

## Resources for Friendship Intervention

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### **Abstract:**

Programs affecting friendship patterns can be implemented at the individual, dyadic, network, immediate environment, community, or societal level. Literature specifically focused on friendship intervention is scarce. The relevance of other resources for the design and assessment of friendship interventions at each of these levels is described.

Practitioners who design social interaction interventions are prompted to familiarize themselves with the friendship literature and to apply the findings. Even if the goal is not to manipulate friendship patterns specifically, interventions should at least be designed not to undermine existing relationships.

**Keywords:** friendship | community | assessment

### **Article:**

Human service providers and program planners are among those who change and manipulate social lives as part of their jobs. Social workers advise lonely people to join clubs and organizations to make new acquaintances. Therapists help their clients develop interpersonal skills. Industrial psychologists advise companies on how to create amiable work milieux. Managers of planned housing organize activities to facilitate contact among residents. Policy makers pass laws that encourage people to rely on their friends and relatives for help rather than on formal agencies. Although the people who initiate and implement these efforts might not think of them as friendship interventions, they may well be.

Designers of these types of interventions typically have focused on altering social interaction, in general, not on friendship specifically. Friendship is considered a somewhat sacred relationship and, therefore, not an acceptable target for intervention. Perhaps this is because, in contrast to

other forms of social relationships in our society, friendship is uniquely voluntary. Whereas relatives are designated by blood or legal ties, neighbors by proximity, and work relationships by contract, friends are selected and are based on affection (Blieszner & Adams, 1992). Yet, friendships are not wholly fortuitous (Allan & Adams, 1989), and thus even this type of relationship can be manipulated.

One possible goal of friendship intervention would be to increase individuals' satisfaction with a specific friendship or with their friendship networks. Less obvious, perhaps, would be to change their behavior, attitudes, values, situations (e.g., financial, social), or conditions (e.g., health, mental health). Or, to mention further illustrations, an intervention might be designed to improve the way the members of a friendship network interact, to make an apartment building a desirable residence, or to involve a wider range of locals in community affairs. Thus, friendship interventions could be designed to change the individual participants, the relationships, or some aspect of the context in which the friendships take place.

Many of the social interventions that have been implemented in the past have been based on a general knowledge of the literature on social interaction. But though many of these interventions have affected friendship patterns, few of them have been based on a familiarity with the literature specifically on friendship (see the following section for examples). The failure to use friendship research findings in developing and executing social interaction interventions is unfortunate. A haphazardly conceived intervention is more dangerous than or, at least, less beneficial than no intervention at all.

The purpose of this paper is to prompt practitioners who design interventions to consider the influence they might have on friendship. Even if the goal is not to manipulate friendship patterns specifically, interventions should at least be designed so that they do not undermine existing relationships. We will address this purpose by discussing the literature from a variety of traditions that would be useful in designing friendship interventions or in understanding the potential consequences. Note that in addition to the literature from the disparate areas cited in this paper, studies specifically on friendship should also be consulted in designing interventions (see Blieszner & Adams, 1992, for a summary).

## Levels of Intervention to Enhance Friendship Patterns

### *Overview*

Depending on the level at which change is desired, different lines of social scientific inquiry are relevant to the design of interventions. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss the literature relevant to designing interventions at the level of the individual, dyad, network, immediate environment, community, and society, respectively.

The type of friendship intervention must vary according to the level at which change is desired. To bring about change in the friendship patterns of individuals, one must alter the personality dispositions or structural positions of those individuals—their ways of relating to people or their opportunities to make and maintain friendships. To bring about change in dyadic or network

relationships, one must manipulate their structures and interactive processes. At the remaining levels, one must create or alter contexts to facilitate the types of friendship patterns desired.

People who design interventions must remember that intervening at one level will probably affect other levels as well, in ways that are not easily predictable. For example, a friendship network intervention designed to affect the interaction patterns among members might also affect the dyads that compose it and the individual members.

