

## PROBLEMS WITH FRIENDS IN OLD AGE

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### **Abstract:**

Although many studies of friendship support exist, little information is available on friendship's negative dimensions. Guided by a conceptual framework encompassing structure, process, and phase elements of friendship patterns, we explored troublesome aspects of friendship in a probability sample of community residents, focusing on four types of problematic friendships. Data from in-depth interviews reveal that problems with friends stem from structural features internal to the dyad, factors external to the dyad, changes in the extent to which lives intersect, and day-to-day interactions. These results are based on 42 respondents reporting friendship problems, usually with one of the four focal types of friends, about evenly divided across genders, but showing an age trend. Except for the ended friendships, some of which had dissolved long ago, problems were discussed in the context of ongoing relationships. Older adults do not necessarily terminate friendships that include certain difficulties.

### **Article:**

If one evaluated late-life friendship solely on the basis of available topics in the research literature, the tendency would be to conclude that old people rarely have problems with friends. We assert, however, that the state of the research literature is obviously a function of the questions asked by investigators. Because most people seem to hold the biased assumption that friendship is a voluntary relationship in which harmony prevails (or else people would simply end the relationship), scholars have failed to ask questions about relational difficulties when examining friendship.

Indeed, a recent review of adult friendship studies revealed very few investigations of friendship difficulties conducted and a restricted range of friendship problems identified (Blieszner and Adams 1992). Only two studies included mention of conflict in young adult friendship (Canary and Cupach 1988; Healey and Bell 1990), two examined conflict among middle adult friends (Argyle and Furnham 1983; Davidson and Duberman 1982), two assessed conflict in older adult friendship (Dykstra 1990; Fisher, Reid, and Melendez 1989) and only one study mentioned betrayal within older adults' friendships (Hanson, Jones, and Fletcher 1990). No reports focused particularly on the processes through which friendship problems evolve late in life or how older adults handle friendship discord.

Recently, however, researchers have begun to give more attention to negative aspects of close relationships (e.g., Cupach and Spitzberg 1994; Finch, Okun, Pool, Bryant, Snow-Turek, and Ruehlman 1995; see also Fehr 1996) and as we demonstrate in the present study, asking specific

