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Peggy C. Giordano

Bowling Green State University, [pgiorda@bgsu.edu](mailto:pgiorda@bgsu.edu)

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# The Wider Circle of Friends in Adolescence<sup>1</sup>

Peggy C. Giordano  
*Bowling Green State University*

Adolescents interact with a variety of peers, in addition to the close friends generally emphasized in the literature. In this article I contrast the style and content of the communications directed to close friends and other youths characterized by varying degrees of “nearness and remoteness.” The handwritten messages found in high school yearbooks are analyzed and used to illustrate some of the distinct features of each type of discourse. This analysis suggests that while intimate relations undoubtedly play a key role in development, adolescents also learn a great deal about themselves and the social world they must navigate through their interactions with the wider circle of friends.

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers interested in adolescence have increasingly focused on the role of close friends (Laursen 1993*a*). The writings of Sullivan (1953) and recent reformulations and extensions of his original insights (Youniss 1980; Youniss and Smollar 1985) have been especially influential.<sup>2</sup> Close friendships are seen as offering the adolescent some important advantages over parent-child relations because they are inherently more egalitarian and less judgmental. These features encourage the adolescent to explore identity issues under the “safeguards of trust and reciprocity” (Smollar and Youniss 1982, p. 296). Savin-Williams and Berndt (1990, pp. 278–79) summarize Sullivan’s argument:

Such friends increase one another’s self-esteem; provide information, emotional support, and advice; and help and support one another. Friends also contribute to an evolving sense of identity, of having a place in the world. Through self-disclosure, and by allowing oneself to become vulnerable

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Theodore Groat, Charles H. McCaghy, David A. Kinney, and the *AJS* reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the article. Address correspondence to Peggy C. Giordano, Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403.

<sup>2</sup> Furman (1993, p. 90), e.g., labels Sullivan’s theory “the preeminent conceptualization of the field.”

before a coequal, adolescent friends share with one another their most personal thoughts and feelings, become sensitive to the needs and desires of others, and, in the process, acquire a deep understanding of the other and the self. This intimacy, according to Sullivan, has critical significance for future interpersonal relationships (including romances), and is crucial both to developing a sense of connectedness with others and individuating the self.

This emphasis on close friends has provided an important counterpoint to a family-dominated view of development. But despite the centrality of these relationships in adolescents' lives, an exclusive focus on dyads (Kandel 1978) or "the group of friends [respondents] you usually hang around with" (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh 1986, p. 1183) tends to preclude consideration of other kinds of peer interactions that may be less intense but nevertheless significant in their consequences. This focus on close friends also serves to highlight such relationship qualities as reciprocity and shared values, where reality is "cooperatively co-constructed" (Youniss and Smollar 1985), while de-emphasizing issues such as boundary maintenance, asymmetry, and difference.<sup>3</sup> And while some researchers have included attention to topics such as conflict and friendship loss (see, e.g., Goodwin and Goodwin 1987; Eder 1990; Sheldon 1992; Laursen 1993*b*), collectively this emphasis tends to sustain a view of friendships as generally positive and supportive.

In this article I contrast the style and content of the communications of close friends and those in "the wider circle." Although youths clearly learn a great deal from their close friendships, here I focus on how interactions based on elements of distance can also be instructive—as adolescents attempt to forge an identity, learn about and participate in social relationships, and develop an understanding of a particular, situated culture.

### Conceptual Orientation

Simmel (1950) notes that friendship and love, which aim for "complete psychological intimacy," are but two forms of social relations found in modern societies. He contrasts relational forms such as interest groups and intimate relations with the distinctive position of the acquaintance, noting that "the degree of knowledge covered by 'being well acquainted with one another,' refers not to the other per se; not to what is essential in him, intrinsically, but only to what is significant for that aspect of him which is turned toward others and the world" (1950, p. 320). Thus, a

<sup>3</sup> Researchers who have focused on prestige processes in school settings (e.g., Brown 1990) have addressed issues such as hierarchy and difference to a greater extent. The present analysis is in some respects a point of integration between these two traditions (see also Brown, Mory, and Kinney 1994).

combination of both knowledge and ignorance is a fundamental characteristic of these less intimate relations. This mixture has a parallel in Simmel's analysis of the stranger, whom he describes as possessing qualities of "nearness and remoteness." Because the stranger is "not radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, [he] therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of objectivity [and is] bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given" (1950, pp. 404–5).

To the degree that adolescents have a similar view concerning the objectivity of outsiders, it seems likely that what they have to say will be of considerable interest. Simmel outlines an even more fundamental principle that points in this direction: "For the actions of the individual, his difference from others is of far greater interest than is his similarity with them. It largely is differentiation from others that challenges and determines our activity. . . . If something is objectively of equal importance in terms of both similarity with a type and differentiation from it, we will be more conscious of the differentiation" (1950, pp. 30–31).

While Simmel provides a general rationale for this focus, he is relatively silent on what might actually be said or done by the actors in such relations. Ultimately, as Levine (1991) suggests, Simmel is vulnerable to criticism because he does not adequately address the issue of social norms—the content of social action. But the agendas of adolescents are not simply co-constructed by friends in ways they find mutually satisfying. Instead, values and preferences are deeply affected by locations in time and place (Gillis 1981; Modell and Goodman 1990; Elder, Modell, and Parke 1993). Such factors as historical era and social resources help to shape what is considered possible, desirable, acceptable, or subject to ridicule. Thus, a focus on the wider circle of friends is useful not only because such relations have been studied less frequently, but also because this provides a relatively comprehensive picture of social context as it is developed through the process of peer communication.

### Yearbook Messages as a Communicative Genre

This article focuses on the handwritten messages found in high school yearbooks. In many schools it is a tradition for students to write in the front and back pages of each other's school annuals. Adolescents generally receive messages from their close friends, but also from a wide assortment of others: less intimate friends, former friends, friends in a specific setting (e.g., band, drama, or detention hall), neighbors who ride the bus, boyfriends, siblings of best friends, boyfriends' friends, people from work, and even enemies who are still on speaking terms.

Writing in yearbooks is obviously but one of a much larger set of

communication activities in which children and adolescents participate. They also fight, gossip, tell stories, tease, and insult one another.<sup>4</sup> Young people also engage in ordinary talk that is not easily classified, and—more rarely, to be sure—they produce written materials such as notes and diaries. Taken together, these “routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers” (Corsaro and Eder 1990, p. 197) come to constitute the child or adolescent’s world.

Studies of these genres suggest that it is important to understand what takes place in the context of a particular communication activity (its general characteristics or the typical sequence it follows—its rules). A second issue is the larger role or function of these types of speech forms in the process of socialization. Such activities as gossip, fighting, or teasing, for example, have been shown to enhance social solidarity and group loyalty (Fine 1987), provide a framework for developing friendships (Corsaro and Rizzo 1988), produce social organization (Goodwin 1990), elaborate and magnify status distinctions (Eder 1985), transmit and refine normative beliefs (Simon, Eder, and Evans 1992), assuage fears and concerns (Corsaro 1985), and present challenges to adult authority (Willis 1977). Finally, research in this tradition has increasingly recognized the importance of understanding patterns of *variation* in the nature and use of communication activities as they are shown to be situated within a particular social milieu (Heath 1983; Corsaro 1994).

Although it is useful to consider the yearbook messages a kind of communicative genre, there is one respect in which my objectives here are different: while the above studies generally focus on what these various genres do (for the individual, for social relations, and for the creation of culture), my aim is to understand more about what relationships do. The yearbook materials provide illustrations of how individuals at various levels of intimacy communicate. Thus, the genre itself is a kind of window on these relationships, rather than an end point of my analysis. The genre does seem well suited to this “window-on-relationships” role, for several reasons.

First, the yearbook messages contain references to many content areas, including drinking, dating, sports, pregnancy, and teachers. Nevertheless, the most common subject is friendship. Even those few writers who make reference to broader, external events eventually get around to friendship talk:

Bill, Everyone always says that your senior year is the best but mine was really bad until you came along. School was a real dud this year with the

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent review of previous research on many of these other types of genres, see Corsaro and Eder (1990).

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riots and the security guards and the whole bit, but you made it all worthwhile . . . I'll always think of you when I think back on my senior year of 70 at South Dade. Love, Deb (Homestead, Fla., 1970)

Freddy, If we get through this year together we can probably get thru many more. Seriously there should be many good parties after the war. Don't worry for they can never kill the Phi Bete's . . . This is going to be a fight but it will be fun . . . To a good member of Phi Beta Chi, Tom (Shaker Heights, Ohio, 1943)

A second feature distinguishing these messages from other genres is that they do not typically have the moment-to-moment quality found in many other types of discourse (Goodwin 1990). Much of the importance of speech activities such as gossip or fighting derives from their status as recurring forms of everyday speech. Writing in yearbooks, on the other hand, is an infrequent occurrence; it does not have either the daily-round-of-life or processual quality of gossip, fighting, or teasing. This does not mean that such written messages are trivial or meaningless, however.

