

— Linn Alenius Wallin & Klara Goedecke, »With a little help from my friends. Gender and intimacy in two friendship research projects«

— A B S T R A C T —

Friendship is an undertheorized but increasingly important relationship in late modernity. In this article, the authors present findings from two ongoing research projects about friendship, gender and age in contemporary Sweden. They argue that discourses about gender and friendship are highly relevant for how friendship is conceptualized both among men and women, but that culturally ingrained conceptions of men's inability and women's capacity to be close friends ought to be problematized further, from feminist perspectives. Furthermore, they discuss friendship practices, problematizing the frequent equation of friendship and intimate dialogues, which are important but may overshadow other friendship practices, like various kinds of support. The authors show that such support is negotiated in relation to ideas of ideal friendship, permeated by reciprocity and equality, and call for further feminist research about friendship, arguing that a feminist perspective can destabilize gendered dichotomies and contribute to problematizing power relations, vulnerabilities and exclusions in friendships.

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■—Linn Alenius Wallin & Klara Goedecke—■

■—WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS.

Gender and intimacy in two friendship

research projects ————— ■

■— Friendships of many kinds are often seen as important aspects of a full, happy and healthy life, while loneliness and social isolation are seen as negative or even shameful.<sup>1</sup> Friendship is emotionally similar to romantic relationships, although mostly considered to be platonic, but the exact meaning of it is notoriously hard to pinpoint. However, friendship has been argued to be of increasing importance in late modernity, albeit undertheorized.<sup>2</sup> We presented our respective ongoing research projects about friendship at the symposium *Exploring affect: Love*, held at the University of Gothenburg in the spring of 2015. Our projects concerned different groups: Goedecke's interviewees were middle-class, middle-aged men, while Alenius Wallin's interviewees were elderly women from different socioeconomic backgrounds. When cross-examining our empirical materials, patterns began to emerge, leading to fruitful discussions about friendship in contemporary Sweden. In this article, we introduce some themes from our respective research projects, arguing that more Swedish, feminist research on friendship is needed. We focus on how friendship is given meaning in relation to gender, (hetero)sexuality and age, investigating which gendered discourses about friendship are discussed by our interviewees, and how same-sex and cross-sex friendships are described. We also discuss friendship practices like conducting dialogues and exchanging support, and how these practices are made meaningful in relation to ideals of reciprocal and equal friendship.

In discussions about friendship, notions of »true«, »real« or »pure« friendships have often been taken as points of departure. Friendship has been described as an ungoverned relationship »between two free, independent individuals and a meeting of equals«, »unfettered by any selfish or instrumental concerns«.<sup>3</sup> These idealized ideas of friendship have been heavily critiqued for being generalizing, for creating hierarchies between relationships and for disregarding many factors that structure intimacy and friendship.<sup>4</sup> Lynn Jamieson, for instance, argues that conversations are overemphasized when discussing friendship, resulting in normative ideas about what she calls »disclosing intimacy«.<sup>5</sup> Instead, she argues that a degree of depending upon and needing the other are important aspects of

intimate relationships.<sup>6</sup> In other research, it is emphasized that friendships are structured by various societal power relations, such as class, race, place (urban/rural), age, sexuality and gender.<sup>7</sup> Friendships are not detached from concrete living conditions, like financial resources, available leisure time, family circumstances, employment, retirement and health.<sup>8</sup> Friendship can also include downsides, like betrayal, loneliness, and, as Jamieson remarks, personal relationships can also be crucial in maintaining social divisions and providing training in hatred, dominance and submission.<sup>9</sup> Sasha Roseneil and Shelley Budgeon, like Jamieson, emphasize material needs and dependence, arguing that care and intimacy often take place within friendships, outside of the family and the heterosexual couple.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, friendship is seen as complementary to normative heterosexual romantic relationships, but friendship can also be considered to expand and queer the nuclear family, especially among LGBT people.<sup>11</sup> Friendships, kinship and romantic relationships, we argue, become meaningful when compared and contrasted against each other, making negotiations of their far from clear-cut lines of demarcation an interesting and important subject of study.

Emphasis has often been placed on differences between men's and women's friendships. Since the mid-20th century, women have been seen as better at upholding close relationships than men, whose friendships have tended to be seen as shallow and permeated by competition and homophobia.<sup>12</sup> This has led some researchers to argue that men's friendships are judged by a female norm, permeated by conversation, intimate knowledge about the other and exposure of the self.<sup>13</sup> Instead, these scholars argue, men's intimacy should be characterized as »intimacy in the doing« or »covert intimacy« and thus as different from female intimacy.<sup>14</sup> We argue that this dichotomous and heteronormative view of friendship and intimacy carries several gendered presuppositions, not allowing for subtle variations in relationships.

