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A CASE FOR FRIENDSHIP: A MIXED METHODS INVESTIGATION OF CLOSE
FRIENDSHIPS IN ADULTHOOD

by

Grace M. Kelly

A DISSERTATION

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A CASE FOR FRIENDSHIP: A MIXED METHODS INVESTIGATION OF CLOSE
FRIENDSHIPS IN ADULTHOOD

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University of Nebraska, 2023

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Social connections profoundly impact mental and physical health, identity development, and overall well-being. The landscape of personal relationships has changed dramatically over the past decades. Formalized connections and older social structures are evolving (Smock and Schwartz 2020). Loneliness and social isolation are at epidemic proportions and rising, posing widespread societal consequences (Buecker et al. 2021; Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018). Sociologists have studied relationships like kinship and romantic partnership extensively but have devoted substantially less attention to friendship as a means of providing connection (Eve 2002). My dissertation investigates the importance of platonic friendship bonds in adulthood and explores how these relationships are sustained across the lifespan within people's wider social networks.

In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews and collected ego network data from adults aged 21 to 86 with self-reported important friendships (N=43). I use the life course perspective (Elder 1998) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) as theoretical backgrounds to explore the structural, cultural, and affective nature of friendships. These theories help demonstrate the ways in which our cultural understanding and valuation of friendship are shaped by available language and societal norms. In my first chapter, I discuss patterns in how people defined friendship and

describe the purpose and value of friendship across study members' lives. In the second chapter, I examine change and consistency in friendships over the life course, using the concept of turning points (Baxter and Buchanan 2015; Hutchison 2005). In the final chapter, I use mixed methods analysis (interviews and ego networks) to contextualize friendships within participants' broader social worlds.

Sociological research has focused on many types of interpersonal relationships (in organizational settings, social movements, and the workplace, as well as in romantic, familial and adolescent peer contexts). This dissertation demonstrates that friendship is also a meaningful form of connection in adulthood, and is a dimension of social life deserving of inclusion in mainstream sociology. The combined findings of my chapters deepen our understanding of this relationship type, advance the sociological literature on friendships across the life course, and offer avenues for future research on platonic social connections.

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Finally, this dissertation was inspired by what else... My friendships. In the past year especially, I'm so lucky for the support of my friends. They've been endlessly helpful (from picking me up from the airport to welcoming me into their homes and giving me a place to live). The "original four" who shaped the core of my personality and linguistic centers since middle school, the friends I met on the beaches of Costa Rica and working in a tie dye shop in the Rocky Mountains, a Bumble BFF climbing pal, the sorority sisters I still talk to years after Phi Sigma Tau functions have finished, the women in their forties who befriended a recent college grad and many others new and old have had a hand in this process. Specifically, Grace Rempp has stood in as an advisor,

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, social scientists have examined the substantial evolution in adults' social relationships; in families, romantic partnerships, and social integration broadly (Allan 2008; Bumpass 1990). There have been significant societal shifts in these relationships, characterized by having fewer children, reduced marriage rates, and decreased civic involvement (Smock and Schwartz 2020). While these changes reflect positive shifts such as increased gender equality and a wider acceptance of diverse lifestyles (such as LGBTQ family formations), we have also seen an alarming rise in loneliness and social isolation (Buecker et al. 2021; Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018). Recent work has highlighted that adults are more isolated than in previous eras (Franco 2022, American Perspectives Survey 2021). With fewer children being born, families are often smaller, and individuals may lack the close-knit support networks that come with larger families (Kearney and Levine 2020). Additionally, declining marriage rates mean that fewer people have a lifelong partner to rely on emotionally (Lewis and Eichler 2003). Furthermore, decreased civic engagement and political polarization have led to a weakened sense of community, reducing opportunities for social interaction and leaving individuals feeling isolated (Malon 2021; Putnam 1995). The COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated what had been deemed an American "loneliness epidemic" (Murthy 2017). Collectively, these societal shifts have compounded the issue of loneliness, highlighting the need for fostering meaningful connections (Umberson et al. 2022).

One potentially meaningful type of connection that has *not* been extensively explored in recent decades of sociological research is friendship. There has even been

debate on whether friendship is a sociological topic (Eve 2002). When friendship is the focus of sociological research, the population of interest is often children, adolescents or emerging adults (Kochendorfer and Kerns 2020). Research on peer influence in adolescence and the developmental significance of friendship for children abounds, but this substantial level of sociological interest in friendship does not continue into adulthood (Meter and Card 2016). While other kinds of relationships have diversified and declined in recent decades, we know little about changes to friendship's importance across the life course (Kearney and Levine 2020; Martin et al. 2014; Pahl and Pevalin 2005; Reznik et al. 2005). In the wake of changes to other relationships, friendship may offer a viable means of addressing the pervasive societal challenges of loneliness and social isolation. Friendship is a fundamental aspect of social life and plays a critical role in social integration, identity development, and overall well-being (Adams and Blieszner 1995; Chopik 2017). Despite friendship's significance being widely recognized by the general population, sociological research has not fully explored this potential, especially across the entire adult life course. Some research has conceived of friendships as fragile, less impactful than other kinds of social relationships and not socially prominent in the adulthood (Crocetti and Meeus 2014; Wiseman 1986; Wrzus et al. 2012). However, friendships can contribute to social and emotional support, personal growth, and influence life course trajectories (Amati et al. 2018; Settersten 2015; Shin et al. 2023). By investigating the intricacies of this relationship type, we can better understand the ways in which people cultivate meaningful connections, gain a sense of belonging, and build and maintain support systems over their lives.

Researcher Positionality

My personal motivation to research adults' friendships began in early adulthood. Before graduate school, I was surrounded by friendships in my daily life. When I graduated college, I struggled heavily with the transition into "adult" life. In comparison to adolescence and my undergraduate years, it felt empty, isolating, and work driven. To my dismay, others validated my worries and tried to help me find ways to adjust to what they considered "normal adulthood"— a life without the thriving social support and joy of friendships I had in my younger years. At 22, I worried that this was the only available trajectory for the future. Fortuitously, during this challenging period, I met my first adult friend, who introduced her circle of friends. What struck me about this group of people in their thirties and forties was their vitality, joyfulness, and strong connections. They had a variety of circumstances-- some were married, some parents, others were single-- but they all seemed to have the kinds of fulfilling and consistent friendships I feared I'd lost access to in adulthood. Witnessing these vibrant relationships rekindled my hope for what adult friendship and life could encompass. Throughout my academic journey in graduate school, I immersed myself in the study of social networks and connections. Yet, I discovered a noticeable void in the existing literature-- the absence of research on adult friendships. While friendships among children, teens, and young adults were extensively examined, the same level of attention was not devoted to friendships in adulthood. Having witnessed them myself, and hoping to create a life that included them, I knew this is what I wanted to study.

As such, this dissertation is an inquiry into the lives of adults who have invested in friendship. The overall goal of the dissertation is empirically demonstrate the profound significance of friendships in adulthood and explore how they are sustained throughout the life course. To gain an understanding of friendship dynamics in different stages of the life course, I employ a two-pronged methodological approach. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 34 adults (aged 21 to 86) with close friendships and collected network data from 43 individuals. The interviews consisted of questions about study members' perceptions of friendship and its value, life events and friendship trajectories, changes to their friendship views over time, and their wider social networks and connections. I use the life course perspective (Elder 1998) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) as interpretive frameworks to capture both the structural and affective nature of these connections. The dissertation has three objectives. First, to examine how these individuals define the relationship of "friendship" and understand the role it plays in their lives (Objective 1). Second, to explore friendship trajectories and examine how friendships (and views of friendship) change in relation to life events and over time (Objective 2). Finally, to understand how friendships fit into people's wider social networks and how they contextualize these relationships (Objective 3). The dissertation is organized into three chapters according to these objectives.

In the first chapter, I present an inductive, qualitative account of the participants' descriptions and definitions of friendship. In the first section of the chapter, I discuss patterns in the ways people defined friendship. This chapter takes an interpretive stance (Benzecry and Winchester 2017) and borrows from principles of social constructivism to

explore the meaning of this relationship. As previous research has employed and found substantial variety in meanings of the term “friendship”, this study allowed individuals to ascribe their own significance to the relationship type (Adams et al. 2000). Since friendship does not have a fixed empirical or conversational definition, examining how people perceive and construct meaning in their friendships is important (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The second half of the chapter details the role and value of friendship in the lives of participants. This section explores why friendships are significant throughout adulthood. Both sections are substantiated by participants’ descriptions and narratives of their own friends.

In the second chapter, I explore significant turning points in friendships and discuss general changes to friendships over time. Like the first chapter, this chapter consists of qualitative, interview derived data. Using the concept of turning points (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Doherty 2021), I identify and discuss common life events that impacted participants’ friendships over time. The chapter also presents reflections on how the study members’ friendships changed as they’ve aged. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion of participants’ perspectives on the future of their friendships.

The final chapter is a mixed-methods analysis that contextualizes friendships within larger network structures. For this chapter, I compared and synthesized quantitative social network data with qualitative interview data (Belotti 2008). I explore connections, divergences and further findings among these data sources. The interview data for this chapter elicited information about perceptions of different relationship types, their interconnectedness, potential hierarchies, and how individuals balance their network

connections overall. In the network portion of the data collection, the members of the study provided information of their significant personal connections (and the connections between them). Participants were allowed to list any kind of connection, in order to capture the full scope of relationships that were important to them (Bush et al. 2017; Straits 2000). This data was used to create “ego network” diagrams for each participant (Adams 2019; Wasserman and Faust 1994). The network data was analyzed to look for patterns in the networks of adults who have close friendships in different stages of the life course. Then, the quantitative ego network measures and diagrams were compared to the qualitative quotes. This integrated data provides insights into the interplay between friendships and other kinds of relationships, providing information for the third research objective.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Epistemological Orientation: Interpretive Theory

In a broad sense, an interpretive theoretical lens is most appropriate to answer my research questions. The goal of interpretive theory and research is not to uncover empirical “social facts.” Instead, interpretive theorists assert that individuals make unique and subjective meanings of their experiences (Benzecry and Winchester 2017). The goal of the researcher is to recount, understand and explain these meanings from the perspective of those they study. To describe the participant driven meanings that arise from my data, I employ an interpretive paradigm. This theoretical orientation maps soundly on to the aims of my chapters. The first chapter is based on meaning making, and explores the meanings adults with close friendships ascribe to these relationships, as well

as the significance of these friendships in their lives. In Chapter 2, participants discussed the subjective significance of different life events on their friendships, and how their perceptions of friendship had evolved over time. Chapter 3 also explores constructed relational meanings, by looking at how the significance of friendship contrasts or coincides with the meanings of other close relationships, such as romantic partnerships and kin.

Role of Theory: Symbolic Interactionism and Life Course Theory

Instead of seeking to advance theory, this dissertation employs SI and LCT simply as foundations for interpretation (Abend 2008). Mixed methods research often requires theoretical versatility and at times reconciling disparate paradigms (Greene 2007). In this work, I draw both lines of theory for a better understanding of friendship across the life course. Methodologically, my work has some precedent within the literature. Life course theorists have also incorporated qualitative methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews, to examine the meanings people assign to their relationships (Alwin et al. 2018; Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock 2011; Vacchiano and Spini 2021). Symbolic interactionism has traditionally used qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews. However, using mixed methods research in conjunction with SI can deepen our understanding of research problems (Benzies and Allen 2008). Though conventionally SI and social network analysis have not been paired, recently authors have advocated for the possibilities of using these approaches in tandem (Salvini 2010).

On an interpersonal, micro-sociological scale, SI allows me to interpret the processes by which individuals construct meaning in their friendships. Parallely, the

LCT can yield insight into how social expectations and structural forces provide context for the development and maintenance of friendships throughout the life stages and interpret larger trends. With this twofold theoretical approach, I hope to uncover how the meanings of friendship are adapted to succeed throughout different life stages. Used together, LCT and SI complement my methodological approaches and can provide a holistic picture of the formation, maintenance, and significance of important platonic relationships across the life course.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism does not provide a direct explanation of friendships' meanings. Rather, it provides a guiding set of principles on how these meanings should be examined. Benzecry and Winchester (2017) outline several premises central to the interpretation of meaning within symbolic interactionism (based on Blumer's 1969 piece). The first is that meanings are provided by individuals' social world and are contextual. These meanings impact people's actions. Within our societal context, different meanings are given to different types of relationships. For example, there are strong normative expectations surrounding kin relationships and romantic partnerships that originate from a societal context (Cronin 2015). In comparison, friendships have relatively fewer societal stipulations (except perhaps that they should occupy a lower spot in the hierarchy than relationships with stronger societal standards) (Curry et al. 2012; Rawlins 2017). While typically sociologists have conceptualized this to be a weakness of friendship, it also means that friendship may offer the most freedom and possibility of social relations (Blatterer 2015). Individuals likely recognize these "social realities"

within their own relationships, but those who have significantly invested in their friendships may conceptualize their world differently. Therefore, it's important to consider the meanings these individuals ascribe and see if they differ from normative expectations, as my dissertation seeks to do.

Symbolic interactionism also posits that meaning comes from people's interactions (Blumer 1969). To describe how friendships are practiced and interpreted interpersonally, I draw on the ideas of social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Like Blumer, Berger and Luckmann assert that our social interactions create our beliefs about reality. If individuals experience interactions with friends as meaningful, important, and positive, these relationships will likely be conceptualized as such, even without formal institutional supports and norms. Symbolic interactionists assert that individuals' subjective meanings are "negotiated and modified through a process of interpretation." (Benzecry and Winchester 2017:44) Meanings change through this reflexive interpretation. The meanings people assign to their relationships can change through the processes of self-reflection on social interaction and external contextual meanings. For example, while the relative social meaning of kin versus friendship may impact individuals' decisions on which relationships to prioritize, this is not fixed. Meanings originate from social interactions. If an individual has obligatory, negative interactions with their kin and supportive, voluntary friendships, they may begin to prioritize friendships more highly (Braithwaite et al. 2010). Or, if an individual's romantic relationships are unable to live up to societal expectations of stability,

emotional, and intellectual support, they may start to view friendship as an essential way to fulfill these needs (Finkel et al. 2014; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004).

Additionally, Berger and Luckmann argue beliefs about reality created from social interaction have the potential to construct and reconstruct institutions (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Liebrucks 2001). This could affect friendships positively or negatively. If meaningful interactions with friends help create a reality in which they are believed to be valuable, this may mean we will start to see friendship reach the level of societal legitimacy of other relationships. On the other hand, if individuals routinely interact with friends who deem friendship less valuable than other relationships, this will serve to reinstitutionalize other relationships and de-legitimize friendships (Budgeon 2006; Cronin 2015).

Life Course Perspective

The second strand of theory I use is LCT. As with SI, my research does not explicitly test proponents of the life course theory. It is used as an interpretive lens (Abend 2008). LCT draws from multidisciplinary sources, such as sociology, demography, anthropology, and psychology (Hutchison 2005). The theory “looks at how chronological age, common life transitions, and social change shape people’s lives from birth to death.” (Hutchison 2010:20) It can be used in both macro and micro contexts, by exploring larger societal and cultural structures that result in patterned life outcomes and examining individual life event trajectories. Although the life course perspective has often been used in large scale quantitative analysis, it can also be incorporated into more interpretive qualitative research (Locke and Lloyd-Sherlock 2011).

Life Events, Turning Points, Transitions and Trajectories.

Primarily, this dissertation looks at change in friendships over time through life events and turning points. LC theorists posit that each individual's life is comprised of an "event history, or the sequence of events, experiences, and transitions." (Hutchison 2005:144) These "life events" can take place in many spheres of life (i.e., death of a family member and a career change are both life events). Life events can be both positive and negative, anticipated, or unanticipated (Pearlin and Skaff 1996). Life events generally spur change and require adaptation. Especially momentous life events are referred to as "turning points," events that cause significant and lasting change in a person's life trajectory (Hutchison 2005).

People also experience role "transitions" throughout their life course, generally based on changing normative expectations within the family (Carter and McGoldrick 1999). These transitions often mark the movement from one life stage to the next (i.e., marriage, childbirth). The life course perspective explains how people inhabit different relational roles at different times of their life (Evandrou and Glaser 2004; Macmillan and Copher 2005; Wrzus et al. 2013). As such, there is reason to believe that the meaning and importance of certain types of relationships are perceived differently in different life stages. The LCT concept of "age norms" can provide some context for how people might interpret the meanings of their relationships in different life stages. Ages norms are described as "the behaviors expected of people of a specific age in a given society at a particular point in time; they specify the expected relationships with family, friends, groups, and organizations." (Hooyman and Kiyak 2002:41) These norms may be affected

by the individual's "cohort", the group of people born within one historical time period and cultural context (Hutchison 2005).

Finally, "trajectories" are the aggregate of a person's many life transitions, life events and turning points. Life trajectories "involve long-term patterns of stability and change in a person's life and usually involve multiple transitions." (Hutchison 2005:144) A person's life can be made up of multiple interwoven trajectories, such as health, work, family, and other relationships. LCT firmly asserts that each person's trajectory is connected to other individuals' through the concept of "linked lives." (Elder 1998)

I use some of the LCT's concepts to scaffold the research design and analysis. In the qualitative interviews, I collect information about individuals' life trajectories in relation to their friendships by asking about life events, turning points, and role transitions. Life events can lead to role transitions and changes in relational meanings and importance (Doherty 2021). I ask about how individuals' trajectories potentially changed the meaning of their relationships, and how their views on friendship have evolved over time. I explore how some friendships remain successful even in life stages where prioritizing close friendship may not be congruent with "normative, age-related social network changes." (Wrzus et al. 2013:53). I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how some friendships continue to flourish and remain significant despite these age norms. To answer these questions, I ask individuals how they conceptualize and invest in friendship through the different life stages and transitions they encounter over time. Some research has suggested that due to their flexible nature, friendships may be uniquely suited to weather the transitions individuals experience in their lives (Becker et al. 2009; Johnson

2001; Ledbetter et al. 2017; Marin and Hampton 2019; Ruppel et al. 2017) By using the concepts of LCT in conjunction with my two methodologies, I hope to substantiate these findings and contextualize friendships within my participant's overall life course.

CHAPTER ONE: “ENRICHING LIFE” THE ROLE AND MEANING OF FRIENDSHIP

INTRODUCTION

Due to its voluntary nature and lack of institutionalization, friendship has been conceptualized as a “pure” relationship, outside of larger social and economic structures (Eve 2002; Giddens 1992). Perhaps because of this, it has been thought of as a highly personal matter, rather than a socially significant one (Allan 1998; Harris and Vazire 2016; O’Connor 1998). Friendships can be challenging to study because they lack the legal, social, and religious recognition that other relationships have (Rawlins 2017). Unlike more “obligatory” relationships, friends can determine exactly what their relationships look like and negotiate them on their own terms. Unfortunately, many studies employ divergent conceptualizations of friendship, so it can be difficult to assess the positive impacts of these relationships when compared to more clearly operationalized biosocial relationships (Adams et al. 2000). For example, passing acquaintances and deep, long lasting platonic bonds generally both fall under the broad definition of “friendship” (Lee 2022; Rybak and McAndrew 2006). With such significant variation in the way these relationships are empirically defined, friendship’s value may prove difficult to measure and quantify. Consequently, earlier research may underestimate the significance and potential utility of platonic relationships throughout adulthood. While some research has suggested the boundlessness of friendship makes the relationship fragile and impermanent (Wiseman 1986), this chapter offers evidence for a different thesis. Using study members’ definitions and explanations of friendship, I argue

that friendships can be very significant across the life course when conceptualized as such (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969).

This chapter contributes to the existing body of sociological literature in several ways. The study employed an inductive, qualitative approach to explore the significance and role of friendship throughout the life course, drawn from a purposive sample of adults with strong friendships. Research on friendship often relies on assumptions made by both researchers and participants regarding its nature. As mentioned previously, with the lack of standardized and consistent operationalization, friendship's influence over the life course can be viewed as peripheral. To address this issue, the current research directly elicits participant definitions of friendship. This methodological approach allows for conceptualizations articulated by participants themselves, rather than definitions imposed by the researcher or study design. The chapter also details the perceived role that friendship plays in the lives of the study members, substantiated by narratives of their own lived experiences. The differentiation between friendship "definitions" and "roles" is somewhat unique to the present research (Wiggins and Rubin 1986) and is one way to explore the perceived value of the relationship type across the life course.

This chapter is organized into two main sections. First, participant's definitions of friendships are presented, and themes amongst the definitions are explored. One subtheme, consistent with literature ("degrees of intimacy") is also discussed in this section (Johnson et al. 2003; Lee 2022). Next, I discuss themes related to the role and significance of friendship, as communicated by study members. The chapter synthesizes both topics and recounts recurring themes in friendship definitions, friendship functions

and friendships experiences. These participant driven narratives showcase the ways in which friendships can be meaningful, fulfilling and beneficial throughout all phases of life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Friendship

Friend is not a formally defined social role, and the meaning of any particular friendship must be negotiated by its participants. It is assumed by many (both researchers and research participants) that “friend” is a universally shared designation (Sherman et al. 2000; Rybak and McAndrew 2006). Consequently, researchers rarely interrogate the meaning of friendship when they conduct empirical studies. Yet, what constitutes a “friend” is highly variable (Adams et al. 2000). Friendships are characterized by their voluntary nature (Blatterer 2015), but there is an enormous range in what is considered “friendship.” The result of this uncritical application is that in empirical discussions, “friend” can refer to anything from a casual acquaintance to the functional equivalent of a life partner. This is one challenge in assessing “friendship” and its implications for health, wellbeing and other outcomes since studies may not be examining the same kind of relationships at all-- even if their nomenclature is identical (Lee 2022).

Research on the role of friendship occupies in the lives of adults is rare (Wiggins and Rubin 1986). The role of friendship within adolescence have been thoroughly examined, but the buck seems to stop there (Giletta et al. 2021; Montgomery et al., 2020). Even in studies of young people, the meaning of friendship is largely unexplored (Kitts and Leal 2021). Owing to the many possible interpretations of friendship and the ways it

has been examined, platonic, non-kin relationships may be viewed as having an insubstantial role in the lives of adults (Neyer et al. 2011). When these meanings are not disambiguated, social scientists may not be able to accurately capture its effects and subsequently overlook the merits of studying friendship. This is especially true when friendship is compared to other types of relationships (Crocetti and Meeus 2014). Friendship has also been viewed within the social science paradigm of resource exchange, which, if anything, has served to invalidate its importance (Eve 2002; Bellotti 2008). Resource and exchange frameworks are not adequate for capturing the cumulative, rather than direct effects of friendship (Eve 2002).

Some authors have argued that friendships are the backdrop from which everything happens in society, even if their effects are more difficult to trace (Eve 2002). Friendships also influence macro-level features of society, by reproducing and reinforcing patterns (Rawlins 2017). Network researchers have examined friendship broadly in terms of social support and network size (Gillespie et al. 2015). However, we know friendship *quality* rather than quantity is a much more important measure for wellbeing outcomes such as life satisfaction (Gillespie et al. 2015). Research should critically assess what types of relationships “friendship” studies are actually capturing. Some cutting-edge network research has begun to re-conceptualize the multidimensional meanings of friendship and determine its importance but is in its nascent stages (Kitts and Leal 2021; Small 2017). Friendships are an important social unit, which can organize people's trajectories (Eve 2002). Limited to the paradigms from which it has been

studied, we miss the indirect and cumulative effects that friendship has on the life course (Eve 2002).

The present study implements an inductive, participant-driven method to examine how adults across the life course conceptualize their friendships. This flexible approach does not limit these conceptions to any specific prior theoretical orientations or assumptions about friendship. Instead, I allow participants in the study to describe their friendship meanings and how they've socially constructed this role (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Degrees of Intimacy

Studies often do not interrogate the meaning of friendship, but in some instances have investigated its strength. Despite the paucity of research that specifies what is meant by friendship on a broad scale, some studies have examined very close friendships, as my dissertation seeks to do. Recently the terms “passionate friendship” (Diamond 2002; Glover et al. 2015; Peterson 2010) and “bromance” (Robinson et al. 2018) have emerged to describe close and intimate friendships. However, this research largely uses samples of young adults, and the relationships under study (especially “passionate friendships”) contain potentially romantic components. These studies investigate gendered processes of friendship among young people, as well as friendships between individuals with differing sexual orientations (Diamond 2002; Glover et al. 2015). Due to the populations used in these studies and their framing, there is some romantic ambiguity in these relationships. This may change the normative significance of passionate friendships to something more akin to romantic dyads. While this is outside the scope of this research project, I may

encounter these types of relationships among my participants and inquire into their significance, if this is the case. Nonetheless, by investigating the closest friendships of adults in young adulthood and beyond, this study expands the available literature on close friendships to new populations.

Additionally, some researchers have tried to narrow in on the factors that differentiate friends' levels of closeness and importance. In one analysis of casual, close, and best friends, disclosure was used to characterize the different levels (Johnson et al. 2003). Disclosure has often been used as a proxy for level of importance and closeness, but recent research calls this into question (Bearman and Parigi 2004; Dolgin et al. 1991; Small 2017). In studies on who individuals regularly disclose important matters, it was found that disclosure may not even take place between friends at all-- it was just as likely to take place among near strangers (Bearman and Parigi 2004; Small 2017). This research posited that this is due to proximity and the lack of potentially negative involvement of acquaintances in the matters being disclosed (Small 2017). Longitudinal work has also found that disclosure may not be an appropriate proxy for friends' closeness and significance. One study found that while expressing intimacy and disclosure were initially important for friendships, they were not significant predictors of the relationships longevity (Ledbetter et al. 2007). Therefore, we may need to consider factors beyond disclosure when trying to determine what makes friendships fulfilling and lasting. By collecting in depth interview data on study members' conceptualizations of friendship, this study gains a fuller picture of not only how they define their relationship, but also how they cultivate closeness within it.

Gender and Friendship

Despite the heterogeneity of friendship meanings in studies, there are some factors that seem to broadly affect friendship's significance (Policarpo 2015). One demographic factor that has been conceptualized as central to the experience of friendship is gender. Gender has long been examined as one of the primary factors that shape friendship expectations, behaviors, and interactions (Aukett 1988; Fox et al., 1985; Hansford and Bank 2005; O'Connor 1992). Many studies look at differences in how men and women view and practice their friendships (O'Connor 1992; Atkins 2020). There is a wide array of classic sources claiming that men's and women's friendships are in entirely different spheres of affective feeling and operation (Bellotti 2008). Foundational work on gender and friendship found dispositional and structural differences in men and women's friendships across the life cycle (Fischer and Oliner 1983). This scholarship suggests that men have "side by side" friendships, while women prefer "face to face" relationships (Wright 1982). These descriptors spoke to the findings of activity-centered, group-oriented relationships of men and close-knit, disclosure-centered relationships of women (Wright 1982).

In-depth research on men's friendships is relatively rare (Butera 2006; Jacobus 1995). There have been pieces devoted entirely to discussing the difficulty of recruiting men in friendship studies (Butera 2006). Authors have posited that these challenges arise from gendered views of friendship. Men may conceptualize the discussion of their platonic relationships as emotional labor, a "feminine" domain, and not worthy of scientific research (Butera 2006). While this conclusion is somewhat disparaging, it may

speak to the cultural pressures men are under to *not* be emotionally expressive about their friendships (Tognoli 1980). Men are subject to stronger homophobic gender norms and may fear judgments surrounding close friendship (Hess 1979; Bank and Hansford 2000). Intimacy, closeness, and friend's support are all negatively correlated with homophobia and emotional restraint, characteristics men are more deeply socialized into (Bank and Hansford 2000).

To create close friendships, "men must actively defy the myths in our culture which act as constraints against changing sex roles. Homophobia, competitiveness, and inexpressiveness are not useful components of the male role" (Tognoli 1980: 278) While these norms may help men avoid social scrutiny, they are not conducive for building strong relationships. Lacking positive friendship models is negatively correlated with intimacy and support, but having these models can increase friendship's benefits (Bank and Hansford 2000). This suggests that creating and promoting positive cultural models of male friendship can help men to fully reap the rewards of these relationships. Instead of focusing on a deficit model that asks why men "avoid" strong friendships, some researchers propose investigation into the reasons women are better equipped to establish supportive and intimate friendships (Bank and Hansford 2000). The answer may well be the strong gender pressures and norms that have been and are engrained throughout the life course.

Despite the potential differences in normative pressures discussed here, other research argues that gendered friendship trends should be interpreted with caution (Wright 1988; Adams and Blieszner 1994). More recent research suggests that this

caution is warranted, and finds smaller effects of gender than previously thought, or even no effects (Gillespie et al. 2015). For example, in a large-scale recreation of Fischer and Oliner's 1983 study, there were no substantial gender differences in the number of friends people can count on to celebrate birthdays, discuss intimate matters like one's sex life, or depend upon when experiencing trouble late at night (Gillespie et al. 2015). In this study, within gender differences outweighed between gender differences (Gillespie et al. 2015). Seminal work on women's friendship has also been critiqued for overemphasizing difference, without acknowledging that the influential roles friendship serves for women (in reinforcing identity and emotional rather than instrumental bonding) also take place in men's' friendships (Matthews 1993; O'Connor 1992). Additionally, men and women seem to value friendship in similar manners. In studies of friendship commitment and importance, men and women showed no substantial differences (Bank and Hansford 2000).

The Present Study

Through the amalgamation of previous research, it is evident that there are aspects of friendship that should be explored in more depth. The first goal of this chapter is to understand what meanings participants ascribe the relationship of friendship. By examining these meanings, the first section of this chapter explicitly addresses the lack of consistent friendship definitions across prior studies (Adams et al. 2000). In this section, I also examine how participants perceive "degrees" or levels of friendship and the variety associated with the term. This subtheme adds the nascent field of studies that have begun to problematize "friendship" as a blanket term (Kitts and Leal 2021; Lee 2022). By

allowing participants to outline precisely what they mean by friendship and describe their experiences, we can more clearly assess the role and value of this relationship type across the life course. This is the second goal of the chapter. Finally, though gender differences in friendship are not as exaggerated as we might have previously thought, this study will add to the literature by inspecting the potentially gendered patterns in the ways participants define and experience friendship (Gillespie et al. 2015; Wright 1982).

METHODS

Recruitment

This chapter is based on an analysis of semi-structured interview data from a sample of adults with close friendships. These interviews were part of a larger study which included social network data collection (Wasserman and Faust 1994). The interviews were conducted between 2021-2022. Participants were recruited through physical and online flyers (which outlined the aims of the study), and snowball sampling. I also posted calls for participants on social media and shared flyers with any interested parties to distribute on their own. After taking part in the study, participants were provided with study flyers to share with their own contacts. In some cases, study members recommended other potential study members to me directly, and I initiated contact with these individuals via email or phone.

All potential participants were asked the following screening questions: “What is your age?”, “What is your gender identity?”, “Do you have (or have you ever had) at least one significant, long-lasting friendship (someone you would feel comfortable confiding anything to, relationships that you foresee lasting your whole life)?” These

questions supplied the eligibility criteria and allowed for purposive sampling (Tongco 2007). To take part in the study, individuals were required to have had at least one significant, long-lasting friendship. The demographic questions were used for purposive sampling. As the study aimed to explore gender and life course differences in friendship perceptions, the recruiting was targeted to collect a sample with equal subgroups of male and female respondents in different age groups. Though the previous literature generally focuses on male and female friendship differences, several participants identified outside of this gender binary (Atkins 2020; Fischer and Olicker 1983; Connor 1992). If participants met the eligibility criteria, they were asked which pieces of the study they wanted to complete (network data collection and in-depth interview or solely network data collection)¹. Then, we scheduled an in-person or Zoom call for their preferred data collection.

I conducted interviews with 34 individuals (see Appendix C), ranging in age from 22 to 86 years, with a median age of 45 (and mean age of 46.2 years). Of these participants, 47% (n=16) identified as female, 50% as male (n=17), and 3% as nonbinary and transgender (n=1). Many respondents (65%, n=22) identified as “White or Caucasian”, while 9% identified as “Hispanic or Latino” (n=3), followed by 9% as “Black or African American” (n=3) and 7% as “Asian or Pacific Islander”. About 6% identified as “Biracial or Multiracial” (n=2) and an additional 6% identified as “Other” or did not report a racial identification (n=2).

Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted both online via Zoom and in person from November 2021 to July 2022. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were audio recorded. They were then transcribed by the principal investigator. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 105 minutes. Participants were given a \$50 gift card as compensation for their participation.

Interview Protocol

The interviews were semi-structured (Kallio et al. 2016). Participants were able to concentrate on the topics they wanted to focus most on and were asked follow-up questions accordingly. Prior to the interview, participants created an ego network map visualization with the help of the interviewer (Adams 2020). They could reference this map throughout the interview (Tubaro et al. 2015). Participants were asked questions about their definition of friendship, and about friendship's overall significance. They also described specific friendships in their personal networks. As part of the larger interview, they were also invited to discuss their wider social networks and to compare friendship to other types of relationships. Additionally, in later parts of the study, participants detailed the history of specific friendships by describing relationship development in response to life events and turning points (Doherty 2021). Finally, participants discussed how friendship had changed over their lives in general. After the interview, if they had not previously completed it, participants were directed to a brief demographic survey (age, gender, race, marital status, income, and location).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed. These transcriptions were de-identified and put into MaxQDA for analysis. The transcripts were first open-coded (“initial coding”) (Charmaz 2014; Saldaña 2021). For this chapter, the thematic coding process was largely inductive, and did not rely on a priori coding (Blair 2015). This emergent coding strategy fit with the research aims, as it allowed me to best describe study members’ subjective friendship meanings and the active constructions of this relationship type (Benzecry and Winchester 2017; Berger and Luckmann 1966). During the first cycle coding process, several different coding methods were applied to the data. I assigned structural codes to organize and assess the content of the data. I used descriptive and process coding to enumerate the topics and participants discussed and how they did so. I employed in-vivo codes to capture the ways in which participants conceptualized ideas in their own voices. In-Vivo codes consisted of direct quotes and phrasing used by the participants, which could represent ideas shared by other participants or recurring themes in their own interviews. I used emotion coding to indicate tone as participants described events they recalled and their feelings toward topics. Emotion codes were often accompanied by discernable emotional expressions, such as tears, laughter or change in inflection. I applied value codes to the data to denote participants’ expressions of attitudes and beliefs. Finally, some concept codes were developed. I produced concept codes by examining existing codes and identifying patterns. Rather than subdividing the data, these codes “lumped” (Saldaña 2021; Mihas, 2014) sections of data together to describe the general idea expressed. For example, codes that expressed similar concepts like “divorce” and “a

breakup” were aggregated into one concept, “romantic relationship dissolution”.

Throughout and after the first cycle coding process, I wrote code memos to expound on potentially important codes and begin to identify patterns in the data. I used code memos to capture initial thoughts, reflections and interpretations of the first cycle codes. These memos were used as a reference in later stages of analysis.

After first cycle coding, I used code mapping to visualize interconnections between the data, consolidate similar and duplicate codes, and assist with category generation. Second cycle coding consisted of pattern coding and focused coding (Saldaña 2021). I used these methods to organize thematically and conceptually similar codes and assign meaning. I developed themes from the resulting codes. I then narrowed themes down to elements (Durbin 2010). Elements of each theme were identified by pulling all of the coded segments that corresponded with the larger theme code and inventorying the topics the theme consisted of. For example, the first definition theme of “mutuality” was multifaceted. Items I coded into the “mutuality” theme included segments of the interviews containing the following elements: explicit use of the word mutuality, discussion of reciprocated actions and emotions, equality in the relationship (being on the “same level”), and a give and take in the relationship (“two-way street”). In the results section, each theme is described by listing its elements. Then, the meaning of the theme is further illustrated through quotes drawn from the interviews.

RESULTS

The Meaning of Friendship

The first focus of this chapter is on participant descriptions of what friendship means to them. Each interview began by asking the participant to define “friendship” broadly (Sherman et al. 2000; Rybak and McAndrew 2006). Participants provided their perceptions of friendship in general and sometimes added to these definitions with descriptions of their own friendships. The following section describes what their definitions consisted of and draws connections between different participant definitions. Eight primary themes were developed out of participant explanations of friendship’s characteristics: mutuality, dependability, enjoyment, comfortability, understanding, growth, accountability, comparison to other relationship types. Additionally, there was one subtheme present in many participant descriptions, degrees of intimacy. Participants expanded on the themes by sharing anecdotes, significant life events, and engaging narratives centered around their friendships.

Mutuality

The theme of mutuality was referenced often by participants (n=38). This finding is consistent with one meta-analysis on children and adults’ friendships, which listed reciprocity and mutuality were common friendship characteristics (Hall 2011). In the present study, the elements of the mutuality theme included explicit use of the word mutuality, discussion of reciprocated actions and emotions, equality in the relationship (being on the “same level”), and a give and take in the relationship (“two-way street”). Diego, a man in his mid-fifties, clearly and succinctly defined friendship as the ability to

rely on someone and know that the feeling was mutual. To him, a friend was: *A person, you can count on, they can count on you. So, it's a mutual thing.* Other middle-aged men, such as Eric (in his mid-thirties) similarly emphasized mutuality, saying that friendship consisted of, *“A mutual trust. Respect.”* Another man in his thirties, Lamar, emphasized the aspects of growth, comfortability, and mutuality. In his own friendships, he tried to supply support, safety, and encouragement to achieve. It was important to him that this was a mutual goal: *To me, it's the ability to develop a relationship where you can access someone as a support system that... Where, you know, not only is a person helping you to grow or achieve, or feel safe, but they can also provide that to you, as well.*

When participants discussed their own friendships and friendship histories in later parts of the interviews, mutuality was rarely mentioned. Instead, some participants discussed a *lack* of mutuality in previous friendships, suggesting that this trait was a base expectation for friendships they actively maintained.

Dependability

The theme of dependability was also mentioned many times in the data (n=40). It is notable that this friendship trait was one of the most often cited in friendship definitions, because previous research has suggested that individuals may *not* rely on their friends in ways they would other relationships, since friends have no formal obligations to fulfill one another's needs (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995; Rawlins 2017). This theme was made up of references to physical and emotional help, support, needs fulfillment and the ability to “count on”, “rely on” and “lean on” friends. These traits were mentioned in many friendship definitions, and were sometimes the sole qualifiers for friendship. Errol,

a man in his seventies, defined friendship through the simple criteria of this theme: [a friend is] *Someone that I could rely on if needed. Someone that's dependable.* Kim, a 49-year-old woman, said something very similar. Her definition also reinstated the theme of mutuality—she stated clear expectations for her friends and wanted to provide the same: *How would I define friendship... Somebody that you can count on to be there for you. And someone you can count on to be there for them.* Ellen, a 62-year-old woman, and Diane, a 75-year-old woman, did not suffer fair weather friends. They had similar definitions. To them, a friend was someone you could depend upon in any situation. Ellen described a friend as: *The person that you want to call when things are either really good or really bad-- that you know will be there either way.* Diane echoed Ellen, listing qualities she associated with friendship: *Talk about most things, count on them to have your back in hard times and be there to celebrate in good times. I mean, I think those are important characteristics of friends.*

Cecil, the oldest participant in the sample (an 86-year-old woman), also said she could call on friends in difficult situations. To Cecil, the relationship of friendship consisted of both physical and emotional assistance: *You know, you can call on them if need be. Whether or not it would be something that they would have to help you with physically or if you are going through some kind of emotional problem and you had to discuss it with them--or wanted to discuss it with somebody.*

Dependability also appeared in descriptions of the participant's own friends and their experiences with them. Norah, a woman in her sixties, spoke about her best friend, highlighting she valued their shared interests and a love of their home state. Despite their

similarities, what truly stood out to Norah was the knowledge that she could rely on her best friend, no matter the circumstance. She described the things she appreciated about their relationship: *This enjoyment of the outdoors that we both have and South Dakota are things I certainly value, but there is that sense that she would have my back, no matter what. And it is that if the police arrested me for murder, she would come right down there saying, 'Well they deserved it! Whoever she killed! I don't even know who it is, but they deserved it!' She believes the best in me, always.*"

Though Norah used a hyperbolic scenario to in this description, her words demonstrate the unwavering loyalty and dependability of her close friendship. These traits were also accompanied by her friend's profound belief in "the best" of Norah. Regan, in her forties, expressed a similar sentiment about her closest friends. For her, the thing that differentiated "friends" from "ride or dies" was their dependability.

My ride or die people are the people that I immediately call if I need anything, or they need anything. We are on speed dial, you know. It's just the way it is! We all live in different states, we all live totally across the country from each other, but I know for a fact those people, if I were to say, 'I need you right now', they would get in the car.

Regan had certainty in the fact that these friends could be called upon in times of need, even though physical distance separated them. This dependability was not something Regan ever questioned— *"It's just the way it is!"*

While Regan and Norah spoke about hypothetical situations, some participants spoke about very concrete ways in which they relied upon their friends to be dependable. Ophelia, a woman in her late sixties, described her best friend as someone who

“absolutely personifies the definition of friendship.” Ophelia was certain that her friend would be there in any situation. Her reliance on this friend was solidified by their legal commitments: *She's somebody that I could rely on. She would do anything for me. She's my power of attorney. She's my executor of my will. She is somebody that I could really, really depend on, no matter what.*

While the previous participants described how they could depend on their friends in emergency scenarios, the quality dependability was also very important in a practical, daily sense. Other participants spoke about relying on their friends in more mundane and routine ways. Clarence, a since retired man in his seventies, described his friends as dependable in everyday ways. He developed many of his friendships through the workplace: *Troy and Ken was all professional, you know... Troy was always fun to tease! Every time he came to my office, I gave him something else to do! Then he would do it! So he was dependable! Ken, I was there when we hired and moved him up to be at the junior high. He took my job, so we just have that professionally. And then we go off and referee. So, it seems like that's what I kind of gravitate toward.*

Though Clarence teased his friend by giving him constant tasks, the fact that Troy demonstrated his dependability early on in the relationship built a strong foundation for their relationship. He also knew he could rely on his friend Ken-- so much so that he helped select him as a successor in his job. The men's shared workplace created an environment in which Clarence witnessed his friends dependability regularly. Though he and his friends spent time together outside of their job (like refereeing together) having

the prior knowledge that he could rely on them was something he appreciated, and he “gravitated” toward these kinds of friendships.

Despite both being in their seventies, Ernest said one of his best friends was often a “*help with physical things.*” The two men belonged to volunteer organization, where they relied on each other to complete projects: *Well, we're both in Rotary. If I asked him for some help or ask him to do something with me, there's no hesitation. Paul is one that is willing to help whenever I ask.* Ernest’s reliance on Paul seemed both physical and emotional, as he described when comparing their relationship to his friendship definition: *I: Would you say your friendship is different, or the same as your friendship definition that you gave?*

Ernest: In a number of ways, it's the same, because it comes down to reliability, trust-knowing that I can lean on him if I need to do so.

Not only did Paul provide him with concrete help with projects and tasks, he was someone Ernest could “lean on.” While prior research has conceptualized friendship as voluntary and free from the tangible responsibilities of other relationships, this section demonstrates that this was not the way the study members conceived of or experienced the relationship (Eve 2002; Giddens 1992). Instead, in adulthood, these individuals relied heavily on their friends, and felt the relationship was characterized by the ability to do so.

Enjoyment

Central to the participant definitions of friendship and descriptions of their closest friends was just how much they liked these people and enjoyed time spent with them. The theme

of enjoyment (n=27) included references to fun, humor, happiness, having “good times” or “great times”, speaking about friendship as “enriching”, discussing liking their friends as people (“my favorite”), and enjoying time together. Enjoyment was a key characteristic in many definitions of friendship. As Samuel, a 27-year-old man put it, “friends” were: *I guess just people, you can get along with, people you can spend time with, people you enjoy spending time with.* Brady, another man in his late twenties, echoed this sentiment: *My most general definition of friendship would actually just be: You find a person, decide that you like them, and more or less let them know that! You two now interact!* Scott, in his early sixties, described how a friend was someone to share and enjoy life with, while underscoring the dependability other participants spoke about: *Someone you share life with, someone that you just enjoy being around and someone who, you know would always be there if you needed it.*

Leo, a 22-year-old man, underscored the voluntary, enjoyment and companionship-based nature of friendship: *I think that it's a connection purely based on companionship and just well, I guess wanting to spend time together or interact for, just for the purpose of interacting.* He contrasted this quality of friendship with other types of relationships: *Not for like-- I think, I think it [friendship] could exist in other types of relationships, but the reason I say that is because you know, like a romantic relationship, might just be based on lust and might not have friendship in it. Although it could. Family relationships, you know, could be based on like expectations. Although it could have friendship as well.* He viewed romantic relationships as different from friendships, due to the potential for sexual desire (rather than simply companionship and enjoyment) to be a

defining characteristic. He also mentioned the obligatory expectations of family memberships (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995). While Leo stated that these relationships *could* have the positive features of friendship, they also could have these potentially conflicting dimensions.

A thirty-one-year-old study member, Adam, discussed several features of friendship in his definition, but enjoyment was its heart: *I would say that friendship is loyalty, empathy... And I'm a big introvert, so there's very few people that I actually like. So, I would say that friendships also are like the few people that I actually care to hear about their day. That's how I'm going to break down friendship.* Brianna, a woman in her early twenties, said something very similar: *I would say just people that I willingly like to give my time to. Anyone that I would willingly like to give my time to.* As discussed, friendships have been conceived of as voluntary (Giddens 1992). The enjoyment-based definitions specifically demonstrate the *chosen* nature of this relationship type (Pahl and Pevalin 2005), especially for individuals like Brianna and Adam, who feel they are selective with their time and affection. Prior research has suggested that people cease to “choose” peripheral connections as they age, so this definitional aspect also signals friendship’s perceived value (Wrutz et al. 2012).

In their descriptions of their friendships and experiences participants expanded on how enjoyment was a primary feature of this type of relationship. While many parts of the interview focused on the profound emotional impacts of friendships and their significance through life changes, participants also consistently emphasized the importance of simply enjoying their friends as people. At the end of his interview,

Leo stressed this quality. He contrasted what he viewed as important aspects of friendship in this quote: *Interviewer: Is anything about friendship that I missed that you'd like to tell me? Leo: Yeah! Yeah, which I guess most of this [interview] is geared towards like the most sacred part of a friendship, and while that is I guess, probably the most important thing about your friendships, something that is like so important is just like to shoot the shit with him! When I went to LA it was mostly that and I just had, like the best time. We didn't do shit and I had the best time, just like laughing my ass off.*

Though Leo traveled across the country to visit his best friend, the two didn't have to do any activities or sightseeing to entertain themselves. They had “*the best time*” simply relishing in each other's company and shared humor. He viewed this as equally as important as the more “*sacred*” and emotional parts of friendship. At the end of his interview, Clarence, in his seventies, also reemphasized enjoyment: *Interviewer: Is there anything that you think I've missed about your friendships that you'd like to talk about? Clarence: Yeah... Maybe that they're a little bit more important to me than I've said to you. You know, there isn't a whole lot of people there and there's a whole lot of people at the next level. You know, I have a lot of friends, but I don't have... It's important! I like these guys. I like these guys to like me, and I like to like them! So, I want you to know that it's important to me. That would be my answer.* In this quote, Clarence expressed the importance of mutual enjoyment in his friendships. His closest friends were uniquely important, even though he was a social person who had many friends “*at the next level.*” He cared that the men in his closest circle liked him, and he found joy in their friendship too.

