Friendship Between Women: 
A Phenomenological Study of Best 
Friends*

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In our everyday worlds, friendship is an important relationship. As early 
as the preadolescent era, dyadic friendship between people of the same 
age and sex is a normative and transformative developmental experience 
(Sullivan, 1953). Changes in friendship relations in accordance with 
chronological age (Becker, 1974; Candy, Troll & Levy, 1981; Duck & 
Gilmour, 1981; Izard, 1963; Selman & Selman, 1979) as well as differ-
ences in friendship relations for men and women (Aries & Johnson, 1983; 
Bell, 1981; Davidson and Duberman, 1982; Douvon & Adelson, 1966; 
Hacker, 1981) have been noted by numerous writers. Recently, Rubin 
(1983) has suggested that same-sex friendships are especially important in 
women's development.

When we turn to the scientific literature on friendship, we find little 
about friendship between women. What there is contrasts same-sex 
friendships between men and women, and points out the special qualities 
of women's friendships. Women's friendships are characterized as more 
intimate, personal, emotionally based and supportive than men's relations 
with one another (Bell, 1981; Fischer & Narus, 1981; Weiss & Lowenthal, 
1975). Factors of intimacy-assistance, status and power (Candy et al., 
1981) as well as altruism, communion and the expression of feelings 
(Davidson & Packard, 1981) have been found to be important in women's 
friendships.

Although these researchers give us some insights into aspects of 
women's friendships, they leave us without an inclusive answer to the 
question “What is the essential nature of friendship relations between 
women?” As we turn from the literature on friendship between women to 
general writings on friendship, we find a newly revised model of friendship 
that articulates this broader phenomenon.

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Taking these seemingly dichotomous insights seriously, Wright developed a definition of friendship that included both viewpoints. He defined friendship as follows:

Friendship is defined as a relationship involving voluntary or unconstrained interaction in which the participants respond to one another personally, that is, as unique individuals rather than as packages of discrete attributes or mere role occupants. . . . Thus, to the degree that two people are friends, each provides the other with consensual validation concerning his or her sense of individuality. . . . The present conception proposes that friendships are formed and maintained because they are rewarding, and they are rewarding because they facilitate the fulfillment or expression of self-referent motivation (1984, p. 119).

Having amplified the person-to-person quality of the relationship, he then identified five possible friendship values: ego support; self-affirmation; stimulation; security; utility. Thus, he delineated an inclusive model of friendship, and articulated themes common to friendship relations.

Based on Wright’s insights into the nature of friendship in general as well as the insights into women’s friendships cited previously, the present investigation tried to articulate the nature and the quality of women’s friendships. The quality of dyadic relations has been generally neglected (Candy et al., 1981), while an inclusive structural description of women’s friendships is still unavailable. Because friendship is relational, having access to descriptions from both sides of the dyad seemed important to a full understanding of it. Therefore, the present investigation explored friendship relations between women by collecting empirical data from pairs of women friends. The questions guiding the study were: “What do women say spontaneously about their day to day experiences of important friendships with women?”; “What are the essential nature and the experiential aspects of important friendships between women?”

Method

Subjects

Subjects for the study were two sets of women friends. All were college seniors, 21 years old, Caucasian, middle class, heterosexual, and