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Enjoying the Returns: Women's Friendships After 50

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Women after 50 show a new vigor in their friendships. The second half of life elicits review and contemplation concerning where one has been and also, sometimes, decision and change concerning the personal priorities that will guide the remaining decades. New perspectives of the self and intimacy emerge. As time becomes more valuable, choices about how and with whom to spend it become more pressing. As women assess their lives, they also take stock of their friendships, often making deliberate and clear-eyed decisions about where to increase and reduce their emotional investment. Old friendships may be recalibrated or new ones sought to match fresh views of the self and relationships. What does not change is the immense importance women attach to their friendships. Commitment to the role of friend is even more predictive than income or marital status in the determination of older women's life satisfaction (Trotman & Brody, 2002).

In this chapter, the expectations, functions, and development of women's friendships after age 50 will be hypothesized and explored. This is relatively new terrain from the standpoint of psychological research, which has focused on friendship among the young or old but given little attention to the middle years. Thus, speculation will be required. Factors that typically are known to affect friendship will be considered as well, including historical forces, gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, individual differences, and culture. Negative aspects of friendship such as conflict and false friends also will be discussed. Fruitful research directions will be proposed to begin a systematic exploration of women's friendships after age 50.

Historical Influences on Friendship

Current views of women's friendship contrast sharply with those that prevailed a century ago and until the recent past. At present, women's friendships with other women are regarded as a psychological asset that contributes to happiness, health, and well-being. A large amount of well-being research documents the finding that women's same-sex friendships are more intimate and supportive than men's (Bank & Hansford, 2003). Women tend to enjoy same-sex friendships more than men do because of the greater intimacy between women friends (e.g., Bank, 1995).

In contrast, the dominant view from the time of Aristotle until the 1970s was that women were incapable of true friendship. One argument was that women were not genetically programmed to bond with one another; others asserted that sexual jealousy and the desire for men's approval inevitably resulted in hostility between women that prevented friendship. Women's friendships often were trivialized as being "two-faced," "gossipy," or "juvenile" (O'Connor, 1992).

With the growth of women's studies and also the "science of relationships" from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, more positive attention was focused on women's friendship. Contextual factors that affect women's friendships were emphasized. For instance, the primacy of marriage as a social institution, particularly for women, was recognized as lessening opportunities for friendship (O'Connor, 1992). Feminist historians also challenged the negative view of women's friendships by uncovering numerous cases of romantic friendship between women friends during the 1800s (e.g., Faderman, 1981). However, the research that resulted from those analyses was aimed primarily at identifying gender differences rather than understanding the nature of women's friendship in its own right. Thus, women's friendships continued to be regarded as secondary attachments relative to the marital bond, a view that reflects implicit heterosexist and patriarchal views of the importance of women's friendship (Rose, 2000).

A more recent trend has emerged that questions the secondary status of women's friendship. For instance, the emotional strength of women's friendships was found to be no different from their relationships with husbands or lovers (Goodenow & Gaier, 1990). Women's longer lifespan in the developed countries and the likelihood that they will outlive their husbands has resulted in reconsiderations of the importance of friendship, particularly later in life (Allan, 2001). This new interest in women's friendship highlights the fact that very little is known about this important relationship, particularly during midlife. Much more remains to be explored concerning the convergence of life stage and friendship for women after 50.

Expectations of Friends

Expectations of friends in Western, industrialized cultures tend to be idealized. Friendships typically are expected to involve intimacy, enjoyment, dependability, acceptance, and caring. Furthermore, women's expectations for friendship tend to be very high. Gouldner and Strong (1987) reported that the middle-aged women in their study expressed "a great longing for friendship" and described their idealized friendships in terms that were similar to those used for romantic relationships:

The perfect friend was thought of as possessing, above all, the traits of trustworthiness and unswerving loyalty and the ability to keep confidences. She was a person, who was, at the same time, a good listener, an entertaining companion, someone with whom she could gossip and air serious problems. Ideally she would provide sympathy and opportunities for catharsis and self-insight along with distraction and fun. (p. 105)

The "voluntariness" of friendship contributes to its idealized status as well as distinguishes it from other social relations. Unlike marital or family relationships that are bound by institutional ties, friendships are chosen. They are not facilitated by social roles and are not coerced. Other characteristics unique to friendship include autonomy, sentiment, and freedom from structural constraints. In addition, friendships tend to be governed by the norms of reciprocity and equality. These features lend themselves to popular conceptions of friendship as private, self-governing dyads that are voluntary and informal (Bell & Coleman, 1999).