Other participants spoke about deeply enjoying even very ordinary tasks when together. Friends enriched even the most monotonous aspects of life. Selene, a woman in her twenties, described how living with her best friend improved her day-to-day life: *We make mundane life fun and enjoyable with each other. That's why we choose to do everyday life with each other, because we find that it's magical when it's just the two of us!* Brianna agreed, saying *"I definitely love spending time with her-- more than anyone else!"* Making mundane moments *"magical"* was not unique to this pair. Scott, who was in his sixties, described the visits he made to his best friend. The two shared the hobby of golf, but this seemed secondary to how much they just enjoyed being in each other's presence: *I love to go there and visit. We play golf. He belongs to a country club, and I would say the best thing in life, for me, is just to play golf with Keith. Just sit in the cart and just talk about life.*

Christopher also spoke about trips to visit his best friend and how he enjoyed his friend more than most other people: *You know he's one of the few people I genuinely enjoy hanging out with for days on end. Like, I know I could like show up, just go visit him-- and [his wife] has come with me too before-- and I'll have a consistently good time. Whereas most people it's kind of like you know okay 'Let's visit for two three hours, then I got stuff to do.'* As an introverted person, Christopher rarely came across people he felt comfortable to spend *"days on end"* with, let alone people he would *"have a consistently good time"* with. For him, this was a distinctive attribute of his closest friendships.

Overall, enjoyment was a crucial feature of participants' friendships. Study members of every life stage and gender expressed this. Brianna described time spent with

Selene as more enjoyable with anyone else, and Scott said spending time with his best friend was the “*best thing in life.*” Barbra, a woman in her seventies, summed up this theme well, saying: *Well, I think the thing about friendships is there's a feeling... How to put this... Sometimes when you with a friend, either singly or with a group of friends, there are times when everything meshes. There is a more of a closeness. I am left with the feeling of one, 'How lucky I am to have these friends!' and two, when I am with them, 'There is no other place or any other thing that I'd rather be doing!'*

Comfortability

The theme of comfortability (n=25) included the elements of feeling at ease among friends, feeling that they could be themselves without feeling “awkward” or “weird”, as well as general feelings of security and safety. Dallas, in his early thirties, considered these characteristics to be essential to friendship. For him, friendship was defined by this theme. His understanding of friendship included few expectations: *Just someone you can hang out with and literally just do nothing. There's nothing forced. There's nothing you have to think about. You can just sit there and do anything really. You know, it doesn't get weird if there's not talking.* For Christopher, a 48-year-old man, “real” friendship was typified by a high level of familiarity and reassurance: *Friendship to me... A real friend is somebody to just call out of the blue or stop by unannounced, and feel comfortable doing that you know, and maybe know that you're welcome.*

Comfortability was not limited to sharing physical space. Participants also discussed how emotional security and acceptance were important defining factors of friendship. Eric described how to him, friendships were a space of comfortable self-

expression: *I would say it's people who you can be yourself around and not, you know, not feel weird about it.* Malcolm, a man in his early fifties, also spoke about this kind of acceptance and emotional familiarity. Along with these features, Malcom added in some additional elements. Trust and respect were also high-ranking elements in his definition of friendship: *Well, I think you need to feel pretty darn comfortable with that person and be accepting of each other and there's a lot of trust. Trust and respect.* Jasmine, a 24-year-old woman, said that while shared interests and common ground could begin a friendship, what solidified the relationship was a sense of security, safety and comfort around the person: *So, for me, I have to feel a certain level of security in a friendship, right? So, if we already established that 'Oh, we have these like common like intellectual and philosophical interests, mental, and energetic like kind of interests,' and I feel safe around you, then that's like 'Oh my God! This is my friend!' You know what I mean?*

Ease, comfort and security in the connection were defining qualities of friendship that also appeared in study members' descriptions of their own friends. Regan, for example spoke about meeting her friend Vera and almost immediately knowing *"that I was safe with her."* This feeling of safety, security and comfort was instrumental to the start of their enduring friendship. In his definition, Christopher spoke about how a true friend was someone who he'd feel comfortable enough to *"just call out of the blue or stop by unannounced."* When applying this definition to his own best friend, Christopher said it fit perfectly: *I definitely know-- he lives in this tiny little tenement house in Jersey City. He's got a kid. It's pretty tight in there, but I could show up tomorrow, I know I could. I*

could be like whatever, 'Jill and I split up man, can I crash here?' And I would be welcome to.

In this quote, Christopher gave the hypothetical situation of splitting up with his wife. If this ever happened, he knew his friend would be someone he could turn to. Although his friend didn't have ideal circumstances, he would always be willing to take him in. Other participants also spoke about a high level of comfort in their close friendships.

Harvey described his long relationship with his two best friends in the following way: *I would say that there is a comfort amongst this friendship. It does feel old in a good way. It feels all well-worn, it feels matured!* His friend Brady agreed, comparing their friendships to relationships with his other close friends and his partner.

Brady: I would say that my relationship with Harvey and Ari just feels different from all those others in the sense that, like you said Harvey, it is very.... It's like your favorite old sweater in a way, right?

Harvey: Yeah, yeah! (laughs)

Brady: There's something very comforting about our relationship that like... I don't worry about it! Like when I fold that sweater up and put it in the closet, I don't go 'Oh, is it going to be as comfy next time?' I go, 'Ah, I'm tired, and things are not going that well for me right now...' and I just know I can like sink into this and it's going to be great!

Ari: Simple!

While he had very strong relationships with other people in his life, the comfort he felt in his “well-worn” and “matured” friendships was special. He didn't have to worry about

or question these close friendships. He knew that he could simply “*sink in*” and find comfort in them.

Understanding

The theme of understanding (n=26) included elements of knowing each other well (or “the best”), understanding the individual’s personality, likes, and life circumstances, knowing the “good and bad” (holding nothing back, knowing “everything” about one another), and knowing they would not be misunderstood. These defining traits of friendship were brought up in friendship definitions, and when participants talked about their own relationships.

Participants like Harvey, a person in their late twenties, discussed this level of personal understanding in their friendship definition. They defined friendship as such: *So, I guess, I would say sort of the unspoken understanding of a bond, that is a little more, a little more [pause]... personal than what we typically imagine, and where you can speak to another person in a way that you might not be able to speak to people you work with, or people in your family. But not in a way of just making jokes or anything, but in a vulnerable type of way.*

Ari: It's not locker room talk...

Harvey: But it also could be! And it's just a general understanding of one another's nature.

For Harvey, friendship included a layered understanding of one another that spanned from “locker room talk” to one another's vulnerabilities. Another study member, Brady, initially gave a very general definition of friendship (saying “*You find a person, decide*

*that you like them, and more or less let them know that. You two now interact!”). This conflicted with the way he felt about his own friends. In describing them, he captured the essence of the theme of “understanding”: *The thing about my close friendships is that they are with people that I genuinely feel I understand. I, to a certain degree, understand their hopes and desires, their value system. You know, to reduce it to a cliché ‘what makes them tick.’ Like these are people who I understand! And not only understand that-- like there are qualities about them... The things that make them tick are, in some ways, the things that make me tick! And like on that deeper elemental level, I'm able to notice that and go, ‘Okay, yeah!’ which is, I guess, a deeper definition of... my first definition of friendship.**

Brady expressed a genuine sense of understanding his friends' hopes, desires, and values. This knowledge went beyond surface level, as he delved into what drove his friends and made them unique. He came to the realization that the things that made his friends "tick" coincided with his own motivations and sense of self.

Zoe, a woman in her twenties, spoke about her and her best friend’s understanding of each other, as well as their shared language. She fully trusted this friend because they knew each other so well and had gone through many things together. Describing her best friend from childhood, she said: *We know each other, really, really well. I mean, she knows all my like neuroses and the things that make me anxious. Partially because she's been there for most of them, and partially because, like she's the person, I was able to trust with those things.* Zoe continued in this description. In the following quote, Zoe demonstrates the “*understanding of one another's nature*” Harvey

spoke about in his friendship definition, using similar language to other participants: *She knows me. She knows that makes me tick, she knows what will make me nervous, she knows how I'm going to react to something. She's able to reflect-- she's almost like a mirror. She holds up a mirror for me. And it's like 'Hey have you noticed this thing?' That's great or that's hard.*

The two women were so close they had developed shared language that even others closest to them (like their husbands) struggled to keep pace with. *And so, I feel at ease with her, because there's like a certain... This actually just happened when we went out for dinner. She just got engaged and we were going out for dinner on Sunday with Isaac [Zoe's husband] and her fiancé . She went to the bathroom and he was like 'Whoa, I'm just like, overwhelmed by how much you've said!' [Laughs] And Isaac [Zoe's husband] has said that, I'll get off the phone with Hannah-- we'll talk for like three hours-- I'll get off the phone with her-- and I'll start talking to him and he'll have to stop me and be like, "I need you to like snap out of 'Hannah mode!' Because we don't communicate like this!" Hannah and I have a very efficient template of how quickly we talk, because we just get it! We get each other! We have built up a rhythm over, you know, almost 20 years of being friends.*

The two had developed this conversational style over nearly a lifetime spent together. This level of understanding was unique to the friendship and demonstrated how deeply they understood each other's nuances. Like Zoe, Leo shared an understanding and conversation style with his best friend: *We've definitely developed our own sense of humor, that is hilarious to us. But I say it's **our** own because other people don't think it's*

funny at all, or just don't understand. But it's like the funniest thing to me! Leo felt that he and his friend's bond and humor wouldn't be fully understood by others, but this seemed to make their connection all the more special: *Maybe the way we communicate is more understood by both people than in other [relationships].* Because of this deep knowledge of one another, Leo was able to speak freely with his best friend: *I can say anything. I know it's not going to be misunderstood.*

Frances, who was in her seventies, said her best friend met all of the standards of the definition she outlined. When talking about her, Frances said *"she's what I want a friend to be."* Frances summed up the overall theme of understanding well, saying: *She probably knows me better than anybody in the world.*

Growth

Growth was a central part of some friendship definitions (n=16). The elements of this theme were: learning from friends, improving personally and interpersonally, developing as friends, being proud of friend's growth and becoming "better" (together and individually). Jada, a woman in her mid-twenties, had pondered the meaning of friendship before. She referenced bell hooks (2001) in her definition, and discussed the growth theme: *Well, I think about it a lot. So, I think... I really, really like bell hooks definition of love. Which is like 'two people who are bringing out the best each other and like making each other grow and become better' and so I think friends are a big part of that. Like they're people who love each other, but maybe not in a romantic way or in a family way, but like encourage each other's growth. Then that can take very many shapes.* She differentiated the form of love for friends from love for kin or romantic

partners and emphasized the flexible form of friendships. Jada highlighted that friendships do not necessarily have a tightly sanctioned societal role (Blatterer 2015; Giddens 1992). However, this did not mean friends didn't have a vital role in her life. For her, friendship was a chosen relationship that provided a unique source of love and encouraged personal growth.

Vincent, a man in his early sixties, had a definition of friendship based on a deep sense of love and care for his friends. He learned from his friends often and this was also central to his definition. His appreciation for his friends included a daily component of personal growth through this shared learning: *I define friendship as loving one another, caring for each other, learning from each other. If we need support, having that for each other. We learn from each other. They taught me a lot too. They really taught me a lot, right now, today, as we get together, I learn something new every day. So that makes me feel good.*

Some participants described friendship as a blend between growth and comfortability. Zoe, a 26-year-old woman, explained how her friendships were a site of personal growth, but also deep security: *I think that friendships are relationships that help you both define your best self but also a place for you to feel at home. So, they help you stretch, you think to yourself, like 'Oh that's interesting' or like 'I thought of it that way myself, but I appreciate that perspective!' For Zoe, friends provided new insight for personal growth, but under comfortable and safe conditions: *But also, aren't like... They don't feel like super risky. Like there are people who could help you feel like 'I feel at ease, I feel at home, I feel grounded.'* And like I'm able to show all of my cards. They*

push you the right amount, but also like provide a place for you to just be like, 'Here's all my shit!' I think friendship is that place which, I think for me-- why I have a small circle-- is that I am someone who is pretty discerning about who I show all my cards to. I don't think I'm like a cold or unfriendly person, but like I'm pretty-- I have a narrow number of people who I feel like are going to push me.

Like other study members, Zoe felt that friendships should be a site of vulnerability. As with Brianna and Adam, Zoe was selective about the people she let in. For her, friends were those who were comfortable to be around *and* able to “stretch” and “push” her to foster growth.

Friendship definitions of growth mapped on to descriptions of participants' friends. Leo, for example, felt that each conversation with his best friend was an opportunity to grow: *Interviewer: Would you say that your relationship with Theodore is different from or the same as your friendship definition and why?*

Leo: I would say it's a little more than that because not only do I like just want to be with him, or spend time with him as a companion, for enjoyment, I think I've learned a lot in our conversations. The reason I think it's a particularly good friendship is because when we have these conversations, I think we're both learning something-- it's like an exploration. Like realizing what we're about to say right before we say it! What differentiated Leo's closest friendship from his more general friendship definition was this aspect of learning and growth. Brianna and Selene echoed this, saying their personal and relational growth as friends had led them to stronger relationships overall.

Selene: I would say, the more so now we've grown into ourselves, the more we've like chosen people to stay in our lives or to weed out as well.

Brianna: I think I see the energy that we bring into other friendships is similar to the one we have cultivated here. Because we've grown so much together, in such a good way that we want to just... It makes it very clear now which relationships are healthy and are not healthy in our lives. We're trying to overflow everything [from this friendship] into other relationships.

The growth of their strong friendship served as a model for other friendships. Though friendships are relationships of choice rather than obligation, many participants in this study indicated that they did not want these relationships to remain emotionally or intellectually stagnant. Instead, they were willing to put in work to develop their friendships and themselves (and expected the same in return).

Accountability

Accountability was also identified as important qualifier of friendship (n=17). The accountability theme was made up of mentions of total honesty (“hard truths”), permission to “call out” one another, being a “mirror” to “reflect” back on friends, and a willingness to admit culpability with mistakes. Ari, a man in his late twenties, struggled to define friendship. Like Zoe, he settled on a definition that included the safe space where he could be vulnerable and know his friends would remain loyal to him, but added in the trait of accountability.

Ari: I don't know if I can structure a full sentence and it's gonna make me sound like a caveman, like 'I know two words!' It also just feels sort of generic to me, so I just can't

answer the question well, but just words that stand out to me, when I think about it [friendship], it's just like vulnerability and loyalty, definitely-- but also accountability.

Selene had a definition with very similar elements. For her, friendships were connections that were built on emotional intimacy and acceptance, but also would provide accountability: *I guess friendship to me would be a kind of connection -- it's like a confidant, creating a sort of sense of emotional intimacy. Someone that is a safe space and doesn't choose to judge, but rather... a form of acceptance. But also, with a sense of accountability.*

Harvey defined part of friendship as having someone to “*look after you.*” This coincided with the way they described their close friendships with Ari and Brady. They spoke about their definition in the following way: *It was someone to look after you, and I would say that this friendship is definitely in line with that. In terms of not only that we all shared a lot of hard truths with one another, and I think that hearing those truths and helping each other sort them out, is a good form of looking after one another.*

This “looking after” was made up of accountability and total honesty. Ari built on Harvey’s description, describing how this honesty made their friendship unique.

Ari: We're able to be pretty direct with one another, which is helpful. I give-- if they're slipping, I can tell them! Or if I'm slipping, Brady can tell me whatever. So, I guess-- King shit!

Brady: Oh no, we'll always tell you!

Harvey: It's constant for Brady, what are we supposed to say—it's always! Mr.

Homeowner, Mr. Teacher over there is slipping! [laughs]

He was proud of this quality, calling it “*king shit*”, but also was comfortable joking with his friends about who needed the most keeping in check. However, even as they poked fun at their friend Brady, they highlighted his accomplishments. The duality of this interaction is indicative of how accountability could be both a call out and form of care among the friends.

Like these three, Dana, a woman in her early forties, said her best friend Adam could be totally honest with her. The friends had a vested interest in each other’s decisions, because they would be there for the aftermath: *We have established enough trust that you can really say like ‘You’re being ridiculous right now!’ and ‘You need-- I hear what you’re saying, but also probably not! Don’t do that! That’s a terrible idea!’ And then you can also say like ‘Yeah, but I’m gonna do it anyway!’ They’re like ‘Well okay... We’ll talk about it later when it falls apart...’ but to not to... I guess... I know that he always has my best interest. It’s not something that he’s going to take lightly, because he’ll be there for the fallout, so you might as well try and stop it when it’s happening!* In her view, he did this not to belittle her or question her judgment, but because he truly had her best interests at heart. For Vera and Regan, also women in their forties, accountability came in the form knowing when the other was not being honest and calling them out: *Not only do we know each other too well to try and pull that shit, there’s just, there’s no filters. We know each other well enough that we can call each other on it if it happens, you know, if one of us are holding back, or intentionally censoring, we’re like ‘I’m sorry, why are you doing that? Why would you do that to my friend? I don’t like that!’*

And I think that that level of honesty, that comes from both people, it's really, really freeing. It's-- I mean, she's my favorite friend. Because I know I can say, do, be anything with her and she's still going to love me.

This accountability was liberating to the women, especially because it was paired with unconditional love for one another. Accountability and growth are two themes that have not been commonly cited as friendship traits in previous literature (Fischer 1982; Hall 2011; Policarpo 2015). In fact, these qualities might be conceived of as grounds for the dissolution of “fragile” voluntary bonds (Khullar et al 2021; Wiseman 1986). The fact that these were traits mentioned points to a potential need to reinvestigate earlier conceptualizations of friendship.

Comparisons to Other Relationship Types

There were many instances in the interviews where participants defined friendship by contrasting and comparing it to other types of relationships (n=68). This has also been a trend in previous studies (Pahl and Pevalin 2005), which may indicate that individuals do not have clear language to describe the significance of the relationship type on its *own*. In this theme, participants discussed how friendship was similar to other relationships (“like a brother”), different from other relationships (“I actually like my friends”), mentioned cross listed ties (e.g., Sister and best friend) and referenced chosen family.

Charlie, a man in his late sixties, viewed friends as similar to family. He included mutuality, similarities with the other person, emotional connection and a “family-like bond” in his friendship definition: *Oh, ‘How would I define friendship?’ That's a good question! We know what friends are, but can we say what a friend is? I suppose it's just a*

relationship of mutual compatibility, shared interests and goals. To me, I mean there is an emotional connection as well. It's just a kind of a family-like bond.

Ophelia, who was now in her seventies, had experienced the deaths of many significant family members. The friendships she cultivated in the wake of these tragedies were extremely important to her: *To me it is like oxygen. Without friends, I couldn't live. I mean, particularly since my family all died. My friends, my girlfriends, are like my sisters, they are like family to me. Very important.* Ophelia considered her friends to be “like family.” This comparison was especially poignant because of the loss she had experienced in her biological family.

Norah, a 63-year-old woman, compared the connection she felt in her friendships to familial relationships as well. Like Charlie, she took some time to consider the question of how to define friendship: *How would you define friendship... That's a hard question you know what? I would say it's a close-- I think of friends-- as a close relationship that's not family, but has that same kind of bonded feel to it, although a friend is more independent from you, I think, then, family members are.*

Despite comparable closeness to a familial relationship, Norah pointed out a key difference. To her, unlike familial relationships that included friendship, friendships with non-family members could be appreciated as more stand-alone relationships.

It's like, a friendship is just about you and the other person! It doesn't quite have all the networks that family does, which in some ways kind of muddies friendship water or muddies that relationship, because you've got other pieces to it. But a friendship is just you and the friend, kind of an intense personal relationship. Like other study members

(Leo), Norah indicated that family relationships *could* include friendship. However, these relationships could potentially be “*muddied*” by interconnectedness with familial networks and other family dynamics. In contrast, friendships were able to be entered fully on the terms of the two people in them.

Brady, a man in his late twenties, reflected on his personal experiences and perceived societal expectations of friendship in his definition. He perceived differences between the two: *I don't know, it's interesting. I feel like friendship to me is like one of the most important parts and relationships in my life, so I'm trying to define it in general, and not just for me! But like it's the relationship you are not taught to value. I think, is what I would say... a relationship... Friendship in general is like a meaningful relationship with another person that you might be inclined to dismiss or not treat with the appropriate level of you know, value.*

Here, Brady implies that other types of relationships are societally recognized and valued, and friendship does not receive the same societal emphasis. This contrasted with his personal experiences, as he viewed these relationships as very meaningful and valuable.

Many participants directly compared their own friendships to kin relationships, even if they didn't specifically refer to them as “chosen family.” Malcolm described his closest friendship: *It's an old one. We've been... It's just a real close one, where we can say it's almost like... feel like it's a brother and sister.* Jada also made sibling comparisons when talking about her two best friends: *They are the best! They're like sisters.* Clarence and his best friend interacted in a familial manner as well: *We're very close, you know, I would say like brothers. We tease each other, we don't worry about what we say.* This

level of “familiarity” ’as significant to Clarence because he knew his teasing and jokes were not something that would negatively impact the friendship.

Others compared their friendships to family in less direct ways. As mentioned, Brady described friendship as a relationship that was not societally valued in the way others were. Despite his perceptions of societal norms, this definition contradicted his own experience in friendships. He felt confident and secure in their importance: *‘The relationship I’ve not been taught to value’-- I don't know if this [friendship with his 2 best friends] matches that as much just because, like I don't know if I ever bought that much messaging about it. They’re just two of the most important people in my life and I never doubted that!* While normative pressures on men may have influenced Brady’s perception that other relationships were more societally valued, Brady felt he’d managed to resist this “messaging” personally (Bank and Hansford 2000; Tognoli 1980). His best friendships had always been of utmost significance to him: *I would describe my relationship with Harvey and Ari as being like... I want to say, like a family relationship? In that I care about them to the same degree. But also, I don't particularly like a lot of my family! Like they're fine, but I have the same degree of care and affection for Ari and Harvey... and I actually like them!*

While Brady said the level of closeness in his friendships was on par with familial relationships, his feelings toward friends differed. Even though his commitment to both kinds of relationships was high, his family relationships included an obligatory aspect (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995). His relationship with Harvey and Ari, on the other hand, was characterized by genuine enjoyment of one another. He continued, saying: *So, that’s*

a very helpful, right? I know it's sort of like appropriating a phrase, but it's almost kind of like a chosen family in a way. Unlike most participants, Brady did specifically use the phrase “chosen family.” However, he worried that the application of this phrase was encroaching on terminology reserved for certain communities or a specific kind of relationship (Braithwaite et al. 2010).

Brady’s friend Ari subverted the adage “*you can’t pick your family*” to talk about his friendships. Ari may have known this phrase was commonly used for families, but in this quote, he used it to talk about friendship: *I mean, most of the time, you could try to say like “Oh, you can't pick your friends!” But you can!* Although Ari felt that though friendship was often considered circumstantial, it could be cultivated intentionally.

Finally, some study members compared their relationships to marriage and romantic partnerships. Davion described their relationship with their two best friends in terms of its deep commitment: *I remember one time, I described it as a marriage. Again, just because, we've known each for a fair amount of time, we really are like, aside from our immediate families, the most important people in each other's lives. So, like **best friends**.* This powerful phrasing shows the extent of Davion’s perceived commitment to their friendships, even if these relationships do not hold the institutionalized benefits or cultural priority of legal binding marriage (Coontz 2006; DePaulo 2008).

Degrees of Intimacy

The previous sections described themes in the characteristics study members viewed as embodying friendship. However, as described in the literature review for this chapter, not all “friendships” are created equal. Many different kinds of relationships can be (and have

been) categorized under the umbrella term of “friendship.” (Adams et al. 2000) Existing literature has begun to investigate and catalogue the substantial variation in levels of closeness found in friendships (Lee, 2022; Rybak and McAndrew 2006). However, in society at large, there are no uniform, agreed upon cultural distinctions of friendship “levels”, especially in adulthood. This is evident in the lack of formal linguistic descriptors of friendship with varying degrees of intimacy (Policarpo 2015). Far from being unrecognized by participants of the study, this was brought up regularly in the interviews. The theme “degrees of intimacy” was one of the most commonly mentioned as study members tried to define and describe friendships (n =81). As there is no established language around these “levels,” study members used a variety of self-constructed linguistic conventions to describe this phenomenon (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

The degrees of intimacy theme included many different comparisons of friendship types (“gold jewelry” vs “costume jewelry” , “really good friends” vs “friends of time and place”, “best friend” vs “lighter friendships” , “ride or dies” vs “friend-LY”, “kindred connections” vs “acquaintances”), discussion of friendship quality and depth (“I don't have a lot of width”, “surface level”), some friendships being atypical, unique, special, and unlike others. Participants also identified (and questioned) specific language, calling friends “best friends”, “true friend”, “deep friend”, “more friend? many friend? best friend?” and particularly “personal relationships”. Participants often referenced their wider social networks in this theme, discussing how there were different “layers” of closeness in their friendship groups and the “closest circle” of friends.

Participants had differing opinions on levels of friendship closeness. Some participants had friendships that weren't as close, and they acknowledged this. For some, this wasn't perceived negatively. Samuel, for example, didn't assign a value judgement to his "lighter friendships", but he was aware that they were distinct from his deeper friendships.

Samuel: Just like friendships in general, I have a lot of like just lighter friendships, where we do just hang out talk about nothing and drink.

Interviewer: Would you say that your friendship with [his closest friend] is in any way different from the friendship definition that you gave?

Samuel: For sure! It's definitely deeper. I guess the definition of friendship is a lot more broad, a lot more open. I have a lot of friends, but then... There's more deeper relationships. We need more words! More friend? Many friend? Best friend? I don't know! In this differentiation, Samuel described how he didn't have the language to adequately describe these levels of friendship, especially the close bonds he had with "deeper" friendships. Malcolm, friendship *could* encompass lighter relationships with coworkers and people he knew less well. However, this was much different than the deep bonds he shared with his best friend. Malcolm said this relationship was different than his general definition of friendship, due to the level of unspoken intimacy and background knowledge: *[It's different] Only in the sense that we are just close enough that we don't even have to say it at this point. I think [it's] a little bit different just because it is... more! Because of our long history, you know. We've known each other for so long.*

Although very close friendships were highly valued by participants and the interviews largely focused on these lifelong, deep connections, “surface level” friendships were not consistently regarded in a negative light by participants.

Dana spoke about the specific functions of friends she was less close too:

Separate from anybody on my list [of closest relationships], I do think it's important to have work friends. While Dana knew her closest friend Adam would listen to her talk extensively about work, she believed her work friends may be better suited to this task, as they'd have more stake in the conversation and a fuller context for the issues at hand. Because of this, she said *“I do think that is invaluable part of the working experience.”* She also specified that this had changed since the Covid-19 pandemic and the advent of remote work: *In particular, now we all work permanently remotely. So, you can't even drop by somebody's desk! You have to make all the effort to zoom them and complain about your coworkers!* The pandemic had made her more appreciative of this type of friendship: *So, I do find that to be a separate category that I think is important, and maybe it's more important now, because I don't have one! Because my work friends both left me! But that yeah, that category has its own value.*

Dana also described reconnecting with friends from college, calling them “surface level”, but acknowledging their merit as well: *You know, some friendships are only on that surface level. And some-- like my college roommates-- all four of those college friends have kids. So, we don't have those things in common. But at the same time, I texted one of them this morning-- and was like ‘I met this woman at the bar on Saturday who said that she was an Into the Woods and she insisted that she knew me!’ and I was*

like, "Oh my God! Yeah, I made your costume!" And like that was 20 years ago! And immediately the friend I texted was like "Oh, was that Andrea?" She was like "I have a picture at home!" You just have this like instant connection from super, super long ago. Despite being in different life stages (Dana did not have children or a partner) and the time that had passed between them, the women were able to instantly reconnect over a common memory. This demonstrates the versatile and durable nature of even "lighter" forms of friendship (Becker et al. 2009).

Unlike Samuel and Dana, some participants didn't maintain "lighter" types of friends and kept their circle small. Many differentiated "true friends" and described how these friends were unique. Like Samuel, Vera acknowledged that she had people in her life she would be friendly towards, but she made a clear distinction between this and her "ride or die" friendships: *There's varying degrees of friendship-ness, you know? And I have a lot of people in my life that I feel friendly to and care about, but then there's people who are kind of the ride or dies, you know.* Vera's friend Regan used slightly different language. Her threshold for friendship was significantly higher: *I have friends, and then I have acquaintances. And even though I may know quite a lot about people who I consider to be an acquaintance and they may know quite a bit about me, they are not people that I would trust with pivotal points in my life.*

To Regan, disclosure wasn't enough to define a "friend." (Bearman and Parigi 2004; Dolgin et al. 1991; Small 2017) Instead, the word "friend" was reserved for those that she truly trusted. Similarly, Ophelia had "real friends" and "friends" and outlined distinct requirements for each. She described this using metaphor: *They have to be a*

dependable person. If they're flaky and I'll keep them as a friend but... Kind of like costume jewelry-- my real friends are my gold jewelry. I guess it's honesty and dependability. They can't betray me. To be there in my circle, they have to be 100%.

Like Regan, to be in Ophelia's circle of "real friends" (or "gold jewelry"), the person had to demonstrate that they were honest, genuine and could be counted on. Interestingly, Ophelia still maintained some relationships that didn't meet this criteria, saying *"I'll keep them as a friend."*

Harvey spoke about some friends that fit Ophelia's "costume jewelry" description. They maintained some friendships due to proximity, convenience and a need for companionship. However, they didn't view these relationships favorably: *I've had other friendships... Or what you would call that... Or... I've spent a lot of time with other people who don't fall into that same that same sentiment [of his closest friends].*

Harvey seemed unsure as to whether they should include these people in the category of friendship, even if they had spent a substantial amount of time together: *The only reason that I was around those people, you know, was for bad reasons. Whether it was taking the same drugs or leaving the bar at the same time... Not wanting to go home. Stuff like that. People you would never spend time around, if it weren't for that one stupid lonely reason.* They contrasted these relationships with their close friendships. These friendships were not built on a need to fill an emotional void: *I'll hang out with Ari and Brady when I'm lonely or when I'm not lonely. And there's, you know, there's actually a reason to spend time!*

Some participants spoke about lighter level friendships but did not maintain these friendships themselves. For Vera, true friendship required a deep understanding of one another and the ability to really be yourself, echoing understandings of friendships that included comfortability: *The people that you can go to, and just be yourself and really say what you feel, and what you think. And they're just like 'Yeah, man, I get you.'* *Those!* Vera implied that she had other relationships that met her earlier description of “friendly”, but she clarified here that she did not see those relationships as “really friends.”: *You know, if it's not that, then it's just friend-LY, you know. You're just being friendly. You know, a kind person in the world. But then there's those people who are really friends, and those are people who you can really trust with your physical being, as well as your emotional being.* As for Regan and Ophelia, “real friendship” required trust for Vera. For her, “true” friendships were sources of emotional and physical security.

Adam spoke about his own friendships and his choice to be selective and deeply invested in his friends-- especially when compared to how others might view friendships. He used a coin metaphor to describe the value he placed on his friendships: *Dana and I, we talk a lot. There was an analogy that was like... Are you a person that has friends- that maybe has like 100 pennies? Maybe you're a person that has friends, you know, you have 10 dimes that you would consider friends! So, we use the change reference. I'm not a person that has you know, like 100 pennies, a 100 friends. I'm definitely a person that views it like, I'm a quarter friend person! I would say that I have like four friends. So, I don't have a ton, but the ones that I do, I'm super invested in and are really meaningful friendships.* Adam was only interested in these very meaningful friendships- not “penny”

or “dime” friends. He maintained just a few friendships and was “very invested” in the relationships.

Some participants didn’t specify whether or not they maintained other types of friendships or “friendly” relationships. Ellen, a woman in her sixties spoke about varying “levels” of friendship, but implied that her own relationships were characterized by a strong emotional bond and vulnerability: *Well, I think there, there are different levels of it. I think it's a person that you feel really close to that you can show who you really are.* Davion also perceived that there were a variety of kinds of friendship, but their personal friendships fell into a deeper, valued and prioritized category: *I guess friendship, for me- because there are many different kinds of friendships and that value placed on friendships for different people- but for me, they're really like the most important connections in my life.* Vincent, a man in his early sixties, spoke about “true friendship” and said the “type of names” he named in his network were critical relationships to him. He described these friendships as long-lasting, caring, loving, and supportive: *Like the type of names I named for the friends, you know, they saved my life really. And you know that's a true friendship. We all got connected together and what's so good about that is right now, today, we're all still friends, so you know for me, that's a blessing. True friendship? It's caring for each other and loving each other, supporting.*

One pair of friends (Brianna and Selene) used distinct terminology to describe the significance of their relationship. They described their friendship as a “platonic life partnership”, which they explained in this way: *A platonic life partnership to us is the emotional intimacy of like a best friendship. Coupled with the commitment of like a*

marriage, in the sense of domestic and financial partnerships potentially starting a family together, making joint life decisions together.

Regan summarized how she felt about friendships in this quote. Her understanding of friendship emphasized a shared way of thinking from a deeper spiritual perspective: *I think friendship for me is a connection with a kindred spirit. So, it's not just about, you know, shared circumstance or shared interests or things like that. It's a shared purpose. It's a shared general world outlook. It's a shared priorities for how you live your life. Those kinds of things. That's what friendship really is, to me, is connections with a kindred spirit.*

The Purpose of Friendship

The previous half of this chapter explained characteristics individuals perceive the relationship of “friendship” to encompass. The goals of the preceding section were to demonstrate the varied meanings of the term and allow participants to describe the relationship type without researcher imposition and assumptions (Adams et al. 2000). This section adds to the previous one by moving beyond definitions to describe why this relationship type is important to individuals. To do so, I discuss the function and value of friendship in the lives of participants. In addition to defining friendship, study members were asked to speak about the role of friendships in their lives. In this section, I provide these descriptions. Thematic analysis surrounding friendship’s value resulted in the creation of six themes unique to the role of friends, and two additional themes that substantiated characteristics identified in the friendships definitions of the previous

section. The present section's themes are centrality, shared history, confidant, sounding board, effort and maintenance, flexibility and willingness to reconnect.

While some participants had prescriptive definitions (explaining what a friend should *be*), others gave more active descriptions that described what friends *did*. At times, the way participants described the functions of friendship had significant overlap with their definitions. The themes of "support" and "companionship" are extensions of the themes of "dependability" and "enjoyment" in the previous section. Despite reinstating a few aspects of the definitions in these themes, the ways participants defined friendship and the ways they explained the value of friendship in their lives were strikingly different. While many participants hesitated or stumbled over their friendship definitions, most had a near reflexive response when questioned about the role and value of friendship.

Centrality

Centrality was the first theme among the friendship roles and was referenced many times in the data (n=42). This theme featured many different references to friendship as central to the lives of the study members. They described friendships as their "closest" relationships, "oxygen", "soulmate", "kindred spirit", "everything" as a "priority," and as "the most" "very" and "extremely" important. Within this theme, friends were hailed as people participants could not imagine life without and had daily involvement with. When asked about the role of her friends, Ellen, in her sixties, simply said "*Huge. Huge!*" Dana (who was 42) echoed this by saying "*It's everything.*" Ophelia repeated her oxygen metaphor to describe role her friends played for her. To Ophelia, friendship was essential:

It's extremely important, it's the whole world. It's oxygen really-- I couldn't live without it.

In addition to describing the considerable role of friendship, participants spoke about its enduring significance in their lives. Though Diane was in her seventies, friendships had been indispensable to her since childhood: *It's probably one of the most important things to me, since I was a little girl. My mom never could understand, because I had a bulletin board over my desk and a list of all my friends and their telephone numbers. And if I wanted to do something, you know, I'd go through the list! My mom said, "Can't you just be home?" or like "Why?"*

Diane felt that others didn't view friendship with as much reverence as she did: *It's always been extremely important to me, more than for other people, sometimes. I like to have groups of friends and I like people where I can really be myself.* Her mother, for example, did not understand her childhood need for companionship. She expressed that although it may not be normative (saying friendship's role to her was '*more than for other people*'), friendship was a personal necessity (Benzecry and Winchester 2017). From a very young age, having a network of friends to rely on had provided her space to express herself fully.

In addition to talking about how friendship was important in their own life course, some participants spoke about how friendship had been a lifeline through more widespread difficulties, like the global health crisis of Covid-19. Like other participants, Cecil's friendships were hugely important to her. They became even more needed during the COVID-19 pandemic: *Oh, it's extremely important in my life. Especially during the*

past two years, with Covid. If I didn't have friendship, or people that I could rely upon to meet with outside the apartment and things...[shakes head] Extremely important.

Cecil couldn't imagine going through the pandemic without the support of friends. These friendships had been important throughout her long life, but she was especially grateful for them in a time when she would have been otherwise isolated.

When participants described specific friends, their centrality in their lives was very clear. Participants deeply enjoyed and admired their friends, had known them for decades, and were sure of their commitment. This can be seen in quotes like this one, where Regan describes her friend Vera: *For me, at a very early age, I knew that she was a woman I wanted in my life for the rest of my life... Period, the end. No matter what I brought to her door, she was going to be like 'Okay, well we're just going to deal with it, because I love you and it's fine! We'll just figure it out!' You know?*

Regan knew from early adolescence that she wanted to maintain her friendship with Vera long term. The relationship was not conflict free, but the two were committed to one another even when they disagreed about each other's life choices: *And so, even during those periods, where maybe we did not see eye to eye on how we were choosing to live our lives, I knew that if the shit really hit the fan that she was one of a handful of people I could call and say 'I need you, it's bad' and she would be like 'Dope, what do you need? I have it for you!' You know, I've just always known that about Vera.*

Her friend played an essential role in her life. It was a "bedrock" connection that had lasted for many years and would last for many to come: *I think that having absolute*

confidence in that kind of bedrock of friendship is one thing that allows it to go through multiple decades and life changes, and you know, all the things that happen when you grow up.

Consistency

Friendship provided consistency in the study members' lives. The longevity of the participants' friendships was one potential reason for its centrality in their lives (Ledbetter et al. 2007). To be eligible for participation in the study, participants have at least one close friendship they "envisioned lasting their whole life", though there were no eligibility criteria related to the current length of the friendship. Despite it not being a requirement for participation, many participants had *already* built lifelong friendships. Participants from all stages of adulthood were interviewed. At the time of the interview, most participants had maintained meaningful relationships for decades. Some research indicates that personal networks shrink over the life course and become more kin-centered (Wrzus et al. 2012). However, the members of this study had strong and lasting friendship connections that were very consistent over their life trajectories (Elder 1998). The theme of extensive shared histories and length of friendships was mentioned often as participants talked (n=48).

Lifelong friendships began in many different eras of peoples' lives. Some were from childhood, others young adulthood, and some in middle age. Often, friends had been in each others' orbits, but their closeness developed over time. Dallas was in his early thirties but had known his best friend Eric almost his whole life. They had spent much of that time together, living together off and on throughout their young adulthood.

We've been-- known each other for 27 years? 28 years-- 27 years probably. I don't think we're best friends right away, we didn't really become best friends until high school-ish, and then we roomed together in college for two years, then we lived together in college, and then both went our separate ways and we both ended up in our hometown.

Eric disputed Dallas's narrative and insisted they had become friends from "first or second grade" when they first began playing sports together. However, he credited the release of the videogame HALO, about twenty years before, as the real catalyst of their friendship. Scott, who was in late middle age, had met his best friend in high school. Like Eric and Dallas, sports brought them together: *I need to start from the beginning. I graduated three years ahead of him in high school, out of high school, we got together and played sports together. We play softball together and we played basketball in leagues, and that's how we formed our relationship. I really didn't know him in high school, because I was three years older but playing sports with him, we just hit it off as best friends.*

Ellen, met her two closest friends four decades ago, at a job at a winery when they were in their early twenties. She described their relationship as: *Long term. It's been... I met them in 1988! And we all worked together in Napa, California at a winery!*

Some participants started their friendships in the earliest years of their lives and maintained them throughout adulthood. Charlie (whose best friend had since passed away) described how their friendship began: *Ken and I were born one month apart. And we met when we were four years old in our church nursery school, and we've been friends ever since. So, it was a lifelong friendship.* Brady and Ari (in their twenties) had

known each other since they were five years old. They attributed their long relationship to an unlikely origin: the alphabet: *We've known each other for a very long time... I think we owe, in a kind of weird like cosmic fate sort of way, our friendship to the alphabet, because my last name is [last name] and his last name is [last name] and so we were sat directly next to one another... In that sense, it did feel kind of just like, it was given! I mean I was five years old, when I was making the decision, but just like a very spur of the moment, 'Yeah I guess I like you!' It was an impulsive thing that began our relationship!*

Clarence, now in his seventies, made a career pivot in middle age. He developed one of his closest connections in this stage of life after this move: *I came to town, and he welcomed me to town. We started out being... kind of doing business together. So, we have the professional tied in that way, and then we found out that hunting was an interest of both of us. Then we officiated probably for 10-15 years together. So that, now that's a bond! It was just us two guys in the car!* Years of professional work, shared hobbies, and countless hours spent together resulted in the two men becoming great friends.

Shared History

The benefit of these remarkably long relationships was developing shared histories and deep familiarity with one another's lives. The theme of shared history was expressed many times in the data (n=13). Kim explained that her core group of friends had extensive shared histories. These women had a vast knowledge of Kim's family, life path and "everything about her", as she described in this quote: *I've had those friends since childhood. There's no history telling, there's no going back and explaining who my family is, who my siblings are. They already know everything about me.*

Barbra had spent her entire adult life (upwards of 50 years) with her friend Dot. Living through young adulthood, motherhood and retirement together cultivated a strong sense of familiarity between the two: *The best thing is that we share a long history. We know each other's vulnerabilities and our strengths. We've shared raising children around the same time. The best part is being able to be direct with each other, and you know all the little in-jokes that happen when you're really close to somebody. That's there! I mean, from adulthood, she's my longest friend.*

Valeria (in her fifties) also said one of the best things about her closest friendships was how long they had been friends and all the stages of life they had shared together: *The best features are just the level of longevity. Of being there for one another, we've all helped each other from our kids' baby showers to our kids' weddings.* Nora had a very similar experience with her best friend, though not all the life events they had shared were positive: *This relationship now is so long lasting. And life doesn't necessarily get easier, as you get older, you know.* Norah spoke about how the pair had been with one another through health struggles, divorce and losing parents. Through it all, they had one another's support: *I don't mean to get emotional [tearing up]. You know these bonds of friendship have certainly deepened that way. And I know with upcoming hard things she'll help me.* She felt their friendship had only gotten closer over the years with all they'd gone through and felt certain of their future together.

Participants also talked about how shared histories helped them grow as individuals and together. Samuel, in his late twenties, had known his best friend since middle school. The relationship had had a remarkable effect on their personal growth: *It's*

like growing up and being molded together. We've molded each other. We've had a huge influence on each other, since we were young, so it's hard to let go. Not that I've tried! [laughs] This enduring friendship profoundly influenced the pair's personal development in their youth and their identities in adulthood. It was also a motivating factor for upholding the relationship. Two women in their forties, Regan and Vera, felt that their long friendship had afforded them lots of time to grow. They had put in substantial effort to come to the place they were now at: *Regan: We've been through a lot together over the last, what 25 years or so? Probably going on 30 years--Jesus. God, more than 30. More than 30! We fought through some shit to get here, you know!*

Vera continued, discussing the many life events and personal transitions the two had shared: *We've both gone through so much personally and professionally...Death of parents and everything. But in the end, it's just like, it was worth it. It's been worth it to us both to be like yeah, I still... Let's connect still.* This effort had not been in vain. The women felt that their individual growth and their growth together had been a positive journey, even though it had at times not been easy. Brianna and Selene echoed this, describing their relationship: *It's also been for so long! Like, you know each other through your formative years... There will never be someone that has gone through all these ups and downs. We've seen each other's growth so much and appreciate all the growth that we had to go through here. Nobody, even from now onwards, will have that relationship.*

Support

Ability to depend on their friends was frequently mentioned in participant definitions and descriptions of their friends. Participants expanded on the definitional theme of dependability when asked about the role of their friendships, recounting instances where they relied on their friends (n=40). They shared a wealth of stories about many kinds of friend support. Participants talked about friends supporting their goals and ambitions, providing emotional and physical support (especially in times of tragedy and transition), and supporting other relationships. As mentioned in the section on dependability, these narratives are notable due to the fact that friends have no formal responsibility to one another (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995; Rawlins 2017). In light of this, the level of volunteered support they *do* provide is remarkable. The following descriptions highlight the range of ways participants relied on friendship in their lives.

Life transitions were often times when friends' support was needed. One participant was in her seventies, but still remembered how her best friends had helped her through a monumental move in young adulthood. They provided emotional and social support as Barbra adjusted not only to being on her own for the first time, but the culture shock of moving from the Midwest to a large city.

We met when I moved from Minneapolis to New York, when I was 21 and going to graduate school. We met one of the first days, and we were two of the youngest people there. She was one of maybe-- I had maybe four really good friends? Really good friends that came from that group, and she was one. I was in... That was like almost like a foreign country to be a New York! So, we spent a lot of time together.

Sometimes, friend's support was physical. Norah and her best friend both had to move many times in their adult lives due to their husbands' careers. They went through these transitions together, doing manual labor on their respective new homes: *You know, we go to each other's houses and help with home improvement on these various houses, we do all those kinds of things!*

Having a familial-like support network amongst friends was very important for one participant, who had recently immigrated from Singapore. Selene said the following: *I guess I always put a lot of significance on friendship. Especially moving out to LA from Singapore alone, I put even more emphasis on friendship. It's a support system, you know people to spend good times with celebrate with, but also rely on and hard times. Having lived away from my home country, friendship for me is kind of like chosen family. So, my friends here are my family here.* For Selene, friendships provided support throughout life's up and downs. She described the major role of her friend and chosen family network as "*Stability.*" Unlike many participants, Malcolm hadn't often considered friendship's role. However, similar Selene, he viewed friends' role as giving consistent and stabilizing support: *It's a stabilizing thing. It's something you have-- it's there! Friendships are there and-- I guess I don't maybe necessarily think about them enough! Yeah, they're stabilizing.*

Selene's best friend, Brianna, agreed with Selene's the chosen family sentiment. She added that their own family histories influenced the strong emphasis they put on friendships: *I guess for friends as well, it would be like chosen family. Because we both come from not necessarily the 'conventional family structure' and therefore, we've seen*

the importance of that. Brianna continued, describing how her mother also had very important friendships that supplied emotional and material support throughout her upbringing. She had seen the importance of friendship modeled through this experience. *My parents divorced when I was like two or something. Really young. My dad was never really in the picture. But my mom, you know, needing a little bit of help to raise me and also provide for our family, go through jobs, and go to night school, and all that stuff—called on a friend. Called on one of her best friends to be my godfather, and basically, he's my adoptive father. He helped raise me. He and my mom as friends raised me together, and so I saw the importance of friendship right away.*

Although support from friends had always been a part of her life, Brianna did not view this as fully normative, explaining it as “*because of my unconventional parental structure.*” (Benzecry and Winchester 2017) However, she did not perceive this negatively. It was only through this structure that she developed her own supportive platonic relationships, that had been instrumental as she navigated huge life transitions.

