

Friendship Group Hierarchy

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Abstract

Friendship is a link between two persons that is a common outgrowth of human interaction and existence. This investigation seeks to examine the extent to which friendships depend upon individuals having similar qualities and practices. Specifically, this investigation examines the extent to which individual qualities (e.g., attractiveness, intelligence) are perceived by individuals to be similar to those of their friends. Do close friends necessarily share similar interests and qualities as opposed to individuals who are not? A study of friendship intensity and the extent to which characteristics overlap amongst friends of different intensities was conducted using ninety college students as participants. Each participant was asked to complete a Personal Quality Scale and a Friendship Group Quality Scale. The Personal Quality Scale examines attitudes towards attractiveness, popularity, intelligence, athleticism, religion, stress levels, academics, dramatic personalities, creativity, and spontaneity. The Friendship Group Quality Scale asked participants to divide friends into three distinct groups (primary, secondary and tertiary) based on self disclosure, support, interaction, and affection. When participants were asked to rate their own qualities along with the perceived qualities of three groups of friends, results showed a significant gradient between primary, secondary, and tertiary groups suggesting a hierarchy. Participants described the attitudes and qualities of friends in the primary group as closer to their own, followed by secondary friends, and lastly friends in the tertiary group. Implications of the findings for friendship formation are discussed.

One of the most pondered questions regarding relationships is “Do birds of a feather flock together?” That is, is the foundation of a strong social relationship built upon similarities between individuals? Research on both friendships and romantic relationships suggests that commonality between two persons may increase the likelihood of friendship or attraction (e.g., Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). It seems

likely that homophily, the tendency of individuals to associate with others like them, may play a role in forming and preserving, but its exact role, particularly with adults, is still unclear.

At least two potential explanations of the role similarity plays in friendships come from Steglich and Snijders (2006). Network autocorrelation is defined as “the empirical finding that social ties occur more frequently among demographically or behaviorally

similar actors than among dissimilar actors” (Steglich & Snijders, 2006). One attempt to explain the importance similarity plays in friendships is the “homophily principle” which argues that “it is easier or more rewarding for an actor to interact with a similar other than with a dissimilar other” (Steglich & Snijders, 2006). The homophily principle implies that friendship occurs more frequently due to similar actor attributes. A second explanation is the “assimilation principle” which states that “network actors adapt their own individual characteristics to match those of their social neighborhood” (Steglich & Snijders, 2006). In this case, network autocorrelation can occur over time due to processes of social influence. From the research, it is not entirely clear which principle may be more responsible in terms of friendship formation, or whether both principles may apply and may actually work together.

For example Newcomb (1961) found that most transfer students became friends with those who they thought were most like them. Originally, the friendships developed from perceived similarities. As the friendships continued, however, actual similarities began to appear and friendships were altered to account for them. Thus while similarity seems important in friendship development, it is not clear whether it is an elicitor of friendship, a consequence of friendship, or a combination of both.

A preliminary step towards teasing apart the role of similarity in friendship might be to examine the extent to which individuals themselves perceive similarity differences in those friendships they describe as being of great and lesser importance. Specifically, if asked to differentiate between close and less close relationships, to what extent do individuals identify more or less perceived similarity as being important to friendships?

In this investigation, it was predicted that participants would perceive the greatest similarity with those they were the closest to, while those friends who were perceived as less close would also be perceived to have fewer similarities with the participant.

Specifically, after dividing friends into primary, secondary, and tertiary groups, it was predicted that perceptions of similarity between friends and the target individual would be greatest for primary friends, less so for secondary friends, and still less for tertiary friends.

Method

Participants

A sample of convenience consisting of 93 college students from a small southern liberal arts college in the United States was recruited. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 25. Only 90 participants’ data were used in the final data due to incomplete surveys or improper completion, such as marking only choices on the right hand side. Of the 90 participants, 44 were female and 46 were male. Participants were surveyed within a class setting to simplify data collection. Participants were gathered from history, psychology, and other core curriculum classes. After coordinating with respective class faculty members, students in the classes were asked at the beginning of the class period if they would be willing to participate in an anonymous friendship survey. All students asked to participate were willing to complete the survey.

Materials

The friendship survey consisted of three different parts.

