The Stability of Social Interaction

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In a study of the stability of social interaction, participants maintained a social interaction diary, the Rochester Interaction Record (RIR), for 4 1-week periods during their freshman year at college. Stability was operationalized in 3 ways: absolutely, in terms of the similarity across the 4 periods of amount of interaction and of reactions to interactions; relatively, in terms of correlations between interaction measures taken at different times; and in terms of the stability of social networks, defined as the consistency across time of participants' close friends. Social interaction was found to be more stable over shorter periods of time than over longer periods, and stability increased over time. In addition, opposite-sex social interaction was less stable than same-sex interaction, and this was particularly true for interactions with close friends. The present results are interpreted by considering social environments as social systems with an emphasis on the importance of social norms as mediators of social interaction.

Psychologists have long been interested in the stability of social behavior, and the stability of behavior figures prominently in discussions of some of psychology's most enduring questions. Which is more influential, personality or situational factors? How much do people change across the life cycle? How do people adapt to changing life situations? Which is more important, nature or nurture? Answers to questions such as these inevitably require some assessment of behavioral stability, and when considering human behavior it is essential to consider social behavior. Therefore, it is important (in terms of evaluating a wide variety of theories) to know if, when, and why social behavior is stable. To further psychologists' understanding of the stability of social behavior, the present study used a social interaction diary to study the stability of naturally occurring social interaction.

The stability of behavior is a prominent theme in research on the temporal stability of personality. Under the assumption (not always tested) that if a personality construct is stable then its behavioral manifestations will also be stable, some research on the temporal stability of personality has focused on behavioral variables. For example, Block (1971) studied the temporal stability of personality by examining the stability of ratings made of people's behaviors (see Block, 1977, for a discussion of research on the temporal stability of personality).

The classic psychological question of the relative influences on behavior of personality and situational factors is a question about the stability of behavior, although the term *consistency* is often used instead of *stability*. Research on this topic has spawned three camps. One group consists of those who believe that behavior is determined primarily by situational factors and that behavior is not consistent across different situations (e.g., Mischel, 1984). A second group consists of those who argue the opposite, that people's behaviors are consistent (stable) across situations (e.g., Epstein, 1979). The third group, the interactionists, believes that personality and situational factors combine to influence behavior, an approach described by Magnusson and Endler (1977b). Within this last framework, the stability and consistency of behavior is thought to depend on the consistency of the situations people encounter or choose. Although these three groups may disagree about how stable people's behaviors are—and if they are stable why that is so—they all are interested in the stability of behavior.

Blass (1984) has suggested that personality and social psychology are converging and focusing on similar topics, noting that conceptual variables that were once experimentally manipulated are frequently being studied as individual-difference variables (e.g., self-consciousness). To the extent that this is true, social psychologists need to address some of the same issues that traditionally have concerned personologists, for example, the stability of behavior and the consistency of the relationships between individual differences and behaviors (see Snyder and Ickes, 1985, for a discussion of the relationship between personality and social psychological theories).

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More specifically, determining the stability of the social behaviors labeled as *social interactions* has important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, understanding how and when social interaction is stable should help increase researchers' understanding of the dynamics underlying social interaction. For example, variations in the stability of different types of social interaction might indicate that different types of interactions are regulated or influenced by different factors. Practically, it is important to know how stable social interaction is because the stability of interaction may determine upper bounds for the relationships between measures of social interaction and measures of other individual differences. Although research on naturally occurring social interaction has increased within the past decade, not enough is known about the stability of social interaction.

In the present study social interaction was measured using the Rochester Interaction Record (RIR; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977), a social interaction diary. Participants in the present study maintained the RIR four times (twice each semester) during their first year at college. Using a standardized form they described all the social interactions they had during each period of the study. Summary measures were calculated to describe each individual's social interactions. Some measures described the quantity of interaction (e.g., average number of interactions per day), and others described affective reactions to interaction. In addition, participants' social networks, the specific people with whom they interacted, were measured.

Three hypotheses guided the present study. First, similar to the results of considerable research on other individual differences, it was hypothesized that the stability of social interaction would be inversely related to the length of time over which stability was measured. The stability of behavior between two more distant data collection periods was hypothesized to be less than the stability between two more proximal times.

Second, it was hypothesized that the stability of social interaction would increase as the amount of time spent in a particular social environment increased. The more time people spend in a particular environment the more familiar they become with it, the more they adjust themselves to the environment, and the more the (social) environment adjusts to them. For example, for the vast majority of students, entering college means entering a new environment, with new roles, norms, and expectations, and adapting to this environment takes time. Over time people are more likely to find their behavioral niches, and over time their role sets will be more likely to recognize and support these niches, leading to greater stability in interaction over time.

The hypothesized increase in stability over time was derived in part from Katz and Kahn's (1978) model of social systems. Katz and Kahn viewed social systems as sets of role relationships and defined roles as repeated behavioral sequences. Role expectations are communicated to individuals, and over time, these expectations are integrated with individuals' personalities and a role emerges. A similar outcome was suggested also by Stewart (1982). She suggested that people would be more stable, both temporally and cross-situationally, after they had been in a specific environment for some period of time. In her work she emphasized the concept of *emotional stance* and suggested that behavior would stabilize when people had been in a situation long enough to achieve a stable emotional stance toward it.

Third, it was hypothesized that opposite-sex social interactions would be less stable than same-sex interactions and that this difference would be most pronounced for behaviors involving close friends. Existing research suggests that for most people same-sex social interactions should be less problematic (and by implication more stable) than opposite-sex interactions. First, this is suggested by the consistent finding that same-sex social contacts are much more common than opposite-sex contacts (e.g., Nezlek, Wheeler, & Reis, 1983). Extrapolating from this, greater familiarity and experience should lead to less anxiety and distress. Second, same-sex interactions are likely to be more familiar and stable because in same-sex interactions the expectations and styles of co-interactants should be more congruent (at least at the molar level) than they are in opposite-sex interactions because the interactants are all of the same sex (cf. O'Meara, 1989). Moreover, research has consistently found differences between the social interactions of men and women (e.g., Nezlek et al., 1983), differences that probably both result from and perpetuate differences between the sexes in their expectations for interaction. In addition, for many people, opposite-sex others present additional possible role relationships compared with those presented by same-sex others; that is, heterosexuals typically do not consider same-sex others as potential sexual or romantic partners. These added possibilities may confuse or make less clear the nature and purposes of opposite-sex social events compared with those of same-sex events (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Shotland & Craig, 1988).