In addition to helping with transitions, friends gave support through life’s other challenges. Friend’s emotional support helped participants with their mental health and well-being. Diego, a man in his fifties, spoke about how his best friend supported him even though they did not see each other in- person often: *I don't see her often-- other than on WhatsApp-- but times where I've had... just gone through anxiety, she'll be there. She'll pray for me; I can talk to her.* Despite their limited in person interactions, this friend was someone Diego could be vulnerable with about his mental health struggles and rely on for emotional support. Like Diego, Malcolm didn’t see his best friend often. This

did not lessen the relationship's importance. He described this friendship's role in his life: *I think we both tend to reach out when... In particular, for this friendship, it's one that's predominantly one of support. So, if either of us are like [waves hands in the air, makes distressed face]... Whatever! We can reach out to the other with problems. That's probably why I picked her [as his closest friend] because it's more of... I think if there is a person that I've had to lean on, from that standpoint, that would be the strongest.*

Participants also discussed both giving and receiving support in the wake of tragedy and difficult times. Like many other participants, Kim emphasized the substantial role of friendship in her life. She credited this importance to the support her friends provided in some of the hardest times of her life, like when her son passed away: *The role of friendship in my life is very big, because I've suffered a huge loss in my life with losing my son, so having my friendships has been very important. They have been very supportive to me.*

Valeria experienced a very similar personal tragedy with the sudden and unexpected death of her own child. Her friends responded immediately, with one flying in the same night. She spoke emotionally about this time: *You know, when I lost my son, they were all-- they're all here, you know. Sandy lived out of town, so she flew in town to come and be here. They were here the night that we got notified.*

As mentioned in earlier sections, Ellen's support for her best friend had been forced to solidify quickly, with her friend's stage four cancer diagnosis a few years into their relationship. She provided extensive instrumental and emotional support her friend in this time, even though their relationship was relatively new: *Two or three years after*

we met, she had lymphoma. Stage four lymphoma and was supposed to die. She didn't die! I still have her! And I think that is what has made our-- it's hard sometimes to explain our friendship-- because I haven't lived near her for 30 years, but we're still extremely tight. But I think that intensity of that friendship during that time... It just cements your love and your concern, or you know, whatever you want to say! You know, I'm probably gonna cry! I'm already crying. Although her friend's illness had been years earlier, remembering this difficult time still brought up strong emotions. Ellen had been there for her friend throughout her cancer diagnosis and treatment, and years in and out of recovery. Although she had put a lot of time into the relationship (even moving to help with her friend's treatment), she felt the support and commitment were absolutely mutual. To Ellen, this friend's role was providing *"Amazing support! Again, both good and bad times."*

Barbra spoke about how she and a friend shared personal histories: *We found that we had some traumas in our childhood that we could identify with each other.* These experiences were a point of connection for the pair. While some of Barbra's family members also had these experiences, her friendship was not intertwined with the relational context of this painful history. They could meet each other at a place of empathy and understanding, without the added, sometimes complicated interpersonal dynamics of family ties.

As these narratives demonstrate, friends provided support through life transitions and during difficult experiences. Support also came in the form of supporting each other's goals, and pushing each other towards success. Jasmine explained how friends

motivated her: *We're very supportive of each other's life goals and ambitions and we keep each other accountable when it comes to those goals and ambitions. [Friendship's role is] Keeping each other accountable on our goals and ambitions, the things we want to learn.* Jasmine gave a concrete example of how she and her friend supported each other's goals. Jasmine was born in Louisiana but had been displaced by a natural disaster as a child. She wanted to reconnect to her childhood culture by learning and practicing more French in her adulthood. She explained a daily ritual of theirs: *Another little thing that we do, we're both learning different languages. I grew up learning to speak French, he's trying to do Spanish. We're both going on Duolingo. He has like 150 day streak! I get up to maybe like 20 days and I'm like shit [laughs]. So, I do it, but he's made me way more consistent in terms of my language learning. Because I want to stay relatively proficient in French, I want to learn Russian. Things like that. I've always loved languages. So, literally a lot of our goals, we're very supportive of each other.*

She was motivated to learn on her own, but her friend Darelle's encouragement and example inspired her and helped her remain consistent. Jada and her friends shared a career field and had gone through law school together. Despite the stressful and competitive nature of their work, the women were invested in one another's success. Jada described them, saying *"I think they're people, I want to cheer for and support."*

Finally, friends provided social support to one another by aiding friends in their relationships with family members and other friends. Barbra and her best friend both had difficult family relationships, but helped one another throughout them: *We've supported each other through... There have been rifts in families, and we supported each other*

through that. Eric and Dallas, two best friends, were part of a larger group of friends. However, Eric explained that Dallas played an important role in the maintenance of these friendships:

Dallas is my facilitator. I don't really like watching sports, and a lot of our friends do. So, Dallas always tries to include me in watching sports. Basketball, March Madness. Football (but not the Superbowl with the Rams, he's got to watch the Rams game on his own, otherwise he gets too emotional and upset with people who don't take it seriously)! [laughs] But Dallas is a big link between a lot of different other friend groups of mine. He kind of keeps me in the loop. Because I mean sometimes on Friday night, I'd just be okay with just staying home, playing some video games and not going out when other people are going out. It's like 'Okay...fine!'

Though Eric had slightly different interests than the rest of their friends, Dallas ensured that his friend didn't get left out of the circle of friends. Eric was more introverted and may not have went out of his way to regularly spend time with the group. However, he enjoyed this time and appreciated that Dallas encouraged him and helped him foster his other friendships.

Companionship

In addition to support, friends supplied companionship, camaraderie, and enjoyable time together. For many participants, friends did not have to directly provide support to be appreciated. Sometimes, just having someone who was present throughout life was important. This theme (n=39) encompassed mentions of spending time with one another, enjoying each other's company, doing activities together, and knowing friends were

readily available to share things with. This theme adds to the definition theme of “enjoyment.”

Some participants described their own friends as simply, “*the people I share things with*” (Davion), and people to “*share life with*” (Diego and Valeria). This ranged from the most important to the most ordinary aspects of life. Leo talked about this as a feature of his best friendship that he was very appreciative of: *I can have conversations with him with varying degrees of levity, you know. We could just be trying to make each other laugh, or talk about something that's hard, or topics with more depth. It's a friendship grateful for, I'll say that!* Jada also spoke about sharing with her closest friends: “*When good things happen, when bad things happen, when mundane things happen-- I just want to tell them!*”

Frances described the role of friends as people to confide in and people who helped her, but she emphasized that they were people she truly enjoyed spending time with. To her, enjoyment was an assumed characteristic of friends, but an essential one. Frances said: *Someone to have fun with! To go places and do things with, you know, that goes without saying, you know!* Charlie agreed with Frances, saying, “*Someone to have fun with is another important factor!*” Despite mentions of “going places and doing things” time spent with friends did not have to include specific plans. Jasmine described “*quality time*” with her friends as primarily quotidian activities: *We spend quality time, just enjoying each other's presence, eating food and stuff.*

Diego emphasized that friendship played a daily role by simply helping him: “*to go through this life.*” Friendship was a protective factor against loneliness, providing

mentorship and companionship. He described how friendships allowed him: *To not feel like you're by yourself out there, right? I feel like, I'll say this for me, just as a guy who believes in God-- God puts people in your life and some of them are to be your friends and to show you how to go through life and do life together.* As a Christian man, Diego felt that God had blessed him with this kind of relationship. Like Jasmine and Diego, Malcolm said friendship's role was based on shared time and enjoyable companionship, but he also knew friends could be counted on through whatever challenges or successes he encountered in life: *You know, they fill our time, right? I spend a lot of time with my friends. Hopefully, you share good times, especially, more often than not, but they're also there for the bad ones.*

Physical distance was not necessarily a hurdle to the camaraderie friends felt. Valeria repeated the words of others, saying the role of a friend was based around being a present companion: *"I would say is just doing life with, sharing life events."* Though Valeria had friends who she saw regularly, she also spoke about friends who had moved out of state nearly a decade before. While these friends didn't have the option to pass time together on a regular basis, they found other ways to be involved in each other's lives: *Yeah, even though they live out of town, we do trips with them! We go down there!* This is consistent with literature on geographically distant friends that found friendships to be adaptable in the face of moves and changes in distance (Becker et al. 2009).

Brady expanded other participant descriptions of sharing life by describing *why* he valued doing so. He was grateful for friendships, because they improved his quality of life. He described friends' role in metaphor: *I will say I mean to me, friendship in*

general-- and I feel really blessed in that I think I have a lot of pretty well-developed friendship relationships—But it's like seasoning on life or something-- it makes it more fulfilling! It enriches my life. You know, friendship exists in a lot of ways, like just to make my life richer.

Confidant

Many previous studies have focused on friends' role as confidants (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries 2000; Parks and Floyd 1996; Policarpo 2015). Members of this study spoke to this as well (n=48). This study contributes to the existing body of literature by shedding light on the reasons *why* friends are ascribed the role of confidant. The confidant theme in this study begins to explain why individuals perceive their friends as fitting this role, uncovering key attributes of friendships that are potentially not present in other relationships, such as a lack of judgement. Elements of this theme included: participants fully trusting friends, knowing their privacy would be respected, telling “anything” to friends (“show my cards”, “reveal myself”), and knowing they would not be judged for doing so (can “air all my dirty laundry”). They also compared this their friendships to relationships not built on this level of trust and situations in which they felt judged or had been judgmental themselves.

Frances spoke about how she and her friends created a mutual, judgment free space within their friendship. She felt that they could tell each other anything, and both parties would listen without passing judgment.

Somebody who I could tell things to, and they won't judge me. Somebody who they can tell me their innermost thoughts and things and I don't judge them. I listen to them, and

they listen. She also described how there were no inhibitions between her and her best friend, saying “*I could tell her anything and she can tell me anything.*”

Harvey lightheartedly compared friendship to a kinship relationship, explaining how friendships allowed a unique kind of disclosure. He felt that friends were a space to express vulnerability. While other relationships (such as the one he had with his mother) also allowed for this kind of vulnerability, he was able to be vulnerable in friendships “*in a different sense*” and didn't have to filter or censor himself: *Somebody you can go to about like vulnerability, stuff you feel vulnerable about, I suppose. In a different sense than what you can like try to go to your mom about! There's just some stuff mom just doesn't need to know man [laughs]...*

Similar to Harvey, Charlie spoke about how his friends were trusted confidants and compared these them to other relationships in his life: *My friends have been people I have been able to confide deeply in. In many ways, more deeply, even then, with family members. Sometimes it was to gripe about family [laughs]! But that it's someone to confide in, is an important factor.* For Charlie, there were “*many ways*” he felt he couldn't necessarily confide in family members. Friends allowed him a space to freely speak in ways that may have strained his family relationships.

Friendships are formed by choice. When compared to more socially recognized relationships (with biological and legal ties), voluntary platonic relationships inherently have limited ability to socially sanction or impose consequences on those in them (Eve 2002; Giddens 1992). While the voluntary nature of friendships has sometimes been considered a weakness of the relationship type (Wiseman 1986), these relationships are

grounded in mutual enjoyment and a deep understanding of those involved in them.

These qualities, along with the nonjudgmental nature often found in friendships, create an environment where people can communicate openly without the fear of facing negative social repercussions.

Sounding Board

In addition to being confidants, friends often played to role of a “sounding board” (n=22).

This theme also extends the confidant literature and demonstrates an area where friendships have specific value (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries 2000; Pahl and Pevalin 2005; Parks and Floyd 1996; Policarpo 2015). Friends served as a receptive and supportive listeners for participants when seeking feedback, ideas, or perspective on topics and issues they encountered in their lives. This theme’s elements included “talking things out” with friends, bouncing ideas off one another, “go back and forth”, having friends as “reference point”, and respected opinion.

Frances emphasized that her friends played the role of listener, but also actively helped her figure out problems in her life. She described this role: *“Somebody who will listen to me, who I could talk things out with.”* Friends valued the feedback their friends gave because they had deep admiration and respect for them. Leo spoke about his best friend, saying, *“I have a lot of respect and admiration for Theodore. When I’m talking about something, I value his opinion.”* Selene and Brianna shared this admiration. Selene said that she and Brianna *“kind of just always have loved the way each other’s brains work.”* Because of this, they viewed the other as the ideal person to bring new ideas to.

Lamar's friend and former bandmate Hassan played a similar role. Whether Lamar wanted to bring up music, their career, or processing emotions, Hassan was ready to engage: *We go back and forth with each other with creative ideas! Like music and technology. Mostly the relationship started that way, mostly jazz music and talking about counseling and kids and gardening. Hassan studied counseling for his master's degree. But even before that, before he decided to go to grad school, we would talk to each other about how music is a way for us to like express ourselves and sometimes, to deal with things that are hard to I guess process in other words, or in other ways.* Since Hassan had a strong emotional understanding of his friend, experience as a mental health professional, and a love of music, he was able to be a uniquely valuable sounding board for Lamar.

Like Hassan, Samuel's friends understood him and how his "brain worked" well. Because of this, they could help him process: *They're important as a confidant, and someone to bounce ideas off of. I organize my own thoughts by talking to them and [they] help me put things in perspective.* His friends' familiarity with his way of thinking allowed them to help Samuel look inward and "organize his own thoughts", as well as develop a wider outlook on situations. Norah did not use a sounding board metaphor, but discussed how her friendships played a similar role: *What role... You know what I think, they're kind of, for me, they're kind of a mirror to my life.* Norah's friends did not "mirror" her in the sense that they were similar to her. She explained that her friends "*held up a mirror*" to her life by helping her to critically examine and reflect on situations in her life and chose how to move forward. Like Norah, Jada's friends helped

her reflect on and process her past, and prepare for future decisions: *I think that they really helped me be reflective. Like in deciding what I'm going to do next or processing things that have happened. I think that I space for me to reflect is I'm with them.*

While many participants described how their friends fulfilled the role of sounding board without using this term, others specifically referenced it. Adam described his friend Dana's role in his life: *I would say, like a sounding board. We're both pretty much I would say among the first stops for each other for a sounding board! 'Are my... Do my thoughts make sense?' 'Am I being irrational?' As well as the person that walks each other off the ledge. So, I would say that's an important component that I don't have that with my other even close friends or family members. Dana is very much that sounding board. Either knows whether or not to share in my outrage, or whether or not it's appropriate to try and push me off the ledge.* The two used each other to validate their thoughts and emotions. They also were the person who knew whether to “walk each other off the ledge” or “push me off” and get them to go out of their comfort zone. They trusted each other's judgment implicitly, more so than many of their other close friends or family members.

Effort and Maintenance

Friends were willing to put considerable effort into their relationships, which has not been highlighted in previous research (Neyer et al. 2011). Rather than always describing the roles of their own friends, this theme includes many actions on the part of the study members. However, as outlined in the definitions of friendship, the expectation of effort was a mutual characteristic. The theme of effort and maintenance (n=54) included

recognition of effort as a necessity in friendships, intentionality, working through challenges (“fighting for it”), problem-solving, relationship maintenance (therapy, regular communication), commitment, investment, care and attention.

One of the biggest ways friends demonstrated effort was by being available—whether this was by being a “first call” for participants, keeping in regular contact, making each other feel heard, or making intentional time for one another. This kind of availability and effort was important to Jasmine. She placed importance on demonstrating active engagement and making contributions to the relationship: *It has to be regularly maintained, through communication and by check-ins and check-ups. Like even if it's like you sending me a meme or something!* Communication and effort didn’t have to be complex, but participants did acknowledge that these were important factors to the maintenance of their friendships (Becker et al. 2009).

Scott also spoke about making the effort to communicate with his friends regularly. He cited the role of his best friend as primarily “*staying in touch.*” The two lived in different cities and had for many years. Despite this, he was secure in the knowledge that his friend would be a constant correspondent: *I pretty much stay in touch on a daily basis with Keith. And he lives in [a town multiple states away]. So, we're on the phone, texting every single day.* Valeria and her friends also were in very regular contact. She texted and spoke with all her friends daily, and spent time with local friends frequently: *So, the four of us just text and stay in touch every day. Then like I said, Jenny and Amber and I are going out to dinner tonight, we went out to dinner with Paul and Amy on Monday or Tuesday. Just very... We just stay in touch on a regular basis!*

Ophelia's friends provided regular contact as well. She and her friends shared continual updates on their daily lives: *I mean, I'm in contact with my friends, all the time. I talk with them all the time. I keep the relationship going all the time.* She acknowledged that her close friendships required some effort, saying she *"kept the relationship going all the time."* Like others, Davion spoke to the importance of effort and friendship maintenance. While Davion had some friendships that relied on *physical* availability, their closest adult friendships had changed their views on friendships' role.

I don't think I ever really consciously thought about the role of friendships in my life until I got older and like basically formed friendships outside of my immediate physical bubble. Because school friendships are easy to maintain, because you're always around each other and co-worker friendships, you're always at work together. Whereas these long-distance friendships are... I have to choose to make them important, and I have to choose how to make them important.

Davion hadn't reflected on the role and significance of friendship until they had developed friendships that weren't founded on proximity and convenience. Their close, long-distance relationships required effort, availability and intentional communication to keep going (Becker et al. 2009). Additionally, since friendship does not have any grounding in social institutions, Davion had to actively, personally, construct this importance, saying *"I have to choose to make them important."* (Berger and Luckmann 1996; Blatterer 1992; Giddens 1992)

Zoe also maintained long-distance friendships. Despite their physical distance, she knew her friend would be "on-call" for anything significant that happened in her life.

This was mutual: *I know that I would be her first call-- and I have been-- for an emergency or happy news, or like. she was an ICU nurse during COVID, so we were there for each other through that whole thing. And she's my first call for anything big.*

Diego used Zoe's language of friends being a "first call." He described his closest friend, Eve, as someone who was "there on the other end" and "readily available." He spoke about her role in his life in the following quote: *Someone who's there on the other end. She picks up her phone or she'll--she's someone who is there, she's readily available to be your friend, to be there for you.*

Availability was not reserved for emergencies and big events. It was essential to the everyday maintenance of friendships. Scott and his wife had a large, connected network of friends. Scott valued this network and was committed to upholding it. As described previously, he had regular contact with his best friend. He also spoke about his more extended network: *It's just been a habit through the years that we just call each other every day, you know. And as far as some of the other people on our list, you know we get to a point where 'Hey, we need to you know call Dan and Carrie and set something up, because you know, you got to stay in touch with your friends.*

He acknowledged that he and his wife "get to a point where" they knew they need dedicate to spend with their friends in order to keep the relationships going. Scott was well aware that friendships needed to be regularly prioritized in order to function.

However, this was not an unwelcome obligation: *We look forward to spending the time with everyone on list and it takes effort. It takes effort to line something up, to arrange you know, to go somewhere. I mean if you don't put the effort in, it's not going to happen.*

But we look forward to it, we love our friends! In these quotes, Scott describes the ongoing social construction of these relationships through sustained communication and effort (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Lamar also spoke about taking intentional time to upkeep his friendship. In his friendship definition, he said friends were people who provided support. For him, this support could come in the form of making the effort to walk through the park with one another, providing companionship and a listening ear: *In the beginning, we started off as mostly bandmates, but now that we still keep in contact, even though we haven't played a show together in couple years. Now it's mostly just to be in each other's company. We just talk about the different things we have going on in our lives. I still feel like we support each other, if even if it's just taking the time to talk to walk and to listen.*

Like Lamar, Leo reflected on the importance of listening in his friendships. Each of his closest friends was willing to engage with him and make sure he felt heard, no matter how trivial the subject: *The thing that I recently realized that is in all of my important friendships is that not only can I bring up any topic with them, including you know, things that don't matter... Not only can I bring it up and talk about it, but they're talking about it with like as much intensity as anything! You know, if it's like some little debate about nothing that actually matters, to go fully into it, engaging! Just a willingness to put your energy into it.* Leo's friends allowed him to feel heard by putting in this communicative effort. They were willing dedicate energy and engage with Leo's thoughts regardless of the subject.

Flexibility and Willingness to Reconnect

One interesting feature of relationship maintenance and effort was the flexible expectations friends maintained for one another and their willingness to reconnect (Policarpo 2016). Like the theme of effort and maintenance, this theme often dealt with the participant's role in their own friendships. A majority of the participants had at least one close friend who was geographically distant from them (n=26). While the previous section demonstrates how some participants maintained near constant contact with their friends, others had more sparse contact. This was especially true for seeing one another in person. Zoe described her best friend as her "*first call.*" However, this wasn't always reflected in their communication styles, due to the distance between them: *We don't... Currently, I live out of state, and have lived out of state for eight years. So, we don't see much of each other, and we really only talk on the phone like maybe once a month.* Despite the infrequent nature of their calls, Zoe viewed them as significant and enough to maintain the relationship: *It's not often-- like we text a little bit, but then when we talk on the phone it's like four or five hours!*

Kim had a group of long-distance friends. These friends texted often but gathering them all in one place was very difficult: *The challenge would be time to see each other. Yes, distance. Bianca lives in Iowa, Annie lives in Nebraska, and another Annie lives in Florida. So, the Annie in Florida we don't see as often. We went and visited her in September, but I hadn't seen her face to face for probably 10 years. She's more of a texting friend.* As Kim suggests, many participants were adept at using technology to

keep in contact. This is a common strategy in long-distance friendships (Policarpo 2016).

Frances and her best friend, both in their seventies, had some barriers to seeing one another as often as they'd like. Their health sometimes meant they couldn't get together in person. However, she felt sure in their relationship and knew that they technology gave them the option to contact one another: *I'd like to see her more, but she lives in Brooklyn, and I live in Manhattan. We both have very busy lives, but we try to see each other and talk to each other. I can't always see her when I want to, and she can't always see me, but you know if it's something really important, we could always talk on the phone.* Technology was an important way for participants to connect in long-distance relationships, but some still struggled. This was especially true in adjustment periods after moves, as participants renegotiated their relationships. Jada spoke about transitioning from living with her close friends to moving across the country from one another: *I think it's hard we're all now in three different time zones, for the first time. And so that is difficult, being far apart.*

Others viewed it differently and were very flexible in terms of their expectations for communication. For Malcolm, sustaining a long-distance friendship was a marker of their deep connection: *Well, the best features are... The interesting thing, I think, is that it's long distance-- California to here. So, we see each other, maybe once a year. But it's always easy! You know there's no awkward questions like 'How you been?' and that kind of thing!* The pair could easily reconnect, even after long times spent apart. Davion also viewed distance as having a silver lining: *I feel like the main challenge is just that we're*

all in different places, which can be hard in terms of seeing each other and making quality time for each other. But I think one of the best aspects of our relationship is that we do that! We do like to make time to see each other on a pretty regular basis. I think that we're just really good about, I don't know, just paying attention to each other. To Davion, intentionally maintaining contact and “paying attention” demonstrated the effort and care the friends were willing to put into the relationship.

While most participants made it a point to invest effort in their friendships, not all of them had. Though participants expressed that friends could reconnect after long periods of time, they would not last if wholly neglected. Christopher came to this realization as he spoke about his friends. He expressed some regret for not prioritizing his friendships. He faltered some as he spoke about the role friends played in his life:

It doesn't...it doesn't-- probably, you know, I don't-- I'm not very good at cultivating friendships and there are times I regret that. I wish I could do better or try to take measures to improve my social circle, or whatever, but, overall, I tend to prioritize friendships, probably, honestly last under... [other relationships]

Christopher spoke very highly of his friends and their importance to him, but was self-aware in that he did not put in the effort to show his appreciation for them: *To my own regret-- not necessarily justifying that perspective-- I'm just saying that's what that's my actual behavior, you know. So, in many ways, you know the few friends that I have are very important, but I don't talk to them very often.* With the exception of this narrative, participants discussed actively putting some level of effort into their friendships and the awareness they needed to do so in order to maintain them. Even with the recognition of

the role of effort in their friendships, study members described a remarkable willingness to reconnect. Vera and Regan demonstrated capacity this in the following quote: *Vera: There's times we're friends, and times when we're like really close friends. People just change so much, you know, and it doesn't have to be, like, it's not like we are weekly in touch! It's... sometimes we're more in touch than other times. And it's just sort of that's how it goes!*

Regan: For sure! Even though we totally go through periods, where it's been like 'How long has it been? Oh my God! Has it really been like two years since we've talked?'" It doesn't feel that way, because the connection is strong enough that the amount of time apart doesn't matter. She and Regan fully accepted the ebb and flow of friendship. Rather than periods of decreased closeness signaling the end of the relationship, they were a chance to give their friends space to change and grow (Khullar et al. 2021). Instead of harboring resentment, they were happy and willing to reconnect whenever their friends *did* reach out.

Adam explained that a hallmark of true friendship was just that—being able to be gracious when friends needed space or life got in the way: *Another qualifier for me on what a true friendship are those friends that you could go a year without talking and if ever you maybe didn't talk for a year and a half, where you got really busy needed to find a time to see each other for two years! That if you ever called, they'd still answer. And that you would immediately be able to pick up the conversation, and there wouldn't be any hostility for the absence. So, those are the people that I now considering like my top 10. Those folks that you know if life comes up, or weird things are happening in your life,*

or maybe you don't see each other or talk to each other for six months, it wouldn't actually affect the friendship.

Specific Roles

When participants discussed the role friends played in their lives in general, they outlined the common themes of centrality, longevity, support, companionship, confidant, sounding board, effort and maintenance, and flexibility and willingness to reconnect. While many participants had general expectations of their friends and described common traits of these relationships, they also acknowledged variety in what they needed and wanted from their friends. Some participants talked about how they relied on friends for specific needs (n= 11).

Ari, for example, valued certain characteristics in some friendships, but didn't require them of all his friendships. He deeply valued the shared accountability of his close relationships with Brady and Harvey, but he didn't feel like this was essential to every close friendship: *I don't think I have like an accountability type friendship with my friend Scott? I don't know if that we ever see either one acting in a way that needs to be held accountable, I guess!* Similarly, Brady had a larger network of close friends outside Ari and Harvey. He described these relationships, saying *"they're all strikingly different in their own way."*

Ernest also had friends who played specific roles for him, whether they were social, emotional or physical. He had differing expectations for his friends, and knew who played which role: *I guess, they would be different in the in the types of things that I would expect them to do for me, does that make sense? Paul helps me out with a lot of*

physical things. That go with Rotary. Larry is there to talk about even as much as politics. I mean, I think that probably separates Larry, Arc is a high school buddy of mine and. While we don't anymore visit on a regular basis. He and I go back a long way!

Charlie also discussed the differences between his friends and the roles they played in his life: *Norman was a later friendship... His and my friendship was in a lot of ways, like Ken and I's in terms of having fun and getting in trouble, and all that kind of stuff, but Norman was a more outdoors the person than Ken. Norman and I went on hikes and did canoeing. Norman also had a theological bent that Ken did not have. Ken wasn't much interested in religion or theology and Norman and I went to seminary different schools, about the same time. Charlie was incredibly close to both of his friends, but they provided for different intellectual and philosophical needs: So, each friendship met different needs for me, thinking about those friendships selfishly. And what I provided to the friendship for each was, you know, likewise, somewhat different.*

Adam explained how each of his friends brought unique things to the table: *I need different types of relationships. So, I don't need multiple—or I'm not somebody who desires multiple have the same type of relationships-- I kind of have like a friend that fits every one of my needs, so there isn't really a lot of overlap, as far as like similarities. Maybe it is fair to say I've compartmentalized aspects of my life or topics so that each one of those friends covers one of those topics, or passions, or interests. This did not always correlate with the level of closeness of the friendship: I think it's the type of personalities [more so than levels of closeness].* These quotes speak to the versatility of friendship. Individuals do not have to rely on all of their friends to fulfill every specific

personal need (as may be expected in other relationship types, like marriage) (Finkel et al. 2014). Instead, each friendship may contribute its own distinctive value.

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I compared data from in-depth interviews with 34 adults with close friendships to create inductive themes surrounding the significance of friendship in adulthood. The study's goal was to investigate how adults from different life stages define the concept of friendship, and explain why this relationship type was significant to them. The analysis led to the identification of nine distinct themes regarding how the participants defined friendship and the characteristics they perceived friends as having (mutuality, dependability, enjoyment, comfortability, understanding, growth, accountability, comparison to other relationship types, degrees of intimacy). I identified six additional themes surrounding the role friendship played in the lives of the participants (centrality, shared history, confidant, sounding board, effort and maintenance, flexibility and willingness to reconnect, and friend specific needs). Two of the themes in definitions were expanded on when participants described the role of their friends (support and companionship). The ideas participants had surrounding friendship were not abstract. Almost every aspect outlined in the definitions and roles was embodied by participants' descriptions of their own friendships.

Members of this study described the role of their friendships as central to their lives. In order to define friendship, many study participants compared friendship as a relationship type to other types of relationships. One differentiating aspect of friendship (when compared to kin or romantic relationships) was that it was simply a relationship

they enjoyed, purely for the sake of companionship. Rather than this voluntary aspect of the relationship leading to fragility, the participants spoke about strong, lifelong friendships built on reciprocity and a deep understanding of one another (Wiseman 1986). This understanding was often based on a shared history (Elder 1998). Participants traveled through life stages with one another, adding to a rich tapestry of shared experiences and memories. They provided social, emotional and material support. Friends put effort into the relationships and maintained them regularly. Friendships were a space to be comfortable, vulnerable, and understood. However, they were also a space people were held accountable and were able to grow. Like previous literature, friends were conceptualized as confidants (Adams, Blieszner, & De Vries 2000; Parks and Floyd 1996; Policarpo 2015). Extending this literature, friends played a vital role of sounding board, helping participants work through issues and reflect. Study members confided in friends because they were nonjudgmental and provided advice and insight without the social embeddedness and potential consequences of other relationships (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). Finally, friends were characterized by their flexibility. Even when friends did not have frequent contact, the participants spoke about a willingness to reconnect that was unique to this relationship type (Becker et al. 2009; Policarpo 2017).

This research builds on previous research in several ways. Few previous studies draw friendship definitions from adults in all life stages. This study (which benefits from its broad age range) found support for many of the existing findings. For example, a large scale survey done in an international context found similar attributes in definitions of "good friends" including "unconditional support" and "presence" (Policarpo 2015). The

same study also sought to differentiate levels of friendship, by asking participants to identify separate characteristics of “intimate friends.” These friends were typified by “trust”, “self-disclosure” and “family.” The family category included family like (“she’s a sister to me”) and cross listed ties (such as spouse and friend). These characteristics were also found here. A study of older adults found some similarities to this study in their identification of friendship characteristics. While they identified nine themes, the ones shared by this study included reciprocity, positive attributions, understanding and familial comparison (Patterson et al. 2009). A meta-analysis of both adults’ and children’s’ friendships found commonalities with this study in regard to the characteristics of reciprocity, emotional support, companionship (Hall 2011). The present study aligns with these studies and adds to their findings. The definitional aspects found in this study that are *not* strongly emphasized in other studies of friendship include enjoyment, comfortability, growth, accountability. These unique themes can deepen our understandings of how people perceive and practice their friendships.

The present study also conflicted with large-scale, older research. Previous inductive studies of friendship have found very general applications of the term “friend”, which was not found in this study. One large-scale study described friendship definitions as “largely unsystematic” based mainly on factors of what the relationship did *not* include (specialized role relations, kinship ties, intimate and material involvement) (Fischer 1982). Participants in the current study had very distinct ideas surrounding the qualities and traits of friendships. They were conscientious about who they applied the label of “friendship” to. Their friendships were characterized by emotional intimacy and many

forms of support. Level of closeness and degree of intimacy were also things the participants recognized. Differences from previous literature may have resulted from this acknowledgment. For the most part, participants were not engaging in or discussing casual friendships. The relationships with their own friends were durable and played a central role throughout their lives.

My analysis also found few differences in friendship definitions and functions based on gender. One meta-analysis of friendship found differentiation in friendship qualities and expectations based on gender (Hall 2011). However, the samples of many of the studies involved in the meta-analysis were much younger than the present sample (with a mean age of 15 years, compared to a mean age of 46 years). Since gender socialization is increasingly prominent in adolescence, these findings may not apply as well to adult friendship (Leaper and Farkas 2015). Gendered findings on friendship traits is mixed. Like this study, previous research among college students did not find gender differences in descriptions of friendships (Rybak and McAndrew 2006). More research may be needed to clarify whether people in later life stages exhibit gender differences in their conceptualizations of friendship qualities and significance.

While there are some multidisciplinary studies that investigate the meaning of friendship, there is less literature that examines the role of friendship in adult's lives (Fischer 1982; Hall 2011; Patterson et al. 2009; Policarpo 2015; Rybak and McAndrew 2006). Research that has investigated friendship's role has used the social science paradigm of resource exchange, which does not adequately capture the complex and varied functions of friendship found in the present study (Eve 2002; Bellotti 2008) Very

little research differentiates friendship traits and the role friendship plays. In the data of this study, these aspects were at times intertwined. However, this research identified unique aspects of friendship's role in adults' lives, including centrality, shared history, sounding board, effort and maintenance, and flexibility and willingness to reconnect. Though there is overlap between these concepts, the study attained richer findings through their separation.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of this study is that while I qualitatively identified many friendship characteristics and perceived levels of closeness, specific friendship characteristics and ways to describe closeness are potentially highly variable between samples. As mentioned, there was no uniform terminology used among members of the present study to differentiate levels of friendship. This terminology also does not exist in any widespread sense in the literature (Adams et al. 2000). Due to this, from a methodological standpoint, it may be difficult to apply the findings of this study to larger scale, quantitative studies. Future research could build off the present findings by examining patterns friendship descriptors and compiling archetypical friendship categories (Lee 2022). Some studies have begun to do this (Kitts and Leal 2021; Lee 2022), but future work is needed in order to capture the nuances and complexities of friendship types (and their functions) comprehensively across the life course.

Expanding the qualitative foundations of this research to the creation of quantitative measures could yield more robust theoretical and methodological approaches for studying friendship characteristics and levels of closeness. This process could involve

developing validated scales or questionnaires that capture different dimensions of friendship. The present study offers valuable qualitative insights into friendship characteristics and levels of closeness, but further research is necessary to establish more standardized frameworks for studying friendships.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to collect descriptions of the concept of “friendship” and use participant narratives to demonstrate its significance and value in the lives of adults. The present findings both align and deviate from contributions of previous work and provide some novel insights into adults’ friendships. This chapter adds to the literature by closely examining definitions of "friendship" among adults in different life stages. The chapter demonstrates how these relationships impact those in them, underscoring the multifaceted forms of support and comradery they provide, and highlighting their indispensable role in individuals' lives.

CHAPTER TWO: FRIENDSHIP CHANGE OVER THE LIFESPAN

INTRODUCTION

There is an abundance of research on friendship stability and change in childhood and adulthood, but our body of knowledge on friendship change over the life course is limited (Bowker et al. 2006; Meter and Card 2016; Ng-Knight et al. 2019; Poulin and Chan 2010). Close friendships have demonstrable effects on health and well-being (Franco 2022; Shin et al. 2023), but they are also increasingly rare in adulthood (American Perspectives Survey 2021). There have been few studies on how life events and turning points impact the friendships of adults (Becker et al. 2009). Paradoxically, friendships may become more important as people age and encounter the distinctive challenges and transitions of adulthood. There are few studies that look at friendship turning points *throughout* the adult life course in diverse samples (Becker et al. 2009; Doherty 2021). As such, we have limited knowledge on how different kinds of life events impact friendships. It has long been highlighted that friendships are voluntary and uninstitutionalized, meaning they may be particularly vulnerable to dissolution (Blieszner and Roberto 2003; Vieth et al. 2022; Wiseman 1986). Examining change in these relationships and seeing how they unfold over time is worthwhile because it allows us to get some sense of how close friendships can remain successful over a lifetime. In light of this, the aim of this chapter is to examine how close friendships change and develop over adults' lives.

The chapter is organized in three sections. These sections cover turning points in friendships, change in perceptions of friendship over the life course and outlooks for the

future. In order to better understand processes of friendship change, I used the concept of “turning points” to guide the interviews and discuss specific instances in which friendships became more or less close (Baxter and Buchanan 2015; Hutchison 2005). Turning points are ways to conceptualize relationships change, and are events that lead to change and transformation in life and relationship trajectories (Baxter and Buchanan 2015; Hutchison 2005). The first section of this chapter is devoted to describing these turning points. In this section, I present shared participant turning points in the duration of their friendships across the lifespan, categorizing them by type and their effect on friendship closeness. Through this analysis, the chapter identifies common events that influence friendship closeness as people progress through the life course. After describing turning points they experienced in their friendships, participants were asked to reflect on how their general views of friendship and its importance had changed over their lives. These reflections make up the next section of the chapter. Finally, participants were asked what direction they anticipated their friendships would continue in, which are the subject of the final section of this chapter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is minimal research on specific life events, relational turning points and changes that impact friendships in different stages of adulthood (Becker et al. 2009; Doherty 2021; Johnson et al 2003). Multidisciplinary life course research has focused heavily on children’s and adolescent’s friendships and their developmental effects (Elder 1998; Erikson 1993). However, there is some research across the adult life course that can inform the present study. LCT has posited that different types of relationships evolve

differently over individuals' lives (Wrzus et al. 2013). Research on friendship (both using the LCT and generally) has found evidence for this (Wrzus et al. 2017). There are patterns of friendship fluctuation based on biological age and its connection with normative life events (de Vries 1991). LCT research broadly finds that life events serve as important catalysts for the restructuring of social networks (Pahl and Pevalin 2005; Wrzus et al. 2013). This research can help shed light on potential milestones, shifts, or changes that individuals may experience in their friendships as they progress through the lifespan. In this literature review, I examine how we might expect age and normative life stage events and transitions (Carter and McGoldrick 1999) to affect friendships.

Leaving Home

Early on in the adult life course, there are several kinds of life events and transitions that may impact friendship (Barry et al. 2009). Often, young adults are leaving home for the first time. While there is potential for the loss of pre-college friendships, the overall developmental and social significance of friends does not get lost in the transition to college or other independent living arrangements (Oswald and Clark 2003). Friends are highly valued during young and emergent adulthood (Blieszner and Roberto 2003; Kalmijn 2003). At this stage, friends provide not just company, but advice, support, role socialization, and influence on identity formation (Bellotti 2008; Blieszner and Roberto 2003; Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2016). As young adults navigate a host of life changes, friends can act as a sounding board (Craig-Bray et al. 1988; Markiewicz et al. 2006). In one longitudinal study of early adulthood, friend support remained very high from ages 18 to 25, and was not associated with either living at home or leaving for school

(Galambos et al. 2018). Another longitudinal study found an increase in friendship quality from 18-22, which they attributed in part to the potential of “greater freedom” to enjoy time with friends in early adulthood (Langheit and Poulin 2022).

Entering Romantic Relationships

While leaving the family home seems to be a turning point that elevates the importance of friends, the initiation of long-term romantic commitments is a common life course event with a more mixed impact on friendship (Galambos et al. 2018; Langheit and Poulin 2022). As young adults move through the normative and linear life trajectory of singleness, dating, marriage/cohabitation, and childbearing, friendships can be overshadowed (Wrzus et al. 2013). Notably, romantic relationships seem to have the strongest displacement effect on friendships (Cronin 2015; Johnson and Leslie 1982; Kalmijn 2003). Spouses and partners can begin to fulfill the psychological and instrumental needs friendships formerly did (Blieszner and Roberto 2003). Additionally, the transition into marriage and cohabitation often leads to the shrinking of the couple’s friend networks (known as the dyadic withdrawal hypothesis) (Kalmijn 2003). One study investigating sources of social support during young adulthood proposed a theoretical schema to explain the three distinct stages of support that arose in their sample of young adults (aged 20 to 35) (Carbery and Buhrmester 1998). These stages were “the single phase”, “the married-without-children phase” and “the parenthood phase” (Carbery and Buhrmester 1998). Within these stages, social support and reliance on friends changed. Friends were most important in the “single” phase. In the “later” phases, other

relationships were the primary providers of social provisions (Carbery and Buhrmester 1998).

Even those who do enter into romantic relationships may have their friendships impacted by them (Doherty 2021; Jalma 2008). Prior research suggests that this process is gendered (Depaulo 2008; Doherty 2021; Jalma 2008). In studies of women in young and middle adulthood, romantic relationships were cited as the most common cause for turning points in and dissolution of friendships (Doherty 2021; Jalma 2008).

Interestingly, life stage may temper these effects. While young women reported that romantic relationships caused friendship dissolution (Jalma 2008), an analysis of middle-aged women's friendships found that romantic relationships increased friendship closeness just as often as it decreased it (Doherty 2021).

Despite these patterns, recent decades of life course research have identified that "typical" life course events like marriage and cohabitation are changing as the transition into adulthood become more fluid and prolonged (Arnett 2000; Lewis and Eichler 2003). More recent, longitudinal research found that best friendship quality decreased slightly over emerging adulthood (19 to 30 years old) (Langheit and Poulin 2022). At the same time, investment in romantic relationships increased (Langheit and Poulin 2022). However, the decline in friendship quality was mediated by investment in romantic relationships (Langheit and Poulin 2022). These findings indicate that the decrease in intimacy between best friends from ages 19 to 30 may not be solely driven by entering into romantic relationships. Individuals who were more committed to their romantic lives during emerging adulthood actually reported higher friendship quality, which may

suggest that these relationships can positively influence one another (Langheit and Poulin 2022). This association may be bi-directional. Other longitudinal work looking at couples has found that respondents with whose spouses were highly integrated into their friendship networks had higher marital quality (Kearns and Leonard 2004).

Having Children and Caring for Family

Research on friendship dissatisfaction suggests that the midyears of the life course are often a low point for friendship (Bhattacharya et al. 2016; Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2016). This can be detrimental to individuals' well-being (Bhattacharya et al. 2016). Role transitions and increased responsibilities to family have been suggested as the precipitating factors of this decline (Carbery and Buhrmester 1998). As discussed, entering into romantic partnerships has the potential to influence friendship quality (for better or worse). For those who continue on to have children, demands on time and resources may be further complicated (Carbery and Buhrmester 1998). It is also possible that adults in middle age may be caring for aging parents, only increasing potential role strain (Bastawrous et al. 2014; Miller 1980).

Interestingly, existing research shows limited support for these assertions. Despite contending with many competing demands, research shows that adults in these stages of life still value their friendships highly and are affectively invested in them (Blieszner and Roberto 2003; Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2016). Caring for family (children and parents) may not bear as strong of an influence on friendships as initial movement into a romantic partnership does (Cronin 2015; Carbery and Buhrmester 1998). One study of parental adjustment found that support networks (including friends) remained relatively stable in

the period from birth to two years postpartum (Bost et al. 2002). Unsurprisingly, individuals who experienced changes and decreases in this support reported more a difficult adjustment period and higher rates of depressive symptoms (Bost et al. 2002). Other research found that having a child, though obviously a major life course turning point, did not impact the frequency of contact with friends (Sander et al. 2017). In fact, within some friendships, having a child actually increased friendship closeness (as long as both friends were in the same life stage) (Doherty 2021). These studies suggest that friends might provide added support in the wake of family-related life changes.

Divorce and Widowhood

Research has also looked at how transitions out of romantic relationships affect friendships (Carr 2018). While the loss of a partner has rarely been viewed as anything other than detrimental, social networks often adapt and grow with marital dissolution (Carr 2018; Wrzus et al 2013). Across all life stages, friendships have “resurgences” after romantic breakups and divorces (Bidart and Lavenu 2005; Bookwala et al. 2014). Some research indicates that post-romantic dissolution, friends may be uniquely able to support individuals. Single and divorced adults are more likely to cite non-kin as their closest friends when compared to married or partnered adults (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). Friends may be perceived to be the least judgmental and personally invested in the previous couple’s relationship (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). Additionally, friends often provide instrumental and psychological support after traumatic life events like the death of a partner, and during the transition into widowhood (Carr 2018). In short, just as friends are generally considered to be very important before people enter into romantic relationships,

they are a source of refuge at their end. Whether romantic relationships end due to separation, divorce, or death, research demonstrates that many people rely heavily on their friends through these difficult life changes (Kaljmn 2012).

Retirement

Retirement is a life transition that is associated with friendship revival (Carter and Cook 1995). With retirement and children leaving home, older adults generally have reduced time constraints, which seems to allow for more time for friendship (Liechty et al. 2012; Vinick and Ekerdt 2020). Perhaps due to this, the research on the importance of friendship in older adulthood is abundant (Adams and Blieszner 1995). Friends are often primary sources of support in old age (Blieszner et al. 2019). When social support from friends is low, retirement is linked to a significant rise in depressive symptoms (Kail and Carr 2020). However, as the level of social support from friends increases, this association diminishes, demonstrating friendship's mitigating effect on depressive symptoms (Kail and Carr 2020). Research has shown that late-life friends assist with caregiving, life satisfaction, well-being, navigate grief and mental health (Blieszner et al. 2019; Cronin 2015). Due to the multifaceted benefits friends can provide in old age, some scholars have called for friendship in the later stages of life to be a research agenda (Blieszner et al. 2019).

Health and Financial Changes

Unfortunately, friendships are not always physically accessible to older adults, as they may encounter health difficulties (Blieszner and Roberto 2003). Additionally, their reduced financial means may not allow for frequent friendship activities (Blieszner and

Roberto 2003). Older adults report fewer friendships than younger adults and less frequent contact with their friends (Sander et al. 2017; Stevens and Van Tilburg 2011). However, some research has found that despite contacting and visiting their friends less than individuals in other age cohorts, the oldest adults were most satisfied with their friendships (Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2016). As friendship dissatisfaction is highly correlated with loneliness (which can be extremely detrimental in old age), this is an important finding (Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2016). Although it has been theorized that in old age people have fewer relationships in general, this does not mean they cut out friendships or that they are not vital (Carstensen et al. 2003). Instead, older adults may focus and rely on a small number of very close and important friends, instead of creating new relationships (Blieszner and Roberto 2003).

The Present Study

With regard to past scholarly work, this study will elicit friendship turning points from adults in young adulthood, middle age, and older adulthood. I will add to the literature by expanding our knowledge of events that result in friendship changes over the life course. The second part of the chapter will focus on the significance of friendship and perceptions of change, providing a more comprehensive overview of how friendship trajectories and experiences impact participants' views of friendship over time. These reflections will be concluded by descriptions of future friendship expectations.

METHODS

Recruitment, sampling, general interview procedures and description of the coding schemas used for this study are detailed in previous chapters.

Interview Protocol

For this portion of the dissertation specifically, I used a “turning point” interview protocol based on protocols used in similar turning point studies (Braithwaite et al. 2018; Doherty 2021). I adapted the questions for close friendships in adulthood (Braithwaite et al. 2018). Prior to asking questions about turning points, I defined the concept of a “turning point” (Baxter et al. 1999) for participants. Life events that shape relationship trajectories have been referred to as "turning points." (Hutchison 2005). These impactful incidents that bring about substantial and enduring transformations individuals’ lives and relationships (Baxter et al. 1999). As this study aims to describe how friendships develop and are maintained over the life course, participants were asked about these significant junctures in their lives and relationships. Study members detailed changes to their friendships by naming significant turning points that occurred during the course of specific relationships. They described these turning points and identified their effect on friendship closeness. After the turning point data collection, study members were asked to reflect on friendship change overall and the future of their friendships.

