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Balancing Marriage and Friends: The Funeral of Friendship?

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Author: Cora Polsgrove

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**Balancing Marriage and Friends:
The Funeral of Friendship?**

by
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Abstract

This study examines the effect of marriage on friendship and the way individuals balance their relationships with their spouses and their friends. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with eleven adults from their mid-20s to mid-60s. Analysis revealed that marriage shapes the kinds of friendships people form, but has a less significant effect on friendships that predate marriage. Married people form mutual, activity-based friendships with other couples and maintain the emotionally close, same-gender friendships that they formed before marriage. Data supported the dominant American ideal of spouse as best friend. While marriage did have some influence on friendship patterns, work and child responsibilities were more influential.

Introduction

How does marriage affect friendships? How do couples negotiate their relationships with their friends and their spouses? This is a subject that anyone who is married or has a married friend has given at least passing thoughts. The relationships one has with friends and spouse (and, in some cases, children) are, arguably, the most important bonds in one's entire life. However, previous studies indicate that these two relationships are often in conflict. On the other hand, research also indicates that friends and spouses can take on complementary roles in a person's life. Therefore, the interaction between these two relationships is a subject of great interest and relevance to anyone who has both friends and a spouse. In this study, I explore the ways married people balance their relationships with their friends and their spouses. I examine the impact of marriage on friendships and vice versa, and the roles couple and single friendships play in a married person's life.

Past research shows that marriage is one of the top "flashpoints" of friendships – moments that often throw friendship into crisis and into question (Pogrebin 1987:67). Getting married can mean the end of some friendships and the beginning of others. Previous studies suggest that marriage often spells the death of friendships with single people and the birth of a new kind of friendship: "couple friendship," or dual friendships between two or more couples (Rubin 1985). In contrast, I found that while married people do tend to form new friendships with other couples instead of individuals, they also maintain the close same-gender friendships they made before marriage. Although same-gender

friendships remain strong, cross-gender friendships are more likely to be negatively affected by marriage. While marriage does influence the kinds of friendships people form and the amount of time they spend with their friends, work and children play a more influential role in determining how much free time a person has to spend with their friends. My research shows that marriage is not necessarily the funeral of friendship, although a combination of marriage, children, and work can cut into the time individuals devote to friends.

Before we can proceed, though, it is essential that we develop a working definition of friendship. This is a daunting and deeply theoretical question; fortunately, previous research and literature on the subject provides a slew of definitions and musings. Pogrebin differentiates seven “degrees” of friendship, from coworkers to neighbors to acquaintances, but posits that “true friendship describes a feeling, not a situation. [...] Friendship is a heart-flooding feeling that can happen to any two people who are caught up in the act of being themselves, together, and who like what they see” (Pogrebin 1987:35). Rubin points out that definitions like this represent an idealized version of friendship rather than a reality. When Rubin asked interviewees “What is a friend?” ideals of “trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding, acceptance” emerged (Rubin 1985:7). But after asking about interviewees’ relationships with their friends, she discovered these ideals are rarely mentioned in the context of specific friendships. “It’s then the disparity between the idealized version of *friendship* and the reality of relations with *friends* stands revealed so clearly” (Rubin 1985:8). Bell points out that there are

two dimensions of friendship: social and personal (1981). "Friendship can be seen as voluntary, close, and as an enduring social relationship" that "carries with it rights and obligations" (1981:12).

These explanations give an overall idea of what friendship scholars have determined to be the key aspects of friendship. My research does not contradict these ideas; the responses I received spoke to the breadth and variety of friendships and of human relationships in general. Instead of asking for a hypothetical definition of friendship, I asked interviewees who their best friends were, and then had them describe the nature of these relationships. These descriptions led me to conclude that interviewees considered their friends to be those people who they voluntarily interacted with socially, those they would go to if they were having a crisis, or with whom they had meaningful conversations. As I will explain, these roles could be filled by the same person or group of people, or by separate groups or individuals.

I will begin by reviewing the literature and previous research on the intersection of friendship and marriage. Much of this research was conducted several decades ago and needs to be brought up to date. It does, however, provide a good starting point to explore how current marital and friend relationships depart from and adhere to the patterns highlighted in past studies. I then describe the research design of my study; I explain the methods I used and their advantages and limitations. Next, I give a detailed description of my findings. I discuss the role and prominence of couple friendships among married individuals, how close individual friendships are integrated into married people's lives, and the role of

children and work in shaping individuals' friendships. Finally, I close by reiterating the central findings and conclusions of my research, as well as by proposing possible directions of future research.

Literature Review

The 1980s were a burgeoning period for the study of friendship, marriage, and the relationship between the two. While a great majority of the literature on the subject dates back to the 1980s, many of the books written during this period were based on studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s. Significant changes in American social and economic structures mean that new research is needed. My research sheds light on the ways friend and spousal relationships have changed in the past decades.

For example, the bulk of the research conducted in the '60s, '70s, and '80s described married women as having numerous and emotionally close friendships that they formed during the day when their husbands were at work. Married men, on the other hand, had few emotionally close friendships. However, the husband was instrumental in forming "couple friendships." He would begin a friendship with a (male) co-worker, then he and the co-worker would bring their wives along for a social event. It was assumed that the two wives would use their common experiences as wives and mothers as a basis for their friendship. From then on, it was the wife's responsibility to be the couple's "social secretary" in planning events between the two couples (Bell 1981:137). My research indicates that while

this is still the case for some couples, for many the role of “social secretary” is less gendered than it was thirty years ago, and both married men and women can form the base of couple friendships.

Fortunately, more recent research has been conducted on the subject of marriage and friendship. An interview-based study of “194 dual-earner couples in mid-life” found that while most married men and women had close friends, married women described their relationships with close friends as more emotionally supportive than did married men (Helms-Erikson 2000). Married men were more likely to discuss marital problems with their spouse, whereas wives were equally likely to discuss marital problems with their close friend as with their spouse. Women often rely on other female friends to engage in what Oliner refers to as “marriage work.” “*Marriage work* refers to reflection and action to achieve or sustain the stability of a marriage or a sense of its adequacy” (1989:123). Oliner interviewed twenty one women, seventeen of which were currently married, and all of which said they discussed their marriages or romantic relationships with their female friends (1989:122). In general, women view their same-sex friendships as more similar to their spousal relationship than men do (Voss et al. 1999). One study asked married men and women to rate various aspects of their relationships with their friends and spouses, such as strength of relationship, “interpersonal rewards,” degree of strain or tension, and general favorability (Voss 1999: 109). The study found that women rated their same-sex friendships more positively on all aspects than did men, and women also viewed their relationships with their friends and spouses as equally

encouraging and supportive. Men rated their relationships with their spouses more positively than those with their friends in terms of “general favorability, self-affirmation value and ego support value” (Voss 1999: 112). Overall, the study found that while men and women view their spousal relationships similarly, there are differences in the way they view their friendships.

Friendship research repeatedly concludes that women’s same-gender friendships are more emotionally close than men’s same sex friendships. The difference between men’s and women’s friendships has been described by defining women’s friendships as “face-to-face” and men’s as “side-by-side,” implying that while women’s friendships revolve around talking, men’s friendships revolve around doing (Allan 1989). Women have more emotionally close friends than men both before and after marriage. Incidentally, this is a difference that sometimes causes conflict between spouses, as men gripe about the lengthy telephone conversations their wives have with their female friends (Rubin 1985). The discomfort men experience due to their wives’ close friendships can be the result of both jealousy and a sense of betrayal (Robertson et al. 1991). Several researchers have found that men consider their wives to be their “best friends” and thus turn to them for emotional support. Women, in comparison, are just as likely to turn to their close women friends as their husbands for emotional support (Rubin 1985; Helms-Erikson 2000; Voss et al. 1999).

