Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 2 Article 11

1990

A Communication Based Model of Friendship for the Interpersonal Communication Course

Rod Troester
Pennsylvania State University at Erie

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca

Part of the Higher Education Commons, Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons, Mass Communication Commons, Other Communication Commons, and the Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Troester, Rod (1990) "A Communication Based Model of Friendship for the Interpersonal Communication Course," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol2/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Basic Communication Course Annual by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

A Communication Based Model of Friendship for the Interpersonal Communication Course

Rod Troester

Everyone has friends, makes friends and inevitably loses friends over the course of a lifetime. It is equally true that everyone has personal ideas about what friends are, how to make friends, and how to maintain and dissolve friendships.

The topic of friendship is either implicitly or explicitly raised in most interpersonal communication courses. As communication educators seek to develop communication competence in students, it is assumed that the skills acquired will transfer to the various types of relationships in which students engage, including friendships. This paper develops a model appropriate for the study of friendship within the context of the interpersonal communication course. While numerous approaches exist for studying both interpersonal communication and friendship, this paper will explore the psychological approach to friendship developed by Duck (1982) and the management approach to interpersonal communication advocated by Deetz and Stevenson (1986). The purpose of this paper is two-fold: to clarify the relationship between friendship and interpersonal communication, and suggest how a systematic integration of these perspectives offers important insights and implications for the communication educator in developing friendship competence in conjunction with competence in interpersonal communication.

This paper briefly explains the social-psychological theory of friendship developed by Duck (1983) and the management approach to interpersonal communication of Stevenson (1984) and fully articulated by Deetz and Stevenson (1986). A model of friendship built around the general systems principles of structure, function, and evolution is then offered as a means of integrating the cognitive-psychological and behavioral-communicative dimensions of friendship.

PERSONAL CONSTRUCT THEORY AND FRIENDSHIP

Steve Duck adopts Kelly' Personal Construct Theory as the basis for his examination of friendship. Three of Kelly's eleven theoretical corollaries are of particular importance in Duck's research including the choice, commonality, and sociability corollaries (Kelly, 64, 90, 95). In Duck's research, the choice corollary suggests that individuals will select friends based on the other's potential for providing personality support. The commonality corollary suggests that similar construct systems (systems of thought), rather than attitudinal similarity or physical attraction, form the basis for relational development part the acquaintance stage. Finally, the sociability corollary emphasizes that understanding the construct system (the way of thinking) of the other through interaction, enables friendships to grown and develop. Developmentally, Duck suggests that in friendships we choose those individuals we feel can and will support our personality, we seek commonality of construct systems (similar ways of thinking) rather than physical or attitudinal attraction, and we develop an understanding of the construct system of the other person through social interaction.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete review of the research program of Duck and his associates. Comprehensive explanations of Personal Construct Theory, critiques of the dominate acquaintance research paradigm and friendship development research can be found in Duck's research (1973, 1977).

The theoretical grounding provided by Kelly's Personal Construct Theory and an ongoing program of research by Duck form the basis for his recent work *Friend, For Life* (1983). Duck builds his case for the study of friendship by pointing out the monetary and emotional costs that result from failed relationships. Monetarily, for example, Duck calculates that every person in the U. S. pays a dollar a day to foot the bill for failed marriages, what he terms a relationship tax. Duck argues that common sense and folklore like birds of a feather flock together and opposites attract, provide the individual with little guidance and contradictory advice as to what to do in developing friendships. A common example is the computer dating service that matches lonely individuals, yet provides no training as to how to move beyond the initial "hello" toward a relationship. The usual result of such a match is that the same lonely individuals are left with yet another failed attempt at developing a relationship.

Duck argues that friendship skills can be taught and need to be learned. Accordingly, the four focal points of *Friend, For Life* are: (a) to enable individuals to recognize and select appropriate opportunities for friendship, (b) to develop a range of strategies to encourage friendships, (c) to provide knowledge of the ways relationships develop and grow, and (d) to develop a set of skills to maintain and repair friendships. These focal points require additional clarification.