Stability can be defined in various ways, and it is important to consider any definition in terms of two criteria: how stability is operationalized and the range of behaviors or situations over which measures are aggregated. Typically, stability is operationalized either by correlations between measures taken at different times or by changes in means of these measures, two methods corresponding to Magnusson and Endler's (1977) descriptions of relative and absolute stability.

Typically, social psychologists have studied the absolute stability of social interaction and social relationships. For example, Wheeler and Nezlek (1977) reported only analyses of variance (ANOVAs; over the two time periods of the study and among different types of events) of the data generated by the social interaction diaries they collected. Similarly, Berg (1984) and Hays (1985), in their studies of friendship development, presented ANOVAs of mean changes over time. Social psychologists have tended not to focus on relative stability. For example, Wheeler and Nezlek did not report any correlations across time, and although Berg and Hays reported some correlations of measures between time periods, they did so only in discussions of possible causal relationships. The relative stability of social interactions or social relationships per se was not discussed in any of these three studies. The present study examined both the absolute and relative stability of social interaction.

It is also important to consider the range of situations and behaviors over which measures are aggregated when discussing stability. For example, Epstein (1979) argued that most research

has not found meaningful relationships between traits and behaviors (implying that behavior is not stable or cross-situationally consistent) because behaviors have been measured too narrowly. He presented broad measures of behaviors and moods and concluded that behavior is stable. In response, Mischel and Peake (1982) argued that because Epstein aggregated across different situations, he did not allow situational differences to emerge. Clearly, it is important to consider the range of situations and behaviors over which measures are aggregated when drawing conclusions about behavioral stability. The present study examined the stability of social interaction using measures incorporating a variety of aggregation strategies.

For present purposes, stability was operationalized in four ways. First, aggregate stability was defined as the extent to which group means of different interaction measures varied across the four periods of the study. For example, did the average number of interactions per day change during the year? Second, absolute stability was defined by comparing the absolute value of changes across different time periods in the study; for example, was the average change (either increase or decrease) between the two periods in the second semester smaller than the average change between the two periods in the first semester? Relative stability was defined as the extent to which individuals remained stable relative to one another; for example, were those who were the most socially active at the beginning of the study the most socially active at the end? Each of these types of stability was assessed in terms of the quantity and distribution of interactions, for example, number and percentage of interactions that were opposite sex and in terms of interaction satisfaction and intimacy.

The stability of social networks also was measured. For each person, lists of close friends were derived from the interaction diaries for each of the four data-gathering periods of the study. The stability of social networks was defined as the overlap of these lists between different periods. Social networks have been found to be mediators of important psychological states such as loneliness (e.g., Stokes, 1985); however, little is known about the stability of social networks. Moreover, given the present hypotheses about behavioral stability, it was important to know whether the stability of individuals' social interaction would be related to the stability of their social networks. That is, would interaction patterns be more stable if the people with whom one interacted remained the same than if these co-interactants changed?

Method

Participants and Setting

Participants were first-year students attending the University of Rochester. They attended an introductory meeting (mixed-sex groups of 12 to 16) after receiving a brief description of the study provided during their freshmen orientation. Of the 96 students who attended the introductory meeting, 78 became participants in the study (41 women and 37 men). Participants were White and between 17 and 19 years old. Although sexual orientation was not measured explicitly, in poststudy interviews most participants answered questions about their social lives that suggested they had a heterosexual orientation.

Instructions to Participants

Participants were told that the study concerned patterns of social interaction and that they would use a structured diary form to describe their social interactions. An interaction was defined as any encounter with at least one other person in which the participants attended to one another and adjusted their behavior in response to one another (Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). This definition of an interaction is similar to Goffman's (1971) concept of a *social with.* Examples of interactions were provided (e.g., a conversation or dancing), as were examples of situations that were not interactions (e.g., sitting side by side in class and not talking). For each of four 1-week periods during the year, participants were told to record all the social interactions they had that lasted 10 min or longer. The importance of updating the diary at least once a day was emphasized, and they were told that the success of the study depended on their honesty and cooperation. Finally, participants were given an instruction booklet that repeated the instructions provided during the meeting. Detailed instructions for using the RIR can be found in Nezlek and Wheeler (1984).

Participants rated their satisfaction with and the intimacy of each interaction on 7-point Likert-style scales. These two ratings assessed important dimensions of interaction suggested by Forgas (1976). In keeping with previous research using the RIR, it was noted that intimacy did not have to include a sexual component, and satisfaction was defined as the amount of pleasure or enjoyment experienced during an interaction. Using categorical response scales, participants also indicated who initiated each interaction, the location of each interaction, and the primary nature of what they did during each interaction. The diary form was the same as that used by Wheeler and Nezlek (1977).

Procedure

Participants were asked to maintain diaries for four 1-week periods during their first year at college, periods were labeled Time 1 through Time 4 (T1, T2, T3, and T4). The first data collection period began immediately after the initial introduction to the study. At the beginning of each of the three other periods a member of the research team contacted participants by phone and told them to maintain the diary again. Each of these 1-week periods was separated by approximately 8 weeks. This allowed comparisons of the stability of interaction across different amounts of time: across 8 weeks (three replications: T1–T2, T2–T3, and T3–T4), across 16 weeks (two replications: T1 and T3 and T2 and T4), and across 24 weeks (T1 and T4).

A 1-week period was chosen for each diary because (a) it represented a meaningful unit in terms of the organization of participants' lives (Larsen & Kasimatis 1990), and (b) it provided a basis for a reliable assessment of participants' general social environments. A shorter period of time would not have provided a sufficient basis to examine reliably differences across settings, for example, relative amounts of same- and opposite-sex social interaction.

Participants were interviewed individually at the end of each collection period. They answered questions about the difficulty they had maintaining the diary, the number of interactions they felt they missed, and other questions regarding the accuracy of their diaries. These responses were very similar to those given by participants in the Wheeler and Nezlek (1977) study and other RIR studies, and they strongly suggested that participants maintained the diary in accordance with instructions. In the interest of economy, these data are not presented in this article. The average number of days the dairy was maintained in each period was 7.0.