It is not known if women's friendships at midlife diverge from the descriptions above. Although midlife women may wish for the ideal, there is reason to believe they may be more appreciative of authenticity in themselves and others that could lead to greater tolerance for the foibles and failings of friends and self. On the other hand, as awareness of death becomes more salient to women in their 50s, they may desire to break free from scripted roles, discover new or rejected aspects of the self, or seek a greater sense of wholeness. The feeling that the time is "now or never" to do something meaningful can impact friendships negatively if friends want to maintain the status quo.

Friendship Functions

Adults of all ages endorse six functions of friendships (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). At a minimum, friends are supposed to stand up for each other (even in a friend's absence), share news of success, provide emotional support, trust and confide in each other, volunteer help when needed, and try to make the friend happy when together. In addition, close friends are supposed to repay debts and favors, be tolerant of the friend's other friends, avoid criticizing the friend in public, keep confidences, avoid jealousy and criticism of other relationships, avoid nagging, and respect privacy. Violation of these functions is likely to jeopardize the friendship.

Friendships play a unique and crucial role in adults' lives. Friends' similarity in terms of personal and lifestyle characteristics makes them well suited to affirm each other's identity, reminisce, give advice, provide socialization, share leisure activities, and help with nontechnical tasks. Friends are expected to provide the companionship and emotional support required to meet the losses and transitions of growing older.

Equality is a distinguishing feature of friendship. Friends are happiest when the friendship is perceived as being equal in terms of the "give-and-take" in the relationship (Roberto, 2001). Inequalities in material resources or interpersonal power must be leveled between friends or the friendship may not survive. Reciprocity also is important, particularly in the early stages. Established friendships are expected to be "communal" rather than "exchange" relationships (Clark & Mills, 1993). Communal relations do not require that a specific debt be returned with a comparable benefit, as would be expected in exchange relationships. Equality of affect rather than equality of exchange governs communal relations.

Long-term friends provide a sense of continuity with the past, and over time they may be regarded as family, which enhances a sense of connectedness (Lewittes, 1989). Women (and men) report being happier spending time with friends than with anyone else (Larson & Bradney, 1988). Fortunately, friendships among older women contribute to psychological growth, as well as to physical and mental health (Patrick et al., 2001).

Gender Roles

Friendships are strongly affected by gender roles. Women are more likely to provide solace, sympathy, and sophisticated types of emotional support to their friends than men are (e.g., Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003). These behaviors are learned early in life. Girls are encouraged much more than boys to behave in a nurturing way toward others; to talk about their emotions, and to express sympathy. By adulthood, women are not only better at giving nurturance and support, they are *expected* to be ready and willing to provide it.

Women place a high premium on giving and receiving comfort from their friends, which suggests that women who are unable to provide it will be negatively perceived or rejected (Holmstrom et al., 2005). Although gender roles are robust across the lifespan, countervailing forces at midlife might temper stereotypic expectations for unconditional support from women friends. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women in midlife come to value truth-telling more than they did when they were young. Levine (2005) characterized this as a “new intimacy”: “We are much more forthcoming about our failings and failures, more willing to seek and accept advice, less know-it-all about dispensing advice, and a lot less concerned with eliciting sympathy for its own sake” (p. 145). The expectation for a greater level of honesty may free women to have a greater range of response to friends’ predicaments. Less sympathy and more direct advice, such as “don’t be upset about that” or “you’d better get your act together,” might be given and appreciated.

The Development of Friendship

The usual path to friendship is for women of similar attitudes, activities, and social class standing to meet and become friends as their paths cross frequently (Fehr, 1996). The connection at first may be superficial and based on an “even exchange” of pleasantries, invitations, or activities. Over time, if the interest is mutual, a gradual transition through a series of increasingly intimate, personal disclosures will occur and lead to a closer friendship. As trust and self-disclosure increase, the friendship becomes based more on communal norms such as mutual concern than on a formal reciprocity regarding what one gives or gets in the friendship (Clark & Mills, 1993).

Making Friends

The formation of friendship is constrained by at least three factors that affect the opportunities adults have to meet potential friends and promote friendship. First, demographic variables tend to limit friendship. At all ages, women tend to come into contact with women who are similar in terms of age, race, social class, sexual orientation, and who live and work in similar areas. Women with young children often become friends with mothers of their children's friends. Roberto (2001) reported that older women tend to live close to their close friends, to be about the same age and social class status, and to share social and ethnic backgrounds.

