



Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Friendships in Middle Adulthood

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Chapter Title: "Friendships in Middle Adulthood"

Pub. Date: 2009

Access Date: December 11, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412958462

Online ISBN: 9781412958479

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958479.n233>

Print pages: 731-735

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In midlife, generally defined as the period between young adulthood and old age, friendships provide affection, companionship, understanding, and social support and therefore contribute to well-being. Friends can also affect the status, power, wealth, attitudes, behaviors, and values of middle-aged people. In addition to these consequences for individuals, midlife friendship patterns can affect society, such as by reinforcing the class structure and upholding the institution of marriage. Friendship is thus an important type of human relationship during this stage of life. This entry synthesizes what is known about the interactive processes exchanged between friends during midlife, the internal structure of midlife friendships, and how these friendships vary across contexts and individual demographic characteristics.

In Western societies, friends are not determined by blood ties, as relatives are, or by residence, as neighbors are. This absence of a structural definition of friendship results in a lack of clear consensus about which relationships are considered friendships and about the normative expectations relevant to this type of relationship. Although scholars have generally conceptualized friendship as a voluntary relationship between equals, research shows that individuals use the term to refer to relationships that do not meet these criteria, sometimes applying it to mere acquaintances and sometimes reserving it for intimates. Despite this variation in the use of the term, however, most people define *friendship* social psychologically and, more specifically, affectively, as a close relationship with nonkin.

With age, opportunities for and constraints on friendships change and people approach friendship with different attitudes, skills, and dispositions. Although people experience the middle years in different ways, midlife is the stage of the life course with the potential for the most responsibilities. Not all middle-aged people are committed to partners, have children, are employed, or care for older adults in their families, but these circumstances are expected of middle-aged people in Western society and can affect friendship. For example, involvement in a committed romantic partnership sometimes means dropping some friendships, adding new ones, and spending more social time with couples. Children absorb a great deal of time, which can interfere with friendship, but they also provide new sources of friends for their parents—the parents of their friends. Caring for an aging parent can limit the amount of time available to spend with friends, but can also widen a social circle, for example by adding acquaintances from the parent's neighborhood or from a caregiver's support group. Similarly, work both uses time that could be spent socializing and provides new opportunities for friendships with coworkers.

Friendships of midlife adults are also likely to differ from those of younger or older persons because of the developmental maturity often characteristic of this stage of life, such as an ability to handle a highly complex environment, the emergence of a highly differentiated self, and an achieved balance between productivity and stagnation. Midlife friendship patterns are thus different than those of younger and older people. Furthermore, concurrent sociological and developmental forces affect midlife friendships, as do prior experiences. Given that the longer people have lived, the more time they have had to follow different paths, friendship patterns are more varied across individuals during midlife than they are during earlier periods of life.

Unfortunately, given the importance of friendships during middle age, few studies define *midlife* theoretically. Most of what is known about midlife friendship is derived from

general samples of adults, which sometimes include participants as young as 18 years and as old as or older than 65 years. Even those studies that focus on midlife adults often impose arbitrary age boundaries on the category rather than using theoretically derived definitions of stage of life course or level of developmental maturity to determine which adults should be included as participants. In a sense, midlife is the residual age category and sometimes represents the norm against which people of other ages are implicitly compared. The literature on children, college student, and older adult friendship is thus larger than the literature on midlife friendship.

Although scholars from many disciplines have contributed to the study of friendship, collaborations among scholars from these different disciplines are rare. For this reason, the literature on friendship in general and on midlife friendship specifically is somewhat fragmented. Psychologists and communication scholars tend to study dyadic processes using experimental methods on convenience samples of volunteers. Sociologists (and some anthropologists) study network structure, usually conducting small-scale surveys of specialized populations. Finally, some historians, anthropologists, and sociologists study midlife friendship qualitatively in context, describing case studies in detail without comparing friendships across contexts.

Interactive Processes in Friendship Dyads

Interactive processes are the action components of friendships or what is exchanged between friends, including what they do with their friends and how they think and feel about them. Perhaps because researchers have assumed all friends feel close to each other, they have concentrated on studying friendship behaviors and cognitions rather than focusing on the feelings involved in friendship.

Recent studies of midlife friendship behavior focus mainly on communication patterns, social support, and conflict. Friends communicate better than acquaintances do because they share more mutual knowledge, display greater levels of self-disclosure, are more relaxed with each other, exchange more information, and communicate more positively in ways that build morale. In midlife, women are more likely to emphasize the importance of self-disclosure in their friendships than men are, and women tend to discuss different topics with their friends than men do. Women friends tend to discuss intimate relationships, reveal their fears and doubts, and talk in depth about personal problems. In contrast, men friends are inclined to talk about sports, business, and politics.

