MALE FRIENDSHIPS: IMPLICATIONS FROM RESEARCH FOR FAMILY THERAPY

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ABSTRACT

Family therapists have rarely focused on men's friendships and how they affect family interactions. Having friends can lead to a longer and healthier life. Yet men are frequently described as having difficulty establishing friendships and also as not being fully committed to their families. Such friendships may pull men away from their families yet are a necessary part of their lives, just as families are. The purpose of this study was to learn how men viewed friendships with other men and to place those findings in the context of the family. Three hundred and eighty-six men were asked a series of questions to gain a baseline description of friendships, the value they placed on them, whether they had enough friends, and how they established and maintained friendships. Implications for family therapy are discussed.

Family therapists need a better understanding of adult male friendships. Such relationships form the fundamental core of many men's reference groups as well as a major source of their social support network whether they are in a family or are single. In the context of a family, male friendships may affect a man's availability to his wife and children. Men, often portrayed as absent from the family, may often feel pulled between their friends and their family, particularly if the friends have been significant in their development or have helped them in a crisis. In addition, the patterns of interaction men engage in with friends may be similar to what they engage in with their children. For example, LaRossa (1995) describes men as likely to watch television with their children when they are responsible for child care. This may be a similar pattern of interaction that they engage in with their male friends. In order to understand the role that men play in families, as well as to assist male clients who are having difficulties coping, the nature of these friendships needs to explored.

The quality and quantity of adult male friendships have been the subject of some attention over the last 25 years with an emphasis placed historically on the deficits in those relationships. Lewis (1978),

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in writing about emotional intimacy in men, stated, ". . . many American males in adult life have never had a close male friend nor known what it means to love and care for a male friend without the shadow of some guilt and fear of peer ridicule" (p. 108). While the vestiges may still remain, much has changed for men since that was written. From Promise Keepers rallies, to the Million Man March, to the Fathers' Rights meetings, men from vastly different cultural and social backgrounds are searching for greater connection to each other and to their families (Brooks & Good, 2001). Becoming closer with other men through friendships is part of the connection that many are trying to build. The establishment of these friendships has implications for understanding men's contributions to the life of families.

The family therapy textbooks have been silent on friendships in general as well as on the life of men in families (see, e.g. Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000; Horne, 2000; and Nichols & Schwartz, 2005). While textbooks discuss women through the lens of Feminist family therapy, not a great deal of attention is paid to their female friendships either. Ignoring the impact of friendships on men and women in the family can lead to a lack of understanding of the multiple pulls on adults trying to balance work, intimacy, child care, and friendship.

Establishing and maintaining friendships can result in significant benefits and should not conceptually always result in time taken away from family. Adults who have friendships live longer and healthier lives (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Betcher & Pollack, 1993) as they are in better physical and mental health (Carstensen, 1991; Winefield, Winefield, & Tiggerman, 1992). Strong social support systems help in other ways, too. Florian, Mikuloncer, and Buchotz (1995) report a link between people who give and receive support having higher levels of emotional security than those who are more isolated. Men's life spans are shorter than women's, in part perhaps because of the way they are socialized (Harrison, 1978; Williams, 2003). If men are socialized to not be vulnerable with others and to deal with problems on their own, they are not apt to seek help when they need it and their health (including mental health) needs may go unattended (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). As mental illness is stigmatized in many communities, seeking assistance for emotional problems, from professionals or from friends, may be avoided by men who do not wish to appear weak (Aronson, Whitehead, & Baber, 2003). They may also not ask their significant others for help when they need it.

If we want to extend men's lives and improve their quality of life both physically and emotionally, helping men establish friendships may be one way to achieve these goals while also helping them main-

tain a satisfying connection with their family. The purpose of this study was to learn how men view friendships, how they establish them, and how they maintain them. From the responses that a diverse group of more than 380 men gave to a series of open-ended questions about friendships, it is hoped that a baseline of information can be provided that clinicians can use in working with men in the context of their families as well as in their male relationships.

