

People Would Talk: Normative Barriers to Cross-Sex Friendships for Elderly Women*

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Abstract:

A normative explanation for elderly women's lack of male friends is developed by showing that cross-sex friendship is defined as romance, that there are norms inhibiting romance during old age, and that other norms encourage them to reject potential mates who can no longer meet traditional sex role demands. The data were derived from in-depth interviews and observations of 70 non-married, white, elderly women who lived in a middle-class Chicago suburb. It can be expected that future cohorts of elderly women who will have been exposed to models of non-romantic cross-sex friendships early in their lives will have more of these friendships during old age. Key Words: Qualitative, Cohort, Romance, Sex roles, Age norms

Article:

Little has been written about cross-sex friendships during old age, perhaps because such relationships are relatively rare. In one of the few articles that touches on the topic, Booth and Hess (1974) reported on the prevalence of cross-sex friendships in a sample of middle-aged and elderly urban residents. They found that only a minority of their respondents reported cross-sex friendships. Women reported fewer cross-sex friendships than did males, especially in the elderly cohort. Booth and Hess suggested two related explanations for the difference in the prevalence of cross-sex friendships among women in the middle-aged and elderly cohorts. First, they suggested that the scarcity of old men in relationship to old women limits the opportunities of elderly women to meet men. Second, referring to previous findings that husbands are more likely to initiate friendships shared by a couple (Babchuk & Bates, 1963; Babchuk, 1965), they suggested that elderly women are less likely to have male friends because these women are less likely to have a spouse who will initiate friendships. Hess (1979) has questioned the findings that husbands are more likely to initiate couple relationships than wives.

Although Booth and Hess discussed normative and structural constraints on cross-sex friendships during old age, their structural argument is better developed. As a result, they miss some important factors affecting cross-sex friendships during old age and some ways in which norms regarding cross-sex friendships in the current elderly cohort might differ from those regarding cross-sex friendships in future elderly cohorts.

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The primary purpose of this article is to develop a more complete normative explanation for elderly, non-married women's lack of male friends. As the data presented below demonstrate, non-married elderly women do not define friendships with men in the same way that they might define same-sex or couple friendships. They generally assume that a cross-sex friendship includes romance or courtship. The definition of cross-sex friendships as romantic further reduces the number of potential candidates because it eliminates married men from consideration. While there are 2 men for every 3 women 65 years or older, there is only 1 non-married man for every 4 non-married women in the same age group (Soldo, 1980). The data further demonstrate that there are prescriptive and proscriptive norms regarding courting relationships that further reduce the pool of potential male friendship candidates.

A second purpose of this article is to develop an understanding of why older women define cross-sex friendships as romantic relationships. Despite the definition by older, non-married women of cross-sex friendships as romantic, not all of them are romantic. A final purpose of this article is to explore the exceptions to the rule.

Data and Methods

This article is based on data from a 1981 study of 70 white, non-married, female senior citizens who lived in Oak Park, a middle-class suburb of Chicago. According to the 1980 census, one-fifth (21.8%) of Oak Park's adult population (41,471) was 62 years or older. Approximately two-thirds (66.9%) of the Oak Park residents who were at least 62 years old were females (Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, 1981).

The author personally interviewed each respondent using a standardized instrument. After the first 20 interviews, the instrument was modified, some questions were eliminated and others added. Many open-ended questions were used, and interesting comments were noted in answer to close-ended questions. To enhance this process, the interviews were tape recorded, making it possible to check quotations for accuracy. Also, careful observational notes were made during and after the data collection period. Observations were made at various senior gathering places and, because the author lived in the community throughout the period of data collection, many of the respondents and their friends were observed shopping or doing volunteer work. In addition, some respondents called after the interview to elaborate on something they had said, to inform her of recent events in their lives, or to check on her progress.

