelings, making the social situation uneasy for all members.

Apprehensiveness tended to arise in a group structure, with the men stating they were convinced that there was a specific adversary or group of adversaries within these units. Aged males in the relational network of neither gender maintained that they were generally indifferent toward any form of friendship formation, with many putting forth their independence and lack of a need for close, personal relationships. For some, intimacy was said to be an intolerable discomfort, despite the lack of human companionship and the stresses of aging that would seem enough to lead men to develop closest friendships and avoid depression. Some of the criteria of friendship units perceived as leading to states of depression for the participants were senility, apathy, sickness, sympathy, dependency, reliability, and money. Within the neither-gender unit, withdrawal was perceived as actively shunning interpersonal relationships, whereby

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participants in a social setting frequently acted as if they were alone and ignored others who were present.

In the closest friendship relational network of both genders, the aged males had a mean of 1.6 male and 1.1 female friends. When the closest friendship relational network included friends of only one gender, the men had a mean of 1.4 male and 1.3 female friends. It might be concluded from these data that aged males, even those with closest friendship relationships, have relatively few people with whom they engage in intimate, personal contact. Moreover, 22% of the participants maintained that they had no closest friends. The self-perceived variables in the closest friendship relational network for these men suggested a negative cognitive set. Within this frame of reference, friendships might become frustrating and grating for them, perpetuating superficiality in relationships and barring true intimacy.

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