Male Friendships

Why do men have a difficult time making friends and how does this difficulty affect their family relationships? Fear of closeness between men is often linked to homophobia (Lewis, 1978; Morin & Garfinkle, 1978; Pease, 2000; Tognoli, 1980) so friendships are maintained at a physical and emotional distance. Lewis (1978) believes that the barrier to closeness between males is not just homophobia but is also a lack of role models, a fear of being vulnerable, and competition between men. With men being taught to control their emotions (Meth, 1990), the opportunities to connect with other men (and women) are greatly restricted. As a result, men may develop "shoulder to shoulder" friendships or friendships that involve activities, like sports (Roy, Benenson, & Lilly, 2000) rather than friendships where they interact more directly. Men may bring that pattern of interaction into the family and child care responsibilities. In a study comparing men ages 25 to 34 with men ages 35 to 50, decreasing numbers of friends were found with age with the hypothesis suggested that this was due to increasing time invested in a relationship with one woman (Wall, Pickert, & Paradise, 1984). As families are formed, this increasingly pulls men away from friends. But even with women, emotional intimacy can be problematic. Ward, Bergner, and Kahn (2003) argue that the socialization of men makes intimate relationships with women and the discussion of emotions difficult—thus men withdraw when expected to articulate emotions.

Much of what is known about men's friendships comes from comparing them with women's. Rubin (1986), in researching deficits in men's lives, wrote, "At every life stage during those years, women have more friendships . . . than men, and the differences in the content and quality of the friendships of women and men are marked and unmistakable" (p. 166). More recently, research on friendships have described women's as more self-disclosing (Dindia & Allen, 1992), emotionally closer (Carstensen, 1991), and more oriented toward one-on-one relationships (rather than toward group relationships) than men's (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997). Friendships continue in importance as

people age but are seen as more important to women than men over time (Siebert, Mutran, & Reitzes, 1999).

Other research offers a less deficit-riddled picture of men's friendships when compared with women's. In some quarters, friendships are thought to be equally important to both men and women; it is the definitions of friendships that have varied for men and women (Vaughn & Nowicki, 1999). Tognoli (1980) described men as having more friendships than women but less intimate ones. That friendships serve different functions for men and women was further supported by Roy et al.'s (2000) study of adolescents and adults where no sex differences were found in the importance of friendships. The ability to receive support ultimately may be linked more to one's genes than to one's gender, according to Agrawal, Jacobson, Prescott, and Kendler (2002).

Male friendships could be a significant focus in family therapy for men who are feeling isolated and unable to connect with other men or women. In addition, those friendships may be drawing men away from their family and affecting interactions with children. Without a basic understanding of how friendships work for men, family therapists are left to guess how to address connectivity on many levels.

METHOD AND SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

In order to learn how men view male friendships, a series of open-ended exploratory questions were developed by the author with the assistance of two separate teams of student researchers who enrolled in the author's graduate research course. The qualitative method was chosen as it was believed that the type of information being gathered, highly descriptive impressions of males' friendships, could best be gained in this manner. It is an appropriate method when answers are being sought, "... that stress how social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:8). In addition, when dealing with a topic about which little is known, starting with the subjects' own descriptions is often preferred (Padgett, 1998) as the subjects' voices are heard (Regehr, Marziali, & Jansen, 1999).

Following IRB approval, during the 2002-2003 academic year 39 MSW students each asked 10 men a series of 13 open-ended questions. A few subjects were excluded in the final count, either because there was not time for the interview to be completed or because the subject was below the 21-year-old inclusion requirement. The students practiced interviewing each other as a pre-test of the instrument. After the

first actual interview, they returned to class to discuss the interviews and their reactions. In-class discussion after every three interviews continued throughout the semester. As these were open-ended questions that involved discussion with the subjects, it was important for the students to gain a clear sense of the meaning of each question so they could clarify any of the questions for the subjects as needed. The students discussed the progress of their interviews at each class. This helped dispel one of the threats to qualitative research's reliability and one possible limitation—researcher bias (Padgett, 1998). By continually talking as a group, issues individual students may have had about what men were saying were worked through. Padgett (1998) refers to this process as peer debriefing.