Duck observes that while a sense of belongingness, emotional support, and reassurance of self-value are important, personality support is the primary reason why individuals form friendships. In order to select appropriate friends,

individuals need to understand what Duck calls the "chemistry" of friendship (1983, 33). This chemistry includes an understanding of and sensitivity to the appropriate times and places for friendship development, judging one's own and the other's relational needs, and knowing how to communicate during the early stages of development. Duck suggests the first several moments of "searching' (uncertainty reduction) become important in providing "markers" (inferences) that help to "locate" (assess) the other person (1983, 49-50).

In exploring the development of friendships, Duck focuses on the processes of seeking similarity and support, the competent use of self-disclosure, and the means of demonstrating that the friendship is growing. Duck stresses the need for the gradual and appropriate disclosure of information suggesting that: "The appropriateness of inappropriateness of disclosure is defined by the relationship between the two people and the level of intimacy that they seek to achieve" (1983, 68).

Realizing that individuals are forced to adapt to and make decisions about personal and professional life changes, Duck points out that life changes from decisions to cohabitate, get married, change or quit jobs all entail new and sometimes hidden pressures, rights, responsibilities and consequences. As life changes occur, complementing relational changes must occur.

In discussing the nature of poor relationships, Duck observes that it is a mistake to assume that relational problems indicate something is "wrong" with the individuals involved. Rather, the focus of attention should be on examining and changing the processes and behaviors individuals use in making friends. Duck concludes that: ". . . friendships often break up from the influence of strange and unlikely impersonal causes that people overlook" (1983, 155-7). The research of Steve Duck provides a comprehensive picture of the psychological or cognitive dimensions of

friendship including the psychological and emotional costs, motivational and developmental factors, relational dynamics and difficulties.

THE MANAGEMENT MODEL OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

There is a difference between knowing about friendship and interpersonal communication and mastering the skills necessary for conducting friendship and interpersonal communication. Stevenson (1984) working from the approach suggested by Knowles (1970, 1973) explores this difference in interpersonal communication as the difference between a pedagogical and andragogical approach to learning and skill development. Of the numerous approaches available for instruction and skill development in the area of interpersonal communication, some are theory based while others are more skills oriented. Stevenson divides these approaches into two models, the Knowing Model and the Management Model. The knowing model, organized around pedagogical principles, assumes that if individuals know enough about communication concepts, principles and skills, they can transfer this knowledge to their everyday life experience. The management model, built around andragogical principles, includes the following basic components: (a) knowledge in the pedagogical sense, (b) analytical skills focusing on how to think through situations, (c) behavioral skills focusing on perception and message construction and (d) skills at systematically organized change (Stevenson, 8-11). The management model provides insight into how to move from 'knowledge about' interpersonal communication to the 'skills to do' interpersonal communication in real life situations.

The management approach is explained in *Managing Interpersonal Communication* by Deetz and Stevenson (1986). Central to the management approach to interpersonal communication are message construction and adaptation skills; finding ways to present ideas that are appropriate to the needs of individuals, the situation, and the relationships that exists. The adoption of a participative attitude drawn from Hart and Burk's concept of rhetorical sensitivity (1972) accompanies this need for an adaptive focus.

In order to adapt to individuals and situations, communicators must possess listening and perceptions. Individuals must be perceptually able to assess a situation to determine what information about the other person and the situation are communicationally significant. Both the complexity of the situation and the complexity of self and other must be perceived. Developing an understanding of interpersonal interaction systems and relationships is also essential. This aspect focuses on the skills of aligning interpretations -- the context of the interaction, and aligning and negotiating the relationship that exists between the parties.

