

## DEFINITIONS OF FRIENDSHIP IN THE THIRD AGE: Age, Gender, and Study Location Effects

By: REBECCA G. ADAMS, ROSEMARY BLIESZNER, and BRIAN DE VRIES

[Adams, R. G.](#), Blieszner, R., & DeVries, B. 2000. "Definitions of Friendship in the Third Age: Age, Gender, and Study Location Effects." *Journal of Aging Studies*, v.14 1 117-33. doi:10.1016/S0890-4065(00)80019-5

Made available courtesy of Elsevier: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/08904065>

**\*\*\*Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

### **Abstract:**

Friendship is not institutionalized in American society; hence, perceptions of it vary. Rather than studying sources of this variation, most scholars ignore the complexity, bemoan the difficulty it causes in analysis, or eliminate it. We examined the frequency of use of previously studied and emergent characteristics of friendship as definitional criteria and the age, gender, and cultural patterns associated with them. Data are from two North American cities: the Andrus Study of Older Adult Friendships in southeastern United States (28 women and 25 men, age 55 to 84), and the Social Relations Project in western Canada (39 women and 25 men, age 55 to 87).

Definitions of friendship differed across age and gender groups within each culture, but most striking is cross-cultural variation.

### **Article:**

#### INTRODUCTION

It has become a cliché to begin articles on friendship with a discussion of how its definition varies across individuals, as friendship is voluntary and not subject to as many institutional constraints as are family and neighbor relationships. Most researchers who study various aspects of friendship structure and process use one of three approaches to dealing with this definitional variation. They either ignore the complexity, bemoan it because when they compare people's friendships they are inappropriately comparing different entities, or eliminate it by instructing the people they interview to use a limited definition in discussing specific relationships (see Adams 1989, and Matthews 1983, for more detailed discussions of these measurement issues). A much smaller number of researchers examine the variation.

Some of the researchers who studied variation in the definition of friendship have done so indirectly by asking about the importance of sundry of its elements. For example, Parker and de Vries (1993) compared ratings by female and male undergraduate students of the importance of interactional and emotional dimensions of friendship. Shea, Thompson, and Blieszner (1988) asked elderly residents of a rural retirement community to rate the importance within friendship of resources exchanges such as love, status, information, affection, and services. Candy, Troll, and Levy (1981) studied the significance of three functions of friendship: namely, status, power, and intimacy assistance, in a sample of women aged 14 through 80 years.

A few researchers, most of whom studied older adults exclusively, examined definitions of friendship directly by asking their respondents what the relationship means to them. For example, analyzing data from transcriptions of guided conversations with older adults, Matthews (1983) identified two friendship orientations— friends as particular individuals and friends as relationships. When Adams (1986) asked elderly women in suburban Chicago to describe what a friendship is, they tended to define it social psychologically, referring to affective characteristics. Roberto and Kimboko (1989) constructed three categories of friends from the definitions given by older adults living in a western U.S. city—the likeables, the confiders, and the trustables. Based on interviews to determine how elderly people conceptualize friendship, Patterson, Bettini, and Nussbaum (1993) identified nine definitional clusters—devotion, commonality, reciprocity, relational stratification, frequent contact, positive attributions, positive impact, understanding, and familial comparison. De Vries, Dustan, and Wiebe (1994) asked men and women from each of four age groups (20 to 34, 35 to 49, 50 to 64, and 65 and older) to define friendship. They then coded the definitions into a list of categories including self-disclosure, affection or appreciation, assistance, empathetic understanding, ego reinforcement, shared activities, shared interests or values, acceptance, trust, structural features (e.g., time known, frequency of contact), loyalty or commitment, and compatibility (Parker and de Vries 1993). Ego reinforcement, empathetic understanding, structural features, and acceptance were mentioned less frequently than were other aspects.

### *Gender and Age Effects*

Some of the researchers cited above examined age and gender differences in definitions of friendship. For example, Matthews (1983) and Roberto and Kimboko (1989) reported that the older men and women did not differ significantly in their orientations toward friendship. Using Matthews' conceptual distinction, de Vries and colleagues (1994) confirmed this null finding and also reported that, in their sample, the oldest respondents were more likely to include individual references in their definitions. In addition to examining gender differences in Matthews' friendship orientations, these authors explored age and gender differences in the tendency to mention frequently used categories of the Parker and de Vries (1993) typology. Women included a larger number of dimensions than men, but there was no age difference in number of aspects named. With age, men increased their use of affection or appreciation and women decreased theirs. The opposite pattern emerged for loyalty or commitment. Women mentioned self-disclosure more frequently, whereas men mentioned trust more often. Identification of assistance or support decreased with age for men, but not for women; mention of compatibility and shared activities increased with age for women, but not for men.

