

## Sociology of Friendship

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### **Abstract:**

Traditionally, friendship has received little systematic attention from sociologists. The issue of social integration has of course been central to the discipline since its origins in the nineteenth century, but until recently friendship itself was rarely seen as anything but peripheral to the major issues that defined the subject. Indeed, in this regard, a concern for friendship lapsed far behind a focus on family and community organization. It was these twin concerns that from an early phase of the discipline's history shaped the ways in which sociologists addressed the topic of informal solidarities. Communities and families were understood to have significance as sustained forms of social institutions. Even though their patterning was subject to the transformative processes of nineteenth and twentieth-century industrialization, they were understood to be of greater structural consequence than the far more individualized and prosaic ties of friendship.

**Keywords:** friendship | personal environment | networking | life course | networks and networking | kinship | widowhood

### **Article:**

Traditionally, friendship has received little systematic attention from sociologists. The issue of social integration has of course been central to the discipline since its origins in the nineteenth century, but until recently friendship itself was rarely seen as anything but peripheral to the major issues that defined the subject. Indeed, in this regard, a concern for friendship lapsed far behind a focus on family and community organization. It was these twin concerns that from an early phase of the discipline's history shaped the ways in which sociologists addressed the topic of informal solidarities. Communities and families were understood to have significance as sustained forms of social institutions. Even though their patterning was subject to the transformative processes of nineteenth and twentieth-century industrialization, they were understood to be of greater structural consequence than the far more individualized and prosaic ties of friendship.

In the absence of any explicit concern with developing a distinct sociology of friendship, it was family and community studies—especially the latter—that provided most knowledge about the social organization and consequence of friendship and other similar ties. The data generated and the consequent analyses were often quite limited, but to the degree that they explored the range of informal solidarities in which people were involved, they necessarily paid heed to the commitments that existed between nonkin others and the patterning of sociability that occurred within a locality. Thus it is possible to interrogate many older community and family studies to reveal at least the key elements behind the dominant forms of informal relationships that existed (see, e.g., Allan 1979). It was, however, rare indeed for any of these studies to explore the broader significance of friendship or the part these ties played in sustaining or challenging social order.

A recognizable sociology of friendship only really began to develop as an area of significant interest in the 1970s. The work of two renowned scholars was particularly influential in encouraging sociologists to take friendship seriously and treat it as more than just a personal relationship of little social consequence. The first of these was Eugene Litwak (Litwak 1960a, 1960b, 1985, 1989; Litwak and Szelenyi 1969). His long-term interest in primary group structures led him to explore the different types of support and exchange that different members of people's personal networks were best suited and most able to provide. In particular, in distinguishing between family, neighbors, and friends as categories of informal relationship that were based on different modes of solidarity and structurally capable of meeting different contingencies, he highlighted the idea that friendship in its different guises was of consequence socially as well as individually. He was one of the first sociologists to emphasize the role that ties of amity played in sustaining routine social organization, although a number of social anthropologists were also exploring the importance of such ties in their analyses of urban lifestyles (see, e.g., Mitchell 1969).

The second scholar whose work did much to foster the emergence of a recognized sociology of friendship was Beth Hess. In two highly influential papers (Hess 1972, 1979), she effectively outlined the parameters for the development of a sociology of friendship. She was one of the first sociologists to recognize that friendship patterns were liable to be influenced by the social roles an individual occupied. She was particularly aware of the interplay of gender and age on this, although she also recognized the significance of class and other aspects of social location. In addition, Hess explored the wider role that friendship played in social life. Rather than just seeing it as a voluntary relationship engaged in for its own sake, she emphasized its functional consequences for role performance and the part it could play in the construction of social identity.

Over the last 30 years, the seeds sown by these scholars have resulted in the sociology of friendship receiving far more acknowledgment as a legitimate field of enquiry within the discipline. As with other such developments, this shift can be seen within a broader sociological context. Many analyses of the social transformations of late modernity have emphasized processes of individualization involving the relative decline of more traditional collective social institutions. Within the emergent social patterns characteristic of the era, individuals are seen as having increased opportunities for constructing social identities and “narratives of the self.” No longer is their lifestyle—or indeed their life course—as settled or determined by aspects of their

structural location as it once was. Of course, the extent of the freedoms individuals have here is itself related to structural location; it is also easy to overemphasize. Yet the pervading sense is that individuals have greater control over the ordering of their lives than in previous times. This choice extends to the construction of personal networks, with direct consequences for the significance of more “chosen” or “voluntary” ties such as friendships. In turn, policy debates have also begun to emphasize the importance of issues such as social capital and social exclusion, thereby also highlighting the increased significance of informal associations for people's well-being.