Second, the norm of equality in friendship also tends to restrain the development of friendships across socioeconomic status or identity categories that cause social distance. For instance, a friendship between a woman and her household worker must surmount both economic barriers and social ones caused by inequality of rank in the social order. Similarly, friendships between Black and White women or lesbians and heterosexual women may have to meet additional criteria in order to bridge the social distance and to put the friendship on an equal footing (e.g., Hall & Rose, 1996).

Patriarchal definitions of women's place as secondary and subservient to men also shape women's friendships. Among heterosexual couples, men's preferences and friendships often dictate couples' social lives. Women more often than men report that dating or marriage precipitates the loss of a same-sex friendship (Gullestad, 1984; Rose, 1984). Wives may seek to maintain friendships with their women friends independent of their husbands, but arranging to see women friends separately from couple activities requires extra effort and makes the friendships more difficult to maintain. The negative effect of marriage on women's friendships continues after divorce or widowhood. Both divorced and widowed women report having to rebuild their friendship networks (e.g., Armstrong & Goldstein, 1990). Once the husband is no longer present, his friends may drop the wife as a friend.

Situational factors that arise from male dominance and gender roles also place major constraints on women's friendships. As Enright and Rawlinson (1992) pointed out: "The bosom of the family is not a rich breeding ground for friendships" (p. 96). Women continue to shoulder about 70% of the household and child care responsibilities, and most have little free time for their own leisure pursuits (e.g., Green et al., 1990). Women earn less than men on average and have fewer resources to use in establishing and maintaining friendships. Women also have less access to and less control of public space than men do, including parks, bars, social clubs, athletic courts, and arcades. Fear of violence from men limits women's forays alone outside the home. Thus, demographic, social, and physical constraints limit friendship choice and interactions.

By age 50, some of the limitations on women's friendships described above may be reduced. Working women in their 50s are more likely to have their own financial resources and also to have more leisure time due to a decline in family and household responsibilities as children grow up and leave home. In fact, the 50s might amount to a "golden age" of women's friendships, given that women

are likely to be at their height of confident power (i.e., Neugarten, 1968), financial stability, and still in relatively good health. It may be the era when women fully learn to “treat a friendship like the gift that it is” (Paul, 2004, p. 164).

Maintaining Friendships

Studies of friendship in the middle years have not asked about the strategies used to maintain friendships. Friends interact both at home and in community activities. Getting together to talk is the most common social activity, but friends also help each other with transportation, shopping, and running errands (Adams, 1997). Communication strategies are important in friendship maintenance throughout life. Aspects of communication that create tension are the interplay between independence and dependence in friendship and between friendship’s protective and expressive functions. Friendships provide room for women to pursue individual goals and interests, but also in times of need require interdependence. These two privileges of friendship require ongoing negotiations to keep the friendship in balance. Likewise, friends must balance expressiveness with protectiveness. Honesty, candor, and self-disclosure have to be managed carefully to avoid harming the friend.

Ending Friendships

Friendships may end for a number of reasons, but this has been examined empirically in only a few studies of either younger or older adults. Causes of endings cited by women and men in their 20s included lack of social skills or reciprocity, inappropriate self-disclosures, inability to express feelings, and learning something distasteful about the friend (e.g., Rose, 1984). Women are more likely than men to lose a friendship because their romantic relationship competed with the friendship for time. Adults in their mid-20s to mid-30s attributed friendship endings to a lack of respect for privacy and too much demand for personal advice (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). In old age, active termination of friendship is rarely reported other than due to the death of a friend. Friendships either decline or end by “fading away” due to a change in lifestyle or pathway over the years, a move, or major breaches of friendship norms (Bleiszner & Adams, 1992).

At present, no research exists that addresses how and when midlife women end friendships. However, developmental research concerning women at midlife suggests that they may act to terminate even long-term friendships if they are chronically unsatisfying. For instance, Gersick and Kram (2002) studied high achieving professional women at midlife and reported that the age 50 transition was characterized by the task of coming into one’s own. This task deals with gaining confidence in one’s abilities, knowing what one wants, and being able to go after it. The women’s stories suggested that a wellspring of energy to pursue one’s own life was released during the age 50 transition. The reassessment of relationships

during this period, combined with increased confidence to ask for what one wants, hypothetically might trigger decisions to end unsatisfying friendships.