Measures of Social Interaction

Summary measures were calculated to describe each participant's social interactions for each period a diary was maintained. Interaction

quality was measured by the averages for the two ratings, intimacy and satisfaction. Interaction quantity was measured by calculating the mean number of interactions for each day, the average length of interactions, and for specific types of interactions—the percentage of all interactions of that type. In addition, social networks were measured using the number of different individuals represented during each period, adjusted for the specific number of days the RIR was maintained in that period.[1]

Separate sets of measures were calculated, representing different levels of aggregation. The first set, overall, described all of a participant's interactions that occurred during a record-keeping period. A second set distinguished interactions on the basis of the sex of the participants. Some measures, same-sex, described only those interactions in which all other interactants were the same sex as the subject; others, opposite-sex, described only those interactions in which other interactants were of the opposite sex.

A third set of variables described interactions with participants' friends. The determination of best and close friends was done by examining rank-ordered lists of all cointeractants mentioned by each participant during each period. Same- and opposite-sex best friends were designated as the most frequently mentioned same- and opposite-sex cointeractant, and same- and opposite-sex close friends were designated as the three most frequently mentioned same- and opposite-sex cointeractants for each period. The use of frequency of contact as an indicator of the closeness of friendships is consistent with the results of prior studies using the RIR, which have found a high correspondence between nominated best friends and the frequency with which individuals are mentioned in the diary (Reis & Wheeler, 1991). In addition, Hays (1989) reported that frequency of contact was strongly and positively associated with closeness of friendship.

Summary measures were calculated with a variant of the Rochester Interaction Record Analysis Package (RIRAP; Nezlek & Wheeler, 1984), a set of programs written specifically to summarize data generated by the RIR. The level of analysis used to summarize the interaction diaries was the individual. Although there was considerable variability among participants in how socially active they were, participants contributed equally to the final analyses. Discussions of this analytic framework can be found in Wheeler and Nezlek (1977) and Nezlek and Wheeler (1984).

Results

Analytic Strategy

The stability of social interaction was measured in four ways. First, aggregate stability was measured by comparing group means of interaction measures across the four periods of the study. Second, absolute stability was measured by comparing the absolute value of changes in measures between time periods. Third, relative stability was measured with autocorrelations for each measure for all pairs of periods; that is, number of interactions per day at T1 was correlated with number of interactions per day at T2, T3, and T4. Fourth, social network stability was examined by measuring the extent to which close and best friends remained constant across periods: For example, what was the status at T2 of the best friend during T1, and how many close friends at T1 were close friends at T2?

Not all participants were included in all analyses. Of the 78 participants in the study, 64 maintained a diary for all four periods, and 14 maintained a diary for three of the four periods. There was no consistent pattern to this exclusion, nor were participants without data from all periods demonstrably different from those with complete data. Analyses that did not require data from all periods included all the available data. In addition, some men were excluded from some analyses because they did not have opposite-sex interactions during some periods. Although no formal hypotheses regarding sex differences were formulated, given that sex differences have been found in much of the research on social interaction and its correlates (Nezlek et al., 1983), all analyses compared the interactions of women and men. Finally, measures describing interactions with same- and opposite-sex close and best friends were analyzed separately, and because the results of the close and best friends analyses were very similar, only the best friends analyses are discussed, unless noted otherwise.

Aggregate Stability

The stability of mean levels of interaction for the sample as a whole was examined with ANOVAs, with sex as a between-subjects factor and time (period) as a within-subjects factor and a trend analysis for time. The first set of analyses examined the aggregate stability of measures describing all social interactions, and the means and the results of these analyses are presented in Table 1. The ANOVAs of the overall measures produced very few differences across time. Average intimacy, satisfaction, length, and size of same- and opposite-sex social networks did not vary across the four periods (all $Fs < 1$), although social activity per se increased over time. There was a significant linear trend in the analysis of interactions per day.

Although sex differences in interaction are not a focus of this article, they are described briefly. On average, women had more interactions per day than men (6.9 vs. 5.4), $F(1, 62) = 7.5$, $p < .01$; they had smaller same-sex social networks (9.1 vs. 12.6 persons per week), $F(1, 62) = 6.5$, $p < .05$; and they had larger opposite-sex social networks (9.8 vs. 4.9 persons per week), $F(1, 62) = 23.6$, $p < .01$. However, there were no differences between women and men in how they changed over time; there were no significant Sex × Time period interactions in the analyses of these variables (all $ps > .25$). The above analyses were repeated separately for measures describing all same-sex interactions and all opposite-sex interactions. With one exception, the results of these analyses were similar to the results of the analyses of the overall measures, and analyses of same- and opposite-sex interactions are not presented in detail. There was a significant linear trend in the analysis of the percentage of same-sex interaction, $F(1, 62) = 6.2$, $p < .05$; same-sex contact decreased over time ($Ms = 0.57, 0.56, 0.52$, and 0.51).

The aggregate stability of interactions with participants' networks of friends was analyzed similarly. Analyses of interaction with same-sex best friends did not produce any significant effects for time, although there were some differences between men and women. On average, women had more interactions per day with their same-sex best friends ($M = 1.9$) than did men ($M = 1.4$), $F(1, 62) = 4.2$, $p < .05$, although women and men did not differ in the percentage of interactions they had with their same-sex best friends. In contrast, contact with opposite-sex

[1] The categorical data describing initiation, location, and nature of interactions are not discussed in this article.

