

# KEEPING AND ENDING CASUAL, CLOSE AND BEST FRIENDSHIPS

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Strategies for maintaining and ending casual, close and best friendships were investigated using a sample of ninety young adults, aged twenty to twenty-eight. As hypothesized, best friendships were regarded as more self-maintaining, more based on affection and less affected by a decrease in contact than close friendships, which in turn were more dependent on affection and interaction and less dependent on proximity than casual friendships. Best and close levels were more clearly differentiated for hypothetical cases of friendship than for actual ones. life-stage and sex also affected friendship conceptions. The implications of the friendship level results for friendship research methodology are discussed.

In recent years, conceptions of friendship held by children, adolescents and adults have become an increasingly popular subject for scientific investigation within social and developmental psychology (e.g., Berndt, 1981; Dickens & Perlman, 1981). One approach has been to examine variation in friendship concepts in terms of level of relationship. Most frequently, research has focused on the attributes or functions associated with friendship level (e.g., Duck, 1973; La Gaipa, 1977). However, conceptions of means of keeping a friend or, conversely, how friendships end, have not been determined for different levels.

Friendship has been described as having two or three theoretical levels. According to Wright (1984), at least two levels of friendship can be distinguished: *superficial* friendships which are formed and

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maintained because they are rewarding ; and more *developed* friendships, which are based on the friends' concern for each other's welfare and an appreciation of the other's unique and irreplaceable qualities. Developed friendships have an 'intrinsic, end-in-themselves' quality which transcends the need to exchange identifiable rewards to maintain the relationship. In effect, developed friendships are self-sustaining.

Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) outlined four stages of relationship development that are applicable to friendship. At the first stage, *orientation*, people notice and interact with each other in superficial, stereotyped ways. At the second stage, *exploratory affective exchange*, relations are friendly and relaxed but interactions are not very intimate. *Affective exchange*, the next stage, involves greater intimacy and mutual understanding. During the last stage, *stable exchange*, the pair know each other well and can easily predict each other's behaviour ;communication is increasingly intimate. The last three stages correspond roughly to three friendship levels: casual, close and best. The orientation stage is less relevant to friendship ;technically , most people probably would not label relationships at this stage as friendship.

The preceding theories suggest that friendship development consists of two or three levels marked by increasing affection, intimacy and attention to the friend's unique attributes and personality. Also implied is that strategies for maintaining friendships may depend on the level of the friendship. If developed friendships are to evolve, as Wright (1984) implies, the reward exchange which is responsible initially for maintaining the friendship must be replaced with different strategies. Altman & Taylor's (1973) theory also predicts that more contact would be needed to maintain casual or close friendships than best ones. In terms of the ending of friendships what would be expected at each level is less clear. At the casual level , a simple decline in the rewards or interaction maintaining the friendship might precipitate an ending. On the other hand , if developed friendships are self-sustaining, as Wright suggests, best and close friendships should be less affected by a decline in contact due either to reduced proximity or to reduced interaction .

Evidence indicates that the attributes of friends and the functions of friendship vary depending on the level of friendship being described (Duck , 1973; La Gaipa, 1977, 1979; Kon & Losenkov, 1978), as predicted by both Wright's (1984) and Altman & Taylor's

(1973) theory. However, only one study (Hays, 1984) has directly addressed the question of how friendship strategies vary with level. Focusing on friendship maintenance, Hays (1984) found that undergraduates reported using different behavioural strategies for maintaining same-sex casual, close and best friends. Communication and companionship were used to maintain friendships at all three levels, but consideration and affection were necessary for maintaining close and best friendships, respectively. Although Hays did not examine termination strategies, it is only reasonable to assume that they also might vary across level.

The major objective of the present study was to identify the strategies associated with ending friendships, as well as maintaining them, at each level. It was hypothesized that as friendship progressed from the casual to best level, affection for the friend based on her or his unique qualities would become increasingly important, whereas the significance of actual contact with the friend would decline. Conversely, loss of affection would be more likely to end best and close friendships than casual ones.