Perhaps because this is seen as an out-of-the-ordinary activity, adolescents can take the occasion to be more reflective, philosophical, and even sentimental than they would ordinarily allow themselves to be. Possibilities for the expression of emotion and affect are greater within this format than at the lunch table or during baseball practice, where joking and gossip tend to flourish. But while the yearbook-signing tradition may encourage youths to move into this type of communication, it is not inevitable. Note differences in the style of discourse in the following messages:

Dear Carole,

It is sad now to think that we will be leaving. Even though I've complained I'll miss it but even more, I'll miss you. Carole you are my moral support and I doubt that I could have made it without you . . . (West Los Angeles, Calif., 1962)

Lori—

To a girl who gave me alot of shit all year. Engle paid you. You owe me \$10 you stole when I was on the phone. Trudi (Perrysburg, Ohio, 1974)

While the first message evokes the reflective and sentimental qualities found in many of the messages, the second one certainly does not. Trudi first presents a short and unsentimental discussion of the relationship. This is still technically yearbook talk, because it involves a summing up. But then the writer breaks with the form entirely, using her message to air her side of a grievance involving the receiver. Examples like the second one are rare, but they do occur. In addition, these two messages help to illustrate how an everyday-concerns mode of discourse compares with the type of writing encountered more often in the yearbook pages.

The tendency toward reflection and sentiment in yearbook entries may also be facilitated because the comments are written rather than verbalized. This also presents certain advantages in my attempt to analyze them. Aside from being one of the few writing activities in which adolescents participate of their own accord (as contrasted with thank-you notes, homework, or college applications), these exist as free-standing, complete entities. Unlike studies of some of the other communicative genres, which must necessarily involve some level of intrusion or framing on the part of the researcher, the form and content of these materials are determined by the writer. Depth or completeness do not depend on interviewing skills or level of rapport, and the topics covered are not affected by research biases or interests. For example, if the sender chooses to mention intimate self-disclosure ("We have shared thoughts and feelings only we could understand"), it is because she thought it important to do so. The relative constancy of the format (what has been written in a yearbook) and the occasion (usually the end of the school year) is also an advantage, because it is possible to make some basic comparisons across individuals and school contexts.

There is a fourth distinctive feature of this communicative genre. Unlike other types of communication, which typically involve reciprocal exchanges, in this case the senders do all the talking while the receiver remains relatively silent. This obviously represents a departure from the interactive processes emphasized in observational studies of more routine forms of speech. However, these materials offer us a theoretically useful type of distortion. Usually, if a researcher hears only one side of things, it is the actor's side. This is true of questionnaires, interviews, and even analyses of diary contents. In this analysis, the yearbook owner is bombarded with communications from a variety of others. This necessarily heightens our sense of the others' importance, while temporarily downplaying the actor's own role as identity developer, friendship maker, or culture producer. I do recognize the two-way nature of these processes, but have found it useful to focus the present analysis on what comes in from the other direction.

## DATA AND METHOD

### Sample

Over a three-year period, I collected and analyzed the written messages contained in 247 junior high and high school annuals. Based on an estimated mean of 30 messages per book, this represents the communications of some 7,000 adolescents. The collection spans the years 1924–93, and includes schools located in 22 states.

I initially examined several yearbooks as a source of additional information about some of the schools included in the Toledo Youth Survey (see, e.g., Giordano, Cernkovich, and DeMaris 1993). However, the handwritten messages in the front and back pages—and sometimes scattered throughout—turned out to be much more interesting and revealing than were the “official” printed contents of these books. These writings provided information about the students’ preoccupations and concerns, and especially about their relationships with one another. The initial set of books was loaned by African-American students who lived in low-income neighborhoods in Toledo. I gradually added yearbooks of European-American students to the collection, as well as those of African-American youths who attended school in more advantaged circumstances. Ultimately, I also used the collection of yearbooks from Bowling Green State University’s Popular Culture Library and a local historical museum. A used book dealer was another source for 60 books. In all, 117 books were personally collected, while the rest were obtained from archival sources. The archival materials greatly extended the reach of the project both geographically and historically, but the personally solicited books were especially useful. With the latter, I was often able to conduct interviews regarding the content of the yearbook messages and to place the books within a known school context. I also sampled theoretically, adding cases to illuminate emerging questions or to increase the number of books from certain types of schools or students.

This collection of yearbooks is thus quite heterogeneous; but it is neither random nor representative of a particular population. However, since I analyzed a large number of messages written by students in widely differing circumstances, it is possible to make some general observations about trends that appear to cut across these varied historical and social contexts. Because I also observed many differences across the yearbooks, the appendix includes a brief discussion of how the variables of ethnicity and socioeconomic status in particular seemed to be related to these patterns of variation. The latter observations are necessarily more tentative, given the sampling strategy employed.

### Issues of Generalizability and Validity

In this study certain youths are not represented: those no longer in school, those who did not choose to buy a yearbook, and those who did not participate in the message-writing tradition. For example, some individuals interviewed said their school did not have such a tradition, or that they wanted to keep their books clean, and others were so alienated from the school’s social scene that they did not wish to or were not asked to



participate. Some of these factors are affected by social context: writing in yearbooks appears to have become more common in recent decades. In addition, individual messages are, on average, much longer and more revealing in the more contemporary books; those dating from the 1960s to the present especially reflect this trend. Socioeconomic status also has an impact. A faculty yearbook adviser from Toledo's lowest-income school district estimated that only about 20% of the students purchased a yearbook in 1993, compared with a 70% estimate by the adviser in the most affluent district.

There are also validity issues related to the interpretation of the messages. Although there is precedent for analyzing the content of written communications,<sup>5</sup> there are nevertheless problems inherent in the process of attempting to assign some general meaning to what has been written (Hawkes 1985). First, there is the notion that such messages are unlikely to offer an honest reflection of adolescents' true feelings and thoughts. This idea is echoed in the following yearbook message:

Janie, I hate to be like everybody else and just write alot of things you know they never mean, so I'll just say what I feel. I think you're a really great person. Remember all the fun we had serving. Lots of luck, Lisa (Austintown, Ohio, 1972)

Although there is often a hyperbolic quality to the language used in yearbook messages,<sup>6</sup> they vary a great deal, and are not universally complimentary. Further, many messages contain themes similar to Lisa's, indicating that the writer's sentiments are sincere even if those of many others are not. I also became a more experienced decoder of "yearbook talk" as the project proceeded. For example, one individual whose yearbook was in the collection expressed skepticism about the project: "Yeah, but I don't know what any of this means, because if you would read my yearbook you would think I was this popular guy with a lot of friends . . . but I really wasn't." I later checked the notes relating to that book and found no references to his being popular or having many friends.

Another potential validity problem is that the messages were not intended to be read by outsiders. Indeed, one of the characteristics of the more intimate messages is that the sender will invoke a private mode of discourse, using phrases that have meaning primarily to the receiver.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Douglas (1967) analyzed suicide notes; there have also been a number of studies of diary entries (e.g., Sieffge-Krenke 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the message "you're an awesome friend," for example, one young girl commented in an interview, "She hates me and I hate her."

Even the less intimate messages are situated within a context, one that is not always apparent. In some cases, I did not view this as problematic. For example, as I discuss below, the messages contain frequent references to shared memories (e.g., “Hey this batter’s stale, so’s the cookies . . . you can wear my dad’s tennis shoes” (high tops). Although it is important that the sender moved into this reflective type of discourse, it did not appear necessary to learn the details of the incident of the cookies and tennis shoes. In other instances, additional information was useful and indeed necessary as a validity check on emerging categories and ideas. Thus, while the messages themselves are the primary data source, the following were especially helpful sources of additional information:

Objective data about the schools in the collection were frequently available, and provide an independent basis for describing a particular school setting as, for example, low income or more affluent.<sup>7</sup> The official yearbook was another source of information about schools, the peer scene, and sometimes about individual owners. Class pictures document a school’s size and ethnic composition. In the case of archival sources, it was also possible to determine the ethnicity of book owners by using these pictures. Activities highlighted provide further clues about a school (e.g., the presence of Future Farmers of America). The activity list of an individual, or lack of one, also provided information about the social location of the yearbook owner, as did pictures with the team, or, for example, the audiovisual club.