In feminist discussions about friendship and gender, women's friendships have generally been regarded as positive and politically important, while men's same-sex friendships have been seen in a more ambivalent light.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, men's same-sex friendships have been regarded as arenas where male privilege, sexism and homophobia are (re)produced. On the other hand, they have been seen as promising to the feminist movement, as relations where new, caring and emotional masculine positions can be developed.<sup>16</sup> We argue that friendship between all genders should be studied from feminist perspectives, in order to highlight power relations within and around the relationships. While gender differences regarding friendship are discernible, we argue that these are subtle and should be seen as influenced by constructions of gender in

society. Expectations of, and to some extent, practices, in men's and women's friendships can differ; women are frequently seen as experts of friendship and intimacy, and as investing a great deal in relationships, while ideas of autonomy, stoicism and non-emotionality are central to dominant constructions of masculinity, which affect men's friendships.<sup>17</sup> For instance, both men and women have higher expectations of women's loyalty, willingness to listen and ability to keep secrets, qualities associated with Jamieson's »disclosing intimacy«.<sup>18</sup> We argue that intimacy should be studied as a multifaceted phenomenon, intersected by various societal and discursive categorizations, rather than possible to sort into two gendered, neat categories.

#### — METHOD AND MATERIAL —

As mentioned above, this article takes two research projects as its point of departure. Both projects were based on interviews, conducted during 2014 in different parts of southern Sweden. All interviewees volunteered to participate. Alenius Wallin's interviews were conducted individually, with ten women, aged seventy to eighty-five. All described themselves as heterosexual, and managed their daily life without support.<sup>19</sup> Goedecke's interviewees were middle class, well-educated men, aged twenty-five to forty-nine, describing themselves as heterosexual or »mainly« heterosexual (three interviewees). Twelve men were interviewed individually and eight in pairs (where the interviewees were friends with each other). All interviewees were white and spoke Swedish without »foreign« accents; one spoke about having migrated to Sweden as a child. Both our approaches focused mainly on same-sex friendships, even though cross-sex friendships came up occasionally. Alenius Wallin's approach was explicitly focused on friendships over the life course, but the meaning of friendship, friendship practices and friendship and gender were discussed during both authors' interviews.

We see the interview situation as a site for not so much reporting as producing knowledge<sup>20</sup> about friendships, and suggest that emphasizing performativity and how friendship is talked about in relation to norms can be fruitful in the studies of friendships.<sup>21</sup> When using interviews, the researcher has to be aware about her own role in the interview situation and about the power differential when it comes to controlling the analysis.<sup>22</sup> This means that listening closely, respectfully and reflexively to the interviewees is important.

Working with two empirical materials, collected independently, poses challenges. Since we, for ethical reasons, have not read each other's interviews, we have had to iron out our interpretations in conversations and in our mutual writing processes. Our frequent discussions about our respective

interviews have been analytically fruitful, and forced us to rethink our theoretical and analytical stances. Our theoretical approaches were initially slightly different, as were the layouts of our interviews. For the purposes of this article, we use Jamieson as main theoretical inspiration, and address some themes that emerged in both our projects. Our research shows both complexities and differences among the differently aged and gendered interviewees, but it should not be seen as a comparison of the friendships of two distinct groups. Instead, it is an attempt to highlight the complexities of friendships in relation to various (gendered) ideas about what friendship is or should be. The article is divided into two empirical parts. First we discuss gender and friendship as well as same-sex and cross-sex friendship; secondly, friendship practices, such as intimate dialogues, are analysed together with how friendships come to matter.

#### — NEGOTIATING GENDERED FRIENDSHIP —

The ideas of gender differences in (same-sex) friendships, mentioned above, do not exist solely within the context of research, but permeate popular accounts of friendship as well. This became evident during all our interviews. Goedecke's male interviewees repeatedly drew on discourses about men's friendships as lacking, shallow and permeated by stoicism, non-emotionality, and competition. Many of the men saw this as negative and tried to distance themselves from it during the interviews, mainly by positioning themselves as another type of man, aware and critical of stereotypically masculine friendship behaviour. One of the interviewees, Robert, argues that most men are »emotionally handicapped« and not able to connect emotionally with other men. He longs for a type of friendship that he has not yet experienced with a man:

— Unfortunately, I have not been able to hang out with my male friends in the way I want to hang out with someone, and it's like, »what is it that you long for?« Well, I long to be able to be a bit weak... without feeling that I make my friend very uncomfortable. I understand it, because I can feel that discomfort myself [---] When I look at the girlfriends I've had and look at their friendships. God, they call their best friend and cry for hours, it's fantastic! Such a relief! »Why do you feel so good?« Well, she has cried for an hour! To someone who has comforted her for an hour and said that everything is going to be alright, shall I come over, we can have a cup of tea. (Robert, individual interview)<sup>23</sup>

