When Montaigne described friendship as "souls that mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them," he was talking about his friendship with another man. The images of friendships in both myth and everyday life were historically male-dominated. They were characterized in terms of bravery, loyalty, duty, and heroism (see Hammond & Jablow, 1987). This explains why women were often seen as not capable of having "true" friendships. But today the images of ideal friendship are often expressed in terms of women's traits: intimacy, trust, caring, and nurturing, thereby excluding the more traditional men from true friendship (see Sapadin, 1988).

Attempts to alter how men construct their friendships on a wider cultural level involve major shifts in the way men's roles are structured and organized. For one, friendships between men in terms of intimacy and emotional support inevitably introduce—in ways they never had done before—questions about homosexuality. As Rubin (1985, p. 103) found in her interviews with men: "The association of friendship with homosexuality is so common among men." For women, there is a much longer history of close connections with other women, so that the separation of the emotional from the erotic is more easily made.

Lehne (1989) has argued that homophobia has limited the discussion of loving male relationships and has led to the denial by men of the real importance of their friendships with other men. In addition, "the open expression of emotion and affection by men is limited by
homophobia. . . . The expression of more tender emotions among men is thought to be characteristic only of homosexuals” (p. 426). So men are raised in a culture with a mixed message: Strive for healthy, emotionally intimate friendships, but be careful—if you appear too intimate with another man you might be negatively labeled homosexual.

Part of this has to do with what Herek (1987) calls “heterosexual masculinity,” an idea that includes such personal characteristics as independence, dominance, toughness, and success. It also is defined by what it is not—not feminine and not homosexual. Thus, to be masculine in today’s culture requires a distancing from any behavior that may indicate homosexuality, including emotionally close friendships with other men.

This certainly wasn’t always the case. As a good illustration of the social construction of masculinity, friendship, and sexuality, one need only look to the changing definitions and concepts surrounding same-sex friendship during the nineteenth century (Rotundo, 1989; Smith-Rosenberg, 1975). Romantic friendships could be erotic but not sexual, since sex was linked to reproduction. Because reproduction was not possible between two men, the close relationship was not interpreted as being a sexual one: “Until the 1880s, most romantic friendships were thought to be devoid of sexual content. Thus a woman or man could write of affectionate desire for a loved one of the same gender without causing an eyebrow to be raised” (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988, p. 121).

However, as same-sex relationships became medicalized and stigmatized in the late nineteenth-century literature, “the labels ‘congenital inversion’ and ‘perversion’ were applied not only to male sexual acts, but to sexual or romantic unions between women, as well as those between men” (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988, p. 122). Thus, the twentieth century is an anomaly in its promotion of female equality, the encouragement of male-female friendships, and its suspicion of intense emotional friendships between men (Richards, 1987). Yet, in ancient Greece and medieval Europe, chivalry, comradeship, virtue, patriotism, and heroism were all associated with close male friendship. Manly love, as it was often called, was a central part of the definition of masculinity (Richards, 1987).

Same-sex friendship between men was highly revered in ancient Greece and during the European Renaissance. Sherrod (1987, p. 231) writes: “Based on literary sources, we can assume that educated Europeans 500 years ago, like educated Greeks 2500 years ago, held a high regard for intimate friendships.” Historical evidence also suggests a high level of intimacy and romantic friendships between young men during the nineteenth century. Rotundo (1989, p. 1) quotes Daniel Webster in 1800 calling his best male friend “the partner of my joys, griefs, and affections, the only participator of my most secret thoughts.” He argues that such phrases were typical of middle-class men during their youth. Friendship, beyond the companionship of boyhood, evolved into one “based on intimacy, on a sharing of innermost thoughts and secret emotions . . . a friend was a partner in sentiment as well as action” (Rotundo, p. 1).

The romantic nature of male friendships in middle-class nineteenth-century America can in part be explained by the absence of words and concepts for homosexuality. Physically affectionate relationships between men and even the sharing of beds were not uncommon between young men. Since the desire to engage in sexual acts between two men was seen as something beyond human nature, a sexual connection was not made with physical touch or sleeping together. Furthermore, when homosexuality was thought about, it was almost always in terms of a particular sexual act, not an identity or personal characteristic. Rotundo concludes:

[A] man who wished to kiss or embrace an intimate male friend in bed did not have to worry about giving way to homosexual impulses because he would not assume that he had them. In the Victorian language of touch, a kiss or an embrace was a gesture of strong affection at least as much as it was an act of sexual expression. (p. 10)

However, as distinctions began to be made between homosexuality and heterosexuality in the late nineteenth century—a distinction that was now seen to be rooted in a person’s biological and psychological urges, not something that was an external unnatural impulse—the stigma attached to same-sex touch and intimacy grew. By the turn of the century, a form of male relationships was gone: “Romantic male friendship is an artifact of the nineteenth century” (Rotundo, p. 21).