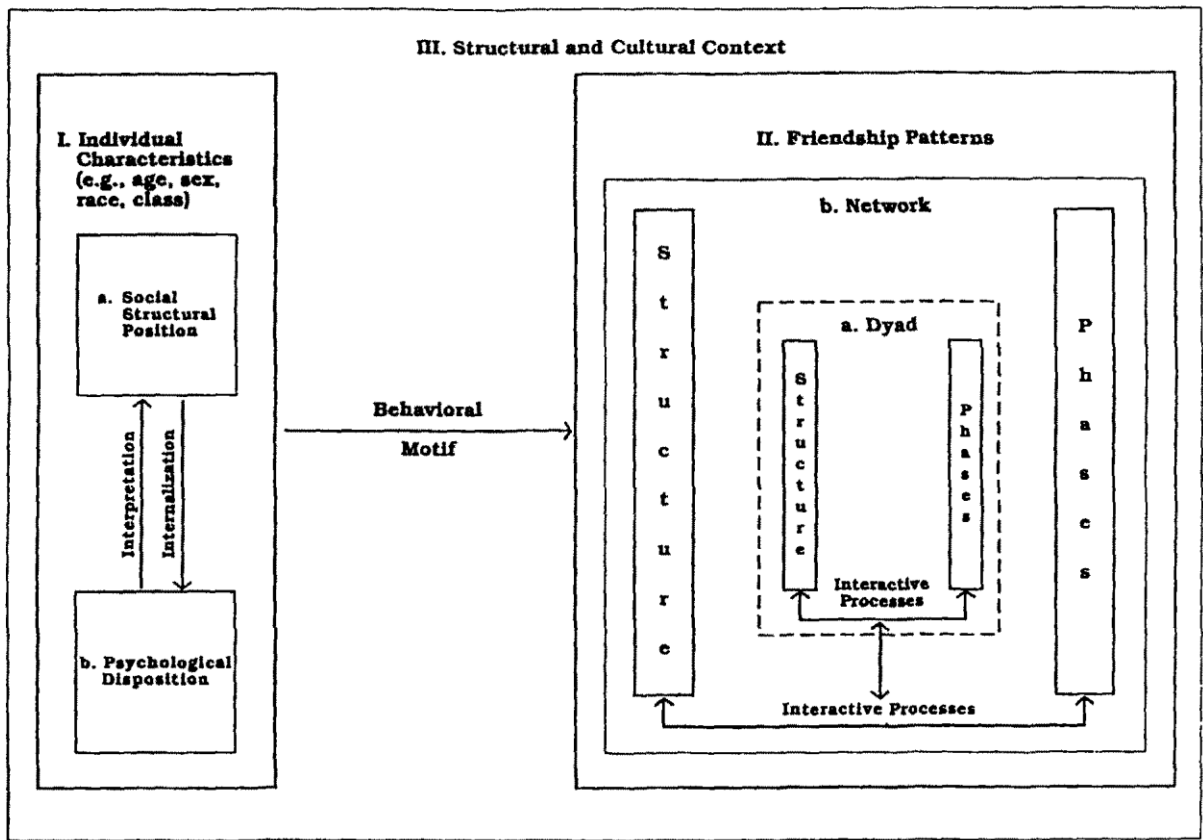
questions of elderly people about problems in their friendships yields a range of types of problems and types of friends with whom problems occur. The purpose of this article, then, is to describe in some detail the multidimensional nature of friendship problems in the later years of life.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The foundation of the research was a conceptual framework that integrates sociological and psychological perspectives, as depicted in Figure 1 (Adams and Blieszner 1994). The intent of this framework is to aid in organizing the literature and identifying research gaps. The framework posits that the social structural and psychological aspects of individual characteristics such as age and gender interact with one another to create unique lived experiences. In turn, these individual characteristics shape a person's behavioral motifs, defined as the constellation of the routine and unpredictable aspects of daily activities. Behavioral motifs then influence friendship interaction patterns. These patterns comprise dyadic and network structure and phases of friendship.

Friendship structure involves the degree of similarity among friends, their extent of emotional closeness, and their status or power differences. Similarity is assessed in terms of homogeneity of social characteristics such as gender, class, age, and marital status. In general, researchers have found that people are more likely to be friends when they share such social characteristics. The degree of emotional closeness in the relationship is called solidarity. Some researchers treat intimacy as a process variable rather than as a structural one, but it is a fairly widely used measure of the strength of social ties and of social distance (Marsden and Campbell 1984). Status and power differences pertain to the internal hierarchy of relationship. Such hierarchy does not necessarily reflect the relative social positions of the participants in the broader societal context, however. Individuals who occupy similar structural locations nevertheless could have different degrees of power or status within the context of their relationship. Power is the "probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out [her or] his own will despite resistance" (Weber 1947, p. 152). Status reflects the distance between actors in terms of prestige or perceptions of moral worth (Brown 1965).

Friendship phases reflect the developmental status of the relationship, whether in the formative, maintenance, or dissolution stage. Friendship structure and phases affect one another through interactive friendship processes, which are the dynamic aspects of the relationships between dyad members and among network participants. These processes



**FIGURE 1**

Conceptual Framework for Friendship Research. From "An Integrative Conceptual Framework for Friendship Research" by R. G. Adams and R. Blieszner, 1994, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 11: 166. Copyright 1994 by SAGE Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

include the covert cognitive and affective responses and the overt behavioral events that occur when people interact. Cognitive processes reflect the internal thoughts that each partner has about her- or himself, the friend, and the friendship. They entail assessment of the stability of the friendship, explanations of shared experiences, and interpretations of personal characteristics and motives. Affective processes encompass emotional reactions to friends and friendship, whether positive and pleasurable, neutral and indifferent, or negative and unpleasant. Behavioral processes are the action components of friendship. Examples of such actions are communication and self-disclosure, displays of affection and support, and shared activities and interests, as well as betrayal, arguing, and the like. Finally, the figure indicates the importance of attending to the structural and cultural context of friend interactions, including changes over time (see Adams and Blieszner 1994; Blieszner 1995; Blieszner and Adams 1992, for additional details).

