

## Secondary Friendship Networks and Psychological Well-Being Among Elderly Women\*

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One of the major issues in social gerontology is, and has been, the relationship between social integration and psychological well-being during old age. There are two major theories which predict opposite outcomes. Activity theory suggests that the aging individual should compensate for role losses by increasing activities in other areas, such as friendship, in order to be happy (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953). Disengagement theory, on the other hand, suggests that a mutual withdrawal of the individual and society contributes to successful aging (Cumming & Henry, 1961). The unresolved issues of this controversy and the critiques of the two theories are too lengthy to describe here. As Larson (1978) observed in a review of the research on the subjective well-being of older Americans, though researchers using different measures of psychological well-being and activity have often reported different findings, they have shown that these two variables are, in general, positively related.

The literature shows that there is a clearer relationship between friendship activity and psychological well-being than between family activity and psychological well-being among old people (Lemon, Bengston, & Peterson, 1972; Pihlblad & Adams, 1972; Adams, 1971; Edwards & Klemmack, 1973; Wood & Robertson, 1978; Pihlblad & McNamara, 1965; Larson, 1978). There is an assumption in much of the literature that this is because friendship involves older people with age peers. An alternative explanation is that friendship involves the old person with the larger society more than family relationships do.

Not all people have the same orientation toward friendship. Some people see it as an intimate relationship one only shares with a few people during a lifetime. To others, friendship is more inclusive. Friends are those with whom one currently spends time. In this paper, I show that it is the latter, secondary orientation toward friendship which contributes to the psychological well-being of elderly people. I argue that secondary friendships are more likely than the more intimate, primary type of relationship to involve the older person with the larger society. In other words, a secondary orientation towards friendship enables the older person to remain engaged with the larger society.

### DATA AND METHODS

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This article is based on data from a 1981 study of 70 white, non-married, female senior citizens who lived in Oak Park, a middle-class suburb of Chicago. According to the 1980 Census, a fifth (21.8 percent) of Oak Park's adult population (42,471) was 62 years or older. About two-thirds (66.9 percent) of the Oak Park residents who were at least 62 years old were females (Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, 1981).

In this study, though I rely heavily on the data that I collected by using standardized instruments, I took careful notes on my qualitative observations both during and after the data collection process. In many cases, these notes were crucial in helping me to interpret quantitative findings. I lived in the community where I conducted the study throughout the process of collecting and analyzing the data. I saw many of my respondents and their friends shopping or doing volunteer work during and after the formal data collection process. Some respondents called me after I interviewed them to elaborate on something that they had said, to fill me in on recent events in their lives, or to check on my progress. During the data collection process, I spent time in various senior gathering places and saw many of my respondents and their peers. I kept careful notes on all of these encounters.

I found my respondents with the cooperation of several agencies and individuals who served the senior population in Oak Park. Half of the women whom I interviewed lived in age-segregated housing, and half of them lived elsewhere in the community. Some of the women received services, and others volunteered their time. Although I did not draw the sample according to the rules of probability theory, there are good reasons to believe it fairly accurately reflects the segments of the Oak Park Community that I was studying. First, the marginal distributions of the women's background characteristics reported in Table I are very similar to those for Oak Park's elderly women reported in the 1980 census (Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, 1981). My sample does include a higher proportion of women more than 84 years old and a lower proportion of women from 62 to 64 years old than Oak Park did in 1980. Second, since I lived in the community for four years, I have a pretty good sense of what its older inhabitants were like. A wide variety of community members, some of whom worked with the elderly and some of whom were elderly themselves, who have read an extensive report on the research I conducted (Adams, 1983) have confirmed my opinion that my sample seems representative even though it is not in the mathematical sense. Although my findings cannot be generalized beyond the situation of old, white, non-married, non-institutionalized women in Oak Park, I am sure that the friendship patterns of their counterparts in other suburban communities are somewhat similar. The reader should be careful, however, to remember the limitations of my sample.

### *Variables*

**Friendship.** In this research, I did not use an a priori definition of friendship. The first question I asked each respondent was: "People have different ideas about what friendship is. How would you describe what a friendship is?" To help them clarify their definitions of friendship, I asked: "How does this differ from an acquaintance?" Once I was satisfied that the respondent had as clear as possible a definition of friendship in her mind, I asked: "Are there any people that you consider friends now?" and, if appropriate, "Could you please tell me the first names of the people you consider friends?" In this way, the interview started with the respondent defining friendship for herself.

