Defining Friendship: An Age Old Question

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Abstract

This paper uses a dataset generated from keyword tagging works of literature and contemporary sources to scope the potential of a common definition and understanding of friendship.

About 9000 keyword tags on about 300 keywords are used to extract friendship definitions from authors such as Aristotle, Cicero, C.S. Lewis, Alberoni, Nehamas, Greif, Degges-White, Hall, Shumway, Millington and others. On the compiled dataset MDS and correlational analysis is used to validate intuitive groupings and relatedness of friendship concepts. Six key dimensions of friendship are deduced with 55 subtraits.

As an application a relative importance of friendship traits in old age is deduced.

The paper is still work in progress but now at a stage solicit discussion and comments.
DEFINING FRIENDSHIP: AN AGE OLD QUESTION V0.75

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1. Introduction

Friendship is an age old topic. The first recorded story of mankind, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, essentially is about friendship. The Greeks, most notably Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus, and the Romans (Cicero) discussed its nature and its effect.

In the 20th century sociologists and psychologists started studying the concept of friendship, whether more its nature and effects within the pair or dyad, or what impact it has on networks and how people move within society and networks. Theories on Social Penetration theory and Social Exchange theory have been formulated and tested. Whereas however sociologists and psychologists clamour about the loss of meaning of 'friend' given todays superficiality and Facebook, equally the supposedly more meaningful term 'friendship' classifying the relationship that two 'true' friends have towards each other is by no means even close to uniformly agreed upon. Indeed even linguistically classical philosophers, psychologists and sociologists can be shown to occupy different spheres. Even in 2020 it seems that the criticism of Fischer, [1982] on the inadequacy of the various definitions available does still hold. Fischer, [1982] p.288 defines the task at hand thus: "These observations lead to the conclusion that 'friend' is probably too vague a concept to be used in scientific research. We cannot, however, abandon it. It is too important a 'folk concept', an idea that people use to order their worlds. And, it is too much a part of our own intellectual apparatus. But we should at least have a systematic, empirical understanding of what Americans seem to mean when they call someone a friend." Matthews, [1986] likewise criticises the inadequacy and partiality of focus of various friendship definitions in sociological and psychological literature prior to her exploration of friendship in old age.

This paper tries to measure and contrast the associations and emphasises that writers of old and new place on the concept of friendship. It intends to thus answer then question by simply generating a data set rather than fine arguments along philosophical or logical lines, and likewise staying with simple data rather than indulging in highly sophisticated statistics analysing carefully crafted sociological surveys.

The focus at the moment is getting the overall view and dimensionality of friendship right. This document is designed to spell things out, and to serve as a discussion basis with other scholars and friends to garner feedback, placing trust in peoples intuition and gut feeling about this feature of basic social life. In terms of vocab and language

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DEFINING FRIENDSHIP: AN AGE OLD QUESTION V0.75

it should thus be understandable to a well-read lay person, but not necessitating familiarity with specialist psychological and sociological vocabulary.

The content of this paper is to define a conceptual framework that captures the key elements of friendship attitude and behaviour with a set of variables reasonably completely and concrete enough, that it resonates with lay peoples experience and understanding. It tries to evaluate whether there is a consensus view on friendship and explore to what degree divergence exists across disciplines, target audience, gender and other

2. Literature Review - Source material

When reviewing the preeminent works on friendship, the following works come to mind. Aristotle, 1926 with his Nikomachean ethics and the classification of friends of utility, pleasure and virtue is quoted and discussed usually at length in any text on friendship. Likewise many classically minded people cite his requirements of goodwill that is reciprocally declared and demonstrated. Cicero, 1923 discussing the role of friendship on the back of breaking friendship and allegiances during the Roman Civil war, however deserves no less attention. In our time continuing the classical tradition of discussing the nature of friendship there is the Oxford Inkling Lewis, 1960 normally known for apologetic writings on Christianity and the Chronicles of Narnia, Alberoni, 2016 - an Italian intellectual most prolific in the 70ies - and Princeton philosopher Nehamas, 2016 generally concerned with translating what a philosophically good life could mean in our century. On the psychological / sociological pop science literature (i.e. books that are based on solid research however designed to be read by a wide public) there is Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey, 2011 on female friendship, Greif, 2009 on male friendship, and Delaney and Madigan, 2017 on friendship among modern adolescents. Shumway, 2018 and Millington, 2019 published densely packed friendship improvement advice, even labelling their book identically as the Friendship Formula. Asatryan, 2016 writes with depth and insight about concrete steps towards improving friendship quality. Nelson, 2016 illustrates the importance of the positivity - consistency - vulnerability framework for female friendships and Nelson, 2020 transfers this framework to working relationships and teams at work. On the religious side, aside from going directly to the Bible, Youtube and SermonCentral has made a number of sermons accessible where pastors urge their flock to build good friendships and give advice on how to go about it. Rath, 2006 on the back of a large dataset from the Gallup organisation identifies eight roles how our friends benefit our lives and how this can particularly unfold at the work place.