In the present article, we focus on the maintenance and dissolution phases of friendship, when people either are having problems within ongoing relationships or have ended difficult liaisons. Study participants provided descriptions of their problems with friends, which we coded and analyzed using the conceptual scheme described above. Thus we present information about perceived friendship problems in terms of internal structural features of the friend dyads; situations and conditions that are external to the relationship but nonetheless affect it; changes in the intersection of lives; and cognitive, affective, and behavioral interactive processes.

## METHOD

### *Sample Selection and Characteristics*

The Andrus Study of Adult Friendship Patterns was conducted in Greensboro, NC. A computer program randomly generated (a) one of six sex-age categories [female or male in either the young-old (55 to 64 years), middle-old (65 to 74 years), or old-old (75 and older) age group] and (b) a telephone number with a Greensboro residential prefix. A screener called the number and determined whether a person who fit the selected sex-age category lived in the residence and was willing and able to participate in the study. The calling procedure continued until each of the six sex-age categories included 10 participants, yielding a probability sample of the population of community-dwelling older adults in Greensboro. Due to some of the identified individuals being unable to complete the interview, the part of the final sample analyzed here comprised 53 respondents. The participants included 28 women and 25 men aged 55 to 84 years ( $M = 67$  years).

The sample was 77% Caucasian, 21% African American, and 2% other racial ethnic membership. Whereas about a third of the sample had a high school degree or less schooling, 68% had completed post-high school education ranging from technical training to advanced university studies. Religious preference was divided over 87% Protestants, 9% Catholics, and 4% Jews. Although 9% of sample members were divorced and 25% were widowed, the majority were married (66%). Respondents had been in their current marital status for 2 to 60 years. They had between no (4%) and 12 children, with the median between 2 and 3. Approximately a quarter of respondents were involved in providing care to someone else, usually children. As for their health, 75% rated it good or excellent, 59% stated that their health did not limit their activities at all, and 89% did not depend on anyone for routine help in the home. Most participants (66%) were not employed. Virtually all of the respondents believed that their financial resources met their needs at least fairly well.

### *Design and Procedures*

The design involved face-to-face interviews lasting from 1.5 to 7 hours ( $M = 2.7$  hours). The interview schedule included structured questions, published scales, and open-ended questions. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS® statistical analysis software. Responses to open-ended questions were transcribed verbatim then processed using a qualitative data analysis program, The Ethnograph (Seidel, Kjolseth, and Seymour 1988).

To avoid constraining the range of friendships discussed, we did not impose a definition of "friend" on the participants, but rather asked them for their definition (de Vries, Adams, and Blieszner 1996). Respondents provided information about all their friends and they gave additional details about their closest friends. They discussed between 3 and 132 friends ( $M = 29.5$  friends). We asked detailed questions about relationships with 10 specific focal friends, including those with whom the participant might have a troublesome relationship. This analysis is based on data for the four problematic types of focal friends: one with whom the respondent preferred to be less close (Too Close), one with whom the respondent had a problem (Difficult), a friendship that was fading away (Fading), and a friendship that had ended (Ended).

## RESULTS

The results are based on analysis of data from discussions of four types of problematic friends. First, in overview of the findings, we present four tables that provide quick summaries of the prevalence of problematic friendship types and show which study participants reported experiencing them. Second, we preview sources of problems with a summary table then provide extensive quotations from the transcripts to illustrate the numerous sources and types of problems experienced. The problems are categorized according to the elements of the conceptual framework discussed previously. Finally, also in keeping with the conceptual framework, we delineate the findings according to the effects of gender and age group membership. This analysis of qualitative data provided rich detail about many aspects of friendship problems that have not been mentioned previously in late life friendship research.

### *Problems Within Focal Friend Types*

As shown in Table 1, the likelihood of having a friend within a particular negative category was not evenly distributed across the four focal friendship types. Only 11% of the sample named a friend who was too close and only 25% admitted to having ended a friendship on purpose, whether for reasons deemed problematic or not. The difficult and fading friend questions elicited the greatest number of responses (51% and 68% of all study participants, respectively), but not all individuals who had a fading friendship identified a problem within that relationship category. That is, the friendship was fading for reasons other than those viewed as problematic.