Two issues related to friendship research methodology were taken into consideration in this study. First, several studies have found differences between people's descriptions of their ideal friend and their actual friend (La Gaipa, 1977; Murray, 1982; Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975), indicating that conclusions about hypothetical friendships cannot be based on descriptions of actual friends, or vice versa. In the present investigation, both hypothetical and actual cases of friendship were examined.

Second, there is a lack of agreement in friendship research about the number of levels of friendship, how to define them, and what characteristics are associated with a particular level. For example, Weiss & Lowenthal (1975) distinguished four types of friendships in their study of friendship across the life-span: acquaintanceship, friendly interaction, friendship and intimacy. Some other cues which have been used include 'a very good friend' (Bell, 1981), 'a friend' (Hacker, 1981); and 'your roommate' (Hill & Stull, 1981). This lack of agreement about definitions of friendship level makes it difficult to generalize across studies. How do adults themselves define different levels? The answer could provide useful guidelines for terminology and definitions in future research.

Life-stage and sex are additional variables which affect friendship. The early twenties appear to be a period of high contact with friends (Verbrugge, 1983) and *O!* reliance on friends to discuss

the issues of early adulthood (Tokuna, 1983). By the mid-twenties, expectations for friends change: more emphasis is placed on communication and the individuality of the friend (Tesch & Martin, 1983). In addition, dating or marriage results in a withdrawal from the friendship network (Milardo et al., 1983), particularly for women (Rose, 1984). Regardless of age, single adults have more interaction with friends than do married ones (Shulman, 1975).

In the present study, it was hypothesized that (a) compared with undergraduates, older graduates would value more highly continued affection for the friend's unique qualities, and (b) single adults, compared with married ones, would view interaction as more important for remaining friends. It was also expected that romantic relationships would be more likely to interfere with women's friendships than with men's.

## Method

Subjects consisted of ninety Caucasian adults (forty-five females, forty-five males) ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-eight from a north-eastern city and university. Thirty subjects were single undergraduate juniors or seniors ( $M = 21.2$  years); thirty were single college graduates ( $M = 25.2$  years); and thirty were married college graduates ( $M = 25.1$  years). Women and men were equally represented within each life-stage.

As part of a longer interview, subjects were individually asked a series of open-ended questions concerning same-sex friendships and focusing on maintenance ('How do two people stay friends?') and ending ('How do friendships end?') for each of seven friendship targets. Four targets represented hypothetical friendship levels (a 'friend', casual, close and best); three asked about actual friends (casual, close and best). Questions concerning hypothetical friendships were asked first.

Subjects' responses were tape-recorded and transcribed. Then, responses were treated as a series of 'statements' (Livesley & Bromely, 1973). Agreement between two independent raters on differentiation of thirty transcripts into statements was 99 percent.

Next, a coding system was developed using a content analysis of statements. Responses concerning keeping of friends were classified using four categories: proximity, affection, interaction and self-maintaining. *Proximity* statements were those which referred to physical proximity as the basis for staying friends, e.g., 'I just kept running into him.' *Affection* was defined as compassion, love, liking or commitment as the means of developing the friendship, e.g., 'We got to be friends because we liked each other so much.' *Interaction* referred to quality or quantity of friendship interaction, e.g., 'We always made sure we got to talk to each other.' Assertions that no active effort was required to maintain the friendship, e.g., 'Best friendships just maintain themselves,' were coded as *self-maintaining*.

Descriptions of the ending of friendships were classified using five coding categories: less proximity, less affection, less interaction, interference, and nature of

the process. *Less proximity* referred to lack of physical proximity as the basis for ending a friendship, e.g., 'Friendships end when people move.' A decrease in liking, commitment or acceptance was coded as *less affection*, e.g., 'I started to dislike her for lying.' *Less interaction* was defined as a decrease in the quality or quantity of interaction, e.g., 'He quit asking me to go out.' Statements pertaining to dating relationships or marriage as causing a friendship to end were classified as *interference*, e.g., 'Her spouse didn't like me, so we drifted apart.' Lastly, *process* referred to statements about the nature of the termination process, e.g., 'Best friendships fade away gradually.'