This chapter focuses on a number of the issues that have been at the core of the sociology of friendship over the last 20 years. After examining the rise of friendship as a form of relationship within industrialized, Western culture, it explores how patterns of friendship are consequent on wider features of social structure, arguing that people's structural location routinely shapes the organization of their friendships. It also examines the “space” there is for friendship in people's lives, who is eligible for friendship, and what the consequences of this are. It then turns to a discussion of the role of friendship in identity construction and examine more fully the issues raised earlier about the increased salience of friendship and other ties of amity in contemporary life.

First though, it is necessary to consider briefly what we consider the term *friend* to mean in this chapter. Definitions of the concept are more complex than they first appear because *friend* is an evaluative term rather than a categorical one. In other words, unlike neighbors, colleagues, or siblings, friends are recognized as such on the basis of subjective judgments of the quality of the relationship they sustain; there are no clear-cut external criteria that can be used to determine whether someone qualifies as a friend. This, of course, does not mean that judgments are wholly arbitrary; common cultural criteria certainly shape decisions, although none of these are wholly necessary for a relationship to be classified by one or both of those involved as a friendship. Equally, these criteria may be present, yet those involved choose a term other than *friend* to characterize their tie. To complicate the issue further, the criteria involved in friendship can be applied more or less strictly, depending on the context within which the term is being used. Bearing all these caveats in mind, this chapter is essentially going to focus on nonkin ties that involve a comparatively high degree of liking and solidarity, generally incorporating elements of shared sociability and broad reciprocity of exchange (Allan 1989; Pahl 2000).

## **Developing a Sociology of Friendship**

Friendship is often portrayed as a rather timeless relationship. In particular, reference to philosophical discussions of the true nature of friendship, including Aristotle's distinctions between friends of pleasure, friends of utility, and friends of virtue, often implies that “true” friendship has an unchanging character (Bukowski, Nappi, and Hoza 1987; Pakaluk 1991). Yet such a position is essentially asociological. Whatever the characteristics of “true” friendship are taken to be, those characteristics are likely to be shaped by the socioeconomic conditions under which the ideal is being constructed. More important, the patterning of friendships more generally, whether or not they approach some idealized model, will be shaped by the forms of social life that are emergent at the time within the culture in question. In other words, ties of amity are not universal or fixed; the friendships that individuals have are certainly shaped by

personal factors—which themselves will reflect the structural circumstances of people's lives—but equally they will be patterned by the ways in which friendship is socially constructed within their culture.

Various anthropologists have made this point in their analyses of patterns of amity in different cultures. The papers in Bell and Coleman (1999), greatly influenced by Paine's (1969) seminal work, provide good examples of this (see also Leyton 1974). Silver's (1990) analysis of the development of friendship in eighteenth-century Britain is particularly pertinent for present purposes. He argues that only with the emergence of an industrial economy was friendship in its modern guise possible. Before this, social and economic organization privileged family and kinship solidarities to such a degree that trust between unrelated others was effectively outside the realm of possibility. Distrust rather than trust governed these ties, not as a result of personal judgment but as a consequence of the structural formation in which they were embedded. It was only as the economy altered, replacing personal connection with greater contractual regulation, that “space” was generated for ties of friendship lying outside any instrumental concerns (see also Oliker 1998; Pahl 2000). This does not mean that family and kinship ties became unimportant. As research has consistently shown, family ties continue to be of major consequence in most people's lives, although how those relationships are ordered also changes over time. The key point being made here is that personal relationships of all forms, be they kin or nonkin, are structurally embedded and consequently impinged on by their broader social and economic context.

If the premise of these arguments is accepted, it follows more generally that the space there is in people's lives for friendship will be influenced by structural circumstances lying outside the friendships. (Indeed, the idea that friendship as a form of relationship is somewhat “dissociated” from other areas of life is itself one that only “makes sense” within particular social formations.) Thus, how ties of amity are patterned, what exchanges occur within them, what solidarities are developed, where they are enacted, etc., are not solely issues of individual volition. Agency matters of course, but so too do the structural circumstances under which that agency is exercised. For example, long-standing debates about the decline of community and the decreased significance of local relationships in social life clearly incorporate the idea that different forms of solidarity emerged between nonkin (and also between kin) consequent on changed patterns of employment or residence.

