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Abstract

The authors examined same- and cross-gender friendship norms in a sample of 135 adults (average age 73 years). Participants evaluated a friend's behavior, quantitatively and qualitatively, in vignettes in which the friend's gender was experimentally manipulated. Gender often significantly, though modestly, influenced normative evaluations. Women frequently had higher expectations of friends than men and placed a greater emphasis on intimacy. Women were more disapproving of violations of friendship rules, such as betraying a confidence, paying a surprise visit, and failing to stand up for a friend in public. However, both men and women were less approving of a man than a woman who greets another friend with a kiss or who requests to stay overnight. Respondents' open-ended comments reflected positive attitudes regarding cross-gender friendships. Most findings demonstrated that men and women across a wide age range held similar cultural norms for close ties, norms of trust, commitment, and respect.

Keywords

friendship; older adults; gender; social norms

Friendships represent highly salient social bonds in our society. Individuals of all ages report being happier when they are with friends than when they are alone or with family members (Larson and Bradney 1988), and friendships are viewed as the most common source of joy (Argyle 1987). The presence of friendship ties is also associated with a variety of positive health outcomes, such as lower mortality rates and a relatively long life (e.g., Sabin 1993). In our contemporary society in particular, friends serve as "social convoys" through life's journey and as personal, community sources of "cultural capital" (Pahl 2000). The role of informal, close ties is apt to expand in salience in our increasingly fragmented society (Adams and Allen 1998). Yet this crucial type of social bond tends to be overlooked and devalued, especially when compared with familial and workplace relationships (Pahl 2000; Rubin 1985). Friendship also is underrepresented in the social scientific literature, in which the large majority of studies are on the romantic or marital ties of young adults (Felmlee and Sprecher 2000). Relatively little is known about the close ties of individuals as they progress through the life course. In particular, we lack information about the social norms and expectations that older adults have for their friendships.

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The first objective of this research, therefore, was to examine friendship norms and expectations among a current cohort of older adults by asking individuals to evaluate the appropriateness of various types of friendship behavior in hypothetical scenarios. Social norms specify the range of behaviors that are deemed appropriate for a particular type of friendship within a cultural backdrop. Yet norms for friendship and affiliation are not always clear and can be contradictory in some instances (Felmlee 1999), leading to misunderstandings and disagreements between friends. An examination of social norms for affiliative relationships in later life, therefore, may help in gaining an understanding of the processes that lead to friendship conflict and dissolution at this stage of the life cycle.

An important factor that influences friendship norms and values is gender. Research has documented a variety of gender differences in friendship patterns, such as the observation that women's friendships are closer, more cooperative, and more supportive than those of men (Johnson 1996; Rubin 1985). Theories suggest that differing cultural constructions of gender, and unequal positions in the social structure, are apt to result in men and women espousing dissimilar social norms for their friendships. The second purpose of this research, therefore, was to investigate the extent to which gender influences same- and cross-gender friendship for older adults. Finally, we know relatively little about the actual content of the friendship norms of older adults. What are some of the typical normative expectations for this group of individuals? In what cases are norms definitive, and when do they tend to be contradictory? A final goal was to use qualitative data from open-ended questions to identify and illustrate variations in friendship norms in a contemporary group of older adults.

This study remains timely because of the increasing importance of studying older individuals in our society. People are living longer, and the aged represent a growing proportion of the population over time; hence, it is important to understand this substantial subgroup located at the latter stages of the life course. Additionally, there exists a scarcity of sociological research examining the everyday aspects of mature adults and the manner in which they maintain relationships. Understanding people in later stages of life aids in developing explanations of human social behavior that extend across the life cycle.

Background

Characteristics of Older Adult Friendship

Later life is apt to be a time during which friendships are particularly relevant. The older stages in life are when many employed men and women are likely to transition to part-time or full-time retirement from prolonged involvement in careers and jobs. Recent research has documented a considerable degree of variability in retirement ages and processes (e.g., Cahill, Giandrea, and Quinn 2006; Purcell 2005; Quadagno 2005), with a majority of older Americans retiring gradually, and in stages, rather than in one step (Cahill et al. 2006).Yet with either a partial or a permanent reduction in ties to the workplace, a number of older adults are apt to have more time, opportunity, and need for connection with others outside of the home (Allen 1989). As individuals grow older, many lose their spouses through either death or divorce, particularly women, and this also creates a greater call for close ties with friends and acquaintances (Ferraro, Mutran, and Barresi 1984; Lopata 1988). Nevertheless, aging may bring with it constraints that make the development and preservation of close bonds challenging. For some, there are likely to be fewer interaction opportunities after leaving the workforce, as well as in cases in which children, who provide links to a variety of social institutions (Chown 1981), depart home permanently. Furthermore, older individuals may be prone to serious health problems, and some have minimal incomes and reduced transportation, which can limit their social activities (Allen 1989; Lopata 1979; Rook 1989). People also may selectively choose to maintain relatively fewer, but high-quality, close relationships as they advance in years by letting casual ties lapse while retaining more meaningful ones (Carstensen,

Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999). Thus, as adults age, there tends to be a reduction in the total number of reported friends (Phillipson 1997).

Having close friends positively affects the psychological well-being of older adults. Both frequent interaction and emotionally close friends influence well-being, although psychological well-being also may cause an increase in friendship activity (Adams 1988). Friends are named as the people with whom older adults enjoy spending time, engage in leisure activities, and have daily or frequent contact and who have the most positive and significant impact on well-being (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995). Friends are also more important than kin in maintaining older adults' morale (Wood and Robertson 1978). Similar characteristics of friends, such as shared values and interests, trustworthiness, displays of affection, and expressions of support, are appealing across all senior cohorts (Blieszner and Adams 1992). Older adults place a high value on the following characteristics of friendship: self-disclosure, sociability, day-to-day assistance, shared activities, loyalty, trust, and similar interests (Adams, Blieszner, and De Vries 2000).