While the Helms-Erikson study stands out as one of the most recent examples of research conducted on the subject of friendship and marriage, it leaves several aspects of the topic unexplored. Since the study focused on married

couples in “mid-life,” it fails to directly compare friendships before and after marriage. So while we now have a picture of what married, middle-aged people’s friendships are like, we are left with the question of to what degree marriage has shaped the spouses’ friendships. To explore the effect of marriage on friendship, we must examine the nature of adult friendships both before, during and after marriage. My study, therefore, looks at married individuals’ friendships comparatively by exploring the ways they have changed since marriage.

While explanations based on previous gendered divisions of labor may prove inadequate in relation to today’s friendships and marriages, some of the findings of past research have been more enduring. Previous studies on friendship and marriage found that the relationship between marriage and friendship is often a contradictory one. While friendship has been found to be a helpful and necessary component of marriage, allowing the couples to share the burden of their emotional needs with someone other than their spouse, marriage often causes people to distance themselves from their friends, or even sever their friendships completely (Rubin 1985). My study supported these previous findings, as I will describe.

Previous research indicates that there is no doubt that friendship takes a significant hit when a person gets married. Newlyweds tend to focus entirely on the new relationship they’ve just entered into, while their friends “take a back seat” (Rubin 1985:115). As people get older, they put more time and effort into developing their careers and families than maintaining their friendships (Voss et al. 1999). Unfortunately, the friendships people sometimes neglect when they get

married can turn out to be an irreplaceable source of emotional support, one that helps their marriage run more smoothly (Rubin 1985). In addition, research indicates that the way and degree to which marriage affects friendship is gendered. One study published in the early 1980s reports that women's friendships suffer more than men's do early on in marriage and childrearing, but after the children are grown the opposite is true. "Further evidence suggests that this interaction effect can be explained by both structural and dispositional factors, the former working to reduce women's friendships relative to men's in the earlier period and the latter expanding their friendships later on" (Fischer 1983:abstract). If structural factors are to blame, one might predict that this trend might have changed in the past twenty years as more women return to the workforce while their children are still young and delegate childrearing responsibilities to paid workers (Hochschild 1989; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002).

The idea that married people should parcel out their emotional needs among their spouse and friends goes against the American ideal that married people should be best friends as well as lovers. "There is often a strong pressure in marriage, often during the first years, to end friendships outside marriage and turn within for meeting those emotional needs" (Bell 1981:127). My research indicates that this may still be the case, as the majority of married interviewees mentioned that their spouse was their closest friend. However, while many of my interviewees said their spouses are their best friends, most also mentioned having close or best friends in addition to their spouses.

Friendships allow spouses to retain identities separate from their roles as husbands or wives. As Rubin explains, "The friendships we form separate from the couple, then, remind us of our own identity, enabling us to retain the 'I' without getting lost in the 'we'" (1985:134). Rubin argues that women need these friendships more than men do because women lose more of their identity when they get married than men do. According to her, many married women give up their name and their dreams in deference to the aspirations of their husbands. While this would seem to be a potentially dated observation, several of the female interviewees in my study supported this finding by stating that friends gave them a chance to be themselves.

It seems likely that while some aspects of the intersection of friendship and marriage have changed, others have not. For example, friendships still can serve to "fill the gaps" in marital relationships (Rubin 1985:147). As one interviewee in Rubin's study explained, "No two people can be everything for each other, nor should they be [...] Friendship is really a way to get some of the other things that you don't get from the particular person you love and married" (1985:142). In this way, friendships improve the well-being both of couples and individuals.

In sum, studies on marriage and friendship in the 1960s-1980s indicate that friendship takes a significant hit when a person gets married. Married people see their spouse as their best friend and thus have less need for the friends they made before marriage. Their marriage becomes the locus of their lives both in terms of their time and attention and as the center of their friendship network.

Previous research also indicates that there is an undercurrent of tension between spouses and friends as they compete for the time and attention of the married person between them. While it is possible that little has changed in terms of marriage and friendship in the past fifty years, this seems unlikely, especially since the surrounding social relations that shaped spousal and friend relationships have changed drastically. Public and private spheres were more clearly gendered several decades ago than they are now, and it is quite possible that this change would affect friendships, spousal relations, and how the two are negotiated. Indeed, my research suggests that the intersection of friendship and marriage is much less gendered now than research conducted thirty years ago indicated.

Using previous literature as a starting point in terms of the kinds of issues to address, I asked interviewees questions regarding their relationships with their spouses and friends, and how they balance their romantic and platonic relationships. Ultimately, this study gives insights into how different people have balanced the needs of their friends, spouses and themselves in the larger context of their lives.

Research Design

I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with single, cohabitating, married and divorced individuals. My study population was composed of eleven individuals ranging in age from 25 to mid-60s. Six of them were women and five were men. Three of them mentioned that they had one or

more children. Of the women, four were currently married, one was cohabitating with a long-term boyfriend, and one had been divorced for one year after sixteen years of marriage. Of the men, one was single and four were married. I interviewed each participant individually, either at their workplace or in a public place. I specifically did not interview them in their homes as I wanted the participants to have the freedom to describe potential negative effects of marriage without worrying about offending their spouse. The interviews lasted from thirty minutes to just over one hour, with most clustering closer to one hour.

Interviewees	Age	Age Married	Marriage Length	Children
Dave	60s	Mid20s	36 years	?
Fiona	40s	Late20s	16 years	No
Jane	43	Late20s	14 years	1 (8 yr old girl)
Jimmy	25	Mid20s	5 months	No
Joe	33	Late20s	6 years	1 (infant girl)
Margaret	40s	30s (cohabitating)	12 years (cohabitating)	2 (partner's girls)
Mimi	42	Late20s	13 years	2 (9 yr old boy & 7 yr old girl)
Patrick	54	48	6 years	No
Paulo	30s	Single	--	No
Rose	49	44	5 years	No
Steph	30s	Late20s	3 years	No

My criteria for inclusion in this study were minimal; I required only that interviewees had friends and were either married themselves or had married friends. I used snowball sampling to contact participants, which meant that several of the participants knew each other, and some were co-workers or friends. Interviewing close friends meant that I sometimes got interesting and conflicting perspectives on the same relationships from two or more people, but it also meant I had to use extra caution when discussing and describing these friendships to

ensure that the study had no adverse effects on their relationships. To ensure confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms for all interviewees, as well as all the people and places interviewees mentioned during their interviews.

By interviewing people with a range of marital statuses, I have been able to make comparisons regarding the role significant others play in a married, single, cohabitating, or divorced person's life. Interviewing people who have been married for varying lengths of time enabled me to compare the friendship relations of a person who has been married for several months to a person who has been married for over thirty years. Their age range provided insights into generational differences.

One limitation of my study is that the majority of the participants were from middle to upper class backgrounds, although it is hard to say this definitively as I did not ask any questions regarding income level. Therefore, I base my class divisions on information participants related to me concerning their education level, employment, and apparel. With the exception of the one single man I interviewed, all were Caucasian. This limits the application of the study. As with all qualitative research, it is important to remember that these findings are not generalizable to larger populations due to the limited scope of the research. My analysis is based on one series of interviews conducted with eleven individuals living in one region of the United States. By conducting only one series of interviews, it is possible that the subjects' memories of the earlier state of their friendships were colored by their present experiences. They may look back on their previous friendships nostalgically in retrospect, or they may over-emphasize

the effect of marriage because they believe that is what the study is trying to find. To counter this last possibility, I told participants only that I was interested in the change of friendships over time, or simply that I was conducting a study about friendship. I also began the interviews with open ended questions regarding friendship, and did not ask questions about marriage until the participant brought up marriage or their spouse.