It is equally apparent that other structural factors in people's lives have a bearing on the ways in which individual friendships and, as important, their overall personal networks are patterned (see Blieszner and Adams 1992; Ueno and Adams 2006 for summaries of research documenting how structural factors shape personal friendship networks). For example, given the overall significance of gender in shaping the opportunities that men and women have, as well as the part that masculinity and femininity play in the construction of identity, it would be surprising if ties of friendship were not influenced by gender (see Adams and Ueno 2006 for a discussion of the research findings regarding the effects of gender on friendship). So too class location and the resultant material resources available to individuals and families for socializing and servicing ties of amity will have an impact on the patterning of their friendships, although exactly how this operates will vary across time and space (Walker 1995). Age and life course stage are further factors that can be recognized quite readily as having an impact on people's friendship networks.

Young children, teenagers, and adults at different phases of the life course all have different opportunities and constraints influencing their friendships (Hartup and Stevens 1997, 1999; Levitt 2000; Sherman, de Vries, and Lansford 2000). Similarly, life course transitions such as widowhood and divorce frequently lead to a substantial reordering of friendship networks.

The point at issue here is not so much the detail of how patterns of amity are influenced by particular structural factors. Rather the issue is that modes of friendship are inevitably shaped by the circumstances in which they are enacted. At a macro level, different social and economic formations foster different ideas of appropriate exchange and involvement in nonkin associations, as Silver's analysis demonstrated. But equally, it is important to recognize that at any time there will be differences in the ways ties of amity are organized, depending on the other commitments people have and the resources that are available. Put simply, the sociology of friendship developed as a consequence of this explicit recognition that these ties were shaped by structural, and not just individual, characteristics. It grew further as analysts began to perceive these ties as being of social rather than just personal consequence, a matter that will be discussed further in the following.

To argue that structural characteristics are important here is to say nothing more than that friendship in its different guises, like all forms of relationship, is patterned by the contexts in which it is located. Rather than standing alone, somehow set apart from other features of social and economic life, it too is integrally bound into the organization and rhythms of social structure. In an earlier work, we (Adams and Allan 1998) attempted to identify some of the different levels through which context patterned friendship interaction and, indeed, the forms that friendship took. We identified four broad levels: the *personal environment* level, the *network* level, the *community* level, and the *societal* level. These levels are not independent of each other but represent a contextual continuum that collectively provides the social and economic canvas against which ties of friendship are—or of course are not—developed.

The personal environment level refers to the more immediate features of a person's life that influence the opportunities and space they have for developing and servicing ties of amity. This would include the material resources they have available for sociability as well as their domestic and work obligations. These in turn will be influenced by the individual's socioeconomic location, including class, gender, ethnicity, and life course position. While the network level is closely linked to the personal environment level, it refers to the overall configuration of personal ties that an individual sustains—with whom he or she mixes, the character of the exchanges involved, and the links there are between the others in the network. Some individuals are involved in larger personal networks than others; some have networks in which family and kin are more central than nonkin; some have denser networks in which many of those involved also know each other.

Moreover, in line with the basic premise of network analysis, the configuration of these networks will have an independent influence on the freedoms that people have to construct and service their friendships and the constraints acting on them (see Adams and Blieszner 1994).

The third level of context that Adams and Allan identified was the community level. This refers to the conventional practices for “doing” friendship and other such ties that develop in the social

environments in which the individual is involved. Linked to the previous two levels but analytically distinct from them, it concerns the ways in which normative and cultural understandings of what ties of amity involve are constructed, sustained, and sanctioned within a given cultural milieu. Analytically, these milieus may at times be thought of as relatively bounded—a particular neighborhood or form of community; at other times, the reference may be to broader cultural patterns—for example, specific class-based or ethnic practices. The final level of context identified was the societal level. This is the level most removed from the individual and refers to the manner in which the dominant social and economic formation fosters different patterns of association. A good illustration of this is provided in Silver's (1990) analysis of the impact on trust and amity of eighteenth-century developments in commercial practice, as discussed earlier.

We do not intend to augment these arguments about context any further here. In what follows, however, we will draw on these different levels of context in framing our discussion of major themes that have emerged within the sociology of friendship.

### **Structural Location**

Some of the earliest work in friendship research was concerned with mapping out the impact on friendship of different structural aspects of people's lives—in the language used previously, how variations in personal environment affect friendship. As would be expected, this remains a key topic within the sociology of friendship.

### **Class**

One concern has been with the consequences of class or socioeconomic status on friendship patterns. While there is a danger of reifying differences between classes (and other social groupings), in general middle-class people appear to have more extensive and involved friendship networks than do people in working-class positions (Walker 1995; Willmott 1987). Some of this difference may be a consequence of how ties of amity are culturally constructed (Allan 1998a), which itself is influenced by the resources people have available for socializing. Generally, people with fewer resources are likely to develop different patterns of exchange and participation than those with more. This is not just a matter of income, important though financial resources are. It is also influenced by cultural practices associated with different class locations. For example, how the home is culturally defined by different classes, who has access to it when, and which aspects of it are “revealed” are all likely to influence the ways in which sociable ties are allowed to develop (Allan 1998b; Marks 1998). More studies are needed that pay heed to people's overall material circumstances, linking these to other aspects of their personal environment that have an impact on their patterns of sociability.