Age and gender differences in definitions of friendship can be explained structurally or developmentally. Both age stratification and life span development theoretical perspectives suggest that adults' views of social relationships are likely to vary with age, a variable that stands in proxy for social structural position and for level of development (Adams and Blieszner 1994; Blieszner and Adams 1992). If friendship patterns are affected by age, it follows that perceptions of friendship might be as well. In terms of social structure, the older people are, the more likely they are to be retired and, if they reared children, to have an empty nest. Because of their stage of life, they participate in a different set of daily routines and activities than those who are employed or have children living at home. This in turn affects their opportunities to make and keep friends. Other conditions such as health, living arrangements, and finances are likely to

affect the impact of retirement and the departure of children from the home on friendship (Allan and Adams 1989). For example, chances to make new friends might be increased or reduced, thus expanding the range of diversity within the friendship circle or compressing it (Adams 1987). The availability of more time might provide opportunities to develop greater closeness among friends or the presence of poor health might constrain interaction and thus lead to reduced closeness (Johnson and Troll 1994).

Developmental maturity, as indexed by age, might also be related to process aspects of friendship definitions. The longer one has lived, the more experience with close relationships a person has probably had, perhaps suggesting great skill with cognitive, affective, and behavioral dynamics of friendship. At the same time, frail health and perceived closeness to death might lead a person to focus more narrowly on just the most intimate of family and friend relationships and might reduce the range of relational behaviors in which the person can engage. The older one is, the greater the potential length of acquaintance among friends. At the same time, due to the health and mobility reasons given above, the older one is, the more likely contact with friends is less frequent and for shorter periods of time.

As with age effects on perceptions of friendship, both structural and dispositional explanations of gender effects can be given (Blieszner and Adams 1992). For example, Wright (1982) described women's friendships as face-to-face and men's friendship as side-by-side, capturing the tendency of women to share emotional experiences and men to share activities. This could be because women have more opportunities to establish and maintain emotionally close friendships than men do. A dispositional explanation is equally plausible. Perhaps due to differential socialization or inherent psychological predispositions, women are more inclined to establish emotionally close relationships than men are. Whatever the explanation, the tendency of women to verbalize their feelings may lead them to emphasize the affective qualities of friendship in their definitions, whereas the tendency of men to share activities with each other may lead them to emphasize the amount of time they spend together and other proxy measures of shared activities. The differing social structural locations and dispositions of men and women together may account for a wide range of differences in their friendship patterns and thus in their perceptions of friendship.

### *Effects of Geographic Location*

Although, as the examples we cited earlier illustrate, some researchers examined age and gender differences in definitions of friendship, none of them investigated whether variations in cultural context also affect the meaning of friendship or even considered how the cultural context in which their respondents lived might have shaped their perceptions. This is not surprising, because a thorough study of cultural variations in definitions of friendship would require a large sample, but friendship researchers have typically not had adequate funding to conduct such a study. Not only would a larger sample size than is typical for friendship studies be required, but administering open-ended questions and processing the responses to them is also time consuming and thus expensive (see Adams 1989, for a table of sample sizes in friendship research).

In addition, the complexity and lack of clarity of the concept of culture may partially account for its absence in friendship research. The terms ethnicity, culture, and even race are often confused or used interchangeably (Betancourt and Lopez 1993). Nonetheless, some preliminary empirical

observations about the effects of culture on friendship can be offered. In their examination of the social networks of both urban native and nonnative elders, Strain and Chappell (1989) found that native elders reported a greater number of friends with whom they had more frequent contact. Penning and Chappell (1987) compared British, French, German, Ukrainian/Russian, and Jewish ethnic elders and found no difference in the average number of friends, but a greater likelihood of the identification of one close friend for French and German respondents. De Vries, Jacoby, and Davis (1996) compared British, French, European, and a multiethnic group of older Canadians on the dimensions of friendship number, contact, and satisfaction. They found that the French identified fewer friends, lived closer to and had greater contact with their friends, and tended to be somewhat more satisfied with their friendships as compared to the other groups of respondents. Together, these results, corroborating the other investigations cited, suggest cultural differences in friendship meaning and interaction patterns.

In this article, as a preliminary step in studying cultural variation in definition of friendship, we compare the findings from two independently conducted small studies of older adult friendship in different geographic locations: Adams and Blieszner gathered data for the Andrus Study of Older Adult Friendship Patterns in Greensboro, North Carolina, and de Vries collected the Social Relations Project data in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Greensboro is part of a triad of cities comprising Greensboro, Highpoint, and Winston-Salem in north central North Carolina. These cities, together with Burlington, made up a 1990 Census, Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) of about one million residents, 59 percent of whom lived in urban areas. The population of Greensboro itself was about 184,000. The region has long been a major center for the textiles, furniture, and tobacco industries. Located therein are numerous universities and colleges.

