



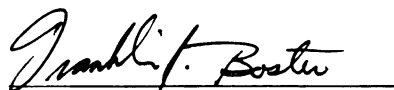
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THE IMPACT OF SELF-DISCLOSURE & SELF-ESTEEM
ON WOMEN'S SAME-SEX FRIENDSHIPS

By

Donna Kidner-Smith

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
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for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

The effects of self-disclosure and the perception of self-esteem were examined as they related to the number of women's same-sex friendships. Self-disclosure was determined by asking each woman how much personal information they felt comfortable disclosing to another female. The results indicated that both working women and homemakers share approximately the same amount of information with their friends, and that there is no correlation between the amount of self-disclosure and the number of same-sex friends. Additionally, men, working women, and homemakers were surveyed for their level of self-esteem. The results revealed that all three groups measured relatively high in self-esteem, with the homemakers measuring significantly lower than either group. The study indicates there is no correlation between the level of self-esteem and the number of same-sex friendships a woman develops.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Frank Boster for his expertise and insight while completing this thesis. Also, a very special thank you to Marge Barkman, whose patience and thoroughness in her work has made the experience manageable.

Above all, I would like to give special recognition to my loving family, without whose encouragement and understanding I would not have reached my goal. Thank you very much for allowing me to pursue and complete this. Don, Brittney, and Merideth, I dedicate this to you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1.....	Introduction
Chapter 2.....	Method
Chapter 3.....	Results
Chapter 4.....	Discussion
References.....	
Appendix.....	

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have examined cross-sex friendships. Some of them assess the level of disclosure between men and women (Barret, 1981; Dolgin, Meyer and Schwartz, 1991; Hacker, 1981), as well as the similarities and differences in disclosure between the sexes. Friendships among women have also been explored, but to a limited degree. Some of these studies attempt to explain the impact of the women's movement on the friendships of women (e.g., Seiden & Bart, 1975). They point out that, although people make friends in all types of social movements, the women's movement has had as a part of its ideology the belief in sisterhood.

Additionally, researchers have investigated the general importance of women's same-sex friendships, indicating there is therapeutic benefit in these relationships (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Bernard, 1981; Scholfield, 1964; Seiden & Bart, 1975). Studies have shown that there is a strong link between friendship and basic health (Lynch, 1980, p. 4). Still other research has indicated that people without friends are generally less able to sustain any other kind of loving relationship (McGinnis, 1979, p.9).

Since medieval times, when ties expanded past family circles, women have befriended women and gathered

together in groups. So strong was the need for comradeship that women turned many of their household chores into social occasions. With other social outlets prohibited, women compensated by washing together at streams, organizing sewing circles, and communally putting up food for the winter. On the American frontier where couples lived away from institutions of civilizations, and often away from extended family, women had to turn to women from other families for advice and support (Block & Greenburg, 1985, p. 21). Without a family to educate them on childbearing and child rearing, young women often sought older women nearby for advice, comfort, and aid.

Not only do women still seek each other, evidence suggests women have a tendency to be attracted to relating in general (Argyle & Furnham, 1983). The abundance of women's groups is consistent with this claim. These groups range widely in scope from consciousness-raising groups to La Leche League meetings, from divorcee's and widow's programs to mothers of preschoolers organizations, from Christian womanhood groups to feminist collectives. What they all have in common is women united with women (Block & Greenburg, 1985).

For the woman whose family ties are strong, so that those relationships meet most of their needs, examining friendships may be insignificant. On the

other hand, the kinship component in the social networks of modern middle-class women is waning (Bernard, 1981). It is logical to expect that the many new elements in middle-class women's lives, (i.e., advanced education, continuous employment, later marriages, demanding careers, fewer children) will not only change their attitudes, values, and life styles, but also influence their relationships (Gouldner & Strong, 1987, p. 4).

The degree to which a woman self-discloses may be one factor that affects her relationships, particularly the same-sex friendships that a woman desires to develop. Self-disclosure is defined as, "...any information exchange that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past and plans for the future. It can be objectively defined as any verbal message that formally begins with the word "I" or any other verbal message about the self" (Chelune, 1979).