### **Gender**

Research has also been concerned with exploring differences in men's and women's friendships. Some of this has examined the “content” of male and female friendships—what men and women do with their friends and how masculinities and femininities affect this. Linking in strongly with traditional themes in the socialization literature, the dominant argument has been that women are

more emotionally expressive in their interaction with their friends, whereas men tend to spend time with their friends in more “active,” and often more public, pursuits. While rightly recognizing the dangers of overemphasizing gender differences per se, Wright's (1982) classic account of men's friendships tending to be more “side-by-side” as against women's more “face-to-face” ties still represents the essence of this argument well. It is very much in line with wider debates about the gendered nature of intimacy and of the significance of disclosure in male and female relationships (see Duncombe and Marsden 1993; Wood 1993).

Other research has explored the space men and women have available in their lives to service different friendships. In part, this is about the gendered organization of leisure, but it is also about the routine scheduling of competing activities and responsibilities. While life course phase is important within this, the main focus is on how different forms of work constrain the time and financial resources available for servicing friendships. Traditionally, the division of domestic responsibilities has given men more free time and money than it has given women to engage with others and service their friendships, especially outside the home. A number of caveats are needed here though. First, such portrayals are premised on assumptions about the ordering of relational and domestic partnerships, which with changing demography are becoming less dominant than they were, certainly across the life course. Second, while (some) women may have more constrained opportunities for engaging in external sociable activities than do men, as discussed earlier, some characteristic elements of femininity seem better suited to managing and servicing friendships.

Friendship *between* men and women is one area where there is a need for more research (Monsour 2002). While most friendships—aside possibly from those involving couples—tend to be gender-specific (in line with issues of status homogeneity discussed in the following), there are arguments that cross-gender friendships are becoming more common. Key questions in much of the literature concern whether such relationships can be kept platonic and whether this is important (Fehr 2004). The same issue of the legitimate sexual parameters of friendship is also now being posed in a different form. With the changing demography of partnership, not only are present partners often defined as friends, but so too some past partners are sometimes redefined as “just friends.” Equally, there are interesting questions to be asked about “friends with benefits” (i.e., people who clearly define each other as friends rather than sexual or romantic partners but who nonetheless occasionally engage in sexual activity together).

## **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity has received far less attention in the friendship literature than either gender or class. In the United States some studies have focused on how different cultural identities pattern the nature of friendship solidarities, although often this also entails aspects of class and material disadvantage. However, most studies of cultural difference in informal relationships have been concerned principally with kinship solidarities, with friendship being a secondary concern. Within some of these though, especially those taking an ethnographic approach, the importance of nonkin connections in people's lives becomes apparent—Duneier (1992), Liebow (1967), and Stack (1974) are classic examples here. Similarly, in Britain, research focusing on community boundaries and identity construction among different ethnic groups, especially South Asian and AfroCaribbean groups, sometimes includes material relevant to friendships, although family and

kinship ties are generally more central within the analyses (Hahlo 1998; Hall 2002; Modood, Beishon, and Virdee 1994).

The most important ethnically oriented research for the sociology of friendship are studies of migration. From the early days of the Chicago School, sociologists have examined the emergent patterns of integration following migration to new localities. Key issues included the ways different incoming groups were “insulated” within the host environment and how they drew on informal associations to both protect themselves and further their social and economic interests (e.g., Fong and Isajiw 2000). For many migrant groups facing hostility from the location's more settled population, the ethnically concentrated networks of others that emerged provided both formal and informal resources that could be used against the exclusionary practices of others. Within this, ties of affinity became a significant means by which individuals could help protect themselves as well as sustain and honor their cultural traditions, traditions that for many become symbolically more important in the face of migration and opposition. While kinship connection usually takes precedence in this, patterns of friendship and nonkin association can also be important. Moreover, the changing pattern of interethnic friendship is revealing of the degree of closure or acceptance between once diverse groups.

