

HOW FRIENDSHIPS END: PATTERNS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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College women's and men's retrospective accounts of recently terminated or deteriorated close same-sex friendships and changes in their friendship networks over the past five years were examined. Four patterns of friendship dissolution were identified: physical separation, new friends replace old, growing to dislike the friend, and interference from dating or marriage. The transition to college resulted in a higher rate of deteriorated friendships than was evident during the high school years, particularly for women. Significant gender differences in patterns of termination were also found: physical separation was more likely to precipitate dissolution in men's friendships, and dating or marriage was more likely to interfere with women's. The results are discussed in terms of how the experiences of the young adult lifestage might result in the termination patterns observed.

While theoretically encompassing friendship termination, recent attempts to delineate the process of relationship dissolution (e.g., Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Duck, 1982; La Gaipa, 1982; Levinger, 1980) have rarely focused specifically on how friendships end. Yet the process of friendship dissolution may differ markedly from that typically associated with romantic relationships, which are more often used as illustrative examples in discussions of relationship termination than are friendships. Unlike romantic relationships, which often deteriorate after some sort of 'breakdown' occurs, friendships may dissolve without either party experiencing any overt dissatisfaction. For instance, some friendships may simply 'fade away' due to lack of proximity or a shift of interests. The distinctions between the two relationships attest to the need for examining friendship termination as a separate case.

Friendship termination cannot be explained as merely a reversal of

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the process of becoming and staying friends, either. Rather than viewing termination as the mirror-image of formation, Duck (1982) and Duck & Lea (1982) argue that it is a separate process. For example, one friend's information about the other is not reduced as the relationship ends, as would be expected in a simple reversal. Thus, there is a need to examine friendship termination independently of formation and to distinguish it from other close relationship endings.

One model of disengagement that is applicable to friendship has been proposed by Rodin (1982). In the model, four conditions are identified that separately or in combination can lead to the dissolution of established relationships. First, one's friends may do or say something that suddenly meets one's 'dislike criteria', that is, may violate some expectancy strongly associated with friendship. Lying might be in this category. Or second, our 'like criteria' may change; we may begin to look for different things in friends, or friends may change and no longer meet our like criteria. Third, a friend may be displaced. A new acquaintance may meet more of one's like criteria or meet them better than an old friend and gradually displace the friend. Last, termination may also occur when the pleasure/cost ratio deviates too far from an ideal point, either through reduced pleasure, as in the case of boredom, or through too little or too great a cost.

An individual's place in the life cycle and gender are both likely to influence not only the range of disengagement conditions that are met but also the manner of their effects. Young adults' friendships during the high school and college years, for instance, will be less affected by the competing interests of career and family that interfere with older adults' non-kin relationships. In later adulthood, differing career choices, income levels, and status differences often weaken old friendship ties, too. However, sharing a student role will guarantee certain commonalities of experience that can provide a continuing basis for young people's friendships.

One factor which is likely to affect friendship termination during the young adult lifestage is the physical and psychological separation of friends that occurs during the transition from high school to college. Second, an increased commitment to romantic relationships should cause a withdrawal from the friendship network for the college age group (Milardo, Johnson & Huston, 1983; Weinstein, 1982).

Establishing a heterosexual relationship will probably affect the termination of women's same-sex friendships more strongly than men's. Babchuk (1965), Troll (1975), and Bell (1981a) noted a pattern in married couples in which the husband's friends became the

couple's friends. Women's friends were less integrated into the marital network. If the same pattern occurs in dating couples, then the advent of a romantic relationship could either displace women's same-sex friendships or intensify the cost of maintaining them in terms of difficulty of scheduling interactions or committing time to them.

Another gender difference in friendship termination has been reported by La Gaipa (1979). The adolescent girls he studied were more likely to attribute the end of a friendship to interference from a third female friend, unlike boys. The third party termination pattern has not been examined among adult women, however.

The effects of gender upon other aspects of termination for this age group are unknown. Gender differences in friendships indicate that intimacy is more strongly associated with women's friendships (e.g., Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Fischer & Narus, 1981; Hill & Stull, 1981); whereas the basis of men's is common interests (Tognoli, 1980; Bell, 1981b). Whether a sudden loss of intimacy will then lead to decline in women's friendships or whether a change of interests will dissolve men's is a question that remains to be determined.