With a friend, Robert argues, one should be able to show one's weakness and sadness, and be listened to and comforted, which is common in Robert's girlfriend's friendships. While Robert

misses close male friends, some other male interviewees claim to have found them. Tomas and Stefan's friendship is, they argue, a close and emotional one, involving much conversation, not least about their own relationship, which they feel makes their friendship strong and unlikely to break.<sup>24</sup> Stefan and Tomas argue that their take on friendship is unique and differs a great deal from how men typically relate to friendship:

- Tomas: I wanted to tell you [the interviewer] about Stefan, and our relationship because I like him so much and he has meant so much to me ... And in a project such as yours, I thought, that must be great! I thought, I didn't know if I am right, but I thought that our relationship, just like falling in love, is unique ... This must be so special, our relationship must be really unique you know [laughter]  
 Interviewer: I don't know yet  
 Tomas: Well, this is not how other guys hang out.  
 (Stefan & Tomas, pair interview)

Their friendship, Tomas says, is special, not only to themselves, but compared to how »other guys« relate to each other. Robert, Stefan and Tomas agree that men in general do not know how to build or maintain good friendships. Men's relationships are shallow and do not allow weakness, but while Stefan and Tomas claim to have found each other – against all odds – Robert longs for and misses friendship with men. They all, together with many of the other male interviewees, claim to be able to recognise and value close, emotional friendship, which sets them apart from »other guys«. These are seen as incapable of having, and without »strategies« for creating, close friendships. Women, by contrast, are described as automatically knowledgeable when it comes to friendships and closeness, a theme discernible in Alenius Wallin's interviews as well. The interviewee Karla tells us that »the strange thing is that men have very few contacts. They do not have the kind of friendship relations that we women have«, while Stina says: »I do not think men find it easy to talk about their innermost [feelings and thoughts] or admit their weaknesses [...] sometimes I think I've had serious conversations, sincere and deep, with some man, incidentally. By chance«. To share weakness and to show trust makes the friendship feel and appear authentic, qualities which are missing in relationships with men, the women argue.<sup>25</sup> Some of the female interviewees argue that the perceived differences when it comes to friendship shape women's and men's lives in different ways:

- My experience is that women have many friends, and acquire, most women, of course not all, but most women acquire many friends over the years, especially compared

to men, if one generalizes. So you can see it quite clearly. And I know that many women have told me about... if there is a divorce or if the woman dies, the man becomes very vulnerable because he doesn't have these friends. And friends for women can be very close friends, but there is also a wide circle of friends where you always have someone available, if you want to [reach out]. I think that is, if one should generalize, if one should distinguish between male and female. And I think it is because women are more likely to talk about their problems, we are more open. (Gunhild)

Gunhild expects women to be emotionally and verbally open, and sees intimate dialogues as prerequisites of friendship, thus drawing upon the discourse of »disclosing intimacy«. This makes women, or at least women who are comfortable with open-hearted conversations, less vulnerable in times of crisis. However, introvert women, who do not live up to the expectations of »disclosing intimacy«, may become even more vulnerable in corresponding circumstances.

It is clear that same-sex friendships are the point of reference in the interviews, but cross-sex friendships are mentioned briefly in both authors' respective materials. The female interviewees argue that men are never as open and willing to talk about problems or feelings, which makes the women experience friendship with men as shallow. A few of the female interviewees also voice the concern that other people's expectations of sexual attraction often complicate cross-sex friendships, even when the friendship is platonic. Some of the male interviewees – who described themselves as heterosexual or »mainly« heterosexual – argue that sexual attraction will always get in the way of cross-sex friendship. Others refute this idea vehemently, arguing that it is based on sexist and stereotypic ideas about masculinity and men's constant sexual prowess. This latter category of men often have several close female friends, with whom they argue it is easier to talk about feelings and »be oneself«. While talking about same-sex and cross-sex friendships, the interviewees refer to discourses about men's difficulties and women's automatic knowledge of friendship. Sexual attraction, obviously seen as problematic and out of place in friendship, is mainly brought up with regard to cross-sex friendship and is not seen as a threat in same-sex relations to the same extent. Many of the women were visibly surprised by questions about love and sexual attraction to female friends, while many of the men had reflected upon homophobia in men's friendships. Here it is evident that ideas of friendship as platonic as well as heteronormativity influence the interviewees' views on friendship.