Using the internet as resource I found three contributions by Jenna Birch, describing important caracteristica of friends according to an MBTI Birch, 2018a, Birch, 2018b, Birch, 2019. Other friendship type explanations from Cerri, 2019 or van DeVender, 2020 do the same, giving advice on friendship desirability and compatibility of various personality types. Likewise Youtube has a host of Ted Talks and other video resources where people young and old share their wisdom on the significance of friendship and how to assess their quality. Finally in the general public media opinion pieces on friendship appear regularly, thus the Guardian or the online-blogging platform Medium have friendship channels. The range is truly diverse and it indicates that the associations with the term ‘good close friend’ or ‘friendship’ might vary and indeed significantly diverge depending on the value set, age, gender, education, background or other personal attributes and preferences of the person asked.

On the sociological research side, Hall, 2012 conducted a key study on the important features of friendships among undergraduates. Roberts-Griffin, 2011 summarized a survey conducted on the AuthenticHappiness Website of Seligman at UPenn. On adult research, the authors Blieszner and Adams have over three decades been at the center of a long research program looking at friendship among adults and older adults, with Blieszner, Ogletree, and Adams, 2019 providing an intermediate review and quovadis. Argyle and Henderson, 1984 provide rules of friendship, Oswald, Clark, and Kelly, 2004 provide a factor analysis. Recently Deri et al., 2018 performed a study on
characteristics of relationships including friends. Apostolou, Keramari, et al., 2020 and Apostolou and Keramari, 2020 generate datasets on motivators and inhibitors for making friends. All this research is done to see if there is structure to the sociological concept of friendship.

3. Method

The method to both identify the dimensions as well as generating a full dataset was to treat the various sources on friendship as if they were unstructured interviews in anthropological research. Thus I coded the text with a growing set of keywords[1] at the time of writing loosely 300. These key words would generally describe items such as ‘my friend does X with or for or to me’ or ‘my friend is or has this desirable attribute’ or ‘my friend exhibits this attitude towards me’. Examples of keyword could be ‘Allow Expression of Self’ or ‘Play Boardgames’ or ‘Virtuous character’ or ‘Wants my success’. Thus a text such as Book VIII and IX of the Nikomachean Ethics 250 keywords triggered, other texts would provide between 50 and 500 triggers.

Where sociological analyses such as Hall, 2012 or Roberts-Griffin, 2011 provided tables based on surveys, usually between 100 and 150 keyword tags were used to approximate the relative results and allocate it to the various keywords. The key here was to break it down into line items of surveys and accurately map the question asked, not the concept it was associated. A cut had to be made to restrict to actual friends behaviour or expectations towards them while they are still friends. Once friends become romantic lovers or enemies this behaviour became out of scope and no keyword tags were assigned to descriptors. Then the 300-keyword-tuple or frequency table per source is transformed into a uniform 50-tuple per work (see next section for variable description) simply stating to what percentage the work is placing emphasis on the various themes. Figure 1 displays the flow. There is no doubt that substantial subjectivity is embedded in this process, however this is the first round aimed at generation of discussion and generation of a first draft of new categories and process. It also can be questioned to what degree a work such as Book VIII and IX of the Nikomachean ethics or as the l’Amicizia of Alberoni can be adequately reduced to essentially a vector of 50 numbers, but it is a necessary step in order to adequately try to compare the weights placed on the individual concepts.

Figure 1. Example Coding Aristotle

One side result of the coding exercise is an appreciation for the diversity of key words and aspects, that also shows the need to catalogue and codify past questions used in sociological surveys. Positivity in past research could be meaning anything from affirmation of person to displaying hope to positive emotions to laughter, and

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[1] I used the software Citavi to attach key words to passages. The internal data structure is accessible through an SQLite interface, that allows for extraction of the keyword tag data into CSV, thereby allowing processing in Excel and R.
depending on different psychological concepts or personality definitions different ‘positivities’ or listening styles might have very different impacts on friendship maintenance. Thus ‘laughter-positivity’ (fun) could be different to ‘affirmation-see strengths positivity’ (affirmation) to ‘see positive’ positivity (hope, optimism) and points to a clear cost of higher aggregation common in sociological research without a common and clear foundation of definition of concepts. This is not for lack of such, because e.g. the character strengths list employed by Peterson and Seligman, [2004] does lend itself suitably as reference framework for all character related aspects. However as the actual datasets from a number of sociological analyses are not available anymore, salvaging and recycling the data in a general meta study will most likely remain a desideratum.

4. The Framework

The 300 key words were condensed to about 50 characteristics, beyond which further merging felt like merging items that were actually substantially different. These characteristics also fell into three categories of personality traits (like friendship related character strength), relationship attitudes (attributes specific to the relationship of the dyad) and activities.


The relationship attitudes can be also dimensions with both ends preferred, this is denoted by ‘vs.’ rather than ‘and’. (1) Respect of Privacy vs. living together, (2) benevolence and care,(3) beneficence and consideration, (4) pride and admiration vs equality, (5) trust and confidentiality, (6) common memory of shared history, (7) mutual belief and background vs different belief and background, (8) loyalty vs independence, (9) mutual interest, (10) mutual understanding, (11) reciprocity and being needed, (12) openness and vulnerability, (13) love and affection and (14) enjoyment of company.

