Emotional Intimacy among Men

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This article is not about sexual behavior between men, nor about typical male friendships; it is concerned with something in between, i.e., emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy is defined in behavioral terms as mutual self-disclosure and other kinds of verbal sharing, as declarations of liking or loving the other, and as demonstrations of affection such as hugging and non-genital caressing.

Cultural prohibitions in America, as well as in many other Western nations, frown strongly upon the demonstration of intimacy between men, such as adult males openly sharing affection in public. As a consequence, many American males in adult life have never had a close male friend nor known what it means to love and care for a male friend without the shadow of some guilt and fear of peer ridicule (Komarovsky, 1974; Pleck, 1975a; Goldberg, 1976). Because of these restrictive norms, even those who have male friends usually have experienced little trust, little personal sharing, and low emotional investments in these friendships (Jourard, 1971; Fasteau, 1972, 1974; Steinmann and Fox, 1974; Pleck, 1974, 1975a; Goldberg, 1976). There is more than a little irony in the keen observation that many American men report their closest male relationships as those discovered through war or sports, i.e., when they are bonded together to kill others (Fasteau, 1974).

Don Clark, a psychologist who has worked frequently with all-male groups, has reflected:

Men need more from one another than they believe they are permitted to have. Expression of positive affect, or affection, between men is seriously inhibited in our culture. Negative affect is acceptable. Men can argue, fight, and injure one another in public view, but they cannot as easily hold hands, embrace, or kiss. When emotions in any area are blocked in expression, they seek other outlets, in distorted form if necessary. (1972, p. 368)
DEFICITS IN EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

Research on male friendships suggests that most males are not very emotionally intimate with other males. Two studies (Olstad, 1975; Powers and Bultena, 1976) suggest that, although men may report more same-sex friendships than women do, these friendships are not close or intimate. For instance, Olstad's study of Oberlin college students reported that the majority of Oberlin males had more male best friends than female best friends. Yet these males tended to place greater confidence in, consulted more about important decisions, and spent more time together with their best female friends than with their best male friends. Powers and Bultena (1976) in a statewide study in Iowa interviewed 234 noninstitutionalized adults who were 70 years or older. Their findings suggested that the aged males had more frequent social contacts than did the aged females, but that the males basically limited their social interaction to their children and their children's families, and to spouses. The aged men also were less likely than the women to have intimate friends and were less likely to replace their lost friends.

Similar findings have been discussed by Knupfer, Clark, and Room (1966), who found unmarried males to have less close relationships with both sexes than females had. Finally, Nye (1976) reported that married men also went less to same-sex and other-sex friends for "therapeutic" purposes than their wives did.

Self-disclosure, a vital component of emotional intimacy, has been reported in many studies to be either very low or utterly lacking between males (Jourard, 1971). Similarly, in Komarovsky's survey of males at an Ivy League college (1974, 1976), college males disclosed themselves much more to their closest female friend than to their closest male friend. For most men, apparently, it is difficult and embarrassing to tell one's best male friend that he is liked. A recent nationwide survey (Peleck, Note 1) reported that a majority—58% of all males questioned—had not told their best male friend that they liked him. If the disclosure of liking one another is so difficult, it is little wonder that hugging, holding hands, caressing, and kissing, which are allowed between close male friends in some cultures, are not often observed in our own culture.

The lack of emotional intimacy between men is currently being decried from a number of quarters. Some writers have even taken the position that the absence of intimate behavior among men is a microcosm spreading to many social problems. Goldberg (1976) argues that the absence of a loving, close male relationship is strongly related to the significantly higher suicide rates among males, especially among divorced