1. Personal Quality Scale

In addition to basic demographic questions such as age, gender, year in school, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and alcohol/drug consumption levels, the Personal Quality Scale asked participants about the extent to which they demonstrated a number of different qualities (see Appendix A). Adapted from the values used by the Personal Value Scales (Scott, 1965), participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt that ten qualities were representative of themselves on a 5-point Likert scale 1 (not true at all) – 5 (completely true). For this investigation,

the qualities examined were: attractiveness, intelligence, popularity, handles stress well, academic, athletic, dramatic personalities, religious, imaginative, and spontaneous.

2. Friendship Group Information

Participants were asked to think about their current friends and, if possible, to divide them into three groups based on how close they felt they were to various individuals. The Friendship Group Information sheet, (see Appendix B), outlined what friendship was and which friends should be included in each group. Friendships were described as bonds, some of which “we consider to be stronger than others.”

Primary friendships were described as containing high ratings of “self-disclosure, affection, respect, emotional support, trust, and loyalty.” Secondary friendships contained a moderate to high ratings for the aspects, while Tertiary friendships contained the lowest ratings.

3. Friendship Group Quality Scale

Similar to the Personal Quality Scale above, participants were then asked to think about and rate the members of their three friendship groups with regard to whether their qualities were perceived as being highly true or barely true in regard to the same domains as the Personal Quality Scale, (see Appendix C).

Procedure

Participants were given a friendship survey that consisted of a Personal Quality Scale, Friendship Group Information, and a Friendship Group Quality Scale. The Personal Quality Scale was the first to be completed. Upon completion, the participants read the Friendship Group Information. Finally, participants completed the Friendship Group Quality Scale.

Results

Responses to the Friendship Survey yielded four groups of numbers. The first

set of numbers involved rating scores of the extent to which individuals thought that they themselves were attractive, intelligent, popular, handled stress well, academic, athletic, dramatic, religious, imaginative, and spontaneous. The second set of numbers reflected the extent to which participants believed their primary friends reflected these same qualities. The third and fourth sets of numbers reflected the extent to which secondary and tertiary groups reflected these same qualities.

In order to examine potential relationships between participants’ ratings of themselves and ratings of the qualities of their three different friendship groups, Pearson Correlations between these variables were calculated (see Tables 1, 2 and 3). In these correlations, a participant’s rating of the extent to which a particular value (such as attractiveness) was true for him or her was compared with his or her ratings of the extent to which primary, secondary, and tertiary friends were thought to be attractive. Results showed that each personal quality was significantly correlated for the primary group with p-values less than .05. For the secondary groups, only popularity, academic level, athleticism, dramatic behavior, religiousness, and imaginativeness were significantly correlated. For the tertiary groups, none of the personal qualities were significantly correlated with tertiary group ratings.

Discussion

The study’s hypothesis supposed that ratings from Personal Quality Scales would show a gradient of matching qualities with the ratings for Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary groups of friends. The hypothesis was supported because all aspects (attractiveness, intelligence, popularity, stress reaction, academic, athleticism, dramatic, religiousness, imaginativeness, spontaneity) of Primary groups revealed p-values of less than .05. For Secondary groups, only popularity, athleticism, dramatic, religiousness, and imaginativeness were significantly related ratings on Personal Quality Scales. For Tertiary groups,

none of the aspects were significantly related. These results show a gradient effect in significance.

This investigation provides support for the idea that individuals are aware of the extent to which their personal qualities and values overlap with those of close and less close friends. Participants in this study believed that their close friends showed qualities and attributes that were closer to their own than less close friends. The question remains, however, of whether similarity is vital to the initiation of friendship or whether it begins to emerge over the course of the relationship.

Future research could begin to tease apart the possible antecedent/consequent nature of such similarity in friendships. An early step may be assessing the extent to which such similarity may only be perceived by the individual or whether such a perception is shared by a third party. It would be particularly interesting to examine similarities longitudinally

to see if more similar individuals are more or less likely to form friendships. College campuses may provide the ideal setting to explore friendship relationships longitudinally. For example, it may be possible to survey incoming first-year students with regard to their personal qualities and values before they reach campus. Follow-up surveys of friendship formation would then allow researchers to see if more or less similar individuals from a particular campus-housing unit (i.e., floor, suite) were more or less likely to form close friendships. End-of-year surveys might then reveal the extent to which personal qualities and values were similar to those at time of entry and whether or not developing friendships may have played a role in either changing or maintaining the qualities and values of individuals. Such techniques and settings may prove useful in uncovering the possible role of similarity in friendships.