### *Individual-Level Interventions: Improving Cognitive and Social Functioning*

The most basic means of affecting friendship patterns is to assist individual persons to engage in friendship more effectively. Examples of how to accomplish individual-level interventions can be gleaned from literature on clinical psychology techniques and research on loneliness. Whereas some scholars and therapists advocate helping people change the way they think about themselves and their partners in order to improve friendship functioning, others focus on social skills development or enhancement.

*Cognitive processes.* Self-defeating thought processes can interfere with the ability to engage in satisfying close relationships. According to Young (1986), friendship disorders result from stable and enduring patterns of thinking that originate early in life and affect future expectations about relationships. The biased schemas lead to problems in initiating or deepening friendships. Common causes of difficulties are social anxiety, poor body image, lack of confidence in one's ability to carry on conversations, inadequate social sensitivity (awareness of how one's behavior affects others), fear of self-disclosure, not knowing how to pace the relationship, holding unrealistic expectations for friendship, low self-assertiveness, difficulty expressing emotions, selection of people who are hard to befriend, fear of being entrapped by the demands of others, belief that one is unworthy and unlovable, feeling different and alienated, and lack of trust.

Cognitive therapists place emphasis on the connection between thoughts and beliefs on the one hand and feelings and behaviors on the other (Berscheid, Gangsted, & Kulakowski, 1984; Young, 1986). Intervention thus centers on identifying irrational beliefs and sources of inappropriate schemas; analyzing the emotional and behavioral outcomes of holding those beliefs and schemas; and replacing them with more realistic, accurate, and positive ways of thinking about the self, others, and relationships. Finally, the individual must replace the self-defeating emotions and behaviors based on the old schemas with new emotions and behaviors that are more effective for beginning and maintaining friendships.

Research on expectations regarding friendship also contains suggestions for cognitive interventions. For example, some elderly adults in Matthews's (1983) study believed that it was impossible to replace any of their friends whom they might lose, so they faced a diminishing friendship network in the future. On the other hand, others had a more flexible orientation that allowed them to acquire new friends throughout life. The implication of this distinction is that people in the former category should be helped to expand their thinking so that they are able to maintain a network of friends over time by adding new members to it. Investigation of communal versus exchange orientations in friendships of college students (Clark, Mills, Corcoran, 1989) and older adults (Gones & Vaughan, 1990) also has applied implications. The finding that a

communal orientation is associated with friendship satisfaction suggests that individuals with an exchange perspective should be helped to focus less on the exact comparability of what they give and get from their friendships and to think instead about the welfare of their friends.

*Social skills.* The literature on behavioral interventions with lonely individuals offers suggestions for interventions designed to enhance an individual's friendship skills. According to Rook's (1984) review, lonely college students, as compared to nonlonely ones, have greater difficulty initiating social contact by introducing themselves to others, making phone calls, and joining groups. They also enjoy themselves less at parties, take fewer social risks, and assert themselves less effectively. They are lower on communication skills such as self-disclosure and responsiveness to others. To counteract these tendencies, counselors use techniques such as modeling, role playing, performance feedback, and homework assignments. Once clients strengthen their friendship initiation skills, they may need further training on how to handle the transition to deeper intimacy.

Ongoing intimate relationships often involve conflict (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). For example, studies of older adults show that jealousy and failure to live up to role expectations are causes of anger among friends (Fisher, Reid, & Melendez, 1989). Although conflict and negativity are not experienced very often with best friends, when they do occur they diminish satisfaction with the friendship (Gones & Vaughan, 1990). Some adults might be well advised to avoid situations with friends that cause them distress (Fisher et al., 1989), but others would be better served by learning conflict-management strategies (Gones & Vaughan, 1990).