Because it is difficult for individuals to distinguish temporary downswings from absolute declines while they are occurring in a relationship, endings are often identifiable only in retrospect. The use of retrospective reports introduces the problem of possible distortions or biases in accounts of friendship endings due to the delay between the event and the report (Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976). But these possible inaccuracies assume less significance when the goal is to study individuals' perceptions of the dissolution process, rather than the event itself. In fact, Duck & Sants (1983) have argued that these alleged distortions and biases are themselves a legitimate subject matter, if relationships are viewed as a process rather than a state.

In the present study, retrospective accounts of a recently terminated or deteriorated same-sex close friendship of college women and men were used to examine patterns of friendship dissolution in young adults. The first goal of the study was to determine the major causes and frequency of friendship termination during high school and college. It was predicted that going to college would precipitate the loss of close same-sex friendships from high school. A second objective was to investigate gender differences in friendship dissolution. Specifically, it was hypothesized that a) more women would have lost a close same-sex friend in the past five years than men, and b) dating or marriage would be a more likely cause of friendship dissolution for women than for men.

Method

Sample

Subjects were 155 undergraduates, 91 women and 64 men between the ages of 17–22 years, recruited from introductory psychology classes at a large midwestern university, with an urban campus and commuter population.

Procedure

First, using a 'lifeline' specifying each year of life, subjects were asked to list all the best or close same-sex friends they had at each age and to specify for each friend whether the friendship was still ongoing or when it had ended. This measure provided an index of the rate of friendship turnover during the high school to college transition.

Next, subjects were asked to write an essay describing the decline of *one* close same-sex friendship that had terminated in high school or since, if they had one. Subjects described what they liked and disliked about the friendship, and how and why it ended or declined. An explanation of what, if anything, subjects wished they had done differently during the now ended friendship was also elicited.

In addition, subjects were asked to specify how satisfied they had been with the friendship when it was at its peak, how much the loss of the friendship had affected them, how significant the loss was to them in terms of what was important in their lives, and how much responsibility they assumed for the decline (5-point scales).

Results and discussion

As expected, many of the young adults studied (57.4 percent, $N = 89$) had lost at least one close same-sex friend in the past five years; the remaining 42.6 percent ($N = 66$) had not lost any close friends during this period. As hypothesized, the transition from high school to college coincided with a higher rate of friendship dissolution than the pre-college years. For the high school period, 13.5 percent ($N = 21$) of the 155 subjects reported having one or more close same-sex friendship end; during college, 35.5 percent ($N = 55$) had ended at least one friendship; and another 8.4 percent ($N = 13$) had lost a friend both in high school and college. During both high school and college, more women (25.3 percent and 49.4 percent, respectively) ended friendships than men (17.2 percent and 35.9 percent, respectively). New friends were also being added to the network; about 37.4 percent ($N = 58$) had established one or more friendships since college.

The results suggest that the transition to college results in a restructuring of the friendship network. Among subjects having lost a friend, the impact of restructuring was greater for men, as those men had

smaller same-sex networks ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.54$) than women ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 2.48$), $F(1,82) = 3.68$, $p < 0.05$.

The effect of the college experience on the friendships of the present sample is probably conservative compared to the experiences of students at universities with residential facilities. Even so, given that most subjects were natives of the area and therefore had high school friends living locally, the loss and gain of one or more friends in the freshman or sophomore years represents a change of 20 percent or more in the networks of subjects who had lost a friendship.

Patterns of Termination

Each of the 89 subjects (59 women, 30 men) who had friendships end wrote an essay describing one decline. From the essays four basic patterns were identified: physical separation, new friends replace old, friend revealed or did something that met subject's dislike criteria, and interference due to dating or marriage. Agreement on classification of essays into categories between two independent raters was 94 percent.

