RESEARCH FILE FOR
SP200 Interpersonal Communication

TOPIC #5: Social Relationships
6 Stage Model of Friendship

Topic 5: Social Relationships - Bill Rawlins 6 Stage Model of Friendship discusses how we build and lose friendships in our lives. There are several distinctive reasons we seek out friendship and it changes based on genders and cultural (1) How did the researcher come up with this model (2) Describe and explain the 6 stages (3) Consider whether this model applies to ALL friendships (4) What are some variations to consider with gender and cultural aspects.
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   Stages of Friendship Interaction
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   Gender factors in Friendships
   Bill Rawlins

WORKS CITED

BELLINO A year ago, a friend of mine from back home called me up to ask for a loan. I said, “Sure,” and asked what was up. He told me his hours had been cut back and he couldn’t buy groceries for his family. I knew the problem was more than paying for groceries. I figured he also couldn’t pay for lights and rent and everything else. So I talked with several of his friends in our church, and we took up a collection to help him. Then, I took it over and left it at his house without any note and without saying anything. He didn’t have to ask for help, and I didn’t have to say anything.

Culture also influences orientations toward friendship. In a study of Japanese and American friendships, Dean Barnlund (1989) found that both groups preferred friends who were similar to them in age and ethnic heritage. Yet Japanese respondents said togetherness, trust, and warmth were the most important qualities in friendship, whereas Americans listed understanding, respect, and sincerity as the top qualities. The differences in rankings reflect distinctions between Japanese and American culture. Interpersonal harmony and collective orientation are central values in Japan, whereas American culture emphasizes individuality, candor, and respect.

A more recent study by Mary Jane Collier (1996) identified different priorities for friendship in four ethnic groups. European Americans give priority to sincerity and freedom to express ideas. Consistent with traditional Asian cultural values, many Asian Americans especially value courtesy, restraint, and respect for families. Among African Americans, problem solving and respect for ethnic heritage were primary criteria in selecting friends. Collier also found that Latinos and Latinas see relationship support and emotional expressiveness as priorities.

In sum, friendship grows out of investments, emotional closeness, acceptance, trust, and support. Our membership in different cultures and social communities may lead to variations in how we experience and express these aspects of friendship. However, it seems that these five common expectations (willingness to invest, emotional closeness, acceptance, trust, and support) transcend many of the differences between us.

The Development of Friendship

Although intense bonds sometimes are formed quickly, the majority of friendships evolve through a series of stages (Mongeau & Henningsen, 2008). Bill Rawlins (1981, 2009), an interpersonal communication researcher who focuses on communication between friends, developed a six-stage model of how friendships develop (see Figure 10.1). Although not every friendship follows the sequence in Rawlins’s model, many do.
Role-Limited Interaction

We might meet a person at work, through membership on an athletic team, in a club, or by chance in an airport, store, or class. We also might encounter new people in chat rooms or newsgroups or as friends of friends on our social networking sites (Parks & Floyd, 1996a). The initial meeting is the first stage of interaction and possibly of friendship. During this stage, we tend to rely on standard social rules and roles. We tend to be polite and to limit personal disclosures.

Because new acquaintances don't have enough personal knowledge of each other to engage in dual perspective, they tend to rely on general scripts and stereotypes. Also, early interactions are often awkward and laced with uncertainty because people haven't worked out patterns for relating to each other.

Friendly Relations

The second stage of friendship is friendly relations, in which each person checks out the other to see whether common ground and interests exist (Weinstock & Bond, 2000). After class, Jean makes a comment about the teacher to Paula. If Paula responds with her impressions of the teacher, she conveys the relationship-level message that she's interested in interacting. A businessperson may joke or engage in small talk to see whether an associate wants to move beyond the acquaintance level of relating. One person in an Internet newsgroup invites another member of the group to engage in individual exchange of ideas.

Moving toward Friendship

In this third stage, we start moving beyond social roles. We might make a small self-disclosure to signal that we'd like to personalize the relationship or meet outside of contexts that naturally occur. Emily might ask her associate Sam whether he wants to get a cup of coffee after work. Ben might ask his classmate Drew to get together to study. Sometimes, we involve others to lessen the potential awkwardness of being with someone we don't yet know well. For instance, Amy might invite Stuart to a party where others will be present.