I also conducted several types of interviews in connection with this project. First, I often engaged yearbook owners in a discussion about their school, including its objective characteristics and how the individual had experienced it. These interviews generally preceded the acquisition of a book and were also helpful in building up enough trust to make such a loan possible. Some owners also chose to “walk through” the entire book, discussing each message. However, the most useful interviews took place after a period of studying the book. These interviews often were conducted when I returned the book, but I have contacted owners as many as five times and as much as two years after initially borrowing their books. I also frequently interviewed the young people who helped me collect some of the books in their schools, where I did not have direct access to the book owner. Since the collector generally attended the same school or knew the owner well, these individuals were

<sup>7</sup> Data on Toledo public and private schools were collected in connection with the Toledo Youth Survey (e.g., the percentage of students in each school who pass the state’s ninth-grade proficiency exam, the sociodemographic characteristics of students, rates of dropout and the like.)

also knowledgeable informants. Follow-up questions generally related to small quandaries or puzzles in the data and to emerging ideas.<sup>8</sup> Questions to the collector tended to be more straightforward than those asked owners (e.g., "Does Brenda get good grades?"). Sometimes, however, the collector provided a useful perspective, characterizing the owner in a way that the owner might not (e.g., "She's going through some kind of hippie phase or something").

Finally, the other messages in a yearbook were an excellent resource when I was trying to interpret a focal message. For example, there is a great deal of joking and oppositional talk within the messages:

Sandra, To a Girl with fat legs and a big mouth, a crumbie figure in a bathing suit and a rotten personality. Well, I think that about sums it up.  
Trish (Woodland Hills, Calif., 1970)

Because of the content of all the other messages (attesting to Sandra's kindness and beauty), I could be confident that this message was constructed as a joke. Another example concerns the messages from a romantic partner. If a message did not clearly carry the message "I am the boyfriend," frequent references to him in other messages (e.g., "Chad doesn't deserve you") made his identity clear. Thus, in many respects the appropriate unit of analysis is the entire set of messages within a yearbook rather than an isolated statement contained within it.<sup>9</sup>

## ANALYSIS

### Basic Elements of a Yearbook Message

I suggested above that yearbook messages often have a reflective quality and that friendship figures prominently in these reflections. The specific

<sup>8</sup> The following is an example of a question to an owner: a yearbook from a boarding school contained frequent references to the term "dayboy." Although it was not difficult to decipher the meaning of this term, I wished to determine what this meant socially and to the owner. It appeared that being a dayboy in that school was not a desirable status—that this was a source of differentiation and a term of derision—live-in boys seemed to feel superior to those who came in each day from town. It was also possible that I had misinterpreted the youths' comments: perhaps I just did not know how to take (or decode) a joke. When I asked the owner about the messages containing such references, however, his extended comments provided an independent validation of my initial interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> The involvement of six undergraduate coders was also helpful, since these students' provided an independent reaction to each yearbook. Thus, for example, the messages to one young man contained many references to his being "strange." The coder also noted this: "to a really strange guy—said many times." These fresh readings gave me additional confidence regarding areas for further exploration. It is interesting to note that when I approached this owner, indicating I had a few questions to ask him, he said, "You're gonna ask me about why they were saying, like, you're strange, aren't you?" This provided additional validation of our initial focus on these particular statements, in that the owner had noticed these comments as well.

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contents of the messages tend to cluster around three general themes or topics.<sup>10</sup> These could also be considered taken-for-granted rules about what should be expressed on such an occasion. Such rules appear to be widely understood and shared, regardless of historical era or the social or personal characteristics of the writer:

*Rule 1.*—Say something nice about the receiver.

To the girl with the sunny disposition and ever present smile (Wyomissing, Penn., 1941)

*Rule 2.*—Talk about your relationship with the receiver.

Well we aren't best friends yet not worst enemies that has to be a great start to a good friendship. (Bloomdale, Ohio, 1990)

*Rule 3.*—Give the receiver some advice, words of wisdom, or good wishes.

Have a successful life with many men constantly kissing your butt. (Bloomdale, Ohio, 1991)

Some messages contain all three themes, others only one. And, as will be shown, there are many ways in which writers resist and depart from these mandates. However, even rather complete acts of rebellion usually include some deference to the rules:

Todd, You're such a fag! You have no friends because you're a loser. I hate you because you have big lips and . . . and . . . and . . . OOPS! Wrong Yearbook! Anyway have a good summer. Dan (Chesterfield, Ohio, 1985)

In this message, Dan clearly reflects his knowledge of what is required of him (say something nice, talk about your relationship), but he has turned the genre upside down as a way of being humorous. At the end, however, notice how he returns to form, with a straightforward good wish: "Anyway, have a good summer."

### Identifying the Messages of Close Friends

After becoming familiar with the general features of yearbook messages, I focused more attention on rule 2. This was comfortable territory because of my previous research interests. However, I became increasingly

<sup>10</sup> This analysis will be limited to the nonscripted messages found in the yearbooks. Scripted messages are rhymes, poems, or other phrases that are not original to the writer, such as "Remember grant, remember Lee, the H— with them remember me" (see, e.g., Herzog and Shapira [1986], who studied a related genre—autograph books—which often contain these kinds of messages).

uncomfortable as I noticed all the different levels and layers of intimacy that seemed to be reflected in these messages. The messages of close friends were clearly there, but so were a substantial number of others, representing various degrees of nearness and remoteness (Simmel 1950).

Since a major part of my argument is that close friends and those in the wider circle have different ways of communicating, and sometimes different things to say, I first discuss how it is possible to identify which of the messages in a given yearbook has been written by a close and intimate friend.

*Overt declarations.*—Because of the traditions associated with rule 2, in many cases the sender will clearly describe the nature of the friendship: “Carol, To the very best (I mean that) friend I had or ever will”; “To my best buddy.” Those in the wider circle may also describe their relationship in relatively straightforward ways: “I haven’t really got to know you too well except in passing notes to Jim.” Although such declarations were especially useful, close friends’ messages tended to be distinctive in several other respects:<sup>11</sup>

*“Reserved.”*—Sometimes the yearbook owner wrote “Reserved,” “Reserved for [specific name],” or “Do not write on this page!!” This provides an excellent clue that the individual designated to occupy the space is a close friend, since a special place has been carved out for him or her in the book. These are also some of the only words written by the receiver. Thus, messages written in a reserved spot likely refer to a relationship characterized by a high level of reciprocity and mutual regard.

*Nicknames.*—Individuals across the entire circle of friends often use nicknames as they begin a message or sign their own names. However, close friends will sometimes use a nickname which appears to be meaningful primarily within the context of the dyadic relationship: “Jennifer, J<sup>2</sup>, Jem, ROAD KILL, nifer”; “Greg (Taco).” A close friend may also reverse the trend found across the wider circle. For example, where there are many references to Tiff, the close friend may begin the greeting with “Tiffany Ann.”

*Gearing up.*—Another difference concerns the nature of the introductory statements. Sometimes close friends’ opening remarks reflect a hesitation to begin, a communication difficulty writers link to the depth of their feelings about the relationship: “Jess, Oh shit where do I begin”; “Cindy, Well that’s a start, now I’m stuck, there’s so much to say it

<sup>11</sup> I do not wish to imply that every message from a close friend contains all these features—these are trends or tendencies in the data. The most definitive index of the status of being a close friend is the overt declaration and/or the self-report of the book owner.

can't be done." This expressed hesitation is not as characteristic of the messages written by less intimate friends, who often jump (at least linguistically) right into the message.

*Length.*—After this brief hesitation, many close friends go on to write very lengthy messages. Although it might seem that certain individuals are simply more adept at writing, this would not account for all the observed variations in length. Part of what adolescents "know" about this genre is that messages from close friends should be longer. As one young woman put it, "The ones to your friends are longer. But if someone comes up to me I don't like I just write like 'good luck' and get out of there." Sometimes a part of the message itself will reflect an awareness of length as a salient feature: "Well, I took up enough pages I guess"; "This page is definatly not enough space for me to write everything I want to." At least some of the message's length emerges, then, not just because the close friend has more territory to cover, but because the sender wants it to be long and the receiver expects it to be.