One domain of counseling touches specifically on communication skills as applied both in social and personal relationships and in business arenas. People might be more successful in interactions with friends and others if they learn to use persuasion and compliance-gaining techniques effectively (O'Keefe, 1990), acquire bargaining skills (Winkler, 1981), and develop expertise in negotiation (Raiffa, 1982).

#### *Dyadic-Level Interventions: Enhancing Partner Interaction*

Friendship interventions at the dyadic level focus on changing the partners' behavior. Marital therapists offer insights about interventions at this level. Although some problems experienced by married couples are not relevant to friendship, others are—especially those that stem from communication difficulties. An example of a dyadic intervention that could be generalized to friend partners is Harrell and Guerney's (1976) program for training married couples in conflict negotiation skills. Other useful skills in friendship are expressiveness, assertiveness, empathy, and promoting change in the self and the partner (Epstein, 1981; Guerney, Brock, & Coufal, 1986).

Marital therapists also emphasize the importance of maintaining a balance in close relationships between individuality, or differentiation of the self from others, and togetherness, or emotional connectedness (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Whereas emotional involvement is important to the development and sustenance of friendship, it is equally important that partners maintain a degree of autonomy or self-determination (see Rawlins, 1983a, b) rather than responding to each other only on the basis of anxiety or other emotions. From this perspective, problems in a friendship

would be approached by helping the partners to identify and reduce causes of anxiety and enhance their ability to function autonomously so they can respond to each other in a more adaptive fashion.

### *Network-Level Interventions: Altering Group Relationships*

Gottlieb (1988) argued that intervention at the network level is more ecologically valid than at the individual level for two reasons. First, it is difficult to change basic personality attributes and second, individual-level interventions that conflict with the values and norms of the person's network will be neutralized or discredited by network members. Also, network-level interventions appeal to societal norms of self-reliance, collective action, and empowerment. One of the most important functions of friend networks is provision of social support via the flow of resources such as tangible aid, companionship, and emotional support through the network (Gottlieb, 1988). Both the provision and the receipt of assistance contribute to feelings of social integration and psychological well-being, although Blieszner (1982) and Goodman (1985) found that giving contributed more to life satisfaction and emotional closeness than receiving. In any case, it is important to find ways to enhance the support provided by existing ties (Thompson & Heller, 1990).

Network interventions theoretically can optimize support by teaching members additional supportive behaviors, changing the structural characteristics of the network, or changing the relationship between the person in need and other members of the network (Gottlieb, 1988). Recent attempts to restructure existing networks and interactions among their members indicated that additional research on the connections between network structure and processes is needed before further intervention recommendations can be developed (Gottlieb, 1988).

Educational programs, self-help groups, and informal support groups can supplement naturally-occurring friend networks by both helping with relationship or other problems and by providing opportunities to develop new friendships. Thus research is needed on how the properties of such groups affect their functioning and on the effectiveness of these types of programs for addressing friendship problems (Gottlieb, 1988; Rook, 1984).

The literature on family and group therapy can be consulted for ideas about the conduct of interventions in friend networks. Group techniques could be applied to friendship in two ways. The first involves helping a person overcome social skills deficits in a group setting, thus enabling the participant to function more effectively among her or his own friends. Many theoretical frameworks inform the strategies that are used to accomplish such a goal (Gurman & Kniskern, 1981). The second category of group techniques utilizes multiple members of an existing network in a therapeutic intervention scheme. Again, a variety of strategies are available (Gurman & Kniskern, 1981). For example, the procedure described by Rueveni (1979) that brings network members to the counseling session to help individuals and families resolve crises can also be applied to serious friendship problems.

### *Immediate Environment-Level Interventions:*

#### *Manipulating Relationships in Everyday Places*

An immediate environment is the social and physical context that surrounds individuals and thus structures their interaction with others—for example, a work place, an apartment building, a church, a dormitory, a recreation center, or a nursing home. Depending on her or his gender, stage of life, or other characteristics, a given individual might interact with people in a variety of such environments or in only one. Scholars from many fields, including interior design and architecture, organizational sociology, environmental and industrial psychology, and cultural anthropology, have examined the ways in which immediate environments shape social interaction.