Many friendships never move beyond this phase (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). They stabilize as pleasant but casual friendships. The friends enjoy interacting but generally don't invest a lot of effort to arrange times together. Disclosures tend to be limited, as are investments and expectations of support.

Nascent Friendship

If people continue to interact and to like what they discover in each other, they begin to think of themselves as friends or as becoming friends. This is the stage of nascent, or embryonic, friendship. As we interact more personally with others, we progress to sharing feelings, values, concerns, interests, and so forth.

At this point, friends begin to work out their private rules for interacting. When my friend Nancy and I were in this stage, after brunch each weekend, we asked if the other wanted to get together the next weekend. Some friends settle into patterns of getting together for specific things (watching games, shopping, racquetball, going to movies) and never expand those boundaries. Other friends share a wider range of times and activities. Although during the nascent stage friends are working out rules for their relationship,
often they aren’t aware of the rules until later. The milestones of this stage are that people begin to think of themselves as friends and to work out their own patterns for interaction. Interracial friendships often require more effort than intraracial friendships, yet the basic foundations of the friendships don’t differ. Acceptance and responsiveness and revealing information about yourself and accepting information about the other are keys in same and different-race friendships (Shelton, Trail, West, & Bergsieker, 2010).

Stabilized Friendship

The touchstone of this stage is the assumption of continuity. Whereas in earlier stages people don’t count on getting together unless they make a specific plan, stabilized friends assume they’ll continue to see each other even if they don’t have specific dates reserved. We take future interaction for granted because we consider the relationship ongoing. Once Nancy and I reached this stage in our friendship, we didn’t need to check with each other about getting together the next weekend—we just assumed that we would. A close friendship is unlikely to stabilize until there is a mutually high level of trust. Once friends have earned each other’s trust, they communicate more openly and fully. Stabilized friendships may continue indefinitely, in some cases lasting a lifetime.

As friendships become stabilized, they are often integrated into the larger contexts of each friend’s social networks (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Thus, when we interact in our social circles, we are often nurturing multiple established friendships at the same time. Online communication is an increasingly popular way to maintain established friendships (Carl, 2006). Nearly two-thirds of the people that Malcolm Parks and Kory Floyd (1996a) surveyed reported that they had a good friendship with someone they first had met on the Internet. Parks and Floyd also found that friendships maintained largely through e-mail and Internet communication were as personal and committed as those maintained through face-to-face contact.

Yet not everyone believes that online friendships are as rich and close as face-to-face friendships. William Deresiewicz (2009) questions whether social networking friendships are “real.” He asks, “If we have 768 ‘friends,’ in what sense do we have any?” And he then suggests that “once we decided to become friends with everyone, we would forget how to be friends with anyone” (p. B6). Contrasting online friendships with traditional, face-to-face ones, Deresiewicz notes that the former are less personal and less adapted to individuals. He thinks online friendships are “just broadcasting our stream of consciousness to all 500 of our friends at once” because “we’re too busy to spare our friends more time than it takes to text” (p. B9). Deresiewicz may be exaggerating, but it might be worth your time to reflect on the intimacy you have with online and face-to-face friends. Think about all the friends on your social networking sites. How many of them would stay with you in the hospital if you were injured, hold you if you lost a family member, or let you live with them for 3 months if you needed lodging (Walter, 2009)?

MARLENE Martha and I go way, way back—all the way to childhood, when we lived in the same housing complex. As kids, we made mud pies and ran a lemonade stand together. In high school, we double-dated and planned our lives together. Then we both got married and stayed in touch, even when Martha moved away. We still sent each other pictures of our children, and we called a lot. When my last child entered college, I decided it was time for me to do that, too, so I enrolled in college. Before I did that, though, I had to talk to Martha and get her perspective on whether I was nuts to go to college in my thirties. She thought it was a great idea, and she’s thinking about that for herself now. For nearly 40 years, we’ve shared everything in our lives.