The questions discussed included the following: 1. What is friendship and what does a friend mean to you? 2. Are friendships important to you? 3. Do you believe you have enough friends? 4. How have friends helped you (are they a source of social support?) and how have you helped friends? and 5. How do you establish and maintain friendships with men?

Limitations of this data-gathering approach may affect the findings and their interpretation. For example, female interviewers might draw different responses from subjects than male interviewers as it has been noted that males often feel more comfortable talking to females. During the in-class discussions of the interviews, this was explored; no significant differences were noted at the time though more subtle differences could exist. Another limitation could be some variation in questioning and recording from one interviewer to the next as there were many interviewers involved. As there was a great deal of information sharing and as the second class read the interviews completed by the first class, this type of interviewer variability was most likely kept to a minimum. At the same time, such variability, where it exists, could be seen as a strength as the purpose was to gain a broad understanding of friendships from a diverse group of men.

An additional limitation could be that the definitions of friendships are not consensually validated and vary by region of the country and culture (Adams, Blieszner, & DeVries, 2000). We all have some concept of what a friendship is but we may not agree on its meaning. Most of the interviews took place in the metropolitan Maryland area—an area known for not being highly transitory. This may mean that residents have lived in the region longer than those who might be interviewed in California, for example, where mobility is greater. Thus, it may be easier to sustain friendships in the Maryland area if people are less apt to move or it may be easier to hold to a standard that a friendship

has to have lasted for a certain duration, e.g., since childhood, for it to be a friendship.

By May, 2003, 386 useable interviews were completed. Two-thirds (65%) of the subjects were white, 29% were African American, and the rest were evenly divided between Hispanic, Asian, and Arab. The subjects ranged in age from 21 to 85 with an average age of 38 years. Educationally, 15% had no more than a high school education, 17% had some college education, 34% had completed only college, and 34% had attended or graduated from graduate school. Twenty-one percent were professionals, 44% worked in sales, business, or other non-professional white collar professions, 22% were blue collar workers, and the remaining men were either students, unemployed, or retired. The vast majority (82%) were Christian/Protestant. Two thirds were married. Answers from single and divorced men are included as these men provide information as to what they might bring into a family in terms of their views of friendships.

FINDINGS

To the first question, "What is friendship and what does a friend mean to you?" the answers tended to coalesce around a few themes. Friendships contained loyalty, trustworthiness, and dependability. Men said there had to be a bond, honesty, and the ability to confide in someone (the implication being that anything could be shared with that person and it would be kept confidential). A friend was someone you could hang out with and joke with. A level of mutual caring was mentioned as a prerequisite for friendship by a number of men and the friend would listen and accept you whether you were right or wrong. Occasionally men mentioned that a friend was someone who would give you a loan or come to your assistance at a moment's notice. In turn, it was mentioned that the inteviewee would assist that friend in the same manner.

A few men believed friendships could evolve only over many years and stated that they have truly good friends only from their high school or childhood years. One 28-year-old African American school teacher disagreed about the time needed for a friendship to develop yet indicated it had to be a substantial length of time with meaningful contact, "A friendship is a very strong relationship between me and another person who I have known for two or more years and we both have past, similar experiences." The general comments suggest that there has to be some shared history between two people before there can be a

friendship and that it requires something deeper and longer lasting than a new acquaintance.

To the second question, "Are friendships important to you?" over 90% stated they were important. Some responses were that they could not have gotten through difficult times without friends, that it is nice to have someone to share things with, and that there are some things only men can talk about with each other. Some men gave brief responses, indicating that the importance of friendships was obvious.

Spirituality was raised by a few men as a reason friendships were and were not important. A 24-year-old white man who was a waiter and camp director said, "Friends are important because they are people that God has allowed me to have in my life. They provide the community I was made to be a part of, learn from, grow in, and live in, similar to my biological family." In contrast, a 40-year-old African American special education teacher said friendships were not important because, "You don't need friends to live. A person can live if he is spiritually in touch." He later added that, "Friends can slow you down." A 33-year-old white teacher and Orthodox Jew said a great deal of his time was spent in observance rituals so that he did not have time for friends. He also said friends were not as important as they used to be now that he has a wife and family.