In terms of specific expression or message construction skills, Deetz and Stevenson discuss the management of abstraction through concreteness, understanding through acknowledgement, responsibility for ideas and feelings through ownership, as well as managing defensiveness and conflict in relationships. Deetz and Stevenson develop each of these message construction skills by explaining the relationale for the skill, the situations they are helpful in and how they are constructed.

One of the most unique features of the management approach is a systematic program for organizing interpersonal change called "learning to learn" (Deetz and Stevenson, 121-7). Grounded in the work of Bateson (1972) and Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974), this 4-step system involves: (a) determining why a change is desired, (b) recognizing and analyzing problem situations, (c)

preplanning for change by developing alternative strategies and behaviors, and (d) assessing the impact of the change. It is this interpersonal change program that becomes important in transferring conceptual knowledge and personal skill development into real life situations.

A DESCRIPTIVE MODEL OF FRIENDSHIP RELATIONSHIPS

This section integrates the psychological understanding of friendships from the work of Duck (the cognitive dimension) and the management approach to interpersonal communication from Deetz and Stevenson (the behavioral-communicative dimension) into a model for conceptualizing and conducting friendships. The model is based on the General Systems Theory concepts of structure, function and evolution (see for example Fisher, 1978, 194-233 or Emmert and Donaghy, 1981, 223-36). In the same way that general systems theory is useful in analyzing complex biological, social and organizational phenomena, it is also useful in studying friendship relationships. It provides a perspective from which to examine the components that make up the social phenomenon of friendships, a means of analyzing the relationships and functions of these component parts, and way of accounting for the growth and development of friendship relationships.

Before discussing the model of friendships are interpersonal relationships in which individuals come to think alike or share similar cognitive construct systems. The individuals are able not only to support the other's personality, but enable the other's personality to grow and develop. In this sense, friendship is not necessarily related to gender, sexual intimacy or the duration of the relationship. In the present context, a friendship is a relational system whose

structure involves the cognitive systems of the parties, whose function is to seek similarity and growth in those cognitive systems, and whose evolution or development is facilitated by carefully managed interpersonal interaction.

The Structural Components and Characteristics of Friendship

The structure of friendship includes the cognitive construct systems of each individual and the structural relationships between these cognitive systems. The constructs that individuals use for making sense of their environment form the basis for their attempts to predict and control the environment – including their attempts to predict, control and understand people within the environment.

The structural characteristics of friendship include the constructs the individual uses for categorizing and making sense of the physical and social environment in which he or she exists (collectively his/her personality) and the similarity, complementarity, and interrelationship between the construct systems of two individuals (jointly each individual's personality structure in relation to the other). Figure 1 depicts these structural components and characteristics. Individually, each person perceives the environment and people within the environment based on his or her own unique cognitive construct system. Friendship marks the joining of these individual cognitive systems in such a way that similarity is found, the cognitive systems begin to complement each other, and a potential for growth and development is peceived by the individuals. The 'joining' is partially dependent upon the willingness of individuals to participate in the relationship and use effective perceptual skills.