The central advantage to the semi-structured interview method is that it provides an in-depth understanding of the complexities of interpersonal relationships. While a survey would have allowed the gathering of data from a larger population, such data would only be able to scratch the surface in terms of uncovering the complexities of friend and marital relationships. Research that was conducted in the 1960s and 1970s often employed interviews to gather rich, detailed information on the subject of friendship and marriage. This study sheds new light on the topic by furthering the research begun in the 1960s.

I tape recorded and transcribed each interview in addition to taking notes during the interview. These notes acted as a reference tool to examine emerging themes as I began my analysis. Primarily, however, these notes served as guidelines which enabled me to build questions off what participants have said during the interview. They also allowed me to quickly review general themes that had emerged from previous interviews, shaping the questions I asked in subsequent interviews. In this sense, the questions I asked in the first interviews were subject to change pending the responses I received. My original questions were loosely based around the findings of previous studies, but as I progressed

through the interviews, they became increasingly guided by the information imparted to me by previous interviewees.

However, I did continue to collect data that focused on several general themes. Both my original and my adapted questions reflect these themes. Throughout the interview process, I made a concerted effort not to ask leading questions regarding the effect of marriage or questions that emphasize change and difference rather than possible continuity. I hypothesized that if such changes existed, they would emerge of their own accord. Indeed, this was often the case, and I found that when certain topics did not emerge of their own accord, probes revealed that such topics were not of great significance to participants. I never asked “How did your friendships with people of the opposite sex change when you got married?” Instead I asked, “Do you have friends of the opposite gender?” and then, “Did you have friends of the opposite gender when you were in college?” If these answers differed, I would ask when the change occurred; for example, if a female interviewee had male friends in college but not now, I would ask, “When and how did your friendships with men end?”

I always began the interview by asking, “Who is/are your closest friend(s) right now?” The answer to this question often caused me to ask a series of subsequent questions regarding the participant’s closest friends: do they live nearby, how often do you see them, how often do you talk to them, how do you communicate (phone/e-mail/letters/instant message/in person), and what activities do you do with them. I also would ask a question aimed at eliciting emotional

closeness, something to the effect of: Who do you go to when you have a problem or you need to talk to someone?

If they mentioned that they were married or in a relationship, I would ask if they had any friends who were friends with their partner as well, and if they had any “couple” friends with whom they were friends with both members of the couple. If so, I asked how they got to know them and who was the instigator of the activities in which they would participate with their spouse. I also asked questions about friends of the opposite gender, both currently and earlier on in their lives. I was careful not to ask if their significant other changed their opposite sex relationships, unless they brought it up first, in which case I would ask a probing question.

In the later interviews, I often asked interviewees to rank their priorities in their daily life, or to divide up the time they spent each week with their spouse, friends, children, or at work. When they expressed the variety of people and activities in their life or the difficulties they had balancing everything (which several did), I would ask what strategies they used to balance everything, and if they had to sacrifice one relationship or activity in their lives, who or what that was or would be. I explored changes in their friendships over time by asking about their previous friendships, or if there were any points in their lives where they noticed their friendships changing drastically, and what those moments were.

Analysis: Emerging Patterns of Friendship

The diversity of my sample in terms of age and length of marriage resulted in a range of findings. Several patterns emerged that alternately support and contradict previous research and suggest new trends and avenues for future research. My study confirms the previous finding that friendships formed during marriage often center on couples and mutual friends. These friendships tend to form when two friends include their spouses in activities. While married people are less likely to form new close emotional friendships, most do manage to maintain their close friendships that began before they married, with the exception of opposite sex friendships, which are often negatively affected by marriage. While previous studies found that gender is the determining factor for the kinds of friendships people have and who they rely on for emotional support, I found that both women and men had close friends that they relied on for emotional support in addition to their spouses. My interviewees conformed to the American ideal of being “best friends” with one’s spouse. Previous studies found that friends and spouses are sometimes in direct competition for a person’s time, a problem that is sometimes resolved by “dropping” the friend. Several interviewees conceded that it was difficult to balance work, children, friends and spouses. A popular solution was to spend time with one’s spouse and friends together. When they were forced to choose between spending time with friends and time with their spouse, most (sometimes guiltily) said they chose their spouse over their friends. The following discussion will explore these findings in more detail.

Forming and Maintaining Mutual Friendships

I use the term “core friendship” to refer to the relationship between two individuals; “secondary ties” are then formed when the two individuals bring their spouses into the relationship. In doing so they form what researchers have dubbed “couple friendships” and what many of my interviewees called “mutual friends” (Rubin 1985; Bell 1981; Pogrebin 1987). Here, I use the terms “couple friendships” and “mutual friends” interchangeably. The “core friendship” refers to the two original friends, and “secondary ties” refer to the all of the relationships involving the added spouses.

Previous research found that couple friendships start when men who are friends introduce their wives to each other. Therefore, it was believed that men were always at the “core” of couple friendships, that is, it was their relationship that began the couple friendship and held it together. My study found that while most couple friendships do begin with two friends and develop when the two friends add their spouses, as often as not the core friendship is between women as men. Mimi, who is forty-two and has been married for thirteen years, explains, “Well, it’s kind of a stereotype that once the husband gets married or the guy gets married, that he’ll hang out with his wife’s friends. But I think with us, I think it’s pretty even.”

When I asked the interviewees if they had any mutual friends with their spouses, a new pattern emerged. Couple friendships did not universally originate in men’s friendships. Rather, the interviewees spent the most time discussing the couple friendships that developed around initial friendships involving them and their friends. That is, when Joe, 33, spoke of the group of mutual friends that he

and his wife of six years spent time with, all of these mutual friends were originally Joe's friends. When Rose, 49, spoke of the mutual friends she had with her husband of five years, she mentioned her own friends she had before she married who later became friends with her husband. This may suggest that couple friendships develop from both men's and women's friendships, but the couple friendships that come to mind first and are most important to the individual are those that grew out of his or her own friendships, rather than the spouse's friends. A person may believe that their spouse and their friend's spouse have grown to be equally good friends, but in truth the original friendship remains the strongest tie. This theory was put to the test when Fiona, who is in her forties, divorced her husband of sixteen years. She had tried to involve her husband in her group of friends, but he always preferred for her to join his group of friends (and their wives). For this reason, their "mutual" friends were his friends and their wives. Since their divorce one year ago, Fiona has stayed close to her friends but has not spoken with the "mutual" friends that she and her husband spent time with when they were married.

We had mutual friends together, which basically consisted of people that [my husband] went to high school with, high school couples, I mean, everybody got married or whatever. Since our divorce, anybody – oh, we had our mutual friends and then I had my game night and my tennis friends and even though some of these people knew each other, right now it's extremely separate. I haven't talked to any of those people that were our mutual friends because it's awkward right now for everybody. But this group of my lady friends has remained consistent throughout the whole thing.

It is possible, though, that some couples' mutual friendships tend to grow out of one spouse's friends and not the other's. Rose described several couple friendships, all of which grew out of her pre-marriage friendships. Rose described how she has grown close to one of her best friends' husband. In fact, when she was in a serious car accident, he flew across the country to take care of her while she recovered. He is also becoming good friends with Rose's husband. "If I go to bed, they stay up for hours on end and I always feel like I'm missing out on something. I think there's something that is growing there but I don't know how much." Rose has not developed similarly close relationships with her husband's friends and their spouses.