Table 1
Aggregate Stability of Interactions Across Four Time (T) Periods

Variable	Level of aggregation	T1	T2	T3	T4	Time
Intimacy	Overall	3.5	3.6	3.6	3.5	ns
	Same-sex best	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.6	ns
	Opposite-sex best	4.1	4.1	3.9	3.9	ns
Satisfaction	Overall	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	ns
	Same-sex best	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	ns
	Opposite-sex best	5.5	5.1	5.2	5.3	ns
Length	Overall	52	52	55	54	ns
	Same-sex best	46	52	50	50	ns
	Opposite-sex best	58	53	55	55	ns
Interactions per day	Overall	5.6	6.0	6.4	6.7	11.5*
	Same-sex best	1.6	1.7	1.5	1.8	ns
	Opposite-sex best	0.7	0.9	1.3	1.4	12.3*
Size of social network	Same-sex	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	ns
	Opposite sex	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	ns
% nongroup interactions	Same-sex best	0.37	0.39	0.35	0.36	ns
	Opposite-sex best	0.15	0.18	0.24	0.25	11.5*

Note. There were 33 women and 31 men included in the overall and same-sex best friend analyses, and there were 32 women and 22 men in the opposite-sex best friend analyses. The Time column contains the F ratio testing the linear component of the time within effect. The degrees of freedom were 1 and 62 for the overall and same-sex best friend analyses and 1 and 52 for the opposite-sex best friend analyses. Effects represented by *ns* were not significant (all $ps < .10$). Other significant effects from these analyses are described in the text.
* $p < .01$ or beyond.

best friends increased over time for both men and women. For opposite-sex best friends, number of interactions per day increased linearly as did percentage of interactions (see Table 1).

Overall, these analyses suggest that on average, interaction quality and quantity did not change over time, except that contact with opposite-sex friends increased. However, it does not necessarily follow that because group means did not change that individuals did not change, and changes at the individual level were examined in the next set of analyses.

Absolute Stability

The stability of social interaction at the individual level was examined by comparing absolute changes in measures. For each participant, for each measure, the absolute value of the difference between each pair of periods was calculated. To test the first hypothesis—that stability would be greater over shorter periods of time than over longer periods—sets of analyses with planned contrasts were conducted. The first contrast (C1) compared the average absolute change over one period (8 weeks: changes from T1–T2, T2–T3, and T3–T4) with the average absolute change over two periods (16 weeks: changes from T1–T3 and T2–T4), the second contrast (C2) compared changes over one period with changes over three periods (24 weeks: T1–T4), and the third contrast (C3) compared changes over two periods with changes over three periods.

Analyses of the absolute stability of interaction generally confirmed the first hypothesis, although in the interests of economy, these analyses are not discussed in detail. The detailed results of each analysis are presented in Table 2. Broadly speaking, the analyses of the C1 contrast provided the most consistent support for this hypothesis. Average absolute changes over 8 weeks were less than average absolute changes over 16 weeks. The analyses of the C2 and C3 contrasts also provided some support for this hypothesis. In addition, more consistent support was found for this hypothesis in the analyses of the overall and same-sex measures than in the analyses of measures of opposite-sex interaction.

There were significant Contrast × Sex interactions in the analyses of absolute stability of satisfaction and intimacy, and these are noted in Table 2. This occurred in the analysis of the C3 contrast of overall satisfaction, $F(1, 62) = 4.6$, $p < .05$, and in the analyses of the C2 and C3 contrasts of satisfaction with opposite-sex interactions, $F(1, 48) = 8.0$, $p < .01$, and $F(1, 48) = 7.8$, $p < .01$, respectively; and with opposite-sex best friends, $F(1, 48) = 6.7$, $p < .01$, and $F(1, 48) = 5.3$, $p < .05$, respectively, and in the analyses of the C1 contrast of intimacy in opposite-sex interactions. These interactions were all due to the same pattern of results. The absolute stability of men's reactions to interactions varied across time as predicted, whereas women's did not vary as much across time as men's.

The second hypothesis—that interactions would stabilize over time—was tested by comparing the absolute changes across period pairs T1–T2, T2–T3, and T3–T4, using ANOVAs with an orthogonal decomposition of the period-pair, within-subjects factor. The tests of the linear component from these analyses are presented in Table 2. In the analyses of intimacy and satisfaction in overall, same-sex, same-sex best friend, and

Table 2
Absolute Stability of Interactions

Variable	Mean absolute change between period pairs						Separation by periods: Contrasts (C)			Stability over time (linear)	*df*s
	1–2	2–3	3–4	1–3	2–4	1–4	C1	C2	C3		
Overall											
Intimacy	0.60	0.51	0.37	0.70	0.57	0.72	12.3***	8.5***	ns	10.1***	1, 62
Satisfaction	0.49	0.31	0.30	0.57	0.40	0.57	30.0***	17.6***	4.9**^{s}	10.8***	1, 62
Length	12	13	11	16	14	13	11.9***	ns	ns	ns	1, 62
Per day	1.3	1.2	1.1	1.6	1.6	2.0	9.5***	16.6***	8.8**	ns	1, 62
Same-sex network	0.55	0.51	0.52	0.58	0.45	0.51	ns	ns	ns	ns	1, 62
Opposite-sex network	0.43	0.39	0.32	0.43	0.46	0.47	3.9**	3.2*	ns	4.3**	1, 62
Same-sex interactions											
Intimacy	0.70	0.58	0.45	0.85	0.64	0.82	14.5***	9.7***	ns	5.3**	1, 61
Satisfaction	0.56	0.37	0.41	0.65	0.46	0.70	11.8***	19.5***	9.0**	8.4**	1, 61
Length	13	14	13	17	13	15	2.9*	ns	ns	ns	1, 61
Per day	0.87	1.1	0.94	1.0	1.2	1.3	5.7**	5.7**	ns	ns	1, 62
% all interactions	0.13	0.14	0.12	0.15	0.15	0.16	4.7**	3.5*	ns	ns	1, 62
Opposite-sex interactions											
Intimacy	0.92	0.85	0.73	1.0	0.96	0.92	12.7***^{s}	ns	ns	ns	1, 48
Satisfaction	0.69	0.57	0.57	0.80	0.66	0.73	6.7**	4.7**^{s}	ns^{s}	ns	1, 48
Length	20	25	23	23	23	19	ns	ns	ns	ns	1, 48
Per day	0.66	0.68	0.55	0.73	0.76	0.74	5.3**	ns	ns	ns	1, 62
% all interactions	0.10	0.10	0.07	0.10	0.10	0.10	3.9**	ns	ns	ns	1, 62
Same-sex best friends											
Intimacy	0.79	0.63	0.51	0.92	0.77	0.93	16.2***	10.7***	ns	9.4***	1, 62
Satisfaction	0.59	0.49	0.38	0.69	0.60	0.87	17.6***	25.1***	10.2**	7.2***	1, 62
Length	20	21	15	17	19	18	ns	ns	ns	3.2*	1, 62
Per day	0.68	0.63	0.73	0.76	0.91	0.92	8.0***	4.5**	ns	ns	1, 62
% nongroup interactions	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.14	0.13	0.11	ns	ns	ns	ns	1, 62
Opposite-sex best friends											
Intimacy	1.0	0.99	0.76	1.2	0.79	1.1	ns	ns	ns	3.9*	1, 52
Satisfaction	1.1	0.73	0.67	0.95	0.84	0.89	ns	ns^{s}	ns^{s}	8.6**	1, 52
Length	27	32	30	33	32	30	ns	ns	ns	ns	1, 52
Per day	0.52	0.68	0.47	0.83	0.90	0.98	11.0***	8.5***	2.7*	ns	1, 52
% nongroup interactions	0.09	0.13	0.08	0.12	0.16	0.14	8.4***	6.0**	ns	ns	1, 52