Researchers have identified the positive effects of intimacy (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Bochner, 1974; Erikson, 1959; Hacker, 1981; Jourard, 1971; Wright, 1982). Intimacy can contribute to a fuller, more enjoyable, and rewarding life. One who experiences a low level of intimacy may thus face a number of problems, including dissatisfaction with life and difficulty developing a sense of self (Erikson, 1959). Studies have found that women who self-disclose are viewed as better adjusted and more likeable than women who do not self-disclose

(Chelune, 1976; Derlega and Chaikin, 1976).

Additional studies of sociability and loneliness have indicated that people need two kinds of social relationships to ensure a sense of well-being.

The first type provides people with a sense of attachment that, for most individuals, comes from an intimate relationship with a spouse (Weiss, 1969, 1973). Sometimes a woman establishes this kind of intimacy with a close friend, her mother, or a sister. The second kind of relationship provides a sense of community that comes from a network of friends who share concerns and values (Weiss, 1969, 1973).

Most friendships do not meet the needs ordinarily supplied by marriage, nor, does marriage usually provide the needs ordinarily met by friendship. As Gouldner and Strong state, "Relationships like marriage and friendship tend to be relatively specialized in the needs they answer.... "(Gouldner & Strong, 1987, p.118).

In a study of women's friendships the majority of respondents had a close female friend, and those who did not yearned for such a relationship. It was a rare woman who was so totally enthralled with the role of homemaker and mother or obsessed with her career that she completely ignored the need for friendship (Block & Greenburg, 1985, p.13).

Yet another factor that may explain why some women

have many friends while others have only a select few concerns the issue of self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as an individual who respects herself; considers herself worthy, and expects to grow and learn. "A major function of friendship and love relationships may be to validate one's self concept by obtaining the support and understanding of the other person" (Derlega and Chaikin, 1977, p. 102). Mental health professionals have repeatedly found that women who suffer from a wide range of dangerous symptoms, ranging from low self-esteem and a sense of "missing something" in their lives to clinical depression and suicidal tendencies, rarely regard their lack of a support system to be at the core of their problems. Yet when these women eventually understand the barriers they have erected against friendships and the possibility of its importance in their lives, they are often able to be helped (Block & Greenburg, 1985, p. 50). The relationship between social support and psychological health or distress has been explored further and those results have indicated that the presence of a confidante, a category which includes friends, was related to better psychological adjustment (Brown, Bhrolchain & Harris, 1975; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968).

American studies show that women perceive their same-sex friendships to be therapeutic (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Davidson & Packard, 1981) and women find their

social relationships with other women emotionally supportive (Bernard, 1981). Because empathetic understanding is a vital characteristic of therapy, this intimate, emotional sharing that is an ingredient of women's friendships may contain a degree of inherent therapeutic value (Carkhuff, 1983).

With employed women commonly experiencing stress from their jobs and guilt from the hours spent away from home, and the homemaker feeling "out of touch" in her role, low self-esteem is still an issue many women are confronting. (Dobson, 1975, 1985). And while this is true, the working women, who may have lower self-esteem than men, may have a higher level of self-esteem than does the homemaker.

Assertions that support this hypothesis are that although many homemakers are in that role by choice, homemakers often do not see immediate results for their effort. Most homemakers do not receive payment for services rendered. Questions may arise as to whether the right decision was made to stay at home, particularly for the career oriented, whose former colleague is employed,

"succeeding," and receiving tangible rewards.

Additionally, having young children may discourage involvement in former interests or hobbies. Feelings of isolation and uselessness can surface.

While the employed women may struggle with low self-esteem, she often receives immediate compensation and recognition for the work completed. She may gain satisfaction from feeling she is productive within the work force and that she is utilizing her time and education. All of this contributes to her self-esteem.

The first hypothesis of this study is developed from the connection between self-esteem and the number of a woman's same-sex friends. This question has yet to be examined empirically, but because studies have indicated that friendships are therapeutic in nature, and serve to validate one's self, the level of self-esteem increases with increasing same-sex friends. Thus:

Hypothesis One:

The number of same-sex friendships a woman develops positively affects her self-esteem.

