



## Gender and Closeness Among Friends and Siblings

Kory Floyd

To cite this article: Kory Floyd (1995) Gender and Closeness Among Friends and Siblings, The Journal of Psychology, 129:2, 193-202, DOI: [10.1080/00223980.1995.9914958](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1995.9914958)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.1995.9914958>



Published online: 02 Jul 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 123



Citing articles: 41 [View citing articles](#) [↗](#)

# Gender and Closeness Among Friends and Siblings

KORY FLOYD

*Department of Speech Communication  
University of Washington*

---

**ABSTRACT.** Friendships and sibling bonds are often the most enduring relationships in a person's life. This study examined what makes each relationship close and how gender and type of relationship affect the ways in which closeness is manifested. Contrary to previous research on American students, respondents in the present study did not indicate that they were closer to their friends than their siblings. Rather, closeness emerged as a function of similarity in friendships and as a function of dependability in sibling dyads. Similarly, women and men reported that their relationships were equally close; however, closeness was manifested differently for each.

---

**FRIENDS AND SIBLINGS** are among one's most unique life companions. They represent what are often the most enduring relationships in life, many times outlasting spousal and parent-child bonds. The line dividing friendship and siblinghood is easily blurred; one often counts siblings as friends ("my sister is my best friend") and friends as siblings ("he's like a brother to me"). The relationships are conceptually unique, however, in that friendship is voluntary, often transitory, and predicated on positive affect, whereas siblinghood is imposed, irrevocable, and usually involves much more shared experience than a friendship. Examining what makes each of these relationships close, and how gender affects perceptions of closeness, yields insightful information about intimate human connections.

A number of American studies have examined gender and closeness in adult friendships, particularly in same-sex dyads. Most have posited that women's friendships are closer or more intimate than men's (Caldwell & Pep-

---

*The assistance of Mac Parks, Valerie Manusov, and Isabelle Bauman is greatly appreciated.*

*Address correspondence to Kory Floyd, Department of Speech Communication, University of Washington, 205 Raitt, DL-15, Seattle, WA 98195.*

lau, 1982; Griffin & Sparks, 1990; Hays, 1984; Sapadin, 1988; Steiner, 1986/1987; Williams, 1985). Quite often, the empirical support for such claims has been that American men self-disclose less than women do, a finding suggested in a number of studies (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Booth, 1972; Davidson & Duberman, 1982; Fischer & Narus, 1981; Hays, 1984; Jourard, 1971; McCarthy, 1986; Rands & Levinger, 1979; Reis, Senchak, & Solomon, 1985; Stull, 1981). A newer perspective has emerged in the last decade, which suggests that men's friendships can be as close as women's but that men develop closeness through shared interests and activities rather than through self-disclosure (Cancian, 1986; Floyd, 1994; Parks & Floyd, 1994; Sherrod, 1987; Swain, 1989; Wood & Inman, 1993). Foot, Chapman, and Smith (1980) found gender effects to be diminished in cross-sex friendship dyads.

By contrast, most research on sibling interaction has focused either on children (e.g., Stocker & Dunn, 1990) or on older adults (e.g., Connidis, 1989). Far fewer studies have examined closeness in adult sibling relationships. Ross and Dalton (1981) found closeness among adult siblings to be related to interactive factors, such as shared experiences, and to social factors, such as mutual values and religious beliefs. Others have cited propinquity, family tradition, and shared interests as elements that draw siblings together (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Lamb & Sutton-Smith, 1982), and some researchers have argued that the age difference between siblings may affect how close they are (Cicirelli, 1982). Gender effects on adult sibling closeness have been virtually neglected, but Pulakos (1989) found that women felt their sibling relationships were closer and more important than men did. It is unclear, however, whether these participants were reporting on same-sex or cross-sex sibling dyads.