Both the social and physical characteristics of the immediate environment shape the social interaction that occurs within it.

An understanding of the effects of both is crucial to designing friendship interventions at this level. Although many authors of ethnographic case studies have described ways in which the characteristics of an immediate social environment (e.g., the status hierarchy, differentiation into cliques, or demographic composition) affect the friendship patterns that develop within it, very few researchers have done systematic studies on this topic. One exception is a study of the effects of the proportion of all residents in apartment building who were old (age density) on the friendship patterns of older residents. Among other findings, Rosow (1967) reported that within both the working and the middle class, the average number of friends increased steadily with rising age density. Furthermore, the higher the age density, the less likely older residents were to seek out or to accept younger friends.

*Social interaction vs. privacy.* Building on the pioneering work of Hall (1966) and Sommer (1969), Lang (1987) recently wrote an impressive synthesis of the information available on the connection between environmental design and human behavior. An issue that pervades this area of inquiry is competing needs for social interaction and privacy. Early studies by Osmond (1966) showed that some spaces bring people together, facilitating interaction, and others force them apart, inhibiting interaction. Although opportunities for interaction enable people to become acquainted (which is the first step towards friendship), opportunities for privacy (Westin, 1970) are important to the further development of friendship. As recent research (Lang, 1987) and the experience of utopian communes (Hayden, 1976) demonstrates, social interaction occurs more easily when the opportunities for contact with others are balanced by opportunities for privacy. Ambiguous spaces, those that are neither public nor private, discourage social interaction of any type (Flaschbart, 1969).

Most researchers have emphasized the need for built environments that facilitate social interaction rather than the need for those that allow for privacy (e.g., Lawton, 1975; Yancy, 1976). Both functional distance (the degree of difficulty encountered in moving from one point to another) and functional centrality (the ease of access to and frequency of use of common facilities) affect opportunities for social interaction (Lang, 1987). In a classic study of Westgate Housing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Festinger, Schacter, and Back (1950) demonstrated the influence of layout of the environment on contacts among people. On both floors of the residence, functional distance was short, but on each floor, functional centrality was

different. On one floor, residents had mailboxes located together and common entrances. On the other, they had mailboxes in different locations and entrances from the outside. Contact was much higher on the former floor.

Previous research thus suggests strategies for designing friendship interventions at the level of the immediate environment. Affording people the opportunity to interact with others is certainly the first step. Allowing people both privacy from those with whom they engage in public interactions and opportunities for developing intimate relationships is certainly another one. Building friendship is, however, more complex than this, and the same pattern of friendships is not desirable for everyone. Furthermore, a given individual interacts with others in many environments. Research examining the effects on friendship patterns of the constellation of characteristics of the myriad environments in which each individual interacts is thus necessary.

### *Community-Level Interventions: Designs to Facilitate Friendships*

The social work, ecological psychology, community sociology, and community planning literatures are relevant for planning friendship interventions at the community level. The term *community* refers to a group of people who are connected to one another, to some degree, by a web of interpersonal relationships. Community is usually used interchangeably with the term *neighborhood*, which refers to a geographic area (Lang, 1987). This discussion of friendship interventions thus focuses on communities that are also neighborhoods.

*Building social networks.* Social workers offer general information about how to bring about change in a community (e.g. Cox, Erlich, Rothman, & Tropman, 1987), and specific discussions of building support networks, especially for the elderly, with the community as client (Biegel, Shore, & Gordon, 1984; Goodman, 1985). By such networks, they generally mean connecting people with volunteers and service providers who reduce people's social isolation, give them emotional support, communicate with them, and provide them with instrumental services. These helpers essentially alleviate some of the individual clients' need for friends, and sometimes establish close relationships with them.