Two judges coded all statements; agreement between judges in coding statements was 94 percent.

### *Analyses*

After statements were coded, the number of responses given in each category was calculated as a percentage of each subject's total number of responses for that question. This prevented more verbose subjects' responses from being weighted more heavily in the analyses. The mean percentage scores were used as the dependent measure in repeated measures ANOVAs performed on each maintenance and termination category. The independent variables were life-stage (undergraduate, single graduate and married graduate) and sex. The repeated measure was friendship level (hypothetical casual, close, best 'friend', and actual casual, close and best).

## Results

### *Keeping friends*

Friendship level was found to have a significant effect ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $df = 6,508$ ) on all categories of friendship maintenance, including proximity ( $F = 71.54$ ), affection ( $F = 12.03$ ), interaction ( $F = 16.68$ ), and self-maintaining ( $F = 7.72$ ). The results indicate that, hypothetically, young adults conceive of casual, close and best friendships as having distinctly different maintenance strategies. However, for actual friendships, few differences were found between close and best friendship maintenance. Even so, differences among levels were in the direction expected. The significant differences among friendship levels discussed below were determined using Tukey's test ( $p < 0.05$ ).

For *hypothetical maintenance*, as predicted, post hoc analyses indicated that contact, either by proximity or interaction, was emphasized less and affection was mentioned more as friendships moved from the casual to close to best level (see Figure 1). Hypothetical casual friendships were maintained most-often by 'just running into each other', and secondarily by 'sometimes planning to

get together'. In comparison, close friendships were based on interaction significantly more than were the other two levels. Spending time together was described as critical at the close level. As one twenty-two-year-old single woman put it: 'You have to work harder at a close friendship than a best one. It requires more effort. You can't take a close friend as much for granted.' Affection was also significantly more often mentioned as essential to close friendships than to casual ones, but less than to best ones.

Hypothetical best friendships were clearly distinguished from the other two levels by significantly more references to affection and 'self-maintaining' as ways to keep a friend. A twenty-six-year-old married woman described best friendships in the following way:

Best friendships are self-maintaining. They are so good and satisfying they require less attention. There is some sort of intangible bond formed - some clear bond at an abstract, universal level. A karma connection. A feeling that it was meant to be that way. Best friendships can tolerate distance, time and pressure. The commitment maintains itself. The emotional intensity doesn't change.

The cue 'a friend' elicited responses similar to those for best friend with regard to affection and interaction. However, like close friends, 'a friend' was significantly less often described as self-maintaining. These results suggest that the idea of friendship as able to continue independent of identifiable rewards or interactions is reserved fairly exclusively for friendships labelled 'best'.

Subjects' descriptions of *actual maintenance* revealed significant differences between the casual level and close or best levels (see Figure 1). Actual casual friends required significantly more proximity and less affection than either actual close or best friendships. The three levels did not differ from each other in terms of amount of interaction. Thus, compared to the hypothetical case of casual friendship, significantly more interaction was reported as needed to sustain actual friendships at the casual level. Subjects' descriptions of actual close and best friendships, unlike hypothetical close and best levels, did not significantly differ. Both required little proximity, some affection and considerable interaction to maintain. In addition, actual best friendships were significantly less likely to be described as self-maintaining compared to their hypothetical counterparts: in real life, interaction in the form of letters, phone calls, visits or exchange of gifts were necessary to maintain them.