The activities are (1) dirt time, (2) collaboration, (3) deep listening and sharing, (4) encouragement and challenge, (5) exploration and discovery, (6) guidance, (7) practical help, (8) being there for the other, (9) vocal support, (10) effecting change,
DEFINING FRIENDSHIP: AN AGE OLD QUESTION V0.75

(11) generosity and gifts, (12) teaching and learning, (13) circle bonding and (14) hospitality.

Finally there are eight resources the availability of which can enhance or limit the potential for friendship development: (1) time, (2) material wellbeing, (3) financial resources, (4) network, (5) attractiveness, (6) health and fitness, (7) content and (8) proximity. Essentially resources are all about possibility or relative cost of participating in activities with friends, but the separation is significant, as different items apply to different groups of the population.

The classification of recurring themes of friendships was a result of slow iteration and expansion, as I was grouping and allocating key word themes. Loosely the friendship personality strengths are inspired by the VIA Character Strengths of Seligman, 2004 the friendship attitudes by the general sociological literature (Hall, Adams, Blieszner, Degges-White, Matthews, Oswald and De Vries to name but a few) and the activities by the friendship books such as Shumway, Degges-White and Rath. Sociological research frequently (e.g. in Blieszner and Adams, 1992) wrote also about the exchange of resources, however frequently those resources were disguised personality traits (love, knowledge), and thus I separated just genuine resources that are externally given by the situation. The basis for a category also was not so much the eventual name, such as positivity or understanding, but the collection of 3-5 statements seen to be at the core of this aspect with titles or denominations still very much subject to potential discussion.

Note the distribution of weight to the categories over the entire dataset, with resources only amounting to loosely 5%, and thus the entire weight mostly being split evenly between personality and activities on the one side and relationship attributes on the other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality %</th>
<th>Relationship %</th>
<th>Activities %</th>
<th>Resource %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactiveness</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Total Summary

5. Clustering

As currently only 40 sources are coded with 50+ variables classical methods of factor analysis or principal component analysis do not work well to extract information. What does generate results is the mining algorithm of K-Means, with both Euclidean and Manhattan Distance to account for weights of significant outliers. Some degree of Winsorization could also be applied for the same purpose. Applying K-Means with Euclidean Distance to the current dataset places CS Lewis into one cluster and Bible & Christian writings into another, and then distributing the other Authors into remaining three clusters, loosely described as one utilitarian (Rath, Birch and MBTI),
DEFINING FRIENDSHIP: AN AGE OLD QUESTION V0.75

another joined philosophical (Aristotle, Cicero, Alberoni, Cuddeback) and sociological (Millington, Hall) cluster, and another purely sociological portfolio (DeggesWhite, Shumway, Nelson, Adams and Blieszner). However these are not stable, indeed shifted between 6000 and 9000 key words and a future version will most likely generate slightly different groupings with then also adjusted centroids. As further sources get added in, and also subgroups such as texts specifically written to or about young or old, male or female people get added, analysing friendship preferences will become less sensitive to individual texts or observations.

A good method for illustrating the connections is that of graphing using dimension reduction techniques such as multidimensional scaling by Mead, 1992. There are suitable R-packages available including, and the figures are generated with the general cmdscale functionality as well as the igraph package. Figure 4 and 5 show connections between the key properties and the authors respectively. At the 10000 word mark these were reasonably robust to omissions of outliers and a general theme is emerging on both counts. While the Author connections are in line with the k-means clustering, the clustering of the properties is quite illustrative and hints at the existence of a few key dimensions.

Figure 4. Property Connections

(1) Common Time: Dirt Time, Proximity, No Respect for Privacy, Common History and Memory, and interestingly also Reciprocity
(2) Affection and Care: Valuing the relationship, Loyalty, Admiration, Affirmation, Kindness and warmth, Hospitality and Communion, Love and Affection
(3) The classical canon: virtuous character, benevolence, beneficence, meeting each others needs, practical help
(4) Good relationship practice: Positivity, Humility, Reliability, Consistency, Openness, Vulnerability, Trust and Confidentiality, Enjoyment and Leisure, Fun and Humour
(5) Collaboration and Understanding: Work Together, Similar belief, Expression of self and deep listening
(6) **Improvement**: Exploration and Discovery, Encourage and Challenge, Guidance Direction, Intelligence and Curiosity, Resource Content

(7) **(Resources)**: Money, Health, Mobility and Material base came off as a separate factor with minor weight or are classed with collaboration.