For example, one woman approaching 50 who had recently ended a 25-year-old friendship described it this way: "The older you get, the wiser you get about your own personality and what you're willing to compromise. You become more selective. You're not going to waste time on people who don't share common goals in friendship. If you have a friend who just takes, forget about it! If you're in a friendship where you are just giving, giving, giving, you're going to burn out. In a long distance friendship, it may take years for the animosity to build. That's what happened with Lois" (personal communication, 2006). The dissatisfaction in this friendship stemmed from a lack of reciprocity in visiting each other and in showing interest in the friend's life and relationships.

At midlife, the extent to which gender differences occur in response to troubled or lost friendships is unknown. Women have a better history of making and maintaining friendships throughout life than do men. As women age, they may be less upset than men if friendships end because they are more likely to establish new ones. Or, women's self-concept in later life may be less entangled with the need to perform well at relationships. It remains to be determined if gender differences in response to friendship problems or endings may disappear or even reverse after age 50.

The Diversity of Friendship

Almost all research on friendship has been done on White, middle class women in the United States, particularly young, White college students. Thus, only a little is known about the lives or friendships of Women of Color, lesbians, or working class, poor, or wealthy women. The few studies available provide some limited insights concerning some variables that may affect midlife women's friendship.

Race and Ethnicity

Research on Black women suggests that they may have somewhat different expectations for friendship and that family roles may conflict with friendships. For instance, women place a high premium on giving and receiving sympathy from their friends, but this may be truer of White women than of Black women. Research with college students (White and Black) indicates that women who were unsympathetic helpers to other women were judged as less likeable by other women than were men who were similarly unsympathetic (Holmstrom et al., 2005). Young Black women proved to be an exception to this rule; they found messages that were classified as "cold comfort" by White women, such as giving advice, to be more sensitive and effective.

Other research also indicates that Blacks value the ability to express rather than to repress emotions, and they may adopt a style in friendship that is intense, outspoken, forward, and assertive (Samter et al., 1997). Young Asian American

women also perceived highly person-centered comforting strategies in friendship as significantly less sensitive and effective than did White women (Samter et al., 1997). As yet, no research has been done to determine if these expectations apply to women over 50 from various ethnic groups. However, previous research with younger women suggests that cross race friendships between Black, Asian, and White women may be problematic, if White women expect sympathy and Black and Asian women do not.

The division of household labor has been found to affect life satisfaction among Black women, and, by extrapolation, it might also affect friendship. Tangri et al. (2003) studied college-educated Black women at midlife and reported that their personal satisfaction with their lives was influenced by household burden. Household burden refers to the inequitable division of labor within the home. Those with less household burden reported more satisfaction. One might speculate that household burden is inversely related to time to spend with friends. Thus, household burden might be an important variable to include in studies of Black women's midlife friendships.

Core values of various ethnic groups also may have a significant impact on friendship. These are just beginning to be explored. For instance, Latinas/os place a high value on turning to the family for support instead of seeking external help from friends, coworkers, and neighbors, even when the family is acculturated to life in the United States (Keefe et al., 1979). However, young Latina college women were found to rely more on friends than family in order to cope with academic and social stress (Rodriguez et al., 2003). It may be that midlife Latinas also would experience a discrepancy between ethnic group expectations and the norms of the dominant culture, but that remains in question.

Social Class and Friendship

Social class strongly influences women's friendships. First, patterns of forming friendship differ by social class. The middle class pattern for making friends involves broadening the context in which the interaction occurs. For example, this means that a friendly acquaintance from a yoga class might be invited to dinner at the other's home. The relationship then becomes defined not by the specific context (i.e., an exercise class) but would be broadened in a way that emphasized the primacy of the relationship over the original context (Allan, 1998).

Working class friendships tend to be organized differently. The context and setting are emphasized more, and the significance of the tie in its own right is underplayed (Allan, 1998). Friendships tend to stay bounded within the initial context, for example, a church group, and are more dependent on joint participation in those specific activities. Thus, working class relations might not as easily be classified as friendships, because cultural definitions of friendship define it as a relationship that exists outside of specific contexts.

Friendship maintenance among working class women relies mainly on informal mutual aid (Greenberg & Motenko, 1994). Typically, working class families rely more on primary kin living nearby to provide day-to-day support, and they

may have relatively few people whom they would name as friends (Allan, 1998). In contrast, middle class women interact with friends more often, provide more assistance to their friends, and are more satisfied with the support they receive in turn (Krause & Borawski-Clark, 1995). In fact, friendships play a larger role in the lives of middle class individuals than kin do (Allan, 1998). The greater mobility of middle class women may result in having fewer kin nearby, which causes greater reliance on friends.