### **Sexual Orientation**

Until recently, questions about the impact of sexual orientation were absent from the sociological literature on friendship. However, with the increased legitimacy given alternative forms of sexuality, the significance of friendship within gay and lesbian lifestyles has become a topic of significant interest. Nardi's (Nardi 1999; Nardi and Sherrod 1994) work has been particularly influential in this. As with other friendship circles, gay and lesbian friendship networks tend to be relatively homogeneous, at least when the individuals involved are “out.” Covert gay and lesbian individuals, on the other hand, often try to ensure that knowledge of their sexuality remains hidden by deliberately not associating with others who share their sexual orientation. Some of the most interesting research in this area involves how personal networks are managed when some individuals know about a person's gay or lesbian sexuality but others do not. While this is often a division between natal family and friends, ensuring “nondiscovery” by those who do not know requires continuing vigilance over interactions involving different segments of the network (Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan 2001).

Research has also shown that gay and lesbian persons often attach a greater importance to their friendships than is common among straight individuals, in part because of a history of familial rejection over their sexuality (Weeks et al. 2001). The concept of “families of choice” is a powerful means of expressing this, with its insistence that traditional kinship connection is not necessarily the basis of an individual's most significant, enduring, or intimate relationships (Weston 1991). For some, friends can be just as important in providing reliable long-term personal, emotional, and material support. Here, *friendship* takes on a meaning different from that found in most studies of “heterosexual normativity” (Roseneil 2005; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004).

### **Life Course**

There has been little longitudinal research that examines friendship behavior over the life course (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). Studies that take a life course perspective tend instead to focus on particular life phases, especially childhood, adolescence, and later life, or particular transitions, such as marriage, having children, divorcing, or becoming widowed (Feld and Carter 1998; Kalmijn 2003). Within childhood, research has focused on such topics as how children's friendships alter as they age, the class and gender specificities of friendship, and the part that friendship plays in the development of an individualized sense of self (Hallinan, forthcoming). Studies of adolescence have examined the part friendships play in the process of gaining independence and challenging parental control and in informing emergent sexuality and setting collective boundaries around sexual behavior and relationships (Crosnoe, forthcoming; Hey 2002).

Later-life friendships have attracted the interest of sociologists largely as a result of concerns over social isolation and loneliness. More recently, there has also been a focus on the potential for friends to provide support as people become more infirm or face transitions such as widowhood. While much of the research has been crosssectional rather than longitudinal, these studies, like research into the continuing importance of family ties, have helped combat dominant stereotypes of negative aging. Research now clearly attests to the continuing involvement of older people in active friendship networks and to the importance of these networks in providing individuals with their sense of identity and in providing help in managing new circumstances (Litwak 1985). Equally though, the friendships of older people, like the friendships of younger cohorts, do not necessarily remain static. As people's circumstances change, new friendships can emerge and old ones become less active. This is particularly so with the experience of widowhood or retirement, when people often report a change in their friendship networks (Adams 1987; Field 1999; Fung, Carstensen, and Lang 2001). Equally, caring for a spouse, as well as one's own growing infirmity, may result in fewer opportunities to service and maintain existing friendships (Johnson and Troll 1994).

### **Networks of Friends**

The development of social network analysis in the 1960s and 1970s (Mitchell 1969; Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1988) provided an analytical framework that was previously missing in the sociology of friendship. In particular, by overcoming some of the traditional dilemmas of the notion of "community," it offered the prospect of a nonnormative and nonlocality-oriented approach to examining the range of personal relationships an individual maintained. These relationships included the different friendships people had but also incorporated other informal ties, including family ties, work ties, and neighbor ties. Thus, friendship solidarities could be examined in the context of other relational solidarities rather than in isolation. Moreover, network analysis offered the opportunity to examine how the configuration of relationships within an ego-centered network was patterned and how different patterns in turn influenced the individual relationships within the network. Thus, the network approach facilitated a better understanding of the social significance of friendship and led to different questions being asked about these ties.

As a result of employing the network perspective, sociologists began to pose questions about the personal networks—sometimes referred to as the "personal communities"—that people

maintained. Many of these questions were seemingly straightforward, although they often presented greater analytical and methodological challenges than were initially recognized. They included such issues as the size of people's networks; their composition in terms of relational categories—friends, kin, colleagues, etc; the degree of clustering of the relationships within the network; and the ways in which the networks changed over time. Developing from this, there was an emphasis on describing the configurations of the networks people sustained rather than the character of individual relationships within them. Such structural issues as size, spread, density, clustering, and the like could then be compared across different personal networks in a systematic fashion, provided sufficient data were collected about the full set of relationships in the network.