Note. Effects that were qualified by an interaction of contrast and participant sex are accompanied by a superscript *s*.
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

opposite-sex best friend interactions there was a significant linear trend in the predicted direction, and there was a similar significant trend in the stability of opposite-sex social networks. The size of the average absolute change between adjacent periods decreased over time. In contrast, there were no such trends in the analyses of any of the contact measures.

The third hypothesis of the study was that same-sex social interaction would be more stable than opposite-sex interaction. The absolute stability of all same-sex interactions and all opposite-sex interactions was compared with ANOVAs, using the six pairs as within-subjects factors. The average absolute changes across period pairs of measures describing same-sex interactions were significantly smaller than average changes of measures of opposite-sex interactions for intimacy (*M*s = 0.55 and 0.67), $F(1, 47) = 5.3$, $p < .05$, and length of interaction (*M*s = 15 and 22), $F(1, 47) = 8.9$, $p < .01$, and were marginally smaller for changes in satisfaction (*M*s = 0.55 and).67), $F(1, 47) = 2.8$, $p < 10$. A similar pattern was found in the analyses of interactions with best friends. The average absolute change across period pairs of measures of interaction with same-sex best friends was significantly smaller than the change of measures of interactions with opposite-sex best friends for intimacy (*M*s = 0.76 and 0.97), $F(1, 52) = 5.7$, $p < .05$, satisfaction (*M*s = 0.60, 0.86), $F(1, 52) = 11.4$, $p < .01$, and length of interaction (*M*s = 18 and 31), $F(1, 52) = 18.0$, $p < .01$.

In contrast, analyses of absolute changes in amount of interaction did not support the third hypothesis. There were no differences between same- and opposite-sex best friends in the average absolute change in interactions per day or in the percentage of interactions. Moreover, contrary to expectation, contact with the opposite sex changed less than contact with the same sex in terms of both percentage of interactions (*M*s = 0.14, 0.10), $F(1, 62) = 30.1$, $p < .01$, and interactions per day (*M*s = 1.1, 0.69), $F(1, 62) = 17.9$, $p < .01$. In addition, contrary to expectation, the size of same-sex social networks changed more than the size of opposite-sex networks (*M*s = .52, .42), $F(1, 62)$

Table 3
Relative Stability of Measures of All Interactions: Autocorrelations

Variable	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4
Time 1			
Intimacy	.71	$.64_{34,23}$	$.59_{34}$
Satisfaction	$.58_{14,13,23}$	$.45_{34,23,12}$	$.38_{34,24,12}$
Length	.50	$.33_{34,23,14}$	$.48_{34,13}$
Per day	$.72_{14,13}$	$.61_{34,23,12}$	$.55_{34,24,12}$
Same sex %	.76	$.71_{34}$	$.71_{34}$
Opposite sex %	.74	$.70_{34}$	$.72_{34}$
Same network	$.59_{14}$	$.48_{34,23}$	$.42_{34,24,12}$
Opposite network	$.67_{23}$	$.68_{34,23}$	$.69_{34}$
Time 2			
Intimacy		$.77_{13,34}$	$.71_{34}$
Satisfaction		$.83_{13,12,24}$	$.65_{34,23,14}$
Length		$.58_{13,34,24}$	$.38_{34,23}$
Per day		$.79_{13}$	$.74_{34,14}$
Same sex %		$.72_{34}$	$.68_{34}$
Opposite sex %		$.68_{34}$	$.69_{34}$
Same network		$.66_{13}$	$.70_{14}$
Opposite network		$.79_{13,12,24}$	$.71_{34,23}$
Time 3			
Intimacy			$.90_{13,14,24,23}$
Satisfaction			$.84_{13,14,24}$
Length			$.66_{13,14,24,23}$
Per day			$.85_{13,14,24}$
Same sex %			$.83_{13,14,24,23}$
Opposite sex %			$.85_{13,14,24,23}$
Same network			$.73_{13,14}$
Opposite network			$.86_{13,14,24}$

Note. All autocorrelations were significant at or beyond the .05 level. Subscripts indicate the comparable autocorrelations from which a given autocorrelation differs at or beyond the .05 level. For example, the T12 autocorrelation for satisfaction was significantly different from the T14, T13, and T23 satisfaction autocorrelations. The procedure used to compare the autocorrelations did not allow comparing T12 with T34 or T13 with T24. Sample sizes were T1–T2, 72; T1–T3, 75; T1–T4, 71; T2–T3, 71; T2–T4, 67; and T3–T4, 72.

= 6.4, $p < .05$, although this effect was qualified by a significant interaction with sex, $F(1, 62) = 6.9$, $p < .05$. The stability of women's same- and opposite-sex networks was similar, whereas those of men were not.

Relative Stability

The relative stability of social interaction was examined with autocorrelations of interaction measures. Autocorrelations for the overall measures are presented in Table 3. All were positive and statistically significant, suggesting that social interaction was relatively stable over the period of time covered by the study.