Friendship has numerous health benefits for individuals in later life. For example, close ties with friends, as well as the presence of a spouse, are linked to increased survival rates of the aged (Rasulo, Christensen, and Tomassini 2005). Extended social networks and higher levels of social engagement are correlated positively with cognitive functioning, and with a lower rate of cognitive decline, among older African Americans and Whites (Barnes et al. 2004). An active and socially involved lifestyle in later life also protects against the development of dementia and Alzheimer's disease (Fratiglioni, Paillard-Borg, and Winblad 2004). Moreover, social support enhances well-being following a stroke in later life and has a moderating, or buffering, effect on the adverse effects of subsequent physical disability (Clarke 2003).

Social Norms and Vignettes

The social norm represents a foundational concept within the social sciences, and it is ubiquitous in a range of analyses within sociology and social psychology. Norms consist of expectations for behavior backed by sanctions, and they denote standards for behavior that are shared by members of a social group and to which those members are expected to conform. According to Kluckohn (1959), they represent sets of blueprints for social relationships that are handed down across the generations. Because they are enforced by sanctions, social norms represent the "cutting edge of social control" (Blake and Davis 1964). They raise elemental sociological questions concerning the ways in which human actions are shaped by, and resist being shaped by, cultural prescriptions.

Despite their significance for social theory and research, social norms are challenging to investigate empirically, and we lack information on many salient, typical social norms (Martin 1964). The early approaches of Durkheim (1895/1982) and Merton (1968) directly addressed societal norms and normlessness, and there exists some recent theoretical work on the topic from a rational choice perspective (e.g., Coleman 1990), but the bulk of current sociological investigation often takes norms for granted and examines social behavior in such a context, rather than specifically confronting the nature of social norms (Therborn 2002). Moreover, an emphasis on social norms can lead to an overly simplistic "normative determinism," in which human behavior is viewed as fully shaped by preexisting, consensual norms (e.g., Blake and Davis 1964).

In this study, our approach to the investigation of norms was to use vignettes, which involve short descriptions about hypothetical friends in specified circumstances, as a tool to more directly examine normative, friendship expectations. Vignettes have been used to study normative questions in conjunction with quantitative surveys (e.g., Alves and Rossi 1978) and in a small number of qualitative investigations (e.g., Hughes 1998). One advantage of the

vignette strategy over the more common method of using attitude statements to examine norms is that it allows for the specification of situational context (Finch 1987). Participants make normative evaluations regarding a particular set of social circumstances, rather than evaluating abstract beliefs or values. By asking questions about hypothetical third parties, vignettes are relatively unthreatening, and therefore, they are particularly useful for gathering information on potentially sensitive, personal topics (Finch 1987). The eliciting of norms in this manner also facilitates the identification of situations in which there exist contradictions, and a lack of consensus, regarding normative expectations.

Friendship represents a particularly intriguing venue for the examination of social norms, in part because of the elusiveness of this social bond. For instance, the meaning of friendship is ill defined and varies widely among individuals (Pahl 2000). Thus, norms regarding friendship are apt to be less clear than those of bonds within more established social institutions, such as the family and the workplace. As a result, there may be more room for differences of opinion and misinterpretation regarding friendship norms. At the same time, the central role of friendship, especially during later life stages, makes it all the more important to examine the nature of contrasting social expectations for this social bond.

In one of the few studies related to the topic of friendship norms, Argyle and Henderson (1984) conducted an investigation of friendship rules in multiple societies, including Great Britain, Italy, Hong Kong, and Japan. These researchers found that several friendship rules were universally endorsed across the various cultures, such as giving help in time of need, respecting privacy, keeping confidences, and self-disclosure.

Gender Norms in Friendship

A number of studies have suggested that there are gender differences in affiliative norms and behavior. When it comes to relating, according to scholarly work, men and women display distinct styles. Such research concludes that women's friendships are "face to face," whereas those of men are considered to be "side by side" (Wright 1982). Women's friendships also are more intimate, whereas men's are found to focus on shared activities (Rubin 1985).

One theoretical explanation for the identification of differences between men and women in friendship behavior centers on the cultural construction of gender. According to Ridgeway and Correll (2004), hegemonic cultural beliefs regarding gender, and the manner in which these beliefs play out in specific, social relational contexts, form the basis of the ubiquitous gender system. Friendship is apt to be one significant social relational arena for the enactment of cultural messages and beliefs regarding gender. Contemporary gender stereotypes contain messages that frame women as more communal in their relationships and men as more instrumental and more agentic (Eagly, Wood, and Diekman 2000). Girls also are encouraged to value interconnectedness and nurturance more highly than men (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982). Furthermore, parents, peers, social institutions, and the mass media foster cooperation and emotional support among girls, whereas boys are led to be more competitive, independent, and aggressive (e.g., Thorne 1986). The influence of cultural stereotyping and gender socialization persists throughout the life course, and messages that encourage warmth and nurturance on the part of women do not end with advanced age. Therefore, friendship norms for older adult men and women are likely to differ because divergent values and behaviors are reinforced socially and emphasized culturally.

Another explanation for gender disparities in affiliative behavior and normative expectations focuses on societal gender inequality and the social structural elements of gender itself (Risman 2004). Men consistently have more power in our society and are overrepresented in prestigious and highly paid occupational positions (Reskin 1984). Women also continue to be more responsible for the care of others than are men (DeVault 1991).