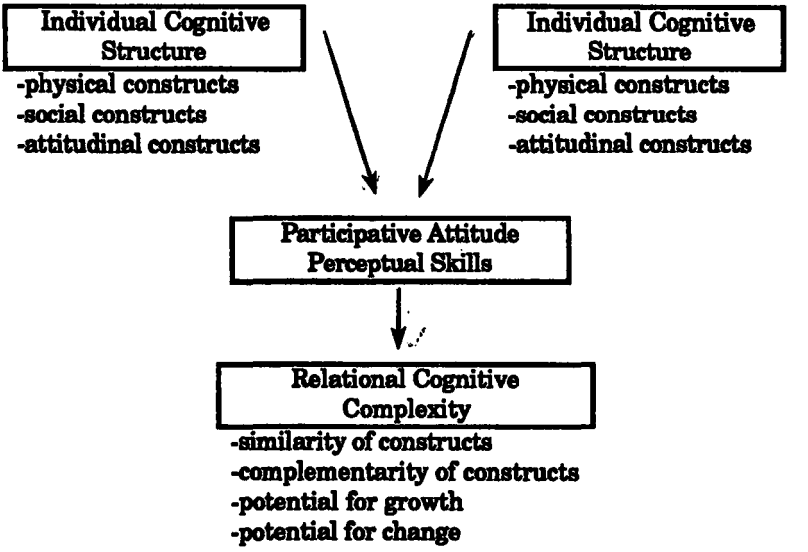


Figure 1. Friendship Structure

Duck's research outlined above suggests that the differentiating characteristic between acquaintance and friendships involves the similarity and interrelationships between personal construct systems. It is at this joint level of relational cognitive structure that the degree to which two construct systems complement each other and facilitate growth that determine the extent to which friendship will grow. Friends examine and explore the ways in which the other thinks and assess the other in terms of his or her similarity and potential for providing growth and development.

Published by eCommons, 1990

The Functional Characteristics of Friendship

The functional characteristics of friendship focus on the reasons why individuals form friendships and the process that friendship serves. Duck points out that personality support is the primary function friendship serves. Individuals need validation of their personal construct systems. This validation comes through Kelly's notion of "man as scientist' (1963, 4). The testing and validation of an individual's construct system comes through interactions with others. Figure 2 depicts the relationship between each individual's motives and the joint or relational motives that a friendship relationship serves.

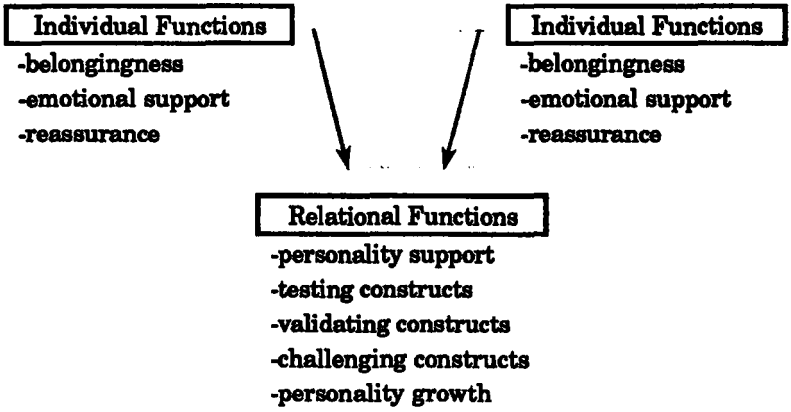


Figure 2. Friendship Function

As individuals interact to validate their construct systems, we begin to focus on the relational rather than the individual functions of friendship. One of the most interesting implications of Duck's research related to the function of friendship suggests that not only must friendship partners'

construct systems by similar, but they must be different enough to allow for growth, challenge and development. Research by McCarthy and Duck (1976) suggests that construct similarity-dissimilarity becomes important at different stages of friendship development.

Friends and friendship serve the function of not only validating personal construct systems, but challenging the construct system of the friendship partner. The validating-challenging function requires that the individuals involved know the limits to which such challenging and growth are desirable. This sensitivity requires careful attention to the perceptual skills stressed by the management approach to interpersonal communication.

The functional characteristics of friendship are related to the structural characteristics of friendship. Structurally, individuals erect construct systems in order to make sense of and structure their world; functionally, these construct systems are explored, validated and developed. As the relational structure of friendship develops, the interrelationships between personal constructs are explored, expanded and challenged to grow and develop from validation to integration and growth.

The Evolutionary Characteristics of Friendship

The evolution or process characteristics of friendship involve the appropriate and controlled exchange of information between people leading to the assessment of construct similarity and complementarity of personal construct systems. Carefully managed interpersonal communication provides the mechanism that facilitates this assessment.