(8) **(Privacy)**: Respect of Privacy, Independence within Friendship

It is at this point that it also makes sense to propose a concept of friendship needs. Assuming that we pursue friendships because these satisfy functional needs of ours we can ask ourselves of what nature these needs are. On the back of the excellent summary of human development scales in Alkire, 2002 and her given criteria on how to evaluate them, I tried out a few of them that were focused on psychological needs rather than the general measures of poverty and human development. The framework of Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn, 1992 provided the most natural fit with its categories of subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity and freedom. Natural here I mean the degree to which common sense and intuition provided a natural fit when trying to map the correspondence of friendship key words to the need categories. Intuitively I found the categorization almost like a perfect descriptions of ‘love languages for friendship’ (in exactly the same sense that Chapman, 2009 writes about love languages for romantic couples - the frequencies on which signals of love are both sent and received, if the partner is open for reception). It should be noticed of course that this concept of ‘friendship satisfying a need’ or ‘friendship being a need to be satisfied’ is strongly argued against in Alberoni, 2016. Evidence for the possibility of satisfying this need is provided by evolutionary biology and general psychological research, and its tradition ranges to Aristotle (Humans are social animals) and arguably the earliest part of the Bible (it is not good for man to be alone ...). I would argue that it is a bit of both. Individual ‘low-level’ needs can be satisfied, in the sense that some people can be made to feel good (and some absolutely fantastic) simply by spending some time with their friends over a hike. For other aspects, in particular questions of meaning or identity, the long term effect is important. A further tangent is the fundamental nature of these needs. Yalom, 1980 in his reference work describes four ultimate concerns
as fundamental psychological questions that every person needs to answer for her or himself: Death, Isolation, Freedom and Meaninglessness. In a way partitioning the above terminology into short-term affective (Subsistence, Protection, Affection, Leisure), transcendent (Creation, Identity, Freedom) and in-between (Understanding, Participation), it can be seen that the transcendent and in-between friendship needs directly cater to the needs of isolation-Connectedness (participation, understanding), freedom-responsibility (freedom), and meaning (identity, creation).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Time</th>
<th>Subs x Prot</th>
<th>Affection</th>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Leisure/Idleness</th>
<th>Creation</th>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Freedom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affection / Care</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classics</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Rel</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration Understanding</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resource</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6. Correlations Factors and Needs**

Whilst some factors naturally correspond to some of the needs listed above, there is no 1-1 correspondence, as figure 6 shows, and thus conceptually it seems currently necessary to keep the friendship factors and the needs separate. The correlational graph however shows very clearly also the differences in emphasis that can occur, depending which friendship model and addressable need the author thinks is key. Furthermore a further reduction from the seven factors or the eight needs will come at a cost of goodness of fit. The Graphs in the appendix show furthermore that while for some needs clusters do have common themes (e.g. the self help books commonly emphasising affection, and old age sources emphasising participation) on some dimensions there is wide within cluster spread. Thus among the philosophers or sociologists the importance of Understanding varies widely, or the role of subsistence and protection diverges for philosophers and religious sources. This divergence is likely to also occur when going out to survey people for their friendship preferences and habits when given the full spectrum of possibilities.

6. Friendship Process

Resulting from this set of personality traits, relationship attitudes and activities it is possible to take Aristoteles original goodwill and virtue based definition of friendship and generalise it. 'Friendship is a free relationship of two or more people, (1) who bring into the friendship some personality strengths conducive to forming a relationship and attractive to the respective other, (2) who develop an attitude to, appreciation and understanding of each other through past interactions, and (3) who repeatedly act out their friendship with and towards each other through a variety of activities.' Fischer, 1982, p.289 makes the claim to report observations, i.e. correlations but no causalties. Fehr, 1996 describes friendship development processes at great length, though for the purpose of this definition it is a start to note that both 'Friendship by Spark' style or the 'Takes time to Grow' friendship are proposed as natural in literature. It is thus not easy to decide whether the existence of friendship determines the attitude and activities, or whether activities and a developing attitude builds and develops the friendship.

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21 And no causal claims are made, only claims of correlation. The fact that associates with whom respondents discussed their hobbies were especially likely to be called friends could mean that discussing hobbies determines whether an associate will be called a friend, or it could mean that respondents were especially likely to turn to people they called friends when they wanted to discuss their hobbies. Either causal interpretation would be appropriate.
DEFINING FRIENDSHIP: AN AGE OLD QUESTION V0.75

7. FRIENDSHIP IN OLD AGE

This is now the part where this analysis moves from being theoretically interesting to potentially applicable and useful. Thinking about the idea on how to foster friendships in the third age in order to reduce loneliness, it is necessary to ask the question, what kind of friendships elderly would like to have, and what needs need to be addressed. Utilizing the datasets provided by the coding of Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey, 2011, Ch10, Greif, 2009, Ch11-14, Matthews, 1983 and Adams and Blieszner, 1989 we have a combined dataset of 734 tags of friendship in old age, and can in figure 7 calculate multiples relative to total dataset average displayed in figure 3. Starting with needs it becomes clear that old people are mostly concerned with participation, still being part of society. On the other hand they have lived their lives and do not need so much to refine their character and identity as the young ones. We can deduce that resources (in the classical sense) become much more important in old age than during earlier years. Financial constraints determine the capacity to participate in cultural activities, as does health. This all correlates with mobility (being able to go about to see people) as well as proximity (how far I need to go to see friends). The general goal is to spend a good and enjoyable time with each other, in a circle of agreeable people who can appreciate their history, ideally old friends with whom they can indulge in nostalgia. A curious fact is the insistence on respect of privacy as well as contrary to that the wish that people would less insist on privacy and be withdrawn (NIndRespPriv), but come out, open their houses, eat and live closer to each other. Finally there is a desire to enjoy mutual interests and hobbies together and be thus somewhat productive (WorkTogether).