All in all, the interviewees discussed, referred to, refuted and

negotiated several well-known discourses about friendship, gender and sexuality. There emerged a consensus that men in general are less skilled at developing close, emotional relationships, where weakness can be shown and confidences shared. Women, by contrast, were seen to possess these skills as it were naturally. In research, these inferences have often been related to dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity, where masculinities are connected to stoicism, autonomy, homophobia and a reluctance to talk about feelings or weaknesses. This would lead to the development of different friendships among men than among women, who are encouraged to relate to others, emotionally and socially.<sup>26</sup> However, our interviewees seem to have similar ideas about ideal friendships; namely a close relationship permeated by mutual confiding, comforting, supporting and sharing of experiences.

At first glance, this shared ideal would suggest that the group of researchers arguing that a feminized ideal of intimacy permeates ideas about friendships, disqualifying men's friendships, are correct. In this research, it is often argued that men's and women's intimacies are essentially different and should be judged by different standards, or should be seen as comradeship and friendship respectively.<sup>27</sup> Instead of using such a dichotomous, essentializing and heteronormative view of gender and friendship, we suggest that intimacy and friendship should be seen not in isolation from dominant constructions of gender, but as more or less available and intelligible to different people.<sup>28</sup> Taking our cue from Michael Messner, we argue that sorting intimacies into »feminine« or »masculine« ones is less relevant than asking feminist questions about how friendships are organized and given meaning.<sup>29</sup> These feminist questions include not only what consequences men's friendships have for attitudes towards women (which is Messner's main concern) but also wider questions about understanding how gender categories, sexualities, power relations and the organization of intimacy in society are affected or challenged through friendships. Feminist questions to friendship, we argue, should also highlight other power relations that affect friendships, like class and age.

Asking feminist questions to the stories of the female interviewees entails understanding in what ways women's friendship can be seen in terms of solidarities between women, and how friendship can be regarded as an arena where women have competency and agency. Feminists have argued that women's friendships should be interpreted as close, strengthening, important bonds, at least as important to women as marital or romantic bonds to men.<sup>30</sup> Here, Alenius Wallin's interviewees value their bonds with other women and seem to feel that they are superior to men when it comes to friendship. Their friendships and their exchange of support (both emotional and mate-



rial, as will be discussed below) can be seen as decentralizing and challenging the heteronormative family as well as questioning (masculinized) ideals of individuality in terms of autonomy and independence.<sup>31</sup> However, bonding between women should not simply be seen as positive and progressive; critical, feminist questions about power relations and exclusions should be asked. There can be inequalities among female friends in that one is more dependent than the other, and friendship may also act as a segregating force, bringing some people together while shutting others out, affecting access to various resources.<sup>32</sup>

The male interviewees do, to some extent, ask feminist questions themselves. When arguing that heteronormativity and upbringing prevent men from forming close relationships with other men, they voice a similar analysis to many feminist researchers.<sup>33</sup> They discuss ideas about men's inability to form friendships in a reflexive way, arguing that most men, sometimes even the interviewee himself, struggle with this. However, many of the male interviewees position themselves as men who, in contrast to other men, can recognize and value close friendship. They can be interpreted as men having been taken in by the alleged feminist »kidnapping« of the definition of intimacy, but they can also be read as profeminists, critical of »traditional« masculinity and working for change through changing their friendships. However, a feminist questioning of their profeminism shows that their positioning rests on making a contrast between themselves and »other« men. This makes their position seem more modern, aware and profeminist. Research shows that Swedish, equity-oriented masculine positions are often constructed in this way, and it has been observed that this contrasting often draws upon discourses about working-class and immigrant men as less modern and aware, thus reproducing other power relations and categorizations between groups of men.<sup>34</sup> So, on the one hand, their position can be interpreted as an appropriation of a previously feminized arena, an example of ever-changing and flexible constructions of masculinities, upholding gendered, classed, and racial power relations.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, their longing for idealized intimate friendships can be seen as a shift towards a more intimate version of male friendship, where (what is perceived as) female friendships are seen as ideal. Asking feminist questions to their stories shows that friendship is a political, organizing tool for the men themselves, and should be seen as gender-politically relevant. Further feminist questioning could include the role of homophobia and what consequences their relationships have for women.<sup>36</sup>

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#### — HOW FRIENDSHIPS MATTER —

Intimate dialogues are evidently gendered in complex ways. Such dialogues (structured by the discourse of »disclosing

intimacy») are important, but friendship also involves emotional and practical support, assistance and dependence. Friends may provide a supportive network in times of need. They may also live together and structure their lives in relation to each other, in a way that is perhaps more often associated with the family.<sup>37</sup> In this section, we problematize and scrutinize in which ways friendship is discussed as important among our interviewees. We also continue to ask feminist questions about how gender, age and class influence how friendships are understood.