Vancouver is located on the west coast of British Columbia, Canada. The city of Vancouver, proper, has a population of approximately 500,000 residents, although it is also the center of the greater Vancouver regional district (GVRD; comprising over a dozen municipalities), which has an overall population of approximately 1.6 million. The GVRD is most noted for tourism and shipping; it also houses many of the offices for the provinces' central industries of mining and lumber. Two of the provinces' largest public universities are located in the GVRD, in addition to numerous colleges.

Although Greensboro is representative of smaller cities as compared to Vancouver, it is embedded in a network of metropolitan communities with a population almost as large. We assume, then, that any differences found in the combined data are more likely to come from cultural sources than from demographic structural ones such as size, density, and homogeneity of the population.

Although this article is not the appropriate forum for an explication of the various dimensions on which Canadians and Americans might be both similar and different, it may be said that, in relative contrast to the individualism and independence of citizens of the United States, Canadians may be seen as somewhat more communal and interdependent. This difference, should it exist, may manifest itself in a preference for affective and cognitive dimensions on the part of Canadians; that is, the welfare of another implicates the welfare of the self in more communal settings. In addition, Vancouver is in a more recently settled area of North America

than Greensboro. This regional difference perhaps manifests itself in a social organization more influenced by tradition, greater structure, and more established norms governing social interaction in Greensboro than in Vancouver. These cultural differences might lead to different friendship patterns and different perceptions of what friendship means.

Building on previous work, in this article we examine older adults' definitions of friendship and how they vary by age group, gender, and cultural context. After discussing the samples and measures used, we report on the frequency with which older adults in these two settings mentioned various aspects of friendships as part of their definitions, and then examine age, gender, and cultural similarities and differences in their perceptions of friendship.

## METHODS

### *Samples*

#### *SOUTHEASTERN U.S. SAMPLE*

The U.S. sample consisted of 22 adults age 55 to 64 years (10 men, 12 women; young-old), 20 adults age 65 to 74 years (10 men, 10 women; middle-old), and 11 adults age 75 years or older (5 men, 6 women; old-old). Random digit dialing was used to select older adults in each of the six age—gender categories. The calling procedure continued until each of the 6 categories included 10 participants. The resulting sample reflects the population of community-dwelling older adults in Greensboro. Due to some of the identified individuals being unable to complete the interview, the part of the final sample analyzed here comprised 53 older adults.

Of these 53 respondents, 77 percent were Caucasian, 21 percent were African American, and 2 percent held other racial ethnic membership. Although 9 percent of the sample members were divorced and 25 percent were widowed, the majority were married (66%). The sample was a fairly affluent one: two fifths described themselves as middle class, two fifths as upper-middle class, and the remainder as working or lower class. Most participants (66%) were not employed. As for their health, 75 percent rated it good or excellent, 59 percent stated that their health did not limit their activities at all, and 89 percent did not depend on anyone for routine help in the home.

#### *WESTERN CANADA SAMPLE*

The Canadian sample comprised 23 adults age 55 to 64 years (9 men, 14 women; young-old), 21 adults age 65 to 74 years (7 men, 14 women; middle-old), and 20 adults age 75 years or older (9 men, 11 women; old-old). These respondents were members of a larger pool of participants in the Social Relations Project, that included 132 women and 116 men ranging in age from 18 to 87 years. Volunteers were sought using a variety of methods including advertisements and presentations at community centers and educational institutions and an article about the project in a local newspaper.

The Canadian participants were primarily Caucasian and of moderate socioeconomic status. The self-reported ethnic identity of the sample was as follows: 61 percent British, 25 percent European, 6 percent Asian, 4 percent Jewish, and 4 percent First Nations (Native Canadian). Although a question of household income was not asked, the median household income among Vancouver residents is just over 56,000 Canadian dollars. Most participants described themselves as retired (63%). Just under one half were married (with three couples reporting a

marriage of 66 years), about one quarter were separated or divorced, and about another quarter were widowed. These characteristics represent a relatively proportionate cross-section of the large west coast Canadian city population from which they were sampled.

### *Measures*

The principal investigators for each of these two studies independently conducted similar preliminary analyses of the research literature before working jointly. Blieszner and Adams (1992) had constructed a typology of friendship patterns, classifying each aspect of friendship previously studied as a measure of internal structure (e.g., level of closeness or homogeneity on demographic characteristics), as an indicator of interactional process, or as a proxy measure of the quality of interactional process (i.e., an indirect indicator such as frequency of contact or length of acquaintance). They further divided direct indicators of relational processes into cognitive (thoughts), affective (feelings), and behavioral (actions) types of interaction. De Vries contributed the list of previously researched aspects of friendship discussed above (Parker and de Vries 1993).