![Figure 7. Friendship in Old Age](image)

8. FURTHER RESEARCH

As the main thrust of this venture is to identify how friendships can be strengthened in midlife so that in later life loneliness is reduced, this theoretical construct needs to be validated. It is unlikely that truly common themes appear. Friendship is by its nature very individual, and friends as Rath, 2006 noticed play different roles to each other. It would be thus great to validate and quantify what needs which groups of people have both in midlife and elder life, and then to see whether there can be interventions to gently nudge people as a whole to interact in meaningful ways that build the friendships towards each other tailored to these needs.

For me the major takeaway is the loss of information and depth, that attempts to reduce friendship to a two, three, four or six factor model and validate them with various survey and statistical methods incur. Friendship is a nuanced relationship,
probably significantly more nuanced than romantic relationships, and needs to be treated as much. Characteristics or aspects that are crucial to one person could be negligible to the next. Reducing friendship quality to a set of one to three questions on social support, emotional sharing, discussing personal items or joint activities as is common practice in public surveys is likewise falling short of many peoples diverse understanding of what friendship means to them. The need for such procedure in the context of large scale population surveys is of course self-evident, but for genuine research of the causes of loneliness the specific dimension in which people feel lonely (i.e. the friendship 'need') probably is a crucial ingredient of the analysis.

Before putting this to proper and practical use there is the question of how to validate the stability of the individual items further, and measure how each of the factors are influenced by age, gender, culture etc., and in turn impact friendship satisfaction. This will happen as more and more texts on friendship are worked through in the above described manner, as well as preparing a survey study to corroborate on a larger scale the relative significance that the literature above implied.

A lot of past sociological research while trying to identify general social mechanisms on the general concept of self disclosure or support did use very specific questions to measure disposition for it, see Hall, 2012 for such a list. It thus should be possible to recode and thus utilize a lot of past research for integration into the variable set described above. Unfortunately open data policies only have become popular in the last five to three years, and it will be interesting how much data can genuinely be salvaged from past surveys and studies for this meta study. The rewards however can potentially be great, ideally generating insight on how to enhance and strengthen friendships on a character, gender, age or other trait configuration.

Furthermore - while romantic relationships or general family relationships are substantially and structurally different in structure than friendships, a survey could likewise be conducted on how family members score on these scales and importance, and in what aspects significant differences occur to friendships. This would also provide additional evidence to the debate of whether friendships and kinships are complementary, substitutable or to what degree they can and do overlap.

9. Conclusion

This is a reasonable framework to analytically categorize friendships and in particular friendship activities within the larger project ‘Maintaining Friendships in Midlife’. It brings together philosophical, psychological, sociological and popular contemporary material, and thus shows agreements and contrarian points. Whilst it draws on a lot of survey- or data based material, it is not yet validated by a comprehensive survey.

Given the variety of different dimensions, and the peril of missing a significant part of the picture, the paper is useful in showing the difficulty of defining friendship by its properties such as Freedom of Choice, Reciprocity, Affection, Loyalty or others. A general definition is necessary, which however will have to acknowledge that for individual people it will always be broken down to specific properties individually and possibly individual to the specific relationship. It should also encourage future researchers on friendship to take the topic on holistically, and not just quote selectively from authors of young and old to support points they prefer and ignore inconvenient corollaries.

At the point of this writing (March 4, 2021) this document is just a proposition for discussion and testing to be developed over the course of 2020. At the time of this publication about 10000 key words are included, and texts for another ≈ 4000 key words are still to be covered. For actual publication it will be edited for brevity. Please feel free to contact me with suggestions and comments.

\[^3\]For me the stereotype is that of Aristotle postulating friends to live together, Ciceronian brutal honesty when required, Jesus disciples sharing wealth - as pointed out by Fromm, 2013, biblical loyalty, or the simple realisation that while having friends is wonderful, it does cost time, attention and effort on one’s own behalf.


Birch, J., 2019. Good Friends Are Hard to Come by—Here’s What to Look for in One, According to Your MBTI Profile.


Fromm, E., 2013. To have or to be? A&C Black.


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Permanent: Christian Langkamp, Am Bilderstock 10, 41352 Korschenbroich, Germany

Email address: christian.langkamp @ outlook.com

URL: www.practicalfriendship.com for project overview and survey hosting
Datapaper: Defining Friendship: an Age Old Question

Christian Langkamp*

August 27, 2022

Abstract

This paper uses a dataset generated from keyword tagging works of literature and contemporary sources to scope the potential of a common definition and understanding of friendship. About 10000 keyword tags on about 300 keywords are used to extract friendship definitions from authors such as Aristotle, Ciceron, C.S. Lewis, Alberoni, Nehamas, Greif, Degges-White, Hall, Shumway, Millington and others. On the compiled dataset MDS and correlational analysis is used to validate intuitive groupings and relatedness of friendship concepts. Six key dimensions of friendship are deduced with 55 subtraits.