Intimate dialogues have already been mentioned as important to friendship. The interviewee John argued that he and his old friend knew »everything« about each other. They had frequent, intimate conversations which John explicitly compared to therapy:

— we function as each other's therapists a little, I think. We can give each other, really, we can be quite ruthless [---] you get an answer from someone you don't keep any secrets from. As far as I know anyway, I don't know how many secrets he keeps, but about me ... he knows *everything*. (John, individual interview)

John and his friend's conversations are therapeutic in the sense that nothing is held back, there are no secrets, and even hard truths can be uttered. John argues that such honesty can be harsh, but in the long run it is beneficial and important. The friend's ability to challenge one's thinking and broaden the view of the world, of the self and of the situation is also important to the interviewee Rut: »I do not want to be backed up, I want someone who pushes me and says 'you are wrong'. Or, 'it's wrong what you are saying'«. Rut tries to be honest to her friends, which is not always appreciated by them, and she wants them to be more honest in their turn. Sharing »privileged knowledge«, as Jamieson puts it, is not only done to gain knowledge of the friend's secrets or hidden experiences – equally important is the knowledge of the friend's character flaws.<sup>38</sup> However, a good friend should not tacitly accept one's unappealing traits, but challenge and question them in order to broaden one's views and offer different input. This creates a feeling of acceptance, honesty and authenticity. The precarious balancing between being supportive and ruthlessly honest shows that these kinds of conversations are important in multiple ways.

Intimate dialogues are not the only kind of conversation, though. Also important is the everyday chat, which is about sharing information, feelings, experiences and anecdotes from everyday life. Majvor says that »it may be that I've seen something on TV, someone fascinating or a good program. And I have

to share; I cannot keep things to myself!«. This kind of daily contact with friends becomes increasingly important as, when growing older, spouses, beloved relatives and friends die. While the younger, male interviewees also mentioned having this kind of conversations, most of the female interviewees were living alone, which rendered friendship even more important. Like Majvor points out, it is necessary to share your life with and be important to somebody and to be recognized and listened to in order to make sense out of life.<sup>39</sup> We argue that one should not underestimate the importance of this kind of conversation to friendship, but also that it must be understood in relation to how the interviewees are situated in terms of class, age and family. Especially in old age, friendship has been shown to be of high importance to keep a sense of subjectivity and a feeling of connectedness to society.<sup>40</sup> To retire or become widowed may result in new ways of organizing life, which may foster friendships.<sup>41</sup>

These different kinds of talk may take place while other friendship activities are conducted. Jens argues that although many of his male friends play games or talk about sports, beer-brewing or »some tangible object« when they meet, they often end up talking about more personal subjects: »[the conversation] starts with the passing that [a football player] made to someone, but it ends with your relationship to your brother«. For Ulla and her friends, art functions in a similar way: »when discussing culture there are often so many personal aspects of it too, which develops the conversation even more«. To Jens and Ulla, shared interests function as a frame for intimate conversations. In this way, practical or activity-based aspects of friendship are blended with conversation-based ones, contradicting gendered dichotomies about men's and women's friendships as based on talking and doing, respectively. The activities create room for intimacy without requiring it; intimate (and other) conversations can, but do not have to, take place. However, switching between intimate dialogues and every-day chats entails knowing when to say what, and when to be silent, a sensitivity that all do not possess.<sup>42</sup>

Conversations are vital when it comes to expressing what friendship means in the accounts of our interviewees. This may be due to the sample of interviewees – somebody inclined to participate in an interview may value conversing more than others. In this sense, the interviewees can be seen as drawing upon the discourse of »disclosing intimacy«. However, as Jamieson points out, intimacy is more complex than that, and emphasizing »disclosing intimacy« may obscure material and practical aspects of friendship. Among our interviewees, the women can be interpreted as more strongly committed to a conversation-based view of friendship than the men. The men find the dialogue important, but mention limits to what is

talked about (sex and relationships are examples of off-limit topics) and discuss shared activities, like playing games and working out together, more than the women. Lending support, like visits to hospitals in times of illness and helping with moving and renovating, are also important. Here, as is also suggested in Jens' quote above, talking and »doing« probably intermingle and cannot be clearly distinguished from each other. One example of practical help among the female interviewees, however, comes from Karla. Some years ago she tried to help her friend get her big house ready for sale:

— Karla: we cleaned and cleared and threw away, but there was much left to do [...] And I said: »you have to ask me, 'cause I am getting older and older. Right now I am as strong as I was three years ago, but we have to deal with it so you can change your life«. But she is depressed. And stuck! So I do not know what to do. [---] [ I'll try to] help her to get away from there, but she is not receptive now. Then I invited her some years ago, on a trip to Berlin for three days. It was nice and she was really eager. But afterwards she fell down [in the depression] again [...] We know each other so well and she has a quick temper (laughs) so when she yells at me, I don't care.