Nonetheless, there were differences among the autocorrelations, suggesting that stability varied as a function of the specific periods being considered. Autocorrelations were compared following a procedure described by Hotelling (1940) designed to test the difference between two correlations describing the same sample. The procedure requires that the two correlations to be compared have a variable in common, and it requires inclusion of the correlation between the two variables that are not shared. For example, T1–T2 and T2–T3 autocorrelations could be compared because both involved T2, and this comparison required the use of T1–T3 autocorrelations. In contrast, certain comparisons (e.g., T1-T2 vs. T3-T4) could not be made because the two correlations had no shared variable. The large number of comparisons raises some questions about the validity of individual tests; yet, the results were consistent, and many of the differences cited below were significant at the .01 level and beyond.

The first hypothesis—that stability would be greater when measured over shorter periods of time—was supported by the fact that autocorrelations between adjacent periods were generally stronger than the autocorrelations between periods separated by a period. All eight of the T3–T4 autocorrelations were significantly greater than the T1–T3 autocorrelations, seven of eight T3–T4 autocorrelations were significantly greater than T2–T4 autocorrelations, and six of eight T2–T3 autocorrelations were significantly greater than T1–T3 autocorrelations. Somewhat less support was found in the comparisons of the T2–T3 and T2–T4 autocorrelations and the T1–T2 and T1–T3 autocorrelations. Moreover, there were no significant differences between the T1–T2 and T2–T4 autocorrelations.

Autocorrelations between adjacent periods also tended to be stronger than autocorrelations between periods separated by two periods. All eight of the T3–T4 autocorrelations were significantly greater than the T1–T4 autocorrelations, three of eight T1–T2 were significantly greater than the T1–T4 autocorrelations, and one differed at the .10 level (intimacy). Somewhat less support was found in the comparisons of the T2–T4 and T1–T4 autocorrelations. Also, there were no significant differences between the T1–T3 and T1–T4 autocorrelations.

The second hypothesis—that social interaction would stabilize over time—was tested by examining differences among the three sets of autocorrelations of pairs of adjacent periods (T1–T2 vs. T2–T3 vs. T3–T4). Each adjacent pair of periods was separated by the same amount of time, so differences between pairs would reflect differences in stability as participants spent more time in the same environment. This hypothesis received some support. The autocorrelations of T3–T4 were generally stronger than the T2–T3 autocorrelations; four of them were significantly different, and one was different at the .10 level (size of opposite-sex network). However, only two of the T2–T3 autocorrelations were greater than the T1–T2 autocorrelations. Although the T1–T2 and T3–T4 autocorrelations could not be compared statistically, the T3–T4 autocorrelations were larger than the T1–T2 autocorrelations, and the differences between these correlations were as great as most of the significant differences found in other analyses.

Autocorrelations were calculated separately for men and women, and the above results were true for both sexes, with one exception. The autocorrelations of Time 1 satisfaction with satisfaction in other periods tended to be stronger for women than for men. Autocorrelations also were computed for measures describing only same-sex interactions and for measures describing only opposite-sex interactions. These two sets of autocorrelations were similar to each other and to the overall autocorrelations; however, it should be noted that the opposite-sex autocorrelations tended to be weaker than the same-sex autocorrelations.

Table 4
Relative Stability of Interactions With Opposite-Sex Best Friends: Autocorrelations

Variable	Time 2		Time 3		Time 4	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
T1						
Intimacy	.32*	.64*	.19	.57*	.04	.67*
Satisfaction	−.06	.21	.28	−.04	.33*	−.13
Length	.27	.14	.02	.53*	.00	.51*
Per day	.54*	.31	.59*	.23	.46*	.16
% nongroup interactions	.65*	.28	.63*	.32	.46*	.14
T2						
Intimacy			.35*	.77*	.40*	.65*
Satisfaction			.51*	.48*	−.15	.66*
Length			−.07	.31	−.30	.48*
Per day			.71*	.29	.60*	.18
% nongroup interactions			.57*	.13	.43*	−.02
T3						
Intimacy					.66*	.84*
Satisfaction					.28	.70*
Length					.11	.15
Per day					.90*	.87*
% nongroup interactions					.82*	.86*

Note. The number of participants for each pair is as follows: T1–T2 37 women, 29 men; T1–T3 38 women, 30 men; T1–T4 35 women, 29 men; T2–T3 38 women, 26 men; T2–T4 35 women, 24 men; T3–T4 36 women, 25 men.
* $p < .05$.

The relative stability of social interaction with same-sex friends was examined with autocorrelations among measures describing interactions with same-sex friends. Autocorrelations for the close and best friends measures were similar to the autocorrelations of the overall measures; all were statistically significant and positive. However, there was one important difference between the overall and same-sex friends autocorrelations. Compared with the overall autocorrelations, autocorrelations for same-sex friends did not vary as much as a function of the time between periods or as a function of the amount of time spent in the environment, although the T3–T4 autocorrelations were still the strongest.

Autocorrelations for the opposite-sex close friends measures were similar to the opposite-sex autocorrelations described above. However, autocorrelations for the opposite-sex best friends measure were different from other sets of autocorrelations, and these correlations are presented in Table 4. In general, the opposite-sex best friends autocorrelations were not as strong, or as consistent, as autocorrelations for other types of interactions. This suggests that interactions with opposite-sex best friends are not as stable as other types of interactions, although they were stable in many regards by T3–T4. One consistent sex difference was that for men, the quantitative measures of percentage and per day did not stabilize until the T3–T4 pair, whereas for women the stability of these measures was similar across all pairs and was similar to other autocorrelations. In contrast, for women there was very little stability in satisfaction with opposite-sex best friends, whereas for men, stability began to appear in the T2–T3 pair. For both sexes, length of interactions with opposite-sex best friend was unstable.

Stability of Networks of Close Friends

Stability was examined also by analyzing the extent to which close and best friends remained constant (overlapped) across time periods. The overlap in close friends was defined as the number of the three close friends in one time period who were among the three close friends in another time period. Overlap of best friends was measured as follows: 1s were assigned if best friends in a period pair were the same, 0s if they were not. To test the hypotheses of the study, the overlap among all six possible period pairs was compared, using ANOVAs, with sex as a between-subjects factor and with a priori contrasts to test differences among the pairs.[2] The contrasts were identical to those used to test hypotheses about absolute stability. A summary of the results of the analyses is presented in Table 5.