Friendships generally follow rules that specify what is expected and what is not allowed (Argyle & Henderson, 1985). Most of the time, we’re not consciously aware of relationship
rules, even though we may be following them. Typically, relationship rules are unspoken understandings that regulate how people interact. For instance, most friends have a tacit understanding that they can be a little late for get-togethers but won’t keep each other waiting long. A delay of 5 minutes is within the rules, but a 40-minute delay is a violation. Most friends have an unspoken understanding that private information they share is to be kept confidential. The case study at the end of Chapter 9 illustrates what can happen when friends violate the unspoken rule to keep disclosures confidential. Although friends may never explicitly discuss their rules, the rules matter, as we discover when one is violated.

Rules regulate both trivial and important aspects of interaction. Not interrupting may be a rule, but breaking it probably won’t destroy a good friendship. However, stealing money, jewelry, or romantic partners may be the death knell of a friendship. Although friends often develop some very unique rules, many of our friendship rules reflect cultural perspectives, as the “Communication in Everyday Life” box above demonstrates.

Waning Friendship

When one or both friends stop investing in a friendship, it is likely to wane. Sometimes, friends drift apart because one moves or because the two are pulled in different directions by career or family demands. In other cases, friendships deteriorate because they’ve run their natural course and have become boring. Many, perhaps most, friendships fade slowly rather than abruptly (Schappell, 2005). A third reason friendships end is violations of trust or other rules that friends establish for themselves. Saying, “I don’t have time for you now” may violate friends’ tacit agreement always to make room for each other. Criticizing a friend or not sharing confidences may also breach unspoken rules between friends.

CARY Janet and I had been friends since our first year at school. We told each other everything and trusted each other totally. When I told her that Brad had cheated on me, I knew she would not tell anyone else. She knew I felt bad about it, plus Brad and I got back together, so I didn’t want anyone to know about that incident. One day, I was talking with another girl, and she asked me how I’d been able to trust Brad again after he cheated on me. I hadn’t told her about that! I knew she was friends with Janet, so I figured that’s how she knew. To me, that was the ultimate betrayal. I’m still on friendly terms with Janet, but she’s not a close friend, and I don’t tell her anything private.
When friendships deteriorate or suffer serious violations, communication changes in predictable ways. Defensiveness and uncertainty rise, causing people to be more guarded, less spontaneous, and less disclose than they were. Yet the clearest indicator that a friendship is fading may be decreased quantity and quality of communication. As former friends drift apart or are hurt by each other, they are likely to interact less often and to talk about less personal and consequential topics.

Even when serious violations occur between friends, relationships sometimes can be repaired. Sometimes, friends hurt us when they are under serious stress. If we attribute something we don't like to factors beyond their control, we may be willing to forgive them and continue the friendship. We are usually more willing to stay friends with someone who hurt us unintentionally than with someone who deliberately harmed us. To revive a friendship that has waned, however, both friends must be committed to rebuilding trust and intimacy.

## Pressures on Friendships

Like all human relationships, friendships are subject to internal tensions and external pressures.

### Internal Tensions

Friendships are vulnerable to tensions inherent in being close. **Internal tensions** are relationship stresses that grow out of people and their interactions. We consider three of these.

**Relational Dialectics** In Chapter 8, we discussed relational dialectics, which are opposing human needs that create tension and propel change in close relationships. The three dialectics of connection/autonomy, openness/privacy, and novelty/familiarity punctuate our friendships, prompting us to adjust continually to natural yet contradictory needs.

Friendships can be strained when people have different needs. There could be tension if Joe is bored and wants novelty but his friend Andy is overstimulated and needs calming routines. Similarly, if Andy has just broken up with a girlfriend, he may seek greater closeness with Joe at a time when Joe has a strong need to feel independent of others. When needs collide, friends should talk. It's important to be open about what you need, and to be sensitive to what your friend needs. Doing this simultaneously honors yourself, your friend, and the relationship. Friends usually can work out ways to meet each person's needs or at least understand that differing needs don't reflect unequal commitment to the friendship.
LANA My girlfriends and I are so often in different places that it's hard to take care of each other. If one of my friends isn't seeing anyone special, she wants more time with me and wants to do things together. If I'm in a relationship with a guy, her needs feel demanding. But when I've just broken up, I really need my friends to fill time and talk with. So I try to remember how I feel and use that to help me accept it when my friends need my time.