RESULTS

Turning Points

Turning points can be a useful way to conceptualize relationship change. In the past turning point analysis this has been done in quantitative (Becker et al 2009; Johnson et al., 2003) and qualitative friendship studies (Doherty 2021). This study takes the latter approach, and explores qualitative themes that arose in the turning point data. In this

section, I will describe different types of turning points participants reported in their friendships and discuss how they impacted friendship closeness.

There were 18 types of turning points that were shared by three or more participants (N=184). Interviewees each identified between 2 and 21 turning points. The mean number of turning points identified by participants was 6.5. The most common turning point was sharing an activity or interest (n=27), followed by a geographical move (n=24), trips together (n=17), emotional changes to the friendship (n=12) values related changes (n=11), family related turning points (n=11), special/symbolic events (n=10). Turning points that were less commonly identified included living together (n=9), death (n=9), fights (n=8) (and resolving a fight(n=4)), marriage and divorce (n=8), losing a mutual friend (n=7), integrating networks (n=6), health issues (n=6), personal crisis (n=6), role transitions (n=6), and changing relationship type (n=3).

Due to the nature of some life events that made up the turning points, participants did not always report a straightforward effect of the turning point on their friendship closeness. For example, some turning points were extremely difficult personally, but had somewhat positive outcomes interpersonally. Or, a turning point could start out positively, but have deleterious outcomes for the relationship. For this reason, turning points were coded as having “negative”, “mixed”, “negative to positive”, “positive” and “unspecified” effects on closeness. Most of the turning points were viewed as having a positive impact on friendship closeness (61%). About 23% of turning points had a negative effect on closeness, followed by “negative to positive” and “mixed” turning

points (each roughly 5%). About 6% of turning points were significant to participants, but had an “unspecified” effect on their friendship closeness.

Role Transitions (n=6, 3%)

Role transition turning points included things such as getting married, becoming an empty nester, moving into and out of careers, and reaching retirement (Elder 1998; Hutchison 2005). Though these turning points are the focus of much past research (Carbery and Buhrmester 1998), they were not more prominent than the many other kinds of turning points. Also notable is that role transition turning points were viewed as mostly positive for friendships (n=4), with one being negative and another unspecified closeness impact. Ari spoke about the positive turning points he had experienced with his friends as they went through role transitions in young adulthood together. He didn’t necessarily view any of the specific changes as abrupt or distinctive turning points, but he did conceptualize them as parts of a positive trajectory in closeness. When asked about friendship turning points, he said the following: *Just watching each other mature and go through different stages of life, I think. The changes that we've gone through as friends have just all been pretty natural. Just watching everything, watching each other's moves through stages. Seeing Brady become a teacher, get to see him buy a home, and to have a successful relationship with his partner—he's doing well! Then Harvey's got this really cool job that he worked really hard to get!*

Harvey: No, no... [protesting]

Ari: He did! He works his ass off every day, he's being humble!

Harvey: You know, we all worked fast food through high school, Ari and I into our twenties. Ari went through the ranks at [a fast food chain] and was like top dog, works at the hospital now! These friends took pride in each other's accomplishments and were grateful to witness life changes with one another. They believed that sharing these pivotal moments deepened their bond significantly.

Participants in later stages of adulthood also reported friendship turning points related to role transitions. Clarence spoke about how retirement affected his relationship with his friends: *I've been out of school [where all the men worked together] directly with Greg and Tom for 15 years now.* When Clarence retired, his friendship dynamics shifted: *So, our relationship now has become more about we golf and we're hunting all the time. Tom and his brothers, they all hunted with me several times!* Clarence still felt close to his friends, and that this turning point was positive in the sense that the friends got to focus on hobbies they enjoyed doing together, rather than work related activities. He also got to spend time with his friend's family, as they shared interests. However, his friends were significantly younger than him and were not yet retired, so he viewed this turning point as having a mixed impact, because they spent less time together overall: *With them working, we're just not together every day like we used to be, or even right afterwards. It just gets -- that kind of thing works itself away from you as you get older. And Tom has three girls, you know.*

While his friends were in different life stages and had to focus on different roles than he did as an empty nester and retiree, he was able to reflect on his friendships from this vantage point: *I would say that that's the thing that you notice, as you get older, like*

me is these guys were all pretty important. You have your kids, they do too. And then these guys after-- once they get an empty house, they'll be able to go back to it! All of them, they're not all as old as me. Greg has Eli [his son] stuff, but I have a feeling when he retires, we'll play golf every day-- back to what we used to do when he didn't have kids!

Though their life stages and obligations didn't entirely match up entirely, Clarence's broader life experience made him look forward to the life transitions and positive turning points in the future of his friendships.

Sharing Activities and Interests (n= 27, 15%)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, sharing activities and interests was often a turning point that made friends closer (Doherty 2021; Johnson et al. 2003). Friends took the same high school or college classes, worked at the same places, joined organizations, and went to church together. They created music together, enjoyed the same artists and went to shows, played video games and sports, did martial arts, and spent time outdoors. The majority of these turning points (n=22/27) were viewed positively and increased friendship closeness.

Charlie gave an example of how attending a Rolling Stones concert was a turning point that kicked off a series of shared experiences. This event brought him and a friend closer, inspired them to continue seeking out experiences, and provided him with valued memories in the later years of his friend's life: *We were both in our sixties when the Rolling Stones finally came back to [their city]. He wanted to go to that concert, and I wasn't so sure I wanted to go. He said, "You know, listen, how many good years do we*

have left?!” It was maybe it was our expression of a midlife crisis or something I don't know! [laughs] That was not anything we had ever done before. All of a sudden in our sixties, we think “Gee, we need to go in and see these super groups that we've neglected all these years!” So, he kind of dragged me into it. But I'm so glad! And that led to... We went to the Stones, and then we went to The WHO, Springsteen, Clapton, and we went to Heart... Though Charlie had been somewhat hesitant to go to the show and laughed at the prospect of the two embarking on a “midlife crisis” venture, this turning point marked a significant juncture that allowed them to live in the moment, enjoy themselves and make memories he treasured after his friend’s passing.

Though most shared activity turning points were positive like Charlie’s, sometimes activities and interest turning points made friends less close. Four participants said that these kinds of turning points were negative for their friendships, while one had a mixed impact on closeness. Some participants discussed how they were no longer able to do their hobbies together as they got older. While their emotional closeness remained largely unaffected, this was still a source of disappointment.

Others spoke about feeling left out when friends began a new activity without them. Several of these turning points happened when the relationships (and participants) were young, but were still viewed as impactful turning points years later. For instance, Kim, who was in her fifties, described a teenage turning point in which several of her friends made the cheerleading squad: *You know, there were even little things that tightened some of our relationships and lessened others. Like when we were in high school, we all tried out. Some of us made it, some of us did not. Me, Annie V and Annie K*

were cheerleaders. So, the three of us really bonded during the high school years, because of that activity. Lana, Sandy, and Rochelle were not cheerleaders. That was kind of a turning point, with some of us. So, I was on the winning end of that... It wasn't--you know-- I never really thought of it as something that kind of broke down our relationship... But I would imagine for the girls that didn't make the cheerleading squad, that's probably something that they feel it was.

Although some of Kimberly's friendships benefited from this turning point allowing them to bond and share in an activity and a communal sense of identity, she was aware that it had likely had the opposite effect for several members of her friend group.

Trips Together (n=17, 9%)

Turning points that resulted from trips with and visits to friends were reported by many participants (n=17). These turning points included vacations, conferences, camps, meeting of friends' family or other friend groups, reunion trips, and trips uniting larger groups of friends. The trips participants reported ranged considerably in scale, from international holidays taken together to small day trips. Despite this variety, all seventeen of the trip turning points had a positive effect on friendship closeness.

While trips benefited friendships in expected ways (like providing a time and space to bond), participants also recounted deeper impacts. Dana illustrated this in her description of several trips she and her best friend Adam had taken over the years. The first trip turning point she described was a quick outing in their young adulthood "*when we didn't have any money.*" The pair travelled to go to see a historical exhibit: "*We drove to the state fair, and we went to Laura Ingalls Wilder house! We made this stupid little*

road trip outrageously fun, and we took a ton of pictures and that was such a fun trip to take! We travel really well together! Though at the time, they were limited by finances, the trip demonstrated to them that they could make any situation “outrageously fun”, and laid the groundwork for future trips: Dana: And then, we were like we should go to France! I’ve never been to Paris! Adam: And I’ve never been to Germany! Both: So, let’s go!

This second trip was a much bigger commitment, and they encountered several stressful situations they wouldn’t have normally faced in their friendship: *Adam: We planned this epic international adventure and that was like navigating a language barrier, navigating hotel rooms, navigating a stick shift, and driving halfway across France to get to a destination! They viewed these experiences as a litmus test of their friendship strength: You know, they always say that’s a big indicator of whether or not your relationship survives-- if you can travel together without killing each other! And it went really well!* This trip was a turning point in which they were to find that their friendship could withstand the potentially hectic aspects of planning a vacation and travelling. Doing so increased their ability to communicate and negotiate through difficulties: *So now we’ve done several different trips together and that continues to be I think a good-- now we know exactly how I am! Show up exactly two hours early, I want to go to the gate! I want to be the first one on the plane! And Adam is like ‘I don’t understand why you’re like this!’ But you know, we’ll try and negotiate some of that and, like, ‘I know you want to do this, I want to do this’ So that also boils down to knowing yourself really well, knowing your friend, and being able to communicate honestly.*

Trip turning points were bonding opportunities because they gave friends opportunities to spend time together during sometimes very busy periods of adulthood (Bhattacharya et al. 2016; Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2016). They also helped friends strengthen and develop their relationship. These turning points could increase participant's self-awareness, closeness and understanding of their friends, and allow them to communicate more smoothly. Trips were important because they created unique situations in a low stakes environment to act like a testing ground for everyday communication competency.

Special and Symbolic Events (n=10, 5%)

Ten turning points resulted from life events that study members considered special and symbolic (Blumer 1969). These included things like weddings, parties (for birthdays, housewarmings, and holidays) and in some cases larger cultural events such as shows, marches, or protests. The impact of these events on friendship was varied (six made friends closer, while four had a negative impact on closeness). Often, the negative consequences of this type of turning point stemmed from friends *missing* an important event. Dot spoke about one such turning point with her friend Genie. She and Genie's friendship was long established, but in the lead up to this turning point, their relationship had soured: *She was very judgmental in ways. I just started feeling annoyed with her, and I just kind of pulled back. Her stepdaughter got married in France-- and Genie considered me like a sister. She has four best friends, and I would be one of them, that are long term relationships, and that are kind of like family. And I didn't go to France. I couldn't, you know. But I was also feeling kind of distant from her.*

Genie was extremely hurt by Dot missing her step-daughter's wedding. Though Dot felt the relationship was emotionally strained (as she was feeling "annoyed" and "distant") before this turning point, missing this special event is what caused a serious rift between them: *I just didn't know how to handle it with her. So, I kind of got a little more distant, and then she got really, really upset with me. I remember it felt very awkward and we didn't know how to handle it.*

Dot didn't know how to communicate with Genie in the wake of this turning point, which caused her to withdraw even further from the friendship. Eventually, this culminated in a bitter confrontation: *I took her out for her birthday for lunch and Book of Mormon and at lunch she lit into me. She was so... Really angry! And nasty! I didn't realize how I had hurt her.* This event turning point and subsequent fight was incredibly negative for the two friends, as it stirred up childhood anxieties and feelings of abandonment: *She'd been a foster kid and she always felt like she didn't really fit into family. And I'd been her family, and I had abandoned her.* Although Dot later gained an understanding as to why missing this special event was so impactful, at the time, she struggled to grasp its significance even feared losing their relationship: *But I didn't understand--that's what I learned later. When she was so angry and mean. And I didn't see where I had been mean to her, I just saw her--and I really felt after that I thought I may never speak to her again.*

While clearly this type of turning point could be very detrimental to friendship closeness, many of the special event turning points were positive, as friends were able to co-create memorable experiences (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Zoe described one such

turning point very early on in her relationship with her best friend: *Hannah and I met the week before a second grade. My parents and her parents set up a playdate. I've often told the story of how we met as like in a role reversal of sorts, she was hiding behind her mom, and I was very like "Welcome to my neighborhood, my domain!" We played, but she says the turning point in our friendship-- I think it's more just like a testament to my mom-- who loves to throw a party-- but we threw her like a welcome to [their neighborhood] party that next weekend! We threw Hannah a party, which I hardly remember, but she always says that made her feel personally cared for.*

While Zoe remembered their first playdate more than the welcome party her family threw her friend, her friend recalled it differently. To her, the party was a special and symbolic event in childhood stood out as a significant turning point. This initial expression of goodwill made her feel welcome, cared for, and kick-started the decades long friendship the two shared, demonstrating the potential importance of this kind of turning point.

Emotional Changes (n=12, 7%)

A large number of turning points (n=12) related to changes in friend's feelings towards one another. Some of the participants (n=4) reported emotional changes that made their friendships less close. These turning points resulted from things such as poor mental health, judgmental behavior, or personality differences. These changes happened at various stages of the life course and were sometimes contextualized by larger societal events (Elder 1998). For example, Frances spoke about the negative impact of COVID-19 social distancing on one of her friendships: *During COVID, she got very depressed, and shut herself off to certain degree.*

Frances discussed another negative emotional turning point, when this friend was openly judgmental about her process as an artist: *As an artist, I use a lot of mixed media, and I do what I call “street shopping.” I find other things on the street, and take that. One day I was walking with her, and I found something really wonderful on the street! And I went to pick it up and she said “Oh!” [in disgust] and she really judged. And I didn't take it. And I don't know what it was, but to this day I'm sorry I didn't take it! I don't want a friend like that, you know? My other friends are encouraging, and they find things for me!* This experience was a turning point made Frances reflect critically on their dynamic: *She's very judgmental, very uptight and I just I had a kind of tiptoe around her I couldn't really be myself. For many years, I don't think I realized what it's worth. She ultimately decide to distance herself from this friend. This coincided with the pandemic, which may have allowed her to distance herself more easily: Over COVID the last two years, I just don't see her, talk to her... Anything, because I don't want a friend who can't accept me the way I am.* While this incident had a negative effect on closeness for the two, it made Frances grateful for the support of her other friends. A few other participants (n=2) conceptualized mixed emotional turning points in this way (starting out negatively but having an overall positive impact in their lives and friendships).

Most feelings based turning points (n=6) were viewed as having a positive impact on friendship closeness. These positive turning points resulted from friends maturing, becoming more expressive of love, gaining admiration, learning more from one another, putting more effort into the friendship. Brianna described one such turning point: *I was just visiting [Selene] for New Year's. And we decided to spend New Year's Eve, the whole*

countdown, just walking around the city and talking for hours! I healed my resentment for [the city], I just fell in love with the city again. Fell in love with our friendship and started saying “You should come visit me next year and, like you know, see my life!” We both got so excited about life, and really saw how like we've been living, making such separate moves for five years. And then like we started seeing how similar we were, and complementary we were, and how the future that we saw was just... together!

This experience was emotionally very significant for the two, and allowed them to lay the groundwork to eventually move in together. During this time, they also realized the value of showing affection within their friendship, which was not something they had been open about before: *We've never been physically—like physically touchy. Therefore, we use our words. [And this time] Even more so was more like, freeing our words! Like saying I love you. We realized how much it does like affect our relationship, and how like it does add to our relationship as well. Just to be verbally validated and validate the other. And say like “Yes, this is special this connection!”* Discussing how to be affectionate and give each other affirmations had a profoundly positive impact on their relationship closeness. In the absence of specific societal markers characteristic of other kinds of relationships (such as “officially” becoming a couple), turning points like this paved the way for them to make stronger commitments to one another (Benzecry and Winchester 2017). After this turning point, they decided to move in with one another: *I think that that gave us the confidence to move forward with it.*

Values (n=11, 6%)

Value related conflicts and changes were commonly reported as turning points for participants (n=11). Most of these turning points (n=7) had negative impacts on friendship closeness. Issues that arose in these turning points included political differences, pandemic related beliefs, religious differences, and judgment of beliefs. These experiences were common to participants of various ages and ideological orientations. However, they were situated within societal contexts specific to life course cohorts (Hutchison 2005). Value based turning points merit particular given the increasingly polarized political and cultural context of present day (Hutchison 2005; Malon 2021). Zoe, then in her twenties, spoke about a how the 2016 Women's March impacted her relationship with her best friend in their late teens. As a result of this turning point, the pair became less close for a period of several years in early adulthood:

2016 was pretty rough for us. The Women's March was really... She posted... around that time there are some rhetoric about how like they [pro-life women] wanted to be part of the March and then the Women's March organizers were like "You're not real women because you think this thing!" She posted one of those articles on Facebook, like the 'Women's March people are anti-woman, because they won't let the prolife people march!' It was just some pretty sensationalist language. Later it was like 'They're hypocrites!' and they're... Whatever... I privately just texted her, and I was like "Hey, I know emotions are like high right now I know we disagree on this..." And we probably always had—but we were children!

Zoe went on to describe how her and her friend's family backgrounds differed. Though she believed they had likely privately held different political and religious opinions throughout their friendship, these ideological differences hadn't come to a head until this turning point. While Zoe grew up in a liberal, politically active household, her friend's family had been more religious and less political. Despite this, initially, she was comfortable communicating with her friend about these issues: *The language in the thing she posted was a little hurtful. So, I finally said like "Hey, that's a sucky thing to say! Like you know we can disagree, but that was harsh!" I remember feeling really hurt, so I messaged her. And it felt fine.* Zoe was hurt by her friend's sudden and public support of beliefs she disagreed with. However, what made this turning point particularly difficult was that Zoe felt as if her friend was applying "sensationalist" and hurtful rhetoric to her personally: *And it also felt weird! Like, this is a weird thing for you to be mad about! Do you think I'M a hypocrite?! Do you think that about me!? It's fine, we can disagree, but you like think this about me? I went to the Women's March, and you know that! So that felt like an attack.*

In isolation, differing political views and values did not lead to decreased friendship closeness. Instead, diminished closeness appeared to result from being mischaracterized or stereotyped based *only* upon these views (Khullar et al. 2020). This was especially painful due to the friends' shared and significant interpersonal and emotional history outside of their respective viewpoints. Clarence, a man in his seventies, experienced a similar values related turning point that reinforced this supposition. One of his friendships changed drastically after their shared church declared a combative stance

on LGBTQ+ issues. The two men had different opinions on the decision, which became a turning point for them: *Something happened at church that changed it with Peter. When we were closer, we saw each other every Sunday. Then when that changed, I maybe didn't see him more than two three times a year. And I got the point eventually, where we didn't talk much. I mean we would acknowledge each other, wherever we saw each other, but we wouldn't say much.*

In the wake of this ideological disagreement, the pair no longer saw one another frequently. This had a clear negative impact on their closeness, and their once consistent dynamic slowly deteriorated. Clarence was aware that the friendship was in danger of fully slipping away: *So, I realized that you know, either one of us, one or the other had to step forward and say, "You know we're still friends!" I kept waiting for him to do something. I'd guess he kept waiting for me to say something.* Clarence recognized the need for communication to repair the connection, but he was not the one who directly decided to "step forward". What eventually brought the friends back together was a third friend: *I think how that changed was just that he had a good friend of his that was also a good friend of mine. We worked together at church. I think how—what kind of brought that relationship back together was going through her. I would see her a little more often than him and I kept... She even made the statement "I hope you still like me." [They also had differing views on the church's stance] I said, "What happened had nothing to do with our friendship." And I think that suddenly brought a relief for her.* By expressing that he did not regard their differing opinions as personal condemnations, Clarence was able to reach common ground with this third friend. In turn, she helped repair his

relationship with Peter: *I think she passed that on to Peter, and now we're not quite back to where we were, but we certainly are more talkative, and we communicate better!*

While their friendship was not identical the level it was before this values related turning point, they were able to reconcile through communication with a less high stakes party—their mutual friend.

A few of the value based turning points increased friendship closeness (n=4).

These turning points generally occurred when friends advocated for causes that their friends respected. Christopher spoke about one such turning point that occurred before his friendship officially began: *I really liked Dave. I knew I actually really liked him—I'd only met him my senior year, like the second semester of my senior year, in some kind of homec-y sexed-y type class. He was the only one in class that stood up for personal opinions that at the time were pretty radical! He stood up for gay marriage! Which in '92 most people weren't-- most people weren't, you know! Seeing Dave strongly defend his views was a turning point for Christopher, even when the two were just acquaintances: We didn't really hang out outside of school, but we talked and kind of hung out sometimes. Though they initially weren't close, the value-based turning point made Christopher admire Dave, and laid the foundation for their friendship to blossom once their circumstances aligned: *It was really weird, he was randomly assigned as my second freshman roommate. Once he was though, I mean we just became like the best of friends! Best friends almost immediately! And then we're like super tight friends for the next you know, 20 years or so!**

Fights (n=8, 4%)

Eight of the reported turning points were fights with friends. These fights ranged in severity and subject matter. The impact of fights on friendships was not wholly negative (though some of the fights were perceived this way, n=4). Some said fights had mixed effects on friendship closeness (n=1), and three said the impact of fights was negative but turned positive—or was entirely positive.

Selene and Brianna talked about one such example. They took a cruise with each other's families when they were in their early teens. During this time, they had their first disagreement: *Brianna: We had like I would say, like our first big fight on that!*

Selene: And also the only fight as well!

Brianna: In a way, it was so funny because she was bawling.... and I was like weirdly pleased? I'd broken her! She's always the type to bottle things up and I craved--- I knew that that was false! Like, I would rather hash things out than live fake politely. And so that tension was really like uncomfortable for me and, and this is obviously in hindsight and my 15 year old mind was not great-- manipulative-- I realize I was pushing her--

Selene: To see if I would push back... And like because she said, I was like a 'bottle all my shit up' person-- therefore I hated confrontation. Which is funny, because my best friend was so confrontational.

Bri: I mean, then it might have been toxic but also that was the thing—I was like 'Come yell at me! I wanted to see how you're feeling—like, I know you're mad at me! Say it all!' So, I think like that release of like yelling at each other-- and that's the only time we've done it-- was like a relief to me. It was kind of like, 'Great! I want it all! I want to... I

would rather us arguing to get closer than like keep it in and have this distance between us!’

Selene: Exactly. That tension just drove us further apart, now that that was broken, we could come back together again.

Bri: And I wanted her to know that I could see her absolute worst and still be there, the next day. She was afraid of that, so I think I wanted to prove myself to her as well.

Selene: Exactly!

With this argument turning point, the two became much closer. The fight allowed Selene to express her emotions more freely, allowed Brianna to feel that the tension between them eased overall. While this was the only major fight that the two had experienced in their friendship, it led to smoother communication overall.

Like Selene and Bri, Davion spoke about a turning point that changed the communication between them and their friends. Prior to this fight, Davion was feeling upset about the level of communication and expectation in some of their long-distance friendships. Two of their closest friends had moved to the same city and were able to easily spend time together. Davion was still in long-distance friendships with the pair, and felt that they were being expected to put in extra effort while not getting to enjoy the extra time the two other friends spent together: *We had like a really bad fight about it. I explained that it was important for me to like, schedule my time, basically. I was like ‘I can't blow off all of these things in my life!’* This confrontation initially made the friends less close, but resulted in Davion erecting some positive boundaries, which improved their friendships: *The expectations are different amongst like all of my relationships. So,*

the easiest thing is to just make friendship days essentially. After designating time for each of their friendships, Davion felt better able to balance the relationships.

A few of the negative argument turning points resulted in the ending of the friendship. The cases that this happened were usually precipitated by ongoing incidents in the relationship, such as consistently breaking boundaries or fights with other friends.

Christopher spoke of several emotional fight turning points: *We had this pretty big fight over another one of my best friends, where he made accusations towards me and towards this friend that just, from my perspective, seemed delusional. I mean, it was shocking, his perspective on things that happened in the past was not at all based on [reality]--- it was like really weird and skewed and when I tried to go, 'But no?!'... Then he would say he thought the same things about me!? Then I would try and say, 'But that's not what happened at all!?' I kept trying to explain myself, and it was important for me to do so. We had a whole blow up about that, and ultimately, I just quit responding to him.*

It was important for Christopher to try and salvage the relationship, but at a certain point, he came to the realization that his friend's perspective was not going to be changed:

I essentially realized that I had to accept that I wasn't going to convince this person. And you can't convince people in general, no matter how hard you try or how you do it, how you go about your argument, when you're having like a fundamental disagreement about reality. Sometimes you just have to get up and let somebody hate you for things you didn't even ever do. Christopher wanted to maintain the relationship, but he reached a point of exasperation when his friend was not willing to change his perspective. He stopped contacting the friend, but the two ended up having a bitter confrontation after this turning

point: *I don't remember specifically what I did anymore, but I do remember that I ran into him at a party, and he started screaming at me outside of this party "How dare you! How dare you!" I just said-- I was just done arguing at that point-- he was trying to bring up these different things (that in his perspective happened) and I just said, "I don't know man, I dare! I dare!" And I remember he broke down crying, and ran away. And it was really hard. Like way harder than a breakup with a girlfriend, or romantic relationship.*

This impassioned argument was a transformative event for Christopher, which marked the end of the friendship. He compared this turning point to a romantic break-up, a comparison that has been made in other friendship turning point studies (Doherty 2021). The event caused him to reflect on the true nature of the friendship and future ones: *The interesting thing about that is actually the whole process-- because I mean I knew that guy for 12 years, I was probably 16 [when they met]. From the get-go, he had kind of, from the moment I met him, he had kind of insinuated himself into my life, in spite of my intentions. Then I had to sort of like realize a lot of our friendship seem to be based around guilt, about how he was doing and wanting him to get along with people.*

Although this fight turning point caused the loss of a friendship, it led to realizations about what Christopher wanted in his relationships. It was fundamentally positive for Christopher's own self development and future relationships: *So, I always looked at that whole experience, though as a fundamental component or aspect of me maturing into a full adult. I feel like when I was younger, I used to worry more about pleasing people in general. And I felt like going through that process with him like did kind of*

fundamentally change how I view relationships... It was like a steppingstone in my maturity.

Resolving a Fight (n=4, 2%)

Turning points in which participants resolved an argument (n=4) were generally viewed as having a positive effect on closeness. These kinds of turning points were sometimes more passive and unintentional-- like starting to slowly hang out again or doing things they both enjoyed. Some resolutions were more deliberate, like going to therapy together.

Leo spoke about a turning point that gradually began the process of rebuilding his relationship with a distant friend: *I wish I remembered like a specific time... But if I'm being completely honest... You know, I do, maybe I do. We're at his house, playing video games, talking music and watching movies. Playing video games just for like an activity to do, while we like to talk about whatever music we're listening to. Although in this turning point the two didn't have any explicit discussions about restoring their friendship, it included doing things together that they had previously enjoyed. Leo continued: All these situations [when they were reconnecting] were like a lot of our [previous] hangouts. Because it's just like, we just sit there as something that would make sense to do, while we talk. To Leo, playing video games and watching movies provided a helpful backdrop that just "made sense" and allowed the two to feel more comfortable talking: So, I remember this time we're talking about it, Charlie Parker. It's like great obviously great music, but there's like so much lore around that! We were talking about that, and I don't know how he feels, but I definitely felt like it was like 70% feeling, of like the other*

*conversations. So, I was like 'Okay, cool! Yeah! Like we're back!' Amidst the mundane and familiar background of video games and movies, the pair was able to reestablish their connection. This process was not immediate (as Leo said, they were at "70%" during this conversation), but it was a hopeful turning point for him. After several months, the pair ended up much closer: *It was definitely ease back into it type thing, but by the end of that year, by the time we graduated, we were like as good friends as I've ever been with him!**

Dot also had a turning point that was the resolution of friendship conflict. Her approach was much different than Leo's. She and her friend took intentional steps to repair their relationship. First, she reached out to other members of her social network, who encouraged her to reinitiate contact with her friend: *I talked to my daughter, I talked to my sisters, I talked to some friends.* She began this contact in a low pressure manner: *Then we started emailing each other, a little bit. I didn't realize how mean I had been by not being honest with her, and just disappearing. That was really mean. I value being a nice person and manners and good behavior. So, I was horrified as I started looking at my shadow self. But we emailed each other, a few times we talked on the phone, and we said, 'We really messed this up, but we loved each other, and we've got so many things that nobody else has with each other,' and so we really worked at it.*

In this time, Dot realized the reasoning behind her friend's outbursts and anger and deliberately worked through these feelings. Both valued the relationship, and viewed it as unique and worth salvaging. This process did not come easily. The women both took accountability for their actions, expressly communicated, and put in the effort to repair their relationship. They were proud of the outcome, and noted that this level of

commitment and care was rare: *And we got a much, much stronger relationship. But oh! It took a while, and it was really uncomfortable! So, it was pretty amazing. I think it's that both of us had a lot of therapy (we are therapists) and we really love each other. That we were able to put it back better than ever? That's amazing! We always talk about it, because that never happened with anyone else. We both have to look at our own behaviors. But it was really important to both of us, and we talked about it because I've never-- I mean, it's not usual what we did.* Dot and her friend actively subverted norms around friendships and treated them as relationships worth investing effort into, rather than dissolving simply because the relationships were voluntary in nature (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Giddens 1992; Khullar et al. 2021).

Changing Relationship Types (n=3, 2%)

This type of turning point was relayed by three participants. These turning points occurred when one relationship type changed into another (i.e., romantic vs platonic, professional vs casual). Two participants reported initially having a romantic relationship that turned into a friendship, and another reported an employee that turned into their friend. These were all viewed as positive turning points. Davion described how one of their relationships changed in this way: *Davion: Yeah, we met on Tinder, and we went on a couple dates. Then I made the conscious decision to not pursue them romantically. I actually was on the hiring committee for a job that they applied for! So, I was like, I think we should be friends, it seems like that's where it's going anyway.*

Interviewer: Was there any kind of pushback or resistance? Or were they just really kind of on the same page with you about that?

Davion: I think they had their own feelings about it, but I think it was just the natural progression. So, we have been friends, ever since!

Though Davion expressed that their friend's romantic feelings might have initially differed from their own, they were unconcerned about this. In their view, the turning point marked the start of their current, strong, platonic relationship and made them closer overall.

Geographical Move (n=24, 29%)

One of the most common turning points (n=24) was a change in distance from friends (Becker et al. 2009; Policarpo 2016). Move turning points participants spoke about included moving farther apart geographically, going to different schools, and going away for an exchange program or extended summer trip. The impact on these moves on friendship was varied. Interestingly, n=9 were viewed by participants as having a positive impact (or no impact, n=1) on their level of closeness. Leo spoke about how he and his friend were the closest they had ever been at the end of college. At this time, his friend moved across the country. However, Leo described this anticipated turning point of a geographical move as having no real impact on their level of closeness: *He lives in Los Angeles now! But same deal now!*

Of the twenty four move turning points, eight were perceived as having a negative impact on friendship closeness. Jada spoke about why moving after law school had been negative for her friendships: *The bad ones [turning points]...When we all left California, I think that's been really a challenge. Very, very tough. We talk all the time... like constantly! I'm like—I'm going to be fired! I have to stop texting! We're still trying to*

figure out like a regular... We would hang out very regularly, because we were a bubble during the pandemic, but now that we are on time zones, we're still trying to figure it out. But, just like sharing things are happening in our lives and then also sharing things like, we will watch a show together or I don't know, go to a webinar. Jada lived with her friends during law school and was able to spend time with them during the pandemic. As the pandemic ended and they all split ways for their respective careers, they struggled to regain this rhythm and balance work-life pressures. This turning point is also representative of life course work-life trajectories, which may impact friendships (Elder 1998). This turning point had a negative impact on their closeness, although they all still worked to maintain the friendship.

Four of the move turning points were conceptualized by participants as having a mixed impact on closeness. This generally was the case when their ability to see one another was reduced, but their communication changed or improved as a result. Malcolm spoke about this kind of move turning point: *I think probably the biggest change was probably around we went from knowing each other, every day seeing each other when we were in middle school—that everyday relationship. Then we separated, went our different ways to different schools and as part of that, we lost the day to day, even though we were still living in the same small town. We lost the daily, but I think what we learned was the ability to know the deeper reliance on what was there. That was something that we learned, just because of that kind of forced separation.* Although as a child, Malcolm and his best friend saw one another daily, switching schools required them to learn how to communicate differently (Policarpo 2017). This turning point reduced their proximity to

one another, but laid a foundation for them to rely on each other more deeply. This quality and skill characterized their adult relationship (Malcolm was in his fifties at the time of the interview) and was greatly valued years later.

Some of the move turning points started out negatively and ended up having a positive impact on the relationship. Scott illustrated this in one powerful turning point. During the time period surrounding this turning point, his mother died, and he was going through a divorce. In the midst of these personal trials, his best friend moved, which greatly affected him: *Jeff, he moved. I just felt all alone, you know. I felt alone! I am! My best friend left, I'm single, my mom just passed away. I was kind of in a really dark place.* Scott was not doing well mentally or emotionally in the wake of all these difficult life events, and he decided to reach out for help from his friend: *That's when I started calling Jeff all the time. So, he moved away, and I started calling him daily. Without him-- Without the relationship with Jeff-- I don't know what would have happened [voice breaking]. That turning point when I got divorced, my mom died, he moved away-- that right there really built a strong bond with us, you know, because I was by myself. That made our relationship. And ever since that, those phone calls never stopped you know?* Scott credited this relationship for bringing him out of an extremely dark time in his life. The support his friend provided was crucial to him. This turning point not only increased their closeness, but improved Scott's personal wellbeing tremendously: *So, it's been good, every day, since he left.*

Cohabiting (n=9, 5%)

A turning point many participants mentioned was living together. Cohabitation is viewed as a major milestone in romantic relationships, but has been less explored among friends (Sassler and Lichter 2020). Cohabiting was viewed positively by the majority of those who reported it as a turning point (n=8). Brianna and Selene described how their relationship changed through one such turning point: *Brianna: We've now moved in with each other. It was a milestone, definitely. Selene: We see how well we work together in just mundane moments. And then also, how much we constantly work on the relationship itself. Like we talk about the littlest things. She'll be like "Take out the trash next time!" And I'll be like "Okay, but be gentler with me!" Just the small things, because we see how all the small things add up to the big things. Even when issues arise (on our own or with each other), we always see it as two of us against the problem, never one against the other.* Moving in together made Brianna and Selene face mundane issues together. Through this turning point, they learned to communicate candidly about these daily difficulties. They believed doing so made them closer overall, as they were able to apply their open communication to face larger issues.

One participant described living together as a turning point that had a very positive effect on their friendship closeness initially, but ended up causing distance between the two. Leo spoke about living with his friend in college. He described the turning point as: *Definitely significant-- we moved in together for sophomore year of school. It was significant in good ways and bad ways—we got very close.* While the two deeply enjoyed living together for a time, their closeness shifted into insularity: *But there*

*was like a lot of negativity in our room. Definitely there was definitely a feeling of kind of like... "Fuck everybody at the school!" So, like some dependency... Leo acknowledged that their relationship was not particularly healthy during this time, but still highlighted the level of closeness as he reflected on this era of the friendship: *But also like you know, we're just like... We were so close! So, I guess before it turns bad it's pretty good!!! It only comes to like a header, an end at some point.* After this "header" (which Leo described as a gradual distancing), the two friends spent a summer and part of the following semester apart. Eventually, they rekindled their relationship, but made sure to maintain other bonds as well.*

While most friends chose to move in with one another voluntarily, in a few cases (n=2), participants spoke about times they had to move in with friends to retreat from another living situation. Jasmine spoke about leaving her family home in her youth: *I ran away from home when I was like 14... I would have been like 15. I didn't really run away, I like kind of walked away, but I went away from my house, because I was just mad at my parents! It was a really dramatic thing. One of the places I stayed was at his house, and he was a real supportive friend about it.* This turning point had a positive effect on their friendship closeness, as Jasmine was able to distance herself from a tense family situation. Being able to rely on her friend during this time built a foundation of trust between the two and their friendship continued a decade later.

Family Related Turning Points (n=11, 6%)

Many participants relayed friendship turning points related to family dynamics, which included a wide range of circumstances. The interplay of friend and family relationships

is understudied (Wrutz et al. 2017). Study members of all ages spoke about this kind of turning point, suggesting it merits research. Sometimes, family-related turning points consisted of meeting and integrating into friend's family networks. These turning points (n=3) were all viewed as having a positive effect on friendship closeness. Diego, for example, spoke about how his friend "*was always a nice, welcoming guy*" but that their relationship became closer and more "personal" after he spent time with his friend's wife and children: "*Now there's kind of more of a personal relationship. They invite me over to their house-- they have a family, so it's more of a personal relationship.*"

Some participants spoke about turning points where they received help from friend's families. Malcolm illustrated this kind of turning point that occurred when he moved out of his mother's home as a teenager: "*When I moved out of my house, when I left my mom's place, I ended up going and living with her and her mom.* The timing of Malcolm's move into his friend's home and his friend's parents' divorce coincided. Because of this, the turning point was helpful to both friends: "*Her folks were-- at that point her mom had gotten divorced, and I'd been able to help her a little bit of that process, or be there for them.* Even though his friend actually moved away for college at the time ("*She had gone off to college and would come back and find me sleeping on the couch!*"), Malcolm felt closer to her after being welcomed into their home and being able to bond with her family. He greatly appreciated this support in the tumultuous time of his young adulthood: "*They were there for me at that time.*"

In other cases, participants discussed how friend's helped them through struggles with their own children, parents, or spouses. Samuel, a young man in his twenties, spoke

about how his friend Sunoo helped strengthen his relationship with his mother when he moved into their home: *It was a bad time for me and my mom. We fought all the time, like yelling fights. It was not a healthy relationship. I mean you know, teenagers fight with their parents, whatever. But, weirdly like, socially-- we should have stopped when we had a guest, obviously, but we didn't. But Sunoo like fixed it!? So that was a huge... That was a huge turning point for sure! Where he got drug into like our first fight. And it was... Fine!* Samuel initially worried that fighting in front of a guest would be awkward or impolite, but this was not the case: *He would tell my mom like, "Hey, you need to listen to Samuel, I know he's a kid but, you need to listen to him!" and he'd be like "Samuel, you need to stop yelling, that's not helping!" He was like a mediator for these huge stupid fights. I didn't get in trouble when Sunoo was there, because my mom and I communicated better with him there!* Sunoo acted as an advocate from Samuel and helped the two communicate more calmly. This family argument turning point was unexpectedly very positive for both his relationship with his mom and Sunoo.

Friends also helped in times of family crisis. Dot discussed a turning point that happened when her daughter was struggling with her mental health in college: *My daughter was out in Boulder [Dot lived in NYC] and she wasn't doing well. She got very depressed and she wouldn't... What ended up happening, I had to go out and rescue her. So, I flew out, and she wouldn't-- I couldn't get in touch with her, but I told her friends to tell her that I was coming. I just needed to pull her out of school and get her home. And so that meant packing up everything! She was in an apartment at the time-- packing up everything and sending it back to New York. I called my friend Debbie. She's been my*

friend since college. I hadn't talked to her in a couple months probably, and I called her, because I didn't have a car, I didn't have boxes... I didn't... So, I called her up, my daughter is there crying. I said, 'Hi Debbie-- I was wondering if you can help me!' and she goes 'Where are you?' and I said 'Oh, I'm with Diane in Boulder, and I'm going to bring her home.' And she goes on the other side 'Oh my God...' and I was like 'What do I do!? How do I send these!?' I was gonna get boxes-- and then 'Should I call the post office!?' Like, I don't know what to do, my daughter was not functioning, right!? She goes 'Listen, this is what you're going to do! You're going to go to the mailbox! And you're gonna [gestures].. This what you're going to do!' and I was sitting in a motel, and I said 'Well, I'm going to be by myself in the motel tonight' and she says 'Okay, you're going to give me a call!' I go 'Okay!' and I called her.

In this turning point, Dot was struggling to juggle the stress of a family emergency and the practical tasks at hand. Her friend's level-headed, calm and decisive presence was invaluable to her in the situation. Her friend helped her get through the crisis on both pragmatic and emotional levels: *I mean it was really a horrible experience to have to do this, to see my daughter in such bad shape and to have to you know, completely take care of everything. But that is a friend. I hadn't talked to her for a while, but she caught on immediately. She helped me in a crisis!* Her friend's responsiveness was not lessened by the time the pair hadn't been in contact. She was readily available to take the reins and help both Dot and her daughter when they were in distress. This turning point was very positive for their relationship closeness, so much so that Dot viewed Debbie as personifying the ideal friend.

Malcolm went through a similar turning point with his friend Kari and his own daughter: *She [his daughter] hits a pretty big wall and was pretty damn depressed. We were pretty worried. Kari is a psychologist -- something along those lines-- We were finally like [to his daughter] 'You need to hook up with somebody who knows us a little bit, but is objective and removed.'* So, you know, Kari helped a lot with that, when we were kind of panicking. Much like Dot's friend Debbie, Kari was able to step in and provide pragmatic advice and support to Malcolm and his family in their time of need. Her professional background and her personal relationship with their family allowed her to fill this role. Malcolm viewed this turning point as a building block in their friendship, that added to his sense of security in the relationship: *So, it's just it's been things like that, I mean with Kari I do get a lot of just hang out time, that doesn't happen much but it's like whenever either of us have issues, we can reach out.*

Friendships were able to strengthen and support family relationships in many cases. This extends research suggesting friendships and families serve complimentary functions (Bookwala et al. 2014; Carr 2018; Connidis and Davies 1990; Patterson et al 1993). Friends were in some ways ideal sources of assistance, because they often possessed a more objective, outside perspective of the situation with insider knowledge of how to handle it emotionally.

Though the majority of the family turning points increased friendship closeness (n=9), one participant spoke about a very negative family related turning point. In this instance, an ideological difference with a friend ruined the participant's close relationship with their friend's mother. Zoe and her best friend had known each other since childhood.

She spent much of her youth with her friend's family: *She was like my mom, for a lot of this, and she has served as a model to me of what you know a mom can be. Because she is very different from my mom, and they're also like 12-- she's 12 years younger than my mom, so a very different household. They're just different people-- not better or worse, but just a different model like what a parent could look like.*

In this turning point, Hannah and Zoe had been fighting, and Hannah's mom got involved in the dispute: *She [Hannah] must have told her that I messaged her- and Hannah's mom Kristen messaged me and was like 'How dare you tell Hannah that she's not allowed to have an opinion!' And I was like 'That's not what I said!' But Kristen's also like very reactive, I just know that about her.* Though Zoe knew that her friend's mom was reacting in the heat of the moment, this still caused her great anxiety: *But then I was really insecure about, like, now Hannah's mom hates me!? What the fuck!?* Because they had known each other so long, this loss was devastating to Zoe: *This just wrecked 15 years of my life, like this is my family! So, our relationship was sort of irrevocably damaged. I mean, like Kristen and Scott (her parents) came to our wedding and they were great, but that's just never really been the same.* The two friends eventually reconciled, and Zoe was able to partially repair the relationship with Hannah's mom, but the turning point was still had a sizable, negative impact on both their friendship and Zoe's connections overall.

Integrating Networks (n=6, 3%)

Friends also mentioned turning points where they joined or created larger networks of friends. Participants mentioned things like going to a friend's college and meeting their

friends, meeting larger friend groups with significant others, and joining activity groups. These turning points were prevalent in all stages of life and demonstrate a willingness to expand friendship networks in adulthood (Wrutz et al. 2013). Norah described this kind of turning point with her best friend: *We worked at the school together. At one point I stopped in her nurse's office and asked if she wanted to start walking in the mornings. Then we became a part of a walking group that that grew and became a biking group! And you know, ended up being a big group of friends! But we were probably the ones that started that.* The two women turned their hobby into a larger group activity. This amplified their relationship, by showing them how well they worked together and how their personalities complemented one another: *She's a planner, and a mover, and a shaker you know! And I'm a smoother outer. So, she has her can-do spirit, and I kind of massage the feelings along the way to get everybody together. And that's worked pretty well!*

Like this turning point, nearly all of the turning points of this type were viewed by participants as making them closer (n=5). In one instance, network integration has a negative effect on friendship closeness. In this case, the participant joined a large group of existing friends, but didn't feel that the friends were putting forth the same amount of effort into getting to know her as she was with them. Frances described this incident: *A few years ago, I belonged to a group where a bunch of us got together once a week at some other's house. And these people were friends, for a very long time, and I was very happy when they invited me to join them. And for a long time, I enjoyed it. But something happened where when they made me feel very hurt and I realized that I knew a lot about*

their lives they really didn't know much about mine and they didn't really care! While initially, Frances was very happy to be included in this wider friend group, she didn't feel fully included. When she was hurt by something that happened in the group, she concluded it was not worthwhile to maintain one-sided relationships with members of the larger group. This gave her time to focus on more mutual relationships, and she did not regret the decision: *So, I just stopped going, and it was a whole group of friends that I just kind of gave up I, and I don't miss them at all!* This turning point does support previous research the individuals become more selective with their connections over time, even if it was the only one of its kind (Wrzus et al. 2013).

Marriage and Divorce (n=8, 4%)

Other network turning points were based around marriage and divorce, which was suggested by previous literature (Carr 2018; Cronin 2015; Johnson and Leslie 1982; Kalmijn 2003). At times, friends break ups and divorces led to strain on friendships and were viewed as negative turning points (n=3). This was especially true when the friends were also friends with their friends romantic partners. One woman in her early sixties, Diane, had a years-long friendship that withstood multiple bouts with cancer and cross-country moves. However, one of the major rifts in this friendship stemmed from their highly incorporated social network. When her friend Marta was going through a divorce, Diane was angered by her friend's treatment of her ex-husband, who was also her friend. The two entered an extended time period where they didn't speak to one another. Diane described this turning point: *When they got divorced, it was really hard. We didn't live there, we lived here. And we had been really close friends with them. She had been*

honest with me about what she was doing-- she was having an affair and I wasn't... I was not very happy with that. It was just hard-- I just had to get there, you know, get to the forgiveness spot of my own, and no one can make you do that. And then, I guess, I did that and now I think they're both better off, but it was hard at the beginning because we had been so close. Like I said, vacations and camping trips, holidays together.

Because Diane had shared these important rituals, a familiar connection, and had multiple friendships based around the couple, she resented her friend's behavior and disruption of their shared network (Carr 2018). She viewed this as a negative juncture in their friendship closeness.

One participant spoke about the mixed impact of their friends getting into long term romantic relationships. These turning points were compounded by the fact that the friendships were new, and that Lamar had moved in the intervening time. He spoke about the difficulties this caused for his friendships: *I got a job and moved to [a new city] for a few months. That made extra distance between the new friendships that I made a year before. I had to spend the next year just building those back up, because the proximity just wasn't there. And also, most of my close friends, had gotten into serious more serious relationships. So that-- so not only did we not have the time to like care for and foster relationships, they were also focused on growing romantic relationships with other people.* These multiple life changes resulted in decreased friendship closeness for a time (Galambos et al. 2018). However, Lamar spent “*the next year just building those [friendships] back up*” and eventually felt that his efforts had been successful.