Respondents were identified by agencies and individuals who serve the elderly. Half lived in age-segregated housing; some received services while others volunteered their time. Although not a probability sample, it appears to reflect the elderly women of the community. First, the distributions of the women's background characteristics reported in Table 1 are similar to those for Oak Park's elderly women reported in the 1980 census (Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, 1981), although the sample includes a higher proportion of women over 84 years old and a lower proportion of women from 62 to 64. Second, because the author lived in the community for 4 years, she had a sense of what its older inhabitants were like. A wide variety of community members, some of whom worked with the elderly and some of whom were elderly themselves, read an extensive report on the research (Adams, 1983) and agreed that the sample appeared representative. Although the findings cannot be generalized beyond the situation of old, white, non-married, non-institutionalized women in Oak Park, the friendship patterns of their

counterparts in other suburban communities are likely to be similar. The reader should be careful, however, to remember the limitations of the sample and to consider this research as exploratory.

The Women's Friends

This study did not use an a priori definition of friendship. The first question each respondent answered was: "People have different ideas about what friendship is. How would you describe what a friendship is?" To help them clarify their definitions of friendship, participants were then asked: "How does this differ from an acquaintance?" Once the respondent had in mind a clear definition of friendship, she was asked: "Are there any people that you consider friends now?" and, if appropriate, "Could you please tell me the first names of the people you consider as friends?" Subsequently, each respondent was asked a set of questions about each friendship.

The respondents identified a total of 678 friendships. Some friendships were with males, some were with females, and others were with couples. When the respondent was asked questions about each of her friendships, the relationship she had with both members of a couple was considered as only one friendship. She was only asked the questions about the member of the couple to whom she was closest or, if she was equally close to each party, about the female. Some of the cross-sex friendships were with men married to women whom the respondents did not consider as friends.

As shown in the first column of Table 2, the vast majority (90.6%) of the friendships were with females, and only small percentages of the friendships were with males (3.6%) or with couples (6.1%). In couple friendships, the respondent usually felt closer to the female member or felt equally close to both members. The respondent only felt closer to the male member of the couple in 3 of the 14 couple friendships named.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (n = 70)

Characteristic	Percent in Category
Age in years	
62–64	4.3
65–74	42.9
75–84	32.9
85 or more	20.0
Education in years^a	
0–8	17.4
9–11	15.9
12	21.7
13–15	29.0
16 or more	15.9
Income in dollars^b	
Less than 5,000	41.1
5,000–9,999	33.9
10,000–19,999	12.5
20,000 or more	12.5
Marital status	
Widowed	65.7
Divorced	12.9
Separated	1.4
Never married	20.0

^aOne person refused. The percentages are based on 69 cases.

^bFourteen people refused. The percentages are based on 56 cases.

Table 2. Percentage of Friendships of Each Type (n = 678) and Percentage of Respondents with Each Type of Friendship (n = 70)

	Percentage of friendships	Percentage of respondents with one or more
Male ^a	3.6	17.1
Couple ^b	6.1	20.0
Male closest	0.4	4.3
Equal	3.3	14.3
Female closest	2.4	7.1
Female	90.6	95.7 ^c

^aSome of the males were married, but the respondent did not identify their wives as friends.

^bA couple friendship is one in which the respondent considered both members as friends.

^cAll of the women who named at least one friend named at least one female friend.

As shown in the second column of Table 2, almost all of the women named at least one female friend. Fewer than a fifth named at least one male friend, and a fifth identified at least one couple friendship. More than a third (35.7%) of the respondents had at least one friendship with a male or a couple. Only a fifth (20.0%) of the respondents had at least one friendship with a male or a couple in which they were closer to the male members of the couples. In the analyses that follow, friendships with males and friendships in which the respondent was closer to the male member of a couple will be referred to as friendships with males or as cross-sex friendships. The 14 women who had at least one friend of this type had approximately two ($X = 1.9$, $SD = 1.3$). Altogether, the respondents named only 26 such friends, and of the 26, only 14 were with men

no more than 9 years younger than the women. Thus, of the 678 reported friendships, only about 2% were similar-aged, cross-sex friendships.