In her 1989 study, Pulakos compared friend and sibling dyads and found that friendships exhibited more reciprocity, positive affect, and activities and that sibling relationships were characterized by more differentiation. Friends were also shown to share more activities and topics of conversation than were siblings. The relative contribution of each activity or conversation topic to the closeness of the relationships, however, was not studied. It may be that particular activities are more important to relational closeness than others and that this may differ as a function of gender, relational type, or both. Statistically, the strength of Pulakos's position may also have been compromised by her use of within-subject comparisons, as she asked each participant to report both on a friend and on a sibling.

The present study sought to extend Pulakos's (1989) findings by asking American college students to indicate what activities, topics of conversation, and affective states were most important to the closeness of their friend and sibling relationships, as well as how close, committed, and satisfied they felt with those relationships. Results were analyzed for main effects of gender and

relationship type, as well as for the effect of their interaction. Both same-sex and cross-sex effects were analyzed.

Significant gender effects were hypothesized to reflect the perspective that closeness is manifested differently for men and women:

*Hypothesis 1.* Men in all relationship types will report that closeness is based more on shared interests and instrumental activities than on verbal interaction or emotional expressiveness.

*Hypothesis 2.* Women in all relationship types will report that closeness is based more on verbal interaction and emotional expressiveness than on shared interests or activities.

*Hypothesis 3.* There will be no significant gender difference in assessments of overall relational closeness, commitment, or satisfaction.

In the comparison of same- and cross-sex friendships with same- and cross-sex sibling relationships, three significant effects were hypothesized:

*Hypothesis 4.* Cross-sex friends and siblings will manifest closeness in ways that are more verbally and emotionally expressive than those reported by same-sex friends and siblings.

*Hypothesis 5.* As a group, friends will report manifesting intimacy in more ways than will siblings.

*Hypothesis 6.* Participants will report that they are closer to, more committed to, and more satisfied with their friendships than with their sibling relationships.

With regard to the interaction between gender and relationship type, the following research question was posed: What effect does the interaction of gender and relationship type have on indicators of relational closeness?

## Method

### *Participants*

Respondents were 168 student volunteers in an introductory speech communication course at the University of Washington. There were 72 men and 96 women, who ranged in age from 18 to 39 years ( $M = 20.55$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ). Respondents were given extra course credit for taking part in the study. The median age difference between participants and their target others was 2 years ( $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ).

### *Procedure*

Data were collected via an eight-page questionnaire, only parts of which were used in the analyses presented here. The first page instructed respondents to

report either on a same-sex friend ( $n = 46$ ), a same-sex sibling ( $n = 42$ ), an opposite-sex friend ( $n = 39$ ), or an opposite-sex sibling ( $n = 41$ ). If a respondent did not have a friend or sibling of the specified gender, then he or she was asked to report on another relationship type.

Respondents reporting on friendships were instructed to select a close friend rather than a best friend. Some previous research has suggested that important gender effects are masked in best friendships (e.g., Ashton, 1980) and also that many students do not have one particular individual they consider their best friend (Monsour, 1992). Respondents reporting on sibling relationships were instructed that if they had more than one sibling of the specified gender, they were to pick one to whom they felt close.

Respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point, Likert-type scale how close they felt their target relationship to be, how committed they felt to the relationship, and how satisfied they were with it. Higher scores indicated greater levels of closeness, commitment, and satisfaction. The questionnaire also included a checklist of 42 items that were potential indicators of relational closeness. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale how much each item contributed to the closeness of their target relationships. Higher values indicated a greater contribution to relational closeness. Items represented either activities (such as watching a movie, talking about a personal issue, or shaking hands) or affective states (such as caring or acceptance). The list was initially compiled from items used in previous research on friends and siblings (Parks & Floyd, 1994; Pulakos, 1989; Swain, 1989) and was augmented after a pilot study of 19 undergraduates, who were asked to indicate what made their friend and sibling relationships close. (A complete list of the items used is available on request.)