Some of [my husband's] male friends from the early years are sort of my friends but it's all about him. I would expect, I guess, they like me and they enjoy my company, but they're there because of him, not because of me.

Overall, mutual friendships can arise out of either spouse's core friendships, although for some couples, mutual friendships arise more out of one person's friendships than the other's. It is common for married or cohabiting people to have mutual friends with their spouses. However, it appears that people remain closest to those friends who were their friends originally rather than the mutual friends that arise from their spousal friendships.

Mutual friendships revolve around doing things together. There is a clear evolution in terms of the types of activities that couple friends do together. The younger couples often go out together to bars or restaurants, while the older couples usually have dinner at home and then linger to talk, drink, and play

games. Several of the middle aged (40+) interviewees mentioned going on vacations with other couple friends. They recalled going out with their couple friends when they were younger, so it can be concluded that the shift from going out to staying in is age based rather than generational.

Some interviewees noted that the shift from going out to staying in was often spurred by getting married and having children. This shift was seen as natural, gradual and collective, as most people within a friendship group married and had children around the same time. For Rose, the shift happened gradually as people in her friend group started pairing off, getting married, and having children.

I think it was when people started dating and breaking up and marrying and when the weddings started and when the kids started coming, then those people would pull out and they'd have more responsibilities to their sweetheart or whatever. They'd take themselves out for a while to devote more time to that. And it started evolving. That's when we started changing into the, "Okay, let's make dinner and drink wine" instead of going out and about. And then they'd start leaving [the friend group] and, you know THE WEDDING, or BABIES or growing up, and, that must have been the shift. I don't remember anyone announcing, well I can't go because of this, that and the other, but it sort of became the way it happened. Just sort of pairing off and becoming more responsible. It does sound awful. But it was a whole mess of new and exciting things for people.

While the kinds of activities couples do together change as they grow older, all interviewees described their mutual friendships as based on "doing" rather than "talking." Mutual friends live nearby and tend to be the ones with whom a couple socializes with most often. However, these couple friendships are not emotionally close in the way that friendships between two individuals are. Jimmy, 25, and his

wife of five months spend time with another couple several times a week, but when I asked Jimmy if he would talk to this couple if he had a problem, he said, "I think it'd make them uncomfortable if I confided in them or something." Mutual friendships, then, play an important role in a couple's social life, but they are not as emotionally close as the relationships between spouses and two individual friends.

Organizing Mutual Friendships

The two youngest married men, Joe and Jimmy, both described cohesive groups of friends that grew out of their close friendships. Jimmy, 25, and his wife of five months spend time with a group of friends that Jimmy has known since high school. Jimmy is the one who organizes group poker nights because he is the one who likes to play poker. When it comes to non-poker related group activities, though, Jimmy said that everyone plays a role in organizing. Joe, 33, and his wife of six years socialize with two other couples they consider good friends. Joe is the strongest link between all of these friends however, as he worked with one of the husbands and played soccer in college with the other. As the strongest link, Joe has historically been the one who organizes all of the get-togethers. Since his daughter was born recently, however, Joe has not done as much organizing. This means that the three couples do not get together as often, although other members have picked up the slack to some degree. Joe's couple friendships illustrates a common theme: in most cases, it is the person who belonged to the "core" friendship who instigates and organizes mutual friend

activities. An exception to this is Dave, who has been married for thirty-six years. He explains that while he and his wife plan activities together, she is always the one who does the actual calling, regardless of who is part of the “core friendship.”

I hate the telephone. She's the social one and she likes doing the telephone work. So it's stuff that we may cook up together but she'll actually . . . you know, if it wasn't for her we wouldn't end up doing half the things we end up doing. It sort of begs the question, if I didn't have her would I end up not doing those things at all? Or would I eventually make those contacts because there's no one else to do it, and I think the answer is probably yes. But since she likes doing the telephone and likes doing the contacting, why should I take away something that she finds joy [in]?

Dave's description is reminiscent of the research findings from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Such research argued that “regardless of who makes the initial contact, it is usually the function of the wives to provide the continuity for socializing” (Bell 1981:137). Dave's marriage resembles the marriages described in these earlier studies, as he married in the early 1970s. However, two of the younger women also reported being the primary organizer for their and their husbands' social lives. Jane, who is 43 and has been married for fourteen years, said, “I guess I tend to navigate our social calendar more. We are a little gender imbalanced,” but added that if her husband was part of the core friendship then he would be the organizer. Steph, who is in her early thirties and has been married for three years, said the organizer is,

Never [my husband]. He is the most, ‘I don't care, just tell me where to go and what to do,’ basically. Which is nice. See, usually it tends to be the women [who organize]. Especially when it's a group of women and men, it tends to be the women that organize it.

However, she also added that her husband will invite some of his friends from work and their spouses over. These experiences suggest that the role of social organizer is less tied to gender and more dependent on who is part of the core friendship. Even if women claim to do more organizing than men do, this could be because organizational methods are gendered. Fiona's response suggests that while both she and her ex-husband of sixteen years have active social lives, they organize their social lives differently.

All [of my ex-husband's] mutual friends from high school were real connected to his family and his sisters and his brothers so it was just a family-friend conglomerate. People show up at Thanksgiving dinners and all that. I think socializing in that group was less about picking up phones and more about always having a standing night that they would try to get together. When you're friends with people for so long that they're always around, you don't have to call, they're just always around. So I wouldn't even say that it was organizing. It just was. It just was what it was. Like they were a part of you. And they were a part of him. That's just how interconnected he was with this group of people. [With my group of friends it was different] because it was a much newer group for me. For only five years. It was a different kind of thing.

Of the eight people who discussed the role of social instigator, three said the role was largely fulfilled by the wife, for two the role was filled by the husband, and two said both husband and wife did some social organizing. Margaret, who is in her forties, hosts bonfires with Phil, her live-in boyfriend of twelve years. Phil calls to invite his friends from high school, and she calls her friends from work. There are, however, a few of Phil's friends that she will sometimes call: the couple friends that grew out of Phil's childhood friendships. This suggests that for the most part, the core friendship continues to be the

strongest tie between couple friends, but the secondary ties formed in couple friendship can, and sometimes will, grow equally strong. All of the interviewees had mutual friends that they spent time with in the company of their spouse. Several interviewees expressed the convenience and pleasure of being able to spend time with their spouse and their friends at the same time. Rose, who married at 44, explains:

But I really think that it's taken me by surprise that I like to be with [my husband] as much as I do and that I don't want to escape. I enjoy adding his company to the mix. But I think 75/25 [time spent with him and friends/time spent with just friends] is probably accurate, and it does take me by surprise. One of the things that happened when we started dating and we realized it was beginning to be serious, it was that I have this party that I have, since the early 80s, he wanted to bring his friends into it. And it worked. I mean, it has become ours.

Rose's sentiments reflect those of many married interviewees who find that when they have a limited amount of free time to socialize, it is helpful to spend that time with both their spouse and their friends, rather than having to divide their time between the two.

Separate Friendships

While all interviewees mentioned having some mutual friends with their spouses, two interviewees stood out as having largely distinct friendship groups. What is even more remarkable is that while one interviewee saw this situation as a fundamental problem, the other enjoyed it. Patrick, a 54 year old married man, has been playing music with the same group of musician friends his entire life. His wife of six years is equally engaged in dressage, an equestrian activity. These

social groups never overlap, and Patrick and his wife make only occasional forays into each other's respective worlds.