The management approach to interpersonal communication is particularly appropriate and useful for understanding and examining the communicative aspects related

to the development of friendships. Figure 3 depicts the relationship between the communicative skills detailed by the management approach and the developmental phases in the formation of friendship. The approach is growth and change oriented. It provides conceptual knowledge about interpersonal communication and the means for applying this knowledge to individual skill development. The management approach complements the evolutionary characteristics of friendship by facilitating the growth of friendship relationships, as well as the maintenance and repair of existing friendship. The next section will explore the relationship between the cognitive-psychological and the behavioral – communication dimensions of friendship as friendships are formed and maintained.

In the development of new friendships, Duck points out that individuals need to be aware of what he calls the "chemistry of friendship" relative to the decision to engage the other (1983, 33). Perception skills that allow individuals to understand the complexities of the situation, self, and others are vital to assessing this chemistry prior to engaging the other. By emphasizing social-perspective taking skills, the management approach enables and encourages the construct system of the other party to be explored. Skills at message construction and interpretation are also essential.

As friendship develops through the exchange of information and a growing awareness of the complexity of both the situation (Duck's chemistry) and the other's personal construct system, messages need to be constructed in such a way as to take into account both the needs of self and the needs of the other. In this regard, the participative or rhetorically sensitive attitude from the management model become important. In a model of friendship, this attitude emphasizes the mutuality they must develop as a friendship evolves and grows.