Defining Cross-Sex Friendships as Courting Relationships

Most, or perhaps all, of the women who participated in this study assumed that cross-sex friendships are courting relationships. When the first 20 women were asked why they did not have any or more male friends, all but 3 of them implied that cross-sex friendships are always courting relationships:

never wanted a man [after my husband died]. I had a couple of dates. [I] could have gone steady. [I] could have married one.

Well, no. Because I, no — I've been widowed for 22 years. Everyone in the office where I worked said, you'll probably get married right away again, but I didn't think of it. I had three or four men who came up to see me. But I'll tell you, it's a little different after you've been married. Oh, I had a man who wanted to sleep with me a year ago. See, it's a little different now. Uh huh. We were very straight laced when I was young.. .

Well, let's see which ones I would call friends. I haven't had any close male friends since — I don't make myself available, I mean — at the Nutrition Center, she pushes herself on men. I'm not the pushy kind . . . I had a man here, a friend of mine. He wanted . . . to buy a house if I would live with him. Here, he wanted to live with me! I said, oh no. Well, with me, my mother came first. I was a bridesmaid always. I just didn't go for men.

One woman who distinguished between romance and friendship said:

Why didn't I? No, I never thought about men being friends. Marriage — I had three. Those are the only ones I know anything about. I married the last one twice. That was something, wasn't it?

It is possible that the 3 women who did not imply that cross-sex friendships were by definition preludes to marriage also felt that way. In using open-ended questions, one can never be confident that a respondent's reply is complete (Backstrom & Hursh-César, 1981). All 3 of them gave brief responses, citing the shortage of males as the explanation for their lack of cross-sex friendships:

I just don't know any.

Well, we're getting an increasing population of men [in the age-segregated building in which I live], but they're very much in the minority. I don't think we've got more than 25 out of the 200.

There is a shortage of males.

If they had elaborated on their answers, they may have revealed an assumption that cross-sex friends court.

There were two limitations in addition to those imposed on the pool of acceptable male friends by the demographic shortage and the women's definition of cross-sex friendships as romantic. Both of the additional constraints were the direct result of the women defining cross-sex friendships as courting relationships. Although the last 50 women interviewed were not specifically asked to discuss cross-sex friendships, many of them spontaneously mentioned that there are norms prohibiting courtship among elderly people. When the first 20 respondents were

asked if they knew anyone their age who dated, 65% mentioned such proscriptive norms. Sometimes, the norms were enforced by the elderly person's children:

It wouldn't be very proper. My neighbor in Arkansas —she's 98, but she was offered a date. Her daughter said no. I don't know about anybody. I don't know of anybody who is my age [who dates]. Honest to God. But when I dress myself up, and I don't look this old — I don't know why we couldn't date. A man with a nice car to take me out once in awhile wouldn't be bad. But I wouldn't go now. If I want to go, I'll go with my son. He probably wouldn't like it if I would be traipsing around.

Other times, the norms were enforced by the elderly person's age-peers. Seven of the 70 women were currently dating. They went to great lengths to hide their relationships from others or, at least, to eliminate the possibility of anyone thinking they were behaving "improperly." When one woman was asked how often her male friend came to visit her, she said:

I don't let him in my apartment. It wouldn't be proper. People would talk.

The women at one of the local senior gathering places described this woman as "fast." They said that she was "always running around" with her male friend. Another woman did not refer to her male friend by name while being interviewed, because she was afraid that other people would discover her relationship and would begin "putting them together." Another respondent would not go anyplace in Oak Park with her male friend because "people would get the wrong idea."

The second additional limitation involves the women's traditional attitudes toward sex roles. While most of the women seemed to prefer to remain unmarried, they expected a potential mate to be able to protect them, both physically and financially. In many cases, a marriage to one of the available men would have involved a role reversal. This was a common theme throughout the interviews, and 35% of the first 20 respondents mentioned it as an explanation for their lack of male friends. Since they generally considered cross-sex friendships as romances, they evaluated potential male friends as potential mates and rejected them:

I tell them right off, I'm not interested. It is too late now. Anyone I'd marry would be sick and deaf and blind.

