

## A Look at Friendship and Aging

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A need exists for a better understanding of friendship and its role in the lives of old people. This article gives a selected overview of some of the research findings on aging and friendship, suggests some directions for future research, and discusses implications of the findings for practice.

### VOLUNTARY NATURE

The voluntary nature of friendship distinguishes it conceptually from other types of social relationships. An individual's friends, for example, are not determined by blood ties, as relatives are, or by residence, as neighbors are. Of course, though they are not as formalized in the United States as in some other societies, structural and normative constraints do guide individuals to choose friends of the same sex, age, race, religion, geographic area, and status levels (Laumann, 1973; Adams, 1985). It is the element of choice, however, that makes friendship different from most other types of social relationships.

Aging is often characterized by the loss of choice. Age-related changes, such as decreased health and financial resources, often leave older people dependent upon agencies and family members not of their own choosing. This factor makes friendship, which is theoretically voluntary, a potentially important activity for older people, who may lack freedom in other areas of their lives.

### DEFINITIONS & TYPES

Since friendships are voluntary, and there are no strict normative and structural guidelines for choosing friends, people's definitions of friendship, and the criteria they use in deciding whether someone is a friend, vary considerably. Researchers have often used, for theoretical or practical reasons, a priori definitions of friendship or have otherwise limited the possible range of responses. For example, some researchers have studied only local friendships (Rosow, 1967) or friendships in which contact was recent (Rosenberg, 1970; Cohen and Rajkowski, 1982). Other researchers have studied only the respondent's best or closest friends (Williams, 1959; Laumann, 1973). Although this research has provided an important foundation for understanding friendship, it has not addressed the variety of definitions and types of friendship that exist in the United States.

Recently, three efforts, using strikingly different empirical methods, have attempted to reach some understanding of how people define friendship. Matthews (1983) described two definitions of friendship that emerged from her inductive analysis of transcripts of guided conversations with 60 men and women aged 60 or more. They related their biographies using friendship as a constant referent. The first definition to emerge concerned the special qualifications, such as a shared past, that particular individuals had to have in order to be friends. A second definition emphasized the importance of the presence of people in daily life — not the qualifications of the particular individuals involved. This distinction seems similar to the one made by Kurth (1970) between friendship and friendly relations.

In contrast, Fischer (1982) studied the differences between associates who were labeled as friends and those who were not. Of the associates listed by a cross-section of adults living in northern California, 59 percent were labeled as friends. This label was applied broadly to almost all associates who were not kin, co-workers, or neighbors. The respondents were most likely to apply the label to people of the same age, to people known for a long time, and to people with whom they had primarily sociable, rather than intimate or material, involvements.

Neither Matthews (1983) nor Fischer (1982) distinguished between *characteristics* and *definitions* of friendship because of their methodologies, which depended on discussions or descriptions of specific relationships to arrive at the characteristics of friendship. My study made this distinction when examining the friendships of 70 elderly women who lived in a middle-class suburb of Chicago. Rather than beginning with specific relationships, this study started with the respondents defining friendship for themselves. The women tended to define friendship in social- psychological terms, referring to affect or predisposition to help one another. Most of the women were not strict about choosing friends who met their definitional standards. However, women who defined friendships in social-psychological terms *and* who had friendships conforming to their expectations tended to have higher friendship satisfaction than others. All three of these studies suggest that people tend to apply the label "friend" indiscriminately. The third study also suggests, however, that people do know the difference between a real friend and someone to whom the label is applied for the lack of a more suitable one.

Since people seem to define friendship in social-psychological terms and to apply the label subjectively, the researcher is faced with a dilemma. If one studies friendship without using an a priori structural definition, one is likely to be left comparing apples and oranges. If one were to use a structural definition, one would be superimposing limitations where they did not exist. One would not be studying friendship, but rather a subtype of it, as many researchers have in fact done.

As an alternative, one can use the time-consuming methodology employed in my study of 70 elderly women, described above. By allowing respondents to list as many friends as they wish and by not imposing criteria on the selection process, it is possible to study variations within the category by imposing distinctions a posteriori. The study (Adams, 1986) found, for example, that the emotional closeness and physical distance separating the 70 elderly women from their friends was related to whether the women received instrumental and emotional support. Emotionally close, local friends were most likely to offer both types of support.

## CONSTRAINTS

Since friendship requires two people, its voluntary nature represents an element of risk to the individual. Either party might terminate the friendship, or there might be a discrepancy between the expectations of one friend and the behavior of the other. For example, if one friend expects regular visits, an older person with failing health might find this "obligation" difficult to fulfill. The friend might terminate the relationship or turn his or her attention elsewhere. In this sense, friendship is not an ensured relationship; norms regarding friendship are not clear enough or strong enough to ensure the continuation, form, or content of a specific relationship.

The literature suggests that aging people are at risk of losing friends. When their health declines, their income decreases as a result of retirement, or they are widowed, older people are likely to experi-



once a change in their social lives (Brown, 1981). As Brown observed, declining capacities may force older people "into a stage of *retrenchment*, in which one's network shrinks to a few 'good, old friends.'"