## Results

The effects of gender and relationship type (same-sex friend, same-sex sibling, cross-sex friend, or cross-sex sibling) on the relative importance of each item were tested initially with a series of  $2 \times 4$  analyses of covariance, with the covariate being the difference in age between participants and their target others. However, no significant covariation was identified as a result of age difference, and so a series of  $2 \times 4$  analyses of variance (ANOVAs) was used in the final analyses. A number of main effects emerged for both gender and relationship type, as well as several interaction effects, which are identified below. Three  $2 \times 4$  ANOVAs were also used to test for main and interaction effects of gender and relationship type on participants' assessments of their overall relational closeness, commitment, and satisfaction.

### *Gender Differences*

The effects of gender on indicators of relational closeness were analyzed. Men reported more often than women that closeness was manifested through drinking together,  $F(1, 159) = 17.99, p < .001$ ; shaking hands,  $F(1, 159) = 7.86, p < .01$ ; and talking about sexual issues,  $F(1, 159) = 12.82, p < .001$ . These results provide support for Hypothesis 1.

Women reported closeness in their relationships to be more strongly associated with talking about personal problems,  $F(1, 160) = 4.58, p < .05$ ; talking about fears,  $F(1, 159) = 5.37, p < .05$ , and talking on a deep, personal level,  $F(1, 160) = 4.45, p < .05$ . Women also indicated more often than men that closeness was manifested through hugging,  $F(1, 160) = 14.67, p < .001$ ; caring,  $F(1, 160) = 9.97, p < .01$ ; saying that they like or love each other,  $F(1, 159) = 8.07, p = .005$ ; and how much they know about each other,  $F(1, 159) = 4.77, p < .05$ . Shopping was also mentioned as an indicator of closeness more often by women than by men,  $F(1, 160) = 7.34, p < .01$ . These results confirm Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 was also confirmed, with nonsignificant main effects for gender emerging on respondents' assessments of their overall relational closeness,  $F(1, 160) = 1.14$ , commitment,  $F(1, 159) = 0.69$ , and satisfaction,  $F(1, 160) = 1.07$ .

### *Friends and Siblings*

Relationship type (same-sex friend, same-sex sibling, cross-sex friend, or cross-sex sibling) had a significant main effect on a number of closeness indicators. A series of *t* tests isolated significant mean differences. Rather than report each individual *t* value, I have grouped these results according to relationship type.

Participants reporting on cross-sex friendships identified the following as more important indicators of closeness than did participants reporting on other relationship types: hugging,  $F(3, 160) = 14.22, p < .001$ ; talking about the relationship,  $F(3, 159) = 4.03, p < .01$ ; saying that they like or love each other,  $F(3, 159) = 7.73, p < .001$ ; doing things together,  $F(3, 160) = 2.95, p < .05$ ; and studying together,  $F(3, 159) = 2.69, p < .05$ . These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 4. As a group, participants assessing cross-sex relationships reported spending holidays together to be more strongly associated with closeness than did those reporting on same-sex relationships,  $F(3, 160) = 32.26, p < .001$ .

Three indicators of closeness were associated significantly with sibling relationships as opposed to friendships. Participants reporting on sibling relationships identified the following as reflecting greater closeness: doing fa-

vors for each other,  $F(3, 160) = 3.24, p < .05$ ; providing help in an emergency,  $F(3, 159) = 3.35, p < .05$ ; and "just knowing we are close without having to talk about it,"  $F(3, 160) = 3.43, p < .05$ . Participants reporting on friendships, on the other hand, were more likely to manifest closeness through drinking together,  $F(3, 159) = 7.89, p < .001$ ; talking about sexual issues,  $F(3, 159) = 12.40, p < .001$ ; telling secrets,  $F(3, 160) = 2.79, p < .05$ ; sharing interests,  $F(3, 160) = 7.86, p < .001$ ; and "hanging out" without doing anything in particular,  $F(3, 159) = 10.09, p < .001$ . Hypothesis 5 was confirmed, with participants assessing friendships reporting significant associations with more indicators of closeness than participants assessing sibling relationships.

