Structural predictors of problematic friendship in later life

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Abstract:
The purpose of this study was to examine the constraining and facilitating effects of social structural position (age, sex, race, class, financial sufficiency, and number of friends) on opportunities for friendship. We hypothesized that the greater the number of people who share a given social structural location and the more access they have to situations where it is possible to meet new people, the less likely they are to have problematic friendships. The sample comprised 53 male and female community residents aged 55 to 84 years who enjoyed fairly good health. Logistic and multiple regression procedures revealed outcomes opposite to our predictions: those who were supposedly more social structurally advantaged actually reported greater numbers of problematic friendships. Potential interpretations include the possibility that these people are more critical than others of their friend relationships or more willing to acknowledge problems, that the norms regarding commitment to friends are weaker among these individuals, or that they learn to acquire friends but not to avoid and solve problems in their relationships. Apparently, people with more friends are not more likely than others to terminate problematic friendships or to redefine them as mere associations.

Article:
The existing literature on late-life friendship leaves the impression that older adults rarely have problems with their friends. Generally, researchers study friendship as a voluntary relationship and thus implicitly assume that when friendships develop problems, people end them. As some scholars (Allan, 1989; Rawlins, 1994) have observed, however, friendship choice and maintenance are constrained by factors external to the individuals participating in them. Sometimes these structural factors guide participants to continue friendships even though they are problematic. In other cases, dispositional factors, resulting from socialization or attributable to inherited personality traits, lead old adults to persevere with problematic friendships.

Elsewhere, we (Blieszner & Adams, 1998) described the problems old adults had with four types of friendships—one they perceived to be too close, one they found to be difficult, a relationship that was fading, and one that they had ended intentionally. Not all problematic friendships are alike. The problems that respondents described included internal structural issues (e.g., low solidarity, differential status or power, and lack of homogeneity), factors external to the relationship (e.g., health problems, interference by partners, and time conflicts), lives that no longer intersected, and factors related to various relationship processes (i.e., cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of interaction). Although a few respondents identified three or all four

types of problematic friendships within their network, most acknowledged only one or two problematic types. The analyses reported here are based on the same data set. Compared to the article described above, however, this report includes quantitative analyses of predictors of problematic friendships rather than qualitative descriptions of the problems encountered.

In the scant literature on problematic nonromantic relationships and the even smaller literature specifically on problematic friendships (cf. Fehr, 1996), researchers have usually explained the existence of negative aspects of relationships with individual-level personality variables (e.g., For- gas, 1994), dyadic-level process variables (e.g., Guldner & Swensen, 1995), and structural characteristics of the network (e.g., Rook, 1984). In contrast to explaining the existence of friendship problems in terms of personality, dyadic interaction, or network composition, our purpose was to examine the social structural predictors (e.g., gender, race, class, and age) of the types and number of problematic relationships reported by old adults.

Most researchers who have included social structural variables in their models predicting problematic relationships have used them as control variables rather than studying their effects (e.g., Pagel, Erdly, & Becker, 1987; Ruehlman & Wolchik, 1988; Stephens, Kinney, Norris, & Ritchie, 1987), although a few exceptions exist (e.g., Geissinger, Lazzari, Porter, & Tungate, 1993; Matt & Dean, 1993; Minkler, Roe, & Robertson-Beckley, 1994; Riley & Eckenrode, 1986; Sagrestano, 1992). For example, Riley and Eckenrode (1986) found that women with more education and financial resources derived more positive support and experienced less stress from their social ties than did women who were less advantaged, Matt and Dean (1993) identified distinctive connections between social support and psychological distress according to participants' gender and whether they belonged to the young-old or old-old group, and Sagrestano (1992) determined that power had a stronger effect than gender in predicting choices of influence strategies in social situations.