The ramifications of gender inequality persist into old age. For example, the poverty rate for elderly women is more than twice that of elderly men, in part because women tend to live longer, but also because they are less apt to have pensions plans (Miller 1998). Nonmarried women living alone are more likely to be in poverty than are solitary men and less likely to escape poverty (Hardy and Hazelrigg 1993). Older women exhibit higher rates of psychological distress than their male counterparts, distress that is largely due to financial problems that are in turn in part related to women's higher propensity to be nonmarried (Keith 1993). Moreover, women report lower levels of satisfaction with retirement, largely because of their lower incomes and somewhat because of their reduced likelihood of being married (Seccombe and Lee 1986).

A structural argument suggests that gender differences in affiliative actions and expectations are due to contrasting opportunities and constraints that face men and women in everyday interactions (Allen 1989). Older women's limited financial resources, compared with those of men, for example, may increase women's need for informal ties. Furthermore, women's heightened involvement in the care of family members and friends is likely to expand their opportunities to forge such informal links and lead them to place greater value than men on intimate connections.

Empirical research documents gender differences in the friendships of seniors. When assessing the criteria for friendship, for instance, women highlight the emotional qualities, whereas men highlight indirect, proxy indicators of friendship, such as frequency of contact or length of acquaintance (Blieszner 2000). Older adult men also are less prone than women to discuss their feelings in relation to friends with whom they desire greater closeness (Blieszner 1995). In terms of numbers, older adults have more women than men in their social network (Akiyama, Elliott, and Antonucci 1996). Yet the relatively extensive social relationships of women are not uniformly beneficial, and in some cases, men may be more advantaged in having relatively few close ties (Antonucci, Akiyama, and Lansford 1998).

Some behavioral norms within friendship vary by gender. For example, young women are more approving of friends exhibiting crying and hugging than are young men (Felmlee 1999), findings that suggest a greater degree of intimacy within the same-gender friendships of women. In contrast, men can be less demanding of their friends, implying that men are less emotionally invested in their affiliative relationships (Felmlee 1999). An individual's sexual orientation, as well as gender, also can influence normative friendship expectations (Muraco 2005). These gender and sex differences likely persist into older adulthood.

Despite the extensive empirical differences in friendship attributed to gender, researchers caution against placing too much emphasis on gender distinctions. Some have found differences between men and women to be exaggerated in accounts of friendship and have noted that such discrepancies are more likely to reflect social norms than actual activities and behaviors (Walker 1994). Others have noted that gender operates in conjunction with other social locations, such as class, marital status, and age, and that the entirety of one's social context must be considered to fully understand the implications of any one dimension (Adams and Allen 1998). As such, several scholars maintain that there are likely to be more overall similarities than differences in men's and women's friendships (Allen 1989; Duck and Wright 1993; Felmlee 1999).

Cross-Gender Friendship

Cross-gender heterosexual friendships are common among college-aged individuals and in white-collar, professional workplace interactions (Wright 1998). Although heterosexual cross-gender friendships provide many benefits, they also face challenges that include a lack of social support, the presumption by others of sexual involvement, a lack of cultural models, and social

inequalities (O'Meara 1989; West, Anderson, and Duck 1996). Accordingly, some older women view cross-gender ties as preludes to romance and cite strong norms against courtship among older adults (Blieszner 1995). On the other hand, cross-gender friendship may flourish in later life because of a diminished focus on how sexuality might influence the relationship (Matthews 1986). Social norms for cross-gender friendships may differ from those for same-gender friendships for older adults, particularly in situations with sexual connotations, as occurs with young adults (Felmlee 1999).

In the first part of our analyses, we investigated the role of gender in the normative evaluations of various types of friendship behavior. To what extent did gender shape the degree to which respondents viewed various actions on the part of a friend as appropriate? We also investigated whether the gender of the friend being evaluated influenced assessments of friendship behavior. Finally, we included age as a control variable in our statistical model. Given theory and findings from the literature discussed above (e.g., Eagly et al. 2000), we expected that the responses of women would emphasize norms of nurturance and intimacy more so than those of men. Women also may be relatively demanding of their friends, and more prone to reinforce affiliative social norms in general, because of the enhanced salience of friendship for females.

In the second part of the analyses, we used qualitative data to examine the content of the social norms of this group of respondents. What types of friendship norms were expressed in the open-ended responses? We also used the qualitative data to aid in interpreting the findings from the quantitative analyses.

Methods

Participants

The participants consisted of a total of 135 adults between the ages of 50 and 97 years, with an average age of 73 years (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). The majority of the participants were female (54.1%) and Caucasian (59%); close to one third (31.3%) of the respondents were married, and approximately one fourth (25.2%) were widowed. The sample was drawn from four different municipally sponsored recreational centers catering to the needs of older adults in different cities in northern California. Participation in the study was voluntary, with each individual receiving small monetary compensation for completing the short survey. Volunteers were solicited by placing information in senior center newsletters and by making announcements at events sponsored by the senior center. The researchers randomly handed the volunteers a questionnaire that asked questions about a hypothetical male or female friend. To preserve anonymity, volunteers placed the completed surveys in envelopes. In a few instances, the respondents required assistance either in reading or in writing their responses on the survey forms, because of difficulties with sight or writing abilities. Several individuals also preferred to complete the survey within the context of an informal interview. In a handful of cases, individuals affiliated with the senior centers volunteered to serve as translators for non-english-speaking respondents. Our target goal, based on our funding, was to collect data from approximately 130 individuals. We pretested the questionnaire and the scenarios with a sample of two adults from a senior center and revised the scenarios accordingly.