**TABLE 1**  
Frequency Distribution of Problem Identification within Problematic Friend Types (*N* = 53)

<i>Problem Identification</i>	<i>Types of Problematic Friends</i>			
	<i>Too Close</i> %	<i>Difficult</i> %	<i>Fading</i> %	<i>Ended</i> %
No Problem, Friend Named	88.7	49.1	32.1	75.5
Friend Named, No Problem Mentioned	0	0	24.5	3.8
Friend Named, Problem Mentioned	11.3	50.9	43.4	20.8

### *Prevalence of Problems*

Among the 53 study participants, 42 (79%) discussed negative aspects of friendship. Note that although a participant might have had more than one friendship that fit in a given problematic friendship category, we elicited information on just one exemplary case. As shown in Table 2, most participants had only one or two problematic friendship types and relatively few claimed partners in three or all four problem categories.

Table 3 indicates that those reporting no problematic friendships were about evenly divided between men and women ( $\chi^2 = .02$ , *df* = 1, *p* < .90) but women were more likely than men to mention friends in 3 or 4 problematic friend categories. According to Table 4, a trend across the age groups occurred, with more middle- and old-old (9) than young-old (2) individuals claiming they had no friends in any of the focal categories ( $\chi^2 = 3.11$ , *df* = 1, *p* < .07)

### *Sources and Types of Problems*

Table 5 presents a preview of the nature of the problems associated with the various focal friends as revealed by analysis of the qualitative data. Internal structural features of dyads (solidarity,

power or status, and homogeneity issues) influenced obstacles in the difficult, fading, and ended friendship categories. Conditions and situations external to the dyad, which are generally beyond the control of the friend partners, accounted for negative aspects of difficult and fading friend types. Differential life circumstances, preventing the friends from interacting regularly, affected all but the ended friendships. Interactive processes (related to cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of transactions) were involved in the preponderance of friendship problems, being reported in all of the too close and ended friendships and most of the difficult and fading ones.

**TABLE 2**  
Frequency Distribution of Number of Problematic Friend Types Named

<i>Number of Problematic Friend Types</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
0	11	20.8
1	23	43.4
2	14	26.4
3	4	7.6
4	1	1.9
Total	53	100

**TABLE 3**  
Sex by Number of Problematic Friend Types

<i>Number of Problematic Friend Types</i>	<i>Sex</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
0	20.0	21.4
1	56.0	32.1
2	24.0	28.6
3	0	14.3
4	0	3.6
Total	25	28

Each category of friendship problem included multiple dimensions, as indicated by the descriptions given previously. In the following sections, we illustrate specific aspects of each source of problems with quotations from the respondents.

### INTERNAL STRUCTURE

Although the majority of the problems respondents reported having with their problematic friends were matters of process, in 12 relationships, the problems resulted at least in part from internal structural issues. The most common structural problem was low solidarity—the respondent did not feel close to his or her friend. In some cases, the friendship had never been a close one. For example, a 67-year-old man described a friendship with his former barber:

We weren't that close of friends in the beginning anyhow. We just were acquaintance friends and so forth.

In other cases, a previously close relationship had begun to fade. For example, one 57-year-old male described a fading friendship with a former colleague:

... you know, I still think of him as a friend. I think of him as a highly talented chef and colleague. Um, the relationship just isn't as close as it was.

**TABLE 4**  
Age Groups by Number of Problematic Friend Types

<i>Number of Problematic Friend Types</i>	<i>Age Group</i>		
	<i>55-64</i> %	<i>65-74</i> %	<i>75+</i> %
0	9.1	30.0	27.3
1	36.4	45.0	54.6
2	45.5	10.0	18.2
3	9.1	10.0	0
4	0	5.0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>11</b>

**TABLE 5**  
Problematic Friend Type by Category of Problem

<i>Problem Category</i>	<i>Problematic Friend Type</i>			
	<i>Too Close</i> %	<i>Difficult</i> %	<i>Fading</i> %	<i>Ended</i> %
Internal Structure	0	22.2	17.4	18.2
External Factors	0	18.5	60.9	0
Separate Lives	33.3	7.4	69.6	0
Interactive Processes	100	92.6	78.3	100
<b>Total Number of Friendships Identified</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>11</b>

*Note:* Columns do not sum to 100% because more than one type of problem could occur within a particular type of friendship.