By structural predictors, we mean indicators of the location of individuals within society that might constrain or facilitate their opportunities to make and maintain friendships (see Blau, 1994, for a general theoretical discussion of structural opportunities and constraints). Two characteristics of social structural location are important to consider in regard to friendship. First, it is very well documented that people tend to choose friends who occupy similar social structural locations to those they occupy themselves. Friendships thus tend to be homogeneous in terms of gender, race, class, and age (see Blieszner & Adams, 1992, for a summary of this literature). One aspect of a social structural location that thus determines whether its occupants are advantaged or disadvantaged regarding friendship opportunities is how many people occupy the location. The more people who share a gender, race, class, or age, the more opportunities for friendship exist for them. Following this logic, among old people, women, Caucasians, and young-old adults are more advantaged than their male, African-American, and old-old counterparts simply because of differential mortality rates and resulting subpopulation sizes.

Second, for people to establish relationships with those who share their social structural locations, opportunities must exist for them to meet each other. Opportunities for access are affected by a variety of nonstructural factors including personality, health, mobility, and culture. Of structural interest though is access to situations in which it is possible to meet new people. Among old people, those who are women, who are young-old, and who have more financial

assets are more likely to have access to new friends. Women are more likely than men to participate in senior organizations and church and to have an established pattern of participation in voluntary and community organizations. Young-old adults are more likely than their elders to be employed and to enjoy continued involvement in clubs and volunteer organizations. Financially advantaged people quite simply have more money than others to spend on entertainment and social life.

In the general friendship literature, researchers have reported that people with less advantaged social structural locations in terms of class, gender, and age are less successful at friendship (e.g., Babchuk & Anderson, 1989; Brown, 1991; Fischer & Oliker, 1983; Johnson & Troll, 1994; Laumann, 1973). (Another important structural characteristic, race, apparently has not been examined in terms of friendship success). These researchers, however, typically have measured lack of success in terms of a small number of friendships rather than in terms of the qualities of the relationships such as the absence of emotional closeness or, more relevant here, the inability of people to avoid and solve problems that arise in them. It remains to be seen whether these same variables predict lack of success in friendship when it is defined in terms of the presence of problematic relationships rather than in terms of the absence of many friendships. We would expect them to do so, because friendship is a voluntary relationship. For this reason, it follows that people with many friends and the opportunity to make many more would terminate problematic friendships or redefine them as mere associations rather than retain them. Exploring this possibility is the purpose of this article.

Method
Sample and procedure
The data analyzed herein were collected in 1990 in Greensboro, North Carolina, a city with 183,521 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). Random-digit dialing was used to select a sample of old adults in each of six age-sex categories. Staff members were successful in securing appointments with 27% of eligible persons. Trained interviewers included the two authors, another woman, and a man. They conducted face-to-face interviews, including both open-ended and closed-ended questions, in locations convenient to the respondents. Interviews lasted an average of 2.7 hours (range = 1.5 to 7 hours). No interviewer effects on self-disclosure were noted, though some interviewers were better at probing for detailed responses on certain questions than others. The number of respondents who completed all of the questions analyzed here was 53.

Structural characteristics of the sample
The participants occupied a wide variety of niches in the social structure. They included 28 women and 25 men, aged 55 to 84 years (M = 67; SD = 8). The sample was 77% Caucasian, 21% African American, and 2% other racial ethnic membership. Although 9% of sample members were divorced and 25% were widowed, the majority were married (66%) and lived with their spouses (64%).

The old adult population of Greensboro is relatively affluent. In 1990, 34.5% of the households headed by an aged person had an income of less than $15,000, 32.9% had an income of $15,000 to $39,999, and 36.6% had an income of $40,000 or more (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). The sample was thus also fairly affluent. Whereas about a third (32%) of the sample had a high

school degree or less schooling, a quarter had completed some college, about a fifth (21%) had a college degree, and almost a quarter (23%) had completed post-baccalaureate education. Most participants (66%) were not currently employed, but about half (51%) of the respondents claimed that their financial resources met their needs very well, and only 2% said their financial resources were inadequate. About two-fifths (43%) of the respondents considered themselves to be members of the middle-class, and almost as many (38%) described their class as upper-middle. The rest (19%) placed themselves in the working or lower- middle class.