For the purposes of the research reported here, the two frameworks were combined. Each aspect of friendship identified by de Vries was designated as structural, cognitive, affective, behavioral, or proxy, and added to the examples of each of the three aspects of friendship that Blieszner and Adams (1992) identified in their synthesis of previously conducted research. The initial list of friendship definition elements within the five broad categories was thus developed from these two independently conducted analyses of the literature.

Additional examples of structure, process, and proxy measures were added to the framework through an analysis of both data sets. In both studies, respondents were asked open-ended questions regarding their definition of friendship and probes were used to obtain further details. In the southeastern United States, respondents were asked, "People have different types of friends. How would you say that close friends differ from more casual ones? How do casual friends differ from acquaintances?" The western Canadians were asked, "What is your definition of friend? What makes someone a friend and someone else not?" An investigator associated with each data set coded the responses from her or his project, using categories from the initial typology when possible and adding new categories when necessary. Then the coders exchanged data sets and coded each other's cases, noting discrepancies between them. The codes used here reflect a negotiated consensus regarding the definitional categories embedded in each case.

## RESULTS

The framework resulting from the coding is presented in Table 1, along with the frequencies with which the respondents mentioned the broad and specific elements of friendship as part of their definitions. Note that each aspect of friendship definition is categorized broadly according to the Adams—Blieszner typology, and that many of the specific categories were originally included in the Parker and de Vries (1993) typology. New codes emerging from the data in addition to these were care (feelings of affection), sociability (getting along well together), duration of contacts, solidarity, and homogeneity. Although ego reinforcement was included as a category in the initial typology, it was omitted here because none of the respondents in either sample mentioned it. Parker and de Vries similarly found it to be infrequently used.



**TABLE 1**  
Elements of Friendship Definitions (*N* = 117)

<i>Element of Definition</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Behavioral Processes	90	76.9
Self-Disclosure	56	47.9
Sociability	46	39.3
Assistance	28	23.9
Shared Activities	24	20.5
Cognitive Processes	82	70.1
Loyalty/Commitment	43	36.8
Trust	29	24.8
Shared Interests/Values	26	22.2
Acceptance	15	12.8
Empathy	13	11.1
Appreciation/Respect	6	5.1
Affective Processes	47	40.2
Compatibility	27	23.1
Care	24	20.5
Structural Characteristics	35	29.9
Solidarity	34	29.1
Homogeneity	5	4.3
Proxy Measures of Process	28	23.9
Frequency of Contact	16	13.7
Length of Acquaintance	13	11.1
Duration of Contacts	2	1.7

Overall, in order of decreasing frequency, respondents defined friendship in terms of at least one behavioral process (76.9%), cognitive process (70.1%), affective process (40.2%), structural characteristic (29.9%), or proxy process (23.9%). The 117 respondents named over three specific characteristics of friendship on average ( $M = 3.4$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ), with 8.5 percent of them naming only one and 9.4 percent naming six or seven.

In the next part of the Results section, we illustrate the specific characteristics of friendship listed in Table 1 with quotations from the two studies. Note that because most respondents named more than one characteristic in their definitions, these examples are excerpted from the whole. Also note that within the five broad categories of the Adams—Blieszner typology, we discuss the specific examples of elements of friendship definition in order of their decreasing frequency. Finally, we present the results of a series of three-way analyses of variance, all with age category, gender, and study location as independent factors. Each analysis had a different dependent variable, namely, the number of characteristics within a broad category of the typology.

### *Behavioral Processes*

The behavioral processes mentioned were, in order of decreasing frequency, self-disclosure, sociability, assistance, and shared activities. Most respondents identified one or two behavioral processes ( $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = .9$ ). A middle-old man who lived in Greensboro described friendship in a way typical of those who mentioned self-disclosure as a criterion:

ell, with close friends you feel free to talk with them you know, talk with them about some of your personal problems. You talk with them, you feel free to talk with them period, about anything that arises or anything that's at hand to talk about.

Sociability was often used to reference the good or fun times friends shared, as reflected in the following quote from an old-old Canadian woman:

A friend is wonderful pleasant.... I've had great pleasure with a friend.

Additionally, sociability tended to be reserved for distinguishing between casual friends and acquaintances, as this quotation from a middle-old Greensboro man illustrates:

With casual friends, you may go out to a dinner or have a social contact, and acquaintances you say "hello."

An old-old woman, also from Greensboro, used assistance as a criterion:

I don't know. Real close friends are more free to help, you know, to do things.

A young-old woman who lived in the southeastern United States contrasted close friends with casual ones in terms of shared activities:

You do things [with close friends] probably more so than you do with your casual friends. A casual friend is just like a "hello," and, you know, just a little small conversation, and "good-bye."

### *Cognitive Processes*

The respondents named six cognitive processes. In order of decreasing frequency, the respondents mentioned, loyalty or commitment, trust, shared interests or values, acceptance, empathy, and appreciation or respect. They delineated an average of approximately one cognitive process ( $M = 1.1$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ). A young-old woman from the southeastern United States described friends as loyal or committed:

You may never see a person for a year, but if that's your friend, when you call him, he'll be there.