In other cases, relationship transitions caused participants to become closer with friends or rekindle their friendships (n=3). This finding does not match the overall LCT literature surrounding marriage (Blieszner and Roberto 2003; Kalmijn 2003), but was found in other friendship turning point studies (Doherty 2021). Charlie spoke about how his relationship with his best friend changed on the advent of both of their weddings: *He got married, I got married. And that changes things, in some ways. You know all the sudden, he and I have this friendship and we are both bringing in women that neither... That I didn't know well, and he didn't know well the woman I was marrying, so there's a dynamic change there!* Despite causing the men to adjust their dynamic, Charlie believed their respective marriages had a positive impact on the friendship: *I would say generally positive effect! I think one of the reasons-- it's kind of funny-- one of the reasons that he and I got along so well is because he and I were both loners, hanging around together. You know, (Ken more than I) would sometimes say 'Let's get the women engaged with each other, and you and I can go off and do something else!'*

The two enjoyed the solitary nature of their relationship. Their wives got along well, so they spent plenty of time together after they both got married. However, Charlie also appreciated that their wives were not “loners” in the way he and Ken were. The two women encouraged Ken and Charlie to get out of the house and spend time doing things they all enjoyed: *But even just having spouses, that kind of enlarged the herd a little bit! [laughs] I think we, you know, the four of us, went on some adventures that Ken and I wouldn't have just done on our own!*

Another participant also said relationship changes had a positive impact on their friendship. Malcolm's friendship with Kari changed when she got married in middle age and struggled somewhat with her new relationship: *She got married about two years ago, and she waited a long time! She's married to a great guy. But she's... Gonna build a world and it's all going to have square corners! And that kind of thing. And he's not! [laughs] He's loosey goosey! So, you know she was going through it, like 'What did I do?! I made this life change-- What did I commit to!?' That's just what it is man, you know!* Before this turning point, Malcolm, who married in his twenties, had leaned on Kari for support in his romantic relationship: *"There were sometimes when [his wife] and I were having troubles and she [Kari] was there, really there for us."* When Kari got married herself, he was happy to be able to give advice and perspective, and felt that being able to exchange this kind of support made their friendship even stronger. This turning point is especially unique, because previous research has suggested cross-sex relationships may be threatening to romantic partnerships, rather than facilitating them (Cronin 2015).

Losing a Mutual Friend (n=7,4%)

Losing a mutual friend had mixed impacts on friendship closeness. Some mutual friendship loss turning points were viewed very negatively (n=3). Brady, Harvey and Ari shared their history of a former friend, Easton, and the increasingly negative turning points that took place in their relationship: *Brady: Easton's there since second grade, he was a pretty central part of the group from that time, until he dropped out of college. We were friends with Easton until we all moved to [their college town]. These two are at [a*

*local community college], I was at [the four university in the town]. Easton dropped out from [community college] after, not even a full semester... So, like three weeks and then he was like 'This isn't for me.' So, at that point-- again, so much of this goes back to kind of chance and proximity, which is interesting... But just because he wasn't around us, he was in a different place at that turning point. Just his moving was a turning point. Brady's friends disputed that Easton's dropping out of college and moving was the primary issue within the friendship. However, Brady viewed the lack of proximity to one another as very important. He continued: *Don't get me wrong the decisions, he [Easton] made thereafter... We tried to hang out with him-- but that was like a 90 degree turn that became a 180. I get that he was steering away from us real hard, but the initial divergence was just that college wasn't for him.**

This turning point is suggestive of the LCT idea of “linked lives”, which posits that individuals close to one another follow similar educational and economic trajectories. While the other friends were in college, Easton began to follow a different trajectory (Elder 1998; Settersten 2015).

Though dropping out of college happened in conjunction with other difficulties, it undoubtedly created distance between Easton and the group. The others tried to repair the relationship, but the rift intensified over time, as Brady described: *One thing I think is probably worth mentioning is like we tried to keep contact with Easton after that point. Like, I know that was the turning point and it was, but there were a lot of occasions... We made friends with him again and again and again, but it was... He surrounded himself with sketchy people. Though the other friends tried to reach out to Easton “again and*

again”, he was not receptive and had started to create a new network. Harvey described how this impacted Easton and their relationship: *He started just hanging out with really shady people-- I mean, he did--I think he did a lot of drinking and drugs-- but that's... Who hasn't... But his issue is he was just around like-- I think he was really starved for not attention, but for meaningful relationships?*

At this point, substance abuse was not the problem that the friends took issue with. Rather the company their former friend was keeping was worried them (as Harvey described: *“His house got robbed and they took all that stuff- that was the kind of people hanging around”*). The friends were still empathetic and believed that Easton was desperately searching for genuine connection, due to his childhood history. However, his lack of physical proximity, the negative influences of his new connections, his increased substance use and his self-imposed isolation from the original group caused his old friendships to falter (Setterson et al. 2015) This culminated in one final, negative turning point, which Harvey described here: *Harvey: That last time that I saw him, I thought I was gonna have to take him into the hospital because we had been...We were partying, so to speak, and Easton showed up at the tail end of it. And he was pretty much blackout drunk and then he started partaking of some of the party favors, and he was at one point-- Jared left-- Easton starts like laying on the couch-- is like blacking in and out and he's like... Eyes are kind of like rolling around his head. I'm thinking I had to take him to the emergency room... but at that point-- he ended up fine-- but that was a point when I just couldn't do Easton anymore. I hope he gets better, but I couldn't handle that shit anymore.*

After experiencing the traumatic event of their formerly close friend's near overdose, Harvey decided to end the relationship. This culmination was not a happy event for any member of the friend group, nor did it necessarily bring them closer. It was with grim acceptance that the other members of the group came to the same conclusion: *Brady: And having not been present for that and not having spent that much time with him in the window just before then, I mean that turning point for the two of you was also for me like, 'Wow... That about seals it...'*

This layered series of turning points demonstrates that though there were many factors that could plausibly have ended a friendship (the “diverging destinies” of all the group members going to college and Easton dropping out (Setterson et al. 2015), his subsequent reduced closeness to the group, his association with people his friends perceived as dangerous, or his struggles with substance use), none of these factors individually caused the friends to give up the relationship. At each juncture, his friends tried to provide support and maintain contact. This is similar to recent research on friendship dissolution, which showed that most individuals prefer to distance from friends, rather than end the relationship entirely (Khullar et al. 2021). However, ultimately, they could not reconcile their friend's lack of reciprocated effort, which led to the disappointing end of the relationship.

Not all turning points of this kind had such adverse effects on friendships that continued after them. One participant spoke about a friend loss turning point that had negative and positive effects on the remaining friendship. Two of the friends in the trio dated and then broke up, while the third friend was at college. Though the situation was

not ideal, the other friends remained in contact, as Jasmine described: “*We [her and the third friend] did a good job of that-- me and Andres break up, and then the drama around that... but he helped me with that.*” Three instances of this kind of turning point were viewed positively, as the remaining friends bonded in the wake of losing others. Adam illustrated this in a discussion of a turning point for him and Dana early in adulthood and early on in their friendship: *When we were newbies in the friend world, when some like big traumatic life event stuff happened, both of us just kind of stayed present. There was some like ‘Of course I can sit here on the couch’ and just like ‘I have nothing to lose, I need to eat my Applebee’s anyway, so like ‘Let’s watch TV!’ So, I think there’s some beauty in like when some huge things happen in each of our lives, we weren’t so connected or so intertwined, that you know there was kind of a no judgment. And I don’t think we did anything crazy, but when other people just kind of disappeared or there was weirdness.* Although neither member of the pair “did anything crazy” in terms of showing their support for one another, they deeply valued the mundanity of their relationship. Presence was important to them (Policarpo 2015). The pair didn’t specify what kind of traumatic events they were going through at the time, but they expressed that their other friends did not provide needed support. Dana and Adam were able to help one another cultivate a sense of normalcy in the midst of chaotic life events, a quality their other friendships did not possess. Becoming less close with these friends ended up becoming a positive turning point for the pair, bringing them closer and making them appreciate one another all the more.

Death (n=9, 5%)

Deaths of family members and loved ones made up significant friendship turning points for several participants (n=9). Though the circumstances surrounding these events were negative, many of these turning points caused friends to rely on one another and strengthened their relationships (n=6). Kim described a friendship turning point caused by the passing of her oldest son. Many of Kim's friendships began in high school. The women had remained in semi frequent contact as they all started families and grew older, but the unexpected death of Kim's son prompted a resurgence in their friendships: *Kim: I would say the death of Isaac affected our friendship. They all gathered around me and rallied behind me [began to cry]. Interviewer: Would that maybe be a positive point? Kim: It was! That was kind of a turning point that brought us back together too.*

For several participants (n=2), death related turning points had mixed effects on friendship. Valeria spoke about turning points that occurred as many members of her friend group dealt with parents passing away or experiencing declining health. As their parents aged and each member of the group navigated through their own familial challenges, the group served as a support network.

Finally, one participant described a particularly salient death-related turning point in her friendships, the assisted suicide of a friend. This experience, and the loss of her own friend, was a turning point in her own life: *She had ovarian cancer, and I can't remember how many years ago she was diagnosed with that, but she fought it hard. And did not win the fight--it's not a good one. In California it's legal to take a drug and end your life 'death with dignity'. She was one of the 11 people to do it in the state, the first*

year it became legal, and I was there with her. There were 13 of us around her bed and it was really intense, but I completely believe people should have that option to do it safely and it was-- and I am a huge proponent of that being legal in every state—not that everybody can do it, because it takes a really strong person to be able to do that.

Though the experience was devastating, the ability to plan and prepare gave Ellen some peace of mind: *When I came back here and I was walking with a friend of mine and telling her about it, she goes “That sounds beautiful,” she goes, “I know it was hard-” but I’m like “It **was** beautiful!” I mean we were there, we knew when it was going to happen, it wasn’t like you were like, “Is it today, is it tomorrow?! [her friend’s passing] Should we go, should we not go!?” You know, you chose whether to be there, or not. Or your circumstances were that you could be there, or not.*

Ellen’s choice to be present this very intense and difficult experience for her friend demonstrated commitment and trustworthiness that other friends admired as well: *It was an intense time for sure, and other people would say... ‘But you’re that kind of friend the person that will be there.’* In sharing in this incredibly intimate experience with her friend, Ellen was also able to show her dedication to her other friendships, which strengthened them all (Policarpo 2015).

Health Issues (n=6, 3%)

While death and grief had both positive and negative effects on friendship closeness, turning points related to health issues were generally viewed positively by participants (n=5). When health turning points did have a negative impact on friendships (n=1), it was because they impeded friend’s ability to do the things they normally did together. This

has been found in previous literature on aging and friendship (Blieszner and Roberto 2003). Charlie described this here: *As we aged, I know some of the things we were able to do went by the wayside. They were limited, because Bob has lost his eyesight and Dane some years ago had a stroke. So that's-- those are events in those relationships that have kind of changed things in terms of our ability to interact.*

Other friends actually bonded during health problems (whether their own or a loved one's) and viewed these turning points as positive junctures in their friendships (n=5). Norah described how her friend Sarah helped her when her husband had go into emergency surgery: *Life doesn't necessarily get easier, as you get older, you know. So, this last year [her husband] ended up with quadruple bypass-- kind of emergency quadruple bypass. And Sarah is a nurse. She took care of me. She-- I don't mean to get emotional [tearing up]... You know these bonds of friendship have certainly deepened that way, and I know with upcoming hard things she'll help me.*

While Sarah had the medical know-how to be helpful to Norah's husband in the aftermath of his health emergency, it was her care for *her friend* that made this turning point special to the both of them. Because of turning points like this, Norah gained confidence in their relationship and knew she could rely on Sarah in the future.

Vincent was one study member who talked about a turning point that occurred when he was in a nursing home and dealing with health issues. During this time, a volunteer named Cherry would often visit him, stopping in regularly to see how he was doing. For an extended period of time, Cherry tried to befriend Vincent. They spoke often, but Vincent hesitated to accept the companionship: *Years ago, I was in a nursing*

home, and I wasn't doing too well. During that time... I gave up. I didn't want to be bothered, I didn't want to be, you know, I just I didn't want to see nobody.

The turning point in their relationship only occurred when Vincent decided to let Cherry become a true friend: *People always tell me this, 'It takes one person to make that change.'* And that person was Cherry for me. *She kept coming in, coming in, the room praying for me, talking and stuff like that. This voice is telling me "Listen, give the lady a chance, she got something for you" and she changed my life. You know, she changed my life.* In this turning point, Vincent decided to listen to his intuition and accept Cherry's offers of friendship. Her consistency and kindness in a time where he was struggling mentally and physically demonstrated her character, which he greatly admired: *The thing I love about her, she got a beautiful heart, and personality. And plus, she's with the Lord, she's a spiritual person.* This turning point allowed Vincent to gain a deep friendship, and had a positive impact on him overall: *She really changed my life, I will never forget that long as I live.*

Personal Crisis (n=6, 3%)

Personal crisis turning points were instances in which participants experienced external (such as a house fire, going through a pandemic) or internal (episodic mental health problems) stressors that impacted their friendships. Two of these turning points had a negative effect on friendship closeness. Lamar discussed one such turning point, referring to the COVID-19 pandemic: *The last major turning point was probably just the pandemic starting. I think every relationship was harder to maintain during that. I think I cut off from almost everybody for a little while.* The social isolation in the early days of the

pandemic marked a negative turning point for all of his relationships, demonstrating how larger social events can impact relationships (Elder 1998).

Several participants viewed personal crisis turning points as having mixed impacts on their friendship closeness (n=3). Generally, participants spoke about experiencing some kind of crisis, which disrupted their lives and weakened their ties to friends. However, many also gained closeness to their friends through their support in these times. One participant spoke about a myriad of jarring personal events that initially disrupted his relationships, but later gave him time to invest in them: *I put in my two week's notice-- a week later, my apartment caught fire burned down! I was out of a job, I didn't have much. Not in school, not at a job, not at my own apartment, so I had a lot of time on my hands. And then a friend of mine (who we were not that close), but he reached out to me. And that that led to me playing music around [their city]! Which is where when I spent quite a bit of time with Hassan and Paul [who became two of his closest friends]. Because of just--I just didn't really have much to do with my time, which I started spending a lot more time with them.*

After experiencing the loss of his home and the unpredictability unemployment, Lamar decided to go to therapy. He credited this for changing this tumultuous turning point into one that impacted his friendships positively: *That only became positive probably like--the fire burned it down in January, so probably like very three or four months later, after starting therapy to help me like really navigate these new relationships. So, therapy was probably the most important but, that the major event with the just not having a job, place burning down-- that allowed a space for new*

relationships to grow! In a practical sense, his newfound free time allowed him to foster relationships, while therapy helped him create a strong and healthy emotional foundation to build relationships on.

One personal crisis turning point had a primarily positive effect on friendship closeness. Brady described how when his friend struggled with his mental health, it pushed the rest of the friend group to rally around him: *He was having kind of a hard time, he was really suffering, and it was clear. And so, Ari and I kind of had to be there to really support him in a way that-- you know our friendship was close, certainly, I mean the reason we all decided to move to Hastings was, at least in part, because we would all be in in Hastings-- But we were providing a kind of support that I don't know that we had really needed to that point.* Though the trio had been friends since childhood, they hadn't been very emotionally vulnerable in the relationships until this experience. Past research has suggested that this is common in men's friendships (Tognoli 1980). Through this turning point, the men became more comfortable with affection, which solidified their commitment to one another: *Brady: But I think that really was a positive turning point in our relationship actually, which is a weird thing to say, because, like it was a dark experience. It was kind of hard for us, and I can only imagine how hard it was for Harvey, being the center of it. But I do really think it made us closer. It really showed the degree of commitment and affection that we had for one another.*

Harvey: I agree 100%. This turning point shows how cultivating vulnerability and emotional depth, even amidst difficult situations, can positively impact men's friendships with one another (Bank and Hansford 2000).

Life Course Friendship Development

In addition to providing specific friendship turning points, most participants (N=31) spoke about overall changes to friendship and its importance in their lives over time. This section details themes in perceived changes to friendship over the life course. The study members were asked about friendship changes near the end of the interview, after recalling their turning points and discussing the importance of friendship in different life stages. This data was consolidated into seven themes. Within them, study members described developing deeper friendships, having higher friendship standards as they aged, and focusing more on the quality of friendships, rather than quantity. They also spoke of their personal development as individuals, feeling more secure relationship attachment and gaining perspective, acceptance, and greater appreciation for their friendships.

Always Important (n=13, 42%)

Some participants felt that their friendships and friendship ideals hadn't changed over time. This bolsters previous research that has compared friendships of young and older adults (Patterson 2007; Pica and Verno 2012). When asked if her friendships had changed, Dot, in her eighties, said *"I would almost say that they haven't! Namely because, as I mentioned, my home dynamics were not the best. So, my friendships-- and I still am in touch with some people from high school-- became extremely important to me and I relied upon that like I said, having a close brother or sister. So, they sort of substituted."* Her friendships had played a strong, kin-like role since her youth. Scott, in his sixties, said the strength of his friendships hadn't wavered: *"I don't think they*

changed one bit! We started out strong and are very strong today. I think it's no different than 20 years ago!" Dot, in her seventies, said of friendship: *"It's always rated high with me and it hasn't changed."* Ophelia was also in her seventies, but said of her friendships: *"They haven't [changed]. They're just as important to me now as they were when I was a little kid."*

Friendships' significance endured throughout the life course, as many participants explained. These findings are not entirely consistent with past literature, which has suggested that especially in middle age, friendships can falter (Bhattacharya et al. 2016; Nicolaisen and Thorsen 2016). Though Norah was in retirement and had made her closest friends in middle age after becoming a mother, she said that *"I don't know that it has changed, I think my friendship with other women have been very, very important to me, always."* Over her life, Frances had been single, married and widowed. Friends had remained important to her throughout all these stages of her life: *It's always been important to me, and I've always had friends! Before I was married, after... I had a lot of friends! Now, have a lot of friends! So, it's just the friendships are different, but the importance has always been there."* Like the other women, friends had always been important to Kimberly, but in her older years, she had appreciated them more: *Well, friendship has always been important to me, and I feel like even when I was young, in grade school, I always surrounded myself with a big circle of friends. My mom and dad's house is where the circle of friends would hang out. I guess, maybe I value my friendships more now than I did then. I took them for granted, maybe more, when I was younger, and now I really love them and appreciate them.*

Personal Development (n=18, 58%)

Though friends were valued by participants at all stages of life, they were able to create stronger relationships over time because of their own *personal* development. This has been noted in friendships of children, but not explored extensively in adult friendships (Furnham 2022). Within this theme, study members spoke about becoming more confident and independent as well as developing their own identities and sense of self-worth. These developments led to less anxiety about their friendships, and more secure attachments.

Several participants said that their view of themselves was strongly impacted by peers in their youth, and this had changed over time (Anthony and McCabe 2015). Vera explained it in this way, *“It definitely changed for me. I think when I was a younger person, I definitely defined myself through friends.”* Like Vera, Jada felt that she had used friendship as a measuring stick for her own self-worth. This changed with age: *In the past, friendships were like a way to evaluate myself. Like if I didn't have friends, there was something wrong with me. Now, I don't feel that way. I'm like I'm an okay person! I want to find people that I enjoy being around!* This didn't negate the impact of her friends on her self-concept, but rather changed their impact into a healthier, more balanced one, *“So, I think maybe they're less important to my own ego, but more important to me flourishing as a person.”*

Selene said that over the years, she realized how important it was to develop her own identity, outside of her close friendships: *I think for me it's like seeing how much you kind of need to be your own person. If not, you'll end up being codependent on people,*

rely on them shaping you-- rather than you also taking the steering wheel and driving your own car! Like others, in the past, Regan felt that her self-conception was dependent on her friendships. However, as she grew older, she became more self-aware about others' responsibility to her, and more independent: *I think I used to derive a lot of my worth from the people that I surrounded myself with, and I don't do that anymore at all! Because that's not their job, just like it's not my job for them.* Selene summarized this sentiment in her own friendships: *"I think before, we were codependent-- now we're interdependent."*

Participants also had less anxiety within their friendships as they grew older. Dot relied on her friends heavily in her youth and always had a friend on call. However, as she aged, she said this changed *"I don't have that kind of anxiety anymore. I do talk to my friends when I've been upset about something but it's not such a desperate quality, I think, when I was younger, it was much more desperate for them."* Malcolm said that he used to worry if he didn't have regular contact with his friends: *"When you're- -I think probably the insecurities of being younger, you tend to be tended to wonder like, "Oh gosh, I haven't seen him for like three months is he pissed at me? Is he mad at me?"* As he aged, Malcolm began to realize this wasn't necessarily the case. He felt less insecure about his relationships in general: *I think that kind of stuff is falling away. A lot of other awkward insecurities that I didn't realize I had, those aren't as important anymore. Those aren't really present and influencing my relationships, whether it's friends or not.*

Zoe dealt with some feelings of self-doubt and anxiety in her friendships up until college. She explained that at the time she thought: *"I'm just gonna have these*

insecurities!” After graduating college, she was able to work through these: *“But really in the last few years, I think it's just settled down. You just kind of settle down about it, you're not in college anymore, so there's not a competition of who has more friends or anything anymore. Never been there really, but I just feel more secure.”* This life transition period facilitated a healthier friendships, rather than decreasing their quality as previous studies have found (Langeheit and Poulin 2022). In adulthood, Zoe didn't feel she had to strive for acceptance, popularity, or a larger friend group. These characteristics are important in friendships of younger individuals, but may not be for adults (Drolet and Arcand 2013). She became more satisfied with her existing connections, and sure in their staying power: *Like my friendship with Hannah, I've come to a place of acceptance of what it is. I know it will always be here, no matter if things may change! We kind of had a like an adult fight... I was like, after that, she will be there! I can call her anytime and know--- I feel that way about our other friends as well. So, I just like feel maybe less strive-y.* While Zoe had lost some friends in young adulthood, she gained greater appreciation of the network she did have: *I mean, I've definitely, maybe just in the last couple of years gotten more comfortable with like, I feel really confident in the people I can see being in my life forever.*

The personal development participants experienced also shifted the things that participants needed from their friends. Dot exemplified this in her discussion of how her ideas of friendship had changed over time: *Well, I don't know if it's my views, but my needs have changed. I still have the need to be close to people, and be able to share things, and really listen to them and you know support them if they write a book or they*

do something! Y'know, I'll be right there for them. But not the neediness to have to talk to them. Dot was still dedicated to her involvement in her friends' lives, but her needs were no longer based in "desperation" (as Malcolm termed it). Vera and Regan discussed similar themes. In their younger days, the need to "be heard" was a central aspect of their friendships. This shifted over time: *Vera: It was like 'I need to be heard!' and they'll be like, 'Yes! I will hear you!' But now, it's like everybody's like 'Yeah, I'm fine, here's what's going on me', you know, what you want to hear! I mean we definitely have times, where you do need to be heard still and those are the people that really get you. You're like, 'Oh, that feels nice!' to be understood in a way where someone really knows your history. Regan: But I think validation gets weighted much differently, the older that you get. I mean, because when I was really young, I needed my friends to be like 'You're not crazy! You have every right to expect-- or want to desire-- you know all of these things that you need and want and deserve!' And now I'm just like 'I know what the fuck I deserve!' I know what I want, I know how to get it, I know what I need, I know how to get it, I know what I deserve! And I'm not willing to accept anything less. But we're all still human at the end of the day, and that's complicated and messy. And sometimes you need your friends to be like "I'm sorry, why are you being mean to my friend? Could you knock that shit off? I would appreciate it!' Because that happens always, because we're humans.* As the women aged, their self-possession, confidence and ability to satisfy their own needs grew.

For many study members, the role of friendship changed over time. In their youth, friendships were needed to consistently validate their self-worth and identities (Furnham

2022). As they grew older, participants gained self-confidence and instead relied on their friends for grounding and support in their own decisions, rather than constant reassurance. Jasmine spoke about this in her discussion of how her views on friendship had developed: *I think my views have changed in correlation with how I have changed. In terms of prioritizing myself and being okay with the things that I need in relationships.* She felt much more comfortable expressing her needs and thus getting them met. Overall, study members felt more secure, more able to express themselves, and better able to get what they needed out of their friendships as they got older. Like others, Adam discussed how despite these changes, friendship retained its significance in his life: *I think my life has changed, but I think the importance of it [friendship] hasn't.*

Acceptance (n=14, 45%)

Personal development may have resulted in the next theme, which was acceptance. Within this theme, study members discussed maintaining flexible contact (Becker et al. 2009), how they stopped “keeping score” within friendships, and how they learned to better match their expectations to what their friends could reasonably give.

Malcolm, for example, spoke about how in the past, he felt compelled to spend time with friends often: *Well, I think, probably the biggest one would be that, when I was younger, as a kid or as a young adult, it felt like I always **had** to do something with my friends. Now, not so much. I can accept that I don't have to see them that regular, you know? Then it's fine! But we can still get together and have fun and doesn't have to be awkward when we're back-- just because we haven't seen each other for a couple of*

months. As he aged, he gained perspective and realized that the frequency of time spent together was not directly reflective of the status of their friendship.

Jada struggled with the same kind of expectations in her younger years: *The amount of contact--like I feel much more comfortable—if I haven't talked to someone in six months, something like that. As a close friend, we're both just very busy right now! Whereas previously, especially in undergrad, I really felt like if someone was your best friend, you have to talk every single day or they're not really your best friend! Like they don't really care about you!* Like Malcolm, if her friends didn't maintain a certain level of contact, she was unhappy with the status of the relationship. However, she began to accept that harboring resentment did not improve her relationships: *I think something that's really changed for me in the past, like three years, is my expectations for maybe more tangible, or countable things in a friendship. I still feel strongly that like you should improve each other and care about one another deeply, but I think I've really tried to stop keeping score. So, if someone forgets to text back, or if someone doesn't want to visit (but I visited them), or they don't remember my birthday-- things like that-- I have realized that it's not helpful to me to keep score.* She continued, describing how she had gained perspective and ceased to quantify friendships by who was putting the most into the relationship: *That like counting friendship in those ways is something that has really changed, I think... Getting upset about things that now, I feel are small, but in the past, were so big.* Instead of embitterment, Jada developed more accepting expectations. This flexibility seemed key to the maintenance of the relationships, especially in changing life circumstances (Policarpo 2015).

Vera also spoke about how in her youth, issues like those Jada mentioned upset her deeply *“I took a lot of things very personally from my friends. And there'd be like a lot of strife about it... I think, as I have grown older, I definitely prefer friends who, like we were describing, you can go six months and not talk or two years or whatever and you're just like ‘Oh, I didn't mean it, for it to be that long!’”* Over time, Vera came to accept (and even preferred) friendships where less frequent contact didn't cause discontentment. While the three previous participants spoke about managing expectations within the context of maintaining contact, Regan discussed this more broadly: *I don't have the expectations of my friends that I used to when I was younger. I don't expect them to save me, I don't expect them to make my worth tangible, I don't expect them to you know, do all of these things that we all expect our friends to do when we're much younger!* As Regan grew older, these high expectations diminished and she became more accepting of her friends' actual capacities: *The depth of support, the expectation around it, I think, shifts from ‘I expect my friends to be willing to walk through everything with me’ to ‘If I invite them to.’ I just **know** my friends are there. There's no expectation anymore-- I just know exactly where they are, what they can do, and what they're willing to do.*

Rather than expecting that her friends would meet a nigh impossible threshold, her knowledge of what they *could* do became more accurate, and she trusted that she could rely on this. Her mindset around her relationships changed as she accepted that her friends would not be able to meet every standard she set. She described this shift: *It's trust versus expectation.*

Finally, gaining acceptance extended into wanting the best for their friends, no matter the personal outcome. Lamar felt that therapy had improved his quality of life and relationships tremendously over time. He wanted his friends to share in this: *I feel like more therapy will make all of my relationships thrive more than they have... I see where therapy has helped me, and has helped me be more intentional.* While he wanted his friends to reap the same benefits he did from therapy, he was willing to accept his own flaws and supported his friends unconditionally: *And that's not to say that I'm coming from a perfect position at all, that's definitely not true. That doesn't mean that it'll make my relationship with them any stronger-- because if they need it, they may find that that may not be the best for them! But I think their overall quality of life would improve!* He wanted the best for each friend's personal development, even if that meant they did not continue their relationship. Much like other participants, Lamar let go of his relationship expectations over time. His level of acceptance was altruistic. He was strongly committed to his friends flourishing as individuals, even if they went their separate ways.

Higher Standards (n=11, 35%)

While friendship dynamics changed to involve more grace and acceptance, participants (n=11) also expressed that their overall standards for friendships rose over time. This theme included the following elements: less patience and time dedicated to “surface level” relationships, friends who didn't respect boundaries, and people who hadn't demonstrated their loyalty. Participants also spoke about intentionality when making new friendships. They were aware of the standards and qualities they desired in new friends, and as their standards rose, some participants expressed that they were more discerning

and cautious about meeting new people. While many aspects of this dissertation conflict with the proposition that people their reduce their networks to mostly kin connections as they age (Connidis and Davies 1990; Wruz et al. 2013), this theme and the subsequent one (“Quality over Quantity”) provide potential explanations for the opposing findings of the current study. Many people still highly value friends as they age, even as they reduce their number of connections, because they become more selective about the *kinds* of friendships they keep. This finding further demonstrates the need to study specific *levels* of friendship, rather than using broad definitions of the relationship (Adams et al. 2000).

Dana, for example, said that she became “*less patient with just small talk friendships*” as she approached middle age. Kim, in her fifties, drew distinctions between types of friends when reflecting on how her ideas of friendship had changed over time. She differentiated her relationships based on their loyalty: *I feel like you've got your friends that will be there for you, through second then, no matter what they're still going to be your friend! And you have some friends that won't necessarily be there for you, like some of my [other] friends.* She recognized this consistency and desired friends who met these standards. Like Dana and Kim, Regan spoke about how her definition of friendship was “restricted” over time to only those who met a high standard of being a “kindred connections”: *I think that that my definition of friendship now is simultaneously much more open and much more restricted to those kindred connections, instead of just “Oh, we have all this in common and we work at the same place” like no, that doesn't cut it anymore.* Though homophily has long been touted as one of the most central characteristics of friendships (McPherson et al. 2001), this became much less important

to Regan over time, as she balanced the responsibilities of adulthood: *I do have limited time and I do have limited resources and I'm all about efficient allocation of resources and I'm also all about constantly having my life be full of nothing but joy and magic. And if you don't qualify for those things, then you're probably not going to be in my life for very long.* Regan was only interested in investing time in connections that "qualified" as deep, spiritual connections that provided joy.

Developing higher standards also changed how participants approached new relationships. Jasmine, for example, desired new friendships but felt the process was daunting, as she "assessed" potential friends with a critical eye: *I think forming friendships is just hard but also hard for me-- As it has been pretty much all my life. I don't think I'm going to have another solid friendship group again until I'm like... after 30 to be honest, like late 20s, early 30s. I'm not saying that based off of the trajectory of the world, just acknowledging my own fault in terms of how I assess people for friendships... And I hate to kind of adopt that perspective, but it seems almost like you know it some way, like a lot of relationships are transactional. And I don't want transactional relationships in my life, and that's probably why I don't [make friends easily] ... Only because I prefer like more authentic like energetic supportive connections.*

While Jasmine "hated" to adopt a judgmental attitude toward potential new friends, she felt it was perhaps an unfortunate necessity in order to find the "energetic" and "supportive" and not transactional connections she wanted to add to her life. Like Jasmine, Vincent spoke about having to assess potential friends. Over time, he realized the need to be somewhat judicious as he encountered new people: *I'm a friendly person,*

but I have to be careful who my friends are. They can say they could be your friend and at the end of the day, they not your friend. But it's up to me to make that choice. So right now I'm still learning. Vincent felt autonomy and intentionality in his ability to make decisions about who had the potential to become a good friend (which grew with more experience). However, he didn't harbor any ill will towards those who didn't meet these standards: *I can sit down talk with somebody, see where they coming from. If they not my friend... I don't hate nobody right? I love people. I just say 'Okay, we could be friends to a certain state.'* Instead, he was willing to listen to the person and set up healthy boundaries within the relationship.

Quality over Quantity (n=8, 26%)

Participants contrasted friendship network types and number of friends over time. While this wasn't a unanimous sentiment, several discussed how they had become much more interested in quality friendships, rather than upkeeping larger friendship networks. Dot, for instance, felt that the pressure to have many friendships eased over time: *When I was younger, I felt like I had to have a lot of friends. Because I had to space it out, so I didn't overwhelm people. That's kind of how I thought of it.* In her youth, she maintained a larger number of less close friendships in order to not “overwhelm” any of them with too much attention. As she aged, she not only developed deeper connections, but also became more secure in her attachment to them.

When discussing friendship change, Zoe brought up being part of a much wider network of friends in her younger years (Wruz et al. 2013). During college, she joined a sorority, which had been a very positive experience: *I was around a bunch of people that*

I really felt like, I'm around all these people who like really get me! I lived in the house for 2 years. That was a defining experience-- everyone was so driven and brilliant and amazing and nice and like very little drama! There were people that I'm still super grateful for. It was simultaneously like 'Wow I belong! This is crazy! All my high school insecurities have like vanished!' ... However, she continued, discussing the downsides of this greater network: *But then when it swung that other way, it was so severe. Like 'I don't have a person!' because I am like a 'I have a person, I need a person!' because I am that way. There would be times where I'd be like EVERYONE here has a person but me!* While Zoe sometimes thrived in this social environment, she also longed for closer, more exclusive relationships (that she felt others had). Lacking a best friend or specific “person” left her feeling excluded and resentful of the larger group.

Other participants discussed the idea of having “a person” as well. Dana and Adam, for example, talked about how a “monogamous”, best friend relationship was the “pinnacle” of friendship. Dana pondered this idea: *I can pinpoint large chunks [of her life] where I did not have a best friend. I have a ton of friends, but then you know, sometimes someone is your best friend, but they're not your best friend back-- or vice versa! I've had a couple of those ones, where I was their closest friend (because they didn't have a lot of friends) and ones that were like 'Well, you're my best friend now' but they had others... Having somebody that we're best friends together? That is fantastic!* Adam: *It's totally different. It's the pinnacle of friendship for sure.*

Having an exclusive best friend was an unmatched experience. Leo also spoke about this. In high school, he belonged to larger friend groups, but he viewed these

friendships as largely expendable: *There were times when I'd be like "Ah, fuck all these people!" you know? At my school it was like you're friends with this group of people, and it's like eventually you don't want to hang out with those people, then you leave the whole thing!* He could easily transition out of these groups, because he was satisfied with being alone and independent. This is consistent with studies of friendship "turnover" in youth (Ng-Knight et al. 2019). At the time, Leo didn't value friendship: *So, if I was looking at all these people, groups of people, friendship's not that important. I could do my own thing.* It was only when he developed a very close relationship with his best friend that this changed: *But now that I have a friend like Theodore in this moment of my life, I can acknowledge it's very important!*

Some participants discussed how friendships reached this best friend level. For Norah, this level of deep friendship was reached when friends maintained their relationship through life transitions: *I've always said, there are your really good friends, and then there are friends of just time and place, and they don't make the jump. To me, friends somewhere else doesn't make them worse friends--and if you'd stayed in the same place, you might have kept up with those friends.* To her, the friendships that didn't "make the jump" were not inherently lesser relationships. It was almost a matter of fate that the relationships didn't continue. Despite bearing no resentment towards "friends of just time and place," Norah was also not particularly interested in new friends at this stage of her life: *It's interesting, I'm not sure what this new stage of life being in retirement means for friendship, you know. I've got a lot of family obligations, right now, so I'm not spending time making new friends. I've laughed with [her best friend] we've*

said, 'Well, we have all the friends we like! We don't need friends.' It seemed that age and reflection on life transitions made Norah's focus on the friendships that *did* continue all the more special (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Elder 1998).

Despite several participants becoming more selective with friendships over time, others *were* interested in expanding their networks (n=4, 13%). Jasmine was intentionally trying to create new relationships. She had been using an app to form connections: *I got bumble back again this year, I'm in it for some better friends! Not to say that the current ones that I have aren't good, but like I don't know, just wanting like different types of experiences. Different types of fun and enjoyment, different types of activities, different types of ways to spend my time.* She was very open to making new connections and was excited by the prospect of fresh experiences within these friendships. Like Jasmine, Diego was deliberately pursuing new friendships over time. This was because he had learned to value his connections more deeply with age: *I think I seek them out more. I used to have to really close friends growing up. That's all I really thought I needed-- but as I go through life, I want more. So [the change has been] just wanting more friendships.*

Charlie, who had experienced the loss of friendships due to illness and age, felt as if he couldn't recreate these lifelong friendships, but still was hopeful at the idea of making new friends. He said: *I do anticipate making new friends throughout life. You know, I don't have enough life left I don't think to develop the kind of friendships I had with Michael and John, because those were lifelong friendships. But yes... My friendship door's open.* Like these participants, Vincent wanted to expand his network. He viewed

each day as an opportunity to build connections, and took comfort in this thought: *Every time I meet somebody, the people I meet, you know, that's a new friend! Male or female, and that makes me feel good. We exchanged numbers, go have a coffee, sit at the park. Whether I go home or wherever I be at, I say you know, I met a nice new friend today.*

Mutuality (n=4, 13%)

Though mutuality was a frequent theme in how participants defined their friendships, some participants came to recognize its importance much more strongly over time (n=4). For example, Diego began to realize his own responsibility within friendships: *I think my views on friendship... It's more now I feel like I have to be there more for them as well! Before, when someone's your friend, they're your friend to you. Now, it's like friendship... It's a reciprocal mutual thing. There's reciprocity in there. I think I've been a friend to other people, but I think now I realized I need to do that more.* While Diego had people in the past who had been friends “to” him, as he aged, he aspired to take on more accountability within his friendships, and increase his level of effort and reciprocity.

Mutuality gained importance for some participants because they had developed stronger understandings of the qualities they brought into relationships. Jasmine, who spoke about the high standards she held potential friends to, said that these standards originated from the things *she* knew she could bring to a friendship: *I know I'm good for emotional support. I know I'm good for-- if I have it within my ability to like do something for you, then I'll do it! I know the type of person I am, and I know the type of loyalty!* She was confident in her own abilities to be a friend (providing loyalty, dedication and support) and she wanted this in return.

Other participants discussed how had become more important to them by reflecting on friendships in their lives that *hadn't* been mutual. Frances, for instance, was in her seventies, but recalled friendships from high school and her twenties that hadn't been mutual. She spoke about how her views had changed: *I used to-- the way I had friends is I felt like I had to give a lot, and be there for them and do things for them, and listen to them and help them through things.* Like Jasmine, Frances knew that she “gave a lot” to her relationships, and hadn't always received the same. She gave an example: *With this girl Lulu, I did that. We had a plan to go out once and I called her and she said she forgot about it, she maybe had another plan with her mother, and I was devastated. I was very lonely then; it was a hard time for me and breaking a plan was really difficult. I decided I only wanted friendships with it was a give and take now, whereas I was giving totally. My whole view of friendships changed then. I haven't thought about this for a while.* Despite not thinking about this lesson from years before, it was a principle Frances abided by since: *And over the years I've made friends and dropped friends because I want to just find an equal given take.* Frances and Jasmine's ideas of friendships changed in similar ways over time, as they acknowledged their worth and value in relationships. Though Frances and Diego's experiences directly contrasted each other, they both concluded that mutuality and reciprocity were essential aspects of friendship.

More Depth (n=5, 16%)

In line with the increased quality of friendships, study members spoke about deepening of friendships in various ways. There is limited research on friendship quality over adulthood, but some on young adults indicates erosion of friendship depth over time

(Langheit and Poulin 2022). This did not seem to be the case in later life stages. In this theme, participants discussed changes in the content of their friendships, like a shift from childhood teasing to adult vulnerability or from friendships based on proximity to those based in genuine enjoyment of one another.

Charlie, for example, felt that over time, his friendships had evolved into deep brotherhoods: *It's more of an evolution than a turning point, when a friendship... John and Michael were both brothers to me in ways that my biological brother has never been.* This evolution was especially important to Charlie, because he had strained relationships with his family of origin (Braithwaite et al. 2010). Like Charlie, Ari talked about how over the years, he had developed a much stronger bond with his two best friends. Within these relationships, he was able to be more vulnerable than he was with the vast majority of people: *This is a big one. I think it has seemed to be like a stronger bond we've built over time, the longer we've been around. My main thing is even just establishing some sort of connection or network is a vulnerability thing, with these two, also Sam-- there are very few people I even attempt to be kind of vulnerable with.* Ari did not feel comfortable expressing vulnerability in his life in general. The fact that he opened up and created a small network of friends with whom he felt able express himself was a monumental change that happened within his adult friendships.

Harvey also talked about how their friendships had grown to incorporate aspects of vulnerability. They discussed how the content of the relationships changed from their youth: *I think as a child, as we were when we all started spending time together, it's to really about having a good time, you know. It's about someone to wrestle around with in*

the yard with someone that lives across the street or likes the same dumb band and do some dumb novel stuff. Just to go fuck around with. And then, as you grow older-- especially if you keep the same company-- you start actually growing up together. You start, just by having spent so much time-- you share your life with these people. You share your thoughts, your dreams, your experiences. While Harvey didn't deliberately plan for their childhood relationships to deepen in this way, they viewed it as a byproduct of spending so much time together. Given enough time to flourish, friendships that began with proximity (playing with a neighbor kid) or homophily (liking the same things) matured into much more (McPherson et al. 2001).

Adam experienced a similar change, though later on in his life. In young adulthood, many of his friendships had been premised around working in the same field, which was less true with age: *Over time, I think my friendships have become more concerned about depth and for me, less based around my work. As I've gotten older, I've been more concerned about the depth of our relationship, loyalty and some of those components, but less focused on my job.* Instead, he became to prioritize depth of the connection, loyalty and other components he mentioned when defining friendship, like empathy and enjoyment.

Greater Appreciation (n=11, 35%)

With this increase in friendship depth and quality came a greater appreciation for friends. Study members (n=11) discussed how they now held friendship in higher regard. Time gave them a chance to reflect on friendships with gratitude. They spoke about no longer taking friendships for granted, valuing them more, becoming better friends, and

recognizing friendship's overall impact. They attributed these changes to maturity and aging, losing other friends, spending time without their friends.

Participants at different stages of life discussed how the importance of friendship had changed for them. Sam, in his twenties, discussed how in the past, he had prioritized romantic connections more highly than platonic ones. At the time, he felt that this was normative, even if stereotypical, behavior within young men's friendships: *There's the dumb joke stereotype, where when you're a bunch of dudes and one of them gets a girlfriend, he stops hanging out with the guys! And it was a funny joke, but it was true. We all did it! Whenever we had a girlfriend, we would stop hanging out with the guys.* However, over time his views and behaviors had changed: *That's definitely not something I would do anymore, and not just like dudes, but friends in general! Like Dani- - I wouldn't bail on for a girlfriend ever anymore! I'd be less flaky now, than I was back then.* His commitment to his friends was much stronger than in the past.

Another participant in his twenties, Brady, said his friendships had grown in significance and depth as they matured. This change also became obvious in the way the friends interacted: *I feel the importance of our relationships changing over time is sort of reflected in our treatment of one another changing as well.* He explained that as children and teens, his friendships were much more superficial, "dumb" and "zany" due to the gendered expectations they felt ("*High school boys are weird to each other! And there's a lot of cultural whatever caught up in that...*") Growing up strengthened their relationships, and vastly improved their treatment of one another: *The way we treated each other in high school, compared to how we act with each other now?! I mean it's*

night and day! These emotional shifts provide support for the idea that older norms around men's friendship are changing over time (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Tognoli 1980).

Like Sam and Brady, Diego held friendship in higher regard as he aged. However, this was for different reasons. In his younger years, Diego had always been content to do things on his own. This changed as he reached middle age: *Before, I think I was just... I don't know, maybe it's through age or whatever but back then... I used to like just going out by myself to do things. And now I don't like being by myself as much. I'm the guy that goes to the movies by himself. I eat by myself and all that, and then I'd say 'Okay, I'll hang out with these guys now.'* Well now, *I like it more to be around people!* Diego no longer held a cavalier attitude about spending time with and maintaining his friendships: *I feel you feel more alone as a years go on, for me. But you also see the value in having- you feel the value of having other people, and what they bring to your life. So, I think that's it [friendship]. There's something there, you know. It enriches your life.* By his fifties, he had stopped taking his friendships for granted, realizing how much they “enriched” his life.

Vincent, who was in his late sixties, said that as compared to any other time in his life, friendship was most significant now: *“Oh, friendship is more important to me- course because I'm getting older, too. I learn something new [from his friends] every day. So, for me, that's very important.”* He felt that spending time with friends had become especially important as he got older, and allowed him to keep growing and learning as a person. Ellen, also in her sixties, agreed with this sentiment: *People always say that, as*

you get older it's harder to make friends, because I guess there's not as many opportunities to meet new people. I don't know. I think maybe that's part of what you about when you're 62 (which is what I am), you start to think about the fact that you know, these people are important to me! And I've had them in my life a long time! They care about me, and would protect me. I think it's gotten greater-- I think I realized that the ones that are the quality that I love, I don't want to let go! At the stage of life she was in, Ellen felt most able to appreciate her long standing friendships and perceived them as special.

While aging and maturing were factors that made participants gain higher regard for their friends (Adams and Blieszner 1995), losing friends and being away from friends also made them come to these conclusions. Dallas, who had reunited with his friends recently after two years of living away, said this impacted his appreciation for them: *I value friendship more now, because I did leave and go to [another city]-- when I had friends here in our town-- to go to [another city] to experience the new big city... It turns out I'm just not super outgoing by myself. So, that's when I got close to my brother. But you know, I lived there for two years, and came back. Now I have my friend group back here, which is more important to me after not having a ton of friends down there!*

Through moving away, Dallas realized that his friend group what his friend group meant to him and how irreplicable it was. Though he was able to rely on his brother socially in this time period, he was joyful to return to his existing network of friends.

Zoe also talked about gaining a renewed appreciation for her existing support network. Zoe lost friends after college, which had been very upsetting to her for a time.

She struggled to gain acceptance of losing them, but in doing so, she reflected on the value of her other relationships: *This has been fairly recent. I have just kind of be like, 'Why am I so obsessed with like what **isn't** happening here', when I have these three other really wonderful friendships that I can pour into, and they pour into me! I value them, and some people don't have that at all!* She emphasized the mutuality of these relationships, which differentiated them from the friends she lost. The characteristics they lacked made her all the more grateful for her remaining relationships: *I just had to stop myself and be like I have my mom and dad, I have a partner who adores me, and I adore him, and I have like three wonderful people who really adore me as well-- and I adore them! Why am I freaked out these friendships that lasted college and it was super beautiful and wonderful? It's time to let it go.* In letting go, she was able to focus on her other friendships: *I think that has been really fulfilling for other relationships, I've been able to be so grateful for other friendships in my life.* Finally, though Lamar didn't cite a specific reason for the greater appreciation he now had for his friends, he summarized the sentiments of the other participants in this quote: *It's changed, where I now see friendships are some of the most important things you can have in your life.*

Friendship Futures

In addition to reflecting on the ways in which life events and experiences changed their friendships over time, participants described their aspirations and expectations for the future. The following section discusses patterns in how participants talked about the future of their friendships. Themes of this section included: friendship goals, certainty and lack of worry, and lifelong commitments to their friends. Perceptions of the future of

their friendships varied by life stage (Hutchinson 2005). This was especially true in the “future goal” theme. Planned longevity of the relationship also differed based on participant age (Hutchison 2005). For older participants, lifelong friendship commitments were tinged with a keen awareness of their mortality.