Measures of friendship problems

Rather than imposing a definition of "friend" on the participants, the interview began with respondents indicating their personal definition of friend. Using their own definitions, the respondents then listed an average of 30 friends (range 3 to 132; SD = 27). In constructing this list, we encouraged them to think about the places and times during their lives they had established friendships and allowed them to add people to the list as the interview proceeded. Great care was taken to ensure they were satisfied that their list of current friends was complete. After constructing their list, they provided certain information about each of their friends, additional data on their closest friends, and even more details about specific types of friends.

Among the specific varieties of friendship investigated were the four problematic types upon which the present analyses are based. Of the 53 respondents, 11% mentioned a friendship they deemed too close (i.e., wished was less close), about half (51%) had one that they perceived to be difficult, over two-thirds (68%) reported a friendship that was fading away, and a quarter had intentionally ended a friendship. In most cases, respondents who reported having a particular type of problematic friendship described the nature of the problem with a specific friend (see Blieszner & Adams, 1998; for a discussion of the problems they identified). In the case of fading friendships, however, only 64% of the 36 respondents who reported having them deemed the lapsing friendship to be a problematic one. In some cases, the friendship was probably fading for reasons external to the relationship itself and outside the control of the individual participants and hence was not perceived to be problematic. For example, many friendships were fading because one of the participants had relocated or had become ill. For the purposes of the following logistic regression analyses, the dependent variables will thus be the existence of a friendship the respondent thought was too close, one that was difficult, one that had been ended, and one that was fading and for which the respondent indicated a problem.

In addition to the logistic regression analyses with the existence of each type of problematic relationship as a dependent variable, a regression analysis with the number of problematic types of friendships named as a dependent variable follows. Again, fading friendships were only counted as problematic if the respondent identified them as such. Of the 53 respondents, about a fifth (21%) claimed to have none of the four types of problematic friendships, about two-fifths (43%) named one type, a quarter named two types, 8% named three types, and 4% reported friendships of all four types.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of four logistic regressions, with a different problematic friendship type as dependent in each analysis. In each regression, the total number of friends named by the respondent was entered in the first step. The Wald statistic is used to test the significance of the

coefficient. Following from our hypothesis that the people with more friendships are less likely to maintain problematic ones, we expected the coefficients to be negative. As can be seen in the first row of Table 1, the opposite proved to be true, except in regard to friendships that the respondents had intentionally ended. This dependent variable was different from the others, because the terminated relationship was not part of the list of active friendships the interviewer solicited after having the respondent define friendship. It thus makes sense that it was independent of the number of friends on this list.

In the second step of each logistic regression, variables measuring the structural location of the respondents were entered, using forward stepwise selection procedures with the likelihood-ratio statistic as the selection criterion. The structural predictors included being female, being white, belonging to the lower-middle or working class, belonging to the upper-middle class, and stating that the amount of money they had met their needs very well. All of these were two-category variables. In addition, the age of the respondent was included. (See the above discussion of the structural characteristics of the sample for the distributions

Table 1. *Structural predictors of having four types of problematic friendships (N=53)*

| | Types of Problematic Friendships | | | | | |
| | Too Close | | Difficult | | Fading | |
Structural Predictors	Coefficient	(SE)	Coefficient	(SE)	Coefficient	(SE)
Control Variable						
Total number of friends[a]	.04*	(.02)	.09†	(.05)	.03†	(.02)
Independent Variables[b]						
Female	2.04†	(1.27)	7.54**	(2.90)	—[c]	
White	10.46*	(40.27)	—		—	
Younger age	—		−.34***	(.12)	—	
Lower-middle or working class	—		—		−10.29***	(28.42)
Upper-middle class	—		2.65*	(1.27)	—	
Money meets needs very well	—		6.66***	(2.74)	—	
Intercept[a]	−16.92	(40.40)	−1.42	(6.28)	−.75	(.58)
Model chi-square	9.18*		45.56**		14.16***	
Percent cases classified correctly	92.45		92.45		66.04	

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[a]Probability based on Wald statistic.
[b]Probability based on change in the log likelihood.
[c]Variable not entered into equation.
†*p* < .10. *p* < .05. **p* < .01. ***p* < .001.

of the predictor variables.) Note that in preliminary analyses, level of education was included as a predictor variable. Because level of education did not contribute significantly to predicting any of the dependent variables, it was not included in the analyses presented here.