As shown in Table 1, only one main effect of life-stage was found. As expected, life-stage significantly affected the frequency with



FIGURE I  
Mean percent scores for maintenance categories by friendship level

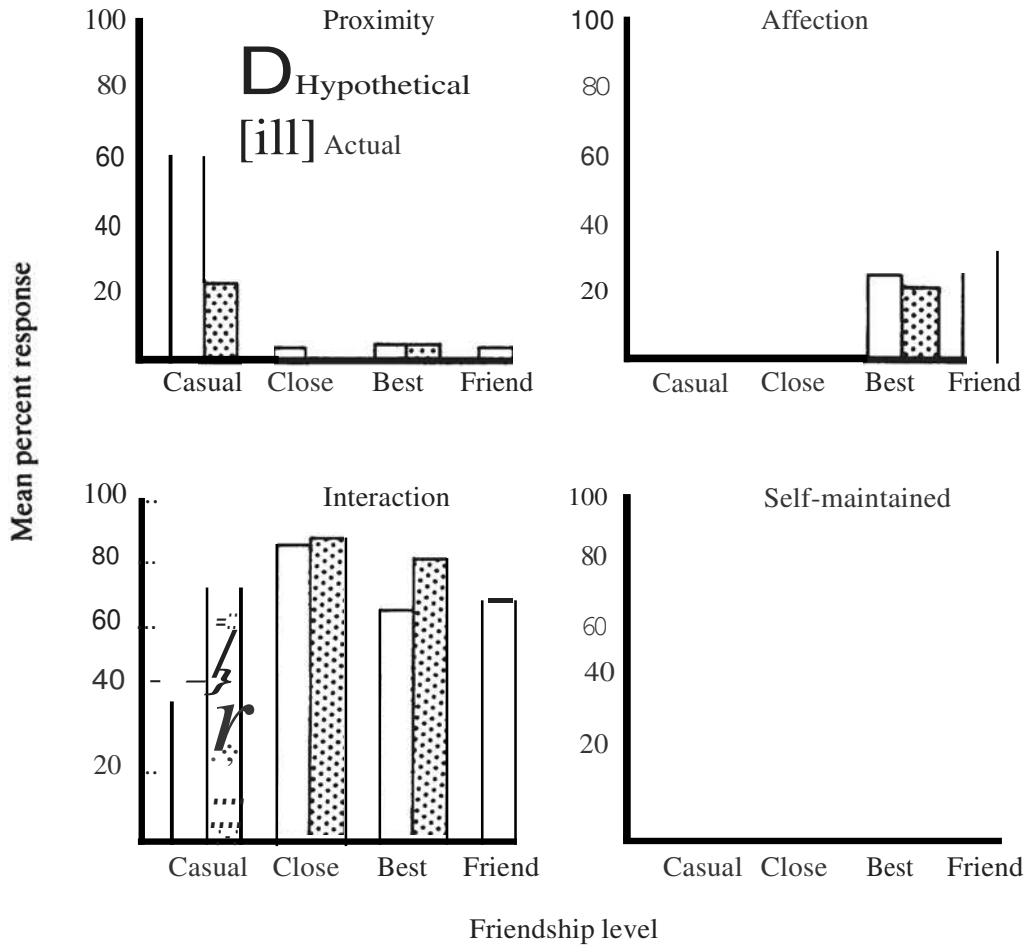


TABLE I  
Mean percent scores for friendship maintenance by life-stage

Category	Single undergraduates	Single graduates	Married graduates	F(2,84)
Proximity	14.2	14.9	11.5	1.65
Affection	9.1 <sup>a</sup>	14.00 <sup>b</sup>	19.7 <sup>c</sup>	4.79*
Interaction	73.5	68.8	66.8	2.03
Self-maintained	2.6	2.3	2.0	<1

Notes

•  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>a, b, c</sup> Means with different superscripts are significantly different, Tukey's test, ( $p < 0.05$ ).

which affection was mentioned as part of keeping friends. Married graduates more often claimed that affection was part of staying friends than did single undergraduates. The prediction that single adults and younger adults would emphasize interaction more in their friendships was not supported. Life-stage also had no effect on responses for the categories proximity or self-maintaining.