Questionnaire

Each research subject read seven vignettes involving a person described as his or her friend and then rated the appropriateness of that person's behavior in each situation. The particular vignettes were chosen to elicit evaluations of various dimensions of friendship. Intimate relationships, such as a friendship and a love relationship, differ from more casual connections in at least six specific ways, according to various researchers (Miller, Perlman, and Brehm 2007): trust (scenarios 1 and 7), commitment (scenario 2), interdependence (scenario 3),

mutuality (scenario 4), caring (scenario 5), and knowledge (scenario 6). With each of the vignettes, we attempted to represent at least one of these dimensions. However, these six dimensions are not exclusive, and it is likely that several vignettes elicited multiple dimensions. We also designed the particular scenarios in the vignettes so that they would exemplify behavior that challenges several of the basic rules of friendship that were identified by Argyle and Henderson (1984) as discussed above. For example, in the first scenario, one friend betrays a confidence, and this behavior violates the rule "keep confidences." The remaining scenarios challenge other friendship rules, including "should not be jealous of other's relationships," "help in time of need," "respect the friend's privacy," "confide in each other," and "stand up for the other person in their absence."

The vignette format has the advantages that it allows for the direct experimental manipulation of an independent variable and that it aids in the examination of social norms that may be invoked in different contexts. Thus, this design is particularly useful for studying the social expectations of the participants. Furthermore, in an experimental design such as this one, participants are assigned at random to conditions. One of the advantages of such a procedure is that unlike in a traditional survey design, one can worry less about the risk for bias in estimates that could occur because of the omission of relevant covariates. Such bias is not an issue in randomized experimental designs (Maxwell and Delaney 2004).

The gender of the friend was manipulated in the vignette experiment. Approximately half of the sample answered questions about a friend identified as female (chosen at random), and the other half rated the behavior of a male friend. On the questionnaire, the respondents were given the following instructions: "Here are several questions involving friends. For each scenario, you are asked to give your opinion concerning the appropriateness of the behavior of your friend. The survey is confidential and anonymous. Please feel free not to answer any question." The vignettes read as follows:

> *Scenario 1. Tells Secret.* "You told your friend, Bill, something in confidence that was very important to you. Later, you found out that he told someone else this secret."
>
> *Scenario 2. Cancels Plans for Date.* "Suppose that you have plans to go to a movie with a friend, Jim, next Saturday. On Friday, Jim calls you and says that he has plans to do something with his girlfriend and that he has to cancel plans with you."
>
> *Scenario 3. Asks to Stay Over.* "Your friend, Mike, is having his place painted and needs somewhere to stay for a couple of days. He asks to stay with you at your place for the next two days."
>
> *Scenario 4. Surprise Visit.* "Suppose your friend David stops by to see you when you are having guests over. He arrives without calling first."
>
> *Scenario 5. Kiss on Cheek.* "Your friend, Mark, hasn't seen you for a long time. When he sees you again for the first time, he gives you a big kiss on the cheek."
>
> *Scenario 6. Won't Confide.* "Your friend, John, has been clearly irritable and upset for weeks. Something is bothering him. You ask him several times what's wrong, and he says: 'Nothing.' He does not confide in you about his feelings."
>
> *Scenario 7. Didn't Stand-Up.* "Last weekend some of your acquaintances got together for dinner, and you were unable to attend. Later you heard that someone said something very critical about you at the gathering. Your friend, Bob, did not stand up for you."

Following each vignette, the respondent was asked to rate the appropriateness of the friend's behavior, according to a 7-point, Likert-type scale, based on the following question: "How appropriate was this behavior, as best you can tell? (circle the number)." The responses ranged

from 1 (*extremely inappropriate*) to 7 (*extremely appropriate*). An open-ended question immediately followed the scale and asked, "Why?"

Two coders created the categories for analyzing the open-ended comments by undertaking a process of open coding of the responses for each scenario and identifying the most common themes to emerge. All open-ended responses were then placed into these categories by one coder. The other coder verified the validity of the categories for a 30% sample of the responses. The intercoder reliability was 83.8%.

Results

Descriptive Results

In the first part of the analyses, we examined the average responses of all the participants to each of the scenarios, as seen in Table 1. Overall, individuals in this study were quite disapproving of a friend telling a secret ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.63$). Additionally, respondents negatively evaluated a friend who stopped by without calling ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.54$) and one who did not stand up for them in their absence ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.49$). On the other hand, in general, respondents were approving of a friend who asked to be a houseguest while his or her own home was being painted ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.71$) and supportive of a friend who greeted them with a kiss on the cheek ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.72$). Participants were more neutral, on average, in evaluating a friend who canceled plans ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.69$) or refused to confide his or her feelings ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.55$).

Gender Effects on Evaluations of Friendship Behavior

Next, we investigated the effects of gender, friend's gender, and age on the evaluation of a friend's behavior in the various scenarios. To test for effects, we conducted a 2 (respondent's gender) × 2 (friend's gender) factorial analysis (analysis of variance), with age as a covariate, for each scenario.

As shown in Table 2, gender influenced the degree to which a friend's behavior was viewed as appropriate in several scenarios. For example, women rated a friend who disclosed a secret as more inappropriate than did men. Furthermore, women were less approving of a friend who stopped in for a visit without calling first. Women also expressed more disapproval of a friend who did not stand up for them when someone was critical of them. In the sixth scenario, women were significantly less disapproving than men of a friend who would not confide his or her feelings.