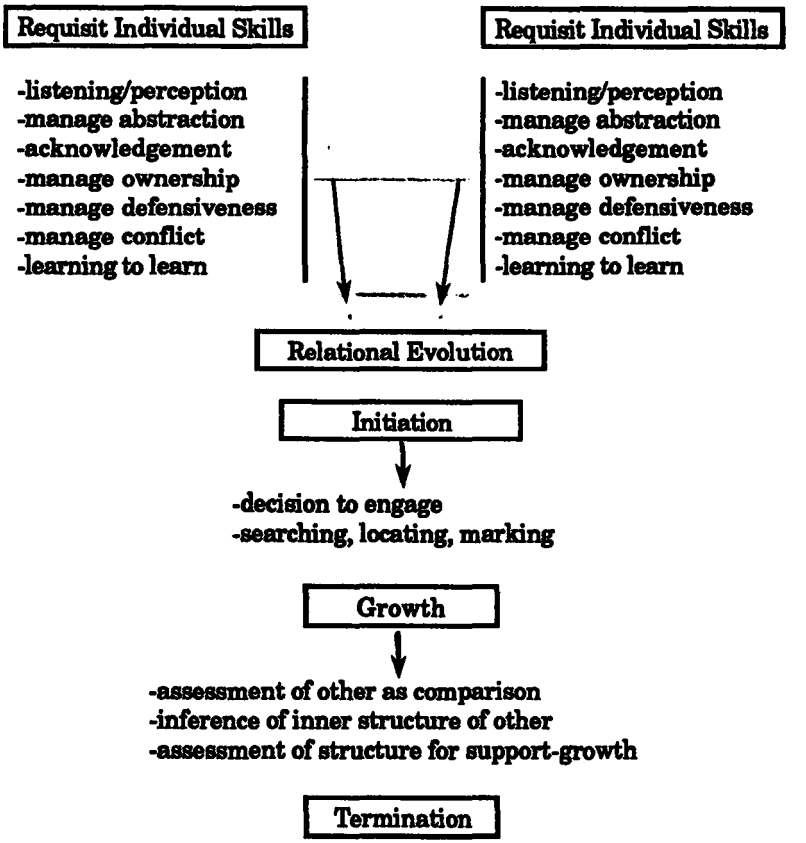


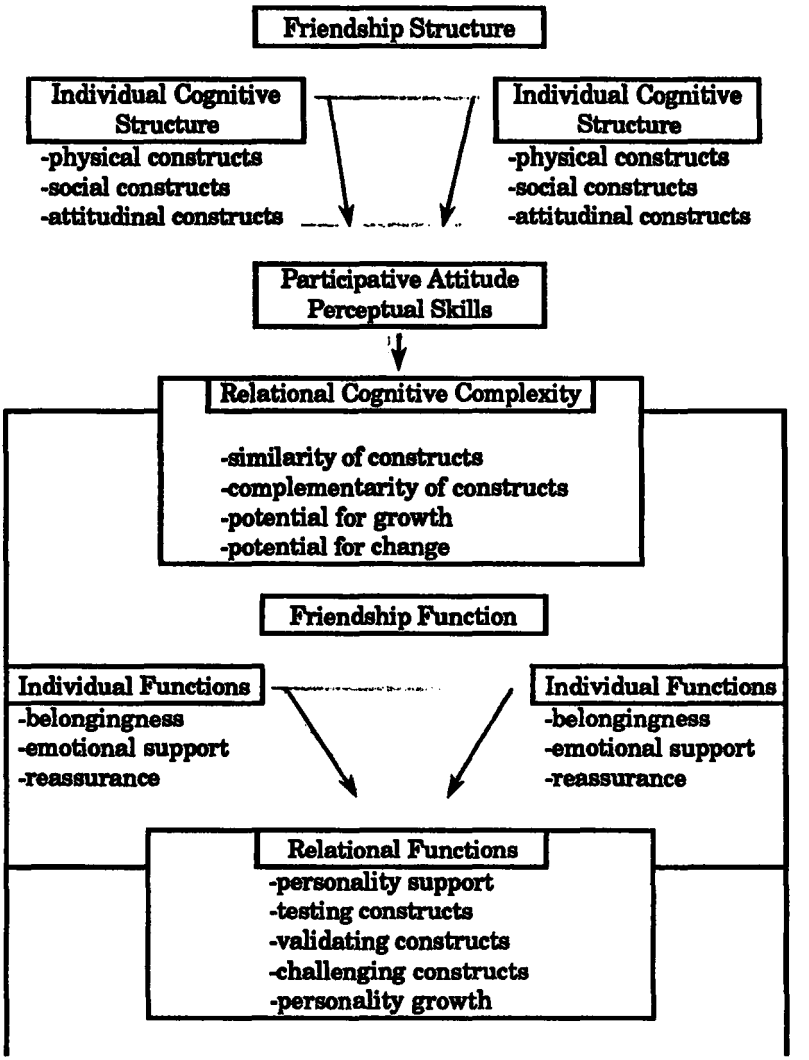
Figure 3. Friendship Evolution

As the relationship evolves, the specific message construction skills of making the abstract concrete, acknowledging messages and the other, and owning feelings and ideas help to structure the self-disclosure of information. These message construction skills enable the exchange of information exploring the complexity of the other and the assessment of similarity and complementarity of personal construct systems to occur.

The learning to learn program for organizing change, when incorporated into the evolutionary characteristics, offers a viable alternative to the "dating service" approaches to friendship development and maintenance. By recognizing the fact that individuals are faced with continual life changes, the learning to learn program helps to equip individuals for these change situations. By incorporating the perception and expression skills mentioned with an organized system for change, the model addresses the ongoing dynamics of friendship maintenance and growth.

Not only do friendships initially develop, they must be maintained, managed, and repaired. Careful attention and sensitivity to the complexity of the situation, the other and the nature of the relationship are crucial. Aligning and interpreting the ongoing content and relational dimensions of the friendship are equally important. Managing defensiveness on the part of the parties helps to build a supportive climate in which the friendship can grow. The inevitability of conflict in a relationship must be anticipated and effectively managed when it occurs so as to allow the relationship to grow rather than deteriorate.

By addressing the cognitive and behavioral dimensions associated with friendship and exploring these dimensions through the structural, functional and evolutionary characteristics outlined, a conceptual understanding of friendship relationships is developed and a practical approach for the conduct of friendship results. Figure 4 depicts the full model of friendship suggested by the previous discussion.