Comparing the overlap among close friends for period pairs separated by different lengths of time confirmed the hypothesis that stability would be greater over shorter periods of time than over longer periods. For both same- and opposite-sex close and best friends overlap was greater for period pairs separated by

[2] All participants who maintained four diaries were included in comparisons of the stability of same- versus opposite-sex friendships, although not all of these participants had opposite-sex contact during all four periods. Overlap for a pair was assigned a value of 0 in the absence of opposite-sex contact in one period because it assumed that a change to or from having a specific opposite-sex friend or friends to not having any opposite-sex friends indicated instability. Separate, parallel analyses that used only participants who had some opposite-sex contact during all four periods produced results very similar to those presented in this article.

Table 5
Stability of Social Networks

Measure	Overlap of friends between period pairs						Separation by periods: Contrasts (C)			Stability over time (linear)
	1–2	2–3	3–4	1–3	2–4	1–4	C1	C2	C3	
Three closest friends							31.6**	68.6**	30.7**	7.6**[s]
Same sex										
Men	1.2	1.7	1.7	0.9	1.5	0.9				
Women	1.7	1.8	1.5	1.5	1.6	1.2				
Opposite sex										
Men	0.3	0.6	0.8	0.3	0.4	0.3				
Women	1.0	0.8	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.4				
Best							14.2**[s]	30.0**[s]	4.7*	ns[s]
Same sex										
Men	0.52	0.48	0.45	0.35	0.23	0.23				
Women	0.58	0.52	0.61	0.42	0.52	0.45				
Opposite sex										
Men	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.13	0.16	0.10				
Women	0.18	0.36	0.48	0.15	0.30	0.12				

Note. *dfs* = 1 and 62 for all analyses. Effects that were qualified by a significant interaction of participant sex and trend are accompanied by a superscript *s*.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

one period than by two periods (C1), for pairs separated by one period than by three (C2), and for pairs separated by two periods than by three (C3). However, the analyses of best friends also produced significant interactions among participant sex, same- vs. opposite-sex friends, and contrast in the analyses of the C1 contrast, $F(1, 62) = 5.1$, $p < .05$, and the C2 contrast, $F(1, 62) = 6.6$, $p < .05$. Both of these interactions were due to the fact that overlap in opposite-sex best friends increased over time for women but not for men.

To determine if stability increased over time, the overlap within the three pairs of adjacent periods (T1–T2 vs. T2–T3 vs. T3-T4) was compared with a 2 (sex) × 2 (same vs. opposite sex) × 3 (period pair) mixed-model ANOVA, with a trend analysis for period pair. Although there was a significant linear trend in the analysis of the overlap in close friends, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction with participant sex, $F(1, 62) = 15.9$, $p < .01$. For men, the overlap among close friends increased over time, whereas for women the overlap remained the same. The analyses of overlap among best friends produced a similar interaction, $F(1, 62) = 4.7$, $p < .05$, although the pattern was reversed: Overlap among best friends remained relatively constant for men, but it increased for women.

The overlap among friends confirmed the third hypothesis, that same-sex interactions would be more stable than opposite-sex interactions. For both the close and best friends analyses, across all six pairs the overlap among same-sex friends was greater than it was among opposite-sex friends: for close friends, $F(1, 62) = 64.5$, $p < .01$; for best friends, $F(1, 62) = 18.9$, $p < .01$. In addition, across all six pairs the overlap among women's friends was significantly greater than the overlap among men's friends: for close friends, $F(1, 62) = 5.6$, $p < .05$; for best friends, $F(1, 62) = 6.2$, $p < .05$.

Additional Analyses

Some participants had more overlap than others among their same-sex close and best friends. This allowed for the possibility that the analyses of absolute and relative stability represented a blend of two patterns, one describing individuals who did not change friends and another describing individuals who changed friends. To test this possibility, individuals who changed friends were compared with those who did not. For the same-sex close friends analyses, individuals with an overlap of two or three close friends were compared with individuals with an overlap of no or one close friend. For the same-sex best friends analyses, individuals who retained best friends were compared with those who did not. These criteria produced roughly equally sized groups for most period pairs. For both the same-sex close and best friends measures, autocorrelations of interaction quantity and of satisfaction and intimacy were very similar. Moreover, ANOVAs of aggregate means and absolute changes for all period pairs using relative stability of friends as a factor (2 [sex] × 2 [changed friends vs. kept friends] × 2 [period pair] ANOVAs) produced no main effects for, or interactions with, friendship retention in analyses of the close and best friends measures. These analyses suggest that the stability of interaction patterns with same-sex friends did not vary as a function of the specific individuals who were same-sex friends.

Although some participants had more overlap than others among their opposite-sex close and best friends, unlike the analyses of same-sex friends, it was not possible to conduct analyses that compared individuals whose opposite-sex friendships were stable within a period pair with individuals whose friendships were not stable. There were too few participants whose opposite-sex friendships were stable to create meaningfully sized groups.

Discussion

The primary goal of the present study was to investigate the temporal stability of naturally occurring social interaction within the context of people's adaptation to a new environment. In general, the results supported the three hypotheses of the

study. First, stability was greater when measured over shorter periods of time than when measured over longer periods, although this difference was not pronounced when stability across 16 weeks was compared with stability across 24 weeks, and the exact form of this difference varied somewhat between same- and opposite-sex interactions. Second, stability tended to increase over time, and stability within the second semester (T3 and T4) was greater than across other pairs. Third, same-sex social interaction tended to be more stable than opposite-sex interaction.

The aggregate analyses of stability suggested that the social interactions of this sample, considered as a system, were stable. However, other analyses indicated that there was change; there were absolute changes, autocorrelations were not unity, and the close friends of many people changed over time. Taken together, these results suggest the existence of a social system with homeostatic mechanisms of some sort, perhaps in the form of social roles. Social systems and their norms and roles tend to be enduring (Katz & Kahn, 1978), and the social roles that comprised this system may have been fairly constant across the four time periods, although specific occupants of these roles may have changed. Within such a system average measures of interaction calculated across individuals or roles would not change (even if individuals did not remain in the same roles across time), because roles and role expectations would remain constant across time. The role changes that did occur might not have been that pronounced (e.g., socially inactive people may not have become socially active people) to lead to relative instability, although changes may have been large enough (e.g., somewhat less active to somewhat more active) to lead to some relative instability and some changes in social networks.