"Do you believe you have enough friends?" opened up a diverse set of responses that dealt with constraints on time and family. The responses were classified into three categories: those that were unsure if they had enough friends; those that felt they had enough friends; and those who felt they did not have enough friends. The first group, where they were unsure, consisted of one out of every six men. Some felt that they had enough friends given the time they had but that they never had much time because of work and family demands. They did not clearly lament not having enough friends. For example, the oldest man in the survey, an 85-year-old white retired poultry dealer, said, "I don't have any [friends]. I had them in the past. Part of the reason is that most of my friends aren't alive. Even when I was young and raising a family, I never had time for friends. I always had to work very hard and we were a close-knit family. So friends weren't really a part of the family. As a surrogate father to some nephews and nieces, that took up time, too." A white man half his age who is an insurance broker gave a similar answer, "Sometimes, because of our lives, you get busy and overwhelmed. You feel like you want to spend more time alone. At other times you realize that is not so good. It's about giving and sharing. I guess I feel you can never have enough friends."

About six out of every 10 men felt they had enough male friends. Most answered briefly in the affirmative but a few gave answers that implied they had enough given the constraints on their time. A 57-year-old bartender of Iranian descent said, "Yes, I have enough for my lifestyle. I go through periods when I get very focused and I see too many people in the restaurant. But when I am calmer, I know I like to spend time with my friends." A 43-year-old white economist drew a distinction between close and causal friends in answering, "I need people who I can interact with casually on a friendly basis at work and in the neighborhood; that [need] gets satisfied with casual friendships. There is the much smaller group of people I would consider close friends that satisfy that need."

A quarter of the men said they did not have enough friends. These men, more clearly than the first group who were unsure, felt they were missing out on something and expressed a level of discomfort. A 44-year-old white married social worker said, "No. I think that I have a lack of confidence in male friendships. I have trouble finding men who are truly similar to me. I am not entirely comfortable with men. I am not into 'locker room talk' and the football game atmosphere really gets to me. I dislike the macho stuff, drinking, etc., that many men do."

A 78-year-old white retired minister had doubts about his ability to make friends. "I blame myself because I tend to be introvertish. It is a matter of trust. You want to have a friend you can spill your heart to and I am not sure I trust people to really hear objectively what I may have to say." A 48-year-old white counselor, talking about the family and friend balance he tries to strike said, "I don't have enough time for them. I don't have enough time for my kids, my wife, or even me. When I do try to get together with my friends, it can't be spontaneous. I have to plan. It's sad and I really long for more." When considering friendships in light of other commitments, a 30-year-old white sales manager indicated that pressures and family made it difficult for him to maintain friends and that, unlike those in the first group, he was unhappy with that situation.

The two questions, "How have friends helped you (are they a source of social support?)" and "How have you helped friends?" yielded similar, reciprocal answers. The way friends had helped the men were similar to the way the men had helped their friends. The most common responses centered around giving advice, giving encouragement, being a sounding board (listening), lending money, helping move, helping with home-maintenance, providing companionship, buoying spirits, and providing humor. A few men said they were never in need of help and had not turned to friends for support.

The examples given by the men as to how they were helped by friends ranged from the common to the extraordinary. A 60-year-old white administrator said, "Close friends are there for you in adversity, in family situations, and at work. They listen and offer information that is based on their own experiences. Or they just listen and say nothing, which is also good at times." A 47-year-old African American poet gave a poignant answer, "Friends have helped me momentarily as well as lifting my spirits. I was a heroin addict for more than 20 years and have been clean for six years now. It has been my friends that I have turned to for emotional support and encouragement through the challenges of trying to remain drug free. I first give honor to God who has placed people in my life that have been encouragers. My best friend passed three months ago. We had used drugs together and he came off of drugs about the same time as me. We needed each other and were there for each other through the struggle. He and I would talk on the phone for hours, praying and sharing our innermost fears and desires."