After the respondent had listed her friends, I asked her a series of questions about each of them. This enabled me to use aggregate measures of the characteristics of friendship networks rather than the global measures which are often used. For example, rather than

Table 1  
Demographic Characteristics of the  
Respondents (N = 70)

Characteristic	Percent in category
Age in years:	
62 - 64	4.3
65 - 74	42.9
75 - 84	32.9
85 or more	20.0
Education in years: <sup>a</sup>	
0 - 8	17.4
9 - 11	15.9
12	21.7
13 - 15	29.0
16 or more	15.9
Income in dollars: <sup>b</sup>	
Less than 5,000	41.1
5,000 - 9,999	33.9
10,000 - 19,999	12.5
20,000 or more	12.5
Marital status:	
Widowed	65.7
Divorced	12.9
Separated	1.4
Never married	20.0

<sup>a</sup>One person refused. The percentages are based on 69 cases.

<sup>b</sup>Fourteen people refused. The percentages are based on 56 cases.

asking the respondent how many friends she had, I counted the number of people she had listed as friends. The proportion of all friends who lived in the same town, the proportion of all friends who were emotionally close, the mean duration of the friendships in years, the mean number of interactions with friends per year,<sup>1</sup> and the density of the friendship network<sup>2</sup> were all constructed from questions asked about each friend separately. See Hess (1972) and Cohen and Rajkowski (1982) for discussion of the methodological and analytical advantages of aggregate measures of friendship characteristics.

The results presented in this paper were not changed by transforming the distributions of the friendship variables to approximate normal ones (Afifi & Clark, 1984; Rummel, 1970). Therefore, I have used the nontransformed variables in the analyses presented here. See Table 2 for the means and standard deviations of the friendship network variables.

**Psychological well-being.** In a review of the research on the correlates of satisfaction among the elderly, Adams (1971) observed

Table 2  
Means and Standard Deviations of  
Friendship Network Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Proportion of all friends who lived in the same town as the respondent	.46	.29	67
Mean number of interactions with friends per year	84.52	73.83	67
Mean duration of friendships in years	23.54	12.64	67
Density of friendship network	27.39	26.07	66
Proportion of all friends who were emotionally close to the respondent	.39	.28	67
Number of friends	9.69	8.34	70

that well-being has been conceptualized, defined, and measured in a variety of ways: "Among these are the concepts of satisfaction, happiness, morale, successful aging, adjustment, adaptation and positive self-image. The measurements have ranged from observations of overt behavior to self-reporting indices to thematic apperception interpretations" (p. 64). All of these concepts are related to psychological well-being.

In this research, I included the questions to construct a two-dimensional measure of psychological well-being, developed by Bradburn (1969). Bradburn suggested that an individual's subjective well-being can be seen as the predominance of a person's feelings of pleasure over feelings of pain in everyday life. In other words, he suggested that well-being is the balance of positive and negative affect states.

Using Bradburn's (1969) measure of positive and negative affect has several advantages. First, they are used often in the gerontological literature (Moriwaki, 1974; Gaitz & Scott, 1972; BEd & Havighurst, 1976; Bengston & Lovejoy, 1973; Stock & Okun, 1982; Graney, 1975). This provides one with an opportunity to compare the results of this study with the results of others. Second, the validity and reliability of the measures have been established and discussed elsewhere (Bradburn, 1969; Gaitz & Scott, 1972; Moriwaki, 1974; Andrews & Withey, 1976). Third, contrary to Bradburn's (1969) expectations, he found the two dimensions of affect, positive and negative, were independent in his sample of adults 60 years of age or younger. Since his study was completed, others have established the independence of these two dimensions in

elderly samples (Stock & Okun, 1982; Moriwaki, 1974). As Bankoff (1981) has observed, the independence of these dimensions gives one a richer conceptual framework for investigating the correlates of psychological well-being than a unidimensional measure would. Finally, this research, like Bradburn's (1969) is focused on the effects of the respondent's current context on psychological wellbeing rather than on personality dispositions that would be tapped by questions focused on generalized time dimensions.

I asked the questions included in the two scales exactly as Bradburn (1969) did and in the same order. The question wordings and percentages of the women responding "yes" to each of the 10 questions are included in Table 3. The women in this sample were much more likely to report feelings of positive affect than feelings of negative affect. Bradburn (1969) noted this same tendency in his sample

Table 3  
Percentage of Respondents Who Answered Yes to  
Each Question About Their Feelings (N = 70)

Question <sup>a</sup>	Percent Yes
During the past few weeks did you ever feel....	
Positive feelings:	
1. Particularly excited or interested in something?	50.0
3. Proud because someone complimented you on something you had done?	75.7
5. Pleased about having accomplished something?	78.6
7. On top of the world?	44.3
9. That things were going your way?	75.7
Negative feelings:	
2. So restless that you couldn't sit long in a chair?	22.9
4. Very lonely or remote from other people?	24.3
6. Bored?	28.6
8. Depressed or very unhappy?	28.6
10. Upset because someone criticized you?	15.7

<sup>a</sup>The numbers indicate the order in which I asked the questions.