Cross-Gender and Friend Effects

There were no statistically significant interaction effects between gender and friend's gender in the quantitative analyses. In other words, the behavior of cross-gender friends was not evaluated in a significantly different manner from that of same-gender friends. There were some trends in the data, but the effects did not reach significance at conventional levels.

There were significant effects of friend's gender in two scenarios. In particular, when a friend gives a big kiss in the form of a greeting, it was male friends, compared with female friends, who were viewed as more inappropriate in their actions by both male and female respondents. Similarly, in the scenario in which a friend asks to stay at one's place while his or her apartment is being painted, there was less approval of male friends who ask to stay over than of female friends who request this same favor.

Age Effects

Finally, age had very little influence on the evaluations of friendship behavior in the scenarios investigated here. The one exception was the surprise visit vignette, in which a friend stops by without calling ahead, for which there was a positive effect of age. In this situation, older individuals were more likely to approve of this behavior than were somewhat younger respondents. In analyses not shown here, we recoded age into various ordinal categories, but none of these measures had statistically significant effects on ratings of appropriateness of behavior in the friendship scenarios.

Note that one of the advantages of our experimental design is that participants were assigned at random to conditions, and the distribution of demographic and contextual factors, such as marital status and race, should be relatively random across conditions. Nevertheless, we explored whether various measures of race and marital status influenced evaluations in these scenarios (analyses not shown here). None of the measures (e.g., non-White vs. White, Asian vs. non-Asian, married vs. not married) had a significant effect in any of the scenarios, regardless of several different coding schemes; thus, measures of race and marital status were dropped from subsequent analyses.

Friendship Norms in Open-Ended Responses

Next, we examined the open-ended responses of the participants, in which they explained their quantitative answers, to gain a better understanding of friendship norms among this group of adults. A sample of open-ended responses that illustrate the various types of normative evaluations is shown in Table 3.

Told secret: norm of trust—The most common type of open-ended response to the scenario involving a friend disclosing a secret (54.5% of the responses) suggests that the norm of trust was an essential factor in perceptions of behavior for these older adults. Some open-ended comments imply that this norm was so crucial that violating trust or loyalty could lead to the dissolution of a friendship. For example, one woman commented, "When you tell someone [something] in confidence, you don't expect them to tell a secret. They wouldn't be my friend much longer."

Cancels plans for date: norm of commitment versus norm of support—In this scenario, a typical response (24.6% of responses) expressed the expectation that the friendship norm of commitment be met. For example, one respondent explained that canceling plans with a friend because of a date is inappropriate, because "a promise should be kept." However, nearly equally common (20.3% of responses) was the contrasting social expectation that friends should be supportive of each other's pursuit of romance. One respondent commented, "Boyfriends always come before 'girlfriends.' If I had the chance for a date, I would do the same."

Asks to stay over: norm of helping—A common friendship norm present in the open-ended responses to this scenario, in which a friend requests to stay at one's place, is that friends provide assistance to each other. According to 43.2% of the respondents, aiding a friend is "what friends are for," and "a friend in need is a friend, indeed." A smaller proportion of respondents (22.9%) reported that such a request is dependent on the duration or closeness of the friendship, commenting that it "would be okay for a good friend."

Stops by unexpectedly: norms of respect and consideration—In the case of a friend stopping by unexpectedly when the participant has guests, 35.1% of the open-ended responses tended to invoke the norms of respect and consideration in friendship. Comments such as "he is not being considerate" illustrate the expectation that friends should abide by the norm of

respecting privacy. Many female respondents voiced particularly strong reactions. As one woman said, "I would be insulted … Infringing on my privacy." On the other hand, several participants mentioned a contrasting friendship norm: "Friends should always be welcome at all times," as one man put it.

Kiss on the cheek: norm of affection—Open-ended responses to this scenario most typically reflected the norm endorsing the expression of affection between friends (50% of the participant comments). A kiss on the cheek was described as a "sign of friendship," an expression of "true love and affection," and an indication that the friend is "happy to see you." Also invoked in this scenario were ethnic and sexual norms for behavior. For example, one respondent noted, "Some people kiss all the time. I'm from Italy and we kiss." Several women expressed hesitation at being kissed by a man, however, because of their conservative cultural backgrounds: "Where I come from, kissing is a very intimate matter," reported one woman. Other participants invoked heterosexist social norms with comments such as "my male friends do not kiss each other, as I am male, I would not appreciate being kissed by another male," and "I don't believe in men kissing." These comments reflect the quantitative finding that a friend's gender affects the evaluation of the behavior of a friend's kissing another friend on the cheek and that the situation that meets with the most disapproval involves a man kissing another man

Won't confide: norms of respect for privacy versus norms of self-disclosure— In the scenario involving a friend who will not confide, 32.1% of the participants invoked the norm of respect for a friend's wishes and/or privacy. As one respondent commented, "she isn't obligated to share her feelings with me." Others note that the norm of self-disclosure is being violated. For instance, the statement "It feels a little shut out" suggests that the respondent interprets such a refusal to be a slight on their friendship.

Didn't stand up: norm of loyalty—A typical open-ended response to the scenario involving a friend's not defending against criticism (32.8% of respondents) reflected the friendship norm of loyalty. Participants' comments, such as "real friends stick up for each other," "not very loyal," and "Bob did not show himself a friend when he did not defend against gossip" illustrate that this scenario violates the norm of loyalty to such an extent that it contradicts the very definition of friendship.