A middle-old man from the Canadian sample offered this definition of friend with an emphasis on appreciation:

It may be features like about the individual, their sense of humor, an admiration that I have aside from that in the way they stand up to the problems that I've known them to experience.

A middle-old Canadian woman described trust that underlies self-disclosure:

Friends you are more likely to blend or share deeper things than you are with someone that is casual, because you know there's a trust there that you build up, you know. And you're confident in that person, because they are not going to expose those things.

A middle-old woman from the same study location offered the following example of shared interests and values:

It's a sort of chemical thing, I suppose it's like falling in love, you meet some people and you like them right away while sometimes it just happens you have something in common, not the same thing with every friend.

One old-old man from Greensboro described friends as those who accept you:



And your close friends, you accept them a lot of times, things that you don't entirely approve of, but they're still there. You see what I mean. You got to accept that as well.

A focus on empathic understanding is evident in the following quote from an old-old woman in the Canadian sample:

A person . . . take a bit of guff and a bit of dirt and not turn you down for one particular reason. Have a good understanding of each other's feelings.

### *Affective Processes*

Compatibility and care were the two affective processes that respondents mentioned. Most respondents did not name an affective process; almost all of those who did, named only one ( $M = .4$ ,  $SD = .6$ ). A middle-old woman from Greensboro described feeling compatible as important to friendship:

Well, you just feel comfortable. You're not, you're not trying to figure people out.

Care was described as a criterion of friendship for one middle-old woman in Vancouver:

Just the way they come across to me as a friend, which an acquaintance doesn't. You feel close. You get close to them, whereas an acquaintance, they are distant, you can't get close to them, they are just an acquaintance and they stay that way.

A young-old man from the same sample incorporated care as follows:

Someone who likes you as much as you like him or her.

### *Structural Characteristics*

Solidarity and homogeneity were the two structural characteristics named as part of the respondents' definitions of friendship. Only about a quarter of the respondents named a structural characteristic of friendship, and only four named two structural features ( $M = .3$ ,  $SD = .5$ ). Solidarity was usually mentioned as a result of other aspects of friendship, rather than as a defining element. In other words, solidarity was assumed to be so central to the definition of friendship that mentioning it would have been tautological. However, one middle-old man from Greensboro summed up the notion of solidarity or lack of social distance fairly succinctly:

They'd come in the house and out of the house almost at will, the same way we did.... But we were very close.

Homogeneity applied to a variety of domains such as belonging to the same religion or working in the same occupation. One middle-old woman from British Columbia spoke of similarity in marital status as a factor in friendship:

There are some other women who are either widowed or divorced who I used to know as acquaintances and I guess because of our single status and the fact that we have to now do things together . . . this is part of what makes an acquaintance a friend.

### *Proxy Measures of Process*

Proxy indicators of relational interaction or quality include, in decreasing order of how often they were mentioned, frequency of contact, length of acquaintance, and duration of contacts. Approximately one out of four respondents named a proxy process, with only a few naming more than one ( $M = .3$ ,  $SD = .5$ ). The following Greensboro woman, in her middle-old years, mentioned both frequency of contact and length of acquaintance in her definition of friendship:

Probably time, knowing them over a Long period of time. . . . You may be acquainted with somebody that you see, you rarely ever speak to, you know of them, you know they exist, and you're around them periodically, but you don't have any direct contact with them, whereas friends you do have contact with them.

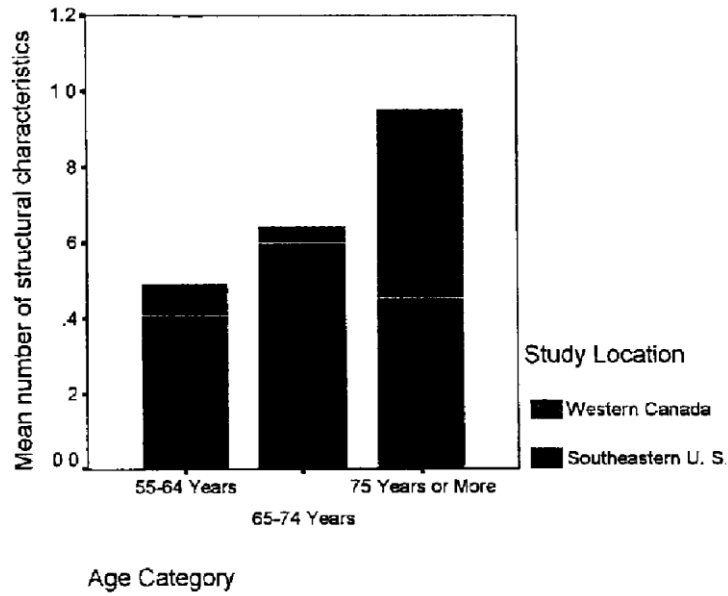
Another Greensboro woman, this one in her later years, mentioned the duration of contacts as part of her definition of friendship:

Acquaintances, you just say, "Hello, how are you today? I hope you're fine. I wish you well." And then the casual friends, I maybe spend a little more time with. "How's your mother? How's your father? How are you getting along? How's the job going?"