I was also asked [to get married] by . He wanted to buy me a car and have me drive him around. No way am I going to run all over. He told everybody we were going to get married. Since then, he passed away in a home.

None of them in here [age-segregated housing] are the kind that would be interested. They want to be waited on, they want — well, there is a joke in the Recreation Club [Newsletter]. The women always say "they're either looking for a nurse or a purse" — somebody to take care of them or to buy them things.

Cohort Membership and Definition of Cross-Sex Friendship

Elderly women are not alone in assuming that cross-sex friendships involve an element of romance. Cross-sex friendships among members of younger cohorts often cause raised eyebrows and speculation. This type of reaction seemed, however, to be more prevalent among the elderly women in this study than it is among younger women.

There are two basic types of explanations for the difference in the prevalence of this attitude among older and younger populations of women. The first type of explanation can be described as an aging one. A proponent of this type of explanation might argue that as women age, they become more likely to define cross-sex friendships as romances. One explanation for the change

with age might be the increasing relative scarcity of unmarried men compared to unmarried women in the women's age group. By the time the older women interested in forming partnerships with males have found mates, there are none left for those who want a noncourting friendship. Certainly not all older people are interested in sexual or romantic relationships, but some of them are (Butler & Lewis, 1976). Gerontologists have also become increasingly aware of the continuing importance during old age of the type of intimacy mates often share — the companionship, affection, touching, and hugging.

The data presented here are not adequate to evaluate the possible strength of an aging explanation. There is not enough variation in the women's ages, and all of them were unmarried at the time of the study. The data demonstrate, however, the loss of cross-sex friendships that the women probably would have described as friendships earlier in their lives. These relationships, though, appeared to have been mainly couple or casual, secondary friendships. In other words, it does not appear that these women once had had close, non-romantic cross-sex relationships and had lost them as men their age became more scarce.

The second type of explanation can be described as a cohort interpretation. The basic argument supporting this type of explanation is that the women who are currently old were raised during a time when the norms regarding cross-sex friendships were different than they are now. The women internalized these norms and have not changed their attitudes despite the changing times. Although it is not possible to separate aging and cohort effects (Maddox & Wiley, 1976), the data presented here suggest that a cohort effect was in operation. The data suggest that the women reached old age without being exposed to real models for non-courting, cross-sex friendships. This was true both for the previously married women who had not worked for most of their lives and for the never-married women who had been employed.

The cross-sex friendships that the previously-married women had had earlier in life had been mainly couple friendships. Their relationships with men had been mediated by their relationships with the men's wives or by their husbands' relationships with the men. In other words, they had related to these men only as members of couples. For example, one woman reminisced about her social life during the time preceding her husband's death. For most of their marriage, they had seen couples who had lived in their neighborhood when they were first married. They had gone dancing and out to dinner with them. She had lost touch with the neighborhood friends of their youth right before her husband died:

I lost track of a lot of people when I took care of my husband for four and a half years. I quit sending Christmas cards and everything. I used to get these beautiful Christmas letters from all of them. When my husband got sick, we just lost touch.

They also had met friends through her husband's job:

Then we had friends . . . well, he was president of the company. They moved to Florida years ago, and we used to hear from them every Christmas. They'd send a crate of oranges. Well, I don't keep in touch with them anymore. . . My husband and , they started work together 10 years ago at the Company. They used to golf together and everything but you know, he's still living. After his wife died, he married this young woman, and she keeps him active. He was a friend too.

This woman had entirely lost contact with most of her husband's work friends when he died.

Another widow had been a nurse when she and her husband got married. Many of their couple friends had been women with whom she had attended nursing school and their husbands. She felt she was very lucky because they did not "drop her", when her husband passed away. Loss of friends is a common experience for women who are widowed before other members of their social circles (Blau, 1961). Although this respondent did not experience this loss, whenever one of her school friends died, she lost touch with her friend's widower.