*Friendship qualities and rewards.*—Close friends typically declare that the friendship is special and also often elaborate on why this is the case. Friendship qualities identified as important in previous research (e.g., Youniss and Smollar 1985) figure prominently in these reviews of the friendship's career. Themes relating to trust, understanding, and reciprocal self-disclosure are mentioned often:

Hi well what can I say? You are one of my closest friends and you know more about me than anyone else. Thanks for always being there when I needed someone to talk to. I'm glad we can stick with each other through the good and the bad. When you are worried or feeling down about something, I feel down about it to. so I'll always understand what ever is bothering you and you can always come and talk to me about any problems. I'll always keep all our little secrets inside as I hope you will do the same. (City unknown, New Jersey, 1986)

*Trouble talk.*—Although the overall tone of most close friend messages is extremely positive, and often highly emotional, there are frequent references to rough times, ups and downs, or everything the two have been through together. Sometimes these troubles refer to events external to the relationship, but often to misunderstandings between the two friends: "This is our 6th year as being friends. Pretty amazing huh? we've had alot of ups and downs but we still kept going"; "I'm sure the fights brought us closer." These references are generally consistent with a view of conflict not as peripheral or destructive, but as integral to development (Corsaro and Rizzo 1990). Their frequent mention in close friends' talk suggests that this may be an important part of the relationship-building process as well (see Youniss and Smollar 1985, chap. 7).

*Shared memories.*—Messages from close friends also contain many

references to places, people, situations, and objects that have meaning within the context of the relationship. Fine (1987, p. 125) develops the notion of idioculture, which explicitly recognizes the "localized nature of culture." He notes that "members recognize that they share experiences and that these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members" (p. 125). Although Fine emphasizes how a larger clique (a baseball team) develops an idioculture, the yearbook data suggest that such processes also occur at the dyadic level:

Patti (alias Claudine L)

There is so much to say without the space or time to write it. I hope you realize I'll probably "cry me a river" when I do have to leave you. [This is followed by 3 pages of highly detailed memories.] . . . I'm sure there were never and I'm certain NEVER two people who ditched as much as we did . . . Do you think a class a day is a good record? Or how about every other day for 6 months? . . . Patti quick we'll get a jeep and then the bikes . . . remember going across the high voltage area pretending we're Bonnie & Clyde? . . . [Continues at length.] All in all it's been too wonderful even for me to put into words. I hope no one takes this wrong but I really love you. You're closer to me than anyone and I don't know what I'd do (I'm gonna do) without you. I'm gonna miss you like hell. Please take care and keep all your brainstorm for Denver. I'll see ya. Love always Trish (American school, Republic of the Phillipines, 1970)

Thus, sharing in a variety of experiences and escapades would undoubtedly be associated with increased intimacy over time. However, this process of resurrecting and reflecting on what has been shared may itself provide additional depth to the relation, much like the function of family stories or picture albums.

*References to the future.*—Some differences are also found toward the end of the message. Acquaintances may wish the receiver a good summer, and less intimate friends may propose getting together, including their phone numbers under the signatures. Close friends would never write down the phone number, as this was memorized long ago. Instead, they may mention specific plans already in the works ("Can't wait for Monroe!!"). Even in the case of senior yearbooks, messages from close friends usually do not end with a vague "Hope we stay in touch," but instead provide stronger reassurances that the relationship will last. Note in the above example that this issue has already been discussed, and a plan to reunite has apparently been made ("Keep all your brainstorm for Denver").

*Personalized embroidery.*—Yearbook messages are more than a straightforward presentation of text. They are written in interesting ways (e.g., in a circle) and make creative use of the official yearbook

(e.g., mocking the funeral home advertisement or photos of a disliked teacher). In addition, adolescents often add words or pictures around the area of the main message. But while decorations offered by the wider circle tend to be generic—they work as well for one receiver as another—the embroidery of close friends tends once again to be more exclusive. Examples of generic embroidery would be a sketch of a beer can, the football number of the sender, or a phrase such as “89—SO FINE!!!” Examples of more personalized decorations include a sketch of a piano (this related to the many times the sender listened to the receiver practice), a picture of a snake, or a phrase such as “federal express.” I do not know what all of these symbols and phrases refer to, and that is the point.<sup>12</sup>

### The Developmental Role of Close Friendships

These messages do not provide direct evidence that intimate friendships play a key role in development, but their tone and content are quite compatible with this viewpoint. Through their overt declarations, reviews of the relationship’s history, and references to a variety of rewarding memories, adolescents highlight the central place of the friendship in their lives. It seems likely that such all-encompassing relations “contribute to an evolving sense of identity” (Savin-Williams and Berndt 1990, p. 278), provide an important forum for learning more about relations, and play a central role in the development of cultural values and preferences:

*Identity.*—Close friends’ messages are generally very positive and supportive. The friend almost universally offers complimentary descriptions of the receiver, in support of rule 1 (e.g., “You’re so good to me! You’re all a person needs. You’re warm, sensitive, thought full, loving, kind, groovey, and an allaround bitchen person”). Such reflected appraisals would appear to enhance feelings of self-esteem and self-worth (Savin-Williams and Berndt 1990). Other references are consistent with the idea that intimate communication is critical as adolescents work through various identity concerns (“Thanks for always being there and listening to my endless problems”).

*Social relations.*—Because adolescents derive so many rewards from

<sup>12</sup> All these elements of close friends’ talk are more characteristic of female writers. Similar tendencies are found in the writing of close male friends, but generally on a much more limited scale. For example, a male may refer to one or two memories when writing to a close friend, but make no such references in a message to an acquaintance. In contrast, it is not unusual for female writers to refer to 25 or 30 events or symbols in their messages to close friends (a manuscript in progress analyses these and other gender differences in the data).



these relations (“I would have never made it through anything w/out you!!”), they may be willing to work especially hard to sustain them. Their apparent pride in weathering the rough spots (“ups and downs”) hints at the skill-building aspect. In addition, many youths express appreciation for friends’ loyalty, trust, and dependability; but perhaps even more important, they recognize their own reciprocal obligations:

My beautiful, brown-eyed girl,  
I have so much to say I don’t think there is enough room to express my feelings for our friendship . . . It seems like we’ve been through so much together . . . You always know when I’m feeling down and how to make me feel better. You have always been so strong for me. You will make it through this problem (you know what I mean). I will be there for you whenever you are feeling down . . . You know that the last thing in the world I would want to do is hurt you in any way. Thanks for being the one I always can count on. You can always count on me. Love always,  
Kristen (Bloomdale, Ohio, 1991)

*Culture.*—Studies of similarity in close friends contribute to the view that values and behavioral preferences develop largely through interaction with intimate others. That friends tend to share many of the same views and beliefs is also evident in many of the yearbook messages (“I’m sure there were never . . . two people who ditched [school] as much as we did”; “What a thrill to think I led you to the Lord. . . . I’m really looking forward to this summer and Bible study and lots of other good things!”; “We haven’t experienced the Big S— yet!”). As Kandel (1978) documents, friendship dyads tend to become even more similar over the course of the relationship (“We’ve grown together so much threw the good times and not so good that we even think alike”), and this further underscores close friends’ influence on one another.

Thus, in many respects these yearbook messages can be seen as complementary to and illustrative of what has been emphasized in the existing literature. But while close friends have an appropriately prominent place in the study of adolescence—as well as in the yearbook pages—if my analysis were to end at this point, some things would be left out. Reading across all the messages in these yearbooks, it is possible to find out a good deal more about particular youths and the social worlds that they inhabit. My central argument, then, is that if I as a reader believe that I knew an adolescent better by reading the messages from “the wider circle of friends,” it seems likely that the receiver has learned from them as well.

#### Communications from the Wider Circle

In this context I use the notion of the wider circle to refer to all but the closest of friends. An adolescent may receive messages from the girl next

to her in English class, a best friend from sixth grade, current or past boyfriends, male friends, an older sister's friends, and members of the volleyball team, as well as second- and third-tier intimates. This meaning of the wider circle thus differs from that employed in most discussions of networks (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994), cliques, or crowds (Brown et al. 1994) in that (1) the members of the wider circle are not necessarily in communication with one another and (2) this set of individuals tends to cut across a number of boundaries based on age, gender, social status, and the like. And yet members of the wider circle apparently do have at least some minimal level of relevance for and relationship to the receiver—after all she has asked them to sign her book.

In some respects, the messages from less intimate friends and acquaintances can be accurately depicted as simply less intense, weaker versions of the communications from best friends described previously. Such messages tend to be shorter, fewer contexts or memories are discussed, and the language and references are less exclusive. Yet fragments of intimacy are often present: a male may have a joking relationship with a young woman in Spanish class and use a special nickname in his message. Another friend from grade school may be a deep repository of memories but make no references to the current relationship. A third may bring up an especially helpful talk, even though there was only one such conversation.