A. *Physical Separation.* In some cases, moving to a new house or city was the cause of separation. Often subjects stated they had failed to give or obtain the friend's new address before the move. Even with the new address, maintaining a long-distance friendship was difficult for most, who frequently lacked the resources to visit or call their friend. Some made consistent efforts, however, as indicated by an 18 year old woman's account of a friendship which ended due to a move:

The decline in our friendship happened when I moved. After I moved we saw each other regularly and talked on the phone all the time. We also would spend weekends together. But it just wasn't the same. We are still friends now but we aren't as close.

Separations caused by going to different schools were also common. In some instances, the friends went to different colleges, and the same pattern of drifting apart occurred as for separations caused by moving. In a few other cases, one friend was older than the other, so the transition from high school to college was not a shared experience. One 19-year-old male described this type of ending as follows:

When I was at college in town and he was a senior in high school, a separation came up. We did not have a fight or quarrel, but he leaned away from me so he could involve himself with his senior buddies. It is very understandable that this was his last high school year and he should make the most of it, but it was wrong for him to just drop me.

Some subjects cited other less drastic separations as dissolving their close friendships. A change in jobs, a change of classes, no longer sharing locker space, or switching from one sport programme to another were some examples given.

For the three years I worked with C.E. I was the only friend he kept and he was the only friend I kept the entire time. Most of our time together was spent drinking if we were off work. When I was fired I got another job and we hardly ever saw each other. (21 year old man)

B. New Friends. Sometimes subjects indicated that old friends had simply been replaced by new ones. A few reported feeling jealous, angry, or rejected by the friend, but for most subjects this transition was amiable.

We were pretty close friends in high school. Afterwards we started finding more friends and we didn't do as much as we used to. From then it just turned into a casual friendship. After high school we didn't see each other hardly at all. (18 year old man)

C. Dislike. Frequently subjects reported that friendships ended because the friend revealed or did something that met their 'dislike criteria'. A wide variety of behaviours were reported to result in dislike, including hostility, religious differences, drug abuse, betrayal, physical violence, and criticism.

I liked my relationship with R.R. because we were about equal in our beliefs or morals. Around the beginning of last year she started having problems with alcohol and her parents. I tried to help her in every way I thought of until I finally told her if she didn't straighten up, our friendship was through. (19 year old woman)

A few people told me that Jim treated girls like dirt. I didn't believe it. I set him up with my girlfriend's best friend. He treated her great for a while, but then he started going out on her. I found out about it. It was hard to believe because he'd told me he didn't do that. Well, that lost a good friendship. (19 year old man)

D. Dating or Marriage. Establishing a heterosexual relationship was the fourth major pattern of close friendship dissolution.

Neither of us had boyfriends so we went out to the bars a lot. During the summer we swam at her apartment frequently. After she moved in with a guy I saw her a lot less. (21 year old woman)

A number of subjects (41.6 percent, $N = 37$) viewed termination as a process involving more than one step. For example, one subject reported moving to be the initial cause of the decline, but then the separated friends started dating and never saw each other again. Secondary causes of termination included physical separation, new friends, dislike, dating or marriage, and a fifth category, *competing interests*, i.e., work or leisure activities were mentioned as more important than the friendship, causing it to decline.

Table 1 shows the frequencies with which different patterns of primary and secondary causes were used to describe termination. No consistent pattern is apparent. Rather, it seems that once a friendship has been 'weakened' by a move, new friends, dislike, or a romantic relationship, or almost any other stress on the friendship can result in dissolution.

Few friendships ended due to a 'breakdown'. Termination was much more likely to be precipitated by external factors, such as a physical separation, than by internal problems, such as dislike of the friend. Perhaps because friendship termination often lacked a clear-cut emotional response, little negotiation about how the relationship was to end occurred. Without the external structural restraints associated with love relationships like public announcements to friends and family, many friendships seemed to deteriorate past the point of being salvaged without subjects noting their decline.

This failure to monitor the friendship was cited as a source of regret in many subjects' explanations of what, if anything, they would change

TABLE 1
Frequencies of primary and secondary
causes of endings

	Physical Separation	New Friends	Causes Dislike	Dating or Marriage	Total
Primary	42	16	20	11	89
Secondary					
Physical Separation	4	1	2	4	11
New Friends	5	1	1		7
Dislike	4	2	3	3	12
Dating or Marriage	3	1	1		5
Competing Interests	2				2

if they could relive the friendship. About 47 percent stated they wished they had made more effort to maintain the friendship or wished they had been more open with their friend about the importance of the relationship to them.