Interviewer: Yes (we laugh) does it happen often that she yells at you?

Karla: Yes, she has a very short fuse! But the friendship remains. Yes, she is a perfect example of friendship!  
(Karla)

Karla tries to support and encourage her friend to change her way of thinking and her living conditions. Their conversations form part of the support, but Karla also supports her friend materially, by buying her a trip and by clearing and cleaning her house. Despite Karla's example, most of the female interviewees found it difficult to recognize practical, hands-on assistance as part of the friendships when being asked straight questions about it, perhaps due to a desire to understand one's friendships as equal and reciprocal. Presumably that is why Karla makes the statement of her friend as »a perfect example of friendship« at the end of the quote above.

Britt also brings up questions of reciprocity when talking about some »very lonely« women she knows, who do not have any friends at all. She maintains friendships with them out of compassion, because she is their only social contact. Britt acknowledges the inequality in these relationships, and says that she often feels guilty about these lonely friends. If the friendship should end, the older women are at risk for social isolation, depression, and may even end up in material need.<sup>43</sup> The lack of reciprocity these relationships reveal is interesting

since reciprocity and equality have often been seen as pivotal to friendship.<sup>44</sup> The women's investment in these apparently unequal friendships can be linked to the socialisation process, where girls are brought up to identify the needs of others and put these before their own.<sup>45</sup> But, to hold a position as »strong«, or to be the altruistic part in a relationship also offers the women an empowering feeling of being needed.<sup>46</sup>

Discussions about reciprocity were visible also among the male interviewees. Mikael and Joel were interviewed together, and while they agree that helping each other is very important to their relationship, both of them state that they sometimes feel guilty about asking for help: »it becomes like you're indebted in some way«, Joel says. Both Mikael and Joel's families live far away, and they rely on each other for practical help more visibly than some of the other male interviewees, who have their families nearby. Their reluctance to ask for help can be seen as a desire to be self-sufficient and independent, which was important to the women too, making their negotiations about which kind of help it was acceptable to give and receive very complex – being a friend is not the same as being a professional care-giver. This distinction was important to uphold, foremost among the elderly women. Voluntariness, maintaining reciprocity and emotional closeness, all seen as vital characteristics of an »ideal« friendship, were employed in this process. These tensions show that friendship must be further scrutinized from feminist perspectives, highlighting how financial strength, class and presence of family members affect power relations within same-sex friendships.

In this section we have shown how intimate dialogues, everyday talk and material and practical assistance are discussed as important to the interviewees' friendships. However, practical or material assistance is emphasized less, especially among the female interviewees, even though it seems to take place. This is consistent with Jamieson's idea about »disclosing intimacy« as an important ideal when it comes to intimacy, but also with her and Roseneil and Budgeon's arguments about material help as pivotal to friendship and other intimate relationships.<sup>47</sup> Besides gender, class, age and family situation impact both friendship practices and negotiations about reciprocity, vulnerability and voluntariness in friendship. Among the interviewees who do not have a family nearby or at all, friendship, with its responsibilities and support, has an especially important role. In these cases, the ideals of friendship as completely voluntary and equal are questioned by feelings of responsibility, which stretch further than the practical and material help that Roseneil and Budgeon emphasize, into taking responsibility for others' feelings of loneliness.

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## CONCLUSIONS

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In this article, we have discussed a number of aspects of our respective research projects regarding friendship and gender, and emphasized the need for more feminist friendship research.

Friendship is gendered in that women in general are seen as capable of having close friendships, while men in general are not. The women and men agree that men's reluctance to show weakness and divulge their innermost feelings pose problems for forming friendships, and some of the men actively try to change this. The interviewees refer to a well-known, 1970s-sprung discourse about men's and women's friendships, and make claims that are very similar to research showing that dominant constructions of masculinity, where stoicism and autonomy are important, prevent men from forming close, emotional friendships. The male interviewees themselves claim to have – for men – exceptional friendship skills. They reflexively refer to discourses about masculinity and friendship, but refute and critique this stereotype when it comes to themselves. In a similar way, the female interviewees argue that women have great friendship skills, but still bring up examples of loneliness and problematic friendships among women. Conversations stand out as important to the friendships, while sometimes overshadowing other aspects of friendship. Among the female interviewees, dialogue was used to help and support friends, to encourage them and to relate and situate each other in life, to such an extent that more practical and material aspects of the relationships were relegated to the background. Among the male interviewees, the practical and material aspects of friendship were mentioned more often, but the ideal of friendship as based on intimate conversations also permeated their accounts, and was connected to a critique of »other« men and longing for new ways of conducting friendships between men. Ideals of reciprocity, voluntariness and equality in friendship were negotiated in relation to care and feelings of responsibility towards others.