The second hypothesis of this study stems from the link between self-disclosure (intimacy) and the number of same-sex female friends. Although the friendship literature has not examined this possibility in depth, a strong correspondence between self-disclosure and the number of same-sex friendships should be found. Thus:

Hypothesis Two:

The more comfortable a woman feels in self-disclosing and listening to other women self-disclose, the more same-sex friends she will have.

The third hypothesis, never tested empirically, is based on the theory that homemakers experience lower self-esteem than both the working women and the men.

Thus:

Hypothesis Three:

Men will measure a higher level of self-esteem than women, but that working women will measure higher self-esteem than will homemakers.

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

Respondents

The respondents for this study were 34 full-time employed women, 43 homemakers, and 30 men in a Western Michigan city. Potential volunteers were recruited by approaching the researcher's neighbors, employees of a hospital, elementary school, engineering department, and business college. Persons were asked if they would complete a questionnaire; anonymity was guaranteed. If they agreed, a questionnaire was provided to them. The questionnaire took approximately six minutes to complete. All respondents completed the survey when first contacted and returned the surveys immediately to the administrator.

Instrumentation

In order to test the three hypotheses, two different items were measured: (1) men and women's self-esteem and (2) women's level of self-disclosure to same-sex friends.

1. The self-esteem scale used (Rosenburg, 1965) was designed to measure attitudes toward the self along a favorable-to unfavorable dimension and was constructed for use in a large scale survey.

When the author speaks of high self-esteem he simply meant that the individual respects herself, considers herself worthy, she does not necessarily consider herself better than others, but she definitely does not consider

herself worse, she does not feel that she is the ultimate in perfection but, on the contrary, recognizes her limitations and expects to grow and improve.

The ten items are Likert type questions, allowing one of four responses: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The items were presented alternatively in order to reduce the possibility of response set. The test was administered to both genders.

2. The second section of the survey measured the level of self-disclosure and the comfort level of self-disclosure among women. The survey was designed by the researcher and contained the Likert- type questions, again allowing one of four responses for the seven questions: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

Self-disclosure has been defined as any statement that begins with the word, "I" or includes any personal reference or opinions and feelings of the person speaking. Women exclusively completed this section of the survey.

Analysis

What is expected to be found is as follows:

Hypothesis One: The more same-sex friendships a woman develops the higher her self-esteem will be. Thus, these variables should correlate positively and substantially.

Hypothesis Two: The more a woman self-discloses and the more she feels comfortable when other women self-disclose to her, the more same-sex friends she will develop. These variables should correlate positively and substantially.

Hypothesis Three: Women will measure lower self-esteem than will the men, but that the working women will measure higher than will the homemakers. Thus, these variables will correlate negatively and substantially.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

Data were inconsistent with the first hypothesis. Self-esteem was unrelated to the number of friends a woman has, and unrelated to the number of female friends with whom women shared information ($r = .08$; $df = 75$, $p > .05$ and $r = -.04$; $df = 75$; $p > .05$ respectively). The mean number of friends for working women was 11.02, and for homemakers the mean was 9.23. This difference was not statistically significant ($t = 1.00$; $df = 75$; $p > .05$). The mean number of friends with whom professional women shared information was 5.06, and for homemakers this figure was 4.79. This difference was not statistically significant ($t < 1.00$; $df = 75$; $p > .05$).

Concerning the second hypothesis only one of the six items correlated substantially with the number of female friends a woman had, and it was the item concerning the desirability of having intimate female friendships ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$, one-tailed test). The data indicate that woman with few such friends found such relationships very desirable; whereas, women with many such friends found such relationships less desirable. The same correlation ($r = -.29$) was found between the number of female friends with whom one shared information and the desirability of having intimate female friendships. Because the data are correlational it is impossible to deduce the cause and the effect in this analysis. The effect may well be

interdependent, however, so that each variable is the cause of the other at various points in time.

Interestingly, items tapping the closeness of one's present set of relationships and the desirability of closeness were more frequently associated with the number of women friends and the number of women friends with whom one shares information. For instance, the more likely one was to report that casual friends were rewarding, the less women friends one had with whom one shared information ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$). Moreover, if either personality ($r = -.27$, $p < .05$) or family/work ($r = -.27$; $p < .01$) prohibited friendship development, one was likely to have fewer women friends.