Yet it would be erroneous to view these communications as merely watered-down versions of close friends' messages, for they differ in more fundamental respects. These differences stem from the way in which less intimate others approach the three yearbook rules outlined earlier. While close friends' messages are strongly taken up with rule 2 (Talk about your relationship with the receiver), the wider circle will almost by definition have somewhat less to discuss in this regard. They do not ignore this theme, but more of the message is devoted to rules 1 (Say something nice about the receiver) and 3 (Give the receiver some advice, words of wisdom, or good wishes). As a result, there is often a good deal of information in such messages. This information has the potential to provide a somewhat different perspective on each of the developmental domains discussed above.

*Identity.*—Members of the wider circle are more likely than close friends to offer unfettered appraisals. Many of the yearbook messages contain strong adjectives, blunt language, and a decidedly value-laden tone. Initially, I attributed these characteristics to the genre as a whole; however, I gradually began to connect this mode of discourse to the wider circle of friends. Although members of the wider circle have not achieved what Simmel termed “absolute psychological intimacy” (1950, p. 325), they show little hesitancy or timidity in offering their thoughts

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and appraisals. The messages to Connie represent a very extreme example of this tendency:

To a fat mother!!!!

Good bye skinny

To connie,  
a nice big girl that should know better than to argue with Mr. Johnson her second class teacher, so connie don't you ever learn . . . sign. Mary ann

hope you have fun with your boyfriend Dave . . . he must be a winner.

connie is fat!!! [fat is underlined eight times]

To Connie

To a very nice fat girl who I have known for 2 years.  
Your friend, Sally Lots of Luck

To my sweetheart

I could love every pound and ounce on you. I come all nite thinking about you Dave

Dear Connie. Keep up the exercise. Hate, Randy

(Rossford, Ohio, 1972)

Most yearbooks do not contain messages this blunt, or even cruel. However, consistent with Simmel's description of the acquaintance, they often carry an "attitude of 'objectivity'" (Simmel 1950, p. 404) that may be difficult for the developing adolescent to ignore:

Bill, It took me almost all of the 4th hour to get to sign your book so you know you are real hip and popular. Best of luck wherever you are. Marguerite (Toledo, Ohio, 1955)

Stephanie, To a nice short, short, short, short, short, short, short girl. Carla (Mentor, Ohio, 1978)

George You're not the boy your mother thinks you are. Harry (rural Ohio, 1928)

To a big set of tits keep them because you can go far with them. Best in everything you do. Plus with guys like me. Love Eric Dupree (Bloomdale, Ohio, 1990)

To Yvonna, a girl that could kick ass. James (Toledo, Ohio, 1990)

## The Wider Circle of Friends

To Tanya, You get on my nerves sometimes and you're moody, but you're alright the rest of the time. . . . Have fun in college! Love, Lynda (New York City, 1980)

In addition to providing these rather global evaluations, some writers enthusiastically share specific observations or suggestions for self-improvement:

Bob. To a good kid this year, but last year you were funnier. Muscle JT (Toledo, Ohio, 1965)

Say James, . . . James, why do you always come to school dressed up . . . I mean every goddamn day your dressed up. You've got to change your ways and mess yourself up a little. . . . Your friend and mine, Brad (Toledo, Ohio, 1977)

Huntley, It's been fun knowing you in trig. this year. In the future when you are asked a question try to give them a short answer. Johnny North (Columbia, S.C., 1965)

Amy, . . . I hope you and Ron stay together forever because your always in a good mood as long as your with Ron. Your friend, meathead (Bloomdale, Ohio, 1990)

Katie, your a great friend with a great butt. Get a tighter pair of pants for bowling. Brian (Bloomdale, Ohio, 1990)

To Doug, a real good pollack and friend. But I wish he would take a bath and use "ban" more often. Steve (Toledo, Ohio, 1967)<sup>13</sup>

The messages from the wider circle also tend to be relatively short, and this perhaps contributes to the perception of them as blunt or abrupt. Further, as Simmel suggested, acquaintances are more likely than others to focus on features that are readily observable or seem salient to them. And as Cooley ([1902] 1970) noted, reflected appraisals are not simply reflections, because an evaluative dimension is also present. But while close friends almost invariably reflect back something positive, this is not always true of the wider circle.

The wider circle is different in another respect: it contains many voices.

<sup>13</sup> One of the reviewers questioned whether it is possible to tell that an appraisal is actually "unfettered," noting that it would be impossible to determine what had been intended by an individual who had written a few lines long ago. I would argue that many of these statements have considerable face validity as unfettered appraisals, quite apart from a particular intention on the part of the writer. For example, the writer who began his message with the words "to a big set of tits," may have intended this as a joke, and it may have even been received this way by the owner. Yet there is still quite a bit of information contained within the message, information which is not as often a part of the discourse of close friends.

What is of particular interest in this regard is that comments in a given yearbook seldom have a highly variable or random quality. Rather, the messages often cluster or coalesce around similar themes, offering a surprisingly consistent and integrated portrait. Consider the following set of messages to a person one sender refers to as “small sad Bill”:

You’ve really livened up all the classes I’ve had with you this year, especially typing. That nun really hates your guts, doesn’t she? Good luck & hope to see you next year. Bob.

To bill, a pretty kool guy with a pretty bleak future ( Just funnin) Dan

To Bill, your in great physical shape man. Who knows with a little effort you might be nobody. George

To little round bill. Have fun this summer. Brad.

Bill always good for a laugh we all know  
that if we let you go

You’ll give us a good show.

I really think you’re a good kid, but, I believe a little more prudence would be beneficial to your character. All in all, you’re a great kid. Brian

Butter Ball Bill, . . .

(Toledo, Ohio, 1965)

The following messages to Kelly also show this tendency for overlap:

Kelly, . . . put it this way if we wouldn’t have met I wouldn’t know how big of an air head you are! Ha! Good luck in everything you do and do it with (Brian D.) . . .

Kelly To a blond, dizzy, and O.K. (sometimes) person. And try one thing get your algebra homework done for once. (ha ha). Matt

(Bloomdale, Ohio, 1991)

To the degree that certain themes are repeated by a variety of senders, these appraisals may be more difficult to ignore. Some of the more creative properties of language may also be consequential. For example, Bill may have a general understanding about his weight problem, but find it difficult to discount a “butter ball” designation. Similarly, being repeatedly called an airhead and dizzy blonde (such references appear in 10 different messages) might help to crystallize an identity around what may have been some tendencies in this direction. It is impossible to assess directly whether or in what way such communications affect the developing identity, but it is interesting to note how Kelly finished off a message to one of her friends:

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. . . this makes no sense so I'm blaming it on my blondeness and that I go to Bloomdale. I'm bored. I'm still thinking . . . Not too hard. Love, Kelly

Obviously, while Bill and Kelly become aware of such judgments they also continue to interact with parents and close friends, who offer their own appraisals and reflections. But I would emphasize that, of these different groups, it is the wider circle of friends and acquaintances who appear least likely to "pull their punches" in order to spare the feelings of the adolescent. Sullivan (1953) makes a similar point in suggesting that compared to the relatively safe haven of the family, peers provide the developing youth a needed dose of reality. If we extend this logic, the world of intimate friendships can still be considered a kind of safety zone when compared to the wider circle. As with family, it is part of the close friend's function to provide a measure of comfort and support. This is less likely to characterize interactions as one moves toward the outer edges of intimacy.

Another difference is the stronger element of contrast found within the wider circle. As Simmel noted, an individual is highly conscious of differentiation from others, in contrast to his similarity with them. Thus, while the process of reflected appraisals has most often been linked to intimate primary groups (Cooley 1970; Matseuda 1992), the reflections of less intimate others may be revealing as well. Certain aspects of the self may be most clearly highlighted not by individuals who share certain traits, but by those who do not. Note the elements of "compare and contrast" found in the following messages:

Jim. To the almost smartest kid in the class from the almost dumbest. See ya at Walbridge Park this summer. Jack (Toledo, Ohio, 1965)

James: It was real big of you to show up for gym once in a while! I'm glad I had you in English this year. It wouldn't be any fun to crack racial jokes without you! Hope to see you next year. P.S. Thanks for letting me sit at the "black persons" table. Jerry (Toledo, Ohio, 1977)

Sheila. To a really sweet kid I'm so jealous of you because you never seem depressed or down in the dumps. Keep smiling and be good. Diane (Toledo, Ohio, 1969)

Somehow I feel that you have had a rough time of it as a day-boy [nonboarding student]. You can rest from now on. Courage, John (South Bayfield, Mass., 1951)

*Social relations.*—There is considerable change and movement in adolescent friendships (Baxter 1985; Berndt, Hawkins, and Hoyle 1986). Many of the messages reflect a keen awareness of this ("This school year is going to be scary cause I'm afraid our friendship won't endure";