We really like it like that. And when I do get to see her I really look forward to it. But it may be that I only get to see her Saturday afternoon and night. And it's great. We look forward to seeing each other. So we can't really relate to a typical marriage discussion, like "Doesn't he drive you crazy?" Because we just don't see each other.

Fiona and her ex-husband had a similar situation. He worked evenings, and his work schedule made it difficult for them to spend time together with other couples. When their free time would overlap, they would either spend time alone together or with his friends. Unlike Patrick, Fiona did not like that she and her ex-husband had almost entirely separate friendship groups and did little socializing "as a couple."

I think I tried to make it happen and for whatever reason it just didn't or got to be too hard with the work schedule. And when the opportunities came up when we had openings at the same time that maybe I didn't want to spend it with anybody else because we had so [little] free time together, we would try to spend it together, just the two of us. And I was very familiar with his mutual [friend] group because they were in our wedding, they were people I knew when we were dating, and all that kind of stuff. So it seemed again that we would always gravitate towards them because it was more comfortable with them or he didn't like to step out of the box. Any effort that maybe I made for [him to spend time with] my new friends, and he was encouraging me to make new friends, was uncomfortable for him because he just wasn't real comfortable in new situations with new people. That's part of the problem. You shouldn't be in a partnership – well, those are pretty strong words, but it does make a relationship hard when you have two separate groups of friends. I'm very conscious of that now. That's not very fun. That's not a good thing. That's very uncomfortable and it's not ideal and I didn't like it that way. It was just kind of the way it evolved. And that was too bad. I don't want separate friends.

Fiona and Patrick were the only interviewees who described having distinctly separate friend groups with which they spent a significant amount of time. However, Fiona and Patrick did name a few friends who they would spend time with along with their spouse. What set them apart was the impact of their separate friendships on their lives. Patrick enjoyed his ability to maintain a friendship group separate from his wife. Fiona described her and her husband's separate friendship groups as "an unfortunate demarcation." These findings suggest that different people have different ideas regarding the degree to which their relationships with their friends and spouses should overlap. However, all of the interviewees did integrate these relationships to some degree.

Forming and Maintaining Close Friendships

All of the married interviewees had mutual friends with their spouses, and these friends were usually couples. Steph explained that while it was usually awkward to do things with her husband and a single friend, there were a few exceptions.

It tends to be hard when it's just [my husband] and I and one other person. Um, unless it's someone that we're both good friends with and then the three of us will go out and it's not a problem at all. Like [my husband] has really good guy friends and they've been single forever and we'll hang out all three of us a lot.

Some couples spent time with single mutual friends, but these friends tended to predate the couples' marriage and originated from relationships with just one member of the couple.

My research revealed that being in a romantic relationship limits one's ability to make close friends. Most people made their closest, best friends before they married or became involved in a serious relationship. Across the board, interviewees referred to their closest friends as the ones who had been around the longest. Some mentioned that these closest, dearest friends were the ones who had seen them evolve as people and knew their many sides. Jane, 43, married 14 years, compares her relationship with Ann, who she has known for seven or eight years, to her relationship with Stacy, who she has known since childhood.

It's not that I would hold things back from Ann. We haven't known each other as long. There's a lot of my history that she doesn't know just because she hasn't known me as long as Stacy. Stacy could know just about everything about me. If you had to pick someone in the world who would know everything about me, that would be Stacy.

Jane explains that Stacy knows her better than her friend Ann does and presumably better than her husband does as well. This finding corresponded to Rubin's finding that married women value their friends because they can be themselves around them and can break out of their roles as wife and mother (1985:135). Jane describes her annual trip to see her single friend, Andrea, as a "sabbatical of singleness."

I can go out and visit Andrea and we can hang free as a bird. And there doesn't have to be a need for other relationships or being coupled up or anything like that. That's a friendship where we really just enjoy our time together as people ...

Several interviewees explained that their closest friends were those who they had befriended before either of them got married. Steph compares the friends

she made recently to the friends she made in college and medical school: “And then I have a group of friends here that, because I spend most of my time with my husband, they’re good friends, but they’re not my dearest friends, like the friends that I had before I met my husband.” She explains that it is hard for her to form close friendships when her husband is around because she often chooses to spend time with him over friends. But during their long-distance engagement, Steph was able to form close friendships:

We were apart for four years. But we saw each other a lot. Like at least once a month. But, you know, for the majority of time, I was there and he was here. So I had really close friends in medical school. I just could spend a lot of time with them. And so I think I’ve really noticed the difference between medical school and residency. Having my husband with me. And of course it’s great to have him here and I would never go back to being apart from him, but that was one nice thing about doing the distance thing is that I had really nice, close friends.

Steph’s experience indicates that it can be difficult to form close friendships after marriage. But while marriage does seem to prevent the formation of close friendships, its effect on already established friendships is less drastic. Through phone calls and visits, Steph has stayed close to the friends she met in college and medical school. For the majority of interviewees, their closest friends were the ones they had known the longest, the ones who had preceded their marriage.

No one said that their spouse explicitly kept them from making new friends. In fact, several female interviewees said they appreciated how supportive their spouse was of their close friendships. This directly contrasts with Rubin’s research that found men often angry and jealous of their wives’ friendships (1985:139). However, as Steph explained, since her marriage she has consistently

chosen to spend time with her husband rather than friends. Time and time again, interviewees would choose to spend time with their spouses instead of their friends. To a certain extent, spending more time and placing more emotional burden on one's spouse is less of a conscious choice and more a matter of convenience. Several of the married and cohabitating interviewees said that they spent the most time with their partner and talked to them the most simply because they lived with them and they were always around. Whether spending more time with a spouse and less time with friends was a conscious choice or a matter of convenience, the fact remains that people are less likely to form close friendship bonds after marriage, although they often do a better job maintaining their existing close friendships than previous research has shown (Rubin 1985:114).

Spouse As Best Friend

This study confirmed the spouse-as-best-friend ideal across the age range and gender divide. Six out of the eight married people I interviewed said their spouse was their closest, best friend, the first person they called when they had a problem or crisis, or to share good news. Their spouse was the person they spent the most time with and the person they preferred to spend time with. However, the spouse-as-best-friend ideal was gendered in two ways. First, while each of the four married men said his wife was one of his best friends, only two of the four married women mentioned their husbands as their closest friends. Second, men appeared to be more aware that they were fulfilling an ideal by saying their

spouse was their best friend. Of the four married men who said their wife was their best friend, the two younger married men remarked on the “wife as best friend” ideal. Jimmy, 25, rolled his eyes and sighed, remarking that he was supposed to say that his wife is his closest friend, although, he reflected, “She probably is anyway.” Joe, 33, acknowledged the wife as best friend ideal as well, but said that there was some truth to it.

There are so many people in this world that I’d probably be happy with going out to dinner, going to movies, going to the theater, whatever it might be, doing that part of the relationship. But it’s the day to day stuff, being the person’s friend, and being supportive, and being excited to see them even when you’ve had a kind of terrible day, that’s the part that I think is the key and the important thing in a relationship that I’ve noticed is being friends. You have to be friends with the person as well as being in love with them because otherwise, you’re screwed.

The women, on the other hand, did not address the ideal. In fact, Rose, 49, was initially surprised when I asked her who her closest friends were, saying, “Oh! I’d forgotten about my husband! I guess I didn’t think about him in the context of this study [of friendship] but there he is.” So while the majority of married respondents mentioned their spouse as their best friend, regardless of age, men were more likely to say their wife was their best friend, and they also seemed more aware that in doing so, they were fulfilling an ideal.