A third-man, a 56-year-old white economics professor, who is helped more by the emotional connection of friends than anything specific said, "I don't know how to define how they help me. There's a certain extension, a sharing of some part of life, mutual caring. Something is there, and it is really easy to converse. You can sit on a boat, whatever—you don't have to talk; stare at the sky—but there's a feeling that this person loves the same things I love and so I don't feel I have to talk about it."

The question, "How do you establish and maintain friendships with men?" was included to get specific examples so that others with relationship problems could learn from their experiences. The answers were both concrete and process-oriented. The concrete answers included making friends through other friends (and often through women if the men socialized as part of a couple), through work, and through activities like attending church, going to school, being in the armed forces, or playing sports. In terms of sports, some men contact other men to engage them in fishing, golf, tennis, or basketball. One 52-year-old African American pharmacist said, "I may call someone that I know likes to play tennis and set up something. After we play, we may notice that we have other things in common and a friendship begins."

In terms of the process of making friends, examples most commonly given as starting points for friendships included looking for the right type of person and trying to become close to them through talking and listening to them. A 23-year-old white salesman said, "Friendships

are established through communication. It is important so that you can find out about people. Talking back and forth you'll find out if you have something in common and be able to find out if you can tolerate being around them."

A number of men offered, though it was not directly asked, what would be attractive in a friend. Their descriptions dealt with character. One man said he pays attention to the way someone "carries himself. If he is a decent and respectable person, I'll try and become his friend." In a similar vein, another man said he could not be friends with someone who had traits he did not respect.

The men's answers concerning maintaining friendships often showed active involvement in the process. Most commonly heard was the need to communicate, to reach out, and to be there when needed to give support. In terms of communication, some men gave specific answers such as needing to communicate every few days, weeks, or months, in order to maintain a friendship. A 37-year-old white business manager reported, "You stay in touch. People are part of your life, so even though you are busy, you have to make time, and you have to create opportunities. You call and stay in contact. You want to know what your friends are doing. You care about them and you have to make an effort to maintain contact."

Putting friendships ahead of family is a balancing act for some men. A 40-year-old white construction manager said, "There are some guys who have to go out at least two or three nights a week with their buddies. I don't. Because of work I am rarely home. But when I am home, my wife will tell me someone called and I'll want to be with my family instead. But the next day, I'll call and—cigar, beer, shoot the breeze. It's relaxing. I guess my friendships are my vice. Maintaining a male friendship does not take a lot of work. You really don't do much. If you just see each other on the road as you're driving past, if you wave, you've just done a lot of maintenance in the friendship."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPY

The responses from the men offer a varied picture of male friendships and have significant implications for working with and understanding men both within and outside the context of the family. Discussions will focus on both of these contexts. The men report that loyalty, trust, honesty, and dependability are important characteristics of friendships, as is acceptance. Most feel a friendship must have lasted a number of years for it to be considered a friendship. The sense from

the interviewers is that everyone they interviewed had some idea about what a friendship was or should be.

While the concept of friendships when broached in therapy may bring an immediate response as to what a friend is, it may not bring a fully conceptualized one. Possible exploration as to how a man would more deeply define friendship could focus on the standard of loyalty or trustworthiness a friend should be held to or how dependable someone had to be to qualify as a friend. These notions of friendship have implications for the standard to which a man in a family might hold his wife/significant other or his children. By talking to a man about his expectations in relationships with men, some insight may be generated into the autonomy each of them has to spend time with friends. If loyalty is important, for example, how would a man balance a call from a friend in need with a commitment to help a child with a school project? Notions of loyalty may also affect how the man counsels his child who has peer-related problems. By having discussions in the family around the balance between adult friends and family, a tone is set for helping the child explore such balancing acts with his or her peers.

The nearly universal response to the second question was that friendships were important to men. Many men derived a sense of self from their early male friendships. If these relationships are healthy, it will be difficult to set them aside completely to be replaced by family. At the same time, family and work need attention, too. A caring father and husband will want time with family and with friends. The interviews show that friends remain important.