“What happened? We always used to be good friends and now we hardly ever talk”). Because members of the wider circle have considerable leeway to change the present relationship level—for example, they can signal a desire to get closer, or they can say nothing—what they do choose to write is of further interest to us, and by inference, to the adolescent. Messages from the wider circle can communicate a great deal about the adolescent’s level of social desirability and worth. One of the striking aspects of the yearbooks is that they reveal extensive variations in the availability of “reserve troops” who express a willingness to be called in as friendship replacements should shifts occur in the inner circle. The following messages are taken from the yearbook of a popular and attractive junior high female. They not only echo themes addressed earlier (e.g., the presence of contrast, the voices coalescing in a rather consistent portrait of the actor), but also help to illustrate the availability of such would-be intimates:

Karri, To a real sweet girl who always makes sports when I don’t. Good luck with the boys even though you don’t need it. Stay funky. Maria

Karri, I’m writing really small for you because I know you don’t like big writers and I want you to like me. Good luck with the guys. Jody

Karri, We’ve had fun together (I hope) at the basketball games. Don’t worry about your best friend Ann cause you have a friend in me. Amber

Karri, when are you going out with me? Hope soon you know we could have a good time maybe go out and get high if you want to. We could go everywhere you want to. Get in touch soon. Curt

Karri, to a girl I hardly know but hope to get better friends with. Good luck in everything. Angie

To a friend I hope still likes me. Good luck with the boys. Lori

Karri, Your great great looking (you already know that). Wish I could have been better friends with you. Hope to see you in the summer. Joe

(Bowling Green, Ohio, 1980)

Thus, Karri not only learns about herself through these communications (she’s a “really good looking chic”), but she knows she has many willing partners if she wishes for a different mix of male or female companionship. The level of deference shown in the messages is striking (“We could go everywhere you want to”), and would also seem to provide her with a sense of her social worth and prestige. Even if these replacements are never called in, the knowledge that they are there could be important, affecting not only her identity but the nature of her social conduct across the entire circle of friends.

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The other side of this contrast is more subtle, because what is different in the books of less popular owners are the things that are not present: there may be much more empty space on the pages, messages stop short of suggesting the two become closer, and the like. Consider the following:

You're a real sweet girl with an A+ personality. Best of luck always  
Thanks a lot for all the answers you gave me for English. Ellen

Well another year is just completed. A fellow-sufferer in Bookkeeping, it  
has been pleasant. Have fun this summer. Always, Nancy

(Toledo, Ohio, 1961)

These are certainly cheerful messages. They do not contain any of the blunt talk described earlier. But there is a notable difference between yearbooks containing phrases such as "Have fun this summer," and those peppered with messages such as "I have hoped and prayed every night that I might have a chance with you, and I will go on living with the thought that maybe I'll get it." Thus, the presence of many faintly positive or generic messages can be as revealing as some of the more unfettered communications quoted above.<sup>14</sup>

*Culture.*—Up to this point my discussion has been social psychological, and formal, in the Simmelian sense. However, the various appraisals and friendship overtures I discussed take place within a particular, situated context. Such contexts differ. What is of concern, gets applauded, and is subjected to teasing or even ridicule reflects social and historical realities as they are constituted and interpreted by the peers in a particular setting (Corsaro 1994).

Research has consistently demonstrated strong similarity in friendship dyads and small groups: an adolescent who is sexually active is likely to have sexually active friends (Billy and Udry 1985), delinquent youths name friends who are delinquent (Cairns et al. 1988), and academically oriented students generally have friends with similar inclinations (Epstein and Karweit 1983). But while adolescents' concerns and emphases are likely to be comfortably in line with those of close friends, this does not provide a complete view of their cultural worlds. Friendship pairs or small groups are also continually confronting their degree of fit with the

<sup>14</sup> Although it was not possible to obtain the reaction of these receivers to every statement, interviews suggest that in many instances owners were aware of these slights, boundaries, and put-downs. For example, one 19-year-old described how he had been somewhat "dorky" in junior high. He remembered "running around trying to get a [named popular girl] or a [another popular girl] to sign my book . . . and then you look down at what they wrote and it's like 'I don't know you too well but you seem like a nice person.'"



wider circle. This means the wider circle provides a more comprehensive window on what is social context for the developing adolescent.

To illustrate, consider the messages written to three high-achieving students who attended different high schools. It is likely that each of these students values intellectual endeavors and achievements and that their friends are similarly inclined. But it is in the nature of discourse from the wider circle that differences in context are especially evident. The messages to Ralph reflect the other students' awareness of his intelligence but indicate that in this setting social rewards do not automatically follow:

Ralph, To a guy who couldn't live without his slide-rule. Really, you're a real nice guy with a lot on the ball, or should I say slide rule. Lots of luck in the future. Edna

I was going to say what I think of you but that wouldn't be nice. So luck. Mickey

Ralph the dippest clod I've ever knowed. Dennis.

. . . appreciate what you did with my test, that help me out alot. Best wishes, Terry Garfield

You know Ralph, you're not such a bad guy, too bad you're a toad. Phil

(Toledo, Ohio, 1962)

It could be argued that these students are merely teasing Ralph—they do not really think he is a toad. But even if these messages were written with playful intentions, words like *dippy* and *toad* are not found at all in the yearbooks of high-status students.

The messages to Tanya, who attended school in New York city, offer a strong contrast. Tanya's school is considered highly competitive, requires an examination for entrance, and contains a very large and diverse student body:

To Tanya, One of the smartest girls I have ever met. Your attitude and approach in dealing with circumstances will make you successful. Good luck in the pharmaceutical field and track. Your friend, Love Chuck

Tanya, Do the best you can always, cause that's all anyone can do. I know you'll have everything you want for yourself because you're just that determined. Don't let up. Love Victoria

To Tanya, Be successful in everything you do. There is no stopping he (she) who is determined to be somebody. D. Bennington

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To a very nice young ladie I've met in New York. Congratulations on your scholastic achievement. Stay with your desires in life and you will achieve your success. Keep your knowledge vastless. Paul

(Brooklyn, 1980)

These comments are revealing not only in their unapologetic praise for Tanya's academic excellence, but because they stress repeatedly that success for her (and them) will likely require a fierce effort and determination. These peer communications thus reinforce not only the merits of academic success, but the high level of motivation and striving writers believe will be associated with it.

Yet a third type of discourse is found in the messages written to Freddie, in his Eastern prep school yearbook. Here, wishes for academic success have a much more taken-for-granted quality. The road to favorable adult outcomes is portrayed as generally pleasurable and virtually assured. These messages also hint that while academic success is important and even expected, it is best to develop a diversified portfolio of activities to complement one's scholarly pursuits:

Freddie, Harvard forever! Well, we're in. I think it'll be rather great. here's hoping we have 4 good years. Harvey

Fred, I tried this year to teach you all that I know about lacrosse. From here on its up to you. you will probably star at Harvard next year, but don't forget what I taught you. Have fun and keep the bottles banging. Thanks for a swell season. Best Wishes, Marvin

From all that I hear it seems to me you're going to be paid for going to college—well I wouldn't go to Harvard either unless I were paid! . . . Keep the scholarships coming. Jim

Ed, what a year!!! stay on the waggon next year and you'll go all the way. Luck in everything. Mel

(South Bayfield, Mass., 1951)

### A Comparison of Close Friends and the Wider Circle

Figure 1 presents a brief overview of areas of contrast in the communications of close friends and those in the wider circle.<sup>15</sup>

*Identity.*—The communications of both close friends and the wider circle can be considered reflected appraisals, but close friends' talk is more uniformly positive and supportive; a soft-focus lens is more often employed in their reflections. The initial similarity between friends and

<sup>15</sup> Although I have neatly connected these processes to the three yearbook rules described at the outset, in reality these data are not nearly so tidy.