Cross-gender friendships—A number of respondents mentioned the topic of cross-gender friendships either in their open-ended responses to the questionnaire or in the context of informal interviews. These comments often displayed highly positive attitudes toward a platonic tie with someone of the "opposite sex." For example, one older woman spoke fondly of her friendship with a neighbor who was a college student, a bond that crossed both gender and age boundaries. She eloquently described the high value that both she and her male friend placed on their relationship. Another woman wrote at length about her enduring best friend, a man who lived in Eastern Europe. Their cross-gender friendship lasted for over half a century, even after both of them had married their life companions, and in spite of the distance that separated them after she moved away to the United States at the age of 14. The closeness of their relationship was evident in her description of the friendship; their correspondences consisted of "sharing every thought and feeling," she stated.

Discussion

The findings reported here reveal that, similar to younger adults (Felmlee 1999; Muraco 2005), gender often affects the normative expectations that older adults have of friendships. There are significant main effects of gender, or friend's gender, in all but one of the seven vignettes. In particular, women tended to view many violations of friendship rules as more

inappropriate than did men, as expected. This occurred in situations that involve violations of norms regarding communication between friends, a finding consistent with previous research (Connidis and Davies 1992; Johnson 1996). Women were more disapproving than men of friends who betrayed a confidence. Women also were more negative in their evaluations of a friend who dropped by unannounced, as well as one who failed to come to their defense publicly when another person was critical of them.

Women may be more judicious of certain types of behavior from friends because they tend to have more intimate bonds than do men (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995) and thus have higher expectations of their friendship ties. Or it could be that men, who traditionally have held more informal and formal power in U.S. society, can afford to be more lenient in their expectations for their social bonds (Hatch and Bulcroft 1992). Women may depend more heavily on friends for a variety of sources of support, given that their societal status and power is lower, their probability of experiencing widowhood is greater, and their likelihood of remarriage is less than their male counterparts (Antonucci et al. 2002; Fischer and Oliker 1983).

On the other hand, women were not uniformly more disapproving of potential violations of friendship norms. In the sixth scenario, women were more tolerant than were men of a friend who is clearly upset but who does not confide in them. The open-ended comments suggest that some women did not strongly disapprove of this behavior because they endorsed respecting privacy and because they believed that the friend would eventually share his or her feelings when ready to do so. As one woman reported, "My friend 'Janet' does this all the time. In time she tells all." Some men, on the other hand, implied that they believed that friends should talk about their problems so that they can come to their aid. "It is better I know about her trouble," stated one male respondent. "I may be able to help." For women, this scenario appeared to raise norms of patience and acceptance of a friend's negative emotions, as well as norms of respect for privacy. Male respondents, on the other hand, seemed to be more disapproving of a friend who does not share their troubles, because they want to be able to help or "fix" the situation as soon as possible. Thus, women's responses tended to reflect norms of nurturance and acceptance, whereas those of men depicted a more active, helping orientation.

In addition, the gender of a friend had a significant effect on behavioral appraisals in two situations. A male friend who bestows a "big kiss" in a greeting received more censure than did a female friend. In other words, it is more acceptable for women to express physical affection with a friend than it is for men (Hays 1985). In addition, male friends who ask to stay over received more negative reactions than female friends. Note that there are sexual overtones in both scenarios. Expressions of physical affection and requests to stay at one's place of residence may be interpreted as behavior with sexual, or romantic, strings attached when men display these behaviors. Note, too, that the most negative reactions were reported by men for male friends who kissed them in a greeting (although this trend was not quite statistically significant). These reactions may reflect long-standing taboos regarding physical affection between men in U.S. culture, in part because of widespread societal homophobia (Kimmel 1994). Presumably, reactions to kissing between male friends would be much more approving within cultures in which this practice is more normative.

Despite the gender differences in respondents' evaluations of behaviors, there were no significant cross-gender effects in the quantitative analyses. Previous research with young adults found some significant differences in the evaluations of cross- and same-gender friendships in hypothetical situations that invoked romance (Felmlee 1999; Muraco 2005). Cross-gender effects may be less likely here than in studies with young adults, however, because the intense salience of romance may decrease with age. On the other hand, the open-ended responses in the current study suggest that in several cases, older respondents are quite attentive to a friend's gender when forming reactions about that person's actions. In the kissing

scenario, for example, one man noted that his friend is of the "opposite sex" and that therefore, her kiss is "consistent with norms of touching." In another situation, a female respondent explained her disapproval of a male friend's requesting to stay at her place by pointing to her gender and her marital status: "I am a single lady and it is a bad thing to do because people will talk." Thus, we find that cross-gender concerns influence friendship evaluations in some circumstances. Qualitative responses also testify to the high value many individuals place on their own cross-gender friendships. These reports contradict the adage that women and men cannot be friends and the notion that older individuals avoid cross-gender ties.

Age had very little effect on the evaluations of friendship behavior among this sample of adults. One exception is the "surprise visit" scenario, in which case age was related to ratings of appropriateness. In this situation, there was a tendency for older individuals to be more accepting of a friend's behavior than were younger ones. Yet the age range was truncated, and a sample that included adolescents and college-age adults may have yielded larger age effects. Note, however, that although age was truncated, the age range in this study was not insubstantial. The sample included some middle-aged participants in their 50s ($n = 7$) as well as some elderly adults in their 90s ($n = 7$), with an overall range of 47 years. Therefore, it remains plausible that most normative judgments of friendship are relatively stable, at least over the age range examined here.

Friendship Norms

The friendship norms expressed by participants stress the importance of trust, loyalty, commitment, tolerance, respect, consideration, affection, self-disclosure, and assistance, findings that are consistent with prior reports of seniors' definitions of friendship (Adams et al. 2000). The norms identified here, such as trust, loyalty, commitment, and respect, are also very similar to those identified by young adults (Felmlee 1999). These results suggest that the general meaning of friendship crystallizes early on in life and that it changes relatively little over the life course (Goldman et al. 1981; Weiss and Lowenthal 1975).