Nonsignificant main effects for relationship type were found for participants' assessments of their overall relational closeness,  $F(3, 160) = 1.83$ ; commitment,  $F(3, 159) = 2.20$ ; and satisfaction,  $F(3, 160) = 1.62$ . Hypothesis 6 was not confirmed.

#### *Interaction Effects (Gender $\times$ Relationship Type)*

The interaction effect between gender and type of relationship on indicators of closeness was analyzed through a series of  $2 \times 4$  ANOVAs. Significant interaction effects were identified in a number of areas, which included talk about personal problems,  $F(3, 160) = 5.16, p < .01$ , and hugging,  $F(3, 160) = 3.84, p < .05$ . Independent-samples  $t$  tests were conducted to isolate significant mean differences, and the results indicated that female participants reporting on same-sex friendships considered each of these elements to be more important than male participants reporting on same-sex friendships considered them to be:  $t(27) = 3.80, p = .001$ , for talk about personal problems, and  $t(28) = 5.71, p < .001$ , for hugging.

Significant interaction effects also emerged for sharing secrets,  $F(3, 160) = 3.44, p < .05$ , and caring,  $F(3, 160) = 3.15, p < .05$ . Individual  $t$  tests revealed that female participants reporting on same-sex friendships expressed closeness by sharing secrets more than did male participants reporting on same-sex friendships,  $t(33) = 2.53, p < .05$ , but also that male participants reporting on cross-sex friendships expressed closeness by sharing secrets more than did female participants reporting on cross-sex friendships,  $t(37) = 2.38, p < .05$ . Women reported expressing closeness through caring more than men did in both same-sex friendships,  $t(33) = 3.36, p < .01$ , and cross-sex sibling relationships,  $t(39) = 2.06, p < .05$ .

Several other interaction effects were found to be significant within the cross-sex sibling relationship, including doing things outdoors,  $F(3, 160) = 3.01, p < .05$ , attending events,  $F(3, 159) = 2.88, p < .05$ , doing favors for each other,  $F(3, 160) = 2.97, p < .01$ , borrowing money from each other,  $F(3, 159) = 3.37, p = .02$ , and "hanging out" without doing anything in particular,  $F(3, 159) = 2.89, p < .05$ . Women considered each of these ele-

ments to be more important indicators of closeness in their cross-sex sibling relationships than did men:  $t(39) = 2.11, p < .05$ , for doing things outdoors;  $t(39) = 2.35, p < .05$ , for attending events;  $t(39) = 2.76, p < .01$ , for doing favors for each other;  $t(39) = 2.88, p < .01$ , for borrowing money from each other; and  $t(39) = 2.87, p < .01$ , for hanging out.

Nonsignificant interaction effects emerged for overall closeness,  $F(3, 160) = 1.18$ ; commitment,  $F(3, 159) = 0.65$ ; and satisfaction,  $F(3, 160) = 0.51$ .

### Discussion

Expected patterns of gender-differentiated behavior in close relationships emerged. Consistent with prior research on self-disclosure, women in all relationship types reported that closeness was associated with verbal interaction, such as talking about fears, discussing personal problems, and saying that they liked or loved each other. Women were also more likely than men to see caring as an indicator of closeness and to manifest their closeness through hugging or shopping together.

Compared with women, men were more likely to associate closeness in their relationships with shaking hands, drinking together, and talking about sexual issues. However, there were no significant gender differences in overall assessments of relational closeness, commitment, or satisfaction. These findings confirm those by Parks and Floyd (1994), Swain (1989), Wood and Inman (1993), and others, who have explicated masculine forms of expressing intimacy. Swain's perspective of *covert intimacy*, for example, suggests that men's relationships are not inherently less intimate than women's, as many have argued. Rather, men express closeness or intimacy in different, gender-validating ways, such as drinking together or shaking hands, and look to these things, rather than to self-disclosure or emotional expressiveness, as indicators of closeness. The present findings suggest that it is a mistake for psychological theory and practice to dismiss men's more active, instrumental relational styles as nonintimate. Clearly, these findings demonstrate that men's relationships can be as close as women's, even though closeness emerges differently for each.