Diverse Communication Styles Friendships may also be strained by misunderstandings that arise from diverse cultural backgrounds. Because our communication reflects the understandings and rules of our culture, misinterpretations are likely between friends from different cultures. For instance, in many traditional Asian societies, people are socialized to be unassuming and modest, whereas American culture encourages assertion and celebration of ourselves. Thus, a native Japanese might perceive an American friend as arrogant for saying, "Let's go out to celebrate my acceptance to law school." A Thai woman might not get the support she wants from a friend from the United States, because she was taught not to assert her needs whereas her American friend was taught that people should speak up for themselves.

Misunderstandings also arise from differences between social groups in the United States. Aaron, who is European American, might feel hurt if Markus, an African American friend, turns down Aaron's invitation to a concert in order to go home and care for an ailing aunt. Aaron might interpret this as a rejection by Markus because he thinks Markus is using the aunt as an excuse to avoid going out with him. Aaron would interpret Markus differently if he realized that many African Americans are more communal than European Americans, so taking care of extended family members is a priority (DeFrancisco & Chatham-Carpenter, 2000; Gaines, 1995; Orbe & Harris, 2001). Ellen may feel that her friend Jed isn't being supportive when, instead of empathizing with her problems, he offers advice or suggests that they go out to take her mind off her troubles. Yet, he is showing support according to masculine rules of communication. Jed, on the other hand, may feel that Ellen is intruding on his autonomy when she pushes him to talk about his feelings. According to feminine rules of communication, however, Ellen is showing interest and concern.

Differences themselves usually aren't the direct cause of problems in friendship. Instead, how we interpret and judge others' communication is the root of tension and hurt. What Jed and Ellen did wasn't the source of their frustrations. Jed interpreted Ellen according to his communication rules, not hers, and she interpreted Jed according to her communication rules, not his. Notice that the misunderstandings result from our interpretations of others' behaviors, not the behaviors themselves. This reminds us of the need to distinguish between facts and inferences.
**Sexual Attraction** Sexual attraction can cause difficulty between friends. Friendships between heterosexual men and women or between gay men or lesbians often include sexual tensions. Even if there is no actual sexual activity, sexual undertones may ripple beneath the surface of friendships. A recent study (Halatsis & Christakis, 2009) found that when sexual interest is expressed in a friendship, the friends need to have an explicit talk to decide if they are going to remain platonic friends, become friends with benefits, or become romantically involved.

Sexual attraction or invitations can be a problem between friends who have agreed not to have a sexual relationship. Tension over sexual attraction or interest can be present in friendships between heterosexual women and men (O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998; West, Anderson, & Duck, 1996) as well as in friendships between lesbians and between gay men (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994). Trust may be damaged if one friend makes a pass at another.

Guidelines for effective communication that we've discussed in other chapters help us deal with tensions in our friendships. For example, it's important to be clear and to rely on I language so that you communicate what you feel and want without deflecting responsibility. Sensitive listening and supportive communication are also helpful in keeping a friendship intact while partners address sexual tensions.

**External Pressures**

In addition to internal tensions, friendships may encounter pressures from outside sources. Three such pressures are competing demands, personal changes, and geographic distance.

**Competing Demands** Friendships exist within larger social systems that affect how they function (Allan, 1994). Our work and our romantic relationships tend to be woven into our everyday lives, ensuring that they get daily attention. The early stages of a career require enormous amounts of energy and time. We may not have enough time or energy left to maintain friendships, even those that matter to us (Duck, Rutt, Hurst, & Strejc, 1991).

We sometimes neglect established friends because of other relationships, especially new ones. When a new romance is taking off, we may be totally immersed in it. We may also neglect friends when other important relationships in our lives are in crisis—for example, if one of our parents is ill or another friend is having trouble. To avoid hurting friends, we should let them know when we have to focus elsewhere, and assure our friends that we are still committed to them.