The contact that never-married women had experienced with men earlier in their lives was perhaps even less like intimate friendship than the contact that previously-married women described. Some of the single women had maintained casual, secondary relationships with men in their offices. These women's relationships with men had been mediated by formal ties. Many of these women commented that most of the men they had known at work were married and that it would not have been proper for them to develop close friendships. They generally had not had any interaction with these men outside of the work setting. Some of these women still exchanged Christmas cards with former long-term bosses or colleagues, but most of them had lost touch with their male friends upon retirement. None of them had close friendships with former colleagues, though one woman still considered two former colleagues as casual friends.

Other never-married women had been in sex-segregated occupations. These women often claimed never to have known any men other than relatives and people in secondary roles. When one such woman was asked about her relationships with men, she said:

don't know too much about men. I had a lovely brother, and he was a good mixer. My brother got married in 1919, so he was out of our home . . . I know some fine men —they're pastors. They're just like big brothers to me.

When asked about male acquaintances, another such woman commented:

The mailman, he's been on this route for years and years. Our garbage man — he keeps a watch to make sure there is garbage in our garbage cans.

The result of this cohort's men and women having led separate lives is that they do not have models for non-romantic cross-sex friendships. Further, they do not perceive one another to be desirable friends. When the author went to the Nutrition Center to talk to a group of elderly people about her research, one of the men in the audience approached her and observed:

If you want to learn about friendship, why are you asking women? They don't know anything about friendship.

There seemed to be a consensus on this topic among the male members of the crowd. This created quite an uproar, with the women referring to the men as "old fools" and giving snide descriptions of specific men's ideas of friendship.

The women seemed to view the men's friendships as instrumental and the women's friendships as socio-emotional. The first 20 respondents were asked how they thought males and females differed as friends. Two respondents felt there were no differences, and approximately a third said they had no experience on which to base an answer. The remaining half of the respondents felt that men were not as likely to be close, to have deep friendships, or to confide in people:

Men don't feel as close to one another as women do. They fake friendships for granted.

They seem to just be business friends. It doesn't go any deeper than that as a general rule. Of course, I'm not a male.

Well, I think it all depends on the individual, but my husband only had about three real close friends. And I repeat, I don't know whether it was the era or — I don't think men thought it was "the thing" to get too close, too chummy. They're lonely when they are widowers. Women always have friends where men don't. They're lost when their wives die.

I think they just treat each other on a masculine basis, I guess you call it. Women have to be a little bit close to each other or — It seems like [women] would demand more from each other than men would demand from each other.

One woman summarized the popular opinion:

Women make better friends than men. Men are not open. They do not share intimacies with one another. Who needs a friend like that?

The literature supports the women's characterizations of men as friends (Bell, 1981; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Hess, 1979; Lewis, 1978; Powers & Bultena, 1976). It is difficult to judge how the respondents thought men would perform as friends to women. Non-mediated, cross-sex friendships without romance or sex had been outside of the realm of most of their life histories.

Exceptions to the Romantic Rule

Although the women defined cross-sex friendships as romantic and seemed to have no models for cross-sex, non-romantic relationships, only 9 of the reported 26 friendships with males were courting relationships. Two additional friendships seemed to be potential romances. One of the women was interested in her male friend, but she was waiting until he finished mourning his recently-deceased wife to make her feelings known. The other woman had started regularly seeing an old colleague after his wife died. The respondent had been single for the entire 15 years she had known him. Although she did not identify their relationship as a courting one, she stressed how much closer they were becoming. They had not seen one another socially before the man's wife passed away.

Of the remaining 15 cross-sex friendships, 11 were with men who were at least 10 years younger than the women. These relationships, like the cross-sex friendships many of the women had had earlier in their lives, were mediated by a friendship with another person or by involvement in a secondary organization. Four of the younger men were neighbors whose wives or mothers were friendly with a respondent. Two of the younger men belonged to a respondent's church, 2 had worked with a respondent, 1 had lived with a respondent while he was in college, 1 was a respondent's social worker, and 1 was a respondent's priest. All but 2 of the younger men did favors for the respondents, such as fixing things around their homes or giving them advice on money matters. The respondents had not seen the non-helpers for years. It is questionable whether any of the younger men would have included the older woman in a list of their friends.

