

BABY BOOMER FRIENDSHIPS

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

I get by with a little help from my friends. I get high with a little help from my friends. I'm gonna try with a little help from my friends.

--The Beatles, 1967

More than a little help from their large networks of friends? Two researchers speculate about their own cohort in old age.

Baby boomers will begin entering old age in 2011. They will be the largest and most diverse cohort ever to experience this life-course transition. The sheer number of baby boomers has challenged institutions time after time (Dychtwald, 1990). Despite extensive speculation regarding the political, economic, and social impact that the aging of baby boomers will have on American society, no one has yet hypothesized the nature of their friendships during old age. Given the absence of scientific studies specifically focused on baby boomer friendships, our purpose is to reflect on this topic based on our knowledge of the literature on friendship across the life course (see Blieszner and Adams, 1992) and our own experience as baby boomers.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the friendships of baby boomer youths were different from those of the adolescents who preceded them. Hanging out with friends and partying in groups all but supplanted dating as a weekend activity. In the midst of the sexual revolution, young men and women also developed platonic friendships, some of which have now lasted as long as three decades. Baby boomers experienced school integration, and many were the first in their families to bring a friend of a different race home for dinner. Youth traveled together to rock concerts and antiwar protests or fought together in Vietnam. Parents of baby boomers worried more than their predecessors did about who their children's friends were and how their peers were influencing them. Some youthful baby boomers formed communes, living with friends rather than starting adult life by forming traditional families. They knew they were different from the older generation; the "generation gap" created solidarity among them. The question remains whether baby boomers' friendships during old age will represent as radical a departure from those of the older cohort as their youthful friendships did. Have the experiences of their youth continued to shape their friendships throughout adulthood, and will they continue to do so in old age, or are they mere memories after all?

A COHORT THAT IS DIFFERENT?

Baby boomers, like other aggregates of people born during the same time interval and therefore experiencing historical events at the same age, constitute a cohort (Mannheim, 1952). (When Karl Mannheim wrote his classic essay, "Problem of Generations," he used the term generation rather than the term cohort. We follow more recent scholars by reserving the term generation for discussions of lineage [Ryder, 1965].) Although scholars have designated various years as marking the beginning and ending of the baby boom cohort, we consider all people born between 1946 and 1964 as members, with 1955 as the mid-point. Our rationale is demographic. In 1965, the rate of population growth was 1.21 percent, the lowest it had been since 1945 (Carruth, 1993). Baby boomers are thus those born during the period of rapid population growth that followed World War II.

Baby boomers share what Mannheim (1951, p. 291) referred to as a "common location in the social and historical process" and are thereby limited to "a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action." Their common location primes them for what he called "certain definite modes of behaviour, feeling, and thought." Understanding what these modes of behavior, feeling, and thought might be is interesting to us for a variety of reasons. First, like other members of our self-absorbed cohort, we are fascinated with our own lives and those of our age-mates. Second, as gerontologists, we are concerned with preparing society for the inevitable impact the aging of our cohort will have. Third, as students of social change, we know that transformations are more likely to occur when a cohort particularly distinguished by its size and composition moves through history (Ryder, 1965). Baby boomers constitute such a cohort. Finally, as researchers who focus on the topic of friendship, we are interested in examining how historical context shapes relationships (see Adams and Allan, forthcoming). Thus, the question underlying our speculation is, How might the baby boom cohort be different because of its peculiar location in the flow of history?

Scholars have not yet conducted systematic studies of baby boomer friendships, and researchers have not designated samples with this particular theoretical purpose in mind. Comparative studies of friendships across age groups are rare, with longitudinal studies almost nonexistent (see Blieszner and Adams, 1992, for discussion of a few exceptions). When researchers have conducted such studies, they have generally interpreted differences in friendship as the result of aging rather than as the consequence of cohort membership. No attempt has been made to design a study, perhaps with a cross-sequential cohort design (see Maddox and Wiley, 1976), to ferret out the potential relative effects of age, period, and cohort membership on the friendships of the now middle-aged baby boomers.

For this reason, we rely here on our general knowledge of the friendship literature and on our own experience, which was of course limited by the circumstances of our own lives. Although all baby boomers belong to the same cohort by virtue of the accident of their proximate birth dates, not all participated in the cohort as an actuality or in the same cohort unit. "Cohort in actuality" describes a situation in which the members of a birth cohort develop a common identity by being exposed to the same historical problems (Mannheim, 1952). Because of the spread of literacy through the development of communications and transportation technologies, and specifically as a result of the widespread presence of television, more members of the baby boom cohort were exposed to the same current events as they unfolded than had been possible in previous cohorts. The baby boom cohort-in-actuality thus represents a larger proportion of total cohort membership than previous cohorts-in-actuality did. "Cohort unit" refers to those members of a cohort-in-actuality whose responses to the unfolding events and experiences were similar (Mannheim, 1952).