**Personal Changes** Our friendships change as our lives do. Although a few friendships are lifelong, most are not. If you think about your experiences, you'll probably...
Sexual attraction can cause difficulties between friends. Friendships between heterosexual men or between gay men often include sexual tension from family reasons, and perhaps have different interests. Because common interests and undertones are one of the bases of friendship, the surface of established friends may not always match. A recent study (Halatsis, 2004) found that while interest is expressed individually, the friends need to be explicit to decide if they share a friendship. Tension over sexuality or interest can be present. In the early stages of friendship, they need to be clear and to rely without deflecting responsibility, so helpful in keeping a relationship.

We're most likely to become friends with people we see regularly, so where we live and work influences our choice of friends (Wellman, 1985). Similarly, unemployment can alter friendships because it takes people out of their usual social networks. Socioeconomic class affects friendships because it shapes our interests and tastes in everything from music to lifestyle. In addition, our economic status affects where we live and work, and how much money we have for socializing with friends (O'Connor, 1992).

Geographic Distance Most friendships face the challenge of distance, and many don't survive it. A majority of North Americans have at least one long-distance friendship (Sahlman, 2006). Whether distance ends friendship depends on several factors. Perhaps the most obvious influence is how much people care about continuing to be friends. The greater the commitment, the more likely a friendship is to persist despite separation. Geographic distance is the reason the majority of high school friendships dissolve when students begin college (Rose, 1984).

The likelihood of sustaining a long-distance friendship also depends on other factors, such as socioeconomic class and sex. Friendships that survive distance involve frequent e-mail contact, phone calls, and visits. It takes money to finance trips and
The !Kung are hunter-gatherers who live in a region of southern Africa where droughts, floods, and famine are all too common. The !Kung’s survival depends on a complex system of social relationships that are maintained by storytelling, gift giving, and visiting.

One year torrential rains killed plants and promoted animals to flee for drier land. As the !Kung grew more hungry and disconsolate, they began telling stories about loved ones who lived as far as 200 kilometers away. The stories brought the distant friends to mind and motivated the !Kung to craft gifts and then to make the long journey to their friends. When they arrived, they gave the gifts, which tell the receiver "I’ve held you in my heart" while we were separated (Dreifus, 2009).

The endurance of long-distance friendships. Women tend to be more willing than men to adjust schedules and priorities to make time for friends (Rubin, 1985), and they are more willing to tolerate less-than-ideal circumstances for being with friends. For example, mothers who sustain long-distance friendships are seldom alone with friends because their children need attention and care. Even though these mothers may miss the intimacy of uninterrupted conversations, they value each other enough to sustain friendships under the terms that are possible.

CASS My parents are so different from each other in their approaches to friendship. When I was growing up, Dad was on a career roll, so we were always moving to better neighborhoods or new towns. Each time we moved, he’d make a whole new set of friends. Even if his old friends lived nearby, he would want to be with the people he called his new peers. Mom is 180 degrees different. She still talks with her best friend in the town where I was born. She has stayed close to all of her good friends, and they don’t change with the season like Dad’s do. Once, I asked him if he missed his old friends, and he said that friends were people you share common interests with, so they change as your job does. That doesn’t make sense to me.

Another reason women and men differ in how likely they are to maintain long-distance friendships is that the sexes tend to have different views of the nucleus of closeness. As we’ve seen previously, shared interests and emotional involvement are the crux of closeness for many women. Both of these are achieved primarily through communication, especially personal talk. The focus of men’s friendships tends to be activities, which are difficult to share across distance. Women can sustain ties with important friends by talking on the phone and writing. Men, on the other hand, can’t share activities over the phone or texting. Thus, they may be more likely to replace friends who have moved away with others who can share activities they enjoy.

Lillian Rubin (1985) distinguished between friends of the heart, who remain close regardless of distance and circumstances, and friends of the road, who change as we move along the road of life. For many people, our intimate friends tend to be friends of the heart, and our workplace and neighborhood friends tend to be friends of the road.