No sex differences in mean responses for any category of friendship maintenance were observed, nor were there any significant interaction effects.

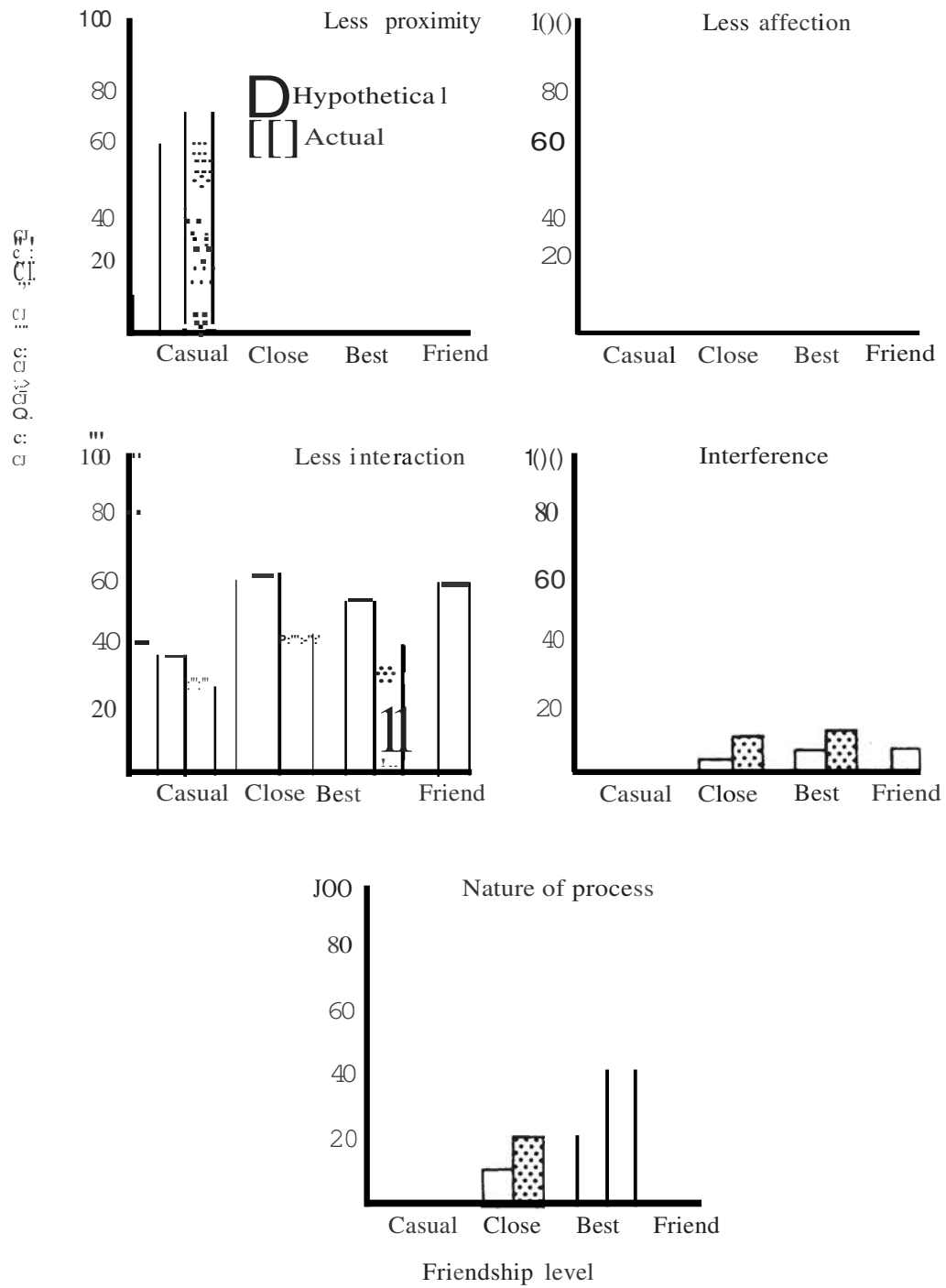
### *Ending friendships*

Termination strategies varied significantly with friendship level ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $df = 6, 504$ ) for the categories less proximity ( $F = 73.97$ ), less affection ( $F = 7.01$ ), less interaction ( $F = 11.82$ ), interference ( $F = 7.14$ ), and nature of the process ( $F = 21.35$ ). The prediction that contact, i.e., proximity and interaction, was less important as friendships developed was supported for both hypothetical and actual cases. However, the prediction that best friendships would be more likely than less developed ones to end because of loss of affection was not upheld for actual cases. All differences among friendship levels discussed below were significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) using Tukey's test.

When describing *hypothetical termination*, casual friendships were most often cited as dissolving because of less proximity, although they also occasionally ended because less effort was made to maintain interaction (see Figure 2). Less proximity was viewed as less of a factor in close friendship termination, which was significantly more often described as ending because of a decline in the quantity or quality of interaction. Reasons for less interaction ranged from 'a change in social circles', to 'not making an effort to maintain continuity', to 'outside pressures like exams'. Less often, but significantly more so than in the case of casual friends, loss of affection was mentioned as a way close friendships ended. Less affection was usually the result of continuing arguments, the discovery of differing values, betrayal or boredom. Infrequently, interference from other relationships was reported as ending close friendships. In addition, a number of subjects could specify only that close friends just 'drifted away' or 'faded to casual'.

Hypothetical best friendship terminations were quite similar to close ones with two exceptions. First, as predicted, less interaction was significantly more likely to end a close friendship than a best