Future Goals (n=8, 24%)

Participants discussed goals for their friendships (n=8). These goals included introducing more aspects into friendships, strengthening the relationships and spending more time together. Jada how she was excited to progress through life stages and transitions with her friends. She viewed these as opportunities to “add” to her friendships. She spoke about her eventual wedding as one such instance: *I’m so excited to get married one day and have all my favorite people get to meet each other! The idea of seating chart-- I’m getting to put friends that don’t know each other at the same tables is like...So exciting! [laughs] So, like, I am so thrilled.* Though previous research has indicated that the commencement of romantic relationships results in “dyadic withdrawal” (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006), Jada planned to use this symbolic event as an opportunity to facilitate more connections (Blumer 1969). She was delighted to orchestrate the meetings of “her favorite people” through this life milestone. She also wanted to share each subsequent “addition” to her life with her friends: *You know, I have my first job, so getting to introduce my friends to that. I have my first very serious partner, and so introducing my friends to that. So, the more things that change in our lives, that we add. One day children, and more pets and new places we live-- sharing those things with each other!* Getting to share her job, her romantic partnership and all future aspects of her life was

something she looked forward to, that only deeper intertwined her friendships into her life.

Other participants discussed generally strengthening their relationships over time. Diego envisioned “*deeper friendship and deeper meaning*” in his friendships in the future. For him, this included more time spent with one another: *Where you spend more time with them, where you visit them, where they visit you and where you're just more on each other's lives! As opposed to 'Hey we're going to do this together' but then you don't speak for a week. or two weeks.* Diego’s goals for friendship included more consistency and intentional planning to see one another. This was a common goal, which Davion also expressed: *That's really the big one for us. Just being able to spend more time with each other.* Some participants felt this goal was in their grasp.

Valeria, who was planning to retire, was joyful about the prospects this new life stage would bring for her friendships (Liechty et al. 2012; Vinick and Ekerdt 2020): *I see us all having more time to invest in our friendships in the next 5 years or so as we all reach the retirement phase of life! I see them becoming more enriched, more meaningful, and more necessary! Thankfully, all my friends are in good health, active and take care of themselves!* Kimberly agreed, and excitedly talked about spending more time together in the future: *Oh gosh, I just wrote my girlfriends! I really see those relationships getting even stronger, because we are going on trips, we are talking every couple of weeks, we are-- our kids are now grown, we have more time to see each other. So, I really feel like those that circle of friends will just get even closer.*

Not all participants felt that their relationships were on an upward trajectory. Christopher, for example, shared some uncertainties for the state of his relationships going forward: *I foresee that I'm going to have to work on them. I do realize the ones that remain, there are difficulties... It takes work to maintain a relationship. Jeremy is super introverted, even more introverted than I am. So, with people like that, Jeremy and I gotten to the place where its sometimes years, but then we bop into each other and start hanging out again. I worry that I won't have any, I guess, maybe that's another way of putting it! I worry that I won't have any if I don't try harder to maintain friendships that I have!* Though Christopher didn't express the same optimism as others in terms of friendship goals, he had taken the first step, recognizing that it took effort to maintain contact.

Certainty (n=6, 18%)

Participants regarded their futures with friends with certitude and nonchalance (n=6). Their answers to this question demonstrated that they were not anxious or worried that their friends would continue to be in their lives. Eric and Dallas casually spoke about what they expected in their relationship in the decades to come: *Eric: At this point I don't see much changing... I don't know if you and [Dallas's partner] are talking about kids in the future... Dallas: Then you just have another nephew! I definitely plan on sticking around here, I mean if you're around here-- we'll make some time to hang out!*

Although there was a potential for life changing transitions (such as Dallas having a kid), the two planned to keep making time for one another (Bost et al. 2002).

Harvey also stated his future friendship plans simply. He anticipated, “*Chilling! Lots of chilling! Being bros! Lots of brews!*” Other participants spoke thoughtfully about their certainty of the future, like Regan: *I think that the older I get, the more clear I get on everything. The more clear I get on who I am, and what I want the rest of my life on this planet to look like. That includes the people that I invite to walk with me and then invite me to walk with them.* As Regan became more secure in herself, she became more secure in the relationships she “invited” into her life and was confident in continuing on this path. In this quote, she emphasized the active choice to construct her friendships (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Adam also spoke with confidence about friendship, comparing his best friend Dana to other lifelong relationships of his: *“I’m not so much as worried about my friendship with Dana! Similar to how I’m not worried about the friendship with my mom or my spouse-- and I think part of that is like, they are so intertwined in my life at this point!”* Although his friendship didn’t have the same legal or blood ties as these other relationships, Adam felt it was “intertwined” with his life in a similar way. Sam also had ample faith in his friendship future, saying *“My friends are my everything right now, and they have been and will be! At least as far as I can see ahead!”*

Conversely, several participants (n=4, 12%) admitted they were less sure about what the future held, but were still unconcerned about the role of their friends in it. Dana said *“I’m not worried about it I just think it [their friendship] will mature as we mature... Whether whatever! Whatever happens next.”* Participant’s dialogue around this topic harkened back to the common theme of “acceptance” in regard to changes in friendship

over time. Regan discussed this: *I try really hard not to throw myself out too far into the future, to define what I want it to look like, because things change so much on a daily basis... So, I know that things will change profoundly in the decades to come, but I have no idea what that's gonna look like, and I'm totally okay with that!* Regan's lack of concern about what the future would bring for her friendships came from the standards she held for her relationships: *I know that it's just going to be more magic and more joy! Because that's all I will accept. So that's easy!* Frances also felt that the future was not something she could easily predict. However, this wasn't upsetting to her. Instead, she took comfort in the knowledge that her friendships had the potential to develop and change, as well as the confidence that she'd make new relationships: *I now trust that the friends I have, some of them will grow stronger, some may fade away and I'll make new friends! So that's very comforting!*

Planned Longevity (n=6, 18%)

While some participants didn't have precise future plans, others spoke about continuing commitment and planned longevity (n=6). Adam discussed longevity and commitment in terms of the daily involvement of his friends in his life, and gradual change he expected: *It's not like you'll pop off the earth, for you know, two months, and you come back and something dramatic has happened in your life or it has dramatically changed. So, I kind of feel like it's not going to be one of those things that you're going to have with some friends. You know, you don't see your niece or nephew for six months, you come back you're like 'Oh my God, you're so tall now! When did that happen?!' Whereas their parents are like "Oh, I see this every day, I didn't notice it."* While Adam said "some

friends” might have jarring changes over time, his closest friends would walk through all of life’s challenges and changes *with him*: *And so, I guess that's how I look at those top three [his spouse, best friend, and mother] in particular, including Dana, where I talk to her so frequently and she's so intertwined in my life that-- while you know kids might be [something that affects their friendship]... She's going to be a part of this journey, the entire time. Just because of the closeness of our friendship and how much we communicate with each other, and again just how intertwined we are. I feel like it's just going to be natural, it's just going to be another day. So again, if you look back 20 years, yes, there's going to be a dramatic difference from what our friendship is like today, than probably what it looks like in 10 years. But I think over the-- in the process of those 10 years, it is going to be so gradual because we're just... She's going to be a part of every single one of those days.”*

Adam described his commitment to his best friends as on par with his spouse and closest kin. To him the future was simply going to be a series of ‘another day’ spent with his best friend. He knew they would be together through them all.

Other participants expressed a “till death do us part” philosophy when talking about the planned longevity of their friendships. Malcolm, for example, frankly said “*Well, someday we will be going to each other's funerals!*” Though this was a somewhat morbid response, it demonstrates Malcolm’s planned, long standing commitment to his friendships. Clarence echoed this, saying “*I think we'll keep our friendship going till I die, I mean, I think more of the same-- maybe even more what we used to do!*” He anticipated “more of the same”, and perhaps even an increase in closeness, which he

looked forward to. Norah expressed very similar sentiments for the future of her friendships: *I would expect-- as long lived as my family is-- that I'll be around for quite a while. I hope my friends are as well. I don't want to lose a friend. I don't know what getting together what does getting together look like when you're in your 80s. I don't know, is it just on the phone? But the these are... We will be friends until we die, I know that!* While Norah knew there would perhaps have to be modifications to their modes of friendship in old age, she was committed to maintaining the relationships for the rest of her life.

As Norah alluded to, the realities of lifelong friendship commitments were most evident in the answers of older participants (n=4, 12%). Some of these participants had lost friends to illness and old age already, whereas others knew that this was inevitable. Ophelia had grappled with friendship loss, and felt that this was only going to continue: *Interviewer: What do you foresee for your friendships in the future? Ophelia: They're all going to die. Unfortunately, that's my curse. I'm going to live and they're going to-- I'm going to lose everyone. I've lost so many already.* While Ophelia struggled to find any positives in the difficult realities of aging and friendship, other participants acknowledged this with more hope and acceptance. Dot, for example said, *"I try not to think about it, but I know that it's going to happen. People are losing their husbands now, it's just part of life. But I'm hoping to grow old with many of them."* (Carr 2018)

Ellen expressed something similar: *I feel so morbid right now... a lot of people have died in my life. You just know that you're going to have a lot of sickness and death-- spousal death and all that kind of stuff. You just have to be happy for the good times, and*

your own health, and the fact that you're the crazy person people call. Acknowledging that this was a part of the life cycle of all relationships and being prepared for it allowed Ellen to be grateful for her own health, the time she had spent with friends, and the type of friends she was in the present. While Vincent had faced illness himself and was approaching old age, his commitment to his friends was reminiscent of the adage “best friends forever”. He seemed to summarize the hopes of many other participants, saying: *Oh, I want to-- God spare me, go forever! Go forever! You know, as long as I'm here, as long as this world be here, this friendship will keep going!*

DISCUSSION

This study explored the progression and change in close friendships throughout the adult lifespan using interview data and the concept of turning points. In the first section, the study identified shared varieties of turning points and examined how each impacted friendship closeness. There were 18 distinct turning points that the participants relayed in this analysis. Following the turning point analysis, participants reflected on how their past experiences had changed their perceptions of friendship overall. Eight themes were derived from this data. Within these themes, participants spoke about how their personal development strengthened their friendships, how they developed higher standards (such as mutuality), how they sought out and enjoyed deeper friendships, and how they gained a higher regard and appreciation for their friends over time. Finally, the participants discussed the future direction of their friendships. There were three primary themes related to the future of friendships, which included planned longevity in their friendships, certainty about the relationships and goals for the future. These final sections added to the

turning point analysis by offering a more thorough understanding of the overall impacts of discrete friendship changes.

Turning Points

This work extends previous studies in several ways. While most studies using turning points to map relationship change focus on families or romantic relationships (Baxter and Bullis 1986; Baxter et al. 1999), this study exclusively examines friendships. This relationship type also goes through many meaningful transitions throughout the life course, which have not been as extensively explored. Previous research on change in friendship has also mainly focused on children, adolescents and young adults (Becker et al. 2009; Johnson et al. 2003; Langheit and Poulin 2022; Oswald and Clark 2003; Poulin and Chan 2010). Some research has explored friendship turning points of young and middle-aged adults, but this research is limited to samples of only women (Doherty 2021). While research indicates that gender may not be as central to friendships as once thought (Gillespie et al. 2015; Wright 1982), the present study adds to the literature by examining relationship turning points and friendship change among a wider sample that includes men, women, and gender non-conforming individuals. The sample also encompasses a larger age range than many previous studies, with adults in young adulthood, middle age, and older adulthood.

This study found some similarities with previous turning point studies. Many of the turning points that created meaningful change in the friendships of young adults also emerged in middle-aged and older adults' relationships (Becker et al 2009; Johnson 2003). This included changes in the geographic distance of friends, living together, taking

trips together, conflict, and conflict resolution. Other similarities included turning points based on shared activities and interests. Network-based turning points such as meeting family, romantic partners, and other friends were also found in previous studies (Johnson et al. 2003). This study also found romantic escalation/dissolution and life crises to be reoccurring turning points (as found in studies of female friends in slightly older samples) (Doherty 2021).

Despite many similarities to past studies, there were also several sites of divergence. First, the participants in this study outlined several turning point types unique to this research. The turning points of special and symbolic events, losing a mutual friend, values-based turning points, and changing relationship type have not been identified in previous studies. Interestingly, some of the life transition turning points found to be very prevalent in previous research were much less prominent here. Having a child was a common turning point in a study of the friendship turning points of young and middle-aged women (Doherty 2021). This turning point was not mentioned by any of the participants in the present sample. Some participants *did* have children and spoke about them in other contexts, but parenthood was not cited as influencing friendship closeness in this study. Romantic escalation (friends/individual entering into a romantic relationship) and dissolution were the most often cited turning points in studies of adult women (Doherty 2021). There were only two instances of romantic escalation as a turning point in this study (approximately 1% of all turning points). Romantic dissolution (which generally increased friendship closeness in previous studies) had mixed impacts on friendship in this study. However, combined romantic escalation and dissolution had a

much smaller impact on friendships than estimated in prior studies (totaling only 4% of all the turning points).

The current study can also clarify and extend life events that impact friendship found in older research. One example is crisis-related turning points. In this study, participants identified several unique kinds of “crisis” circumstances that impacted their friendships: death, health problems, and personal crises (both external and internal). Based on the experiences of adults in different life stages, we can gain more insight into the life events that influence relationships and how (Blieszner and Roberto 2003). While some younger participants *did* identify crisis turning points, older individuals are generally more likely to encounter and have to work through processes closely related to aging (such as illness, caretaking and deaths of loved ones, spouses, and friends themselves) in their friendships (Carr 2018; Kaljimm 2012). This sentiment was echoed when older participants reflected on how their friendships changed over time and what they anticipated for the future of their friendships.

Changes to Friendship Over Time and Future Projections

This study confirmed and contrasted several findings of older studies on friendship change over the life course. One finding echoed in previous work was the staying importance of friends in various stages of adulthood (Patterson 2007; Pica and Verno 2012). Research on change in communication styles of friendships determined there was little variation in topics discussed, value of the relationship, and intimacy of friendships during the course of lifelong friendships (Patterson 2007). This finding was partially corroborated in the present analysis, as some participants said their friendships changed

minimally over time. However, other study members reported significant changes to intimacy and value. These participants experienced strengthening of their friendships over time, marked by heightened mutual admiration, depth and an overall improvement in relationship quality. Previous work has suggested that the qualities valued in friendships are mostly similar in groups of young adults and older adults (Pica and Verno 2012). While the members of the current study did seem to value similar things in friendships regardless of their age, they reported personal changes to characteristics they valued in friendships over the course of their lives. As they aged, they developed higher expectations for friendships, including mutuality, depth, and acceptance. Finally, to my knowledge, this is the only existing study that queries into future expectations in friendships. The novel results of this section demonstrate high levels of friendship commitment, as friends discussed relationship permanence, specific intentions for the future, and confidence in the continuity of the relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

Many studies using turning points have employed retrospective interview technique (RIT) (Baxter et al. 1999) and quantitatively mapped visual representations of closeness trajectories (Becker et al. 2009). This specific approach was not used in the present study for several reasons. First, the turning point analysis was part of a larger, mixed methods study, which already required participants to complete a survey, a social network mapping data collection, and in-depth interview with three components. Bearing this in mind, participants were not asked to complete all protocols characteristic of previous turning point studies in addition to this extensive data collection (Becker et al.

2009). Second, while individual relational trajectories are important, the purpose of using turning points in this study was to identify broader types of events that can impact friendships over the life course, rather than exploring fluctuating closeness of singular relationship trajectories.

Although the study illustrated many of these events, it is worth noting there may be distinct normative pressures and life events experienced by different cohorts or based on demographic factors (Budgeon 2006; Sassler and Licheter 2020; Scott 2006). As this study's sample is heterogenous in regard to age and gender, it provides some preliminary findings on this variation. Still, closer investigations are warranted. The limitations of this study provide an opportunity for future research. Subsequent studies could explore turning points with more focused emphasis and in sub-samples that are underrepresented in the literature (such as men in middle age (Butera 2006) or individuals who choose to remain single or childless (DePaulo and Morris 2005)).

CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to understand how life events influence friendship change over time and discover how peoples' friendship perceptions change as they age. Middle and later adulthood is accompanied by a multitude of life changes, such as shouldering greater social and financial responsibilities, career and work transitions, and relationship and role shifts. It is worthwhile to look deeper at how these changes impact friendships and social support. It is also valuable to examine how people's perceptions of friendship and its value change over time. This study builds on prior research by corroborating many earlier findings, introducing new insights, and providing reinterpretations based on

the experiences of adults in all stages of the life course. This work points to compelling prospects for future research on friendship and its development across the lifespan.

CHAPTER THREE: FRIENDSHIP IN CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The dynamic nature of social networks throughout the life course is well-documented (Wrzus et al. 2012). However, less is known about the evolution of friendship networks across all stages of adulthood. Studies of friendship networks in adulthood tend to focus on college-age adults and retired, older adults (Fiori and Denckla 2015). The emphasis on the margins of the adult life course means there is limited empirical data about the friendship networks of the wide swath of the population in the ages between. Studies of friendship networks also rarely examine the network context that friendships are maintained within (Adams and Blieszner 1995; Ayalon and Levkovich 2019; Wrzus et al. 2012). In childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood, it may be possible to isolate friendship networks, as they are largely formed in environments of primary, secondary and post-secondary schools. These educational environments are separate from familial contexts (del Valle et al. 2010). Romantic relationships formed within these contexts rarely connect disparate social worlds in lasting ways (Laursen and Bukowski 1997). Unlike the social networks of youth, in the adult portion of the life course, there is no clear separation between the spheres of family, friends, and romantic partners. Additionally, there are key differences in the typical networks of those in emerging adulthood (who are often single and living with peers) and those who have romantic partnerships, children, and other network connections (Schweizer and Payne 2018). Older people may also have fewer or divergent social responsibilities, as they typically no

longer work or provide daily care for families (Liechty et al. 2012; Vinick and Ekerdt 2020).

The existing literature has predominantly focused on studying each type of relationship in isolation, which rarely aligns with how adults' social networks function (Wang and Wellman 2010). Adults encounter competing network pressures that are not prevalent in the friendship networks of younger people. Over the years, adults' networks have the potential to change due to cohabitation, marriage, divorce, parenthood, and commitments to other family members, such as aging relatives (Wrzus et al. 2012). The complex interplay between different types of relationships remains largely unexplored, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of how individuals effectively balance and prioritize their connections with friends, kin, and romantic partners.

Moreover, the societal context in which adult friendships exist can exert considerable influence on their network dynamics. Societal norms, cultural expectations, and broader social structures shape the way individuals perceive, navigate, and maintain their friendships (Deaulo 2008; Finkel et al. 2014; Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Neyer et al. 2011). These external factors can introduce additional pressures or constraints on individuals, potentially leading to conflicts, sacrifices, or reevaluations of their friendship networks in adulthood (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). Exploring how adults perceive, internalize (or resist) broader societal attitudes will shed light on the connection between personal relationships and the larger social landscapes (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Therefore, it is essential to explore how individuals navigate and manage their networks

across and among the domains of friendship, kin, and romantic relationships to understand how the relationships function in adulthood.

The present study will add to the literature by examining the networks of a sample of adults who report maintaining close friendships throughout different stages of the adult life course. Through a dual methodological approach (using ego network data and in-depth interview data) the study seeks to answer the following quantitative and qualitative research questions.

Quantitative Research Questions:

1. What kinds of relationships do adults with close friendships list in their personal networks?
2. Are there patterns based on network features, life stage or any other demographic factors?

Qualitative Research Question:

3. How do individuals conceptualize and prioritize their relationships within the context of many potential competing network connections (with family, friends or significant others)?

The data sources will be triangulated, compared, and fused to draw more comprehensive insights than either methodological approach could provide alone. The integrated analysis of network features with answers to interview questions helps answer the overall, mixed methods research question:

4. How do friendships fit into adults' social networks?

By exploring these questions, this study has the potential to broaden our understanding of adults' friendships and the networks that surround them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis offers conceptual and analytical tools to investigate the contexts friendships are embedded in. Network theory and methods are designed to explicitly model relationships and their properties. Thus, the method is well suited to the analysis of friendships and to address the first research questions of this study. This type of analysis is particularly important because most research of friendships after adolescence has conceptualized friendship as a dyadic relationship (Eve 2002; Pahl 2002). Network research can clearly demonstrate that this is not the case-- each individual friendship may be embedded in structures of other friends, romantic relationships and kin (Bush et al 2017; Walen and Lachman). Looking at friendships dyadically limits and misrepresents the full context in which friendship actually takes place. Friendship is practiced within and among other competing and complementary relational structures, which need to be acknowledged to accurately examine friendships across the life course (Budgeon 2006). Antonucci and Akiyama (1987) provide evidence of the value of acknowledging friendship structures beyond the dyad and describe how networks of friends and family can work together to provide a "protective layer" or convoy of social support. Friendship structures that surround the individual matter because they facilitate enhanced social support, as multiple, overlapping friendships can provide the individual with higher levels of integration than a more fragmented network.

A few authors have stressed the importance of considering the social context surrounding specific friendships. In some international work, young adults' friendship networks have been categorized through typologies (Bellotti 2008). The structural features of these networks impacted the way that these young adults received support and conceptualized friendship more broadly (Bellotti 2008). Like the present research, Bellotti (2008) collected qualitative data about friendships. However, the studies did not contextualize young adult friendships within individuals' larger networks of kin, romantic partners or any other connections (Bellotti 2014; 2016). There is little research on the friendship networks of middle-aged adults. In middle age, adults' networks are often categorized through their romantic partnerships. Network studies during this stage of the life course have centered around duo-centric couple networks (Kennedy et al. 2015). Though more focused on the romantic dyad than friendship networks themselves, this research demonstrates friendships and romantic partnerships can have substantial influence on one another (Kennedy et al. 2015). Friend networks can create a normative context for couples, encouraging them to stay together or break up. They can also facilitate or detract from the romantic relationship's resources (Bryant & Conger, 1999). Network structure matters here-- if networks are highly integrated, they are more likely to strengthen couple bonds (Kennedy et al. 2015). When the networks are less cohesive, there is less structural support for romantic partner bonds. Despite being discussed within duo-centric network literature, there is very little research on middle-aged adults' friendship network trends on their own, signaling a need for the descriptive networks I will collect through my SNA.

While there is not much friendship research *across* the life course that considers the effects of other relationships, there is some that looks at the interplay of older adults' kin and friend ties. An existing body of life course theory research looks at older adults' friendships and kin and their effects on well-being and health (Dykstra 1993; Sander et al. 2017). Recent research has also produced network typologies of older adults. These studies have found that older adults have varied types of networks, ranging from isolated networks, disparate family and friend focused networks and integrated family and friend networks (Fiori et al. 2007). Network structure matters here too. Those in "diverse" networks (who received support from diverse types of relationships of integrated kin and friend networks) had the best health outcomes (Fiori et al. 2007). Some literature also examines older adults' friendships *post* romantic relationships (after divorce or during widowhood) (Bookwala et al. 2014; Carr 2018; Kalmijn 2012).

For the most part, friendship studies that take adults' network context into account have not materialized within the LCT literature (Sherman et al. 2000). As the concept of "linked lives" is a core tenant of LCT, focusing on friendships as part of larger webs of connection seems to align with this theoretical background. Though networks have not been central to LCT friendship research, one review specifically called for studies that explore how relationships outside of pairs of friends affect focal friendships (Blieszner and Roberto 2003). The authors suggested that this research use multiple methods to "probe deeply" into the effects of other relationships on the focal friendship (Blieszner and Roberto 2003).

Using mixed methods research may be important to truly understand network trends. Though SNA is rife with potential for studying friendship, most network research suffers the same limitations as traditional survey research. Relationships are elicited using an instrument that assumes a shared definition of friendship, rather than uncovering how people actually experience their relationships (Kitts and Leal 2021). Moreover, once friendship ties are enumerated, network studies often don't investigate the *content* of these ties, and instead, focus on their more structural properties (Edwards 2010).

Despite its limitations, previous research demonstrates that SNA is a valuable tool. This methodology allows us to formally measure the relationships among friends and other significant relationships in their personal networks. SNA can supplement qualitative data by contextualizing it within the participant's larger networks, as previous authors have called for (Adams and Allan 1998; Budgeon 2006; Pahl, 2002). In this study, I use SNA to measure and demonstrate the social structure surrounding friendships, and interview data to flesh out the many qualitative dimensions of these relationships and their interconnections.

Putting Friendship into Context

To address the third research question, it is crucial to delve into existing literature on norms and perceptions within different kinds of social relationships. Friendships are inseparable from the gendered and heteronormative expectations of other relationships (Budgeon and Roseneil 2004; Cronin 2015). When compared to existing network studies of adults, studies on gendered power dynamics have more thoroughly examined how commitments to family and spouses affect friendships (Budgeon and Roseneil 2004;

Cronin 2015). Additionally, marriage scholars have discussed the cultural centrality of and preoccupation with romantic relationships, which has adverse effects on individuals' social support networks (DePaulo 2008; Finkel et al. 2014; Neil and Coser 1974).

In the following sections, I discuss what these somewhat disparate strands of empirical research discover about how the other relationships individuals create and maintain throughout the life course affect friendship. I first describe how romantic relationships and gendered processes affect friendship. Then, I provide literature on kin and friendships. The goal of these sections is to examine how we might expect adults to view their friendships within the context of many potential competing network connections with family, friends, or significant others. Through the description of previous literature, I demonstrate how my dissertation adds to research on the interplay of social relationships of adults in different life stages.

Romantic Relationships and Friendships

One of the most influential relationships on friendship in the life course is the romantic partnership (Gillespie et al. 2015). While marriage rates have fallen over time, the majority of adults have been in (or are currently in) a cohabitating romantic relationship of some kind (Pew Research Center 2019). Though its forms may be more flexible than in the past, long-term romantic partnerships are still the strong cultural norm and aspiration for most people (DePaulo 2008). Romantic relationships have many potential benefits, but also hold the potential to negatively impact other relationships (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006). "Couple culture"-- in both media trope and empirical research-- often competes with friendships (Cronin 2015; Depaulo 2008; Ketokivi 2012; Gerstel and

Sarkisian 2006). Over time, romantic relationships can undermine friendship ties (Cronin 2015; Wruz et al. 2013). Marriage and cohabitation may lead to initial increases in friendship networks as individuals merge their networks, but frequently cause substantial decline as the couple solidifies their relationship (Bidart and Lavenu 2005).

Previous research has suggested that these processes are heavily gendered (O'Connor 1992). Women's friendships can be impacted by the patriarchal and heteronormative societal structure they take place in (Cronin 2015; Fischer and Oliner 1983). Women's perceptions of these gendered relational expectations matter (Cronin 2015). Studies have shown women may feel they're in a double bind when it comes to balancing friendships and romantic partnerships (Cronin 2015). In one study of importance of friendship in their lives, women almost universally cited friends as very important to them (Cronin 2015). Yet, they consistently privileged their romantic partners over friends in terms of resources, time, and intimacy. While most women in the sample recognized that their friendships were diminished by romantic relationships, they felt both guilt for being a "bad friend" and a stronger duty to their (often male) romantic partners (Cronin 2015). Women and their partners seemed to view intimacy as a "zero-sum game," where closeness in one type of relationship eroded closeness in the other (Cronin 2015).

In patriarchal and heteronormative relational contexts, women are expected to prioritize romantic and family relationships over their friendships, no matter how close these friendships may be (Budgeon 2006; Cronin 2015). Coupled women are also often expected and relied on to do the emotional labor of maintaining the *couple's* social

connections with family and shared friends (Tognoli 1980). The romantic dyad seems to be the primary organizing social unit, especially in women's social networks (Ketokivi 2012; Meeus et al. 2007). Social scientists have used a number of theoretical schemas to describe marriage and long-term partnerships' privileged status relative to other relationships. Among these are the "marriage as a greedy institution" thesis (Neil and Coser 1974) and the "suffocation model" (Finkel et al. 2014). As their names suggest, these theories argue that marriages have deleterious effects on other relationships. The greedy institution thesis states that once they enter marriages, individuals become less engaged with their communities, kin, and friends (Neil and Coser 1974). They are materially, emotionally, and culturally engrossed in the romantic relationship and thus disengage from their other relationships (Neil and Coser 1974; Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Kim and Dew 2016), and they are less likely than their unmarried counterparts to visit friends or provide them with emotional and instrumental support (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Kim and Dew 2016).

The suffocation model posits that individuals are now asking (and expecting) their romantic partners to fulfill an ever-growing list of complex psychological needs (Finkel et al. 2014). These include intimacy, belonging, and companionship, but also autonomy, self-expression, and self-actualization. Often, marriages are failing to meet these high expectations (Finkel et al. 2014), causing marital quality and personal wellbeing to suffer (Finkel et al. 2015). Rising marital dissolution and dissatisfaction rates may reflect the high burden that the suffocation model of relationships places on people (Finkel 2018; DePaulo 2007). The model's creators suggest that individuals could either invest *further*

into their marriages (so that they do meet these needs) or begin to expect less of their marriages (Finkel et al. 2014). However, when paired with the greedy institution thesis, the former may further isolate married individuals who *already* withdraw from potential sources of emotional and psychological fulfillment (such as friendship) when they enter into a romantic relationship (Kim and Dew 2016; Neil and Coser 1974). Instead of encouraging couples to further disconnect from their broader support networks or forsake their psychological and social needs, I investigate the claim that friendship can increase well-being for both singles and couples, by providing individuals with multiplex sources of support.

Kin and Friendship

While much research has signaled that romantic relationships rival friendships, research on the interplay of kin relationships and friendship has demonstrated less clear patterns. As with general inquiries into the interlinkage of other relationships and friendship, this area is understudied (Sherman et al. 2000). This may be because, after childhood, researchers have conceptualized family and friend networks as two different social systems with limited interlinkage (Sherman et al. 2000). Much research has described friendship as a relationship of choice, and family as a relationship of obligation (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995). Due to their apparently differing functions, these relationships have not often been discussed in conversation with one another. One area in which there *is* some research on the connectedness and differential effects of kin and friendship is among older adults (Dykstra 1993). In the following sections, I will discuss

kin's importance relative to friendship, as well as the complementary and contrasting nature of these two types of relationships.

Kin's Importance

Some authors have hypothesized that for most individuals, kin relationships are more important than non-kin relationships, like friendships (Neyer et al. 2011). Researchers have deemed this phenomenon the “kinship premium” (Curry et al. 2013). Research has found that while young people are most likely to say that their closest friend is not kin, this changes over time (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). In middle age, these non-kin friends are generally replaced by the romantic partner as the closest friend. Finally, in old age, kin replaced partners as individuals' closest friends (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). In studies of altruism, despite sometimes greater emotional closeness with friends, respondents were more likely to behave altruistically with kin (Curry et al. 2013). As compared to friends, kin more commonly provide instrumental and financial support (Eve 2002). This research is in line with the thesis that people feel a sense of obligation to their families and perhaps not towards their friends (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995). However, these assertions may not really speak to the relative *importance* of different relationships to the individual—it may simply differentiate the relationship characteristics.

Overlap of Kin and Friendship

Despite the salience of kinship in adults' networks, it has been suggested that the boundaries between friends and family are often blurred (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). Even outside of those who more actively acknowledge having “chosen kin”, individuals draw

these comparisons (Allan 2008; Pahl and Pevalin 2005). For example, a mother and daughter may say they are the “best of friends”, while a pair of non-kin friends might say they are “like brothers.” (Pahl and Pevalin 2005) As family structures become less institutionalized, the differences between non-kin and kin may not be all that meaningful (Spencer and Pahl 2019). Although there is not evidence that people are disengaging from kin in modernity, this does not necessarily pit non-kin friendships against kin relationships. Many individuals are *also* engaging with non-kin friends (Spencer and Pahl 2019). It may be that kin and non-kin relationships simply have a considerable amount of overlap in the roles they play in peoples’ lives (Allan 2008).

Complementary Functions

The effects of kinship ties on friendships are not necessarily negative. As suggested in the previous section, there is some overlap in the conceptualization of these relationships and some similarities in support they provide. Research has demonstrated both shared and specific functions of these two relationship types. For example, in studies examining confidants and companions, both kin and non-kin are important sources of key needs (Connidis and Davies 1990). Children and friends were most important as confidants, while friends and spouses were key companions (Connidis and Davies 1990). Research has also found that friendships may be able to complement kin relationships as a source of relational benefits not provided by kin (Bookwala et al. 2014; Carr 2018; Patterson et al 1993).

Interestingly, although when compared to kin contact, friend contact decreases with age, much of the research demonstrating friendship’s complimentary benefits to

kinship has been conducted in populations of older adults (Sander et al. 2017). Studies of older adults routinely demonstrate that in the later stages of life, friends may serve distinctive functions when compared to kin (Patterson et al. 1993). Some studies find that older individuals seek to have their instrumental needs satisfied through kin relations and their emotional needs through friendships (Felton and Berry 1992). Surprisingly, interacting with family members can have neutral or even negative effects on older adults' well-being, while interacting with friends is positively associated with many measures of well-being (Sherman et al. 2000). In addition to well-being, friends may have a singular influence on older adults' health. For example, after the loss of a partner, having at least one friend's support was protective against poor health, yet having family's support had no effect (Bookwala et al. 2014). There may be a specific added benefit from *friend's* support, in contrast to social support generally (Carr 2018). Overall, it seems that friendship and kinship ties coexist and complement each other.

Additive Relationship Structures

There is some research that looks at relationship types that fall outside of the heteronormative life course context (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Budgeon 2006; Elder 1998; Jamieson et al. 2006; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). These studies may be informative for the present study, as prioritizing friendships throughout adulthood has not been considered as part of a normative life course model of social networks (Nordgren 2006; Wrzus et al. 2013). Some research examines individuals who "decenter" kin and romantic/sexual relationships in their lives in favor of platonic connections (Budgeon 2006; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). Relatedly, in studies of chosen kin, some individuals developed

relationships with chosen kin due to "deficits" in their families of birth (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Jamieson et al. 2006). In both cases, people forgo normative connections to forge new kinds of bonds (Wrzus et al. 2012).

While chosen families have been associated with "replacing" families of origin, some individuals seek out chosen kin to supplement and expand their networks, rather than supplant them (Braithwaite et al. 2010; Jamieson et al. 2006). This has been referred to as an "additive" relational approach in chosen kin typographies (Braithwaite et al. 2010).

It is possible that individuals use this "additive" approach to maintain other relationships alongside (or intertwined with) valued friendships, even within the "normative" life course (Elder 1998). To further illustrate this possibility, we can use theories of symbolic interactionism and social constructivism. For example, many authors argue that the idea of the companionate, soulmate, "all or nothing" marriage is a relatively new social construction (Coontz 2006; Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Kim and Dew 2016). In other words, marriages have not *always* caused individuals to sever ties with kin and friends (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006). Couples do not have to disconnect from their broader networks as they become more committed to one another, and have not always done so (Coontz 2006). Recent empirical work has shown that although individuals often *say* their friends are important to them, they continually prioritized romantic relationships and actively constructed and reproduced "couple culture" (Cronin 2015). This is an ongoing construction and can be changed (Berger and Luckmann 1966). If individuals *conceptualize* their friendships as important and additive rather than

competitive, they can become so. As argued in the previous literature sections, this may be possible within and between friendship, kin, and romantic relationships.

The Present Study

Past literature shows the need for research into the social networks that surround friendships of adults, especially those in middle age and older adulthood (Belotti 2008). Understanding all possible avenues of connection across the life course is important as our population grows increasingly older and more isolated (Buecker et al. 2021; Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018). Additionally, though some work has examined the interplay of familial, romantic and platonic relationships, the examination of these processes in different network contexts and life stages is needed (Wrzus et al. 2016). It is not fully clear whether (and when) relationship types rival one another, and how individuals choose to prioritize their connections. This study employs mixed methods techniques and a concurrent sample design to gain insights into these processes (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018). Social network analysis is used to quantitatively examine network characteristics and composition (RQ1 and RQ2). Interview data is used to explore network connections and their interplay in further depth (RQ3). Both methods are integrated to provide comprehensive understandings of the ways people contextualize their relationships and how friendships fit into people's wider social networks (RQ4) (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018).

METHODS

Philosophical Orientation

This research defines mixed methods research in the following way: Mixed methods research combines or mixes quantitative and qualitative methods, techniques, approaches, concepts or language. It requires the collection and integrated analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. This is done to provide a more complete understanding of the research problems than possible with either singular approach. (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004)

This definition (along with those it draws from) focuses heavily on methods and methodology and specifies integration throughout the research process. While a methods focus specifies the technical aspects of data collection, a methodology focus gives attention to the research design as well. With a methodology focus, “the full process of research from formulating questions to drawing conclusions in a study” (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, p. 124) is considered. This means that the mixed methods design is intentional in both the “conceptualization and interpretation stages” of the research (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018, p. 124). This methodology focused definition assisted in the intentional research design of this study. A well thought out research design is essential to successful and deliberate integration of results. Considering mixed methods integration in the creation of research questions, modes of data collection, analysis and synthesis of results are all important steps in coming to an end result of a “better understanding” of the research problem.

This methodological framework leaves room for some flexibility. It does not focus heavily on theoretical and philosophical perspectives. While a philosophical emphasis can greatly aid some studies, it can prove difficult at times to reconcile strict interpretations of philosophical paradigms within a mixed methods study. Philosophically based mixed methods studies also have a different focus- “bringing different sets of beliefs and assumptions into dialogue,” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 126; Greene, 2007) instead of “the idea of mixing particular techniques or stages of research.” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 126) A methodologically based mixed methods definition and philosophical orientation better fit the goals of this study.

Mixed Methods Study Design

This study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design (Plano Clark and Ivankova 2015). Concurrent data collection with shared samples facilitated integration of quantitative social network and qualitative interview data. This design allowed for the visualization of social environments surrounding friendships (through the creation of ego networks) and descriptions of their experiences within these social landscapes (through in-depth interviews). These combined methods provide a richer understanding of how friendships unfold within a larger social context than either method alone.

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 43 individuals who reported that they had close friendships. Participants were recruited from a range of different regions in the United States. Of these participants, 53% identified as female, 42% identified as male, and 5% identified as non-binary or transgender. Many respondents (60%) identified as “White or Caucasian”,

while 14% identified as “Hispanic or Latino”, followed by 7% as “Black or African American” and 7% as “Asian or Pacific Islander”. About 5% identified as “Biracial or Multiracial”, while 6% identified as “Other” or did not report a racial identification. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 86 years, with a median age of 45 (and a mean age of 45.67 years). For further description of the sample characteristics, see Appendix C.

Data Collection Procedure

Study procedures were approved by the institutional review board of University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Prior to data collection, potential participants were informed of the research protocol, content, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality. All participants provided verbal consent that they understood the study and were willing to participate. The study utilized a two-stage data collection process. The first stage was the network data collection, followed by an in-depth interview. These data collections took place simultaneously. Based on purposive sampling and participant preference, some participants completed only the network data collection (n=9), while the majority completed the network data collection as well as an in-depth interview (n=35). Participants who completed only the network portion were compensated with a \$10 Visa gift card, while those who completed both the network data collection and the interview were given a \$50 gift card.

Network Data Collection

The first stage of data collection was a short questionnaire of relevant demographic characteristics that may impact friendships, drawn from existing literature (Blieszner et al. 2019; Diamond 2002; Giddens 2013; Gillespie et al. 2015; Kalmijn 2003). It elicited

information about participant age, gender, sexual orientation, SES, race, and relationship status. The questionnaire was conducted in Qualtrics and was sent to participants prior to the in-person or Zoom network data collection.

For the second stage of data collection, participants met with the researcher via Zoom or in-person to gather personal network data. The type of network collected in this study is an “ego network.” (Wasserman and Faust 1994) An ego network generates personal networks by asking one focal respondent to provide data on their network of significant others (Adams 2019). Ego network data is ideal for capturing the networks relevant to individuals, rather than large groups or institutions (Wasserman and Faust 1994). This network data collection involved the creation of participant ego networks through a software called “Kumu” (accessible at: <https://kumu.io/>). This software has been used to directly involve study participants and community members in network mapping, enabling them to observe and explain their connections in real time (de Moor 2017). Participatory, interactive data visualization software like Kumu allows for a deeper understanding of the structure and content of network ties, as described and narrated by participants (Tubaro et al. 2015). Using network visualization “within an in-depth interview can transform the encounter and elicit richer data.” (Tubaro et al. 2015) As mentioned in the discussion of SNA literature, by using mixed methods, this study gains an “understanding from both structure and content of social ties, as portrayed and talked through by participants.” (Tubaro et al. 2015)

Network Data Collection Phase One: Name Generator

To create their ego networks, participants identified a list of significant relationships via a “name generator” (Burt et al., 2012). Name generators are commonly used in SNA to gather information about individuals’ social networks, by asking them to provide names of people who occupy a certain role in their lives (Wasserman and Faust 1994). Although there is some debate about the best way to ask people about their relationships, name generators often ask for “significant people” or those the individual discusses “important matters” with (Straits 2000). My name generator asks for both, in order to capture the broadest array of important others. By keeping this question broad, I hoped to collect networks of both family, friends and other relationships (Bush et al. 2017). For this study, the name generator asked respondents to identify up to 10 of their most important relationships. I used the following question as a name generator: *“Please list up to 10 people you have the most significant, long-lasting relationships with (people you would feel comfortable confiding anything to, relationships that you foresee lasting your whole life).”* As participants listed names, I added them to the network visualization as a “node”. These nominations were used to create the measure of “outdegree” (number of total nominations each participant made) (Wasserman and Faust 1994). While name generators are often conducted via survey methods and subsequently coded into quantitative data, as mentioned, I used participant driven, mixed methods network data collection (Tubaro et al. 2015).

Network Data Collection Phase Two: Name Interpreter

For each node (person nominated/named by the participant), I asked a series of follow up questions. These questions provided more information about the individuals in the network, including the origin of and type of relationship. Rather than providing answer choices, these questions were open-ended, so study members were able to ascribe their own relationship designations. At times they identified multiplex and cross listed ties (ex) “Best friend/Brother-in-law” etc.).

Network Data Collection Phase 3: Network Connectivity (Density)

In the final stage of network data collection, I asked participants which (if any) nodes were connected to one another. Then, I asked follow-up questions about the type of the connections between their nominated individuals. I used this data to calculate the network measure of density.

After all phases of network data collection, participants were provided with their network visualizations for member checking (Creswell and Miller 2000). Any necessary modifications were made to ensure accuracy. After confirming their network maps, network collection only participants were thanked for their time and received a link to access their \$10 gift card. Participants completing both study parts proceeded to the interview.

Interview Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with participants further explored the network data and the social contexts that surround friendships. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 105 minutes. Interview questions were adapted from a pilot study and discussed participants'

relationships in general, focusing on their ego network and the connections between people within it. Other topics included balancing friendships with other relationships, similarities and differences between friendships and other relationships, and the importance of different relationship types to the participant and society as a whole. With participant permission, interviews were audio recorded.

Data Analysis

Quantitative: Social Network Data Analysis

As previously described, ego network maps were created during the data collection via the Kumu software. An ego network is a type of network that centers around a single person and their relationships, rather than a larger social group (like an organization, family, or school) (Borgatti et al., 2018). The Kumu ego network for each participant was exported and manually entered into network edge lists in NodeXL (Norris 2020). The measures of network size (outdegree) and density were generated from this data. Density is calculated by taking the total number of present network ties divided by the total number of possible network ties (Wasserman and Faust 1994). Information about each tie (obtained during the network data collection) was also inputted into NodeXL. Of all the network ties (N=383), only n=2 listed types other than kin, romantic partner or friend (“mentor” “girlfriend’s mom”). For analysis, the types were condensed to the categories of “kin”, “friend”, “romantic partner”, “other” and “cross-listed ties” (ties that included 2 or more of the previous categorizations). These relationship types were used to create the network measures of number of (and proportion of) friends in the network, number of (and proportion of) kin in network and number of cross-listed ties in the network.

After the creation of these variables, network data was merged with demographic data in SPSS. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were performed on this data to explore potential trends in network features and differences based on participant characteristics, to identify potential network types. This analysis was conducted in SPSS and STATA. All numeric variables were correlated using Pearson's R correlations. Network measures were examined in relation to demographic variables using T-tests and ANOVAs (as appropriate) to contrast group means.

Qualitative

Interviews were transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were then uploaded to the qualitative analytic software program MaxQDA. The data from this study was part of a larger study, which investigated the significance of close friendship in adulthood and life events that impact friendship. The entire corpus of data was open-coded ("initial coding") (Charmaz 2014; Saldaña 2021). This process included structural, in-vivo, descriptive, emotional and value coding. From this point, recursive thematic analysis was performed. Codes were organized into larger substantive categories relevant to the research questions ("family networks", "romantic relationships", "friendship networks", "hierarchy", "societal perceptions"). Then, these categories were examined for reoccurring and significant patterns and further subdivided (i.e., "friendship networks" into "large group of friends" or "unconnected friends"). Individual themes are examined in relation to each other and within and across group cases (for example, "hierarchy" in relation to "family networks"). These themes are then categorized and woven together to interpret patterns, relationships, and overall meaning.

Integration

The network findings confirmed, enhanced and supplemented the interview data. In order to integrate the results, the qualitative themes were compared to the network metrics and participant demographics, as well as specific network cases. Social network analysis frameworks were incorporated with qualitative patterns when applicable (i.e., “friends and family know one another” into “kin network integration”). This process aided in the refinement of qualitative themes, leading to the themes presented in the results section. Overall quantitative findings are presented first. These results include descriptive statistics on social network measures and sample characteristics, as well as some bivariate analysis. After these results, qualitative themes are discussed and presented in conjunction with participant ego network diagrams.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the network characteristics and age distribution of the sample. The average size of the ego networks was around 9 individuals (the size measure represents the number of people the participant nominated using the name generator, which is termed “outdegree” in social network analysis). Although the original study design included a parameter asking participants to provide “up to 10” nominations, a subset of participants (n=9) expressed a desire to name more than ten individuals who met the criteria of the name generator. Since initial limitation was intended to minimize respondent burden, individuals who wished to name additional connections were permitted to do so. This led to more variability in network size, with some individuals

having fewer connections (minimum of 4) and others having more (maximum of 17), with a standard deviation of 2.31.

On average, study members' networks included six people they described as friends and three they described as family. The "Proportion of Friends" variable has a mean of 0.63 and a standard deviation of 0.22. In this sample, friends made up about 63% of the average participant's network connections. The maximum value of 1 indicates that some individuals had networks composed entirely of friends. The number of friends variable ranged from 2 to 17, with a standard deviation of 2.74. The average number of family members in the networks was lower than friends. The range of this variable was also smaller, (with a maximum of 7 family members and a minimum of 0). The "Proportion of Kin" variable had a mean of .30, and ranged from 0 to .71.