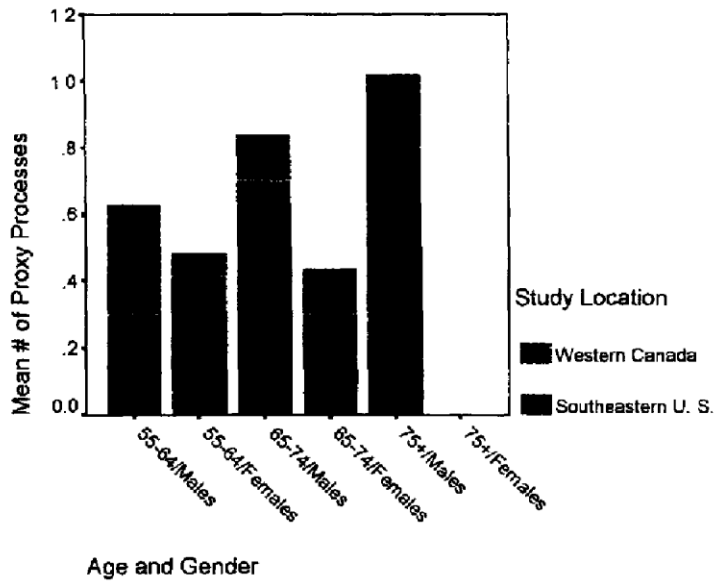
### *Effects of Age Category, Gender, and Study Location*

Turning to the analysis of variance results, there were no age group, gender, or study location effects on total number of friendship characteristics named. Gender and study location each had main effects on at least one measure of the number of characteristics named within each broad category. Women named more affective processes ( $M = .54$  vs.  $.30$ ,  $F = 4.0$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and men named more proxy processes ( $M = .40$  vs.  $.16$ ,  $F = 8.3$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Western Canadians named more affective ( $M = .56$  vs.  $.28$ ,  $F = 5.9$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and cognitive processes ( $M = 1.38$  vs.  $.83$ ,  $F = 7.7$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas southeastern U.S. residents named more behavioral ( $M = 1.5$  vs.  $.78$ ,  $F = 3.3$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .10$ ) and proxy processes ( $M = .42$  vs.  $.14$ ,  $F = 8.7$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and more structural characteristics ( $M = .49$  vs.  $.20$ ,  $F = 8.0$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

As shown in Figure 1, age group and study location interacted with the number of structural characteristics named ( $F = 3.3$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In the southeastern United States, the young-old and the old-old named fewer structural characteristics than the middle-old did ( $M = .41$  and  $.46$ , respectively, vs.  $.60$ ). In contrast, in



**FIGURE 1**  
Number of structural elements in friendship definitions as a function of age group and study location.



**FIGURE 2**  
Number of proxy elements in friendship definitions as a function of age group, gender, and study location.

western Canada, the young-old and the middle-old participants rarely named any structural characteristics, but the old-old ones did ( $M = .09$  and  $.05$ , respectively, vs.  $.50$ ).

Also, as shown in Figure 2, age group, gender, and study location interacted with number of proxy characteristics named ( $F = 2.8$ ,  $df = 2, p < .10$ ). In the southeastern United States, the older the men were, the more proxy processes they named ( $M = .30, .70, .80$ , respectively), whereas

the older the women were, the fewer they named ( $M = .42, .30, .00$ , respectively). Young-old men named fewer proxy processes than young-old women did ( $M = .30$  vs.  $.42$ ), but middle-old and old-old men named more proxy processes than their female counterparts ( $M = .70$  and  $.80$ , respectively, vs.  $.30$  and  $.00$ ). In western Canada, men who were young-old and old-old named more proxy processes than those who were middle-old ( $M = .33$  and  $.22$ , respectively, vs.  $.14$ ), whereas the opposite was true for women ( $M = .07$  and  $.00$ , respectively, vs.  $.14$ ). Men named more proxy processes than women did in the young-old and old-old groups ( $M = .33$  and  $.22$ , respectively, vs.  $.07$  and  $.00$ ), but among those in the middle-old group, men and women named the same number of proxy processes on the average ( $M = .14$  and  $.14$ , respectively).