Fulfilling Emotional Needs

Previous studies found that women relied on both their husbands and their friends to fulfill their emotional needs, while men relied solely on their wives. My research shows that the distinction has less to do with gender and more to do with

either the length of time a person has been married or their age. Interviewees who had been married for six years or less indicated that they saw their friends and spouses playing a similar emotional role in their lives, whereas people who had been married longer than six years tended to place their spouses and friends in different categories. Not surprisingly, however, for the most part the people who had been married the longest were also older. This makes it difficult to tell whether the tendency to differentiate between the roles of one's spouse and friends is tied to generational factors, age, or length of marriage.

All but one of the married people I interviewed described having a close friend with whom they felt they could talk openly about their problems. The one exception is Dave, who is in his 60s and has been married for thirty-six years. His communication with his best friend consists of short e-mails and occasional phone calls. When he wants to talk to someone about a problem, he relies solely on his wife. All of the other married interviewees relied primarily on their spouse as the person they talked to when they had a problem or a crisis. However, they all also spoke of close friends they could talk to in addition to their spouse. Joe, 33, explained the way he spread out his emotional needs among his wife, friends, and family.

The more important thing it is, the more likely it's going to be [my wife]. You know, we live together, obviously, and we have a lot invested, so she tends to be the one I talk to the most, but, you know it just depends how much I want to talk about it. Because sometimes I feel like I don't want to burden her with just hours and hours of discussion about things. So sometimes it'll be her first and then one of these other people next. I think it varies by subject. I'll give you an example: I think if it's about work, I'll talk to my parents next. If it's more about friendships in some way then I'm

more likely to talk to my friend Kurt. My sister is more of a catchall. But it really just depends on who I've already talked to about things.

This quote was typical of married men and women. When I asked who was the first person they went to when they had a problem or wanted to talk, almost all listed their spouse first, then proceeded to list their close friends, siblings and parents. While the younger people (20s and 30s) mentioned their parents more than the older people, with the exception of Dave, all married people regardless of gender and age had close friends they talked to about personal issues or problems.

Men Do, Women Talk?

My findings contradict the entrenched theory that women have conversation-based "face-to-face" friendships while men have activity-based "side-by-side" friendships (Allan 1989:73). As I have demonstrated, both men and women have close friends who they can talk to in addition to their spouses. Several of the men I talked to described having intimate conversation-based friendships with other men, while several of the women described having more superficial, activity-oriented friendships with other women. Overall, my findings show that both women and men have friends for talking and friends for doing. Joe both supported and refuted the stereotype that "men do, women talk." He explained that sports are a "natural" and efficient way to combine friend time with exercise and recreation.

Where you can actually get the exercise and the competition as well as seeing friends at the same go, that's really been a nice trick. And I think that as I get older, and as everyone has more kids and

more responsibility, that's the thing I try to look for, how can I package those things together in a natural way. I'm not going to go out and try a new sport I've never done before just to see friends, but more so, if it's a sport we play anyway. It doesn't have to be a sport, but if it's me and my group of friends that's usually what it is, that's an activity that we all want to do, that we can do together, you know, see each other regularly, then that's really a good way to do it.

The sports he participated in facilitated conversation to different degrees; while he rarely hung around long after soccer practice to talk with friends, curling has a "culture" surrounding it that involves going out to drink after practice or games. While all of this plays into the stereotype that men's friendships are activity-oriented, Joe also described his relationship with his closest friend, Kurt, who he's been friends with since 10th grade.

The thing with him, I mean, me and him are so tight, it's crazy. We keep talking every other day about his future. We talk about what we're going to do with our lives, and sounding things off each other. We're so far beyond the day to day, did you see that news article, did you see that basketball game? We'll touch on those things, but it's really more focused on, what's eating at you today? And what are you trying to achieve today, for him it's trying to figure out what's next, for me it's trying to make my job less busy. Talking about what being a parent feels like or things like that.

While the interview with Joe shows that men's friendships are not limited to doing things, several of the women I interviewed mentioned jogging as an activity that has a friend group associated with it. Two of the women I interviewed belonged to the same jogging group that got together once a week. They also belonged to a circle of friends that would get together to play a dice game once a month. The game, one of them explained, was really just an excuse to get together to talk. "The dice game is really a no-brainer so really it's just a time for us to get together to chat with each other and talk about stuff and just have fun." Both men

and women have friends for doing and friends for talking. Some times the friends for doing and those for talking are separate groups, and other times the groups overlap. As I previously discussed, the friends for talking tend to be those that have been around the longest, whereas the friends for doing tend to live nearby.

Cross-Gender Friendships in Marriage

Most close friendships can survive a marriage. There is, however, one major exception: opposite gender friendships. While marriage is not universally the “funeral” of cross-gender friendships, it certainly has a more detrimental effect on cross-gender friendships than same gender friendships. Of the ten interviewees who were married, divorced, or in a long-term cohabitating relationship, six of them described having close cross-gender friendships while they were married or cohabitating. However, of these six, three mentioned that these cross-gender friendships were a source of conflict or tension. Steph offered a striking example of the effect of marriage on cross-gender friendships. Recently she had reconnected with Luke, an ex-boyfriend, after falling out of touch for several years. They would go out together every other week or so, although Steph was careful to tell her husband about it, and he always gave her the green light.

But then:

I hadn't heard from him [my male friend] in four weeks, and I kept calling him and I was like, “Where are you?” And I started to get worried, like, did he DIE or something? Yeah, and so, he e-mailed back and he's in a serious relationship and his girlfriend said that “I don't think you should see her anymore.” Yeah, and so he was

like, "She's really important to me. I can't really see you anymore and I don't want to talk to you anymore." She trumped me, I guess. And it sort of made me sadder than I thought it would. Because I just felt so good about the way things were. So I haven't heard anything. Nothing. He doesn't want any contact. No e-mail, no nothing.

Patrick's friendship with two of his former, long-term girlfriends demonstrates another way that cross-gender friendships in marriage can be problematic. Ideally, he would like for his wife and his former girlfriends and him to all be good friends, but some tension remains.

[My wife] understands [my wanting to stay friends with my ex-girlfriends] rationally, and I've encouraged her to stay friends with her ex-husband, but she's been taught that, of course, you don't talk to your ex. And I hope to teach her that, you've done all these things with this person, so why would you just abandon that? It would be my goal for us to all be friends together. And for it to be comfortable.

Based on these scenarios, one might assume that it is always the jealous wife or girlfriend who is to blame for the failure of cross-gender friendships in marriage. However, Mimi's description of her close friendship with a single man suggests that other social pressures may be involved.

I have one male friend. He's single. He's two years younger than I am. My husband kind of likes him now. He hasn't always liked him. I think some of his friends gave him a hard time. Like, your wife has a good boy friend, what's up with that? And just their personalities, it just took a while for them to click. And um, just recently, my husband said, if you ever want to double date with [your guy friend] and whoever he's dating I will. So he's warming up to him.

Half of the married people with close cross-gender friends did not find these relationships to be a problem. Rose speculated that age was the reason she could have close male friends even after she got married.