The results do not indicate directly the differences between termination and the forming and maintaining of friendships. Three of the patterns (separation, dislike, and dating or marriage) suggest that some endings are fairly abrupt, involving a complete cessation of interaction. However, the associated emotions appear to decline more gradually. The lack of congruence between actions and feelings may be one area in which termination differs substantially from formation and maintenance processes.

As shown in Table 2, women's patterns of termination differed significantly from men's. Compared to women, dissolved male friendships were more often precipitated by physical separation. Dating or marriage, however, was more likely to have interfered with women's same-sex friendships, as predicted. Contrary to La Gaipa's (1979) findings for adolescent girls, college age women were not any more likely than men to have a new same-sex friend replace the old one.

Ratings concerning quality of the friendship were analysed using a 2×2 analysis of variance (sex \times termination cause). On a 5-point scale, where 1 = not at all responsible and 5 = entirely responsible, women ($M = 2.61$) assumed significantly more responsibility for the dissolution than men ($M = 2.07$), $F(1,82) = 6.88$, $p < 0.01$. This finding is difficult to interpret, due to the ambiguity of the term 'responsibility'. The intent in the question was to determine how active a role in ending the friendship subjects assumed, regardless of initial cause. However, 'responsibility' could have also been taken to mean

TABLE 2
Primary causes of termination by sex (percent)^a

Cause	Women (N=59)	Men (N=30)
Physical Separation	42.4	56.7
New Friends	18.6	16.7
Dislike	20.3	26.7
Dating or Marriage	18.6	0.0
Total	100.0	100.1

^aSex difference is significant, likelihood ratio chi square = 10.56, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$.

'whose behaviour precipitated the decline?' These two aspects of responsibility would be better explored separately.

Gender did not affect ratings of satisfaction with the friendship when it was at its peak ($M = 3.51$), significance of loss ($M = 2.71$), or how deeply the loss had affected subjects ($M = 2.16$), 5-point scales (5 = highly satisfied, very significant, and very deeply, respectively). No significant effect of termination cause on any of the ratings was found.

The moderate ratings obtained on the quality of friendship measures indicate that the friendships were a rather modest priority in life for both the young men and women studied. A number of subjects seemed to be reevaluating the priority of friendship ties relative to other relationships or concerns, however. Some had made a decision to pay a higher 'cost' for friendship in the future. For instance, several young women stated that if they could relive the friendship, they 'would not let a man stand in the way of a friendship'. Others mentioned that they 'wouldn't let a petty argument ruin a good friendship', or 'wouldn't take the friend for granted'. One subject assessed his responsibility in this way:

If I could do it over, I would confront him bluntly and sooner. I would try to compromise with him. I believe that if you wait too long, a relationship can reach a point of no return. With my other friends now, I try to resolve conflicts quickly before they build into bombshells.

These comments suggest that failed friendships may play an important role in the development of personal responsibility and growth. Further research should focus on the impact of termination experiences on conceptions of friendship and maintenance strategies.

Conclusions

The results indicate that the college years are a period of change in young adults' friendships. The precipitators of change appear to be different for women and men. Heterosexual relationships more severely deter women's same-sex friendships than men's. In contrast, men are more inclined to allow physical separation to interfere with friendships.

The increased rate of friendship dissolution during the college transition could be a result of lack of daily contact, particularly for the physical separation and dating or marriage patterns. In high school,

close friendships are maintained almost exclusively through daily contact (Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). Therefore, the college years may be many young people's first experience with absent friends.

Continuing friendships without the environmentally imposed contact of high school requires a cognitive shift to a concept of 'friend' in which the physical presence of the friend is not necessary for the continuation of emotional bonds. Effective strategies for maintaining a stable level of emotional involvement without daily contact may take time to develop.

The results of the present study suggest that previous experience with long distance or absent friends is a factor which should be taken into account when exploring termination patterns. In addition, because people's strategies to maintain friendship may be based, in part, on experience with failed friendships, research on individual differences in friendship maintenance should also assess young adults' termination histories.

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