## CONCLUSIONS

### *Definitions of Friendship*

Our findings confirm and expand the complexity of definitional elements of friendship reported previously. Not only did study participants spontaneously identify 17 specific key criteria of friendship within 5 broad categories, many of them mentioned multiple dimensions as they contrasted close and casual friends with each other and with acquaintances, or delineated what makes a person a friend or not a friend. The results indicate that behavioral aspects of friendship are key determinants of the relationship. People value concrete evidence of friendship as manifested in self-disclosure, sociability, day-to-day assistance, and shared activities. A high proportion of elders also incorporates cognitive processes into the definition of friendship. Appraising a person as loyal, trustworthy, and having the same interests contributes to counting the person as a friend. In contrast, affective processes, structural characteristics, and proxy indicators of interaction were mentioned less frequently when respondents defined friendship. These dimensions are important to some older adults, but achieved far less consensus than behavioral and cognitive dimensions.

Looking at subgroups within the sample showed that women and men focused on distinct aspects of friendship. As expected given the literature on the differences in the friendship patterns of women and men, the former highlighted emotional qualities and the latter were more likely to endorse indirect, proxy indicators of friendship such as frequency of contact or length of acquaintance.

As indicated in the Introduction, our expectations of the data related to age effects implied a linear pattern of change across the three age groups of participants. This pattern was evident in the Canadian data on structural elements of friendship definitions, but a curvilinear pattern occurred in the American data. Solidarity and homogeneity were most salient for the oldest Canadians and for the middle-old Americans. The three age groups did not differ significantly in the number of friendship processes mentioned, however. In this case, respondents in each group were equally likely or unlikely to focus on behavioral, cognitive, and affective aspects of interaction. Age interacted significantly with gender and geographic location in the analysis of proxy aspects of friendship definitions. In contrast to the results for structural features mentioned, age group differences were linear in the American data but curvilinear, in opposite direction for each gender, in the Canadian age group comparisons. That is, the length of acquaintance and frequency of contact were most relevant for the oldest American men, youngest American women, youngest and oldest Canadian men, and middle-old Canadian women.

These results illustrate the heterogeneity of the aged population across geographic locations, and the complexity of influences on friendship interaction. Although we controlled for health in a general sense by studying only community-dwelling elders, it is possible that variations in health and mobility affected perceptions of the characteristics of friendship. Retirement might have afforded the oldest American and Canadian men more chances to interact frequently with friends than their female counterparts had. Or, if their health was worse than the women's and they were more limited in their ability to interact often with friends, frequency of contact might have been more salient to them than it was to the woman.

These findings merit careful consideration by researchers conducting future studies of friendship. It is not appropriate to assume that people share common criteria for friendship. Unless they start by asking respondents for their definition of friendship, investigators risk either not knowing exactly what kinds of relationships respondents are describing, or they risk imposing incompatible or superficial definitions of friendship on participants. In either situation, full understanding of the dimensions of friendship under study is jeopardized. We recommend that researchers take care to solicit respondents' own definitions of friendship as well as their distinctions among types of friends before proceeding to query them on other aspects of friendship.

#### *Effects of Context on Definitions of Friendship*

The significant interaction effects involving study location point to the importance of considering the influence of culture, as affected by geographic region, on friendship. The relative emphasis on affective and cognitive processes in the Canadian sample, and behavioral, proxy, and structural aspects of friendship definitions in the U.S. sample is striking and provocative. Although no clear and definitive interpretation of such findings is readily available, we have entertained a couple of thoughts. As suggested in the Introduction, perhaps the relative newness of the Vancouver area and its members, in contrast to the Greensboro area, suggests a region with fewer traditions and protocol, both of which are rich in structural and behavioral characteristics. Also, the heterogeneity of the Canadian region may bear some responsibility for this pattern of results. The city of Vancouver received roughly 24,000 international migrants annually over the past several years. Perhaps the cultural fusion created by such high immigration rates lends itself to a more cognitive and affective focus on friendship, both in its creation and in its maintenance. Culture, in some form, is implicated in both of these potential explanations.

In both Canada and the United States, young-old persons were relatively unlikely to endorse structural features of friendship such as solidarity (closeness) and homogeneity (e.g., similarity of religion or occupation), but the results for middle-old and old-old persons diverged in each country. The findings related to indirect proxy indicators of friendship were even more intricate because the significant patterns involved differing combinations of age and gender groups within the study locations. Both these complex patterns and the fact that significant interactions with study location occurred for the frequencies of structural and proxy dimensions mentioned when defining friendship but not for the frequencies of including process aspects demonstrate that cultural context has an influence on friendship. These findings underscore the need to examine the consequences of cultural context further. Additional studies of friendship definitions held by

residents of other regions of the United States and Canada, as well as those in other parts of the world, could shed light on the cultural forces that affect perceptions of close relationships.