**FIGURE 2**  
**Mean percent scores for termination categories by friendship level**



one. Second, more statements remarking on the nature of the termination process were made for best friendships. These statements were often much stronger than those made for close friendship, and conveyed the impression that subjects were quite sceptical as to whether 'true' best friendships could end. One single male undergraduate asserted: 'It would have to be something drastic to end a best friendship, like death or a move to Bolivia. Even then, they would be very hard to end.' A married woman graduate echoed the sentiment: 'It would take a monumental issue to end a best friendship – a holocaust, for instance.' 'If it ends, it couldn't have really been a best friendship,' was the underlying message of some subjects' responses, implying that hypothetically, under normal circumstances, best friendships were viewed as self-maintaining.

Responses to the hypothetical cue 'a friend' differed significantly from close and best with regard only to descriptions of endings, where 'a friend' resembled close more than best friendships. This finding indicates that the cue 'a friend' elicits a composite of close and best characteristics.

As shown in Figure 2, similar to the pattern for hypothetical endings, there were significant differences in *actual endings* for casual versus close and best levels ( $p < 0.05$ ). Actual casual friendships were significantly more likely to end from less proximity than were the other two levels, whereas close and best were significantly more likely to end because of less interaction, interference from other relationships or a specific process.

In terms of subjects' breaking up with actual close and best friends, there were two significant differences between levels. As was true for hypothetical best friendships, subjects significantly more often described endings of actual best friendship as a 'process' (e.g., a 'slow death') or a 'gradual process'. However, unlike hypothetical cases, less affection was significantly more often cited as a cause of endings of close friendship than of best.

There were also differences in the number of subjects reporting having had a close versus a best friendship end. Although every subject reported having had at least one close friendship end, 27 percent ( $N = 24$ ) of the subjects had never had a best friendship end. This finding suggests that actual experience might be the basis for some young adults' insistence that, hypothetically, best friendships are self-maintaining.

Life-stage had no significant effect on responses to friendships' end. However, as hypothesized, one sex difference was found:

dating or marriage was significantly more often cited as ending women's friendships than men's (see Table 2). No significant interaction effects were observed.