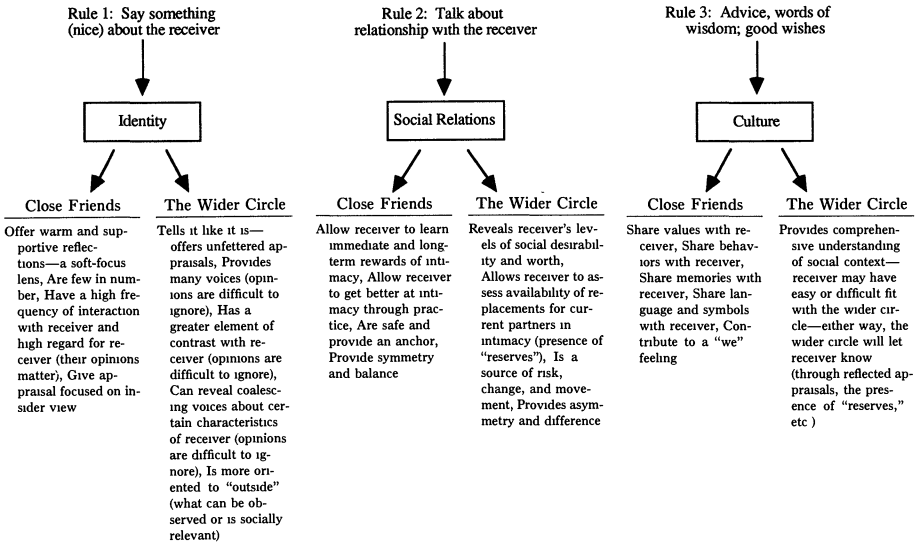


FIG. 1.—A comparison of close friends and the wider circle

subsequent frequent interactions between them likely fosters this more positive, insider view of things. The basic compatibility between close friends increases the probability that communications will have a reinforcing quality that will be associated with feelings of comfort, self-esteem, and self-worth.

Interactions across the wider circle are likely to be less intense and less all-encompassing. At the same time, there are more actors who make up the wider circle. The opinions of many voices may be difficult to ignore, particularly if they emphasize similar themes. Because members of the wider circle generally know less about the individual, their observations and comments are also likely to be more oriented toward what is observable or of immediate interest to them. Their lower level of investment and higher level of distance may also contribute to a style of discourse that can be blunt and highly evaluative. Because the wider circle cuts across more boundaries, there are also likely to be greater areas of contrast between the senders and the receiver of the messages. Collectively, these features create a wide range of communication possibilities and increase the likelihood that the yearbook owner will have an interest in what members of the wider circle have to say.

*Social relations.*—Messages from close friends focus heavily on the relationship itself. The features of such messages are consistent with previous research in depicting close friendships as rewarding and life-enhancing bonds of attachment. Because adolescents have a strong in-

vestment in these relations, it is likely that they will be willing to devote the effort needed to sustain them (learn to compromise, work through problems, and the like). Learning about and maintaining a more mature kind of relationship is likely to be very rewarding.

Since the wider circle has a greater range in terms of what they can write about the relationship, what they do say is also revealing. There is considerable variation across yearbooks in the number of others who openly express their availability as replacements for friends or romantic partners. The presence and overt declarations of such friends-in-waiting would seem to provide adolescents with a clear index of their social desirability. This in turn could influence not only aspects of their identity, but also their social behavior with both intimate and less intimate others.

*Culture.*—Studies of similarity in close friendships contribute to the view that values and behavior develop primarily through interactions with intimate others. This conception is accurate but incomplete: dyads and small groups of friends take shape and must coexist within (or rebel against) a larger peer framework or culture. Thus, the wider circle provides young people with a broader perspective on the world and how nicely they fit into it. The number of friendship overtures received and the valence of reflected appraisals offered provide continuing feedback about how well the adolescent is doing, at least in those areas deemed important by the wider circle.

Overall, processes described under “close friends” in figure 1 provide a relatively positive portrait of the adolescent period. Communications across the wider circle are potentially more unsettling. Through such interactions adolescents may find stronger challenges to basic beliefs, fully confront their level of social worth, and face judgments that have not been softened by the language of intimacy. A focus on the wider circle thus not only highlights the different things adolescents may learn from such communications, but perhaps also serves as a modest corrective to the generally rosy slant of much of the friendship literature (see also Roll and Millen 1979).

### CONCLUSIONS

In this article I analyzed a particular communicative genre—the handwritten messages in high school yearbooks—and contrasted the style and content of messages written by close friends and those in the wider circle. In general, these data lend support to the idea that less intimate others constitute a somewhat tougher audience for the developing adolescent. And it is likely that this analysis represents a somewhat benign or conservative introduction to such interactions, because there is normative pressure to write something positive in yearbooks (rule 1). In addition, year-

book owners have generally been able to exert some control over who will write in their books. Ambert (1994), for example, recently studied retrospective accounts that documented respondents' pain and embarrassment as recipients of what she called "peer abuse." The more oblique forms of communication, such as gossip, can also be blunt and unyielding (Eder 1985; Eder and Enke 1991). Even within the yearbook pages, comments about third parties are often especially harsh. For example, yearbook owners and their friends will sometimes write short descriptions or captions under the photographs of others (examples: "Eternal bitch from hell"; "Big butt idiot"; or, under the photograph of a female honor student, "I'm ugly—I don't have anything better to do with my life"). An even more extreme form of communication involves ignoring the other completely (see Eder 1985).<sup>16</sup>

Although this article has emphasized the potential developmental impact of the wider circle, studies of close friends will undoubtedly continue to be central. Indeed, some of the heightened importance of these relationships likely stems from the greater uncertainties of the wider arena. Many messages from close friend contain references to the importance of "being there":

Tara . . . Thanks for everything you've done for me. I probably would have been lost along time ago if it wasn't for you. I appreciate you more than anyone else in this whole world. You never let me down and you're always there for me . . . love, Lisa (Aurora, Ohio, 1989)

It may be that being there is even more essential to what defines these close friendships than such features as high levels of reciprocal self-disclosure, since the latter definition of friendship leaves out so many types of adolescents (e.g., many males, perhaps lower-SES youths [see appendix], as well as youths who grew up in eras characterized by greater personal reserve).

In addition to being there, close friends do share many of the same characteristics, values, and beliefs. This is also likely to be comforting in the face of the disquieting contrasts sometimes encountered in the wider circle. For example, consider a friend's message to Ralph (the youth who was teased about never being without his slide rule):

To a good buddy who will sooner or later beat me in chess. Craig

<sup>16</sup> For example, one woman in her late sixties pointed to a Japanese-American girl's picture in her yearbook: "I still feel so bad about her. No one would talk to her. It was awful . . . I was one of the only girls who would even speak to her. She used to just walk down the halls—all alone" (Philadelphia, Penn., 1944)

While the message is short and not very sentimental, it establishes important things: (1) I am your friend; I have played chess with you before and there will be many more games to come; and (2) as far as the two of us are concerned, chess is good. That friendships have both an "I'll be there" as well as a "You're like me" component seems an irresistible and intrinsically supportive combination.

### Linking Friendship Qualities to Developmental Outcomes

Sullivan (1953) depicted a connection with a "chum" as a rewarding relationship, but also believed that those who have enjoyed such friendships will be better off over the long haul than those who have not. Success in the peer arena (variously defined) has been linked to higher self-esteem, positive psychological functioning, a better chance for marital success, and even the inhibition of aggression and other antisocial behavior (Hirschi 1969; Parker and Asher 1987; Hartup 1993).

Although the yearbook data do not allow us to explore these connections directly, it seems unlikely that variations in levels of youthful intimacy will have a major impact on the success of adult transitions, since (1) many of these adult outcomes are heavily and independently influenced by broader structural forces and (2) friendship processes are also influenced by these types of structural variables. Sometimes fluctuations in levels of friendship intimacy will have more to do with adolescents' social addresses or locations than with a particular level of social competence,<sup>17</sup> and (3) the concept "intimacy with friends" by itself refers to no particular content. Thus, being there for a friend can mean constantly skipping school and becoming closer while driving around in a jeep (as the young woman in the Philippines described it), as well as something more socially acceptable (see also Giordano et al. 1986; Cairns et al. 1988).<sup>18</sup> For this reason, I tend to agree with only the first half of Youniss

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, dominant conceptions of friendship seem to relate most closely to the relationship styles of white, middle-class females growing up in the modern era.

<sup>18</sup> A link to better mental health is more plausible. Early positive experiences with friendship may illustrate how beneficial such relationships can be, and, if the skill-building aspect is accurate, these experiences should enhance friendship-building and friendship-sustaining abilities. The acquisition of meaningful adult supports could then buffer the negative effects of stress, or contribute independently to a sense of well-being. A complete inability to form youthful friendships could also be an early marker for a generalized level of disturbance that may continue over the life course. Most of the research that has concerned connections to mental health has unfortunately not examined variations in levels of intimacy with friends, but instead has relied on what are essentially measures of prestige (see e.g., the review by Parker and Asher [1987]). The connection to adult heterosexual relations also has appeal. But while it is reasonable to hypothesize that adolescents can carry valuable friendship lessons forward as they forge these new kinds of relationships (e.g., the importance

and Smollar's (1985, p. 139) definition of friendship as "a principled relationship with a prosocial orientation."