Predictor variables were entered into the equation if they improved the model significantly (p < .10). Rather than using the Wald statistic to test the significance of coefficients as is often done, and as we did in the first step, we used the significance of the difference in the log likelihood with and without the independent variable in the model. According to Norusis (1990), this is appropriate when using a forward selection method with a small sample or when the absolute value of the coefficient is large.

The hypothesis that respondents at a social structural disadvantage were more likely to have a friendship that needed cooling off was tested in the first column of Table 1. When controlling for the total number of friends, females and whites tended to be more likely to have friendships they considered to be too close. This is the opposite of our prediction given that females are at a social structural advantage during old age, and whites are at any age.

In the second column of Table 1, one can see that, after controlling for total number of friends, being female, younger, belonging to the upper-middle class, and having suffi cient funds to meet needs predicted having a friendship that was difficult. As in the first analysis, these findings contrast with the hypothesized effect.

The findings reported in column three of Table 1 show that over and above the effect of total number of friendships, belonging to the lower-middle or working class made it less likely that respondents would report a problematic fading friendship. Once again, this finding is contrary to our expectations.

As mentioned above, total number of friends did not predict whether respondents reported having intentionally ended a friendship. Column four of Table 1 shows that none of the other variables predicted whether respondents named an ex-friendship either.

Table 2 shows the results of a multiple regression analysis with number of types of problematic friendships as the dependent variable. All variables listed in the left column of Table 1 were entered and coded the same way they were for the logistic regressions.

In addition to total number of friends, all of the structural variables with the exception of race significantly predicted the number of problematic friendship types the respondents listed. In order of decreasing magnitude of effects, respondents had more types of problematic friendships if they were female, were younger, and had enough money to meet their needs. They

Table 2. *Structural predictors of the number of types of problematic friendships (N=53)*

Independent Variables	Betas	Regression Coefficients	SE
Total number of friends**	.33	.01	.00
Female**	.30	.62	.20
Younger age*	−.22	−.03	.01
White	.06	.14	.27
Lower-middle or working class[†]	−.20	−.51	.27
Upper-middle class[†]	.19	.42	.24
How well money meets needs*	.22	.47	.21
Intercept	−.91	1.08	
$F = 9.85$***			
Multiple $R = .75$			

[†]$p < .10.$ *$p < .05.$ **$p < .01.$ ***$p < .001.$

also had more types of problematic friendships if they placed themselves in the upper-middle class and fewer types if they described themselves as lower-middle class (i.e., number of types of

problematic friendships increased monotonically with subjective social class). As in the logistic regression analyses, these findings were all in the opposite direction to what we predicted.

Discussion

Based on a review of the literature on friendship success, we predicted that respondents would have fewer friendship problems when they occupied more advantaged social structural positions than when they did not. In general, our findings were opposite of what we expected. Females, the young-old, the upper-middle class, and those who had sufficient funds to meet their needs reported more types of problematic friendships than did others.

Examining the findings regarding the predictors of specific types of relationship problems reveals a similar pattern. Females were more likely to report a friendship that needed cooling off or one that was difficult. Whites were also more likely to claim to have a friendship that was too close. The young-old were more likely to report a friendship that was difficult, as were those who had enough resources to meet their needs. Upper-middle class elderly participants were more likely to report difficult friendships, and those from the lower-middle or working classes were less likely to report problematic fading relationships.

Although the theory used to guide the analyses in this article is not precise enough to explain differences in the relationships of specific structural indicators to the existence of specific types of problematic friendships and the data set is not large enough to control for explanatory variables in any case, the overall pattern is clear. Given these findings then, one must consider why people who were supposedly more social structurally advantaged were more likely to report problematic friendships. One possibility is that people with more resources for making and maintaining relationships might be more likely to be more critical than others of some of their friendships because they have many choices for their closer, less problematic friends. Perhaps they have the experience and skills needed to be able to acknowledge problems, or perhaps they are not as dependent on their friends for their self-esteem or instrumental help. It is also feasible that cultural expectations regarding friendship are more rigid for the advantaged than for the less advantaged, and they thus use more stringent evaluative criteria.