Approximately 60% of the men said they had enough friends. In this group may be men who wished they had more friends but had accommodated to their familial situation saying they have enough considering their commitment to their family. Some of those who indicated they do not have enough friends describe struggling with balancing work and family commitments. Others feel they may be incapable of male friendships because they do not fit in with what males typically like to do—they describe themselves as introverts or not part of the "locker room" scene. For men in families who feel they have enough friends, further exploration may be needed. For those who do not feel they have enough friends, specific suggestions gained from men in this research about how they make and maintain friends may be helpful. A discussion can also occur of what being male means and whether they think males can communicate only about certain topics. Their own socialization around being male and being a friend can be explored even outside the family context. It may be that literature (bibliother-

apy) on male roles (e.g., Betcher & Pollack, 1993; Keen, 1991) might be helpful in looking at their own development as a male. In terms of raising sons and daughters, this can be especially important as Pasick (1990) believes that, without friends, men are diminished as fathers.

The responses as to how the subjects helped and how they have been helped by other men can be used to teach about the nature of giving and receiving between men. The way that men give and receive ranges from the concrete (money, help with moving) to the emotional (providing companionship, listening). While it may be true that men do not feel comfortable asking for help (Addis & Mahalik, 2003), this sample's answers offer a slightly different perspective. Many of these men describe themselves as giving and receiving help. In the context of the family, their participation may need to be reframed to show that they are, in their own way, giving to their wife and children. At the same time, it can be acknowledged that men are socialized to be strong (Meth, 1990) and that accepting help or admitting weakness can be difficult. Without acknowledging weakness or the need for help, the message being sent to children is one fraught with emotional ties that will restrict girls' ability to be strong and boys' ability to seek help.

Responses to how men establish and maintain friendships include a number of suggestions that cover the specific as well as the general. Many men consider friendship maintenance as encompassing a necessary and broad range of activities but also as including some level of interpersonal contact. For some men, friendships include an on-going evaluative process whereby someone could stop being a friend if a level of integrity was not maintained. Contrary to that are the men who replied that friends do not require any work and that a friendship, if it a solid one, will always be there.

Clinically, this information is important to men who are unsure how to start a friendship and maintain it. Discussing the findings with men can help them evaluate their own behavior in light of their friendships. Learning that other men get involved in activities and stay in contact (reach out) to men can provide concrete steps and give permission to men who want to build their own support networks. Rubin (1986) notes that the distinction between bonding and intimacy is not clear. In her view, bonding is less verbal than intimacy which requires a high level of verbal activity. Lewis (1986) points out that men fear too much emotional closeness. For some men, engaging in activities is a form of bonding that is less threatening and should not be diminished.

The interviews reveal that many men spontaneously bring up the conflicts they feel between their friendships and their families. Some have resigned themselves to their familial responsibilities; others have

gladly embraced those responsibilities and may not miss the time they had spent with their friends to a great extent. It must be remembered that many men feel more comfortable with wives and girlfriends and depend on them, rather than men, for intimacy (Pasick, 1990).

In the classic family therapy theories, friendships are not included. For example, in Structural Family Therapy, the executive sub-system refers to the parental dyad (Minuchin, 1974; Nichols & Schwartz, 2005). The social context (including work) is referred to generally but not in a way specific enough to talk about the binds that men are placed in if they feel pulled between family and male friendships. Satir (1972), in describing experiential family therapy, artfully draws hats on the women and men in *Peoplemaking* to illustrate multiple roles they play. But the role of friend is not included. Bowen's (1976) family systems theory describes differentiation from family but not in the context of other friend relationships. Old theories can be adapted to specifically address men's (and women's) friendship needs. Newer theories, e.g., Narrative Therapy, show great promise of being able to address these issues, also. With any theory, the therapist has to believe that such inquiry is important.

CONCLUSION

Men must be understood in the context of their families and friends. One way to do this is to understand their friendships with other men. It is the template of friendships that they bring into the family that affects their relationships with their wives/significant others as well as their children. In addition, it is those friendships that may help or hinder their ability to connect within the family. By describing some typical responses to questions about friendships and by placing them in a family context, it is hoped that practitioners will be able to guide their clients to more fruitful relationships in the future, relationships that will give them more options for how they wish to live their lives.

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