While using this type of approach to plot the membership of people's personal communities is extremely useful, it tends to direct attention toward the configurational properties of networks in ways that of themselves may not directly contribute to our understanding of friendship processes. In part, this depends on what exactly is being measured in plotting the links that constitute the network's configuration. Studies that simply use the existence or otherwise of a relationship between individuals may be less useful than those that include more multiplex measures of the quality of ties—their strength, emotional commitment, duration, exchange basis, etc. However, collecting such data is extremely time consuming and more common in research that adopts a qualitative framework. Some network studies have attempted to do this by simplifying the notion of *network structure* they draw on and being concerned principally with what Barnes (1972) terms egocentered “stars” rather than full networks. In other words, they focus on the direct relationships an individual has rather than on the whole set of connections that exist between all the network's members (Allan 2006).

Antonucci and her colleagues have developed one such approach (e.g., Antonucci and Akiyama 1987, 1995). Antonucci's focus is on the overall patterning of commitment and social distance evident in people's personal communities. Her technique for measuring this requires respondents to place their different personal relationships on a diagram of three concentric circles—somewhat like an archery board—with those who are most close and important in the middle circle and those who are least significant on the outer circle. Methodologically, this method has proved useful in friendship research partly because of the simplicity of its visual representation but also because it encourages discursive comparison of the properties of different ties (including rearranging the consequent position of different relationships on the diagram). In turn, this approach draws on a notion of network structure distinct from that used in the network analyses discussed previously. It is not so concerned with network density or clustering as with the relative composition of the concentric circles, and in particular the membership of the circles nearest the center. By contrasting where different categories of other are placed within the concentric circles, typologies of differently constructed personal communities can be formulated. In their recent study of friendship in Britain, Pahl and Spencer (2004) distinguish five main forms of personal community—friendlike, friend-dependent, family-dependent, familylike, and partner-dependent—that reflect the different positions of family and friends within the concentric circles. (For similar approaches drawing on Antonucci's approach, see Phillipson et al. 2000; Wenger 1990.)

One of the strengths of network analysis—of whatever form—is that it facilitates comparison, not only between the different types of friendships and other ties that people maintain but also with respect to any changes occurring in the patterning of relationship solidarities over time. This is an area of research that warrants more attention than it has received. We know that friendships change over time; in general, they are less enduring than most family ties. Yet there are relatively few longitudinal studies of friendship. Those that there are tend to have been concerned particularly with change in older people's networks (e.g., Adams 1987; Wenger and Jerome 1999). Research into friendship change across a broader life course perspective will be extremely valuable (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). Although this issue will not be explored further here, such analyses would also contribute usefully to research and policy debates about the nature of social capital and its relationship to different health outcomes (Macinko and Starfield 2001; Muntaner and Lynch 2002; Phillipson, Allan, and Morgan 2004).

### **Friendship, Status, and Identity**

As indicated previously, friendships generally occur between people who have similar types of experience and similar structural locations (Kalmijn 2002; Perkinson and Rockermann 1996; Smith 2002; Walker 1995; Ying et al. 2001). While there are exceptions, friendship is generally governed by principles of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). In part, this is a consequence of interest and liking, but it is also a consequence of the ways in which friendship as a form of personal relationship is socially constructed. Essentially, friendship is understood as a relationship of equality and in particular as a relationship between equals (Thomas 1987). While recent research has shown that friends do not necessarily perceive each other to be equal in power and status (Adams and Torr 1998; Neff and Harter 2003), friend relationships are not usually built on ideas of hierarchy or inequality. Within the tie itself, differences in status, authority, economic power, and the like are seen as irrelevant and external. In practice though, such differences are difficult to ignore; in most cases they do impinge on the relationship. For example, if one of the friends has significantly more material resources than the other, then managing the friendship as one of equality becomes quite complex. Aside from different interests and modes of living being likely to emerge, maintaining equality in the routine exchanges of the friendship becomes more problematic, with the relationship often being experienced as less satisfying, close, and intimate (Roberto 1996; Veniegas and Peplau 1997).

Similarly, other social differences make it more difficult to develop or sustain friendships as ties between equals. Indeed, the more divergent people's social location, interests, and commitments, the less likely it is that ties of friendship will form between them. At a commonsense level, this is an obvious effect of social structure (Feld 1982). People often do not have reason to meet socially with others who are different from them (Korgen, Mahon, and Wang 2003). Moreover, friendships develop between people who feel compatible with each other, share interests, and have a common outlook (Chen et al. 2001). Sociologically, the implications of this are consequential. In particular, friendship can be seen as a manifestation of social status, a point perhaps best appreciated in the community studies tradition (e.g., Bell and Newby 1971; Knoke 1993; Laumann, Marsden, and Galaskiewicz 1977; Stacey et al. 1975). Because friendship is constructed as a tie between equals, collectively the networks of friends that people have reflect their relative standing within the hierarchy of status occurring within a society. Indeed, as status divisions have become more complex than they previously were, patterns of informal association

provide a key means of capturing that complexity. In this regard, we can appropriately be judged by the company we do—and do not—keep. Moreover, changes in that company are also revealing of our changing status over time.