Not all older people, however, suffer the same fate. Hess (1979), for example, argued that women are better off socially in old age than are men because women are more likely to have stable, intimate, and supportive friendships. Consistent with this observation are the findings of Fischer and Oliner (1980) that young men had more friends than did young women but that empty-nest and elderly men had fewer friends than did women at those stages.

My study found three independent dimensions of change between 1981 and 1984 in the networks of the Chicago suburban women discussed above: an expansion of the entire network, a contraction of the local network, and the overall emotional weakening of the network. Status group membership affected the dimensions of network change that they experienced.

A topic that has received virtually no attention is the effect of cohort membership on friendship patterns of currently elderly people. Elsewhere (Adams, 1985) I have discussed the normative restrictions on the cross-sex friendships of older women. Although such restrictions exist in younger cohorts, they do not seem nearly as strong as in the older cohort. There are probably other cohort differences in friendship expectations that will affect the ways in which aging and friendship patterns will be related in older cohorts of the future.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The positive relationship between friendship activity and psychological well-being has been clearly established. In fact, the connection is stronger than that between family activity and psychological well-being (Wood and Robertson, 1978; Larson, 1978). The literature offers three explanations for this finding: people have more in common with age peers, which friends tend to be; friendship is more rewarding because it is not an obligatory relationship (Chappell, 1983); and friendships involve the older person in the larger society more than family relationships do (Adams, forthcoming).

Researchers have not given much attention to interpreting the causal direction of the relationship between psychological well-being and friendship activity, but they have assumed that it is unidirectional, with a change in friendship activity causing a change in psychological wellbeing. There is some evidence, however, that the

relationship is reciprocal. A longitudinal study conducted by the author suggests that feeling bad may lead people to seek out new friends, and being separated from old friends may lead to a decrease in good feelings.

### INFORMAL SERVICE SUPPORT

A growing body of evidence indicates that friends provide important service support for older people (Shanas, 1962; Rosow, 1967; Hochschild, 1973; Cantor, 1979; Litwak, 1985). Most researchers have reported that relatives are more important members of the networks supporting older people than friends are. Nevertheless, there are certain circumstances under which friends become more important sources of support. Cantor and Johnson (1978), for example, discussed the importance of friends for the elderly without family. Litwak (1985) discussed the role of friendship in helping in situations where it is important that the helper and the person being helped share similar life-styles, for example in discussions of how to manage daily life. My work suggests that friends help most often when it is convenient to give help and when the need for help is unpredictable. In other words, there seems to be a norm governing help from friends. One does not call on them unless it will cause them only a minor inconvenience or unless one has no easy alternative. Providing transportation for an older friend is an example of such a service that meets both criteria.

The importance of friends as helpers may be underestimated in the literature. Most of the researchers in this area ask hypothetical questions about whom their respondents *would* or *should* turn to for help, or they limit respondents to naming one caretaker (Shanas, 1962; Rosow, 1967; Cantor, 1979). Older people would rather have family members help them than friends, perhaps because family are normatively obligated to do so. Two studies in which I asked people to describe the help they had actually received revealed higher rates of assistance by friends than are usually reported.

### CONCLUSIONS

Friendship, as a distinct category of social relationships, had been until recently a relatively neglected topic of study. Although there is a growing body of literature on friendship, more attention needs to be paid to its conceptualization and the methodological problems in studying it. In order to reach a better understanding of the role of friendship in the lives of old people, there is a need for more research on changes in friendships and friendship networks over time, cohort effects on friendship behavior, the causal nature of the relationship between psychological well-being and friendship activity, and the help *actually* provided by friends.

Some social services programs do take into account the natural support systems of older people, and some also attempt to manipulate these systems. On the other hand, some people have cautioned against inherent dangers and questionable ethics involved in such interventions. For example, programs to supplement already existing network support only where "necessary" might systematically deprive certain segments of the population of outside support (Snow and Gordon, 1980). Such programs might also inadvertently weaken the natural support networks that exist (Litwak and Kulis, 1981). Recently, there has been concern about the effects of the burden of caregiving on those who help older people, with discussion revolving around the disproportionate share of support provided by women, the need for caregiver support services, and the need for policy changes directed at relieving this burden (Sommers, 1985).

Although our knowledge of the role of friendship in the lives of old people is far from complete, the existing information suggests that in interventions that involve friends, service providers must be particularly cautious. First, the evidence presented here suggests that though older people often depend on friends, there are norms against such dependence. A program dependent on support being provided by friends might make old people uncomfortable or alter the feelings of their friends for them. Service providers would have to make sure that elderly clients and their friends were in favor of a more formal arrangement than they had had previously. Second, since people define friendship in a wide variety of ways, one must avoid assuming that people whom older persons call friends are necessarily concerned with the older person's welfare. Third, one must be sensitive to the potential for change in the support provided by friends. Finally, increasing older people's opportunities for friendship activity may not have any effect on their psychological well-being.

Despite these words of caution, one should not underestimate how important friends are to older people, particularly to the elderly without family. Friends are an important source of companionship and possibly a more important source of service support than most of the current literature suggests.

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