The type of relationship also affected indicators of closeness in several significant ways. Not surprisingly, participants reporting on cross-sex friendships cited both expressive and instrumental manifestations of closeness more often than did participants reporting on other relationships, including hugging, talking about the relationship, doing things together, and studying together. Although this same pattern did not emerge among participants reporting on cross-sex sibling relationships, it is best understood in light of previous research that has suggested a "meeting of the minds" effect in cross-sex friendships, in which each partner is more apt to recognize and adapt to

the relational styles of the other (see Foot et al., 1980). Thus, both instrumental and expressive interactions are valued for their contribution to closeness.

Compared with friends, siblings were much more likely to express closeness in purely instrumental ways, such as by doing favors for each other, providing emergency help, and by "just knowing we are close without having to talk about it." For participants reporting on sibling relationships, then, closeness emerged as a function of dependability, wherein siblings know they can count on each other for assistance and can be assured the relationship will remain close even without discussing it. By contrast, friends reported that closeness in their relationships was based on having the same interests and on activities such as drinking together, "hanging out," talking about sexual issues, and telling secrets. For friends, closeness emerged as a function of similarity, expressed through activities of mutual interest. This main effect of relationship type reflects the fact that friendship is a voluntary, often transitory union, heightening the importance of similarity. However, siblinghood is an imposed, permanent union, and the constant nature of the relationship may promote a focus on dependability rather than similarity. Unlike friends, siblings do not need to be alike to remain siblings.

Contrary to Pulakos's (1989) findings, participants in the present study did not report feeling closer to their friends than to their siblings. Indeed, relationship type had no significant main effect on overall closeness, commitment, or satisfaction.

Finally, the interaction between gender and relationship type was significant for several indicators of closeness. Female participants reporting on same-sex friendships were more likely than male participants reporting on same-sex friendships to hug and talk about personal problems as ways to express their relational closeness. This finding is not surprising, given that these activities are often considered feminine models of interaction (Wood & Inman, 1993).

Within cross-sex sibling relationships, women indicated that doing favors, borrowing money, attending events, doing outdoor activities, and "hanging out" were more indicative of closeness than men did. These types of activities are often cited as ways in which men express their closeness to each other (Floyd, 1994; Parks & Floyd, 1994; Sherrod, 1987; Swain, 1989). Because these were cross-sex relationships, it may be the case that the women emulated the interactive styles they saw their brothers demonstrating and came to value them as ways to bond or connect with their brothers.

One limitation of these data is necessary to note and provides some important directions for future research. Because the sample came from American college students, primarily in their early 20s, it is difficult to generalize findings beyond this group. A comparison of the same issues with respondents in other age groups or ethnic groups may illustrate whether these

variables significantly affect the similarities and differences between friends and siblings.

Previous work comparing adult friends and siblings has identified differences in how often people in these relationships engage in certain activities that may be indicative of closeness. In the present study I extended such work by analyzing how important such activities and affective states are to the closeness of each relationship. In this way, those items that are truly indicative of closeness in each relationship can be identified. Also, I analyzed both the main and interaction effects of sex and relationship type. Existing findings on gender differences were confirmed in that both men and women reported manifesting closeness in gender-validating ways. A new understanding of relational differences emerged, however, illustrating that friends associate closeness with similarity, whereas siblings associate it with dependability.