In contrast, contemporary society holds a set of social meanings and prohibitions about homosexuality to such a degree that ordinary touches, and certainly the act of “sleeping together,” often are interpreted in homosexual terms when they occur between two men. Thus, studies of friendship today consistently argue that close friendship is rarely experienced by men in our culture.

Bell (1981) believes that gender images, identities, and roles significantly limit the display of certain emotions, especially those viewed as
The changing nature of gender and masculinity is linked to the social structure, especially in the context of work. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed through the socialization process and is often associated with traditional gender roles. This can be seen in the definitions of masculinity within different historical periods. As Kimmel (1997, p. 14) stated: "Although both masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, definitions of masculinity are historically more flexible than those of femininity." This flexibility allows for changes in gender roles and the public sphere over time.

The emergence of women's movements in the mid-to-late twentieth century has led to changes in the traditional power relationship between men and women. This has also affected the role of masculinity in the public sphere. While masculinity was traditionally associated with power and control, this role is now being challenged by women's movements for equality. Thus, masculinity is not just a static construct but is continuously being redefined and reconstructed in response to social changes.

However, the actual forces that have led to these changes are complex and multifaceted. They include not only feminist movements but also changes in economic structures, technological advancements, and shifts in cultural values. These forces have contributed to a gradual redefinition of gender roles and the public sphere, leading to a more flexible and dynamic understanding of masculinity.
represents a variety of perspectives on men's friendships. While some similarities exist, what strikes the reader most clearly is the wide range
men have in their friendship. Central to this understanding is the role
and social structure play in contributing to how friendships differ.
For each group discussed, we can see how the social roles of masculi-
ity, the organization of friendship groups, and the meanings these have
within the subculture are all shaped by and interact with the social
structure.

**Perspectives on Men's Friendships**

Most of the articles in this collection reflect early stages of research
on the topic of men's friendships. Despite years of work on the issue,
most of what has already been published tends to focus on global and
modal comparisons between men and women. Gender is typically the
key variable in studies of friendship. What became clear in the search
for articles on men's friendships is how few people have begun with the
assumption that there may be greater variation within gender than between
genders. Thus, these articles represent the beginning point of what is
hoped to be a stronger focus on the diversity that exists within men and
how they develop and maintain friendships with other men and women.
The articles often raise more questions than they answer.

**Historical and Philosophical Views**

Friendship as a social concept is subject to variations in how the social
order is constructed. This is especially evident when looking at the issue
from a historical and philosophical perspective. The first section of the
book focuses on philosophical and historical questions related to the
topic of men's friendships. In Chapter 2, "Rejection, Vulnerability, and
Friendship," Victor Seidler writes that Enlightenment modernity brought
a stronger emphasis on privacy and individuality, thereby eliminating the
civic, public responsibilities of friendship. He argues that friendship
has become a private concern, our identities have been established in indi-
vidual terms, and friendships no longer bear witness to our identities.
Seidler develops his argument that men take friendships for granted
because today they are seen as part of the private realm—the back-
ground—and not part of the more important public domain in which mas-
culine identities are given meaning. Friendships in men's lives within
a culture of modernity have been marginalized into the private realm.

As men, he argues, we learn to maintain power by sustaining an image
of self-sufficiency and by denying the importance of others. Men risk
rejection and vulnerability by opening up to friends and by expressing
emotions and feelings publicly. The threats to self-sufficiency, self-
estee, and independence are partly a function of the changing moral
culture and the ways masculinity has been defined in a more public era
of modernity.

How the relationship between masculinity and friendship has changed
over time is clearly presented in Karen Hansen's chapter, ""Our Eyes
Behold Each Other': Masculinity and Intimate Friendship in Antebel-
lum New England." By looking at an exchange of letters between two
young, working-class men in the nineteenth century, Hansen raises pro-
vocative questions about gender, class, intimacy, and friendship. Ro-
mantic friendships among men were not uncommon and, in many cases,
were similar to the intense romantic friendships of middle-class, white
women. By historically situating men and the variety of emotions
available to them in a particular context of economic and social forces,
Hansen shows us not what was necessarily typical of men's friendships
in early nineteenth-century New England, but what was possible. Un-
like today, the suppression of emotions was not essential to demonstrate
manliness. Historical variations in men's experiences illustrate the
construction of the boundaries of acceptable masculine behavior and
masculinity.