What accords an adolescent prestige (the valence of the reflected appraisal) is also situated in time and place. For example, while low peer acceptance has frequently been linked with higher levels of aggression (Parker and Asher 1987), this is not always the case, and it could be argued that the connection will not obtain precisely in those areas where violence and crime are more common. Thus, Jankowski (1991) describes how gang youths initially achieve prestige and sometimes attempt to retrieve it through a variety of aggressive actions (see also Katz 1988). In one of the yearbooks, Yvonna, a young girl attending junior high in a high-crime neighborhood, is commended for her ability to "kick ass." It is very unlikely that one would encounter this type of entry (especially directed to a female) within the pages of yearbooks from a more affluent school. But this peer judgment fits into Yvonna's immediate environment, which has metal detectors at the school's front door and the highest concentration of gang activity in the city.

Concepts such as intimacy and prestige have been central to peer research, but more attention should be directed to the content of what is communicated in the context of both intimate and less intimate relations. This focus would highlight how concerns and identities are shaped around the realities of particular settings, and it would place greater emphasis on what are often significant variations in the way adolescents experience this phase in the life cycle.

## APPENDIX

### Notes on Socioeconomic Status and Ethnicity

The yearbooks used for this research contain messages written by youths growing up in widely differing circumstances. While noting in a general way that peer contexts differ, I have to this point excluded consideration of how such variables as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status seemed to influence the nature of yearbook talk. This enabled me to develop a basic contrast (close friends vs. the wider circle), but the limitations of such a bracketing-off strategy are increasingly recognized (McKenry et al. 1989; Hartup 1993; Heath and McLaughlin 1993; Giordano et al.

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of being there for the other, and the development of trust and reciprocal obligations), a case can also be made that relationships based on high levels of similarity do not make the best training ground for those based on difference. The messages of female best friends sometimes reflect such high levels of sharing, communication, acceptance and interdependence, that they could set up disappointment if romance falls short of the heights of intimacy attained in these earlier relations.

1993). Many of the classic studies of adolescent processes are based on samples of white, middle-class youths; but these and other data point up the need for additional research on how race and class connect to discourse processes, relationship styles, and variations in peer emphases.

In this collection, the messages written by disadvantaged African-American students do appear distinctive in several respects—not only when compared to those written by European-American students, but to African-American youths who attended middle-class or private schools, schools in rural areas, and even these same schools in the 1950s. While some of the variations could be considered stylistic, in other instances these materials highlight what may be more basic differences in the way adolescence is experienced.

### *Close Friends*

Some researchers have suggested that lower-status individuals, lacking resources and opportunities for educational and occupational achievement, tend to place more emphasis on their personal relations. Eckert (1989), for example, concludes that the lower-class “burnouts” she studied rely more heavily than others on their friendships; middle-class youths are described as more instrumental and willing to replace friends as they change institutional affiliations. To the extent that yearbook messages offer even a crude window on these processes, however, one is led to the opposite conclusion—middle- and upper-status students write longer and more involved messages, refer to many more shared memories, and are more likely to use exclusive, intimate language and symbols and to write about being “lost” or “going crazy” without the other. While the messages of the disadvantaged minority students reflect affection and positive regard, such high levels of dyadic interdependence are not as apparent. Some of this difference may stem from the middle-class students’ greater ease and comfort with a written form of communication, but it is unclear how much of the variation can be attributed to this.

A competing hypothesis in the literature emphasizes that some minimum level of resources probably aids the development of intimate friendships (Liebow 1967). For example, many of the memories of middle-class students refer to events and opportunities that greater resources could facilitate:

Missy,

. . . know I’ll leave out something, but most importantly of all: we did all those tons of things together. Again my mind drifts to Myrtle Beach—the ultimate. The greatest moment and memory of our lives and of course we did it together. Well maybe we weren’t connected at the elbow but adjoining rooms was close enough [continues at length] so many other memories . . . you and me are the only ones who can understand them. You and



me have shared alot these past few years. I can't think of anyone else I have trusted or talked or cared about more than you. You have been my best friend and will be always. I'll miss you! Jennifer (Centerville, Ohio, 1987)

A trip to Myrtle Beach is not in itself a guarantee of increased intimacy, but such experiences may facilitate more intrinsic processes such as the trusting and talking and caring to which the writer alludes.

It has also been suggested that growing up in a low-income neighborhood may foster a greater tendency—often based in reality—to see the external environment as a less than friendly or even dangerous place (Anderson 1990; Jankowski 1991), and this could have some spillover effect on the way friendships unfold. The yearbook messages provide suggestive support for this notion, in that a certain wariness is found in some of the messages written by the more disadvantaged students:

To Angelique, . . . What I meant was not to let you supposed to be friends run you over or use you. Your true but silly friend. Tiffany

Rochelle, Thanks for being a friend and remember your smart and you have alot going for you don't let these no good bastards in the world get you down. Tahisha

Kim. . . . P.S. remember to watch your back because tammy johnson want you next. Ha Ha bitch. Keisha

(Toledo, Ohio, 1989)

The comments of more advantaged students contain their share of cynical or world-weary statements (“Only one more year left in this hell-hole”), but do not as often refer to troubles in the immediate social environment (“Watch your back”).

### *The Wider Circle*

Another distinct feature concerns the way in which many of the students from the low-income schools approached rule 3 (Give the receiver some advice, words of wisdom, or good wishes). Given the greater barriers to academic success such students often face, it might be hypothesized that their advice or words of wisdom would emphasize short-run hedonistic pursuits (Cohen 1955).<sup>19</sup> This would also be consistent with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) recent argument that poor minority students must contend with a set of peer norms that discourage academic success and effort. Thus, the following types of messages were especially surprising:

<sup>19</sup> It is important to point out that hedonistic themes are very common throughout the collection (e.g., “Bev. to someone that's always ready for one hell of a party. Never calm down. Always live for the now. Denise”).

## The Wider Circle of Friends

Chuck, . . . I hope you get your act together and keep your grades up because you can't do anything in life without an education. Beverly (Toledo, Ohio 1991)

To Renee, . . . if you can wait for your kids because the road is long and if you have kids the road shortens so stay sweet and good luck. sign: Ms. Cheris Jackson (Toledo, Ohio, 1989)

Philana . . . I wish you luck in your school years & stay away from all of those boys . . . Joyce. PS Stop smoking so much & keep your clothes on. (Toledo, Ohio, 1991)

Philana, . . . you have alot of things in life that you haven't seen and they can wait till the right time. Don't rush life, okay. . . . Keep it up. Also those grades. Keep your mind set completely for college. You see how I messed up . . . Lady B. Keep your panties up. (Toledo, Ohio, 1991)

a very nice sweet young lady . . . Stay sweet and stay out of trouble. say no to drugs. Michele (Toledo, Ohio,)

Bad  
Boys  
Bring  
Babies (Toledo, Ohio, 1990)

Such messages do not necessarily negate the idea that peer norms in disadvantaged schools can be antiachievement in orientation, but they do suggest that such normative systems are complicated and multilayered. Recognizing the presence of so many hazards and pitfalls in their environment, these students may feel a special need to shore each other up with these kinds of admonitions and warnings (see also Rosier and Corsaro 1993). To complicate matters further, consider a set of messages directed to an adolescent who was pregnant at the time her yearbook was signed:

To Nikki, one of my nicest friends in english class. Have fun with your new bundle of joy. Your friend, Joseph Boyd

To sweet Nikki Jones, one of my favorite girls at this school . . . I wish you lots of luck after high school and in the future and hope we will see each other soon after we graduate . . . (name your son after me). P.S. take good care of that baby boy or girl. Love Ronnie

Best of luck with your little baby girl. Nikki if you have a girl her middle name should be Cherise thats mine. Anjelica.

What's up. As you know we will be seniors and that means we have to be serious about our lives and future. May God be with you and yours (baby). Darnell

(Toledo, Ohio, 1984)

There are many other statements of this type in Nikki's yearbook. Close friends were kind and supportive, but again I emphasize the potentially important role of the wider circle: many voices combine to communicate an acceptance of and respect for this young woman and her changing circumstances. These youths do not seem to be at a loss for words. Instead, they appear to have a well-developed repertoire of things to say on such an occasion ("Name your baby after me," or "Have fun with your bundle of joy"). The friendship overtures ("Hope we will see each other soon") provide a further indication that Nikki is unlikely to face social rejection.

Thus, peer contexts need to be distinguished not only by their special mix of norms, worries or preferences, but by the strength of the social controls that are in place and relate to them (Dentler and Erikson 1959; Braithwaite 1989). Currently, our knowledge about and ability to measure what constitutes a peer context or climate can be described as primitive at best. Future research efforts should be directed to the development of methodologies and measurement strategies that can successfully capture and distinguish the normative frameworks within which individual development takes place.

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