Friendships across social classes are often difficult to establish and maintain. The difference described above between working class and middle class norms is one barrier. Social class also impinges on equality in a friendship. Friends are expected to regard and treat each other as social equals. Difference can be tolerated if it does not undermine the sense that each person has equal social worth. Reciprocity also is expected in friendship, although exchanges do not have to be in-kind and do not have to be returned immediately. However, if two women have unequal or limited resources, the balance of equal social worth and reciprocity is upset (Allan, 1998). For instance, working class women may not have the resources to entertain at home or to dine at restaurants as middle class women may be able to do.

For women at midlife, social class norms are likely to be entrenched. This suggests that working class women after 50 would be more embedded in kin networks than would middle class women. In contrast, middle class women may be freer to cultivate friendships at midlife than ever before. As a result, midlife friendships across social class may be unlikely.

Lesbian Friendships at Midlife

Lesbian friendships are another understudied area. Friendships for lesbians are often the main, if not sole, source of affirmation, support, and love (Stanley, 1996). Friends may take on greater importance to lesbians than to heterosexual women because friends may become surrogate families, replacing kin networks that have rejected them (Weinstock, 2000). At midlife, friendships play an important role for lesbians. Tully (1989) studied a sample of mostly White, professional, midlife lesbians and reported that women friends were identified as the people from whom the most social support was sought and received. Many older lesbians maintain a supportive network of friendships that is fueled by the high value lesbians place on friendship (Weinstock, 2000). Midlife lesbians tend to spend time with and receive support from other lesbians their own age, including lovers, ex-lovers, and friends (e.g., Bradford & Ryan, 1991; Sang, 1991). Rothblum et al. (1995) noted that midlife may bring with it a renewed sense of the importance of friends, particularly because lesbians may not anticipate finding sufficient support from formal caregiving service systems as they age.

Ex-lovers are a significant source of friendship among lesbians, particularly at midlife (Weinstock, 2004). Weeks et al. (2001) and Weston (1997) found that lesbians often included their ex-lovers, as well as their current lovers, as part of their close circle of friends. Lesbians were twice as likely as gay men to report that their best friend was a former lover (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994) and also twice

as likely as heterosexual women to report being close to their ex-lovers (Fertitta, 1994, as cited in Kimmel & Sang, 1995). This is far from the norm in heterosexual relations, where friendships between ex-spouses are unusual and, until recently, have been regarded as evidence of “dysfunctional dependency” (Masheter, 1997).

Lesbian friendships raise questions concerning the nature of friendship and hidden assumptions in previous research. The lifelong and central importance lesbians attribute to friendship contests the idea that friendships are “secondary attachments” and challenges heterosexist assumptions that denigrate women’s friendships relative to heterosexual love relationships. For instance, Kitzinger (1996) remarked that language often trivializes friendships: “If a sexual relationship is a ‘primary relationship,’ does this mean that friendships are ‘secondary’? If a sexual partner is a ‘significant other,’ are friendships ‘insignificant others’? And what about the question, ‘Are you two together, or are you just friends?’ when we are both ‘together’ and ‘friends’ and there is no ‘just’ about it?” (p. 296). Perhaps most important, midlife lesbian friendships suggest that more might be gained by studying friendships that have not been limited by the sexist constraints on women’s affection that have been imposed on heterosexual women’s friendships.

Individual Differences

Any discussion of friendship must take individual differences into account. Women have different personalities and may not approach friendship in the same way. Three elements of adult personality development that might affect friendships are identity, generativity, and confident power (Stewart et al., 2001). Research indicates that identity development is positively related to self-esteem and life satisfaction in midlife women and that the early attainment of a well-articulated identity also is related to women’s well-being at midlife (Vandeventer et al., 1997). Generativity refers to the second stage of adulthood posited by Erikson (1968). In generativity, “a man and a woman must have defined for themselves what and whom they have come to care for, what they care to do well, and how they plan to take care of what they have started and created” (Erikson, 1968, p. 395). If this stage is not mastered, the negative outcome is stagnation. A third element of personality at midlife is confident power. Neugarten (1968) proposed that executive processes such as mastery and competence make up the core of the middle-aged personality. Research confirms that middle-aged women feel more in command of their world and themselves than do adults of other ages (e.g., Cartwright & Wink, 1994). Specifically, women report increases in confidence, dominance, and coping skills from early adulthood to middle age (e.g., Stewart et al., 2001).