The variable network "Density" represents how connected the participants' networks were outside of the "ego" (focal person making network nominations) (Wasserman and Faust 1998). This variable ranged from 0 to 1, with a mean of 0.24 and a standard deviation of 0.22. This suggests that, on average, the participant networks were somewhat sparsely connected, with only 24% of possible connections being realized. Participants discussed the density of their networks in more depth in the qualitative portion of the study.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Quantitative Variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
Network Size (Outdegree)	43	8.95	2.31	4	17
Number of Friends	43	5.60	2.74	2	17
Number of Kin	43	2.70	1.83	0	7
Network Density	43	.24	.22	0	1
Proportion of Friends	43	.63	.22	.20	1
Proportion of Kin	43	.30	.19	0	0.71
Respondent Age	43	45.67	19.92	21	86

Correlations

Below are the results of Pearson's R correlations of all quantitative variables. Apart from anticipated correlations resulting from the equations used to derive the variables (ex) the strong correlation between proportion of kin and number of kin), only a few of these measures were significantly correlated (see Table 2). Age and outdegree were significantly positively correlated, with older participants nominating on average more individuals in their ego networks. Age and number of friends were also positively correlated. The correlation between outdegree and the number of friends was likely due to the fact that an increase in the number of friends inherently leads to an increase in network size. The proportion of kin and proportion of friends in the network were significantly negatively correlated, as were the proportion of friends in the network and number of kin nominated. Number of friends and number of kin were less strongly but still negatively correlated.

Table 2. Correlations of Network and Quantitative Measures

	Age	Density	Size	Number of Friends	Number of Kin	Prop. Friend	Prop. Kin	Prop. Cross-listed
Age								
Density	.00							
Size	.40*	-.16						
Number of Friends	.42*	-.23	.67*					
Number of Kin	-.12	.14	.20	-.56*				
Prop. Friend	.26	-.15	-.01	.72*	-.91*			
Prop. Kin	-.27	.17	-.02	-.70*	.95*	-.94*		
Prop. Cross-listed	-.12	-.08	-.25	-.21	-.06	-.04	-.04	

Bivariate Analysis (t-tests & ANOVAs)

Network measures were also examined by comparing means between groups using t-tests and ANOVAs in SPSS and STATA. The network variables were examined with several demographic characteristics relevant to the literature. The first of these was gender.

Unfortunately, the number of individuals who did not identify within binary categories (n=2) did not allow for separate statistical analysis of this group. Consequently, the t-tests compare only women and men. There were no significant differences between women and men on any of the network measures (see Table 3).

Table 3. Bivariate Network Variables Descriptives by Gender (Male/Female¹)

	Male (N=18)		Female (N=23)	
	Mean/ Proportion	S.D.	Mean/ Proportion	S.D.
Density	0.22	0.14	0.26	0.28
Size	8.94	1.86	9.09	2.66
Number of Friends	5.39	2.06	5.96	3.24
Number of Kin	2.83	1.95	2.57	1.83
Proportion of Kin	0.31	0.19	0.29	0.20
Proportion of Friends	0.61	0.21	0.65	0.23
Proportion of Cross-listed	0.18	0.12	0.18	0.10
Partnered (0,1)	0.61	0.50	0.52	0.59

Network variables were also analyzed by the partnership status of respondents (in a romantic partnership/not in a romantic partnership). The dissimilarities between these two groups were minimal (see Table 4). However, partnered respondents had substantially lower proportions of friends in their networks on average, 55% for partnered participants and 71% for unpartnered. Additionally, partnered individuals reported fewer kin in their networks than those who did not have a romantic partner (see Table 4).

¹ Participants who did not report male/female (n=2) were excluded from analysis

Table 4. Bivariate Descriptives: Network Variables by Partnership Status (Partnered/Not Partnered)

	Partnered (N=23)		Single (N=20)		Sig.
	Mean/ Proportion	S.D.	Mean/ Proportion	S.D.	
Density	0.24	0.18	0.25	0.27	
Size	9.43	1.31	8.40	3.03	
Number of Friends	6.05	3.17	5.22	2.32	
Number of Kin	2.15	1.50	3.17	2.31	*
Proportion of Kin	0.34	0.21	0.26	0.16	
Proportion of Friends	0.55	0.22	0.71	0.18	**
Proportion of Cross-listed	0.19	0.12	0.17	0.10	

Next, ANOVA's were used to determine whether there are significant differences in the networks of the three life stage groups (young adulthood, middle age, and older adulthood). After accounting for one outlier (who listed 17 friends and no other network members) there were no significant differences in networks of young, middle age and older adults (see Table 5).

Table 5. Bivariate Descriptives, Network Variables by Life Stage (Young, Middle, Older)

Variable	Young Adult (n= 20)				Middle Age (n=9)				Older Adult (n=14)				ANOVA
	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	Sig.
Density	0.22	0.18	0	0.67	0.38	0.28	0.11	1	0.19	0.23	0.02	0.82	
Outdegree	8.15	2.16	4	11	8.78	1.86	5	11	10.21	2.36	7	17	*
Number of friends	4.75	2.2	2	9	5.22	2.44	2	10	7.07	3.17	3	17	*
Number of kin	2.75	1.55	1	6	2.78	2.49	0	7	2.57	1.87	0	6	
Proportion of Kin	0.34	0.17	0.1	0.71	0.3	0.26	0	0.7	0.26	0.19	0	0.6	
Proportion of Friends	0.59	0.21	0.22	0.9	0.62	0.28	0.2	1	0.69	0.19	0.3	1	
Proportion Cross listed Ties	0.19	0.1	0.09	0.36	-	-	-	-	0.16	0.12	0.06	0.36	
Partner in Network (0,1)	0.47	0.51	0	1	0.67	0.5	0	1	0.5	0.52	0	1	

Note: Not all networks included cross-listed ties. For “Young Adults”, n=9 had cross-listed ties, n=0 of “Middle-Aged Adults” had cross-listed ties, and n=5 “Older Adults” had cross-listed ties.

Qualitative Results

In the following sections, I discuss qualitative themes related to network trends and the processes by which individuals prioritized and organized their network connections. The first set of qualitative themes are organized into sections based on the three primary types of network members participants talked about in their ego networks and the interviews (friends, romantic partners and family members). Within these three thematic sections, I present subthemes and discuss study member’s perceptions of each tie type. The next theme discusses how participants perceived their networks overall, and touches on all of the tie types. This section also includes subthemes, such as the interrogation of the concept of hierarchy, a relationship anarchy framework, and cross-listing of ties.

The qualitative data is presented in conjunction with the network data (Belotti 2008; Plano Clark and Ivankova 2015). Quotes from participants are used throughout the discussion of the themes to illustrate each concept. Ego-network diagrams and network

statistics are also presented within these discussions and supplement the themes found in qualitative data.

Tie Type: Friends

Of all the ego network nominations, the largest percentage were considered “friends” by participants. In the full sample of 43 individuals, 63% of the ties were with friends (241 out of 383 ties). The qualitative themes when talking about friends in the context of larger networks were: relative importance of friendship, density and connectedness of friends in the wider network, and the size of the network.

Relative Importance of Friendship (n=9)

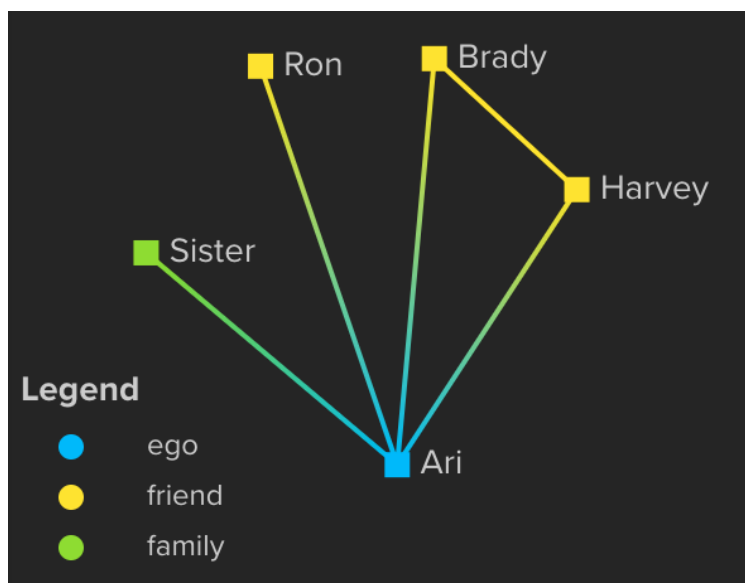
Some participants discussed hierarchies between relationship types, in terms of which they viewed as most important, as well as where they spent their time. Nine of the participants said that their friendships were the most important relationships in their networks. Selene, a young woman who had a small network consisting mostly of friends (80%) said her relationship with her best friend Brianna was the most significant relationship in her life: *I mean pretty much it's this connection, which is platonic love.*

Samuel did not directly discuss the members of his ego network, but talked more generally about his friendships in contrast with other relationship types: *Most important? I think friendships really. I've had a few like important girlfriends but... I guess maybe if I fall in love and get married my ideas will change, but as a still single almost 30-year-old man, my friendships are pretty important. They're the most longest-lasting, so yeah.* When asked if he anticipated this changing over time, Samuel discussed the greater cultural focus on romantic relationships, and said the following: *I don't know. I can't*

imagine any woman being more important than Dani [his best friend]! Davion, a 27-year-old participant, described how their friends were the most important people in their life. Their friendships were where they prioritized their resources, which conflicted prior research on prioritization of kin (Curry et al., 2013): *I guess friendship, for me- because there are many different kinds of friendships and value placed on friendships for different people- but for me, they're really like the most important connections in my life. They're what make me feel cared for and safe and loved. And they're really like the people in my life that I prioritize. In terms of quality time and where I spend my resources- physical, emotional or otherwise.* This was reflected in Davion's ego-network, as 67% of their connections were with friends.

Ari had a small network that included one newer friend, two older friendships and his younger sister (75% of his connections were based in friendship). He spoke about the relationships in relation to one another: *I mean, I think that my relationship that I have with [his two oldest friends], I value little bit more than I do with either [the newer friendship] or with my sister. There's just kind of that old and mature feeling to the relationship I have with these guys. And even though, like, I mean my sister's been here as long as my friendship with them-- I mean sure the relationship has been around for the same amount of time... Only more recently has it really sort of gotten into more friendship thing, on top of being my sister... It's definitely I guess a little more comfortable with these guys, then the other two.*

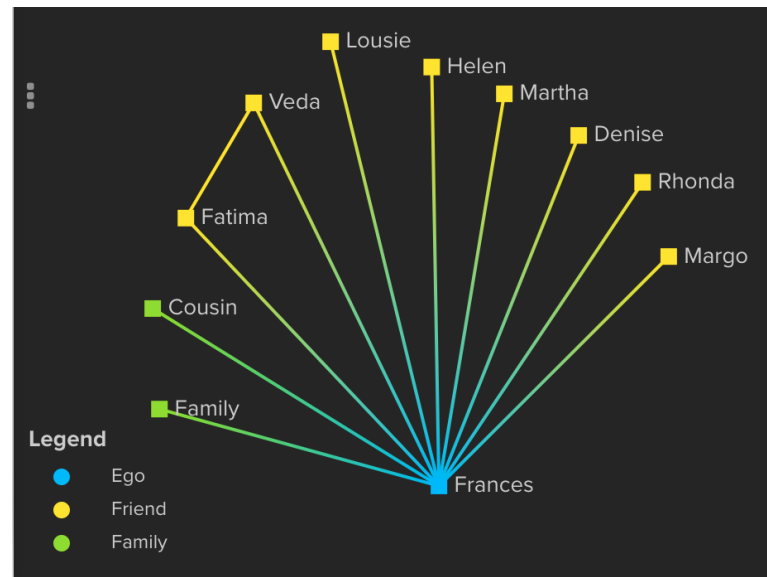
Figure 1. Ari's Ego Network Diagram



Young adults were not the only participants who denoted friendships as their most important relationships. Frances, in her seventies, discussed why friendships were the connections she relied on the most as she aged: *Friendship's I guess the most important, and then family comes next in because of my husband's conditions, I can't count on him for a lot of things... So, I can't...It's very hard for me to ask for help, sometimes I have to, and my friends come through! But you know, I have a lot of family members, some of whom I didn't even put on this list who I'm really close to and care about a lot and who mean a lot to me.* Although Frances was close with her family members, she explained that she did not share the same level of disclosure with them, so she did not list them as members of her ego network of her most significant relationships. Interestingly, she also did not include her husband in her network, perhaps because he was not able to provide the same level of support as her friends did. Frances' discussion demonstrates that as people age, reliance on one all-encompassing, needs fulfilling spousal connection may no

longer be possible (Finkel et al. 2014). As such, people need have to other sources of support when their partners' capabilities become limited in older age (Elder 1998). Like Davion, most of the ties Frances mentioned were with friends (73%).

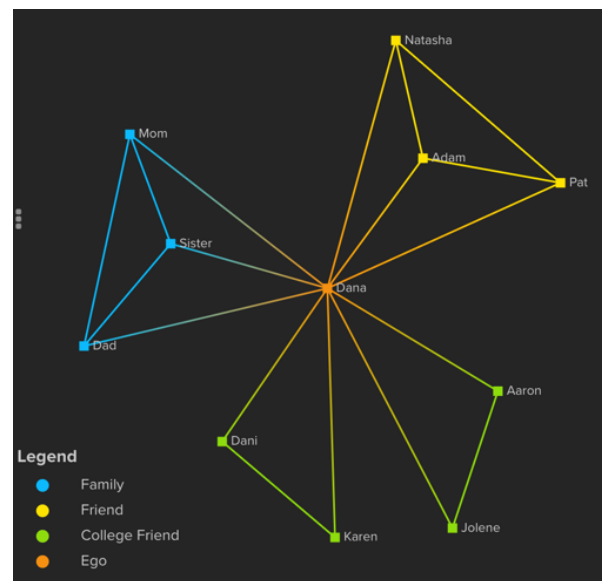
Figure 2. Frances' Ego Network Diagram



Dana, a woman in her forties, expressed that her family ties were very strong, but that she was much more engaged in her relationships with her friends on a family basis. She described this in the following quote: *I'm trying to think of like how... I guess... Because I feel obligated to say family [is most important]. I mean, it just feels inconsiderate to pick my friends over my family, but like... I speak to my parents once a week and it's very like 'What are you guys doing this weekend?' 'Oh.' and then I you know, I get the litany of who's sick and who died and who, whatever... And like my parents are on speakerphone together... Whereas I talk to Adam [her best friend] minimum of five days a week, often more than once a day.* She continued, referencing the friends in her ego network: *During the pandemic I talked to Kate like five days a*

week! I'll talk to Phil three times a week. With a lot more like 'Oh my God, this is what happened at work!' and my parents don't get those details. Not that that they couldn't but... I don't know It just seems like so much work to get through the whole thing, especially when dad's on one extension, and also on his computer, and also watching TV. And mom's you know doing something else... Whereas if I talked to Adam or Kate I could just be like 'Okay, so you remember how Kayla said this one thing? Here's the update on this! And you don't like you can't just start doing that [with family]. I mean I love them, obviously. And there, I have a very good relationship with my family, but if you were like who do you want to spend a Saturday afternoon with? They would not... I would not pick them over hanging out with my friends. While Dana expressed a certain amount of guilt with this revelation (perhaps indicative of feelings of familial obligation (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995), her friendships were the network members she prioritized most frequently. Dana's ego network composition reflected this, as 70% of her ties were friends and 30% were family members.

Figure 3. Dana's Ego Network Diagram



Friendship Network Features

In addition to discussing the composition of their ego networks (by type of relationship) and which relationships they found most significant, participants discussed features of friendship networks specifically. While ego networks could include any type of connection, participants often spoke about their friendship networks specifically (n=38). This included discussion of density and interconnectedness of participant's individual friends as well as the size of their friendship networks.

Density and Interconnectedness of Friend Networks

Participants had diverse perspectives on interconnectedness between their friends. Some appreciated and cultivated connections between their individual friends and different friend groups. For example, Samuel explained somewhat jokingly that “*my closest people are all--they all know each other, because I've made them know each other!*” To him, it was important that there were interconnections between networks of friends. This

was reflected in the density of Samuel's network (0.25), which was higher than approximately 63% of the sample (median density= 0.18). Adam expressed similar sentiments. He referenced he and his best friend's ego networks saying: *I would say that all of the people that aren't related--that are not family to each of us, those friends are all in some way connected to each other. They hang out together, and again I think part of it is Dana and I's friendship is you know, intense soulmate, best friends forever! So like, of course our circles overlapped through the years. There was a substantial period of time that if you were going to see one of us, you're going to see two of us, and so that meant that our friend groups of each's individual friends kind of intertwined.*

The close and intense friendship between Adam and Dana served as a catalyst for the intermingling of their friend groups. Over the years, the pair had spent a considerable amount of time together-- so if someone were to spend time with one of them, they would likely end up meeting both and their circle of friends by extension. The density of Adam's network was .27 (higher than about 69% of the sample) and Dana's was .18 (slightly above the median).

Eric also expressed that he wanted his friends to be connected to one another. To him, this was important so that he could make sure everyone felt included and prioritized: *Personally, I think it is very important [that his friends are connected]. I don't like picking! You know 'I want to hang out with these guys over these guys.' So, I'd just rather do something altogether, if at all possible. I don't want to pick favorites. I'd just rather get together as a group of you know, bigger group than just go do something with*

one friend over picking a different friend. His network density was .3, higher than about 75% of the sample.

Some participants aspired to have connected groups of friends, even if that didn't match the current state of their friend group. Charlie spoke to this idea, saying that to his regret, he *“was never successful in finding a really strong group of friends.”* He also spoke about times in the past when he had a smaller group of four connected friends. He described this group as enjoyable and significant: *John, Bob, Dane and I were a circle of friends and that was fun and meaningful in a lot of ways.* Though Brady did not problematize the fact that his friends were not connected to one another, he said ideally they would be: *More or less, I'm fine if my group of friends doesn't necessarily all know each other, but I think, I would like to [connect his friends], just because I feel like I've kind of seen a spark in these people, and we all get along in independent situations-- wouldn't we all get along together? And what a great big fun party that would be! Everybody let's move to the country, start a commune! Let's have a good time, you know! That's all I'm saying!* Brady believed that his friends would likely be compatible and there was a potential for them to enjoy one another as people—so much so that he humorously suggested starting a commune together. Ultimately, he wasn't concerned that his friends did not have close relationships, but he enjoyed the idea of creating collective bonds. Brady's ego network density was slightly above the median, at 0.19.

Dallas expressed similar ideas saying *“I don't think it's important for them to be connected, but when I've got a good friend, I like to introduce them to maybe another good friend, that they haven't met yet. And you know see what they have in common, see*

how they click hang out and normally it's a lot of fun, so I don't see why I shouldn't do that." From a network science perspective, Dallas acted as a network bridge between friends and enjoyed fostering new relationships between them. He had a similar network density to Brady, at 0.20 (in the 58th percentile of the sample).

Other participants expressed nonchalant and indifference towards friends being connected to one another. Ernest, for example, said that it was the qualities of individual friends that were important to him, rather than having a connected network. He said the following: *I mean yeah, I can see some importance [to having connected friends] but it's not the primary reason for the friendship. I think, just the trust and dependability is probably the primary thing. It's one thing to have a friend, it's another to have a true friend.* For Ernest, the wider social connectedness of the individual was not a required feature for a deep and "true" friendship.

For some, lack of connection between friends was simply an artifact of adult life-- they had made friends in different locations and through different stages, who had limited opportunities to connect. Ophelia referenced her ego network (density of 0.04), saying: *Well, they live in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 different places actually! Every one of them! Maryland, Austin, Pennsylvania, Miami, Cleveland... Julia is in New York and Edward lives in California. They don't live in the same place. They've met each other maybe at some point but...* Even though Bri and Selene were a very connected pair and had grown up together, they had minimal network overlap as adults, and both of their ego networks had a density of 0. Selene explained: *We spent five years apart, so we grew our own networks.*

Brady also described how his friendships were mainly a product of time and place: *The network connections are then based, pretty much after my childhood... Entirely on like when they occur. Like the fact that [listing connected friends names from his ego network] all are there-- it's like well, I met them all in college. And don't get me wrong, we managed to form, like a really pretty broad friend group there who like nicely stayed in contact with one another, but it was ultimately just like a product of time.*

This quote highlights the idea that the formation and composition of one's social network are influenced by external factors like timing and environment. Brady suggests that while personal compatibility contributes to forming friendships, the context in which these relationships develop can have a profound impact on their formation. Throughout the life course, there are many different periods of time in which friendships develop, and potentially limited opportunities to merge relationships developed in different times and places.

Like Brady, Vera and Regan spoke to the potential compatibility and intersections of their separate friend groups, but also how interconnectedness wasn't essential to the relationships: *Vera: I think a lot of my friends would be friends if they would just like hang out! I think a lot of times, you know, it's just sort of whoever got closer to each other, for whatever reason. There was always crossover [between her and Regan's networks] number one because she and I were always friends, so there was always that base level of crossover and then there were also other people that added on to that, but... Regan: We really gravitated towards different groups of people for the majority of our life. Leo echoed this, describing how he and his best friend had network crossover, but*

that ultimately, the relationships were important to him in their own right: *In this context it [connectedness] doesn't matter. Theodore and I also have a bunch of other friends together, that we all hang out together, but all these relationships are only important between me and them for me.* Regan seemed to summarize the feelings of many participants on the interconnectedness (or lack thereof of friendship networks): *I don't know, even though it like if you really look back on it, we really lived very separate lives, I always just felt connected to her.*

“Big Circle of Friends”

Although interconnectedness didn't seem to be a prerequisite for friendships, about a third of the participants (n=13) discussed having a large circle of interconnected friends. These groups were formed via proximity (time and place), shared activities and organizations, layering relationships and intentionally connecting friends. Though Adam believed that he and Dana's networks overlapped due to the strength of their bond proximity also played a role: *I'd also say that, for the most part, the people that are on our list are all regionally live close to each other. So, that makes everyone part of a small community. Everybody kind of knows everybody! I would say, all of them are connected to each other at least auxiliary friends, acquaintances with each other.*

Context was also important for the formation of Valeria's large network of connected friends. She discussed how the group began to form bonds: *We all went to the same church, let me see except for [one couple in her ego network]. But otherwise, all the rest of us went to the same church, we're all having babies at the same time, our kids were same ages growing up together. So, we'd see each other at school events, and*

school plays, and PTA meetings, church functions. The group members had shared a faith, been in the same life stage (raising young children), and regularly saw one another. Valeria's friend group can be related to seminal work on relationships and civic engagement (Putnam 1995). While Putnam's thesis is that civic, community and church involvement is disintegrating in American society, the genesis of this friend group was this kind of involvement. Future work could re-examine this theory by exploring friendship networks in adulthood today, nearly thirty years after Putnam's conclusions.

Although Kim and her friends had long-distance relationships, she described them as a "big circle of friends " that initially met in high school. With this proximity to one another (and the activity of cheerleading) they all became friends: "*Those three are all mutually good friends—they're friends with each other, so we were like a group.*" Additionally, the women had mostly married men from their high school, who were known by the group and also became friends: *We all knew each other, like they were high school sweethearts, Annie and her husband and Donna and her husband-- I met my husband in college, but our husbands have also known each other for 35 years and have all also become friends.* The group was able to stay connected as they transitioned to different life stages and locations because of this multilayered network integration. This was reflected in Kim's ego network, which had higher density than many other participants (.64, the 90th percentile).

Some participants were able to create connections between friends that otherwise would not have been in each other's proximity with concerted effort. Barbra maintained a large and thriving network and said about the study's nomination parameters: "*Ten isn't*

*enough!” While Barbra had an “inner circle” of friends she was very close to, she deeply valued time with a group, despite being less close to its members: *And they are not... each one I like, but I wouldn't be best friends with each of them. But together, it's a wonderful, wonderful thing.* Barbra discussed hosting events and starting social groups to connect her friends: *I like my friends to know each other! I just had my 70th birthday party in December and I had seven friends there. I used to have a yearly women's brunch and then we'd go around the room and talk about ourselves, or what we're doing or you know, whatever. A lot of my friends are social workers and therapists and some people ended up in the doing like supervision group with each other. So, they started connecting. They all know each other... They all refer each other to clients. Actually, I just did a Passover seder. You know people were there from all over. Everybody knows everyone!**

Barbra shared the joy she felt fostering relationships among her friends, citing examples such as her 70th birthday party, yearly women's brunch, and Passover seder. Through these gatherings, Barbra facilitated interactions and networking among her friends, leading to meaningful connections and even professional collaborations among the social workers and therapists within her social circle. Her efforts resulted in a tight-knit community where everyone knew and supported each other and enhanced the sense of connection and camaraderie among her friends.

Tie Type: Family

Family ties were the next most common tie reported in participant networks. Of all the ties in the participants' networks, 30% of them were considered to be “family” or kinship ties (116 out of 383 total ties). When discussing these types of ties, several themes were

identified: the relative importance of family, family deficit, strong family ties, connectedness and network integration of family and friends.

Relative Importance of Family (n=7)

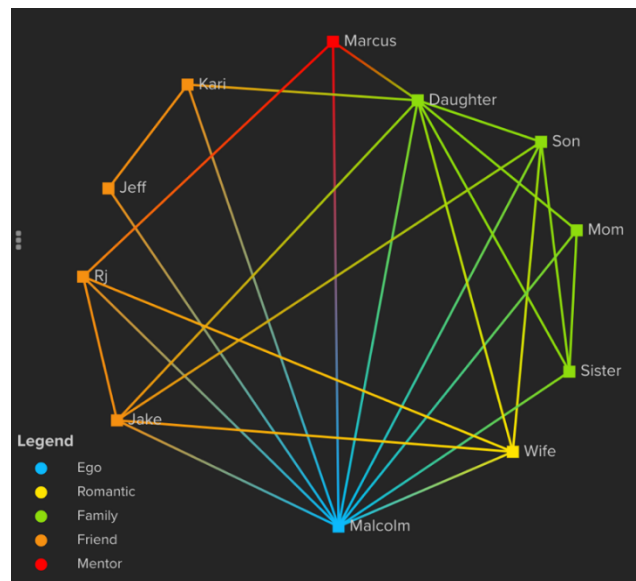
Seven participants said that family members were the most important relationships in their networks. While one participant said his mother was the most significant relationship to him, it was often participants' *own* role as parents and caretakers that seemed to drive this answer. Kim described how in her late middle age, caring for her family with her son and husband, as well as her father was a priority for her: *I would say, the family relationship is the most important. And I would put my husband first and my son. Although now that my dad lost his wife, my mom, I put my dad up there pretty high too because right now my dad needs nurturing and care.* This family prioritization mirrored literature on the sandwich generation (Bastawrous et al. 2014).

Malcolm, who had a strained relationship with his mother, felt it was doubly important for him to foster relationships with his two children: *Part of it is my past and I don't want to have a relationship that way. I've invested a lot of myself in them and I want to see them succeed. I think also it's the time where they are in their lives. They're right there during the daylight hours and it's exciting! The world is right open for them so it's exciting to be part of that.*

Malcolm felt responsible for his children's success, and also recognized that they were at pivotal time periods in their lives when they might need guidance. These factors made them his most prioritized relationships for the time being. These quotes were reflected in

Malcolm's network. He had equal proportions of friends and family members in the network, including ties to his children.

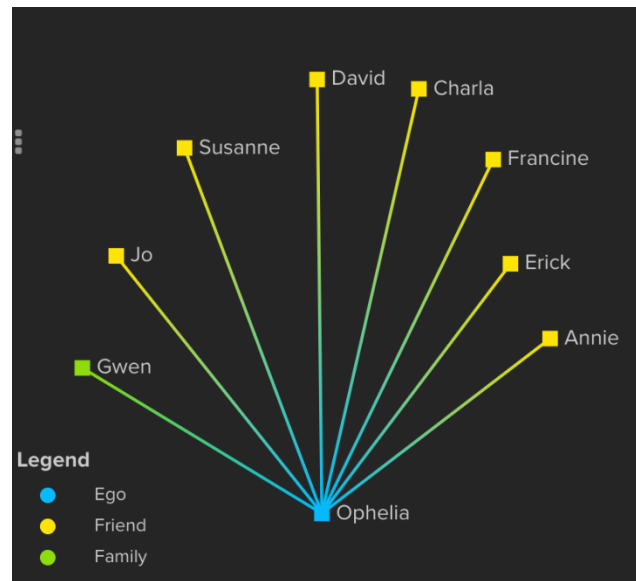
Figure 4. Malcolm's Ego Network Diagram



Family Deficit (n= 17)

In contrast to the participants who highly valued family relationships, a little more than a third of the interviewees discussed not having close kin relationships (n=17). These participants spoke about family members that passed away or were otherwise absent. Ophelia, for example, was in her seventies and many of her family members were deceased. She said in her present network *"I don't have any family."* Though she had lost family members, even at an early age she relied on friendship more than family: *I wasn't really close to my family, so I made my friends my family, even as a young girl.* The vast majority of Ophelia's network connections were friendships (88%).

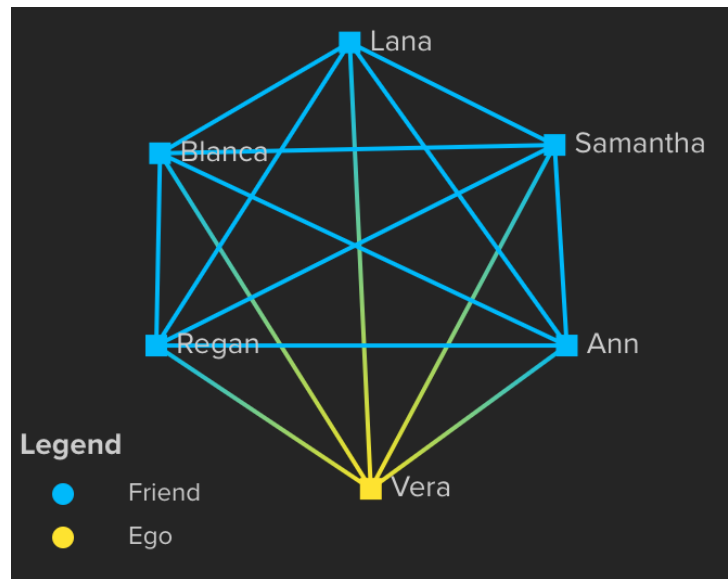
Figure 5. Ophelia's Ego Network Diagram



Like Ophelia, Vera had lost family members over her lifetime: *I guess I don't have much of a family. My parents have both been gone for a long time, and then I have an estranged brother and then, I have a nice brother...* Though Vera had an amicable relationship with one of her siblings, their contact was limited. This extended to the rest of her family: *We just are not people who spend time lot of time together or a lot of time communicating but... just like when we do communicate it's very meaningful... But we just don't really have like a family thing going. And I have nieces and they are-- one of them has kids... But we don't... Again, it's like more of like a Facebook kind of... We communicate on Facebook and sometimes we send some gifts in between. That's it. And I have my extended family, but since my parents have been gone for so long... Once they're gone it's like kind of it's a different kind of connection, and I just you know I just don't feel too close with any of those people.* Vera's family relationships were cordial, but they did not stay in touch often. They sent gifts for special occasions and sometimes

connected online, but the relationships were not integral (or connected) to her network of closest relationships. Vera's ego network consisted entirely of friends, and who were highly intertwined (with a density of 1).

Figure 6. Vera's Ego Network Diagram



Participants also spoke about conflict being a reason they did not maintain their family connections (Braithwaite et al. 2010). Charlie had strong ideological differences from his family of origin. His siblings' fundamentalist religious beliefs had very detrimental effects on their relationships with Charlie and led to the deterioration of their closeness as a family. Charlie took refuge in his other relationships, like his friendships. He said the following: *My friendship with Nelson in particular was creating a new family, so to speak. Nelson was someone who was my brother, you know, in a way that Benjamin [his biological brother] never, never has been. This sounds kind of cold, but those relationships [with his close friends] have been more important to me than those*

with my family of origin. They just were more meaningful in a lot of profound ways than my relationships with my immediate family.

Though his relationships with his immediate family were very tumultuous, Charlie was able to cultivate new bonds with his wife's family later in life. These relationships were meaningful to him, and he credited his relationships with his boyhood friends as precipitating factors in the formation of this new, positive network in adulthood: *Ken and Nelson were both, as I said earlier about Nelson, brothers to me in ways that that my biological brother has never been. And so, you know, I think that that kind of did change it you know! And perhaps enabled my movement into [his wife's] family after she and I were married.*

Lamar's family had recently begun a process of reconnecting and "building up" their relationships, endeavoring to mend the fractures caused by experiences in his youth and young adulthood. Like Charlie, he spoke about his family members in comparison to the significant friendships in his life. *Lamar: For most of us in our family, we're working on building these relationships up, for essentially the first time. There's a lot less expectation to be consistent.*

Interviewer: In the family relationships?

Lamar: Yes, I could go pretty deep into it, but the easiest, shortest answer is just family trauma and generational trauma... To grow up in a household where love and care wasn't really shown appropriately like as much as it was needed... The majority of people have now gone to therapy and now see the importance of being present and now it's been mostly a collective experience to try to foster the relationships.

Traumatic, generational history had weakened Lamar's family relationships. Even though they were on an upward trajectory, he still did not rely on them to the extent of his non-kin relationships. Lamar viewed friendships differently: *The thing with friendships you're not usually- like there isn't you know- a least in my experience, you're not usually starting from a place of forgiveness and trying to build something on top of that.*

In contrast to family relationships, Lamar's friendships were chosen connections built on mostly positive shared experiences and mutual expectations of dependability.

These study members' experiences map on well to the "family deficit" comparison model, identified in typologies of chosen kin (Braithwaite et al. 2010). The concept of "family deficit" arises from a recognition of the deficiencies or gaps in one's biological family, leading individuals to form close bonds with non-relatives who fulfill the roles and provide the support typically associated with family.

Strong Family Networks (n=15)

Participants had varying perspectives on the importance of family connections. As demonstrated in the previous sections, some placed family connection as their top priority, while others had minimal contact with relatives. There were also many times in the interviews where participants acknowledged the strength and value of their relationships in both spheres, recognizing the positive impact of maintaining strong ties with both friends and family (n=15) (Adams and Blieszner 1995).

Eric, for example, had a thriving group of friends, as well as family he saw regularly. He lightheartedly spoke about the differences between the two: *You can pick your friends, you don't pick your family! Luckily, my family is pretty awesome and pretty*

close knit. Zoe was an only child who did not have a large extended family, so her parents played a very central role in her life: *I'm very, very close to my parents. We are very close friends and always have been. There was not a part of my life where I didn't like them, where we didn't talk.* Vincent, who said his friendships “saved his life” also had very significant family relationships: *Our relationship with the family is a strong one! The family of us, we really together and connected. And it's always gonna be like that.* Vincent was sure of the enduring nature of his family connections, and conveyed the loyalty, support, and a shared commitment among them. While previous literature suggests that as people age, their networks become smaller and more selective to consolidate expended effort and resources (Wrzus et al. 2013), many participants expressed that they had little trouble balancing the demands of their family and friendship networks. In fact, positive relationships with both friends and family often simply resulted in the integration of these networks and ties, which many participants spoke about (n=23).

Density and Interconnectedness of Family Relationships (n=23)

Most members of this study reported very longstanding and established network connections. In their view, this contributed to the blending of friends and family. Adam described he and Dana's relationship in the following way: *I think we have gotten to the point now in our friendship to where the friendship has kind of morphed into you know, yes, you're not related by blood, but it's a family connection. So, now it's also like spilled over into family events. We hang out or do stuff with each other's families.*

Over time, their friendship evolved into a relationship akin to family (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). While acknowledging that they were not related by blood, the bond between them had grown to the extent that they participated in each other's family events and spent time together with their respective families.

Norah described how her friends were integrated into her family and vice versa: *Because it's so long lasting now, I know I said friendships are kind of separate from the family, while our friendships are focused on each other, that relationship is primarily between [her best friend] and me... by this time, I know her children, she knows my children. I mean, it's kind of a friendship that's evolved into family! I have my family every Sunday for Sunday brunch, but she has a standing invitation there. She's rolled into the family as well, so, you know that line probably blurs over time.* This friendship was so close and so strongly integrated with her family, that Norah typified it as “blurring the line” between platonic friend and kin (Policarpo 2015).

While this specific relationship had “evolved into family”, Norah spoke about how she and other friends supported one another’s families generally, even if they didn’t conceptualize each other as family members: *They are connected with my family, you know. A big part of these friendships is me catching up with what their children are doing, how are they? Do they still have their parents? How are your parents? If they come see me, they want to be sure they stop and see my mother too. You know, these are wonderful, caring women.* The women continually showed interest in each other's families, checking in often, visiting, and demonstrating their affection and consideration for one another. Like Norah and her friends, Valeria spoke about how she and her

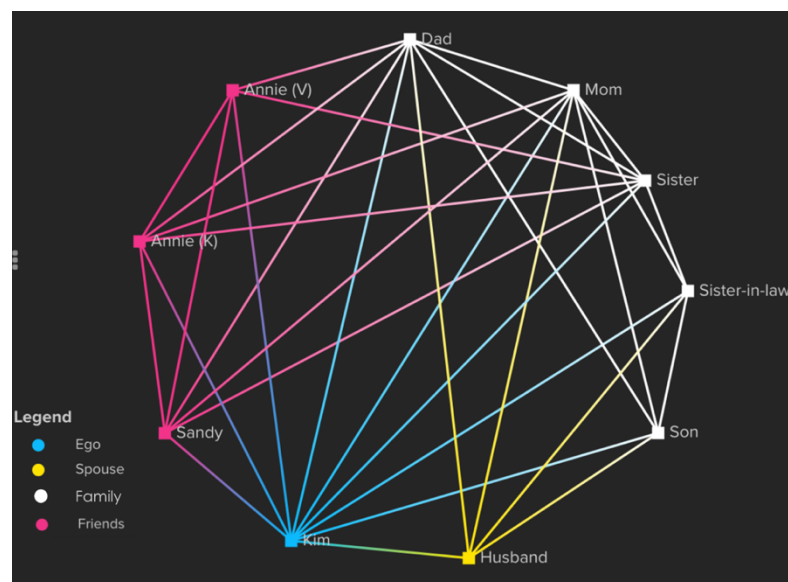
husband were involved with their friends' families: *All of our parents are aging, you know. My parents are both passed away, Sandy's parents are both passed away. Renee and Bass still have both of their parents, but they're failing, you know they're aging. They're making those decisions about getting them in assisted living and stuff like that, so I think now that's a lot more of our-- it's not the **only** focus of our conversation, but you know, we're asking how they're doing. We're asking how they're feeling, stuff like that, just because we know both sets of parents are in their eighties and anything could happen.* Norah and Valeria's descriptions convey a sense of warmth, concern, mutual support, and detail genuine bonds that extend beyond individual relationships to include the broader network of family connections.

This extension of bonds provided added support as participants managed the challenging responsibilities and time constraints of adulthood. They discussed how instead of dividing their time and attention between the two types of relationships, integrating the spheres of friendship and family often resolved any issues in balancing the two. When Malcolm had children, he initially struggled with finding time to see friends and said he *"had to be a little more creative."* However, as his friends started having children, they found ways to fuse family time and socializing with friends: *"Now all the sudden, we're all in the same boat! There was a period there from when the kids were like 0 to about 12, where now 'It's Todd's son's birthday party. We're all going to go spend the night at Todd's tonight! The birthday party is going to be great!' Easy! So, things like that would happen. That was really fun once we all had kids in a similar age, you know. That was a cool change that happened that was family inspired."* Rather than leading to

declines in closeness, the process of growing their families brought about positive changes in their friendships, fostering a sense of unity and creating new opportunities for shared memories (Doherty 2021).

Though Kim expressed the belief that “family comes first” (Neyer et al. 2011) and had obligations to both her family of procreation and her family of origin (Bastawrous et al. 2014; Miller 1980), this sentiment did not create conflict with her group of friends. They were deeply intermixed with her kin networks and had been since childhood: *They’re all I would say connected to my family. They used to come stay at my house, when I was a kid, so they got to know my mom and dad and my sister and then [her sister’s wife] has been part of my sister’s life, since they were 16, so she also became friends with [her three friends] and we’ve all hung out and done things together.* This integration was evident in her ego network.

Figure 7. Kim’s Ego Network Diagram



Although Kim was one of the several participants who placed the highest value on relationships other than friendship (Crocetti and Meeus 2014), her network also demonstrates how integrating networks can allow for both relationship types to be successful (Jamieson et al. 2006). Vincent echoed this, saying that since both types of relationships were significant to him, creating connections between them was meaningful as well. Even if the members of his network hadn't directly interacted, they were familiar with each other due to Vincent's frequent discussions about the people he cared about: *I think it's important. Because me and my family, we've got a good rapport. I'm always talking about the people that's in my life... I'll have them meet them, and it's 'You always talk about this person!' That's really important. That's really very important.*

Likewise, Ellen found integration of friends and family to make her friendships more meaningful: *You just have a different connection, you know? I mean...I just think... I don't know. I don't know how to describe it, but it but it's you know them differently? Because you know all their family? Or all their... you know their stuff? Those family connections, or whatever it might be. I've been friends with [one friend] for, I don't know how many years, 35 maybe. And I was thinking about, for me it's really cool when I know, their parents too, or their kids now! Like, he's a grandpa now! And I know his mom! I had Christmas dinner with them a couple years ago and it was four generations, and I just felt... It was just so cool to me, I mean I just-- it's something about that, of like knowing their whole thing!*

Interacting with friends' family provided richer context and history. As a result, Ellen felt she gained a deeper understanding of her friends, which fortified their

connection. Ellen found it particularly poignant to witness the passing of time and the growth of her friend's family as they aged. She reminisced about especially significant moments (Blumer 1969), like a Christmas dinner where four generations of her friend's family were present. She felt wonder and fulfillment at being able to be such a consistent part of her friend's life journey and get to share in their family connections.

Tie Type: Romantic Partners

The last commonly reported tie was romantic partnership. While numerically less prevalent (6% and 23 out of 383 ties—owing to the fact that generally participants only spoke about one romantic partner), these relationships were discussed as very significant parts of their networks. Because the network data collection focused on the number of ties and type of tie, it was difficult to assess the impact of these relationships using only quantitative data (i.e., the portion or number of romantic ties does not hold the same potential weight as the same measures with friends and family members, since this value was always 0 or 1). As such, the qualitative data can illuminate the ways participants conceived of these relationships as important and provide valuable insights not brought by the quantitative data. The qualitative themes relating to romantic relationships were the relative importance of romantic relationships (with subthemes of practicality and gendered patterns), the interconnectedness of romantic relationships, and friendships in relation to romantic relationships.

Relative Importance of Romantic Relationships (n=8)

Practicality (n=5)

Among those who identified their romantic relationships (n=8) as the most important to them, there was a common theme of practicality and proximity. Christopher said that he gave primacy to his connection with his wife. This was due in part to their emotional closeness, but also more pragmatic reasons: *Just practical things like homeownership, marriage, getting kids kind of redirects your priorities. Simply as a matter of need or necessity if nothing else.* While most participants did not conceive of the practical aspects of cohabitating relationships as taking away from other relationships in the way Christopher did (Cronin 2015), they did express their romantic relationships involved more proximity than other connections in their network. Brady spoke to this: *I would be being disingenuous if I didn't say that my relationship with [his partner] is different from my relationship with anybody else in my network. This is the person with whom I have bought a house and own multiple animals. It's like a daily and it's... That's just it... I think it is to a certain degree, regularity. Because Ari and Harvey aren't far from me, by any stretch of the imagination, but they don't sleep next to me in my bed either. Or if they are, something has gone horribly awry [laughs].*

These two quotes shed light on how financial commitments and the regularity with which they interacted with their partners made the relationships unique in their network (Coontz 2006). One participant did not say that her relationship with her partner was most important, but she did speak to her husband's practical role in her life: *Errol is the person who's steady in my life, really steady. And provides the safety and support. But*

I couldn't... definitely couldn't live just with Errol! I mean my friendships and my family are really important because it rounds it out! But, it would be really hard to live without Errol. We have that partnership, so it's really hard. Barbra described her husband's role as a consistency and stability, coinciding with Christopher and Brady's descriptions of how their romantic connections were intertwined with the routine aspects of their lives. Even as she spoke about her other connections, she acknowledged that life without this support would be very difficult.

Clarence reiterated the importance of cohabitation and reliance on his spouse: *I would say my spouse's [relationship] is the most important, simply because we live together, we depend on each other, and I found that the older we get, the more dependable we are on each other. So, I gotta say the spouse... I would say the last probably 15 years or so it's changed, and it's become more-- we're more dependent on each other. And the reason that's probably that way is that once the kids moved away from the house and we had an empty nest, they weren't there to maybe rely on a little bit.* Like Barbra, Clarence and his wife had a mutual dependence on one another, based on their proximity and the level of instrumental support they both provided. He also said their reliance on one another had grown, due to the more isolated nature of their dynamics as their children aged and moved out.

Gender (n=9)

There were also some gendered patterns related to the relative importance of romantic partners. While previous research has suggested that women tend to prioritize their romantic partners above their other relationships (Cronin 2015), the participants in this

study who said their spouse was most important were mostly men (n=5). Additionally, some male-identifying participants suggested that they felt societal pressure to uphold a romantic connection as their most important, even if they didn't feel this way personally (n=4).

Clyde viewed the connection he had with his wife as innately separate from any other in his network: *Your wife would be different. I mean, a soulmate that kind of thing. So that's different!* Clyde spoke about the bond he shared with his wife as incomparable to others, suggesting that it surpassed the significance of his other network connections by default. As mentioned earlier, Barbra struggled to identify a specific connection type as most important. However, she discussed her husband's views in a way that mirrored Clyde's opinions. She was confident that her husband would conceptualize her as his most important connection: *If you asked my husband, he'd say me over all his friends. Yeah, over all his friends.* While Barbra did not speak about why specifically her husband would prioritize their romantic relationship above all the rest, she perceived gender differences in her own social circles (O'Connor 1992): *"I would think that most of my friends, my female friends, would consider friendship up there very high. And I don't know about all of society.... But it's a very different situation with men. It's really different for men."*

While Cheryl did not offer up reasonings for these perceptions, other participants related them to their value and belief systems (Blumer 1969). One participant, a devout Christian man in his fifties, Diego, was unmarried, but held the general belief that there was a hierarchy between relationship types: *"If people choose to be married, then that's*

probably the ultimate relationship as far as what people perceive responsibility to each other is, to your wife or your husband. Then your family second. If I were to be married and I think it would be the marriage. [as the most important]” He also spoke about his own relationships: *I think my friendships are really important, especially now that I’m older. But I do think if I’m married--like if I marry [his current girlfriend], it’s my responsibility to her-- not just the way I feel, but also, I just feel before God, she and I share something that’s... that no one else is there.* In accordance with his religious principles, Diego felt a moral imperative to prioritize his romantic relationship above all others.