1 Introduction

Friendship is an age old topic. The first recorded story of mankind, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, essentially is about friendship. The Greeks, most notably Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus, and the Romans (Cicero) discussed its nature and its effect. Once the Greek and Roman writers had been rehabilitated as contributive to the Christian faith, medieval writers likewise added their own meditations on the matter. The renaissance and enlightenment also appreciated the benefits of the relationship. Finally in the 20th century sociologists and psychologists started studying the concept of friendship, whether more its nature and effects within the pair or dyad, or what impact it has on networks and how people move within society and networks. Theories on Social Penetration theory and Social Exchange theory have been formulated and tested. Whereas however sociologists and psychologists clamour about the loss of meaning of 'friend' given todays superficiality and Facebook, equally the supposedly more meaningful term 'friendship' classifying the relationship that two 'true' friends have towards each other is by no means even close to uniformly agreed upon. Indeed even linguistically classical philosophers, psychologists and sociologists can be shown to occupy different spheres. Even in 2020 it seems that the criticism of Fischer (1982) on the inadequacy of the various definitions available does still hold. (Fischer, 1982, p.288) defines the task at hand thus: "These observations lead to the conclusion that 'friend' is probably too vague a concept to be used in scientific research. We cannot, however, abandon it. It is too important a 'folk concept', an idea that people use to order their worlds. And, it is too much a part of our own intellectual apparatus. But we should at least have a systematic, empirical understanding of what Americans seem to mean when they call someone a friend." Matthews (1986) likewise criticises the inadequacy and partiality of focus of various friendship definitions in sociological and psychological literature prior to her exploration of friendship in old age.

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This paper tries to measure and contrast the associations and emphases that writers of old and new place on the concept of friendship. It intends to thus answer the question by using frequency data rather than contrasting arguments along philosophical or logical lines. The focus of this analysis is getting the overall understanding and dimensionality of friendship right across disciplines, as well as identify on a simple frequency level where the differences in focus lie.

2 Literature Review - Source material

When reviewing the preeminent works on friendship as well as choosing contemporary literature, there is a wide range available. The key focus was on finding texts that describe ‘what is good in/about friendship’. Aristotle (1926) with his Nikomachean Ethics and the classification of friends of utility, pleasure and virtue is quoted and discussed usually at length in any text on friendship. Likewise many classically minded people cite his requirements of goodwill that is reciprocally declared and demonstrated. Cicero (1923), discussing the role of friendship on the back of breaking friendship and allegiances during the Roman Civil war, however deserves no less attention. Other philosophers of old like Epictetus or Seneca discuss aspects of friendship, but do not offer such extensive treatises. In our time continuing the classical tradition of discussing the nature of friendship there is the Oxford Inkling Lewis (1960), normally known for apologetic writings on Christianity and the Chronicles of Narnia, Alberoni (2016) - an Italian intellectual most prolific in the 70ies - and Princeton philosopher Nehamas (2016) who is endeavouring to translating what a philosophically good life could mean in our century and wrote a treatise on friendship as part of that. On the psychological / sociological pop science literature (i.e. books that are based on solid research however designed to be read by a wide public) there is Degges-White and Borzumato-Gainey (2011) on female friendship, Greif (2009) on male friendship, and Delaney and Madigan (2017) on friendship among modern adolescents. Rath (2006) on the back of a large dataset from the Gallup organisation identifies eight roles how our friends benefit our lives and how this can particularly unfold at the work place. Moving forward to classical self help literature - Shumway (2018) and Millington (2019) published densely packed friendship improvement advice, even labelling their book identically as the Friendship Formula. Asatryan (2016) writes with depth and insight about concrete steps towards improving friendship quality. Nelson (2016) illustrates the importance of the positivity - consistency - vulnerability framework for female friendships and Nelson (2020) transfers this framework to working relationships and teams at work. On the religious side, aside from going directly to the Bible, Youtube and SermonCentral has made a number of sermons accessible where pastors urge their flock to build good friendships and give advice on how to go about it. There are also religious friendship advice books such as Cuddeback (2010). To widen the textual material, an extensive internet search on friendship advice also yielded additional material. I found a few contributions by Jenna Birch, describing important characteristica of friends according to an MBTI Birch (2018b), Birch (2018a), Birch (2019). Other friendship type explanations from Cerri (2019) or van Devender (2020) do the same, giving advice on friendship desirability and compatibility of various personality types. Likewise Youtube has a host of Ted Talks and other video resources where people young and old share their wisdom on the significance of friendship and how to assess their quality. Finally in the general public media opinion pieces on friendship appear regularly, thus the Guardian or the online-blogging platform Medium have friendship channels. The range is truly diverse and it indicates that the associations with the term ‘good close friend’ or ‘friendship’ might vary and indeed significantly diverge depending on the value set, age, gender, education, background or other personal attributes and preferences of the person asked.
On the sociological research side, Hall (2012a) conducted a key study on the important features of friendships among undergraduates. Roberts-Griffin (2011) summarized a survey conducted on the AuthenticHappiness Website of Seligman at UPenn. On adult research, the authors Blieszner and Adams have over three decades been at the center of a long research program looking at friendship among adults and older adults, with Blieszner et al. (2019) providing an intermediate review and quo vadis. Argyle and Henderson (1984) provide rules of friendship, Oswald et al. (2004) provide a factor analysis. Recently Deri et al. (2018) performed a study on characteristics of relationships including friends. Apostolou et al. (2020) and Apostolou and Keramari (2020) generate datasets on motivators and inhibitors for making friends. All this research is done to see if there is structure to the sociological concept of friendship. Together all these texts produce a diverse collection of perspectives of what is good in friendship.