I have separated them here into positive and negative affect for the reader's convenience.

of adults younger than 60 years old, but it is more pronounced in this sample. Bradburn's (1969) respondents were more likely than mine to report that they had been particularly excited or interested in something during the past few weeks. My respondents were more likely to report feeling the other four positive feelings than Bradburn's respondents were. My respondents were less likely than Bradburn's (1969) were to report feeling each of the negative affect states. This suggests that older people experience more positive affect and less negative effect than younger people do. I caution the reader against reaching this conclusion. Gaitz and Scott (1971) reported

that there was a significant tendency to report less positive affect as age increased in their sample of adults who ranged in age from 20 to over 75 years.

I constructed the negative affect scale and the positive affect scale by summing the positive responses to the five relevant questions. Each individual could thus score between zero and five on each scale. As in previous studies, the scales were not significantly correlated with one another (Pearson's  $r = -.0651$ ,  $p > .29$ ,  $N = 70$ ). The distributions from this sample and the distributions for those respondents who were 65 years or older from Gaitz and Scott's (1972) sample of Houston are included in Table 4. The distribution of the negative affect scale appears to have been quite similar in the two samples. My respondents reported more feelings of positive affect, however, than Gaitz and Scott's (1972) elderly respondents. The respondents in both samples were healthy enough to withstand fairly long interviews, but there was a potentially important difference. My sample included only Anglos, while the Gaitz and Scott (1972) sample also included Blacks and Mexican-Americans. It is possible that the differences in experiences reported in the two samples reflect the difference between the experience of being an old Anglo and the experience of being an old non-Anglo. It is also possible that the decline in positive affect as age increased, which Gaitz and Scott (1972) reported, also reflects the difference in these experiences.

## RESULTS

In Table 5, one sees the factor loadings which resulted from doing a principal components analysis with a varimax rotation of the six friendship network variables. See Rummel (1970) for a discussion of factor analysis. Two distinct factors emerged. I have underlined the loadings that defined each factor.

The first factor appears to be a measure of the respondent's secondary orientation to friendship. Respondents who scored high on this factor had networks that tended to be local, new, and dense and they saw their friends frequently. The women who participated in senior recreation centers and other organizations tended to maintain this type of secondary network. Notice that the proportion of all friends who were emotionally close to the respondent and the total number of friends were not loaded on this factor. Some of the

Table 4  
 Percentage Distributions of Positive and Negative  
 Affect Scores in the Oak Park Sample and in the  
 Over 65 Year Old Houston Sample

Negative affect score	Oak Park <sup>a</sup>	Houston <sup>b</sup>
0	47.1%	41.6%
1	17.1%	21.0%
2	12.9%	13.1%
3	14.3%	14.8%
4	8.6%	7.3%
5	0%	2.2%
Positive affect score	Oak Park <sup>a</sup>	Houston <sup>c</sup>
0	4.3%	18.6%
1	2.9%	15.8%
2	22.9%	19.5%
3	27.1%	23.2%
4	20.0%	16.9%
5	22.9%	5.9%

Note: The data on Houston's elderly were reported in Gaitz and Scott (1972).

<sup>a</sup>N = 70.

<sup>b</sup>N = 452.

<sup>c</sup>N = 456.

women with this orientation had many close friends, and others did not. In a similar way, some of these women had many friends, and others did not.

The second factor is defined primarily by the proportion of all friends who were emotionally close to the respondent and the total number of friends. Women who scored high on this factor tended to have small, intimate networks. Their friends did not necessarily know one another nor had they necessarily known their friends for a

Table 5

Rotated Factor Loadings for Friendship Items (N = 66)

Item	Factor Loadings	
	Secondary	Primary
Proportion of all friends who lived in the same town as the respondent	<u>.84</u>	-.27
Mean number of interactions with friends per year	<u>.84</u>	.23
Mean duration of friendships in years	-.77	.14
Density of friendship network	<u>.60</u>	.12
Proportion of all friends who were emotionally close to the respondent	-.06	<u>.82</u>
Number of friends	-.06	-.75

Note: Principal components with varimax rotation.

long time. They tended to see their friends occasionally and to have cosmopolitan networks. The women who had this type of network fell into three categories. First, some of them were very elderly, homebound; or partially disabled. These women tended to place more importance on the affective aspects of friendship rather than on interaction. They were more likely to name friends they were no longer able to see than those with a secondary orientation were. They also named people as friends who helped them, such as neighbors, ministers, and home companions. Second, some of the women who had a primary orientation toward friendship had worked most of their lives. They had not developed a pattern of participation in volunteer organizations or clubs. They tended to have a few close friends, many of whom were old colleagues. Third, some of the women did participate in secondary networks, but counted few of their members as friends. They participated in them to keep busy, but were not really integrated into them. None of the three types of women with primary orientations toward friendship tended to be connected to a larger community through their friends.