The findings also demonstrate the potentially contradictory nature of affiliative norms. For example, in the scenario in which a friend cancels plans with the respondent because of a date, some individuals stressed the norm of commitment and noted that "plans are plans and promises." Yet others pointed out that friends should be understanding, especially when it comes to romance. As one man put it, "I cannot do for Jim what his girl-friend can. She has first dibs and I have second." Such contradictory norms point to potential sources of serious misunderstandings between seniors and presumably between those of other age cohorts as well.

Moreover, the results underscore the contextual nature of social norms. The more general situation surrounding an action often shapes approval or disapproval of a particular type of friendship behavior. In the surprise visit scenario, for example, participants frequently qualified their evaluations, reporting that "it depends on the situation." Other scenarios prompted similarly conditional ratings of behavior. Thus, social judgments tend to be constructed within a particular social setting. According to Goffman (1963), the situation in which interaction occurs shapes and molds individual reactions and remains a powerful, but often overlooked, determinant of expectations. Norms themselves are constructed within a particular social context, in other words, and do not necessarily transcend the interactional setting in which they are evoked.

Evaluations of some friendship behaviors appear to be more susceptible to situational conditioning than others, however. The scenario involving a betrayal of a confidence, for example, elicited few qualifying remarks among participants' uniformly negative responses, whereas reactions to the surprise visit scenario were more situationally dependent. The norm of trust that is raised in the betrayal scenario appears to be fundamental to notions of friendship.

Norms that are basic to the definition of friendship, such as trust and loyalty, may be less subject to situational shaping than other, more peripheral friendship norms.

In a handful of cases, respondents' open-ended comments reinforced the notion that social norms are culturally specific. In the vignette in which a friend greets another with a kiss on the cheek, many respondents noted that expectations regarding physical expressions of affection between friends differ widely by culture. As one respondent explained, "Coming from an ethnic background where kissing people is a custom, it is hard for me to judge." Culturally specific evaluations are also present for other scenarios. For instance, another participant responded to the "surprise visit" scenario by stating, "Being an Okie, it wouldn't matter too much." In this case, regional and class-based cultural expectations shape the social norm, a finding consistent with research documenting other geographical differences in friendship values (Adams et al. 2000).

On a general level, several theoretical implications can be drawn from this study for theories of both gender and aging. The gender differences in friendship expectations that were identified in our sample of older adults demonstrate the robustness of gender and its effects, and they reinforce theories of the gendered life course (e.g., Moen and Chermack 2005). Here we see that gender often continues to play a role in shaping the normative expectations of individuals into old age. The effects of gender are larger in magnitude than those of other structural factors, such as age, race, and marital status, and are not unlike those found in investigations of young adults (e.g., Felmlee 1999). The open-ended responses also point to gender as a factor that often influences normative judgments in these scenarios. The cultural construction of gender, its institutionalization within norms and societal structures, and the consequences of these processes do not end in childhood, but persist. Gender inequality, too, has ramifications that do not end abruptly with retirement or an "empty nest," and this may be one reason that the women in our sample appeared to place somewhat more stake in friendship intimacy than the men. As noted earlier, senior women tend to have more caregiving responsibilities (Herzog and Morgan 1992), greater income limitations and higher rates of poverty (Hardy and Hazelrigg 1993), lower retirement satisfaction (Seccombe and Lee 1986), and higher rates of psychological distress due to financial problems (Keith 1983). Consistent with accounts of aging (e.g., Moen and Chermack 2005), growing old, not unlike growing up, is a gendered and hierarchical process in our society.

Yet it is not the case that men and women occupy different worlds when it comes to friendship expectations in later life. The findings herein underscore the fact that the effect of gender on evaluations of affiliative behavior is not necessarily large, and can be insignificant, as with studies of young adults (Felmlee 1999; Muraco 2005). Differences between the two genders tend to be of degree, rather than of kind (Duck and Wright 1993; Felmlee 1999). The results lend support to a growing body of theory and research that stresses a modest, and not exaggerated, role of gender in relational behavior (e.g., Adams and Allen 1998; Walker 1994). As noted by Ridgeway and Correll (2004), the influence of cultural beliefs about gender tends to moderate, or bias, behaviors that are predominately shaped by contextual factors.

Furthermore, there is no evidence to support an argument for marked differences in friendship norms by age in this sample of middle-aged to elderly adults. We find little backing for a claim that age is associated strongly with a consistent tendency to be either more conservative, or exceptionally lenient, in evaluations of friendship actions. In other words, it is important not to overstate differences by age, as well as by gender, when attempting to account for interpersonal norms. Not unlike young adults, this sample of older individuals espoused friendship norms of trust, commitment, support, loyalty, and respect. Thus, our results demonstrate a robustness to normative friendship expectations that stretches across a relatively wide age range.

There are ways in which the sample and research design may have limited our findings. The sample was composed of older adults who participated in activities and services offered by senior centers, and these individuals are apt to be in better health, and to have access to more financial resources, on average, than those who have no contact with senior centers. It is likely that those who engage in such programs have a greater potential for social contact with a variety of people and therefore are more open to having cross-gender friendships than individuals with more limited social interaction. There also may be an unexamined cohort effect present in the results. In particular, the majority of participants in the sample belonged to the same general age cohort; future research that is comparative across age cohorts could distinguish whether our findings about norms are consistent for adults in later life more generally. Moreover, a number of factors in addition to gender and age may influence one's willingness to find certain behaviors acceptable, such as social class, work history, living arrangements, education, and religious involvement. The inclusion of these factors was beyond the scope of our current vignette study, with its focus on gender, yet these represent important avenues for future research in which such factors could be manipulated experimentally in addition to, or in place of, gender. Additionally, our study focused on friendship expectations, not friendship behavior. Clearly these two dimensions of friendship may differ in practice.