TABLE 1  
Mean percent scores for termination categories by sex

Category	Male	Female	F(1,84)
Less proximity	28.7	24.3	1.47
Less affection	8.9	8.8	<1
Less interaction	43.5	45.1	<1
Interference	3.3	9.0	4.47*
Nature of process	15.6	12.8	<1

*Note*

•  $p < 0.05$ .

## Discussion

This study has demonstrated that young adults' conceptions of the strategies they use in keeping and ending their friendships differ for relationships at different stages of development. In general, the results support Wright's (1984) and Altman & Taylor's (1973) theories of friendship development: best friendships were regarded as more self-maintaining, more dependent on affection, and less vulnerable to a decrease in contact than close friendships, which in turn were more dependent on affection and interaction and less on proximity than casual friendships. However, the extent to which distinctions were made among levels was determined by (a) whether hypothetical or actual friendships were being described, and (b) what phase of the relationship (maintenance or termination) was addressed.

In terms of hypothetical versus actual targets, more differences were found between hypothetical close and best friendships than between actual ones. These results indicate that it is important to take friendship level into account when selecting the cues or targets to use in friendship research. If 'ideal' friendships or abstract conceptions of friendship are the focus of investigation, these findings suggest that casual, close and best levels should be distinguished from each other and from 'a friend'. Differentiating between close and best levels might not be as important if actual

friendships are being studied, since for all practical purposes they appeared to be similar.

Whereas actual close and best friendships did not differ in terms of maintenance, accounts of actual friendship terminations did reveal differences between the two levels. These findings can be interpreted in two ways. First, it could be that as friendships end, different aspects of the friendship become salient. This interpretation assumes, as does Duck (1982), that termination processes are not simply a reversal of forming and maintaining a relationship, but are distinctly different. Second, the termination results could reflect variations, distortions and rationalizations associated with retrospective accounts that would not apply to maintenance findings which were based on descriptions of current friendships. Both explanations appear to account for some of the findings about termination. The extent to which subjects explained endings by describing the 'process' indicates that dissolving a friendship is more complicated than merely reversing maintenance strategies. On the other hand, subjects' post hoc interpretations of the friendship seem to be reflected in their assertions that if an actual friendship had ended, it couldn't have been a best friendship.

The findings that hypothetical friendships were more clearly differentiated and more 'idealistic' than descriptions of actual friendships raises questions about the relationship between social cognition and friendship experience. If conceptions of hypothetical friendships function as scripts, defined by Nelson (1981: 101) as 'general event representation[s] derived from and applied to social contexts', then they might affect behaviour by defining roles and actions in actual friendships. Conversely, Berndt (1981) has pointed out that actual friendships might have an impact on friendship conceptions. There is some indication that both processes were occurring in the present study. For instance, some subjects used their descriptions of hypothetical friendships as criteria for evaluating their actual friendships. However, actual friendship experience appeared to have an impact on hypothetical descriptions as well. Subjects who had never had an actual best friendship end were the ones who asserted that, hypothetically, best friendships were self-maintaining. Thus, congruence between hypothetical and actual friendship might be related to decisions of relationships or to satisfaction. More research is needed to explore this interaction.

Older respondents in this sample, particularly married ones, placed more emphasis on the importance of affection in maintaining

friendships. These results were consistent with those reported by Tesch & Martin (1983), indicating that adults in their mid-twenties were more likely than those in their early twenties to focus on the other person when thinking of friendship. The greater valuation of affection among the older cohort might reflect developmental changes in orientation to friendship.

Only one sex difference was found in this study: romantic relationships were more likely to end women's friendships than men's. This finding might be explained by the tendency for young couples to draw their 'couple friends' from the husbands' or boyfriends' pool of acquaintances (e.g., Babchuk & Bates, 1963; TrolJ, 1975). This pattern suggests that men might be able to maintain same-sex friendships concurrent with marital or dating relationships more easily than women can. Further research would be necessary to determine whether this was actually the case. A final question for future work is why couples are less likely to select the woman's acquaintances as 'couple friends'.

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