Research on social support by friends in midlife is concentrated on studies of women. A particularly important feature of women's closest friendships at this stage of life is the emotional support they provide. This research also shows that women rely more heavily on friends than on family members in the aftermath of difficult events (e.g., an abortion or a diagnosis with a chronic illness). One possible explanation for this finding is that midlife women's friends tend to be other midlife women who, by virtue of their age and sex, are more likely than partners and other family members to have experienced the same problems or to have thought through how they would handle them.

Scholars have also examined relational conflict during midlife, including disagreements over beliefs and values and those regarding habits and lifestyles. Men's friendships involve more conflict than do women's, possibly because women who are currently middle-aged or older have been taught to suppress or avoid conflict. Conflict is also less common in same-sex friendships than in opposite-sex friendships, and middle-

aged and older people work harder at resolving conflicts with their friends than younger people do.

Researchers have also studied cognitive processes in midlife friendships. Research shows that, like in younger and older people's friendships, similarity of values, interests, and background is important in middle-aged people's friendships. These similarities contribute to the ease of communication and the likelihood of shared experiences. Midlife friends also evaluate each other on the basis of politeness and friendliness.

The way people describe their friends and the meaning they attribute to friendship do not vary much across ages, but the discrepancy between how people describe real friends and how they describe ideal friends differs across age groups. Differences in descriptions of real and ideal friends are smallest among middle-aged people. This might reflect middle-aged people's greater selectivity compared with younger people regarding their choice in friends and the fewer physical and social constraints on their friendships compared with older adults.

Internal Structure of Friendship Networks

Scholars have studied the *internal network structure* of friendship (i.e., the form of ties linking an individual's friends) less exhaustively than they have studied their internal processes, perhaps because the network literature tends to focus on social networks in general, without distinguishing family, neighbors, coworkers, and friends from each other and from other types of associates or because interviewing people about their networks is expensive and time-consuming.

One of the most basic structural characteristics of friendship networks is their *size*. Although some researchers have reported that the frequency of interaction with friends decreases with age or even that friendship networks are larger in midlife than in old age, the number of friends does not vary much during the life course. A national study of U.S. residents conducted by Gallup in 2004 reported that the number of *close* friends does vary by age, at least somewhat, with middle-aged people (30–49 years, 7.0 friends; 50–64 years, 8.7) reporting fewer close friends than younger (8.9 close friends) and older adults (12.5). The variation in the average number of friendships and close friendships reported by midlife subgroups is substantial enough that reporting an overall average is somewhat misleading, however.

Even studies of friendships in a particular subgroup often have yielded different results. For example, findings on gender differences in the number of friends during midlife are mixed. Some studies show that adult men have more friends than adult women have, and other studies show the opposite depending on other characteristics of the samples. For example, some data indicate that among white-collar adults, men have more friends than women do and that among blue-collar adults, women have more friends than men do. Although the average number of friends in midlife and how this number varies across subgroups is not clear, research has shown that the size of friendship network and global measures of number of friends are associated positively with access to resources, social support, and various indicators of well-being.

Studies of midlife friendship *network density* (i.e., the percentage of all possible links among friends in a network that do in fact exist) are rare. Perhaps the two most well-known studies of adult network density are Edward Laumann's analysis of Detroit Area

Study data and Claude Fischer's report on the Northern California Study. Laumann, who only examined density among his respondents' three closest friends, found that 27 percent of them had networks that were completely interlocking (100 percent dense), 42 percent had partially interlocking networks, and the rest had radial networks (0 percent dense). Fischer reported that the average density of the network of associates was 44 percent and that the more kin and the fewer nonkin in the network, the denser it was. This suggests that friendship network density, if he had reported it, would have been lower.

The density of networks is related to the processes that take place within them. For example, dense networks make it possible for information to be transmitted quickly and therefore are easy to mobilize during crises. In contrast, confidences are less likely to be kept in high density networks and so self-disclosure is risky in them.

One of the most robust findings regarding friendship network structure is that they tend to be *homogeneous* (i.e., friends tend to occupy similar social structural positions). Studies have shown that midlife friendships are homogeneous in occupational status, ethnicity, age, marital status, income, education, gender, and religion. In general, higher status middle-aged people tend to have more homogeneous networks than do lower status people. Although sociologists generally posit a structural explanation for these findings (i.e., people, especially higher status ones, have more opportunities to meet others who are similar to themselves than do dissimilar others), preferences resulting from socialization may also contribute to the homogeneity of networks. Although findings vary across types of homogeneity, in midlife, homogeneous friendships tend to be closer than heterogeneous ones.

In most studies that include measures of friendship structure, the structural characteristics of friendship networks are used to predict outcome variables such as psychological well-being, occupational success, or educational achievement. The paucity of studies examining midlife friendship network structure is unfortunate because these are important outcomes. As the examples already provided demonstrate, some studies suggest that the internal structure of friendship networks and dyads affects the processes that are exchanged among participants. There are also fewer studies about how interactive processes sustain and modify friendship structure. For example, frequent contact with friends increases the chance that those friends know each other, so frequent positive contact increases the density of friendship networks over time.