There are distinct advantages to our study, as well. The vignette design facilitated the direct examination of social norms for friendship among this sample of older adults. Normative expectations are apt to exert an influence on individual behavior, within a particular social context, and the study framework allowed us to investigate such expectations both quantitatively and qualitatively. The experimental design, with its random assignment of participants to conditions, offered certain estimation advantages over a traditional survey design, as discussed earlier (Maxwell and Delaney 2004). Finally, the research setup also facilitated the examination of friendship norms for a growing, but understudied, segment of our society.

In conclusion, this study points to noteworthy gender differences in friendship expectations for older adults. Women in later life stages often continue to place more emphasis on intimacy in their friendships than do men, and they are prone to have relatively higher expectations of their social ties. The impact of gender does not necessarily abate with age. In addition, our findings further highlight the significance of the friendship bond to senior adults in our society, as suggested by previous research on the physical and emotional relevance of this type of social connection. The individuals in this study held strong, well-defined, although sometimes contradictory norms regarding friendship, and many of them emphasized the high value that they placed on their same-gender, as well as cross-gender, friendships. Finally, the results here also underscore that as with gender, age differences in friendship should not be exaggerated, something that may be easy to do given the typical underrepresentation of research on older adults. On a general level, men and women of both genders, and individuals across a relatively broad age range, share many of the same broad, cultural norms for their close ties: norms of trust, commitment, and respect.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: Demographics of Sample and Overall Means for Scenarios

Variable	*n*	*%*	*M*	*SD*
Demographic Information				
Gender				
Male	62	45.9		
Female	73	54.1		
Marital status				
Married	42	31.3		
Divorced	22	16.3		
Single	19	14.1		
Widowed	34	25.2		
Missing	18	13.3		
Race				
Asian/Pacific Islander	10	7.4		
Black/African American	9	6.7		
Latino	12	8.9		
Native American	8	5.9		
White	79	58.5		
Other	15	11.1		
Missing	2	1.5		
Age (years)	135		72.8	
Overall means of scenarios				
1. Friend told secret			2.03	1.63
2. Friend cancels plans			4.00	1.69
3. Friend asks to stay over			4.83	1.71
4. Friend stops by without calling			3.43	1.54
5. Friend gives kiss on cheek			4.75	1.72
6. Friend won't confide feelings			4.44	1.55
7. Friend didn't stand up for you			3.31	1.49

Table 2

Means for Appropriateness of a Friend's Behavior by Gender of Respondent, Gender of Friend, and Age

Scenario	M		F Ratio			
	Male	Female	Gender	Friend's Gender	Age	Gender × Friend's Gender
Told secret						
Male friend	2.31	1.55	6.32**	0.82	0.00	0.03
Female friend	2.51	1.86				
Cancels plans						
Male friend	4.17	3.47	2.03	1.07	2.63	0.25
Female friend	4.30	4.11				
Asks to stay over						
Male friend	4.62	4.55	0.21	2.66*	0.01	0.04
Female friend	5.18	4.97				
Surprise visit						
Male friend	3.79	3.17	5.11**	0.01	3.69*	0.30
Female friend	3.70	3.16				
Kiss on cheek						
Male friend	3.93	4.85	2.60	5.28**	0.29	1.82
Female friend	5.03	5.08				
Won't confide						
Male friend	4.31	4.77	7.15**	1.16	1.65	0.34
Female friend	3.83	4.75				
Didn't stand up						
Male friend	3.48	3.30	2.94*	0.06	1.28	0.44
Female friend	3.60	2.94				
n	62	73				

Note: Appropriateness was assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (*extremely inappropriate*) to 7 (*extremely appropriate*). *F* ratios were calculated from an analysis of variance.

**
$p \leq .01$

*
$p \leq .05$ (one-tailed tests).

Table 3
Illustrations of Friendship Norms From Participants' Open-Ended Responses and Percentage of Responses Evoking Each Norm

Behavior	Percentage of Comments With Similar Response
Friend told secret	
Norm of trust	54.5%
"Confidential information should be held in trust." (male respondent, female friend)	
Friend cancels plans	
Norm of commitment	24.6%
"He's choosing another person over you after making plans with you." (female respondent, male friend)	
Norm of support	20.3%
"Maybe Jim needs a little romance. We could go to the movies some other time." (male respondent, male friend)	
Friend asks to stay at your house	
Norm of helping	43.2%
"If you are a real friend, you will be happy to help." (female respondent, female friend)	
Friend stops by unexpectedly	
Norm of respect and consideration	35.1%
"He was not considerate." (male respondent, male friend)	
Friend gives kiss on cheek	
Norm of affection (positive)	50%
"We are friends and we're glad to see each other!" (female respondent, female friend)	
Norm of affection (negative)	
"As I am a male, I would not enjoy being kissed by another male." (male respondent, male friend)	
Friend won't confide	
Norm of respect for privacy	32.1%
"Sometimes people want to keep things private—you should respect that and stop nagging." (female respondent, female friend)	
Friend didn't stand up for you	
Norm of loyalty	32.8%
"If he is my friend, he should have said something on my behalf." (female respondent, male friend)	