Another common structural problem was a relative difference in the power and status of the friends. Because friendship is usually assumed to be an egalitarian relationship, when one participant tries to exert disproportionate influence or is haughty, difficulties can arise. A 76-year-old female reported a power struggle with a long-term friend:

She went one way and I'm trying to get her to go another way. It's like I tell this gal occasionally when she takes me somewhere. I say turn right and she turns left.

Similarly, one friend acting as if he or she has more worth than the other also causes problems. An 81-year-old female reported on an incident illustrating her friend's lack of respect for her:

I hate that word 'putting me down', but when . . . we go out here on the street . . . We had been to a party, a birthday party on the street, and we came back and Billie, the Billie I'm so crazy about, we stopped there and talked. Well Billie . . . Now I talk a lot. I know that. But Billie asked a question. She didn't ask either one of us particularly, but she asked some kind of question, something that didn't amount to anything, and I started to answer it, and we both started to answer at the same time. And she looked over at me and she said, 'If you could just hush for once.'

Problems related to dyadic homogeneity can occur when partners have discrepant social characteristics. For example, one 61-year-old female described what happened to a friendship when she and her friend ended up in different economic situations:

I think the background all stemmed from the fact that her husband left her in October and my husband left me in January. And, I had no idea he was going to leave. The separation papers came and he gave me everything we owned. He paid me alimony and her husband didn't do any of those things. I think sometimes it was hard because she was a little bit jealous because I got those things, you see.

## FACTORS EXTERNAL TO THE FRIENDSHIP

Although together the internal processes and structure of relationships accounted for most of the problems respondents reported, in 19 relationships, factors external to friendships affected them. One or both of the friends find themselves in circumstances that have a negative impact on their relationship. In this sample of older adults, the most common external problem was declining health. One 73-year-old male described the results of having health problems:

Well, I think quite a few [of my friendships] are probably fading away because of my age and . . . inability to visit them with distances.

A 68-year-old woman similarly said a friendship was fading away:

'Cause she's been on, flat on her back over a year and couldn't get up and use the phone.

In other cases, spouses interfered with friendships. For example, one 72-year-old woman described her problem with a friend:

She married a jerk. No one likes him. Do you know that when I telephone her that he has to listen to the conversation? She's just a changed person since she's married him; she's just ah, she was a very independent person, free and easy with me. And she married this guy and she just doesn't . . . As I said, she doesn't make phone calls without him listening, she just doesn't do anything without him. She was a widow for many years and lived her own life, had owned a home, had lots of things, had a lot of set of friends, and now he doesn't want her to have any other friends and he doesn't want her to do things.

Another respondent, 82 years old, described how his friend's wife influenced their relationship:

Uh, his wife was very unhappy that I got married to a younger girl. Not a young girl, but a younger girl than my wife was. That's all. And she let me know.

In still other cases, problems arose because one of the friends had a busy work schedule. A 62-year-old woman described one of her friendships as problematic because her friend still worked:

It's just the fact that she works and I don't work. I stay busy doing the things I do, and I'm sure she does with her thing.

A final example concerns friends who had previously depended on third parties to keep them in touch and the third parties had ceased doing so. A 67-year-old female described her relationship with a college friend as follows:

I did (keep up with her) through her mother. Her mother and my (now deceased) mother were acquainted and so I would keep up with her through her and occasionally I would hear from her.

## LIVES NO LONGER INTERSECTING

Not all problematic friendships resulted from internal process or structure issues or from issues external to the relationship. In 20 relationships, the problem was that the friends did not cross paths frequently anymore. This usually occurred because the two friends lived far apart, because their routines did not bring them into contact with one another, or for both reasons.



One 60-year-old woman said her friend lived in another town. As was typical of other friends separated in this way, she only managed to see her friend occasionally. A 62-year-old man attributed his problems with a friendship to distance and retirement:

Distance and the fact that we both retired from where we were. The job was keeping us in contact with each other and since retirement we haven't pursued each other to maintain that friendship we had together. Basically it was more occupational I guess.