Furthermore, there were several interesting relationships between the disclosure items and the closeness items. For example, the more persons reported disclosing personal information, the more likely they were to agree that close friends are rewarding ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). In addition, the more comfortable subjects were with disclosing, the more they found close friends rewarding ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). Conversely, the more persons reported disclosing personal information, the less likely they were to agree that casual friends are rewarding ($r = -.31$, $p < .01$), and the more they desired intimate female friendships, the less they found casual friends rewarding ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$).

Pertinent to the third hypothesis, all groups had

reasonably high self-esteem ($\bar{M} = 31.89$). Nevertheless, the self-esteem of homemakers ($\bar{M} = 30.30$) was less than the self-esteem of professional women ($\bar{M} = 32.65$), which did not differ substantially from the self-esteem of men ($\bar{M} = 33.30$). A one-way analysis of variance for independent groups and fixed effects indicated that these differences were statistically significant ($F = 4.49$; $df = 2, 104$; $p = .0135$). Thus, the data are consistent with the third hypothesis.

These data are summarized and presented in the following tables. Table 1 contains the correlations among the items measured in this study. Table 2 breaks down the critical dependent measures by gender and occupational group.

Table 1
Correlation Matrix for Questionnaire Items

	Disc. 1	Disc.2	Disc. 3	Disc. 4	Disc.5	Disc.6
Disc. 1	1.00	.69	.05	.39	-.19	.11
Disc. 2	.69	1.00	-.01	.33	-.22	.14
Disc. 3	.05	-.01	1.00	-.05	.20	.00
Disc. 4	.39	.33	-.05	1.00	-.16	.11
Disc. 5	-.19	-.22	.20	-.16	1.00	-.26
Disc. 6	.11	.14	.00	.11	-.26	1.00
Friends	-.01	-.03	-.03	.06	.08	-.29
Share	.07	.04	.05	.02	.09	-.29
Close 1	.39	.39	.22	.14	-.15	.18
Close 2	-.31	-.13	-.05	-.05	.99	-.29
Close 3	-.12	-.08	.19	-.08	-.24	.22
Close 4	.02	-.02	.11	-.14	-.01	.22
Close 5	-.23	-.07	.08	-.16	.19	.20
Close 6	-.12	-.25	.05	-.08	.25	.12
Close 7	-.32	-.29	-.02	-.07	.26	-.03
Esteem	.04	.15	-.18	.18	-.24	-.01

Table 2

Mean Score on the Dependent Measures Broken Down By
Gender and Occupational Group

	Homemaker		Professional Women
Disc. 1	3.023		3.029
Disc. 2	3.162		3.117
Disc. 3	2.255		1.941
Disc. 4	3.302		3.205
Disc. 5	1.860		2.058
Disc. 6	2.744		2.558
Friends	9.232		11.02
Share	4.790		5.058
Close 1	3.395		3.470
Close 2	2.699		2.882
Close 3	2.604		2.382
Close 4	2.186		2.147
Close 5	2.418		2.617
Close 6	1.860		1.882
Close 7	1.720		1.735
	Men	Homemakers	Professional Women
Esteem	33.30	30.30	32.64

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis asserted that the more same-sex friends a woman develops, the higher her self-esteem. The data were inconsistent with this hypothesis. The results indicate that there is no correlation between the number of same-sex friends and the level of a woman's self-esteem. There are at least two explanations for these results. First, the majority of the working women surveyed had completed, or were in the process of completing, graduate studies. The majority held upper management or professional positions. It is reasonable to believe that the level to which they have aspired in their career lends to their level of self-esteem and that friendship has less of a bearing on self-esteem on this group than friendships would have on the uneducated or unskilled full-time worker. Future research could profit by selecting variables with proven relationships to women's self-esteem outside of friendship development.

Second, the homemakers surveyed were a homogeneous group. The majority lived within the same area of the city, attended the same church, and held similar values. It is possible that both the income level and educational level of the homemakers surveyed were above the national mean for homemakers within the same age group. Friendship may have less of an effect on this particular group of women than it would for women in other areas of the same

city or across the state who have experienced fewer opportunities. Additionally, although all homemakers were not employed full-time outside of their home, many surveyed were employed part-time, which may contribute to their self-esteem. Consequently, this fact most likely had a bearing on the results. Thus, future studies would profit by measuring a broader cross section of the female population.