Thus, the baby boom cohort does not represent one unified phenomenon but rather has diverse elements. Factors such as gender, level of education, relationship to the Vietnam War, and economic resources shaped the experiences of the members of this cohort and thus determined their cohort-unit membership.

We both belong to the same cohort unit--college-educated females from middle-class backgrounds whose male peers were subject to the draft lottery in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Our speculation is limited by these similar experiences. We are also both part of the leading edge of the baby boom, having been born in 1952 and 1948, respectively. This leading-edge position is helpful for accomplishing our task of exploring how the particular period might have affected baby boom friendships: Social change is easier to observe when fresh contact is made between cohorts--in this case, baby boomers and our parents' generation--rather than later, when society has begun to adjust to whatever impact the younger cohort has made (Ryder, 1965).

In thinking about the impact of our cohort's location in history on the friendships of those in our cohort unit, we have focused particularly on the cultural climate and events that occurred while at least one of us was between the ages of 14 and 21 years and was in high school or college (1962-1974). This choice of focus is appropriate from both a developmental and a structural perspective. According to Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial

development, the focal challenge of the teenage years is to integrate childhood experiences into a mature and confident identity and to acquire an understanding of appropriate roles and expectations; failure to do so satisfactorily results in role confusion. As part of this process, youth tend to overidentify temporarily with popular and appealing individuals and groups, making the youth susceptible to forming cohorts-in-actuality if events occur to mark the difference between them and the older cohort.

Further, according to Erikson's theory, in the next stage of life, young adults face the challenge of intimacy, which calls them to establish committed partnerships with friends and lovers rather than being isolated and self-absorbed. Concerns about adult friendship emerge. With respect to a structural perspective, as Mannheim (1952) suggested and Elder's (1974) research confirmed, this is the age interval during which people begin to live "in the present" and reflect on life's problems. Ryder (1965) summed up this perspective nicely: "Potential for change is concentrated in the cohorts of young adults who are old enough to participate directly in the movements impelled by change, but not old enough to have become committed to an occupation, a residence, a family of procreation, or a way of life" (p. 84-8).

Other than the large size and associated cultural power of the baby boom cohort, perhaps the most important characteristic that distinguishes us from others is that our formative years took place during a period in which an unusual number of varied societal events occurred. In an attempt to determine what events and cultural circumstances shaped our cohort unit, we each read through a list of incidents that occurred while we were in high school and college (Carruth, 1993). We each noted the events and circumstances we could remember. Although the overlap was not perfect, as would be expected given the difference in our ages, the categories of events we each remember illustrate the same cultural themes. We remember space exploration, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, assassinations of public figures, the war and the antiwar movement, the counterculture, a growing mistrust of union and government officials, the improvement of and wider access to communication and transportation technologies, an increasing concern with health issues, and, of course, student activism. The theoretical challenge is to speculate about the connection between this cultural climate and friendship attitudes and opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES OF FRIENDSHIP

Elsewhere we have described friendship patterns as consisting of the phases, structure, and processes of friendship networks and of the dyadic relationships embedded within them (Adams and Blieszner, 1994). Here we discuss the possible implications of early socialization experiences for the internal structure and processes of friendship networks and dyads. We also discuss the potential impact the resultant characteristics could have on other aspects of life during old age.

The most obvious potential effect of the events that ensued during the baby boomers' youth is the development of a high level of cohort identity. The high proportion of this cohort that was exposed to events as they unfolded, the sheer number and historical importance of these experiences, and the clear perception that they (the boomers) were different from the older cohort suggest that such an effect is likely. Although the variety of ways of participating in and responding to these events (e.g., volunteering to serve in the war in Vietnam versus protesting it) initially divided the baby boom cohort, it is possible that these differences have declined in importance over time and that what has emerged is a common feeling of having been through something together. The question, "Where were you when ...?" is a common script for conversations among baby boomers. Discussing the similarities and differences in youthful experiences and attitudes might contribute to the solidarity of baby boomer friendships. These are conversations that cannot be held with people who were not part of the experience.

By this same logic, we expect the friendships of baby boomers to be relatively age-homogeneous. This conjecture is reinforced by the knowledge that in their youth, leading-edge baby boomers claimed not to trust "anyone over 30" and also made disparaging comments regarding the political commitment of the younger baby boomers who followed them.

On other dimensions, however, the friendship networks of baby boomers might be less homogeneous than those of the current cohort of older adults. Baby boomers certainly had more opportunity to establish cross-gender and cross-race friendships than those who entered the historical flow of cohorts before them did. It is also possible that the civil rights movement, the War on Poverty, and the women's movement taught baby boomers to have friendships low in internal hierarchy. In other words, we would expect these friendships to be egalitarian.

During the baby boomers' lifetime, it has become more common for people to relocate away from their community of origin. This change would suggest that their friendship networks might be smaller in old age, because it has been challenging to maintain long-term friendships across long distances. However, it also became easier and less expensive to communicate with friends across distances, a factor that suggests that friendship networks might in fact be larger. These trends also have implications for the density of friendship networks. In general, as the size of a friendship network increases, its density decreases. This suggests that baby boomers' friendship networks might be less dense if they are larger in size. It is also possible, however, that improvement in transportation and communications technologies might make it more likely that their friends have had the opportunity to meet each other at some point.