Sometimes, too, people change interests and associations, to the detriment of existing friendships. A 57-year-old male summarized this aspect of nonintersecting lives nicely:

Our contact is a little bit less frequent. It's drifting into the category of being a casual friendship. He's doing things with different people, living in different places, doing things with different people . . . I don't know. I don't, you know, sort of can't relate to that and because I haven't seen him in a little while, the basis for our friendship is things that we've done in the past. That seems to be atrophying a little bit.

## INTERACTIVE PROCESSES

Cognitive, affective, and behavioral interactive processes played a major role in the problems respondents had with their friends. The number of problematic relationships in which one or more interactive processes figured was 60, with behavioral processes most prevalent (N = 39 relationships), followed by problems associated with cognitive and affective processes (N = 30 and 28 respectively).

The most common cognitive processes evident in the data were attributions and person perception. These were most likely to occur with respect to the difficult type of target friend, when respondents located the cause of the problem they were having in the friend's personality. For example, a 60-year-old woman described this difficult friend:

She's our choir director. She asks for suggestions and then when you give a suggestion she will not take them ... She's the type of person that she knows everything; you can't tell her anything . . . that's her personality, bossy.

Similarly, a man, aged 57 years, described the personality of a friend he had difficulties with:

Sam is a very difficult personality. I always consider him a challenge. He's easy to get cross with people, not just with me but with everybody.

Several of the descriptions of situations with problematic target friends involved relationship monitoring, or paying attention to changes in the nature of the relationship. A 56-year-old woman indicated this example of monitoring when speaking about a friendship that had ended:

. . . I don't think that there's a real . . . breach there, I think it's, ah, kind of a differing of basic attitudes and values that certainly were, that obviously we, I thought were similar and (we) weren't . . .

Although affective processes include both positive or pleasurable emotions and negative or unpleasant ones, negative emotions predominated in the discussions of problematic friendships. For example, hurt feelings and anger characterized difficult and ended friendships. A woman who was 58 years old mentioned her work supervisor when asked to describe a friend with whom she had a difficulty. It seems that the supervisor praised the respondent's work lavishly and publicly, asked the respondent to do extra tasks, and conveyed a feeling of closeness

between them. But when the respondent became ill, the supervisor did not try to arrange a modified work schedule or offer any comforting or supportive words:

... it has hurt me deeply . . . At least she could have called me and said, 'Mildred, I understand . . . I know you have done everything that you were supposed to do on this job, I hate to see you go, there's nothing I can do for you but I'm here for your moral support.' . . . She'd introduce me as, 'This is my friend.' . . . I was always there at her beck and call, I never knew to stay out of work . . . So I don't feel good about her . . . a real friendship stands up no matter what . . . I don't hate her, but ... I would never trust her.

A 69-year-old woman described a traumatic event that led her to end a long-term friendship:

I had gone to the beach with him to meet a group of other people from (College) where I had gone to school . . . there *were* sexual advances which I didn't approve of or cooperate with. Then we came back to my house ... and during the night he tried to crawl in bed with my daughter and his excuse was that he thought it was her mother. So that was the end of that friendship right then and there . I was furious. I was crying. I was sick. He was no one that I would have ever considered (capable of doing that).

Other respondents expressed sadness and regret about friendships that were fading or had ended. Referring back to the man who described the friendship with his barber, even though they were never very close, he lamented that the friendship had faded away:

Well, I regret it. I'd still like to know what's going on with him and his family because I knew them, as well, and I haven't heard from them ... It would be nice if I could get in touch with him to know where he is and what's going on with him.