Assuming social roles to be important determinants of behavior also helps to explain the increase in relative stability over time. Freshman year is generally a time of mutual and gradual accommodation. New students adapt to the existing social environment, and to a lesser extent, the existing environment adapts to a class of new students. The first semester may have served as an adaptation period, a time when different roles and styles were being adopted, perhaps on an experimental basis. By the second semester individuals came to occupy roles more securely; they had found behavioral niches. Autocorrelations between measures taken during the second semester were very strong.

The second major finding of this study was that same-sex interactions (and social networks) tended to be more stable than opposite-sex interactions and networks. The data from this study and most other studies of naturally occurring social interaction indicate that although many college-aged people have considerable opposite-sex contact, they tend to have more same- than opposite-sex contact (Nezlek et al., 1983). This relatively greater experience with same-sex relationships may have given participants a clearer sense of how to integrate individual needs with normative expectations in their same-sex than in their opposite-sex relationships, leading to more stability in these relationships. Also consistent with this reasoning was the increase over time in the amount of contact with opposite-sex friends. As participants began to have more experience with the opposite sex, they may have become less anxious about opposite-sex contact, and therefore, contact with opposite-sex friends increased.

The greater stability of same-sex interactions and close relationships may have been due also to greater agreement in people's expectations for same- versus opposite-sex contact. Patterns of interactions should be more stable when interactants share expectations than when they do not. Some research suggests that men and women view opposite-sex relationships differently in terms of the potential for sexual or romantic involvement (e.g., Shotland & Craig, 1989), a difference that is less likely to occur during same-sex interaction. Other data suggest that men and women view same-sex friendships differently, with men emphasizing more of an exchange orientation and women more of a communal orientation (e.g., Omoto & Mooney, 1991). If individuals bring to opposite-sex interactions and relationships needs or orientations similar to those they bring to same-sex encounters, then men and women will view opposite-sex relationships differently. Either of these sex differences in expectations may have contributed to the relative instability of opposite-sex relationships.

A complementary perspective on the differences in the stability of same- and opposite-sex interactions and relationships is provided by Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration theory. Summarizing the work of a variety of theorists, they noted that interactions that involve more peripheral aspects of one's personality are more common and similar across individuals, whereas those involving more central aspects are more idiosyncratic. The data from the present study and from other studies of social interaction (e.g., Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977) show that interactions with close opposite-sex friends are among the most intimate of interactions. Following the argument presented by Altman and Taylor, interactions with close opposite-sex friends are more likely to involve more central aspects of one's identity than are other (less intimate) interactions, making intimate interactions more idiosyncratic than less intimate interactions. The importance of a wide variety of individual factors in determining the stability of intimate (usually operationalized in studies as opposite-sex) relationships is illustrated in a recent review by Sprecher (1990).

In contrast, less intimate interactions are likely to involve more public and more common aspects of people's identities, aspects that are more likely to reflect normative expectations. If individual factors influence interactions with intimate friends more than they influence other interactions, the relative lack of stability of interactions with best opposite-sex friends found in the present study may have been due to the fact that individual factors vary more widely than norms. Moreover, interactions with same-sex best friends did not vary as a function of the specific person who was the same-sex best friend, and this similarity is consistent with the possibility that same-sex interactions are not influenced by idiosyncratic characteristics.

It is important to note that the present analyses did not distinguish opposite-sex relationships on the basis of whether these relationships were romantic or not. This was done to avoid making assumptions about participants' sexual orientations or about their definitions of romantic relationships. Certainly, individuals' definitions of their relationships (both same and opposite sex) are important to consider when understanding rela-

tionships, and future research could address this issue by including measures of the nature of the specific relationships represented in a diary.

Finally, a statistical explanation for differences in the stability of same- and opposite-sex interaction needs to be considered. Opposite-sex contact was less common than same-sex contact, and therefore, measures describing opposite-sex contact were aggregated over fewer individual events than were comparable measures describing same-sex contact. It is possible that the relative instability of measures of opposite-sex interactions was due not to the relative instability of opposite-sex relationships per se, but to the fact that the measures of these relationships were less reliable because they were based on fewer observations. Although this argument is not consistent with the observed similarity in the stability of same-sex interaction and interaction with same-sex best friends (two sets of measures based on different numbers of events), researchers need to be wary of the influence that number of observations can have on the reliability of measurement.

Although the present study provided some insight into how people adapt to new environments, it would be inappropriate to generalize the present results too broadly. Interactions between marriage partners may be very stable after a period of adjustment, perhaps even more stable than the same-sex relationships of either partner. In different environments interaction may stabilize at different rates, perhaps as a function of the strength of the norms in those environments; the interactions of prison inmates may stabilize very rapidly compared with those of students or employees. Also, stability in the present study was measured over a year; it is not clear how stable behavior would be over a different period.

The difficulty in generalizing from the results of the present study is illustrated by the dissimilarity between the present results and those reported by Wheeler and Nezlek (1977). Although the study replicated most of the important findings of Wheeler and Nezlek, it did not replicate a sex difference in same-sex contact found by Wheeler and Nezlek; women did not have unusually high levels of same-sex contact at the beginning of the year that decreased over time. The most salient difference between the two studies was that participants in the present study responded to announcements made at orientation meetings held at the beginning of their freshman year, whereas participants in the Wheeler and Nezlek study had volunteered to live in a new, experimental, coeducational dormitory. It is difficult to ascribe the differences in the results of the two studies to a specific factor; however, the difference between the two samples is a reasonable choice.

The foregoing explanation assumed that patterns of social interaction are influenced by social norms, and although the existence of social norms is a cornerstone of considerable social psychological theorizing, no data were gathered in the present study to isolate the specific roles that norms might have played in producing the patterns of behavior discussed in this article. Such data, for example, people's conceptualizations of norms and role systems and measures of the relative importance of these norms as determinants of behavior, will need to be gathered to confirm some of the explanations offered here. Nonetheless, social norms appear to be part of a plausible explanation for the present results, and future research on the determinants and the stability of social interaction should include consideration of social norms.

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