**Social Structural Variations**

Much of the writing on friendship tends to emphasize a personal or
individual approach, thereby underplaying the relationship between
friendship and social structure (Allan, 1989). The second part of the
book illustrates how strong the connection is between social structure
and men's friendships. By introducing such variables as gender, family
roles, marital status, dating situations, work roles, and network ties, these
chapters present a strong case for getting beyond a simplistic, global
description of the nature of men's friendships. In one form or another,
each author makes the case that the nature of men's friendships varies
depending on specific social structural characteristics.

Daphne Spain's "The Spatial Foundations of Men's Friendships and
Men's Power" introduces a fascinating variable to the traditional list of
age, race, gender, and class. She argues that “spatial separation” can reinforce certain social distinctions, which can affect solidarity and friendship formation. Spain hypothesizes that male friendships are strongest in societies with a high degree of gender segregation, and that men’s power relative to women is reinforced when spatial separation enhances male friendships.

Spain tests her ideas by examining the presence of men’s ceremonial huts in 81 nonindustrial societies, and the relationship between measures of “male solidarity” and men’s formal and informal power. She speculates about this relationship in contemporary society and the implications gendered spatial arrangements have today for enhancing male solidarity and power.

The relationship between social structure and friendship is forcefully illustrated in “Men in Networks: Private Communities, Domestic Friendships” by Barry Wellman and his collaborators. He argues that men’s friendships are linked to changes in the nature of community. Specifically, he feels that friendships operate in today’s social world out of households rather than in public places. Wellman explores this premise by focusing on men’s personal community network of active relationships, including kin, neighbors, workmates, and female friends. As men’s friendships move into the house, friendships no longer are primarily about accomplishing important things (such as economic or political survival), but they become ends in themselves. To see friendship in terms of openness and companionship, rather than about the comradesly virtues of skills at doing things, is a result of the growing dominance of the service sector in the economy over the manipulation of material goods, Wellman argues. In short, there is a strong relationship between structural changes in society and various forms of friendships for men.

Theodore Cohen illustrates a similar point in his chapter, “Men’s Families, Men’s Friends: A Structural Analysis of Constraints on Men’s Social Ties.” He develops the argument that when friendships compete with other social roles and relationships for men’s time and loyalty, friendships frequently lose. These external, structural factors that shape men’s opportunities for and maintenance of friendship include the impact of marriage, fatherhood, and work roles. Cohen explores the family and work lives of 30 married men through a series of semi-structured interviews, focusing in particular on the entrance into marriage and into fatherhood. The role marriage plays and the time fatherhood entails gradually lead to a consolidation of their emotional lives in their marriages and children, away from peer relationships.

Just as changes in family and marriage roles affect the amount of time men have for developing and maintaining friendships, so too do these changes affect how and what men disclose with their friends. Helen Reid and Gary Alan Fine investigate this issue by interviewing 16 men about their cross-sex friends in “Self-Disclosure in Men’s Friendships: Variations Associated with Intimate Relations.” Rather than assume that all men have some essential difficulty in self-disclosing, Reid and Fine began with the sociological premise that certain structural conditions might account for variations in the way men disclose with friends. They argue that self-disclosure is partly a role phenomenon related to whether the men have an intimate other whose expectations must be met. The maintenance of intimate relationships through norms of exclusivity, Reid and Fine explain, and access to one with whom the men can focus personal disclosures directly affect the amount and quality of cross-sex friendships. In other words, men do indeed disclose to friends, both male and female, when the men are neither married nor intimately involved with someone romantically.

Clearly, the gender of one’s friends is a key structural variable that defines and constrains the nature of friendship. Yet, there is relatively less research on the subject of cross-sex friendships. Scott Swain’s “Men’s Friendships with Women: Intimacy, Sexual Boundaries, and the Informant Role,” addresses the issue and shows how this “subversive activity” can create social change in gender-based behavior. He argues that men’s friendships with women tend to modify masculine-typed restrictions on ways of expressing affection and intimacy. Typically, these friendships center on problem solving and disclosing about heterosexual love relationships. Thus, friends serve as informants by sharing and sensitizing each other to their styles of intimacy. Swain feels that close cross-sex friendships present an opportunity for men to expand the limits of rigid conceptions of masculinity and to explore emotional areas and issues of dependency.