The most common emotional reactions to friendships that were fading away, though, were resignation and indifference. A 58-year-old man had a friend whom he really liked, but who had relocated to France, making communication difficult. He was resigned to the fact that business and distance interfered with the continuation of their friendship. Indifference was expressed by a 62-year-old man in this case:

Roy was in the college group and he was one that comes to all the reunions but ... Roy has never been in the center, he's been a peripheral character. Roy always gets too drunk . . . and he kind of makes a fool of himself and is very contrite the next day and we all expect it and that's just the way Roy does so we don't worry about it. It doesn't reduce friendships any, it just doesn't make for deepening of friendships. Roy's been doing this for 42 years so . . . I don't like him any less but it's a friendship that I don't ever call Roy ... I am not really working or interested in trying to maintain a closer relationship. It's nothing to build on. (Interviewer: How much do you want to continue being friends with Roy?) I don't care one way or the other . . . we didn't have (a) close relationship back at school and the times I have seen him in the interim have not been that fulfilling . . .

It is important to note, too, that some respondents were satisfied with the outcome of negative friendships. A 76-year-old woman discussed ending a friendship with a person who turned out to be shallow and condescending. She felt she did the right thing, and thereby preserved her self-respect. A 67-year-old woman concluded her description of ending a friendship with a married couple who were too demanding, were inconsiderate about things like coming to visit at meal time, and cursed a lot, with this comment:

... as far as we're concerned, we're delighted that we don't get to see them.

Analysis of the data on difficult friends revealed that problems associated with behavioral processes were usually defined in terms of friends who placed excessive demands on the relationship, who betrayed a confidence, or were involved in a conflict.

A woman, aged 71 years, described a situation related to excessive demands that led her to cool off a friendship. The friend frequently requested transportation assistance for a medical treatment. Because the location of the medical center required passage along an interstate highway, the respondent was uncomfortable about driving the needy friend. Eventually she let her other activities prevent her from assisting the friend.

An example of betrayal of a confidence came from a 70-year-old woman who noticed a tendency in her friend that she did not like:

She gets a little overbearing, overpowering, a little pushy, (and) also reveals confidences from other people. (Interviewer: To you?) Which made me a little suspicious or made me change the way I feel about her.

An 81-year-old woman, who prided herself on her gardening, reported a conflict with her neighbor who cut the respondent's flowers and shrubs without asking permission, saying that because she had cut them whenever she wanted when the previous owners had lived there, she felt she had a right to continue doing so. Then one day:

. . . I looked out there and I thought, 'Well, something's wrong with my outside out there and I don't know what it is.' And I said, 'Oh, gosh, it's my hemlock!' And I went out there and she had snipped, well ... I could drive my car through the hole, I can see the woman's porch and everything back there and it was completely private (before).

A 65-year-old man provided an example of conflict at work:

The problem was that Bill and I both believe in giving freely of our time and talents to . help mankind in general, so to speak. Especially non-profit organizations. However, I draw the line at that and in a particular instance, Bill wants to give not only of his time and talents but of his materials in business, as an example go out and shoot a job for an organization or an individual and donate his time, his talent, and also of course the materials; to process the film and to make prints and of course the paper and the chemicals and all of that, and we do not agree on that.

### *Effects of Gender on Problems*

Although men and women did not differ on likelihood of claiming troublesome friends in their networks, looking at transcript data across all the problem friend categories and types of problems revealed patterns related to respondents' gender. For example, we found that geographic distance was a problem-related factor mentioned by both men and women, especially with respect to fading liaisons. Similarly, situations such as a change in work status and other causes of nonintersection of lives were reported by both men and women. Both men and women indicated that they ended friendships in response to a specific incident such as a serious insult or betrayal. Other evidence, though, points to some gender- based differences.

The work environment seemed to figure more prominently in the discussion of problem friendships for men than for women. Many of the men's friendships originated from common career paths, and sometimes business-related issues resulted in friendship problems. Two men, but no women, attributed friendship problems to the friends' excessive alcohol consumption.

Also, men were more likely than women to report that another relationship, such as with a family member, mediated the relationship between the two friends in a way detrimental to the friendship.

In contrast, women were more likely than men to take a stance based on character issues when mentioning problems with friends. They cited the following personal attributes when describing friend-related problems: bossy, self-centered, pushy, nosy, gossipy, moody, jealous, belligerent, competitive, overly demanding, and scatterbrained.