The connection between personality and friendship remains to be explored. A next step in terms of research in this area would be to investigate how identity, generativity, and confident power affects women’s friendships at midlife. One prediction might be that women’s established friendships will gain in importance and clarity at midlife for those women who become self-actualized. It may also be the case that establishing friendships may become more difficult or less eagerly

approached at midlife. Paul (2004) explained that, by midlife, one is more aware of what effort is involved in starting a friendship:

The chocolate cake in the cooking magazine immediately snared me. The triple layers of dark devil's food—my favorite—were glazed with a rich, fudgy ganache. I'd been craving chocolate cake. I could almost taste it. Maybe I'd share it with my family, maybe not. Then I noticed the length list of ingredients, including an artisan chocolate that had to be specially ordered from a catalog. The recipe was complicated—carefully melting chocolate in a double boiler and whipping egg whites. Way too much trouble. Even though I knew it would be delicious, I turned the page. New friendships can feel like that. (p. 90)

Cross-cultural Perspectives

People in numerous cultures characterize the friendship process as one of increasing levels of intimacy. Despite the universality of the process, the character of friendship varies cross-culturally. Some rules of friendship appear to cut across culture; other rules suggest that differences in cultural values might affect friendship. Argyle and Henderson (1984) reported that adults from Britain, Hong Kong, Japan, and Italy (ages 18 to 25 and 30 to 60) endorsed four common rules of friendship: respect the other's privacy, trust and confide in one another, volunteer help in time of need, and avoid jealousy or criticism of the friend's relationships. However, Japanese adults gave more weight than the other three groups did to the friend fulfilling ritual obligations, providing help if requested, and offering information and regard, and they gave less weight than the other groups did to verbal intimacy and supportiveness.

The dimension of individualism—collectivism has been used to explain many differences in interpersonal behaviors, including friendship. The difference between the Japanese and the other cultures above may be attributable to the individualism—collectivism dimension; perhaps intimacy is more highly regarded in individualistic (Western) societies and fulfillment of formal obligations is more important in collectivist (Eastern) societies.

If we extrapolate from that study, we might hypothesize that women in collectivist societies would have more close friends than women in individualist societies. An alternative hypothesis is that women in collectivist cultures would have fewer but closer friends than do women in individualist cultures. The latter hypothesis was partially borne out by a study of adults from West Africa (Ghana) and North America (Adams & Plaut, 2003), although gender effects were not reported separately. West Africans had fewer friends than North Americans, and the friendship expectations of the two groups also differed. Significantly more West Africans expected material and practical support and guidance, correction, and warning, whereas more North Americans expected emotional support, trust, and respect. Thus, a limited amount of cross-cultural research suggests that gender and culture both are significant factors in determining friendship patterns between women from other cultures.

Conflict, False Friends, and Bad Friends

“Are Friends Delight or Pain?” asked Emily Dickinson (Enright & Rawlinson, 1991, p. 317). Friends are a major source of conflict as well as rewards. Conflict is likely to arise when the rules of friendship are broken. The most important rules to keep in friendship, according to adults from four cultures, are as follows: share news of success with each other; show emotional support; volunteer help in time of need; and strive to make the friend happy when in each other’s company (Argyle & Furnham, 1983). Conflict in friendship also could result from one partner’s reliance on exchange norms rather than communal norms (Clark, 1981). If one friend persists in basing the friendship on an explicitly even exchange, such as expecting every phone call or invitation to be returned before another is extended, the friendship may be damaged. Established friendships tend to operate based on communal norms, such that friends expect to give according to abilities and needs rather than according to a strict system of even exchange. Thus, the expectation might be that the friend with more free time would be the one to take the lead in organizing get-togethers, whereas the busy friend would contribute to the friendship in some other way.

Responses to Conflict

Responses to conflict may determine friendship outcomes. Four types of responses to conflict have been identified: exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect (Rusbult et al., 1982). Exit responses refer to threatening to end the friendship, discussing ending it, driving the friend away, or actually ending the friendship. *Voice* includes responses such as talking about the problem, recommending solutions, compromising, or trying to change the friend or the self. *Loyalty* responses refer to waiting to see if things improve or continuing to have faith in the friendship or the self. Last, *neglect* responses refer to ignoring the friend, spending less time together, refusing to talk about the problem, or complaining without suggesting solutions.

Typically, friends tend to adopt passive responses to conflict in friendship, such as loyally continuing the friendships despite dissatisfaction or by neglecting the friend (e.g., Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2005). Because passive responses are the norm, active responses to conflict, such as threatening to end the friendship or voicing the issue, might be regarded as disruptions in the usual way of dealing with things. People expect friendships to be “self-maintaining” and thus, a friend who responds to conflict more actively may be a surprise. On the other hand, a friendship could be strengthened by a friend’s attentive response to an expression of dissatisfaction.