I think because I was in my late forties when I got married, I wasn't planning on giving anything up. Anybody who was my friend was going to be my friend regardless of whether I was married or not. And my husband didn't bring any jealousy issues into it, so he was perfectly fine with me going to sit at a bar with someone that he didn't necessarily know. And I wouldn't make a big deal out of it. I would say, this is who I'm going to be up there with, and if you want to join us you can, but you might be bored to tears! And he is perfectly fine with that. So I didn't really feel the nature of those [friendships] change. But I think it would have definitely, had I been married in my twenties or maybe in my thirties that it would have felt different. I would have been uncomfortable, maybe wouldn't have known how to avoid the flirtations that sometimes happen with men friends. And now I can flirt with anybody I want and I know exactly where I'm coming from and it's not as charged as it was in the twenties, thirties.

However, my data shows no correlation between either the length of time an individual has been married or how old one is and whether or not cross-gender friendships in marriage are a source of tension. Indeed, Jimmy, who is twenty-five and has been married only five months, has successfully maintained his close friendship with Sarah, who he dated for a week and a half in high school. They have remained good friends ever since. "We're closer now than we've ever been, the whole time. It's a lot different now than it used to be." Jimmy says that after his wife, Sarah would be the first person he'd call if he was having a crisis. "Because she wants to do that. She's driven to people's problems. And she wants to listen to people. She loves it. In a sick . . . [laughs] She loves to hear it." Jimmy and Sarah talk on instant messenger every day at work, and the core group of friends that Jimmy spends the most time with consists of his wife, Sarah, and another married couple. It's important to note, however, that Jimmy did not ever mention spending time with Sarah alone; he always talked about doing things

with Sarah, his wife, another couple, and “whatever guy Sarah’s dating at the time.”

Of the four married or cohabitating interviewees who didn’t have close cross-gender friends, two did not recall ever having close cross-gender friendships, which suggests that getting married did not prevent them from forming or maintaining cross-gender friendships that they would have otherwise had. Jane mentioned that she had a close male friend in high school and another in college, but didn’t attribute the end of the friendship to her marriage. Fiona, who is recently divorced, said that while she had several close male friends in college, “There’s no way I would have done anything with some single or divorced guy when I was married.”

Having Children, Changing Jobs

While marriage affects the kinds of friendships people form, my research shows that work and children have a more significant effect on friendships than marriage does. People tend to get married and have children around the same time in their lives. They often move to a new place and start their career at this time. Therefore, it seems reasonable to theorize that while getting married does have some effect on friendships, having children, working longer hours, and moving to a new city or neighborhood may have significant effect on friendships as well. Since several of these events may and often do occur around the same time in a person’s life, it is difficult to say which events have the biggest effect on friendships. However, when I asked interviewees if there were any points in their

lives where they felt their friendships significantly changed in a short time, interviewees mentioned having children, changing jobs, or moving; they did not mention marriage. Several interviewees mentioned age as a factor that changed the kinds of friendships they had and the kinds of things they would do with friends. When I asked Joe what caused his friendships to change over the years, he mentioned kids, work, moving, and age.

As everybody had a kid that made it more difficult. But we all had busy jobs; we've got a couple doctors, and a lawyer and my job is crazy and it just ends up being Friday nights are totally out because everyone's so nuts during the week. And then people travel, some people have to work on the weekends. So I think that having kids contributed to it. Makes it more difficult . . . the nap schedules and all that stuff. But part of it is just getting older. It just seems that staying in and being quiet seems more appealing than it used to. We live 20 minutes away, and somehow 20 minutes makes a big difference. If we were just two blocks away I think it would be a lot easier to call up and say, hey we're going to come over for an hour. But when 20 minutes and 20 minutes is part of the hour, it's not as meaningful. Somehow you kind of get out of that pattern.

Moving farther away from friends, getting busier at work or going back to school, having kids, and getting older were topics that many interviewees mentioned. For those interviewees with young children, however, their children topped the list in terms of taking up the most time, effort, and attention.

For many, their friendships changed significantly when they or their friends had children. Generally, the overall time spent with friends decreased, and their group gatherings changed to child-friendly activities and were shortened to fit children's attention spans. Joe explains,

I have some friends here and there. But we just had a daughter. Fourteen months ago. That takes up a lot more time, so seeing friends has been a lot harder. After hearing about this [study] and

thinking about it I was like, "Yeah, there's really been a change in the last two years as a lot of my friends have had kids." You find yourself seeing them a lot less.

Jane explained the ways marriage, divorce, and having children have affected her friendships over the years.

I was first to get married [of all my friends]. Stacy got married a year after. I was 22 – way too young to get married. She's still married to her husband number one. I was in that marriage for four years. And that ended while I was in college. I kind of had it in my mind at that time that no matter what I did in life I was going to maintain those friendships to some extent. So I made a point of maintaining those friendships with Stacy and Irene. Those were my steady Eddies. And so it was very easy for me to do at that point. We all lived close to one another. I spent less time with them after the marriage, but we didn't *not* maintain our friendship. We continued to spend time together, to do stuff outside of my marriage. [After I got divorced] we definitely spent more time together. But then Stacy was married and she had kids. She was the first of any of us to have kids and that changed things between the three of us, too. Because we were kind of three bonded friends. So then Irene and I spent more time together. And Stacy would spend time with us less often, mostly because she had kids and was busy. So that changed the dynamics a bit. But nevertheless we still held things together.

For Jane and the majority of respondents, getting married and having children meant that they spent less time with their friends. However, Jane mentioned another way having kids has influenced her friendships.

I thought it was really important to form some friendships with people who were in the same shoes as I was. And that's how Ann and I met, during that time. We met through a Mom's Club, which was a community organization. And neither of us have anything to do with it anymore. But we met through that and we both happened to be [from the same area]. Our friendship just developed from there.

Several women mentioned forming friendships with other women based on their common experiences as mothers. But what happens to the women who never have

children and get left out of the “Mom’s Club”? Rose, who married at 44 and has no children, explained that several of her friends with children regularly meet to have breakfast and talk about mothering.

They started a breakfast club that was really geared towards moms. And I never felt left out because I was never really thinking of having children. They said I could come along, but I thought I would be bored actually, by all that mom talk. But I could see where in some relationships that might have been a big negative for the person who might feel left out. I didn’t feel bad about it. It’s a nice tradition that’s continued for them, even now. I’ve been to two of them. They really had stated their purpose of, “Let’s talk about our kids and the problems we’re having.” And I just knew I’d have not too much to say.

Mimi, 42, also described how she met many of her friends through her children and her work at their school. When I asked her to rank the people and activities in her life in order of time and effort, she put her kids first, followed by household duties, working at her kids’ school, her husband, and then her work running a hair salon. I asked where her friends fit into all of this.

The friends are more phone friends. The one neighbor, Susie, we’ll get together periodically. It’s hard though because she has kids. Right now, in the fall, they’re all phone friends. But in the summer, we have a pool, and they all come over to our house and the kids are at ages where they swim and play and my girlfriends and I can all have margaritas and talk.

Mimi has met several of her friends through her children and often sees them in the context of her family. So in this way, her children have facilitated her friendships. Her closest friend, Charlotte, remains the one she has known the longest, since before her kids were born. Charlotte lives in Florida, so most of their conversations happen via telephone, except for once a year, in the summer, when Charlotte comes to visit. Mimi’s social life is arranged around her children,

who are her number one priority. This means she is busy being involved with their lives and working at their school during the year, so her friends – both those she met through her children and those she made before her children were born – become “phone friends.” While several women found their roles as mothers influential in shaping their friendships, none of the men I interviewed mentioned bonding with other men who were fathers. Of the four married men, Patrick and Jimmy did not have children, Dave did not mention having children in the context of the study, and Joe mentioned his infant daughter as the reason he had less time to spend with friends.