Cultural Diversity

If such structural variables as gender, marital status, spatial segregation, work roles, and community ties can affect how men’s friendships are constructed and maintained, then surely subcultural and cross-cultural differences based on sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity should also mediate them (see Gilmore, 1990). The third part of the book focuses on cultural diversity in men’s friendships.
Too often, research on friendship assumes a heterosexual perspective. The arguments traditionally made in the scant literature on cross-sex friendships about men's friendships with women almost always take the perspective of heterosexual attraction. My article on "Sex, Friendship, and Gender Roles Among Gay Men" introduces sexual orientation as an important variable to consider in the discussion of men's friendships. In particular, I look at the issue of sex among friends, an issue that usually is a key topic in the discussions of cross-sex friendships but is virtually left unresearched. An interesting form of this can be studied when looking at the friendships of gay men. Since people typically have friends of the same gender and since gay men are sexually attracted to people of the same gender, the topic of sex and friendship can easily be studied among a group of gay men.

In the process of studying this issue, there are further questions raised about the connections between gender roles and sexual orientation, in particular, how concepts of masculinity are shaped by and, in turn, shape cultural concepts of homosexuality and heterosexual. By uncovering the dynamics of men's friendships and sex, much is learned about men's roles and masculinity.

Similar evidence emerges in Walter Williams' chapter, "The Relationship Between Male-Male Friendship and Male-Female Marriage: American Indian and Asian Comparisons." Challenging the notion that men are incapable of close, intimate friendships with other men, Williams first discusses cultures in which men's friendships are more intimate. He then focuses on same-sex friendships among North American Indians and shows where many men typically get their intimate needs met more by male friends than by wives.

Williams also makes the argument that in many cultures there are two types of close bonds—structured mixed-sex marriage-kinship systems and unstructured same-sex friendship networks—that work to complement and strengthen each other, rather than to compete for time, as several of the articles on marital status in Part Two of this book demonstrated. He illustrates this proposition by describing a Javanese wedding and marriage and how it relates to same-sex friendships.

Clyde Franklin's "Hey, Home—Yo, Bro: Friendship Among Black Men" discusses the meanings of masculinity among a group of working-class and upwardly mobile African-Americans and relates these to their friendship networks. Research on black men's friendships is virtually nonexistent, yet exploratory research by Franklin suggests some interesting variations based on race and class. Working-class friendships among African-American men are often self-disclosing and close, in part due to a shared political ideology. Among upwardly mobile men, however, acceptance of society's definitions of traditional masculinity result in a loss of male-male friendships both quantitatively and qualitatively, Franklin argues. For some, race is the variable that helps structure men's friendships; for others, class becomes the organizing characteristic.

One subculture that provides a fascinating perspective on men's friendships is the world of athletics. One of the primary components of how masculinity is defined in our culture is the relationship to sports. How this, in turn, contributes to the way friendship is structured is the focus of Michael Messner's "Like Family: Power, Intimacy, and Sexuality in Male Athletes' Friendships." He begins by urging us to go beyond either a "feminine" standard of understanding men's friendships or a "separate but equal" approach, and to ask the feminist question about how these male friendship patterns fit into an overall system of power. He illustrates this perspective by examining both the quality of men's friendships with each other and the ways these friendships shape men's attitudes and relationships with women.

In so doing, Messner uncovers the gender dimensions of the sports subculture and how it relates to the social process of masculine gender identity construction. He also describes the development of a kind of "covert intimacy," which needs to be assessed not in masculine or feminine terms, but in the larger context of structured power relations between men and women, and between men and other men.

These chapters together present a variety of perspectives on the issue of men's friendships. They are speculative, exploratory, and suggestive of the kind of research that needs to be done. They go beyond research that uses gender or sex roles as demographic variables. These studies reorganize existing knowledge and introduce newer perspectives within a framework of men's studies that sees masculinity and men's roles as socially and historically constructed and views masculinity and femininity as relational concepts (see Kimmel, 1987).

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A SONG

1

Come, I will make the continent indissoluble;
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever yer shine upon;
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades.

2

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies;
I will make inseparable cities, with their arms about each other’s necks;
By the love of comrades,
By the manly love of comrades.

3

For you these, from me, O Democracy, to serve you, ma femme!
For you! for you, I am trilling these songs,
In the love of comrades,
In the high-towering love of comrades

WA L T W H I T M A N
First published in 1860

I DREAM’D IN A DREAM

I Dream’d in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth;
I dream’d that was the new City of Friends;
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love—it led the rest;
It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,
And in all their looks and words.

WALT WHITMAN
First published in 1860

References