*Effect of size of community.* The ecological psychology literature is useful for identifying variables that might be manipulated to change friendship patterns in an existing community or to establish the desired friendship patterns in a new community. Ecological psychologists have examined the effect of community size on participation (Lang, 1987; Wicker, 1979). The basic premise of these studies is that when there are fewer people in a setting than are necessary for its optimal functioning, people are coerced into greater participation. Smaller settings thus have a higher proportion of people participating and filling roles they would otherwise leave for specialists (Barker & Wright, 1955; Wicker, 1979). The implication is, of course, that because of the higher participation in small communities, friendships will flourish more in them.

*Proximity vs. homogeneity.* In the 1960s, community sociologists debated whether proximity or homogeneity of community was a more important predictor of friend relations. The studies of wartime housing projects and postwar suburban neighborhoods showed that both were important, but homogeneity was more so (Gans, 1976). Gans (1976) concluded that proximity

leads to social interaction, but homogeneity is necessary to maintain relationships on a positive basis. He suggested that site planners should not put dwelling units so close together that people are forced to interact with one another or so far apart that visual contact is impossible. Furthermore, blocks should have somewhat homogeneous occupants to promote friendship, but not so homogeneous that any amount of deviance would be a liability. Social class homogeneity can be produced by building all homes of similar price, and life style homogeneity can be encouraged through advertising campaigns designed to appeal to people with similar values and interests.

*Centralization and decreasing functional distance.* During the post-WWII period and beyond, community planners in Britain and the United States drew on the community sociology literature and the ideas of visionaries, modern movement architects, and businessmen to design "garden cities" or "new towns" (Christensen, 1986; Lang, 1987). These projects were attempts to affect social life through design. Cooley's (1925) notion of the primary group, Park's (1925) idea that people should be rooted to a place to mediate against moral deviance, and the concerns about suburban life raised by Whyte (1956) and Reisman (1950) influenced planners (Christensen, 1986). Ebenezer Howard conceived of garden cities as towns designed for healthy living and industry, just large enough for a full measure of social life, with enough jobs to employ the residents, surrounded by a rural belt, with all of the land being publicly owned or held in trust for the community (Christensen, 1986). Some modern movement architects (e.g., Le Corbusier and Clarence Perry) believed that reducing the functional distance between households and the central placement of shopping, schools, and other community facilities would lead to the development of local friendships. Their goal was planning neighborhoods that were coterminous with a sense of community (Lang, 1987).

Both Britain and the United States undertook new town experiments, but neither was overwhelmingly successful (Corden, 1977). Examples of American new towns include Radburn, New Jersey, and Columbia, Maryland (see Brooks, 1974; Christensen, 1986; Lang, 1987; and Stein, 1951 for detailed descriptions of these projects). In both Britain and the United States, the amount of cooperation among individuals and among institutions was less than anticipated, and the desire for individual identity was much higher. This is congruent with the Western individualistic cultural context (Brooks, 1974). New town experiments convinced analysts that there are limitations to how successfully social ends can be achieved through physical design (Lang, 1987). Residents did not seem to respond to the physical environment in predicted ways. Although none of the analysts specifically addressed the issue of friendship patterns, their work implies that friendships were not significantly different than they would have been in a less planned community.

Among other causes, the failure of new town experiments to alter patterns of social interaction seems to have discouraged people from planning friendship interventions at the community level. Gans (1976) concluded that behavior is due more to the predispositions of residents than to the characteristics of the community. Smith (1979) attributed this decline of optimism about the possibility of changing social behavior through planning to the growth of social systems in size and complexity and the substitution of economic for social concerns. In either case, contemporary urban theory is much less utopian now than it was several decades ago.



We now know more about communities, planning, organizing, and friendship. We learned from the garden city and new town movement and from subsequent research. Although recent research indicates that the ideal friendship patterns for individuals and social groups vary and that community plans must allow for diversity, additional investigation is needed before alternative recommendations for community-level friendship interventions can be offered.