Variations in Friendship across Contexts

Friendships do not, of course, occur in a vacuum; they are embedded in societies, communities, and immediate social environments (e.g., neighborhoods, buildings, and organizations). Although few societal-level studies comparing midlife friendships in different historical periods or in different countries have been conducted, since the founding of the field of sociology scholars have theorized about how the broader social context affects the friendships that take place within it. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, German scholars such as Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies argued that the importance of friendship had declined with industrialization and urbanization because of increasingly diverse social environments, residential mobility, and the development of impersonal bureaucracies, social forces that all are particularly salient in midlife. In a series of articles in the 1960s, Eugene Litwak rejected the notion that close relationships and bureaucratic organizations are incompatible and argued

instead that they perform different, but complementary tasks. More recently, scholars have argued that in the process of industrialization and modernization, the more communal social life of the past has been replaced with a concern for the private world of home and family. Whereas in the past, social lives, including those of the middle aged, centered on relationships with coworkers and neighbors, now improvements in transportation and communications technologies have reduced the importance of local ties. Some scholars have argued that this has led to increased isolation, but others have argued that people are now free to develop a wider variety of friendships. Only a few studies have been conducted comparing midlife friendships in across societies or periods of history in the same society, and few quantitative studies have compared midlife friendships in various communities or immediate social environments. Ethnographic studies (i.e., studies of specific settings that usually are qualitative and include observation), however, raise questions about whether findings can be generalized across contexts and suggest some connection between the characteristics of contexts and how friendship is enacted. For example, ethnographies of poor or marginal populations are more likely to discuss the closeness of relationships in a setting and to describe the social support friends provide to each other. In contrast, ethnographies of the middle class tend to describe friendships in terms of sociability rather in terms of closeness and as focused on specific activities rather than being central to everyday survival. If the friendships in these same settings were systematically compared, quantitative researchers would be able to document how friendship processes and structure varied across these two types of settings more precisely. Comparing these ethnographies also suggests certain characteristics of friendships are the same across contexts. For example, no matter what the setting, ethnographers tend to describe most friendships as homogeneous, probably because most immediate social environments and communities are themselves fairly homogeneous.

Individual Differences

Depending on the study, individual differences are conceptualized and examined differently. Although researchers who study dyadic processes and those who study network structure both tend to discuss individual variation in midlife friendship patterns across demographic characteristics, they use the same measures to indicate different concepts. For example, psychologists often use “sex” as a proxy measure of disposition (e.g., personality, motives, personal preferences, biologically based tendencies), and sociologists use it as a proxy measure of social structural location (i.e., external opportunities and constraints). Researchers who study midlife friendship processes tend to place more emphasis on the relationships among characteristics of friendship (e.g., such as closeness, self-disclosure, satisfaction, perceptions of equity) and less emphasis on studying individual variation within samples. In contrast, those who study midlife friendship structure tend to include many independent variables in their equations and focus on a limited number of friendship characteristics, each measured with a single item. Ethnographers do not often describe individual variation in midlife friendship patterns and when they do, interpretations of findings about how individual characteristics affect outcomes are often difficult to distinguish from contextual effects because contexts tend to be homogeneous.

However they conceptualize and interpret demographic variables, researchers study some effects more than others. Gender is by far the favorite demographic variable among midlife friendship researchers who use quantitative methods, whether they study

interactive processes or internal structure. Researchers do not, however, typically include race, ethnicity, or social class as independent or control variables in their analyses, so ethnographic case studies are the main source of information on the effects of these variables on midlife friendship patterns. Quantitative studies of friendship processes in minority populations are relatively uncommon as are those of noncollege-educated populations.

Not much is known about the effects of age on adult friendship. The information included on midlife friendship in this entry is derived from studies that are not focused on children, adolescents, young adults, or old adults. Often studies that incorporate theoretical definitions of midlife do not include people from other age groups and so explicit comparisons are not possible. When studies do include other age groups, they are typically cross-sectional and do not permit separation of age, period, and cohort effects. Much remains to be discovered about midlife friendship patterns, how they differ from friendship patterns during other stages of life, and how they vary across contexts and demographic groups.

- midlife
- friendship
- middle aged people
- aged
- friends
- density
- networks and networking

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958479.n233>

See also

- [Friendship, Conflict and Dissolution](#)
- [Friendship Formation and Development](#)
- [Friendships, Cross-Sex](#)
- [Friendships, Sex Differences and Similarities](#)
- [Friendships in Adolescence](#)
- [Friendships in Late Adulthood](#)
- [Friendships in Young Adulthood](#)
- [Social Networks, Dyad Effects on](#)
- [Social Networks, Effects on Developed Relationships](#)
- [Social Networks, Role in Relationship Initiation](#)

Further Readings

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