Ideas about friendship and gender intermingle in the interviewees' understandings of friendships. Asking feminist questions destabilizes neat, gendered dichotomies and makes it possible to understand power relations, vulnerabilities and exclusions within both men's and women's friendships. Friendship may meet the need for solidarity between people, but may also act as a segregating force, including some while excluding others. In both cases, we argue, it should be an object of further study for feminist researchers. To the interviewees, friendships are politically, emotionally and materially important and provide the interviewees with forums where they can receive many kinds of help, support and care, where they can situate and understand themselves and the world better. The role of friendship is negotiated in relation to the interviewee's and the

friend's family ties and financial and material resources. The negotiation of the meaning of friendship in relation to, predominantly, family (but also romantic and sexual relationships) further illustrates that friendship should be a subject of interest to feminist scholars, like families have been for the last fifty years. The role of friendship, especially when it comes to material and emotional support, must also be discussed in the light of shifting understandings of the family and the role of the welfare state in late modern Western countries, such as Sweden.

Our respective research projects, read together, show that friendship is negotiated in relation to gender, class and age but also related to ideas about familial and romantic relationships. The complex negotiations about the meaning, role and content of friendship show the need for more feminist attention to the subject of friendship. ■

#### ■ — E N D N O T E S —

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10 Roseneil & Budgeon: »Cultures of intimacy and care beyond 'the family'«.

11 Kath Weston: *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York, 1991).

12 Donald P. Levy: »Hegemonic complicity, friendship, and comradeship: Validation and causal processes among white, middle-class, middle-aged men« in *The Journal of Men's Studies* 13:2 (2005); Lundgren: *Den ofullkomliga vänskapen*. Todd Migliaccio: »Men's friendships: Performances of masculinity« in *The Journal of Men's Studies* 17:3 (2009).

13 Wellman: »Men in networks«.

14 Levy: »Hegemonic complicity, friendship, and comradeship«, 202; Migliaccio: »Men's friendships«, 227.

15 Historically, friendship has been seen as a male domain, a relationship in which women could not participate properly. Since the seventies, however, women's friendships have been revalued. Eva Gothlin: »Att synliggöra vänskap – Simone de Beauvoir och Jean-Paul Sartre« in Ingrid Holmquist (ed.): *Könsöverskridande vänskap. Om vänskapsrelationer mellan intellektuella kvinnor och män* (Halmstad, 2011); Lundgren: *Den ofullkomliga vänskapen*; Eva Österberg: *Vänskap. En lång historia* (Stockholm, 2007).

16 Michael A. Messner: »Like family. Power, intimacy, and sexuality in male athletes' friendships« in Nardi (ed.): *Men's Friendships* (Newbury Park, 1992).

17 Levy: »Hegemonic complicity, friendship, and comradeship«; Messner: »Like family«. Migliaccio: »Men's friendships«; Lillian Rubin: *Bara vänner. Vad vänskapen betyder i våra liv* (Borås, 1987); Richard Schmitt: »Profeminist men and their friends« in Digby (ed.): *Men Doing Feminism* (London, 1998); Robert Strikwerda & Larry May: »Male friendship and intimacy« in *Hypatia* 7:2 (1992); Thomas Thurnell-Read: »What happens on tour: The premarital stag tour, homosocial bonding, and male friendship« in *Men and Masculinities* 15:3 (2012).

18 Diane Felmlee, Elisabeth Sweet & H. Colleen Sinclair: »Gender rules: Same- and cross-gender friendships norms« in *Sex Roles*. 66: 7-8 (2012); Jamieson: *Intimacy*, 1. Rubin: *Bara vänner*.



19 One aspect of interviewing elderly people is that a long life almost invariably includes significant life changes when it comes to aspects like class, living conditions and description of the self and the narration of one's life. Some of the female interviewees had lived and worked abroad some period of their life, one interviewee's parents originated from an East-European country, some of the interviewees had gone through marriage, divorces, widowhood and experienced the death of a child, or other processes that makes it difficult for both interviewer and interviewed to put the interviewee into some easily handled category. Lars Tornstam, for instance, has shown that the elderly are often seen as a unitary group, even though their life circumstances and experiences differ considerably. Lars Tornstam: *Åldrandets socialpsykologi* (Stockholm, 2011).