Several interviewees described the important role their work played in shaping all aspects of their lives, including friendship. Jane, 43, explains the impact of her job on the time she has to spend with family and friends.

Work is a big part of my life right now. Which is a big shift for me in the last few years. Three years ago it was different. I was home a couple of days a week, so I would spend more time with friends. Specifically this year and last year that’s changed a lot due to my status as a doctoral student. Before I spent more time with friends and family.

Several interviewees said that when they or their spouses had non-standard working hours, this significantly shaped their social lives. Joe explains that when his future wife was in medical school, “That was really the driver as far as schedules.” She worked long and non-standard working hours during her residency at the hospital, and Joe arranged his social schedule around her availability. When she was at the hospital, he would spend time with his friends, and when she was free, he would spend time with her. Both Steph and her

husband are in the medical profession as well. She described the difficulty she, her husband, and their fellow medical friends have coordinating their schedules. “And then the other friends, my resident friends, it’s a little harder just because our schedules aren’t great, but we tend to meet after work.” While Fiona had a day job, her ex-husband worked nights. This made it virtually impossible for them to socialize together.

My husband was very separate from my friends for whatever reason. Partly because we worked totally opposite schedules. He worked nights. So, that’s a major part of why that socialization really never took root. He’s in law enforcement and he works nights. Like from 4pm to 3am. So he’s sleeping during the day and he’s working at night. So any socializing that I did in the evenings of course wouldn’t involve him because he would have been working. But that’s a really important thing to note is that a big part of why those were separate things.

Even for interviewees who worked more traditional hours, their jobs played an important role in their friendships. For most, the majority of their waking hours are spent at work. Several interviewees mentioned forming friendships with co-workers. These friendships ranged from pleasant acquaintances to close emotional friendships. The development of these friendships depended on changes in the work environment. Margaret described how one work-related friendship virtually ended when they no longer worked in the same place.

My friend Lauren and I were working the same shift at work, so we’d have lunch together, and then I bought a house close to hers so we started doing more together. I now work in a different building so we don’t see each other as often. I see her now once every two or three months.

Work and children, then, play a powerful role in shaping people’s friendships. They dictate how much free time people have to spend with their friends. Work

schedules and interactions shape the friendships people form on the job and the time they have to spend with friends off the job. Overall, children decrease the amount of time individuals spend with friends. However, children also create opportunities for new friendships to be formed, such as the friendships between mothers whose children are friends.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to discover how contemporary married people negotiate their relationships with their friends and spouses. This research confirmed that mutual friendships with other couples are common among married people; they evolve from relationships between two people and are predominantly activity based. They represent married people's attempts to spend time with both their friends and their spouses simultaneously. Couple friendships tend to be less emotionally intimate than the friendships between individuals that were formed before marriage. While marriage does cause a shift in priority from friends to spouses (and children), friends remain an important part of married people's lives. Marriage is more likely to have a negative effect on cross-gender friendships than same-gender friendships, although some cross-gender friendships do survive marriage. Married men and women both maintain the close same-gender friendships they formed before they married. However, married men and women tend to prioritize their spouse over their friends in terms of who they talk to and who they spend the most time with. Work and children play an even stronger role than marriage in determining friendship patterns in individuals' lives. Young

children demand more time and attention than spouses do, and work takes up more time in a person's weekly schedule than everything else in their lives combined. I found that many married people balance their relationships with their friends and spouses by incorporating the two into group or couple friendships. This enables them to spend time with their friends and spouses at the same time. Married people are more likely to form new friendships with other couples than they are to form new friendships with other individuals. However, most married people I interviewed have successfully maintained the friendships they formed before they were married, and often these friendships form the core of the couple friendships they develop with their spouse.

The gendered division of women's friendships as "face-to-face" and men's as "side-by-side" was not supported by this study. Both men and women described having emotional and activity-oriented friendships, or friends for doing and friends for talking. The friends for doing tended to be either couple friendships or friendships that had formed more recently. The friends for talking tended to be friends who had known each other for many years, often before either or both of them were married. However, the majority of married people thought of their spouses as their best friends, and often put them first in terms of the time they spent with them and the energy they put into the relationship. The men were more aware that by saying their spouse was their best friend, they were conforming to an American ideal.

Another important finding of this study was that the way people viewed their friends and their spouses often changed depending on how long they had

been married. Recently married couples described their spouses and friends as fulfilling similar roles in their lives in terms of emotional support and entertainment. People who had been married longer made a greater distinction between the kinds of things they did and talked about with their friends and their spouses. They spoke of friends and spouses as fulfilling different roles. One woman who had been married for over ten years didn't even mention her spouse in the context of the study of friends. However, this may be a generational result rather than one determined by age or length of time spent married. A longitudinal study is necessary to determine whether or not the length of marriage is the actual cause of these differences.

Further studies are also needed to explore ethnic and class differences, as well to explore friendship relations of people in other countries and cultures. The interview with Paulo, a single Puerto Rican man, suggests that friendships in the American Midwest are quite different from friendships in Puerto Rico, and possibly other areas of the world as well. Paulo began the interview by saying,

I believe that being from a different culture, I find friendships here to be superficial. I realized that early on when I came here, talking to people about friendship and they're saying that they have different kinds of friendships. And to me friendship is like falling in love. You know, that's how I consider friendship. And then your friends become part of your family. When people tell me they have different friends, like friends to go to movies, friends to go cry on their shoulders, to me that's not friends. I mean, [here] you have categories of friends. To me, I only have the [one] category which is friends. My concept of friendship is that you become my friend when I'm willing to give my life for you. And the expectation is that you would do the same for me. It is something that is not spoken about; it is just something that is there.

True to Paulo's assessment, the other interviewees did talk about their different categories of friends, such as work friends, mutual friends, good friends, and best friends. Paulo's comments suggest that the way people define and conceive of friendship hinges on their socio-cultural backgrounds.

As a single man, Paulo found himself losing two female friends when they married "jerks." One of them recently e-mailed Paulo to tell him that she just got a divorce, and now she and Paulo are "trying to re-establish communication again." In the case of Paulo's two female friends, their marriage turned out to be the "funeral" of their friendship with Paulo. As I described earlier, this may be because these were cross-gender friendships, but Paulo suggested that even his same-gender friendships might suffer when and if his friends get married. "I want to point out that perhaps the reason [my friend] Carlos and I are still as close as we are is probably because he's still single and has no kids, same as I."

Margaret, who has been cohabitating with the same man for twelve years, noticed that her friendship with Fiona fluctuated depending on Fiona's romantic relationship status. She noted that when her friend Fiona was going through her divorce, she saw her a lot more often than she had when she was married.

When they were still married, I probably only saw her every few months. Every three or four months, even. But it was only when she separated [from her husband] that we started hanging out so frequently. And now that her and [her new boyfriend] have been hanging out, I haven't seen her as much lately.

In my interview with Fiona, she did not mention these fluctuations in her friendship with Margaret. This suggests that marriage and romantic relationships do affect friendships, but the people involved in these relationships don't notice

the change as much as their friends do. Interviews with single adults could uncover a complementary or conflicting perspective on the degree to which marriage affects friendship.

Hopefully this study will spur further interest and subsequent research on the understudied topic of friendship and marriage. The intersection of marriage and friendship is of great relevance to many people, and it has only begun to be explored. Further research can offer insights into the different ways people balance their relationships with their friends and spouses. A better understanding of how different people balance their friends and spouses may spur individuals to reflect on the role both spouses and friends play in their lives. This reflection could in turn lead people to make conscious positive choices regarding their relationships with their friends and spouses.

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