The second hypothesis posited that the more comfortable a woman feels in self-disclosing and listening to other women self-disclose, the more same-sex friends she will have. No correlation was found between these two variables. The data did, however, indicate that the women who self-disclosed within their friendships (4.90) desired fewer intimate friendships (2.55) while those who did not self-disclose as much (4.79) had more of a desire for intimate friendships (2.74).

One recommendation for further studies on self-disclosure is to provide an explanation of self-disclosure on the survey. The survey used failed to do so, which left the interpretation of self-disclosure to each confederate (see appendix). This same recommendation would be made when asking for the number of friends. Confederates had their own interpretation of what comprised a friend, which possibly accounts for the difference in means between the two groups.

The third hypothesis asserted that men would have higher self-esteem than both groups of women, but that professional women would have a higher score than homemakers. This hypothesis was found to be true.

However, in future studies researchers may want to survey two groups of men, one group who hold comparable socioeconomic and/or educational levels as the working women and one group with a mixture of educational and economic levels. The majority of men surveyed were not college graduates and very few hold professional positions.

As was stated previously, "A major function of friendship and love relationships may be to validate one's self concept by obtaining the support and understanding of the other person" (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). From the results of the research, the group of women surveyed have healthy friendships that are currently meeting their needs.

The study was based on correlational data. Future research may benefit from replicating the study longitudinally. By looking at the impact of such variables over time, it is easier to make stronger causal inferences.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

I am currently writing a thesis on the friendships of women. Please fill out this survey entirely and return it to me, Donna Smith. All information is confidential. Do not place your name on any section of this survey. I will have the results available in the fall if you would like to know the outcome of my research. Thank you.

Section 1.

1. I disclose personal information (such as marriage problems, finances, personal struggles) to my female, unrelated friends.
☐strongly agree
☐agree
☐disagree
☐strongly disagree
2. I feel comfortable disclosing personal information with close, female, unrelated friends.
☐strongly agree
☐agree
☐disagree
☐strongly disagree
3. I sometimes feel that women will reject my friendship if I share personal information.
☐strongly agree
☐agree
☐disagree
☐strongly disagree
4. I feel comfortable when a female, unrelated friend discloses personal information to me.
☐strongly agree
☐agree
☐disagree
☐strongly disagree
5. I sometimes have friends withdraw from me because I expect too much from them (time, self disclosure, dependency, etc.).
☐strongly agree
☐agree
☐disagree
☐strongly disagree
6. I wish I had more female friends with whom I could share on an intimate level.
☐strongly agree
☐agree
☐disagree
☐strongly disagree

7. How many female, unrelated friends do you currently have?

8. With how many female, unrelated friends do you share intimate information with?

9. I believe that having a few very close, female friends with whom I confide is personally rewarding for me.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
10. I believe that having many casual friends with whom I have fun, but where confidences are seldom shared is personally rewarding.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
11. I wish I had more casual female friends.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
12. Personality characteristics (boldness, shyness, other) keep me from developing and maintaining friendships with women.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
13. Family responsibilities and/or work keep me from developing and maintaining friendships with other women.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
14. Women usually reject my friendliness.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
15. In one or two words only, please indicate the greatest benefit you receive from having close, female, unrelated friends.

16. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least an equal plane with others.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
17. I feel I have a number of good qualities.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
18. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
19. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
20. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
21. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
22. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree
23. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree

24. I certainly feel useless at times.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree

25. At times I think I am no good at all.
___strongly agree
___agree
___disagree
___strongly disagree

Section 2. Demographics

1. What is your date of birth? _____
2. Are you married___ unmarried___ divorced___
3. What is the level of education you have completed?
- Junior High___ What grade level? _____
High School___ What grade level? _____
College ___ Freshman___ Sophomore___ Junior___ Senior___
Post Graduate School _____
4. I am employed outside of my home.
- NO___ YES___ Part time___ Full time___

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELPFUL INPUT!

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