20 Steinar Kvale & Svend Brinkmann: *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun* (Lund, 2009); Margaret Wetherell & Nigel Edley: »Negotiating hegemonic masculinity: imaginary positions and psycho-discursive practices« in *Feminism & Psychology* 9:3 (1999).

21 Klara Goedecke: »Making friends. Constructions of change, masculine positions and friendships« in Henriksson & Häyrén (eds.): *In Relation to What? Critical Perspectives on Masculinities and Relationalities* (New York, forthcoming).

22 Diana Mulinari: »Forskarens närvaro och situerad kunskapsproduktion« in Lundquist, Davies, Mulinari (ed.): *Att utmana vetandets gränser* (Malmö, 2005).

23 All names of interviewees have been changed.

24 Tomas and Stefan were interviewed together. It is important to note that the interaction during the pair interviews was significantly different from that of the individual interviews. In this example, Tomas was trying to make himself intelligible not only to the interviewer but also had to relate to his friend.

25 Cf. Brian de Vries & David Megathlin: »The dimensions and processes of older GLBT friendship and family relationships. The meaning of friendship for gay men and lesbians in the second half of life« in *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 5:1-2 (2009); Felmlee et al: »Gender rules«; Marian M. Morry, Mie Kito, Simmi Mann & Lauren Hill »Relational-interdependent self-construal: Perceptions of friends and friendship quality« in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 30:1 (2012); Rubin: *Bara vänner*.

26 Felmlee et al: »Gender rules«. Migliaccio: »Men's friendships«; Rubin: *Bara vänner*.

27 Strikwerda & May: »Male friendship and intimacy«; Scott Swain: »Covert intimacy: Closeness in the same-sex friendships of men« in Risman & Schwartz (eds.): *Gender in Intimate Relationships: A Microstructural Approach* (Belmont, California, 1989); Wellman: »Men in networks«.

- 28 Jamieson: *Intimacy*; Migliaccio: »Men's friendships«.
- 29 Messner: »Like family«, 217.
- 30 Lena Gunnarsson: *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a Feminist-realist Ontology of Sociosexuality* (New York, 2014); Janice Raymond: *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (Boston, 1986); Adrienne Rich: »Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence« in *Signs* 5:4 (1980).
- 31 Sasha Roseneil: »Foregrounding friendship« in Davis, Evans, & Lorber (eds.): *Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies* (London, 2006), 333; Margrit Shildrick: *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries* (London, New York, 1997), 144 pp.
- 32 Jamieson: *Intimacy*, 3.
- 33 Levy: »Hegemonic complicity, friendship, and comradeship«; Migliaccio: »Men's friendships«.
- 34 Lukas Gottzén & Rickard Jonsson: »Inledning« in Gottzén & Jonsson (eds.): *Andra män. Maskulinitet, normskapande och jämställdhet* (Malmö, 2012); Marie Nordberg: *Jämställdhetens spjutspets?: manliga arbetstagare i kvinnoyrken, jämställdhet, maskulinitet, femininitet och heteronormativitet* (Göteborg, 2005).
- 35 Sophia Aboim: *Plural Masculinities: The Remaking of the Self in Private Life* (Farnham, 2010), 57 pp.
- 36 See Goedecke: »Making friends«.
- 37 Roseneil & Budgeon: »Cultures of intimacy and care beyond 'the family'«
- 38 Jamieson: *Intimacy*, 8.
- 39 de Vries & Megathlin: »The dimensions and processes«.
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- 42 Lundgren: *Den ofullkomliga vänskapen*.
- 43 Fisher et al: »Conflict in families and friendships of later life«; Robin Moremen: »The downside of friendship: Sources of strain in older women's friendships« in *Journal of Women & Aging* 20:1-2 (2008).
- 44 Adams: »Patterns of network change«; Sandra Lee Bartky: »Fractured friendship« in Liinason (ed.): *Friendship in Feminist Conversation: Festschrift for Ulla M. Holm* (Göteborg, 2009); de Vries & Megathlin: »The dimensions and processes of older GLBT friendship and family relationships«. Felmlee et al: »Gender rules«; Moremen: »The downside of friendship«. Morry et al: »Relational-interdependent self-construal«; Rubin: *Bara vänner*.

45 Rubin: *Bara vänner*, 127 p.

46 Linn Alenius Wallin: »'Det som hon slår an i mitt hjärta, det fyller mig med glädje fortfarande'. Om äldre kvinnors nära vänskapsrelationer« unpublished master's thesis, Lund University, Dept. of Gender Studies (2015).

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