The research on conflict raises at least two questions concerning mature women’s friendships that have yet to be addressed. First, are older women quicker to react to conflict in friendship or more active in resolving it than young women are? Predictions vary. It could be that older women would be more patient in waiting for conflicts to resolve spontaneously. In contrast, if the friendship is not rewarding, they may be more willing than young women to end it. Second, are older women better at predicting a friend’s response or selecting the most successful way to

handle the conflict with that particular friend? It might be expected that older women, who have sustained long-term friendships, have developed ways to cope with problems successfully. A stable interpersonal script based on long intimacy may govern friendships; a woman may know what friends respond to neglect and what friends appreciate an active approach to problems. In other words, older women's life experience and in-depth knowledge of friends might broaden their repertoire concerning how to handle conflicts.

False Friends and Bad Friends

Research has shown that people with strong friendships experience less stress, recover more quickly from heart attacks, and are likely to live longer than the friendless. They are even more resistant to the common cold (Pressman et al., 2005). Further, more positive health outcomes occur for individuals when they affiliate with a friend in response to a stressful situation; women have a greater tendency than men do to "tend and befriend" when under stress (Taylor et al., 2000). However, some friends may do more harm than good. The extent to which friendships might be destructive or bad for one's health is just beginning to be explored (Yager, 2002). In an enduring friendship, as in any deep relationship, anger, jealousy, envy, and other difficult emotions may occur. Also, some friends lie, cling, criticize, or betray. One may have to decide whether it is just a phase in the friendship and ride it out, or whether it is a permanent condition and disband it.

Betrayal in friendship may be particularly hurtful. Violating a confidence is regarded as a serious affront to a friendship, and Yager (2002) identified 20 additional different types of bad friends. The second most harmful type is when a friend suddenly turns cold without explaining why. This is perceived as more than just an abandonment; the silent treatment is malicious. A third type of bad friend involves someone who insults the other person. The most common type is the promise breaker, someone who promises to be there when needed, then isn't. Some friendships go bad when one of the people gradually or suddenly finds reasons to dislike the other one. It sometimes may take a long while in a friendship to learn enough about the friend to violate one's "dislike criteria," that is, to discover that the friend is a liar, not to be trusted, or that the costs of the friendship greatly outweigh the rewards.

In sum, good friendships are known to contribute to psychological health, but it is becoming apparent that false and bad friendships create stress and do harm. What remains to be explored is if women at midlife are more likely than younger or older women to break off from stressful or harmful friendships.

Directions for Research

Clearly, a great deal about women's friendships has yet to be explained. There are many potential directions for future research. Merely extending any major area of friendship research to include women at midlife would be a good start. For instance,

research on expectations, intimacy, communication, conflict, maintenance, or gender differences in any of these areas targeted at women in midlife would begin to build a profile of adult women's friendships. Studies of the strategies women use to establish and maintain friendships and the processes of transition from one phase of friendship to another are particularly lacking (Bleiszner & Roberto, 2004). In addition, little is known about the importance of friends in accomplishing generative goals such as volunteering to help develop community programs or providing opportunities for mentorship (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1997).

Longitudinal studies using a narrative analysis also might provide a rich context for exploring the convergence of social cognition, life stage, and friendship development. Narratives refer to the stories people create and recreate that help them to interpret and explain relationships. They are important because they help people make sense of their lives (Knapp & Miller, 1994). Many women have long-term and even lifelong friendships that could be tracked over time using narratives or stories about those friendships to examine how identity and cognitions interact with friendship processes and meanings.

Yet another unique approach would be to use women's midlife friendships as a normative model for the study of other relationships and processes. This would be a novel undertaking, particularly because women's friendships traditionally have been regarded as secondary to marital, parental, family, and work relationships. Yet a great deal of research in those areas is aimed at how to avoid problems or how to make those relationships more effective. One could argue that because women's midlife friendships seem to be somewhat protected from the level of disappointment and conflict experienced in romantic and marital relationships, they might provide some insight as to the conditions required to make marriage more positive and fulfilling. In other words, a good friendship might be the best basis for many types of relationships, and women's midlife friendships might serve as an example of how to have them.