3 Method of coding

The method to both identify the dimensions as well as generating a full dataset was to treat the various sources on friendship as if they were unstructured interviews in anthropological research. Thus I coded the text with a growing set of keywords\(^1\), at the time of writing loosely 300. These key words would generally describe items such as ‘my friend does X with or for or to me’ or ‘my friend is or has this desirable attribute’ or ‘my friend exhibits this attitude towards me’. Examples of keyword could be ‘Allow Expression of Self’ or ‘Play Boardgames’ or ‘Virtuous character’ or ‘Wants my success’. Thus a text such as Book VIII and IX of the Nikomachean Ethics 250 keywords triggered, other texts would provide between 50 and 500 triggers.

Where sociological analyses such as Hall (2012a) or Roberts-Griffin (2011) provided tables based on surveys, usually between 100 and 150 keyword tags were used to approximate the relative results and allocate it to the various keywords. The key here was to break it down into line items of surveys and accurately map the question asked, not the concept it was associated. Thus rather extracting factor results simply the key sentiment of a single question and the mean likert scale response or the relative frequency was extracted and coded. A cut had to be made to restrict to actual friends behaviour or expectations towards them while they are still friends. Once friends become romantic lovers or ‘frenemies’ this behaviour was classified to be out of scope and no keyword tags were assigned to descriptors. This generated a frequency table vector with 300 keyword items.

For condensation, the 300 key words were condensed and mapped to about 55 characteristics, beyond which further merging felt like merging items that were actually substantially different. A weight allocation matrix was constructed that prescribed how the keyword weights would be allocated to characteristics weights. These characteristics are elaborated upon\(^2\) in Langkamp (2021) with about 2-4 pages discussion on each item. The book also proposes a process model that ties them loosely together with the subcategorisations of personality traits, relationship attitudes, activities and resources.

Using the weight allocation matrix the 300-keyword-tuple per source is transformed into a uniform 55-tuple simply stating to what percentage the work is placing emphasis on the various characteristics. Figure 1 displays the flow. There is no doubt that substantial subjectivity is

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\(^1\) I used the software Citavi to attach key words to passages. The internal datastructure is accessible through an SQLite interface, that allows for extraction of the keyword tag data into CSV, thereby allowing processing in Excel and R.

\(^2\) Whilst the 2020/2021 version of this paper was the preliminary foundation of this book, the 2022 version is now just summarizing the keyword frequency dataset and its conclusion separate from this book.
embedded in this process, however this is the first round aimed at generation of discussion and
generation of a first draft of new categories and process. It also can be questioned to what degree
a work such as Book VIII and IX of the Nikomachean Ethics or as the l’Amicizia of Alberoni can
be adequately reduced to essentially a vector of 55 numbers, but such a transformation step is
necessary in order to adequately try to compare the weights placed on the individual concepts and
ultimately compare structurally different works to each other.

as the proverb says, men cannot know each
other till they have 'eaten
salt together';

nor can they admit each other to friendship or be
friends till each has been found lovable and been
trusted by each.

Figure 1: Example Coding Aristotle

4 Analysis

The first item is the summary how frequent certain characteristics are mentioned relative to each
other across the various texts described above in the section on source material. Thus it can be
loosely said that personality, relationship traits and activities loosely contribute to the quality
of friendship in the ratio 1:2:1. In terms of intuition this does seem about right. Furthermore
resources, often theorized about in psychological literature, only amount to about 5 % according
to this methodology.

As currently only 40 sources are coded with 55 variables classical methods of factor analysis or
principal component analysis do not work well to extract information. What does generate results
is the mining algorithm of K-Means, with both Euclidean and Manhattan Distance to account for
weights of significant outliers. Some degree of Winsorization could also be applied for the same
purpose. Applying K-Means with Euclidean Distance to the current dataset places CS Lewis into
one cluster and Bible & Christian writings into another, and then distributing the other Authors
into remaining three clusters, loosely described as one utilitarian (Rath, Birch and MBTI), another
joined philosophical (Aristotle, Cicero, Alberoni, Cuddeback)and sociological (Millington, Hall)
cluster, and another purely sociological portfolio (Degges-White, Shumway, Nelson, Adams and
Blieszner).