Of the two factors, only a secondary orientation was significantly related to positive affect (primary: Pearson's  $r = .0144$ ,  $p > .45$ ,  $N = 66$ ; secondary: Pearson's  $r = .2062$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $N = 66$ ). Neither friendship orientation was significantly related to negative affect, but there was a slight tendency for a primary orientation to be (primary: Pearson's  $r = .1164$ ,  $p > .17$ ,  $N = 66$ ; secondary: Pearson's  $r = .0184$ ,  $p > .45$ ,  $N = 66$ ). Having a secondary orientation towards friendship increased the women's opportunities to experience pleasure, but did not reduce their feelings of pain. These findings are consistent with those of Bradburn (1969). He found friendship variables to be related only to positive affect.

With cross-sectional data, such as mine, it is not possible to determine the direction of the causality of the relationship between positive affect and a secondary orientation toward friendship. Perhaps women who had poor psychological well-being withdrew from their



secondary networks. The anecdotal evidence from my study suggests, however, that friendship activity improved psychological well-being by giving the women opportunities to experience pleasure. The women with high scores on the positive affect scale said things such as:

It makes me feel good when I see my friends.

My friends are my biggest fans. Seeing them raises my spirits.

My friends keep my brain ticking. I'd probably lose interest in things, if it weren't for my friends.

The work my friends and I are doing together is important. It feels good to be useful.

## CONCLUSIONS

The data presented here show that a secondary orientation toward friendship contributes to positive affect. It is important to remember that a secondary orientation toward friendship does not exclude having an intimate relationship of the type that Lowenthal and Haven (1968) found was important to the mental health of older persons. A secondary orientation is an inclusive one. Involvement in new, active, dense, local networks gave the women opportunities to remain engaged with the larger society. They had the opportunity to meet new people and to have new experiences as a result of their friendships.

There was a slight tendency for a primary orientation toward friendship to contribute to negative affect. Older women with a primary orientation had a more difficult time in making new friends and replacing friends who had passed away. Because of their strict definition of friendship, it was difficult for anyone to qualify. Some of the women with a primary orientation toward friendship, especially those with physical limitations, did not necessarily have it voluntarily. They did not always have the opportunity to meet more than a handful of potential friends. This suggests that programs should emphasize increasing opportunities for older people in this type of situation to interact frequently with others. Age-segregated housing and nutrition sites provide this opportunity. Religious organizations have old age clubs, but often outreach to isolated people is limited or non-existent. Many programs could benefit from improved access to transportation.

Elsewhere (Adams, forthcoming), I have discussed the tendency for researchers studying friendship to use a priori definitions of friendship or to limit the possible range of responses to questions about friendship. For example, some researchers have studied only local friendships (Rosow, 1967; Williams, 1959) or only the respondent's best or closest friends (Laumann, 1973; Crowe, 1978; Jacobson, 1968). If we are to understand the role of friendship in the lives of elderly people, there is a need for further study of the variation in friendship networks and their functions.

## FOOTNOTES

1. I asked the respondents when they last saw each of their friends and, depending on which was appropriate, how many times they had seen them in *the* last week, month, or year. I then multiplied the number of times they had seen their friends in the last week by 52 or in the last month by 12 to get an estimate of the frequency of interaction in a year. If they had not seen their friends in over a year, the frequency was coded as zero. To arrive at the average frequency of interaction with friends, I added the frequency of interactions for all friends and divided by the total number of friends for each respondent.

2. After the respondent had defined friendship and listed her friends, I asked her with which of her other friends each of her friends was friends. I asked each respondent specifically about each pair to avoid omission. Using this data, I constructed a measure of friendship network density (Kapferer, 1969). Density is a measure of "the extent to which links which could possibly exist among persons do in fact exist" (Mitchell, 1969, p. 181). Density is expressed in terms of percentages. If all possible links exist, density is 100 percent. If none of the possible links exist, density is zero percent. Since four of the respondents had only one or no friends, density could be computed for only 66 respondents.

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