If friendship is significant as an indicator of status divisions, so too it is of consequence for identity construction. At one level, our identities are based on our structural location—we are nurses, mothers, adolescents, or whatever. But in addition, our sense of who we are is also developed through our interactions in the different relationships we sustain. It is in these continuing interactions that our notion of self comes to be (socially) constructed. Friendships may initially appear to be less relevant here, as typically they do not encompass settings where structural location seems to be of direct relevance. However, because friendships are ties between people who are identified—and identify—as being similar to one another, in reality they do play a significant role in identity construction. Typically, the ways in which friends “do” their friendship—the activities in which they engage, the topics of their conversations, their style of sociability, etc.—are strongly connected to their structural location. In these ways, class, gender, occupation, ethnicity, age, sexuality, partnership status, and other such factors shape the content of friendship. But equally, the enacting out of these things within friendships helps to cement identity as Jerrome (1984) illustrated so well in her classic study of the friendship behaviors of her sample of middle-aged, middle-class women.

The relationship between friendship and identity is demonstrated particularly clearly when people experience significant change in their life. Standard examples are when people are widowed or divorced or when they gain substantial promotion. At such times, the tendency is for networks of friends also to alter gradually as a consequence. These consequent changes in friendships are not haphazard. Normally, they reflect the shifts in identity that have occurred. Thus, any new friendships generated tend to be with others who are similarly located, while those existing friendships where difference has become more marked tend to wane. Taking divorce as an example, those who experience divorce without repartnering often find that some friendships with still-married others become less active over time, while ties with those who are also separated or divorced become more central (Kalmijn and van Groenou 2005; Milardo 1987; Rands 1988). Such tendencies develop as a result of the subtle processes involved in maintaining friendship as a tie of equality. However, as a consequence of these same processes, the new identity of, in this example, being divorced is reinforced through everyday interaction with friends. Routinely discussing common experiences of divorce, resolving the various contingencies faced, making plans, engaging in activities of “singlehood” together, or whatever else, with friends in a similar position facilitates acceptance of the new identity (Litwak 1985). As with other identity shifts, changing friendship personnel reflects the changes occurring and helps establish the new identity.

### **Friendship in Late Modernity**

Earlier in this chapter we referred to Silver's (1990) arguments that the possibility of *friendship* as it is now understood arose as a consequence of the structural changes associated with the development of commercial society. As noted then, the idea that dominant modes of sociable relationships are embedded in socioeconomic structures remains a powerful one within the sociology of friendship. In this final section of the chapter we want to consider how changes

associated with late modernity have influenced the organization of friendships. Particularly relevant to this are the growth of individualization, the relative decline of locality as a source of community solidarity, and the major shifts there have been in family, sexual, and domestic life, especially with regard to partner, family, and household formation and dissolution. Some have argued that these changes have resulted in a decline in sociability, especially at a local level, and the need for reestablishing forms of community participation and responsibility (Etzioni 1995, 1997). Others have heralded these changes as freeing individuals from the constraints of place and kinship, thereby enabling greater selectivity and choice to be exercised over sociability, with friendships consequently becoming more rather than less significant in people's lives (Adams 1998; Wellman 2001; Wellman et al. 1988).

In an important article, Pescosolido and Rubin (2000) have suggested that the implications of these structural shifts in patterns of affiliation can be understood by considering their impact on personal networks. In particular, they suggest that with late modernity, a “spoke” model best represents the dominant configuration of personal networks (see also Laumann's 1973 discussion of “radial networks”). Like Giddens (1991, 1992), Beck (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), and others, they recognize that the degree of permanency apparent in individuals' lifestyles in previous times no longer holds to the same degree now. Instead, there is increasing flexibility and transience in people's institutional commitments, be these associated with family, employment, leisure, or even religion. As a result, the extent to which individuals are structurally embedded in longer-lasting, overlapping institutional memberships has decreased. The emergent pattern is for individuals to be involved in a range of more discrete activities, in which there is less consolidation or overlap of personnel. In turn, the configuration of personal networks tends toward Pescosolido and Rubin's “spoke model”—a series of clusters of relationships, with only comparatively little overlap or linkage between the different clusters.

