

INTIMACY IN THE CONFIDANT ROLE IN CLOSEST FRIENDSHIPS OF NONCONFINED AGED MALES

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It has been suggested that elderly individuals need intimate social contact to enhance their well-being. Closest friendships can be the greatest source of social contact within the confidant role of the friendship unit. In this study, we aimed to determine self-perceived intimacy criteria in the confidant role in closest friendships of nonconfined aged males. For this purpose, we examined the most frequently perceived intimacy criteria with reference to the males' particular structural friendship units. Results showed that the most frequently self-perceived criteria were communication, personal concern, belongingness, commitment, and self-worth.

Keywords: intimacy, confidant role, friendships, elderly males, social contact, well-being.

The elderly need close, meaningful interaction and intimate relationships to maximize the quality of their lives. Activities that do not involve deep personal contact with other people are likely to fail as sources of basic satisfaction and gratification (Moriwaki, 1973; Tobin & Neugarten, 1961).

Aged individuals' physical, physiological, psychological, and social well-being are negatively affected by the lack of close social contact. A strong inverse relationship has been found between diseases, mortality, and the lack of intimate social support systems in elderly people. In contrast, intimacy in a confiding relationship has been found to serve as a buffer against anxiety, stress, and illness (Loether, 1975; Lowenthal, 1964; Rathbone-McCuan & Hashimi, 1982).

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FRIENDSHIPS OF NONCONFINED AGED MALES

Friendship is an effective buffer against the demoralization produced by elderly people's social losses of widowhood, retirement, and diminished social participation (Lowenthal & Haven, 1968; Peretti & Tero, 1984). Lacking peer relationships and friendships in old age lowers morale and increases demoralization (Blau, 1961; Sparks, 1980).

Among closest friends, a confiding relationship includes extensive self-disclosure (Orimo, 1980; Peretti, 1976), whereby individuals can express their true feelings about one another in reciprocal interaction and obtain meaningful feedback (Spencer & Dorr, 1975; Vedder, 1971). Shared intimacy enhances the confidant relationship (Cottrell, 1974).

In this study, we aimed to determine self-perceived intimacy criteria in the confidant role in closest friendships of nonconfined aged males. Specifically, we examined the most frequently perceived intimacy criteria with reference to the males' particular structural friendship units.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 82 retired males (age range = 67–76 years). By selecting people frequenting Lincoln Park, Chicago, IL, during the daylight hours, an attempt was made to find a random sample of single or widowed, aged males who were not confined to retirement, rest, or nursing homes and the like. Males were approached as they sat on park benches, strolled in the different park areas, or watched or observed activities (e.g., chess, checkers, boating), in the designated park areas for such functions.

Potential participants were personally contacted and asked if they would like to take part in the study. They were told that the study centered around closest friendships of elderly males, advised that names would not be used to insure anonymity, and assured that all data would be kept confidential.

Men volunteering to participate in the study first completed a closest friendship diagram. No time limit was set for completion, and participants could ask questions of the researcher while working on the form.

Next, the men were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire regarding their perceptions of the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors assumed to be associated with confidant intimacy in their initially diagrammed structured closest friendship units. Again, no time limit was set.

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 ego and other(s) and the gender of each person was noted. A modified sociogram technique (Peretti, 1976) was used, in which participants and friend(s) were presented as a group structure.

We used an open-ended questionnaire to determine the self-perceived intimacy criteria in the confidant role in the participants' closest friendships. Responses regarding self-perceptions of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors were assumed to be associated with confidant intimacy.

Operationalization of Terms

Closest friend. A person with whom one has the most intimate, personal contact.

Confidant. A closest friend with whom one shares one's deepest thoughts and concerns. In the confidant role, the individual understands the other at the deepest emotional and feeling levels.

Intimacy. Self-disclosure characterized by innermost thoughts and feelings of the deepest nature.

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

Results

Self-perceived intimacy criteria in the confidant role in the closest friendships of the nonconfined aged males are shown in Table 1. The five most frequently perceived criteria (70% frequency or more across the whole sample) are presented in rank-order of selection.

Table 1. *Most Frequently Stated Self-Perceived Intimacy Criteria in the Confidant Role*

Self-perceived intimacy criteria	N	%
Communication	78	95
Personal concern	73	89
Belongingness	70	85
Commitment	66	80
Self-worth	63	77

Discussion

Self-perceived intimacy criteria in the confidant role in closest friendships of nonconfined aged males were determined using the data collected. The five most frequently self-perceived variables were communication, personal concern, belongingness, commitment, and self-worth, respectively, in the males' particular structural friendships units.

Communication was mentioned by the participants as being very frequent and extensive in the confidant role. Respondents frequently placed few limits on the wide range of information that could be explored and discussed in the confidant role. Furthermore, communication often involved nonverbal hints and cues as well as words. Needs, emotions, and feelings were revealed that would be hidden from others in the group not

within the role of confidant. Depth of communication was stated to be the greatest in the confidant role, within which the participants responded that their deepest feelings, beliefs, and sentiments could be discussed with the other(s). The men felt that this gave them an opportunity to openly express many forms of communication, but especially those areas dealing with anxiety, stress, and conflicts. Intimacy in the confidant role in terms of communicability to the other led the participants to alleviate pressure and problems in these areas and enhance opportunities for self-growth.

Personal concern, as the second most frequently perceived intimacy criterion, was stated by the participants to be found in the confidant role in expressions and behaviors indicating care about personality development, security, happiness, and general well-being. The men believed that they were being accepted for themselves and not merely as a means to some external objective. Personal concern was also mentioned as having been exhibited in the confidant role when the individual expressed unique feelings or behaviors that could not be quickly or easily transferred to someone else. This tended to make the participants feel as if they could not be replaced in the relationship and it enhanced their intimacy and personal satisfaction with the other(s).

Through the intimacy criterion of belongingness in the confidant role, the men felt there was increased group cohesiveness and stability. Participants perceived strong feelings of togetherness and group loyalty with the other, and maintained that when belongingness was nurtured, there seemed to be a fusion of personalities into a common whole involving mutual sympathies and identification. The men believed that this belongingness created a reciprocal emotional investment with the other(s), and allowed individuals in the closest friendship structural unit to know each other intimately. For many respondents, this led them to their strong closest relationships with confidants in diverse relationships lasting a considerable number of years (up to 61 years for one participant).

Commitment in relation to self-perceived intimacy, was believed to be strong toward the other as well as toward oneself from the other in the confidant relationship. Participants mentioned that the confidant role necessitated a strong sense of commitment among individuals. They perceived a greater degree of intimacy when there was an increased pledging or binding of the individuals owing to the confidant role(s). Divulging of one's most private attitudes, ideas, secrets, and behaviors was stated by the males as a significant criterion in the process of commitment. The men also considered commitment in the confidant role as a measure of the extent to which they felt the other was an integral part of themselves. They perceived this as a bond between the self and other, or a measure of the extent to which they might want to dispense with the confidant role regarding a particular person.

FRIENDSHIPS OF NONCONFINED AGED MALES

Intimacy in the confidant role in the participants' closest friendships was perceived as increasing the men's self-perceptions of positive self-worth, and enhancing their self-confidence and self-acceptance. Interactions with the other allowed the men to convey their hopes and fears more adequately, express and resolve varied problems, and put forth political, religious, and sexual positions that they hesitated to communicate outside the confidant relationship. In many instances, these conditions allowed the men to see themselves within a more favorable framework and as better adjusted individuals than they might have previously conceived.

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