References

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Tables

Table 1
Intercorrelations Between Scale Ratings for Individuals and Primary Friends

Scale	r
Attractiveness	.36**
Intelligence	.29*
Popularity	.56**
Stress	.43**
Academic	.32**
Athletic	.51**
Dramatic	.60**
Religious	.45**
Imaginative	.41**
Spontaneous	.35**

*Notes: N = 88, *p < .05, **p < .01*

Table 2
Intercorrelations Between Scale Ratings for Individuals and Secondary Friends

Scale	r
Attractiveness	.15
Intelligence	.17
Popularity	.27*
Stress	.14
Academic	.20
Athletic	.33**
Dramatic	.35**
Religious	.24*
Imaginative	.26*
Spontaneous	.12

*Notes: N = 88, *p < .05, **p < .01*

Tables (continued)

Table 3
Intercorrelations Between Scale Ratings for Individuals and Tertiary Friends

Scale	r
Attractiveness	.00
Intelligence	-.10
Popularity	-.11
Stress	.13
Academic	.02
Athletic	-.07
Dramatic	-.07
Religious	-.01
Imaginative	-.07
Spontaneous	-.04

*Notes: N = 88, *p < .05, **p < .01*

Appendix A

Personal Quality Scale

1. How old are you? _____
2. What year are you? Fr, So, Ju, Sen
3. What is your gender? M F
4. What is your religious affiliation? _____
5. What is your ethnicity? _____

6. How often do you consume alcohol per week?
Never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, 5 or more times

7. How often do you use controlled substances per week?
Never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, 5 or more times

Rate each of the following questions as they relate to you in general. Where a rating of 1 means you feel it is not true of you at all, and a rating of 5 means you feel it is completely true of you.

1 – Not true at all 2 – Barely true 3 – Slightly true
4 – Mostly true 5 – Completely true

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|---------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8. I am attractive. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I am intelligent. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I am popular. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I handle stress well. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. I am academic. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. I am athletic. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I am dramatic | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. I am independent. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I am a leader. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. I am religious. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. I am imaginative. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. I am spontaneous. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. I am self-controlled. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix B

Friendship Group Information

Friendship is a necessary bond that is formed between two people. This bond can include self-disclosure, affection, respect, emotional support, trust, and loyalty. It also may involve common interests/activities, similarities, and provide assistance. And finally it can be a source of amusement, fun, and recreation.

As humans, we will form many bonds over our lifetime which we consider to be stronger than others. These bonds can be divided into three separate groups called Primary Friendships, Secondary Friendships, and Tertiary Friendships.

1. Primary Friendships will contain high ratings on almost all of these aspects. This group contains those you would consider to be your best friends.
2. Secondary Friendships will contain moderate to high ratings on these aspects. This group contains those you would consider to be your good friends.
3. Tertiary Friendships would contain the lowest ratings on these aspects. This group contains those you would consider to be acquaintances.

Appendix C

Friendship Group Quality Scale

For each of the following questions, consider the people in your 3 friendship groups (Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary) and rate each group on a scale from 1 to 5. Where a rating of 1 means that this is not true of the people in that group, and a rating of 5 means that this is true everyone in that group.

- 1 – None are like this 2 – A few are like this
 3 – Some are like this, some are not
 4 – Most are like this 5 – All are like this

	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
1. My ___ group is attractive.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
2. My ___ group is intelligent.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
3. My ___ group is popular.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
4. I'm dependent on those in my ___ group.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
5. My ___ group is religious.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
6. My ___ group handles stress well.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
7. My ___ group is academic.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
8. My ___ group is athletic.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
9. I often argue with those in my ___ group.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
10. My ___ group is creative.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
11. My ___ group is dramatic.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
12. My ___ group is spontaneous/outgoing	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
13. I prefer one-on-one with my ___ group.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5
14. I would date those in my ___ group.	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3 4 5