The samples used in this study were fortuitously similar in terms of their age and gender composition. Also, the two communities had similar population densities. Although this is not a perfect design, it does provide some confidence in our assumption that regional or national cultural influences affect friendship. Examining contextual effects is complicated, however, because it is difficult to determine where they operate. At what level of interaction are definitions of friendship socially constructed—dyadic, network, immediate social environment, community, or societal (cf. Adams and Blieszner 1993)? To some extent, the answer is probably, "at all levels." For this reason, in gross comparisons across communities or countries, variations in lower level contextual effects might not be obvious. This suggests the need to investigate community- and societal-level perceptions of friendship as reflected, for example, in literature, advertising, and social policies as well as to compare more microlevel definitions in detail, as we have done here.

Differences in the designs of the two studies may also help account for the effects of study location, however. Recall that the Greensboro sample was recruited by way of random digit dialing; the Vancouver sample was composed of volunteers. Perhaps this latter approach resulted in a sample of individuals sufficiently interested in the topic to present themselves, volunteer their participation, and discuss their conceptions of social relationships in general and friendships in particular. These particular individuals may have thought more about their friendships (implicating cognitive dimensions) and their affective quality. Implicit in this analysis is the importance of the context within which queries about friendships are embedded for descriptions of the same. Similarly, it is possible that the difference in the wording of the questions soliciting definitions of friendship led to location effects. Given that the findings were along the lines we initially predicted based on documented differences in the cultures of the two areas, however, we have confidence that context mattered more than study design did. Future research, designed explicitly to test contextual effects, will support or refute our interpretation.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** Adams and Blieszner gratefully acknowledge support from the AARP Andrus Foundation, the Women's Research Institute at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and the Research Council of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. They thank Cecile D. Cachaper and Kara Ruffin for research assistance. De Vries acknowledges the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

#### REFERENCES

- Adams, R. G. 1986. "A Look at Friendship and Aging." *Generations*, 10: 40-43.
- Adams, R. G. 1987. "Patterns of Network Change: A Longitudinal Study of Friendships of Elderly Women." *The Gerontologist* 27: 222-227.
- Adams, R. G. 1989. "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Study of Friendship." Pp. 17-41 in *Older Adult Friendship: Structure and Process*, edited by R. G. Adams and R. Blieszner. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Adams, R. G. and R. Blieszner. 1993. "Resources for Friendship Intervention." *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 20: 159-174.

- Adams, R. G. and R. Blieszner. 1994. "An Integrative Conceptual Framework for Friendship Research." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 11: 163-184.
- Allan, G. and R. G. Adams. 1989. "Aging and the Structure of Friendship." Pp. 45-64 in *Older Adult Friendship: Structure and Process*, edited by R. G. Adams and R. Blieszner. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Betancourt, H. and S. R. Lopez. 1993. "The Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race in American Psychology." *American Psychologist* 48: 629-637.
- Blieszner, R. and R. G. Adams. 1992. *Adult Friendship*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Candy, S. G., L. E. Troll, and S. G. Levy. 1981. "A Developmental Exploration of Friendship Functions in Women." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 5: 456-471.
- de Vries, B., L. A. Dustan, and R. E. Wiebe. November 1994. *The Understanding of Friendship Over the Life Course*. Paper presented at the 47th Annual Scientific Meetings of the Gerontological Society of America, Atlanta, GA.
- de Vries, B., C. Jacoby, and C. G. Davis. 1996. "Ethnic Differences in Later Life Friendship." *Canadian Journal on Aging* 15: 226-244.
- Johnson, C. and L. Troll. 1994. "Constraints and Facilitators to Friendship in Late Life." *The Gerontologist* 34: 79-87.
- Matthews, S. II. 1983. "Definitions of Friendship and Their Consequences in Old Age." *Ageing and Society* 3: 141-155.
- Parker, S. and B. de Vries. 1993. "Patterns of Friendship for Women and Men in Same and Cross-Sex Relationships." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 10: 617-626.
- Patterson, B. R., L. Bettini, and J. F. Nussbaum. 1993. "The Meaning of Friendship Across the Life Span: Two Studies." *Communication Quarterly* 41: 145-160.
- Penning, M. J. and N. L. Chappell. 1987. "Ethnicity and Informal Supports among Older Adults." *Journal of Aging Studies* 1: 145-160.
- Roberto, K. A. and P. J. Kimboko. 1989. "Friendship Patterns in Later Life: Definitions and Maintenance Patterns." *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 28: 9-19.
- Shea, L., L. Thompson, and R. Blieszner. 1988. "Resources in Older Adults' Old and New Friendships." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 5: 83-96.
- Strain, L. A. and N. Chappell. 1989. "Social Networks of Urban Native Elders: A Comparison with Non-Natives." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 21: 104-117,
- Wright, P. 1982. "Men's Friendships, Women's Friendships and the Alleged Inferiority of the Latter." *Sex Roles* 8: 1-20.