## REFERENCES

- Aries, E. J., & Johnson, F. L. (1983). Close friendship in adulthood: Conversational content between same-sex friends. *Sex Roles, 9*, 1183-1196.
- Ashton, N. L. (1980). Exploratory investigation of perceptions of influences on best-friend relationships. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 50*, 379-386.
- Bank, S. P., & Kahn, M. D. (1982). *The sibling bond*. New York: Basic Books.
- Booth, A. (1972). Sex and social participation. *American Sociological Review, 37*, 183-192.
- Caldwell, M. A., & Peplau, L. A. (1982). Sex differences in same-sex friendship. *Sex Roles, 8*, 721-732.
- Cancian, F. M. (1986). The feminization of love. *Signs, 11*, 692-709.
- Cicirelli, V. G. (1982). Sibling influence throughout the lifespan. In M. E. Lamb & B. Sutton-Smith (Eds.), *Sibling relationships: Their nature and significance across the lifespan* (pp. 267-284). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Connidis, I. A. (1989). Siblings as friends in later life. *American Behavioral Scientist, 33*, 81-93.
- Davidson, L., & Duberman, L. (1982). Friendship: Communication and interactional patterns in same-sex dyads. *Sex Roles, 8*, 809-822.
- Fischer, J. L., & Narus, L. R. (1981). Sex roles and intimacy in same-sex and other-sex relationships. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 5*, 444-455.
- Floyd, K. (1994, April). *Toward an engendered theory of intimacy*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Northwest Communication Association, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.
- Foot, H. C., Chapman, A. J., & Smith, J. R. (1980). Patterns of interaction in children's friendships. In H. C. Foot, A. J. Chapman, & J. R. Smith (Eds.), *Friendship and social relations in children* (pp. 267-292). New York: Wiley.
- Griffin, E., & Sparks, G. (1990). Friends forever: A longitudinal exploration of intimacy in same-sex friends and platonic pairs. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 7*, 29-46.
- Hays, R. B. (1984). The development and maintenance of friendship. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 1*, 75-98.
- Jourard, S. M. (1971). *The transparent self*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

- Lamb, M. S., & Sutton-Smith, B. (1982). *Sibling relationships: Their nature and significance across the life span*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- McCarthy, B. (1986). Dyads, cliques and conspiracies: Friendship behaviors and perceptions with long-established social groups. In S. Duck (Ed.), *The emerging field of personal relationships* (pp. 77–90). London: Erlbaum.
- Monsour, M. (1992). Meanings of intimacy in cross- and same-sex friendships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 9, 277–295.
- Parks, M., & Floyd, K. (1994, May). *Intimacy and closeness as alternatives for specifying the characteristics of friendship*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Network on Personal Relationships, Iowa City, Iowa.
- Pulakos, J. (1989). Young adult relationships: Siblings and friends. *The Journal of Psychology*, 123, 237–244.
- Rands, M., & Levinger, G. (1979). Implicit theories of relationship: An intergenerational study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 645–661.
- Reis, H. T., Senchak, M., & Solomon, B. (1985). Sex differences in the intimacy of social interaction: Further examination of potential explanations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48, 1204–1217.
- Ross, H. G., & Dalton, M. J. (1981). *Perceived closeness in adult sibling relationships: Origins, maintenance and meaning*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles.
- Sapadin, L. A. (1988). Friendship and gender: Perspectives of professional men and women. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 5, 387–403.
- Sherrod, D. (1987). The bonds of men: Problems and possibilities in close male relationships. In H. Brod (Ed.), *The making of masculinities: The new men's studies* (pp. 213–239). Boston: Allen & Unwin.
- Steiner, M. A. (1987). Gender differences in intimacy and self-disclosure in same- and cross-sex friendships (Doctoral dissertation, Auburn University, 1986). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 49-05B, 1997.
- Stocker, C., & Dunn, J. (1990). Sibling relationships in childhood: Links with friendships and peer relationships. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 8, 227–244.
- Stull, D. E. (1981). *Sex differences in self-disclosure: A comparison of men's and women's same-sex relationships*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Washington, Seattle.
- Swain, S. (1989). Covert intimacy: Closeness in men's friendships. In B. Risman & P. Schwartz (Eds.), *Gender in intimate relationships: A microstructural approach* (pp. 71–86). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Williams, D. G. (1985). Gender, masculinity–femininity and emotional intimacy in same-sex friendship. *Sex Roles*, 12, 587–600.
- Wood, J. T., & Inman, C. C. (1993). In a different mode: Masculine styles of communicating closeness. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 21, 279–295.

*Received June 20, 1994*