### *Effects of Age on Problems*

We also examined the effects of age group membership, used as a proxy for differing levels of maturity and life course experiences, in relation to problems with friends. As with gender, the interview data revealed both similarities and differences across age groups. For example, respondents in all three groups mentioned the friends' personality characteristics as a prime source of difficulty leading to friendship problems. Also, examples of friendship fading due to geographic distance occurred across all age groups. But the conversations with middle-old respondents were more likely than those with either the young-old or the old-old ones to include discussion of a friend who was too close (a relationship they would prefer to cool off), and comments about problems associated with geographic distance were especially prevalent for this age group. Only young-old respondents mentioned time constraints as a reason for the fading of a friendship, whereas both middle-old and old-old participants attributed fading to the friends' illness or their own inability to travel for friendly visits. Finally, only old-old individuals mentioned that friendships had faded when friends moved away after their retirement.

## DISCUSSION

In the Andrus Study of Adult Friendship Patterns, we gathered detailed data on 10 focal friends, but respondents discussed problems, *per se*, in relation to 4 of them: a friend with whom they preferred to be less close, one they identified as fitting the difficult friend category, a friend who was drifting away from a previous level of closeness, and a former friend. As the numerous examples from our transcripts illustrate, older adults will freely admit to the negative side of friendship if given an opportunity to do so. Having problems with friends does not necessarily signal the end of the friendship, although sometimes it does. Respondents in this study, at least, retained friendships that included various difficulties, although perhaps at a reduced level of emotional closeness.

Problems with friends originate in characteristics of the individuals involved, such as the way one friend perceives the other's personality traits. They arise from the internal structural features of the relationship, such as the degree of closeness, the extent of dyadic homogeneity on age or class, or the unequal distribution of power and status in the relationship. They are caused by factors external to the relationship over which the friends have little control and by changes in life patterns. They result from day-to-day interactions, such as hurt feelings, betrayals and disappointments, and revelation of a friend's undesirable features. Problems with friends sometimes cause anger or distress and other times yield only indifference.

Problems with friends varied somewhat according to gender and age group among these elderly adults. Consonant with friendship research on younger individuals that shows gender differences

in friendship structure and processes, these findings reveal that some of men's friendship problems have different originations than women's. Further, even within a sample of older adults, looking at age subgroups reveals some differences as well as similarities in friendship problems. As illustrated on the left side of Figure 1, these gender and age group distinctions could reflect differing social structural positions (i.e., opportunities and constraints related to friendship interaction patterns may vary according to one's gender or age group category) or differing personal dispositions (i.e., attitudes and personality characteristics may vary according to one's gender or level of maturity). The intersections of social structural and psychological dispositional characteristics with each other and their association with friendship problems or other aspects of friendship interaction await further detailed investigation.

These findings demonstrate that individuals experience friendship problems differentially just as they experience friendship benefits differentially and that friendships are as diverse in their more unpleasant sides as they are in their gratifying aspects. Thus the results contribute depth to the knowledge about older adult friendship that has heretofore been based only on studies of social support and other positive outcomes. The findings further demonstrate that friendship troubles are not related only to cognitive, affective, and behavioral interaction processes, but also to friendship structure and context. This means that researchers cannot accomplish a comprehensive understanding of friendship problems if they focus only on interactions per se. Rather, they must examine structural and contextual features of friendship as possible sources of strain, along with interaction dynamics. Recognition of the impact of context on friendship problems implies that findings about friendship problems might be different for older adults in other contexts such as those in other regions of the country, in rural areas, or living in institutions.

The diversity related to friendship problems uncovered here implies that any interventions designed to address friendship problems must be specific, not global. That is, different approaches are warranted according to whether the root cause of a problem resides within behaviors that might be changed or in a situation beyond the partners' control.

Having catalogued a wide range of sources and types of friendship problems in the later years, our future research goal is to determine the possibility of differentiating between the subsample with and without problematic friendships: Do those in the 21% who had no problems at all with any type of friend differ on social structural variables from those who did recognize problems? Do they employ different strategies to begin and sustain friendships? We also need to distinguish, within a given focal friend category, between respondents who did and did not identify such a friend (Adams and Blieszner 1996). Further, as shown in Table 1, some respondents identified friendships that were fading away or had ended, but did not assign any problem to the relationship—for what nonproblematic reasons did the fading or ending occur? We want to explore these and other structural and process features of troubled and contented friendships.

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