Friendship Structure
Individual Cognitive Structure
-physical constructs
-social constructs
-attitudinal constructs
Individual Cognitive Structure
-physical constructs
-social constructs
-attitudinal constructs
Participative Attitude Perceptual Skills
Relational Cognitive Complexity
-similarity of constructs
-complementarity of constructs
-potential for growth
-potential for change
Friendship Function
Individual Functions
-belongingness
-emotional support
-reassurance
Individual Functions
-belongingness
-emotional support
-reassurance
Relational Functions
-personality support
-testing constructs
-validating constructs
-challenging constructs
-personality growth

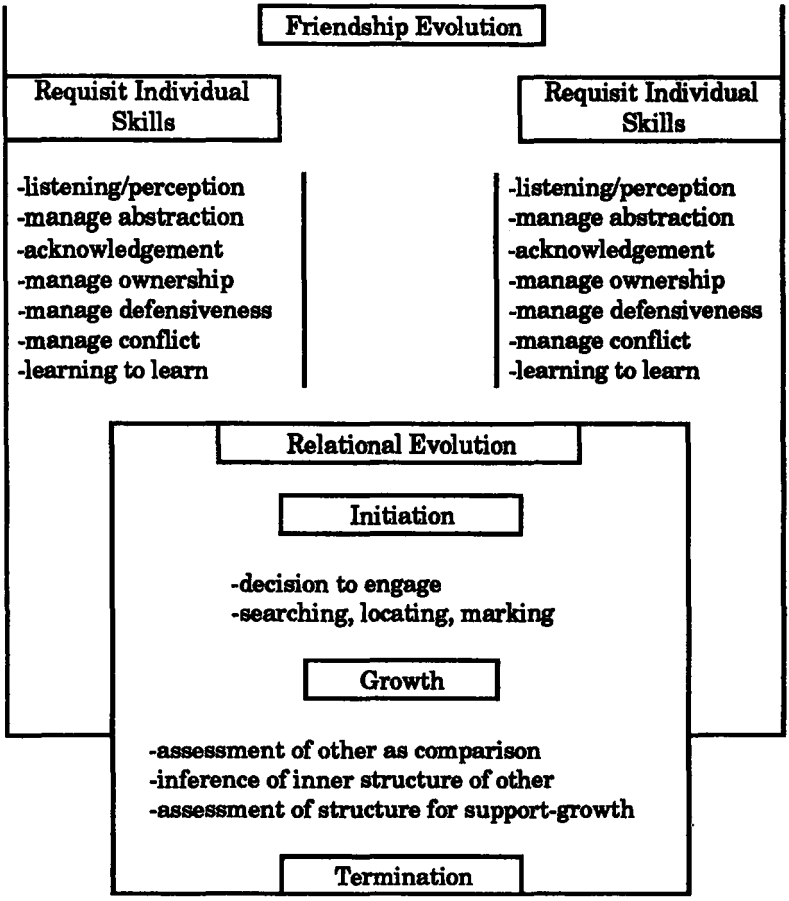


Figure 4. A Model of Friendship Systems

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the epilogue to *Friends, For Life,* Duck argues that the first step to improving friendships is to legitimize and

recognize that it is normal for people to experience difficulty with friendship relationships. In other words, the misconception that friendships are a naturally occurring part of life that must happen to individuals needs to be overcome. Second, he suggests that friendship education and instruction about social relationships needs to be taken seriously.

The communication educator is uniquely equipped and capable of taking up this two-fold challenge. Communication competence, like friendship, falls prey to the misconception that communication skills are a natural ability people acquire through experience. As we seek to teach what we know to be essential communication skills, relating those skills to the real world of friendship relationships seems a natural extension.