Another possibility, of course, is that the norms regarding commitment to friends are weaker among the advantaged and they are more likely to risk losing friends. Furthermore, it is conceivable that the advantaged learn to acquire friends, but not to avoid and solve problems in their relationships, despite desires to do so. Finally, the results point to the intersection of social structural location and disposition. For example, our qualitative data (Blieszner & Adams, 1998) showed that the women were more likely than the men to attribute friendship problems to friends' character traits, which though readily observable by anyone, apparently are noticed more by women than by men. Perhaps this gender-based tendency interacts with social structural location, thus leading to the unexpected pattern of reporting problematic friendship types.

Other studies have revealed that a low percentage of people report intentionally ended friendships (e.g., Matthews, 1986). It is unclear what this means. On the one hand, it is possible that people either redefine ex-friends as never having been friends in the first place or else simply forget they were ever friends. It is also possible that people are more likely to let friendships fade away than to end them intentionally. On the other hand, perhaps people do not

end friendships very often; once they develop, they endure. Our failure to predict which respondents were more likely to name intentionally ended friendships suggests two additional possibilities. Perhaps the norms against ending friendships are so strong in American society that most people were reluctant to discuss such a relationship. It is possible that the respondents who named friends from whom they had intentionally separated were trying to please the interviewer, and other respondents were not equally motivated to do so. Finally, because we did not develop a method for helping respondents remember the name of an ex-friend as we did in constructing the list of current friends, it is possible our failure to predict who had ended relationships, and the low percentage of people reporting them, was partially the result of measurement error.

Contrary to our expectations, we found that the more friends people had, the more problems they reported. With the exception of purposely ended friendships, we also found that people with more friends were more likely to report having each type of problem friendship. Apparently, people with more friends are not more likely to terminate problematic friendships or to redefine them as mere associations. In retrospect, these findings make sense, simply because people with more friends have a greater probability of having any specific type of friendship. It is possible though that more than probability was operating. Perhaps people with a large number of friends are also more willing to be critical of them than those with fewer friends. As with other social advantages, those with large numbers of friends might have less to lose than those with fewer friends, making acknowledgment of friendship troubles less risky for them.

An examination of the structural predictors suggests different solutions to friendship problems than studying the effects of individual-level personality variables, dyadic-level process, and structural characteristics of the network as previous researchers have done (see Adams & Blieszner, 1993, for a discussion of friendship interventions). Rather than suggesting individual therapeutic or group interventions aimed at both those with few friends and those with problematic relationships, these findings suggest that types of prob lems are distinct and thus require separate programs. Furthermore, these findings suggest that people who have few friends, and are at a structural disadvantage for acquiring more, might fail to identify problems in their relationships as a way of coping with their lack of opportunity to form replacement relationships.

In contrast, those at a structural advantage might have difficulty being selective. This suggests two types of programs might be useful: one type designed to help structurally disadvantaged people articulate problems in their relationships and create opportunities for finding new friends, and another type designed to help structurally advantaged people make decisions regarding the acquisition, repair, and termination of friendships.

These findings also call into question some of the assumptions underlying research using social structural variables as predictors of success. Friendship researchers have typically approached studies of friendship success with a bias that having many friends is the most important friendship goal and an indication of achievement. Friendship researchers are not the only ones to commit this folly. One only needs to consider the assumptions underlying research on occupational mobility, marital happiness, or educational achievement to realize the pervasiveness of value-laden conceptualizations of social structural advantage. Social structural advantage should be conceptualized in terms of access to rewards valued in the specific cultural context

under study rather than as access to rewards valued by the dominant culture or by the culture to which most researchers belong.

Two conclusions are very clear. First, problematic friendships are not necessarily ended and thus warrant the attention of researchers. Second, those who study friendship cannot merely sum number of relationships as an indicator of success. Having more relationships does not necessarily mean one receives more support or other rewards. It can mean one has more relationship problems.

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