A good method for illustrating the connections is that of graphing using dimension reduction
techniques such as multidimensional scaling by Mead (1992). There are suitable R-packages avail-
able for this task, and the figures are generated with the general cmdscale functionality as well as
While graphical representation of the Author connections are in line with the k-means clustering, the clustering of the properties is quite illustrative and hints at the existence of a few key dimensions.

1. **Common Time**: Dirt Time, Proximity, No Respect for Privacy, Common History and Memory, and interestingly also Reciprocity

2. **Affection and Care**: Valuing the relationship, Loyalty, Admiration, Affirmation, Kindness and Warmth, Hospitality and Communion, Love and Affection

3. **The classical canon**: Virtuous Character, Benevolence, Beneficence, Meeting each others Needs, Practical Help

4. **Good relationship practice**: Positivity, Humility, Reliability, Consistency, Openness, Vulnerability, Trust and Confidentiality, Enjoyment and Leisure, Fun and Humour

5. **Collaboration and Understanding**: Work Together, Similar Belief, Expression of Self and Deep Listening

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\(^3\)At the time of generating this dataset I still expected to go up to 15000 and a future version may still be based on a further extended dataset.
6. **Improvement**: Exploration and Discovery, Encourage and Challenge, Guidance Direction, Intelligence and Curiosity, Resource Content

7. **(Resources)**: Money, Health, Mobility and Material base came off as a separate factor with minor weight or are classed with collaboration.

8. **(Privacy)**: Respect of Privacy, Independence within Friendship

These groups of properties do indeed ring home on an intuitive basis, but it should be made clear that these are patterns within literature, thus representations on how authors think properties of friendship are correlated. As such it may also be possible that some other lines of literature completely ignores such a trait, and thus it may also be irrelevant to common people thinking about friendship.
5 Comparison to survey dataset

The paper Langkamp (2022a) used for generating friendship preferences can also provide a benchmark to compare the above texts too. There is a caveat that the survey method used in this paper emphasising separation with limited discrete data maybe less suitable for this compared to e.g. a Likert model generated in Langkamp (2022b). One can see that the core of the clusters from this paper lies however elsewhere from the bulk of the textual sources and also somewhat distant to the earlier sociological studies. This can be due to issues of the transformation process, different variables being surveyed or the composition of the survey group. However it does strongly indicate that a thorough understanding of ‘common understandings of friendship’ is still outstanding. The differences of the FSDat clusters to Hall (2012b), Argyle and Henderson (1984), Roberts-Griffin (2011) and Delaney and Madigan (2017) are in part due to different variables being queried. I.e. Hall (2012b) might not have included a question on collaboration on a cause or effecting change, recording a 0 for this vector element, and hence in that variable there would be a difference to FSDat. Alternatively one could fill up such gaps with the overall dataset average and see distances due to missing questions reduce.
6 Further Research

This datpaper is meant to be nothing more than a further step towards capturing such common understandings of good friendship. If we want to design interventions to reduce loneliness in life, particularly later life, and want to use friendship as a vehicle to achieve this, we need to understand what the right understanding of friendship is that is suited to make people feel less lonely. As such it should be both 'good' in a philosophical sense as well as achievable.

Whilst a base canon does seem to exist and is in line with general literature, beyond that different focus themes appear in varying weight and frequency. As Rath (2006) noticed friends play different roles to each other - different in nature but equal in value. As a standard research method employed in friendship research is the usage of both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis usually ending up with two to six factors, we need to be wary how substantial the loss of

4I personally think along the lines of Lewis (1960) that friendship by itself is a worthy goal, self-sufficient and wonderful, a vital aspect of the human experience of the good life, and in that totally independent of its potential suitability to produce mental and physical health effects.

5e.g. social support, emotional sharing, discussing personal items or joint activities
information, context and meaning is when reducing the concept of friendship given this diversity in roles and understanding. Characteristics or aspects that are crucial to one person could be negligible to the next, just like they are to the authors of the standard reference works on friendship. It would be thus interesting to see how a confirmatory study testing various theme compositions or trait structures against each other would be adequately designed, thus separating out a hypothetical base canon vs. specialised additional roles.

7 Conclusion

The method of using the coding of key words to analytically categorize friendship concepts has shown merit to give an overview of the breadth and diversity of friendship concepts. It brings together philosophical, psychological, sociological and popular contemporary material, and thus - delving a bit deeper into the dataset - can show agreements and contrarian points between schools of thought. The data set of Langkamp (2022a) allowed an additional perspective on how close any of the author were to capturing ‘common’ intuition of what is important in friendship. The paper shows that while a reasonably uniform set of variables has been deduced to capture traits of a friendship, there is currently no likely consensus of both literature, pop science and psychosociological research which condensed set of e.g. 10-15 traits are sufficient to characterising a given friendship. One size seemingly will not fit all. However these traits taken together are likely to comprehensively map out the key criteria, and thus build a toolset of building blocks to look for when asking people to describe and characterise their friendships.

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