Only 4 of the cross-sex friendships were nonromantic and with men of similar ages to the respondents. None of the 4 respondents spent time alone with her similar-aged, non-romantic cross-sex friend. In 1 case, the relationship was very casual. It was between a respondent and her retired family doctor. The doctor was confined to a wheel chair. The respondent occasionally

saw him when his wife took him to social gatherings. Their interaction was limited to an exchange of greetings.

In the remaining 3 cases, the relationships were mediated by another relationship or secondary connection. In 1 of these cases, the friends were involved in a service organization. Their interaction revolved solely around their work. In the 2 remaining cases, 1 of the people involved in the friendship was disabled and dependent on the other. One of these 2 dependent relationships was reinforced by a formal tie. The respondent was a member of a service organization that helped disabled people, including her male friend. The other dependent relationship was mediated by the helper's wife. She sent her husband out to do errands for her homebound friend.

Summary and Conclusions

The major purpose of this article was to develop a normative explanation for elderly, non-married women's lack of male friends. The data clearly show that these women viewed cross-sex friendships with age peers as synonymous with romance. This eliminated married men as friendship candidates. The women were discouraged from developing romantic cross-sex relationships by proscriptive norms, often enforced by their children or age peers. They were also discouraged from forming romantic attachments by the scarcity of men their age who could still play the role of protector. As middle-aged women, they had had non-romantic cross-sex friendships. These relationships, however, had been mediated by their husbands, the wives of the men, or their jobs. These women had probably always considered non-mediated cross-sex friendships as romances. They reached old age without being exposed to models for non-romantic, non-mediated cross-sex friendship. As a result, they did not consider men as acceptable or desirable friendship candidates.

When the women entered the "society of widows" (Hochschild, 1973), they had fewer opportunities for cross-sex friendships with age peers. Their husbands (Booth & Hess, 1974) or jobs were no longer there to facilitate and legitimize their friendships with males. Research also has repeatedly confirmed Blau's (1961) findings that widows are often dropped by their married friends. In addition, not many old men participated in the secondary organizations to which the women belonged. Although some of the older non-married women included in this study currently had mediated cross-sex friendships, they tended to be with different males than the ones with whom they were friends during middle age. Very few women reported long-term, non-romantic cross-sex friendships that had continued after retirement or widowhood. None reported emotionally close ones. Their current non-romantic cross-sex friendships were almost all with younger people and were mediated by the young men's mothers or secondary organization membership. The cross-sex friendships of middle age and old age were thus, in general, not the same friendships and were not defined in the same way.

The structural and normative effects on cross-sex friendships are intimately related. For example, older women have fewer opportunities for mediated friendships than younger women because older women are more likely to be widowed or retired. This structural factor would not be important if there were not norms in the older cohort inhibiting non-mediated cross-sex friendships. In a similar way, the scarcity of older men in good physical and financial condition would not be as important if older women had not internalized strict sex-role norms.

Cohort and aging effects are difficult, if not impossible, to untangle (Maddox & Wiley, 1976). Are older women more likely than younger women to define a cross-sex friendship as a romance because they were raised differently or because as they aged there were fewer opportunities for relationships of any kind with men? If the aging explanation were adequate, one could predict that the attitude that cross-sex friendships are by definition romances will be as common in future cohorts of older people as it was among the women in this study. If a cohort effect operates, as this article suggests, one could predict that non-mediated, non-romantic cross-sex friendships are likely to exist in future cohorts of elderly people. The women will have had at least some exposure to models for this type of friendship and thus should define cross-sex friendship more broadly.

The data presented here are not adequate to assess the relative importance either of normative and structural effects or of aging and cohort effects. They do, however, suggest that norms and cohort membership are important to consider when studying cross-sex friendships. It is not adequate to say that elderly women do not have cross-sex friendships, because there is a shortage of elderly men.

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