The Future of Women's Friendship

The immediate future of women's friendships after age 50 will be affected by the intersection of four forces: lifespan development, life course transitions, caring experiences over the life course, and the sociohistorical context (Bleiszner, 2006). The lifespan development perspective suggests that a key challenge throughout life is to adapt to developmental gains and losses, such as children leaving home, widowhood, or divorce. For example, although loneliness and loss may accompany widowhood, it also provides opportunities for developing other interests and friendships (Adams, 1987). Life transitions also play a role in women's friendships after 50. The impact of life transitions is determined by the age at which they occur. Women in their 50s who are caring for aging parents may have more constraints on their friendships than their age peers who are not; whereas the death of a parent may increase a woman's reliance on her friends. Caring refers to feeling and exhibiting concern and empathy for others. Lifespan perspectives suggest that

women who have positive experiences with caring in early and middle adulthood will be more likely to have caring and intimate friendships in the later years of life. Current sociohistorical influences also are expected to play a role in women's friendships. For example, members of the baby boom cohort are likely to view friendships differently in old age than the previous generation did. The prediction is that baby boomers will have mainly age-homogeneous friendships because of to the strong cohort identity they forged in their youth due to sharing powerful historical events together such as the Vietnam War (Bleiszner, 2006).

The beginning of the twenty-first century has been marked by tremendous changes that will continue to affect friendships (Allan, 2001). The introduction of mass-scale, worldwide, electronic communication and continuing globalization has had an impact on women's everyday lives and relationships. More women work outside the home, and in industrialized nations women may expect to live for nearly a century. Marriage has become less normative, and divorce quite soon may be the majority pattern. Overall, women are having fewer children and their dependency on men is declining. As a result, "the domestic, sexual, and familial arrangements that adults construct are now perceived far more as a personal matter for those involved and not as issues over which others have strong rights to influence" (Allan, 2001, p. 329).

These changes have large implications for informal relationships like friendship. Friendship is likely to become an even more important part of social identity as women become freer to develop nondomestic aspects of their lives. Friendship may also play an increasingly important role in confirming new decisions or changes that are made. Lesbian identities provide a good example. Friendships are highly significant for many lesbians for whom friends represent their "chosen family" (Weeks et al., 2001). These are the friends who are trusted and relied upon. Widowed and divorced heterosexual women as they age potentially might begin to adopt a similar model of establishing a "chosen family" comprised of friends.

Signs that women after 50 will forge new directions for friendship already have begun to appear. The Red Hat Society, which has chapters in dozens of cities, is an example of women using friendship ties to promote a more positive cultural view of women after age 50. Red Hat Society members wear red hats and purple clothing to symbolize that after age 50 women will make their own choices about what is fashionable. As founder Sue Ellen Cooper explained:

"The Red Hat Society began as a result of a few women deciding to greet middle age with verve, humor and elan. We believe silliness is the comedy relief of life, and since we are all in it together, we might as well join red-gloved hands and go for the gusto together. Underneath the frivolity, we share a bond of affection, forged by common life experiences and a genuine enthusiasm for wherever life takes us next." (<http://www.redhatsociety.com>)

The establishment of intentional or retirement communities organized by groups of women friends might also arise after age 50 in response to the declining sex ratio of men to women in the later decades of life. Communities based on lesbian friendships and networks already have been established in Florida, Arizona, and

Washington (Rabin & Slater, 2005). The Florida location was founded in 1995 and currently has 330 residents on 278 landscaped home sites within 50 acres of gated, fenced land (Rabin & Slater, 2005). The model of the lesbian residential/retirement community might become a viable type of community structure for heterosexual women friends in the future, as well.

The feminist potential of women's friendships in the future remains to be seen. Irigaray (1985) argued that interaction between women enables them to define a self that transcends the limits imposed on women by patriarchal language and culture. Interactions between women may not always be harmonious, but they allow women a new and different way of being that cannot appear when women are defined by the needs, desires, and fantasies of men. If women's friendships become more significant as they age, they have the potential to challenge the centrality of men in women's lives. This could lead women to recognize and use their power in the public arena. The functions of women's friendships could broaden beyond intimacy and ego support to include instrumental ones, such as access to economic and political resources, much as men's friendships do (O'Connor, 1998). Thus, women's friendships after 50 potentially have important implications for feminist and political activism. Guttentag and Secord (1983) theorized that feminist movements tend to develop when women greatly outnumber men. If so, in the future, women over 50 may become an important base of political influence and social change.

In conclusion, it remains to be seen if women's friendships will continue to reinforce women's place in the private sphere, as defined by patriarchy, or will become a catalyst for their entry into the public arena. However, current trends suggest that friendship in the future will become increasingly important across the lifespan, particularly so among women after age 50 who will have the greatest opportunity to construct their own place in the world.

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