What such a network configuration fosters is a greater degree of control over lifestyle choices and the presentation of self. The knowledge others have of you and the patterns of social control they can exercise decreases in comparison with more integrated networks. This has consequences for two of the issues discussed earlier. First, this pattern of network configuration is compatible with the sorts of friendship change that occur when people's social location and social identity alter. Not being so tied into more integrated networks more readily enables shifts and movements in the weight placed on different friendships. This, in turn, means that at times of personal change, friendships can emerge between those who now have more in common and share the new identity, without this having consequences for network integration overall. Such changes are not impossible with other network configurations, but a network with Pescosolido and Rubin's spoke model properties is particularly compatible with the processes of friendship movements when different identities and lifestyle choices develop. And in turn, as we have argued, these friendship shifts themselves help establish the new identities and lifestyles.

Second, this form of network structure facilitates the expression of different aspects of self in different settings. There is the possibility of a degree of “compartmentalization” in the way we are with different others (Goffman 1959). Researchers have demonstrated that members of stigmatized groups, such as gay and lesbian individuals and adult fans of the Grateful Dead, are often “out” with some parts of their networks but not with others (Adams and Rosen-Grandon 2002; Weeks et al. 2001). While such cases are particularly interesting in terms of the

management of different identities, they are not the only occurrence of these processes. Indeed, in less extreme forms many people present different aspects of the self to different audiences in their networks. This does not involve deliberately hiding or disguising their “true” identities; it is more a case of emphasizing different elements in different sets of relationship. The key issue here is that changes in network structures under conditions of late modernity are likely to foster differential portrayals of the self in ways that are highly compatible with ideas about the growth of individualization and the greater freedom people have to exercise choice over the construction of their lifestyles. The consequences this has for the different friendships people maintain warrant more detailed empirical investigation among different populations than they have currently received.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have addressed a number of key issues that have helped shape the sociology of friendship. Although historically the topic of friendship has received relatively little attention from sociologists, it is one that is clearly pertinent to debates about the ways in which patterns of social integration have altered and are altering. Indeed, there are signs that the sociology of friendship is increasingly receiving attention within social and political debates. This has long been so in terms of community decline, even if the language of friendship is often peripheral to these debates. Recently, though, the rise in popularity of the notion of social capital among policymakers and others (Putnam 2002; Putnam and Feldstein 2003) has led to a recognition that friendships influence people's health status and sense of well-being (Pahl 2000).

However, if friendship research is to realize its potential for shaping policy development and clinical interventions, then more detailed study of the different ways in which friendship has an impact on people's lives is necessary. First, there is a need for more comparative research than currently exists. In particular, it seems crucial to understand more fully the relationship between friendship patterns and social context. While researchers are now showing more interest in this (e.g., see Adams and Allan 1998; Blieszner and Adams 1992; Surra and Perlman 2003), further studies of friendships in specific cultural and historical contexts are necessary. As we have argued in the foregoing, it is evident that friendship behavior is not solely the result of individual agency but also depends on the structural circumstances under which people live out their lives. Public policies themselves constitute one component of this structural context and can consequently play a part in encouraging or discouraging opportunities for social participation, although usually such policies are developed without much consideration for how they may affect people's social lives and relationships (Phillipson et al. 2004). It is therefore important that future studies are designed to allow comparisons of friendships across contexts (e.g., comparative international studies, historical trend analyses) so that an understanding of how contextual characteristics shape friendships can develop and contribute to policy formation.

In addition, friendship research is more likely to influence policy beneficially if there is greater collaboration between different disciplinary approaches, in particular between sociology and psychology. In general, collaboration on friendship research across disciplines has been rare. Researchers have seldom strayed outside the confines of their own disciplines; psychologists and communications scholars have mainly studied dyadic processes, and sociologists and anthropologists have focused more on aspects of network and social structure. Much of the early

work in both these traditions focused on individual variations in friendship patterns, but psychologists were concerned principally with how psychological disposition shaped what happened in friendship dyads, while sociologists were concerned more with how social structural location affected friendship network structure (Adams, forthcoming). This division of intellectual turf has constrained the development of clinical intervention strategies because although there is an understanding of structure and an understanding of process, there is very little literature examining how one influences the other. Consequently, we know very little about how changing friendship network structure (e.g., introducing friends to each other to increase density, forming more diverse friendships to decrease homogeneity) might affect the dynamics of dyadic relationships (e.g., self-disclosure, satisfaction, liking) or, conversely, how changing the ways friends interact might affect the structure of their networks. Recent collaborations between researchers interested in structure and those interested in process (e.g., Adams and Blieszner 1994; Healy and Bell 1990; Neff and Harter 2003; Wright and Scanlon 1991) suggest that eventually a literature more useful in designing clinical interventions could emerge.

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