The friendship model presented here begins to move us from talking about friendships to developing the essential conceptual and communication skills necessary for conducting friendships. The research Duck provides a unified perspective for the study of friendship. Its inclusion in the interpersonal communication course provides students with a useful conceptual understanding of the psychological complexities of friendship. Building from this conceptual understanding, the use of the management approach to interpersonal communication helps to translate this understanding into practice. Integrating these approaches via general systems principles provides instructors with a model useful for presenting both an understanding of the psychological complexities of friendship and the necessary communication skills for managing friendship relationships.

The friendship model presented enables the communication educator to present a theoretically grounded approach to friendship in conjunction with a unique approach to interpersonal communication. One strength of the model is in its integration of knowledge about friendship and interpersonal communication with an emphasis on skill develop-

ment and relational management. It moves beyond presenting students with what the experts know about friendship and interpersonal communication with an emphasis on skill development and relational management. It moves beyond presenting students with what the experts know about friendship and communication to providing the student with the analytical skills necessary to apply the expert's knowledge to real life situations. By using the learning to learn approach to change, students can actively apply what they have learned about friendship and communication to the actual conduct of friendship relationships.

In teaching friendship and communication skills from this approach, the instructor serves not only as an expert resource person who provides the student with information, but functions as a guide or coach for the student. The instructor assumes the role of a facilitator assisting the student in a program of personal and relational development. In reviewing various intervention styles, Putallaz and Gottman (1981) suggest that such a coaching approach is more effective in teaching social and friendship skills than attempting to change student behavior through reinforcement and modelling. By the instructor adopting such a role, the student acquires a conceptual understanding of friendship, identifies desired areas for skill development, and through the learning to learn system translates theory into practice.

Given the audience most introductory interpersonal communication courses draw, an emphasis on skill development and practical application seems essential. The communication educator's potential for influencing the lives of students is considerable. Being able to present the richness of the discipline of communication in the context of friendship which so directly involves the student can result in both a more meaningful classroom experience, and student more prepared to cope with personal and relational experiences.

The development of friendship competence and communication competence can go hand-in-hand. Friendship competence depends upon communication competence. As communication educators seek to develop interpersonal communication competence in their students, they must provide a meaningful link between skill development and real life. The model offered here provides one means of making this essential link between what educators know and what students need to be able to do in order to fully function in friendship relationships.

REFERENCES

Bateson, G. (1972). ***Steps to an ecology of mind.*** **New York: Ballantine Books.**

Deetz, S.A., S.L. Stevenson (1986). ***Managing interpersonal communication.*** **New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc.**

Duck, S.W. (1973). ***Personal relationships and personal constructs: A study of friendship formation.*** **New York: John Wiley & Sons.**

----- (1977). ***The study of acquaintance.*** **London: Teakfield (Saxon House).**

----- (1983). ***Friends, For Life: The psychology of close relationships.*** **London: The Harvester Press.**

Emmert, P. and W.C. Donaghy, (1981). ***Human communication: Elements and contexts.*** **Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.**

Fisher, B.A., (1978). ***Perspectives on human communication*** **. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.**

Hart, R.P. & D.M. Burks, (1972). Rhetorical sensitivity and social interaction. *Speech Monographs 39:* 75-91.

Kelly, G.A. (1963). *A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructs.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Knowles, M.S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy.* New York: Associated Press.

----- (1973). *The adult learner: A neglected species.* Houston: Gulf Publishing Co.

McCarthy, B. & S.W.Duck, (1976). Friendship duration and responses to attitudinal agreement-disagreement. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology 15:*377-86.

Putallaz, M. & J. Gottman (1981). "Social skills and grouped acceptance." In S. Asher & J. Gottman (Eds.) *The development of children's friendship* (116-49). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stevenson, S.L. (1984). *Learning models for interpersonal communication competency development.* Top three paper in Instructional Development presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Chicago.

Watzlawick, P. , J. Weakland & R. Fisch (1974). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution.* New York: W.W. Norton, Inc.