### *Societal-Level Interventions: Social Policies that Support Relationships*

The societal level of analysis is the most remote from dyadic and network friendship interaction, and thus interventions at this level would be expected to have the weakest effect on friendship patterns. Moreover, policy analysts realize that government policies cannot cure all individual, relationship, and societal problems (Dye, 1981). A variety of reasons contribute to the limits of public policy, not the least of which is that social scientists do not know enough about individual and group behavior to provide reliable advice to policy makers (Dye, 1981). Nevertheless, we can find relevant evidence from the social science and family policy literatures to suggest potential interventions at the social policy level that might be successful in enhancing friendship patterns.

Family policy addresses the fundamental problems of families in relation to society (Zimmerman, 1988). Family policy may serve as an effective model for friendship intervention proposals, because several theoretical frameworks for understanding family phenomena also apply to friendship. For example, the systems perspective, often used in family policy analysis, is relevant to friendship. Just as a family can be viewed as a social system, so, too, can a network of friends. The systems perspective emphasizes the transactional interdependence between families or friend networks and the government. That is, families and friends take care of some human needs on an informal basis, thus reducing the requirements for government services. On the other hand, government provides services that enable families and friends to function autonomously. For example, friend networks provide services such as socialization for new roles in the family, at school, or at work. And friend networks contribute to the maintenance of psychological well-being by providing social support. Thus most people do not need to rely on government programs for these forms of socialization and support.

Government policies should contribute to stability of the immediate social environment so that families and friend networks can perform their support functions effectively. Policy strategies should be targeted to the environmental conditions of families and friend networks, not to direct interventions that invade family or friend network boundaries (Zimmerman, 1988). From this perspective, it is appropriate for government to provide for public safety, for instance, so friends can visit each other freely, but not to dictate when or where friends should meet.

From the systems perspective, a number of suggestions emerge about policies and programs to enhance supportive functions of friend networks. For example, policies that provide for respite programs enable caregivers of sick or frail relatives to socialize with their friends, maintaining the strength of friend ties and support. Another instance is Thompson and Heller's (1990) suggestion that policies designed to provide useful social roles for elderly citizens will benefit society through the tasks older persons perform, but will also benefit the elderly participants who will be perceived as interesting companions, thus increasing their chances of

developing and maintaining friendships. As shown here, consideration of the reciprocal relationship between friends and society yields ideas for policies that could enhance friendship networks while benefiting other segments of society. Obviously, research is needed on whether or not the intended friendship outcome occurs with the advent of such policies.

## Summary and Conclusions

Although the literature specifically on friendship intervention is scarce, other resources are available to assess the potential impact of a given design. The clinical psychology literature provides direction for changing the individual's social and cognitive functioning and thus her or his friendships. The theories and techniques of marital therapists are relevant to transforming interaction between members of friendship pairs. Family and group therapists provide ideas for network-level interventions. Scholars from myriad fields-interior design and architecture, organizational sociology, environmental and industrial psychology, and cultural anthropology-have discussed ways in which immediate environments affect social interaction. Social workers, ecological psychologists, community sociologists, and community planners have done research or manipulated environments in ways that would be useful in designing community level interventions. The family policy literature suggests how policies and programs can enhance the functioning of friend networks. Together with the increasing store of knowledge on friendship patterns, these resources provide a strong foundation for the design and assessment of friendship interventions.

We do not, however, necessarily intend to advocate friendship intervention. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, interventions that affect friendship and other relationships occur all the time. Our point is that they should be responsibly designed; counselors, program planners, and policy makers need to consider the results of research on the structure and interactive processes of friendship patterns when developing plans for interventions that could affect social lives. For those interested in designing such interventions, we have suggested some applied literatures that might be of use. Research findings and relevant theory can guide the development of intervention strategies and the analysis of their consequences.

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