These potential structural characteristics of friendships could have implications for how baby boomers are likely to live during old age. For example, will their high level of cohort solidarity affect relocation patterns in old age? Will their decisions be shaped by their cohort-unit membership? Will they be more likely to choose age-segregated housing? Will their high level of solidarity make it more difficult to replace friends as age-mates begin to die? Will they have more diverse age-similar sources of help because of gender- and race-heterogeneous networks? Will they get more than a little help from their potentially large networks of friends?

As these questions illustrate, looking at baby boomer friendships through a structural lens leads to a great number and variety of researchable issues. We can also make some observations and raise a series of questions about interactive friendship processes. Starting with cognitive processes, one possibility is that the baby boom cohort uses unique attributions to explain friendship perceptions, occurrences, and feelings. As they learned to interpret everything from world events to personal relationships from a vantage point inspired by notions of forsaking the old ways and seeking the new, so, perhaps, they began to approach interactions with friends from a less formal and rule-bound perspective than previous cohorts had used. The greater diversity of friends in the network described above implies application of broader, more inclusive definitions of friendship and greater tolerance for unfamiliar ways of being among one's friends than might have been accepted within previous cohorts. Such diversity also implies the possibility that dose similarity of values and interests is a less important criterion for baby boomers than for past cohorts when choosing friends. Projecting into the future, these observations suggest that elderly baby boomers might be less concerned than others about selecting retirement communities composed of others very much like themselves and might opt instead for a location that includes much diversity. Or, it might be that specialized facilities will emerge, catering to subgroups of the baby boom cohort who have long-standing interests and values in common.

Turning to affective friendship processes, a hallmark of the baby boomers when they were young adults was a feeling of freedom to acknowledge emotions and express them more directly to more types of people than had been done before. Openness and honesty were goals for friendship and other dose relationships. Carrying the inclination to examine and convey feelings into the middle and later years of life means that this cohort is likely to have a richer emotional life with friends. In addition, our research has shown that today's elders rarely admit to ending a friendship on purpose, and not all of them acknowledge problematic friendships. We wonder if the baby boomers, in contrast, would more readily describe negative emotional responses to friendship and more willingly seek solutions to friendship discomfort rather than denying or ignoring it, as seems to happen among those of the older cohort. It is also possible that their greater impatience would prompt baby boomers to terminate unsatisfactory relationships more readily than would people in previous cohorts.

It is apparent that thoughts and feelings about friends and friendship are fled directly to the behavioral domain, which is the most obvious of friendship processes. Friendship behaviors are also affected by the attitudes and values cultivated within a given cohort unit. For example, baby boom women were probably the first group to view friendships with women as equal in meaning and value to romantic relationships with men. Hence, baby boom women adopted a code of loyalty to their women friends, forsaking the previous pattern of changing plans made with friends if an opportunity for a date came along later. It will be interesting to see the ways that loyalty to friends plays out among aging baby boomers, particularly in relation to their interactions with family members. As this example shows, the unique aspects of cognitive and affective processes associated with baby boomer friendships have consequences that translate into new behavioral patterns. If baby boomers think and feel differently about friends and friendship compared to members of previous cohorts, do they behave differently as well? Are they more likely to reveal their thoughts and feelings through word and deed? How does self-disclosure about shared cohort experiences affect friendship formation and maintenance? Is this process different from that of previous cohorts, or is it merely the content of disclosures that is different? Are baby boomers more inclined to vacation with their friends and attend reunions in order to recapture shared feelings? Do friends take on greater prominence than family relative to their respective importance among older people? Will baby boomers be more likely than their elders to turn to friends for assistance, recognizing that their shared experiences and value similarity enable them to understand how to help one another better? Given the high levels of age homogeneity among friends, their shared values, and their propensity to disclose their thoughts and feelings, will it be more difficult for baby boomers to replace friends as they go through middle and old age?

CONCLUSION

Our speculation about the characteristics of baby boomer friendships and the consequences of these characteristics reveals an intriguing set of research topics for the immediate and more distant future. Note again the caveat given previously: Our inferences are based on our experiences as members of a particular cohort unit. It will be crucial not only to test our suppositions, but also to examine the implications for friendship of membership in other baby boom cohort units. Baby boom males and members of other racial, ethnic, and class groups are likely to have experienced coming of age differently, resulting in other potential effects on friendship.

Within-cohort-unit analyses, cross-cohort-unit comparisons, and cross-cohort comparisons are also needed for a thorough examination of baby boomer friendships. Longitudinal designs are imperative for detecting the extent to which young-adult events and interpretations move forward into the middle and later years and affect friendships for better or for worse. The ultimate point of inquiry concerns the ways in which and extent to which baby boomers' friendships affect their personal well-being and quality of life. Will baby boomers just get by with a little help from their friends, or will they thrive?

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