Based on responses from other men in the study who felt pressure to prioritize romantic relationships, this belief did not stem solely from religion (DePaulo 2008). Leo spoke about what he perceived to be normative expectations for men’s networks: *He’s supposed to be married; he’s supposed to be closest to who he’s married to. Maybe you have, like a best friend that you’re close with in other ways, but I guess ultimately, you’re supposed to confide everything to your person you’re married to.* Though Leo included a romantic partner in his network, he did not share in these beliefs and didn’t believe any relationship was most important. Samuel, who said his friendships were most important to him, felt that this conflicted with societal norms. He also described this: *Will that change over time? [friendship being the most important] I guess there’s no way to know, now but if the media is telling me anything, yes! Romance is the most important thing in the American culture, so of course I’ll fall in love one day and it’ll be my everything.* Samuel discerned the tendency of media and society at large to emphasize and promote

romantic narratives. He had not witnessed this same attention given to other connections. Brady and Harvey discussed the same thing: *I mean just, given the cultural messaging that we receive in a lot of ways and... I don't mean to like going to lead to some grand conspiracy, you know, I don't think anybody's trying to diminish or put down friendships, but like there's sort of like this... Maybe they're just so unassuming and comfortable they almost don't feel worth mentioning? A movie isn't just like "Look at this person with all these healthy relationships with their friends.*

Eric and Dallas considered their friendships to be the most important relationships in their networks. However, they also acknowledged that, from a societal perspective, this viewpoint might not be held by many (Finkel et al. 2014). They speculated on the most significant type of relationship for the majority of individuals: *Eric: I mean, I would say the romantic one's, probably, you know me biggest one. You don't want to upset the ball and chain!*

*Dallas: You know, I was 30 before I was in like real my first real romantic relationship. I'd be like getting together the family, and then they would always ask 'Oh, don't I have a girlfriend?' And stuff like that. Like there's that pressure, and then same way with different work people and stuff like that, too, so... And it's just like 'Oh, he can't bring Eric to the family function **all** the time, I mean...*

Eric: They'll start asking questions! Like, one of my aunts asked if I wanted to bring my "roommate."

Dallas: But they would construe that as a different way.

These men felt pressure from family members and coworkers to enter into romantic partnerships. While Dallas did have a romantic partner, this was a more recent relationship. Prior to this, the men expressed that family members may have speculated about their sexualities and believed there was a romantic connection between the two of them. This has been found in previous studies of men's friendships (Bank and Hansford 2005; Tognoli 1980). Even though neither man identified as part of the LGBTQ community (and presumably those close to them knew this), this discussion implies that it may have been more normative for them to be in a romantic relationship, rather than close male friends into their thirties (Hess 1979).

In addition to speaking about societal influences to have and prioritize a romantic partner, men in the sample spoke about how they didn't have models of networks that were not centered around a romantic relationship (Bank and Hansford 2005). Lamar said that although his views had changed, he once believed that a romantic partner's role could be all encompassing: *I used to think that... Maybe only one good friendship was needed and the rest of my relationship needs could have been met with a significant other. And in hindsight, that definitely was not the answer...* He believed this view originated in the relationship structures he saw from a young age: *Just the way I grew up and how relationships were taught to me... For instance, my mom always told me that she never had any friends in high school, and she had like two friends in college. And I thought that was normal. It didn't really seem like my dad had too many friends either. And I thought that was, like, normal. But then, after that key turning point in 2017 and after going to therapy and I really spending time to understand the importance of a*

support network and friendships. I started to become more intentional about having the chance to care for them.

Lamar described growing up with the belief that having few friends was normal, as influenced by his parents' experiences. However, in 2017, Lamar went through many life changes, including losing his job and the place he lived. This prompted Lamar to reevaluate his perspective and priorities. As a result, he began attending therapy and invested time in understanding the importance of having a support network for his wellbeing. Through therapy and self-reflection, Lamar recognized the value of fostering a wider circle of connections. Consequently, he committed himself to nurturing his friendships, making conscious efforts to be more intentional and actively cultivate them (Bank and Hansford 2005; Berger and Luckmann 1966).

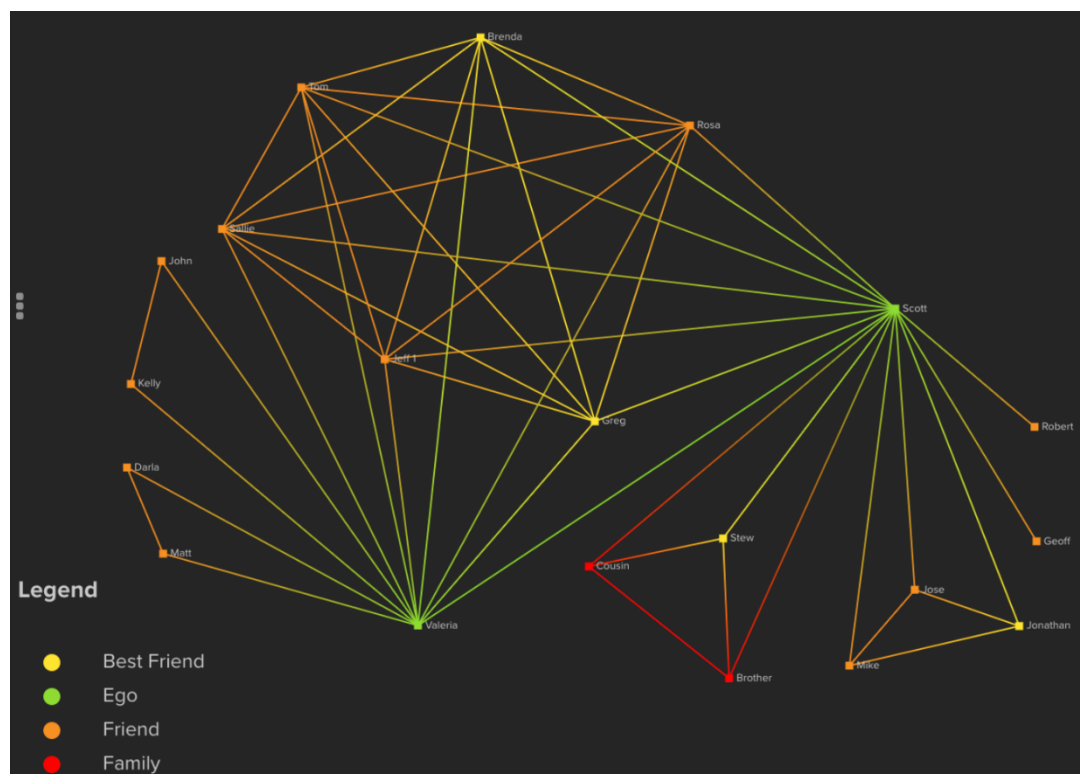
Density and Interconnectedness of Romantic Partners

As with kin relationships, participants spoke about how integrated their romantic partners were into their wider networks (n=11). While participants generally conceived the intertwining of their friends and family as a positive feature of their network that made it more cohesive, this was not always the case with romantic partners (Doherty 2021). Quantitatively, participants who had their romantic partners in their network reported fewer ties with friends, as well as family members. Qualitatively, participants spoke about the involvement of their romantic partners in their networks as both positive and negative.

People who viewed this integration favorably spoke about their romantic relationships as an opportunity to establish networks and develop new friendships

(Kalmijn 2003). Scott discussed how he gained a group of friends when he married his wife: *Her network of friends became my network of friends too! I'm very good friends with the same group of people she is, and I inherited that when I got married to her. They're just super people that I really enjoy being around, and if you ever need anything I mean you call them they'll be there in 10 minutes.* Scott's wife was already part of a group of close friends, and this friendship was readily extended to him when they got married. He expressed gratitude for the bonds, describing how he not only gained the support of his wife through marriage, but also that of the many friends who he “inherited” in the process. The linkage of their networks was clearly visible when looking at their ego network diagrams.

Figure 8. Valeria and Scott's Joint Network Diagrams



While the relationships gained through romantic partners could be rewarding, they were at times less stable than independent friendships. When transitions in romantic relationships (like divorce or breakups) occurred, it could cause strain in the relationships of closely intertwined friends and romantic partners (Kalmijn 2003). Though Scott had the positive experience of meeting new friends through marriage, he also discussed how a divorce earlier in his life affected his relationships: *I went through a divorce, and you go from being friends with married couples-- so now you're single. It is... I noticed it's an uneasy feeling and it kind of changes things. You're not doing things with the couples, because you're single you know. So, I think a divorce plays a factor in your friendships. I think divorce changes your situation.* After his divorce from his first wife, Scott felt alienated from his group of friends. He explained that prior to splitting up, the pair was predominantly friends with couples. Their divorce altered his social dynamics, weakening his connection to the wider group. Being single in a group of married couples was an uncomfortable experience for him, which he believed changed his interactions with friends and his social location.

Kim relayed a similar experience from the perspective of someone who was friends with both members of a couple who divorced. Kim was part of a friend group that had all known each other (and each other's significant others) for decades and remained in contact, except for this time period: *There was a period of time where Brandi got divorced, and she was married to a classmate of ours. When I said I hadn't seen her for 10 years, there was kind of a reason for that, and that was she did not want to see us anymore. She got divorced and it was almost like she wanted to divorce us as well. She*

wanted to move on with her life and not look back. In her friends' perspective, Brandi chose to isolate herself from long-standing friends. However, it seems likely this was because of the broader network structure-- a closely-knit friend group that involved her ex-husband.

Kim had been one of the few friends to offer the olive branch to Brandi. The friend group regularly took trips to visit one another, which had been a source of further tension between Brandi and the group: *She didn't come. Then two years later, we said "Okay, let's go down and visit Brandi!" Well, the girls that went to Albuquerque were not comfortable with that, because they really felt Brandi blew us off. When it came time to make plans to go, only Rosa and I went to see Brandi. The other four girls that we were friends with refused to go. They kind of have hurt feelings over her not being friends with us.* The women who decided to visit Brandi ended up with a much greater understanding of the situation, and the reasons behind Brandi's separation from not just her husband, but the wider group.

She told us her first husband Brad, who was our classmate-- she said 'I didn't know how you guys would take us getting divorced. We'd been together since we were sophomores. I found out he had multiple affairs.' She kind of went into her marriage history and unloaded, or trusted us, with all this information about her marriage, and really got into that side of things. Where before, she had never said a word about how her marriage was in trouble. She never talked about that. So, she really did open up and share a lot about her troubled marriage, and why she didn't want to see us anymore, and so, yes, so she did address it [her leaving the friend group].

Brandi had been hesitant to be honest about the reasons for her divorce, since her husband also had an extensive history with their friend group. Instead of potentially maligning him and causing further group tensions, Brandi distanced herself for a period of nearly a decade.

Luckily, after sharing this with her friends and finding a new relationship, she was able to rebuild her friendships. Kim described their current dynamic: *I feel like after the trip my relationship with Brandi has greatly improved. Now that she's an empty nester and she has moved on-- has a new man in her life. I feel like she's comfortable to get back to being friends with us again!*

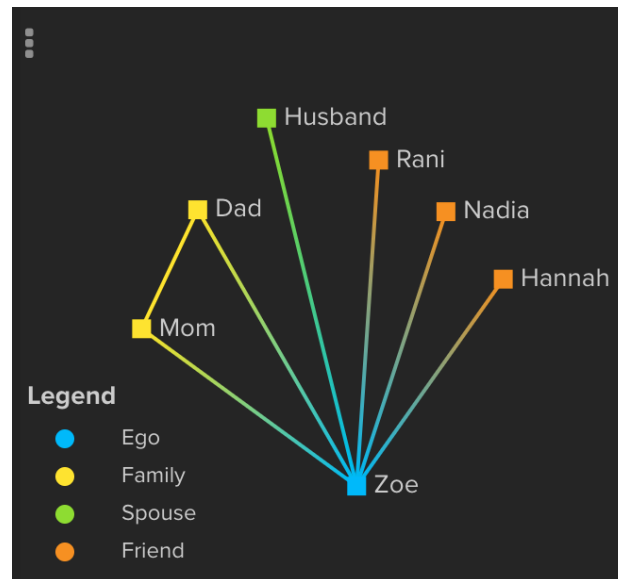
From the data in this study, it doesn't appear that divorce or endings of romantic relationships *necessarily* lead to friendship strain-- this seems to be highly dependent on network structure (Doherty 2021; Wruz et al. 2016). Kim, for example, spoke about another friend who went through a divorce at a similar time period that Brandi did: *Well, I guess Wendy got divorced too. But she was married to a guy none of us liked, so [laughs] it was... You know... and she's been remarried and happy ever since! So, she's been through a divorce, and it was, I would say, we were all there for her when she got divorced. We were all there for her and then she's been remarried and has been happy-- we have all rallied behind her during that.* The very different reaction to this friend's divorce ("rallying behind" rather than a 10-year period of exclusion and hurt feelings) appeared dependent on broader network context.

Finally, there were also some participants who spoke about how their romantic partners were not strongly connected with their friends. This did not stem from conflict or

animosity. Instead, the participants and their partners developed intentionally separate relationships to fulfill their individual needs. Zoe spoke about this: *My partner, he's like friends with all these people because they're my friends [referencing her ego network]. He likes them all, but he's not friends with them in his own right. I think they all really like each other but... [Her husband] knows how important it is for me to have people who aren't him to go to. He knows how important it is for me to have this, this group of people who I can trust who aren't him, who I can go to without him. He does not want to impinge on my people. I think it's a choice for him to be like, 'These are Zoe's people and I love them, but they're for her!' So that when he's not cutting it-- because he is my best friend in a lot of ways, but he's also my spouse, and my roommate, you know? I think it's not healthy to expect romantic relationship to check every box. He understands, like those are people who check other boxes, so they're not gonna have that relationship.*

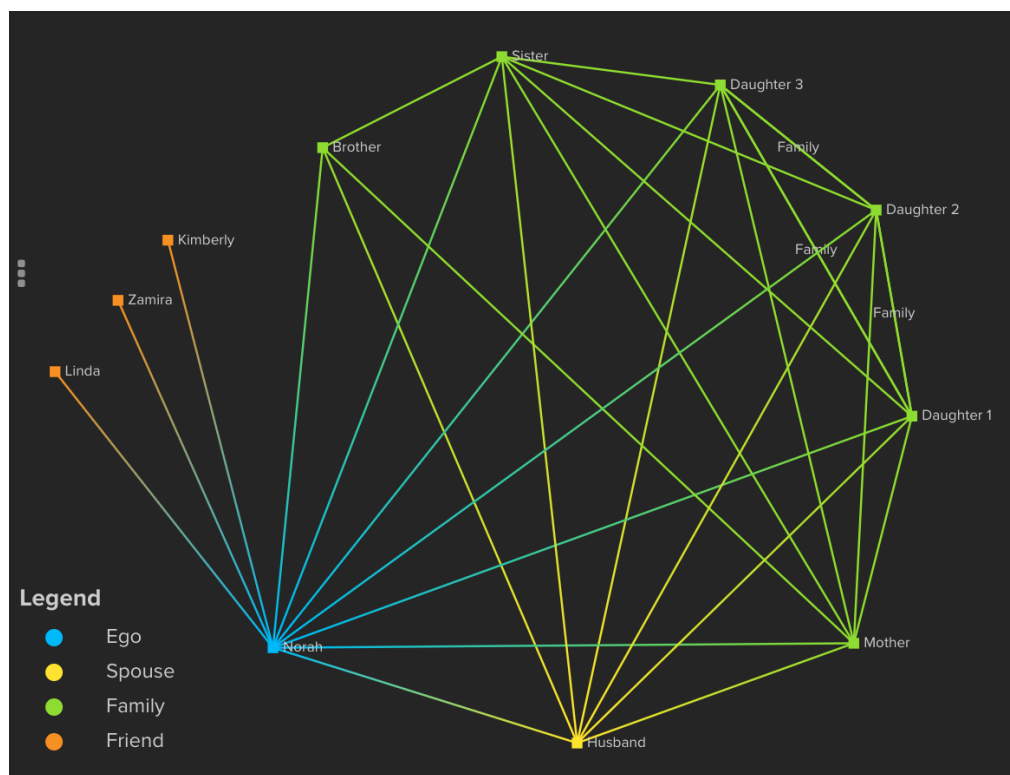
For Zoe and her husband, maintaining boundaries between their individual friends was a way to ensure that they each had sources of support that were not dependent on one another. Though her marriage occupied a huge role in Zoe's life, she and her husband both recognized the value of maintaining their own personal connections and prioritized their individual emotional and social well-being by doing so. Zoe's ego network reflected this, as her nominated connections (except for her parents, who were married) were all independent from one another.

Figure 9. Zoe's Ego Network Diagram



Norah, who was in her sixties and much older than Zoe, also described how her spouse was supportive of her creating her own network of friends: *Bernard [her husband] is always happy for me to go and do whatever I want with my friends! You know, I'm aware of other women... I know of women who are married to men who... I don't like the word 'let' in terms of don't 'let' their wives... But sometimes make you pay in other ways. Bernard has always been very supportive of my friendships and the time I spend on my friends.*

Figure 10. Norah's Ego Network Diagram



Norah alluded to how some spouses did not extend their partners the freedom to spend time with friends and potentially imposed consequences for doing so (Cronin 2015). In contrast, Norah highlighted her appreciation for her own husband, who encouraged and supported her friendships. She believed this contributed to their long-lasting, successful marriage. Overall, Norah had a highly connected network (with a density far above the median at 0.53). However, her husband and her friends were not connected. These seemed to be relationships, as Zoe described, that were simply “for her.” Both women explained that their partners maintained a supportive stance of their friends from a distance. This was visible in their networks. Though of different generations, each couple recognized that they needed personal connections outside of their romantic relationships and respected each other’s desire for independence in

building and maintaining those connections (Finkel et al. 2014; Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006).

Network Perceptions

The following section discusses how the participants perceived their networks overall. Themes here include relationship anarchy (n=25), cross listing of ties (n=39), and complementary relationships (n=11).

Relationship Anarchy (n=25)

Scrutinizing the ways participants reflected on their networks and relationship philosophies resulted in unexpected parallels to the principles of “relationship anarchy” (Nordgren 2006). Relationship anarchy has primarily been studied in the context of queer and feminist research (De las Heras Gómez 2019), as well as research related to polyamory and nonmonogamy (Scoats & Campbell 2022). However, unlike polyamorous and non-monogamous relationship philosophies, “relationship anarchy” is not a specific approach to romantic relationships. Instead, it is a non-traditional approach to *all* interpersonal relationships that challenges societal norms and hierarchies by promoting individual autonomy, consent, and egalitarianism. This framework encourages individuals to define and navigate their connections based on personal needs and desires, rather than conforming to predefined relationship structures. The philosophy aims to create relationships based on trust, emotional connection, and shared values, while rejecting societal expectations and labels associated with traditional relationships (Nordgren 2006). Although none of the participants spoke about familiarity with this

framework, many of their experiences and perspectives inadvertently aligned with its core principles (n=25).

The first of these principles was the idea that “Love is abundant and every relationship is unique” (Nordgren 2006:3). Nordgren further describes this tenant saying: “Relationship anarchy questions the idea that love is a limited resource that can only be real if restricted to a couple. You have capacity to love more than one person, and one relationship and the love felt for that person does not diminish love felt for another. Don’t rank and compare people and relationships — cherish the individual and your connection to them. One person in your life does not need to be named primary for the relationship to be real. Each relationship is independent, and a relationship between autonomous individuals.” (Nordgren 2006:3)

Harvey spoke about relationships in a way that directly mirrored the first principle of relationship anarchy: *The ones that we kind of spoken about tonight, and ones I mentioned [in his ego network] they're all equally valuable in their own way, but I also said they're strikingly different. And so, it's hard to kind of rank any sort of value amongst people that you care about and find meaningful in your life. So, I would say they're all greatly meaningful and to try to distinguish between them with the really difficult.* In his view, it was futile to draw hierarchal distinctions or “rank” connections that each brought distinct value to his life. Jada also identified that each of her connections was unique, and refused to impose a hierarchy on them: *Interviewer: Is one type of relationship that’s most important to you? Jada: [long pause] No! Yes, they have different importance’s for different things. But I don’t...I do not feel that way! I feel*

strongly not that way. She continued, telling a story about how she came to this point of view: Jada: I did this thing with my partner, where you ask each other, a bunch of questions and it's supposed to be like 'get to know each other really quickly' and I was like, 'Well we've known each other for years, but let's do that!' [laughs] One of the questions was like 'Who, in your family, would it disturb you most if they passed away' and I was like 'Oh, let me think that this logically, obviously my little sister! She's still a child, the rest of us are adults.' And my partner just didn't answer. He was like 'I'm just not going answer that. I don't have an answer question.' and I was like 'Oh wow, maybe you don't have to do that. Maybe you don't have to sort people.' That has really stuck with me, and I think about that a lot.

In this anecdote, Jada described how a conversation with her partner spurred a change in her perspective on relationships (Benzecry and Winchester 2017). This experience had a significant impact on her, and she reflected on it frequently. When her partner chose not to rank his relationships, it caused a paradigm shift for Jada (Berger and Luckmann 1966). It made her realize that she didn't have to quantify or “sort” her relationships. As a result, she rejected the notion of hierarchy and began to focus on the value and importance of each connection, which could exist without diminishing the love she had for others (Nordgren 2006).

Adam spoke about how three different types of connections (with his romantic partner, his best friend and his mother) held equal weight to him. Like Jada, he illustrated this by posing a hypothetical scenario in which one of them passed way: *I will get, if you will, super morbid. But there are three people that... I have three people that if they died,*

I think my life would dramatically be different. This also would be bad as my spouse is downstairs, so I don't want to... but I think like these two people [indicating his best friend and his spouse on his ego network] are ranked even—equally, for the distraught-ness. So, it would be obviously, my spouse, if Dana [his best friend] died, if my mom died... If any one of those three people passed away, I think my day to day life would be dramatically altered. I think long term life would like it would just be a huge life shift.

In this quote, he specifically indicated that he did not view his spouse as the one person in his life with whom he had a “primary” relationship (Nordgren 2006). Instead, he held all three connections in extremely high regard. Adam acknowledged that discussing such a morbid topic was uncomfortable. Nonetheless, his imagined situation demonstrates the deep emotional connection he shared with each of these individuals and the profound effect their absence would have on him, regardless of the type of relationship.

Davion added on, underscoring the principles of abundance: *I think, I think there's space for all of the connections and I think that they're equally important.* Davion also explicitly challenged the idea that legitimate and valuable relationships were restricted to romantic couples (Berger and Luckmann 1966; DePaulo 2008): *I think that I have realized that friendships take as much, if not more work than like romantic relationships: can sort of fill or hold that same space in terms of like importance. And priority and like the things we ascribe to romantic relationships.*

The next aspect of relationship anarchy discussed by participants was the idea of a “core set of relationship values” (Nordgren 2006). In this principle, Nordgren discusses

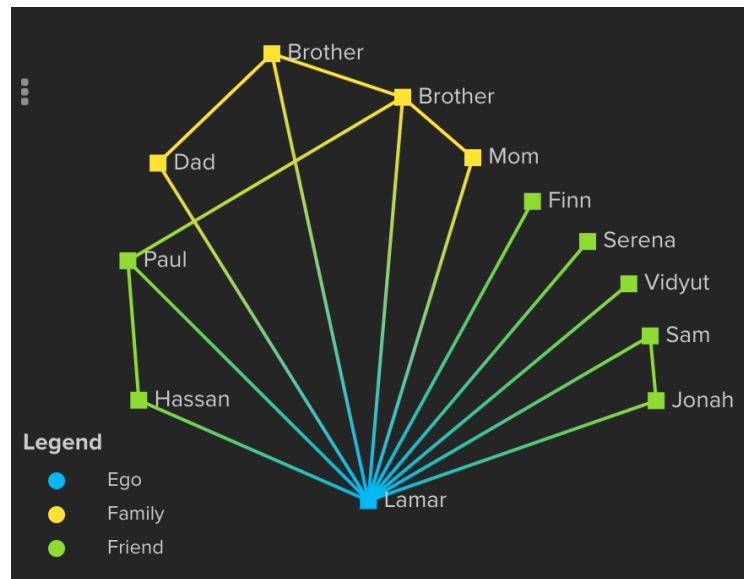
relationship expectations: “How do you wish to be treated by others?” “What kind of people would you like to spend your life with, and how would you like your relationships to work? Find your core set of values and use it for all relationships.” (Nordgren 2006:3) Rather than deeming one type of relationship structure as most important, participants in this study spoke to the qualities they valued in relationships. To them, naming a relationship “kin” or “friend” or “partner” was less important than the qualities the person brought to the table (Policarpo 2015). For Ellen, a woman in her sixties, no type of relationship was most important. Instead, she prioritized relationships that were made up of unconditional love, transparency and lack of judgment: *“The kind of person that you can tell anything to, that isn't going to judge you they may not agree with your thing, but they go “Well okay, you know, I love you anyway!”*

Lamar, in his early thirties, discussed how his commitment to relationships varied based on the set of qualities the person maintained, rather than the type of relationship they were in: *Interviewer: Would you say you have different levels of commitment to the different types of relationships?*

Lamar: Yeah, I definitely do. And not between romantic and family or not, or the other group of friends, but mostly towards people who are intentional about being present. It's more so yeah that you're trying-- not necessary, that I see it, but that that there is an effort to maintain that our relationship.

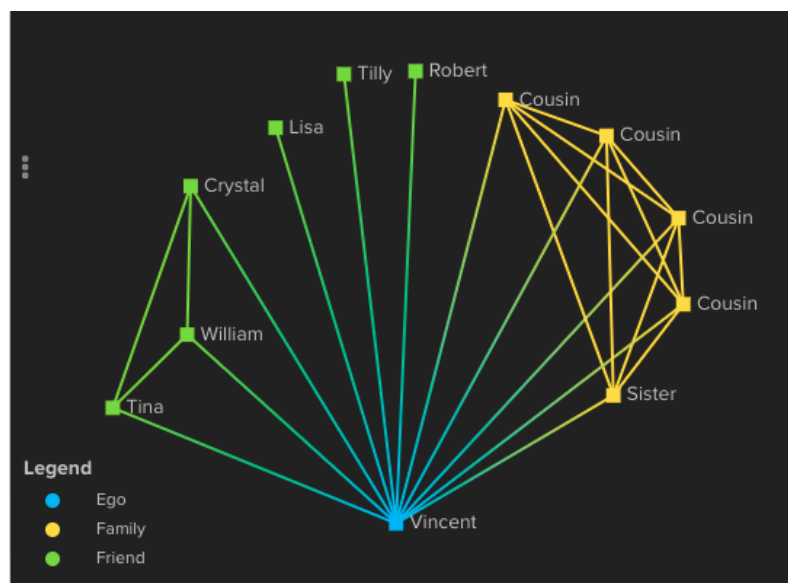
No matter the type of relationship, Lamar was most committed to the connections that met his core set of relationship values, being present and putting forth effort.

Figure 11. Lamar's Ego Network Diagram



Vincent discussed how it was more important to find the “right person” in his life than seek out any specific kind of relationship: *For me, the most important relationships- just making sure I have that right person in my life.* He then listed his set of core values for this kind of relationship: *Just learn from each other, care for each other or she might be going through something she or he might be wanting something-- we can talk to each other and solve the problem.* Vincent’s core values included willingness to grow and learn, openness, strong communication and ability to work through issues.

Figure 12. Vincent's Ego Network Diagram



Finally, Regan spoke about how she applied her core set of values (Nordgren 2006) to all her relationships: *I think I kind of govern all of my interactions in the same way, you know, like once I have that kindred spirit connection with someone that's where it comes from, regardless of whether their family or not.* For Regan, prioritization of her relationships was not based on her biological or legal ties to them (Jaimeson et al. 2006). Instead, she focused on her set of relationship values and qualities she sought out in interpersonal connections and gave her energy to those she viewed as “kindred spirit connections.”

The final principle of relationship anarchy reflected in this data was the tenant of “Customize your commitments” (Nordgren 2006:3). This was mentioned by the fewest number of participants (n=4), but still reflects an important way they conceptualized their relationships. Nordgren describes this aspect of relationship anarchy as “constructing a life together, raising children, owning a house... It’s about designing your own

commitments with the people around you, and freeing them from norms dictating that certain types of commitments are a requirement for love to be real, or that some commitments like raising children or moving in together have to be driven by certain kinds of feelings.” (Nordgren 2006: 5) Two participants spoke directly to this idea:

Brianna: I think that society, as we know it today, has put so much emphasis and glorification on romantic love. And it is the foundation of which most people decide to start a family and I personally disagree, because my experience has been different. While Brianna and Selene conceptualized their relationship slightly differently than other participants in the study (as a “platonic life partnership”) they also emphasized that they did not view their dynamic as particularly rare or remarkable (Benzecry and Winchester 2017). Instead, they wanted others to recognize that they had likely already been practicing similar principles in their own lives, but not feeling as if they were valid or normalized: Brianna: My whole reason for even wanting to share things on TikTok about us is because I don't think we're super special or anything like that! It's just like 'Hey guys, listen! You don't have to feel the pressure of finding a romantic partner just to start a life. You can feel that with someone who is your sibling, your friend-- like whoever you feel that excitement for the future with and partnership with, go for it! Just because it's a-- if it's a platonic type of love, it doesn't mean that it's any lesser than romantic love, and it shouldn't also be a placeholder until you find that romantic love.

Selene: I think you put it beautifully, and like I think having this platonic love and choosing it intentionally (and also not intentionally) has made it even more clear that we

want to go through our lives, very much mindful of the next step, and not just a default next step, like a romantic partner being the companion for life.

Selene and Brianna rejected the idea that the “next step” of their lives had to be within the context of a romantic partnership (Elder 1998). The two had a social media account dedicated to explaining their platonic partnership and life together. Via this platform, they encouraged others to consider investing in relationships on their own terms, free from norms that “some commitments like raising children or moving in together have to be driven by certain kinds of feelings.” (Nordgren 2006:5) They specifically said that they did not view their platonic connections as any lesser than romantic love (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Additionally, they did not view their connection as a “placeholder” until the other found a romantic partner to “start life with.” They saw the future as an opportunity to share more aspects of their life together, and grow their partnership in very practical ways. Though they had already moved in together, they were considering merging their finances and seeking legal recognition (Giddens 1992): *We might get a joint credit card! We are considering any kind of legal recognition—like that we are each other's first of kin (especially since neither of us has family in this country). If anything happens to one of us, we want to be in the operating room.*

While they sought to deepen their commitments for these logistical reasons, they also wanted their relationships to be “recognized” as legitimate by other people (Berger and Luckmann 1966): *Beyond that, like next of kin, maybe health insurance. We want people to recognize this legally so, however we can do that, we're exploring that option*

too. Brianna summarized the message she wanted to share with wider audiences and the “customized commitments” tenant of relationship anarchy by saying: *I think the general view, or the mission of this is really... the greatest love of your life can come in any form.*

Cross-listed Ties

As many participants rejected hierarchal conceptions of their relationships, it is perhaps unsurprising that they did not always view relationship types as distinct and often described their relationships as multiple “types” simultaneously in the qualitative data (n=25) (Pahl and Pevalin 2005). A third of study participants reported cross listed ties in the quantitative ego network data (n=14).

Kin and Friends (n=10)

While many participants described their friends as “like a sister” or “like a brother” (n=9), some also described their biological siblings as their friends. One participant, Norah, said that her sister played a foundational role in the development of *all* her friendships: *My friendships with other women have been very, very important to me, always, and you know I credit, a lot of that to my relationship with Charlotte [her sister]. You know, Charlotte and I have been good friends-- I mean we fought a little bit as kids but really not... we're all pretty mild mannered people... But Charlotte has been my very best friend from forever. Definitely from junior high on, you know. I was really close to my older brother and we did all the outdoor stuff, but Charlotte has been a permanent friend. And I think that has impacted my view of women friendships too. And I don't know how I would feel about friendships like, if I had sisters I battled with or were jealous of or bickered with or who... Charlotte believes the very best of me, and I think when you grow*

up with that kind of unwavering support, it makes you really ready to assume the whole world's going to love you.

Norah's quote underscored the importance of her sister Charlotte in shaping her understanding and appreciation of female friendships, as well as her self-confidence. She described her sister, saying “*she encompasses the friend and family.*” Not only was this a tie that personified both relationship types, it was also one of Norah’s longest lasting relationships: “*There’s only been 18 months of my life that I didn’t have her.*” Norah's relationship with Charlotte intertwined the best aspects of familial and platonic love from an early age, and helped her envision and create other loving and flourishing female friendships as she got older.

Barbra spoke about how friendship was not an inherent quality of sibling relationships, but she was incredibly grateful that this was the case in her own life: *I’m particularly close to my sisters and we get along! One of my first cousins, he has two sisters and once he said, ‘Do you guys really get along?!’ They don’t! They fight, they have trouble. Yes, we annoy each other like crazy. We do annoy each other, but yes, it’s real! And you know we’re so fortunate.* The deep friendship found in her relationships with her sisters was not based on their proximity to one another growing up, but the fact that their personalities and interests were compatible. In Barbra’s perception, there were some differences between these familial relationships and friendships (based on the length of and shared family of origin), but because she greatly enjoyed her sisters as people, the relationships were similar: *It’s different to have someone you have a history with your whole life, and you have your parents... There is a different feeling. They’re*

almost like a part of me... my whole growing up. But I think I think it's more based on personality like- there all a lot of things that are similar -- like I love to read my sisters are voracious readers. I have some of my friends that are real readers, and we talk a lot. I think... I mean, it's pretty much the same with your best friends and sisters.

For Barbra, these familial bonds were important, but doubly so because she perceived them as best friends: *I'm very close with my sisters. It's hard because we're sisters, you know, we've been with each other our whole lives. But I would choose them too.*

Though Barbra believed a shared upbringing carried weight, she and her sisters had particularly significant bonds because they embodied qualities of friendship: enjoyment and mutually choosing one another.

Siblings were not the only familial relationships that included close friendship. A variety of extended family members were considered good friends by participants.

Frances described several connections like this: *My niece on my husband side, she's an amazing person, and I want to be friends with her-- even if we weren't relatives—I'd want to be friends with her!* She also had a cousin who she had considered a very close friend when she was alive. Frances described why their relationship was perhaps less complicated than a sibling one and more easily came to involve friendship: *Roberta was like a sister, without all the garbage of growing up together!* One participant, Ellen, described how she was actually much closer to her aunt than any of her siblings: *We've just always been close. I was in her wedding and she's still one of my closest friends, even though, like people always go 'You're related?!' and 'That's your aunt?! She's not that much older than you!' and that kind of thing. But yeah, she's just one of my favorite*

people on the planet. We have really good intense conversations, or we can be goofy and laugh about absolutely nothing at this or that in the same conversation!

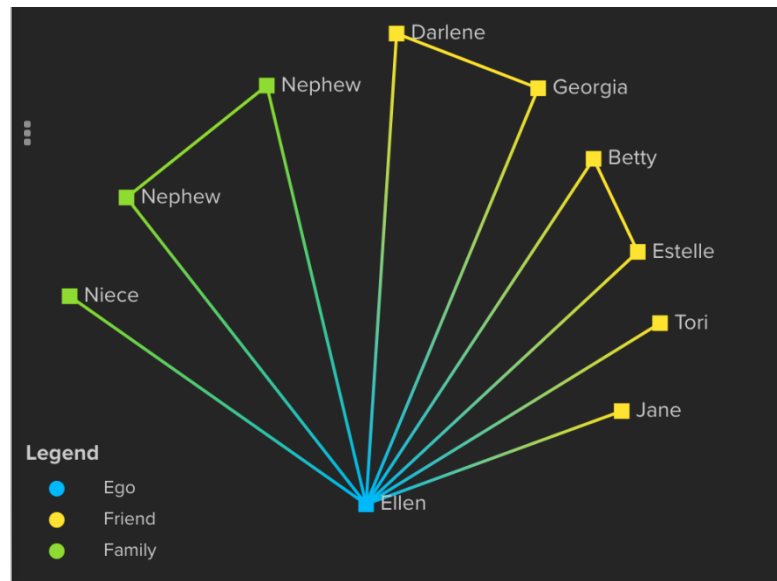
The level of closeness and comradery that Ellen and her aunt shared was sometimes viewed by others as unusual (Berger and Luckmann 1966). However, like Barbra, Ellen felt their connection exceeded that of a typical familial connection, because they enjoyed each other's company so much and had high levels of disclosure with one another. Ellen was also very close to her nephew, who combined the words "friend" and "aunt" together to construct a new term that described their relationship (Blumer 1969): *Cameron is our nephew, and he calls me his "fraunt". He started that when he was a little kid.*

Interestingly, in their ego networks, neither woman (Frances or Ellen) initially listed these connections as both family members and friends. However, in the qualitative interview, they clearly also designated them as such: *Ellen: The people that I have as family [on her ego network] I definitely would call them friends too.*

Interviewer: [Looking back] Would you say would have probably put them both as friends and family?

Ellen: Oh, absolutely!

Figure 13. Ellen’s Ego Network Diagram



The women who described their sisters as best friends in the qualitative interviews (Barbra and Norah) named them solely as “family members” in the quantitative data collection. This data triangulation might suggest that cross-listed ties like these are underestimated in solely quantitative data collection. Mixing in qualitative methodologies help uncover the true meaning and significance of ties (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018).

Finally, participants discussed relationships with the families they married into, many of which came to involve friendship over time. Charlie described this process: *Interviewer: How did that kind of happen, that those people [referencing ego network] became to be both friends and family members?*

Charlie: Well, I didn't know any of them except through [his wife]. But, in every case, I met them, I liked them, I got along with them, I felt that it was mutual! Whenever there's a family gathering, or when or whenever we're getting together with any of them, I always feel like they are glad to see me as I am to see them. I get along with her family a lot

better than I get along with my family of origin! I don't have much in common with any of the members of my family of origin, so, whereas I do feel like there, there are commonalities between myself and those in [his wife's] family.

Clarence described a similar experience, if in more playful terms: *My brother in law's ...*

They're a lot like... You know, you get stuck with them, but you grow to like them!

[laughs] While relationships with family members began with obligation and proximity to one another through biological or marital ties (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995), they developed into friendships through enjoyment of one another, shared interests, and mutually choosing the relationship.

Spouse and Best Friend (n=20)

As described in previous sections, romantic partnerships were very important in the lives of participants. There were many instances in the qualitative data that participants spoke about their romantic partners as friends in conjunction with the romantic sides of their relationship (n=20) (Finkel et al. 2014).

Dallas was among several participants whose romantic relationship included friendship: *I consider my romantic relationship... I consider us like really good friends, if not best friends. There like a really good, awesome friend on top of everything.* Notably, among those who considered their spouse or romantic partner to be the most important relationship in their networks (n=8), the majority (n=5) defined this relationship as their closest friendship. Like with familial relationships, friendship was not considered to be an inherent quality of romantic relationships (Benzecry and Winchester 2017). This was illustrated by several participants who said that their relationships with previous spouses

had not also been based in friendship. Christopher described this: *I was actually married before and that wasn't true. I was married for ten years. So, yeah, I know it sounds generic, but I really feel like [his wife] is my best friend. I don't know that it would be... Like if the question is, in general, is my philosophy that a marriage or a wife, should be the most important thing? I don't know that any certain type of relationship should be the most important! But mine is with my wife.*

Several participants held slightly different views, and conceptualized romantic relationships as “richer friendships.” Jasmine said that romantic relationships were “*just like friendship with extra steps.*” Kim described her relationship with her spouse: *I think that [romantic aspects of the relationship] adds value to the friendship. Like, if you talk about [her husband] and I's friendship, I mean there's certain things about being married that makes it sets it apart from being a friend, but we are also best friends!* Brady coined the phrasing of “richer friendship” saying: *I'm still friends with [his partner]! Just because we are dating and have been for a while doesn't mean that... I guess there's a different dimension to the relationship. It doesn't feel substantively different like emotionally or like investment-wise. Again, it just feels like a richer friendship in a way.*

While Brady felt similar emotional closeness and commitment to his other friends, he viewed his relationship with his partner as a friendship that was deepened by the romantic aspects it came to include. Overall, the participants of this study had dualistic views of romance and friendship. Some viewed romantic relationships as

enriched friendships, while others viewed romantic relationships as being enriched by friendship.

Friendship as a Complementary Relationship (n=11)

The final theme in the network perceptions was the view of different types of relationships as complementing one another (Bookwala et al. 2014; Carr 2018; Connidis and Davies 1990; Patterson et al 1993). Participants spoke about how their relationships were not in competition with one another, how they needed every relationship in their network, and their relationships supplemented one another (Nordgren 2006).

Though Brianna and Selene had a relationship different than most participants in the study, the stability found within their platonic relationship had positively influenced their other bonds: *The most prominent thing is that I think I was seeking all the stability that I have her from my past romantic partners-- to the detriment of them. It's completely changed my whole life, like my partnership with her has given me a completely new outlook on life and relationships and how I approach other people, and what I need from other people.* Because Brianna felt sure in the security and stability of her platonic life partnership with Selene, she was able to relieve the pressure on her other relationships and enjoy them for the elements they *did* contain—not those they did not.

While Ophelia spoke glowingly about her now deceased husband, she cautioned against not maintaining friendships: *When my husband was alive, he was the most important thing in the world to me... But I always kept my friends, no matter how much my husband meant to me. I would go out and go see a foreign film with a girlfriend and he'd be home. I did not ignore my friends to have my husband!*

Interviewer: Would you say that there's something that specifically friends bring when compared to other relationships?

Ophelia: Totally.

Interviewer: What do you think it would be when compared to other relationships, what is what specific about friends?

Ophelia: I think girlfriends kind of... You have things in common that you might not be able to talk about with your husband, not that you couldn't talk about it with him—he just wouldn't understand them as well as a girlfriend! Don't ever stop your friends, even if you have the most wonderful guy in the world!

Ophelia spoke about her marriage in the terms of “the suffocation model” (Finkel et al. 2014), as fulfilling many of her psychological needs. However, she viewed friendships as an important source of social support and understanding, not to be “given up” even amidst the most fairytale of romances.

Like Ophelia, Clarence said that although he and his wife addressed many of each other’s needs, friendships complemented the relationships and filled unmet needs: *Where the spouse, maybe can't necessarily fill in a need or something, that's where like my other friends can! Running an idea by them, or maybe asking them about specific topics.*

Though these participants reported being dependent on their romantic partnership financially and emotionally, they acknowledged that these relationships couldn't serve as their sole sources of connection. Friendships brought in diversity, different perspectives, and were additional sources of support and connection. Barbra embodied the sentiments of this theme when she discussed each type of connection in her ego network: *I can't*

imagine my life without all three of those [her friends, her husband and her sister]! I mean I did have a divorce, I was divorced. But then I found another partner and it worked out even better! So that's very important to me. My family is extremely important, you know, my extended family I love... but my sisters, I can't imagine life without my sisters! Then like I said, I think I had a harder time in the beginning of COVID in some ways, when everything locked down because I'm extroverted, and I like groups of friends! So, I mean it was hard for everyone in different ways, but it was especially hard, because I wasn't seeing groups of friends, I mean maybe it's the one friend for a walk or something! So, I don't think... I couldn't live with just one!

DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the ego network structures of adults with close friendships, investigated study members' conceptualization of these networks, and explored how they navigate, balance, and prioritize various types of relationships. Using quantitative social network data, I examined the content and structure of the networks of 43 adults in different life stages. The participants were free to nominate any individual they were close to (provided that these were connections they envisioned being in their lives long term) and were asked to give inductive descriptions of the type of tie. Despite the flexibility in the name generator used in the study, most of the ego networks (n=41) consisted of three tie types: friends, family and romantic partners. These types of connections are common to networks of adults, but the proportion of each network type was notable in this study (Wrzus et al. 2013). Friendships were the most prevalent types of relationship in these networks in all age groups. Structurally, I found minimal

quantitative differences in the participants' ego networks based on the demographic characteristics of age, gender and relationship status. Overall, many of the ego networks had low interconnectedness among all relationship types. Network features such as density, size and network composition (proportion of friends/family) varied among participants, but not in patterns that were discernible through the quantitative data alone. While the quantitative findings of this study were preliminary, they did serve to bolster the qualitative data. Because of the concurrent, mixed methods study design with paired samples, these data sources were able to be triangulated and increase reliability. This study is legitimated through strength maximization and sample integration (Plano Clark and Ivankova 2018).

Though the quantitative data was not plainly patterned by demographic or structural factors, participants' qualitative descriptions of their networks were often shown and confirmed by their ego networks. Additionally, the interview data resulted in the creation of themes which provide rich observations on network hierarchies, societal perceptions, and interconnectedness of ties. The integrated, qualitative and network findings of this study validated and challenged aspects of previous research, contributing novel insights to the existing body of research.

The three primary relationship spheres participants nominated in their ego networks (friends, family and romantic relationships) were talked about in terms of hierarchy in the interview data. Some of the participants described their friendships as the most important relationships to them, which coincided with the high prevalence of these relationships in their networks. This finding conflicts with previous research suggesting

that after adolescence, friendships lose primacy in individuals' lives (Curry et al. 2013; Neyer et al. 2011; Wrzus et al. 2012). While a subset of participants talked about having strongly integrated friendship networks that they appreciated, others expressed ambivalent attitudes on integration as a social group. Some participants considered the significance of individual friendships to be independent from the wider network. This is a finding unique to the social networks of adults, as belonging and interconnectedness are important in peer networks of youth (Drolet and Arcand 2013).

In regard to romantic relationships, this study found limited support for the “suffocation model” of marriage (Finkel et al. 2014). A small number of participants *did* discuss companionate, “all or nothing” marriages (Finkel et al. 2014). As theorized by past research, many of these participants conceptualized their romantic partners as best friends and expect them to fill an overwhelming share of their relational needs (Coontz 2006; Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006; Kim and Dew 2016). However, this research did not support previous findings related to gender and romantic relationships, nor the “marriage as a greedy institution” thesis (Cronin 2015; Neal and Coser 1974). Previous research suggests that heterosexual women prioritize romantic relationships over all of their other relationships, even when they have close relationships of other kinds (Cronin 2015). This study did not replicate these findings, and instead found that *men* in the sample seemed more conscious of the cultural hierarchy of romantic relationships (whether or not they shared this ideological stance themselves). I also found minimal, mixed support for the “greedy institution” thesis (Neal and Coser 1974). While partnered individuals had lower proportions of friends in their networks, they had larger networks than non-partnered

individuals on average. Participants also specifically discussed the intentional maintenance of connections outside of their marriages so that they had diverse and separate forms of support. By offsetting the burden placed on marriage and “outsourcing” support, friendships can be additive resources to romantic relationships, rather than competing with them. Far from diminishing other relationships, friendships can help them flourish by taking off the pressure for marriages to be “all or nothing” relationships (Finkel 2018; Finkel et al. 2015)

Consistent with studies on familial obligation, some participants considered their familial relationships most important (Antonucci and Akiyama 1995; Sander et al. 2017). Those who conceptualized their relationships in this manner often had responsibilities to dependents (as parents, or respondents in the “sandwich” generation (Miller 1980)). Other significant findings related to kinship in this study are the ways that people conceptualize these ties. While findings have been mixed in previous work, some studies argue that there “at a cultural level clear boundaries exist between family and friendship ties.” (Allan 2008; Pahl and Pevalin 2005:1) In this study, I found many multiplex, cross-listed ties (especially among friends and family members). This was bidirectional (friends were conceptualized as family, and family members as friends). However, this was one area of the research where the qualitative and quantitative findings contrasted with one another. With the addition of the qualitative data, there was some indication that quantitative methods may mis-conceptualize relationships that respondents perceive as occupying multiple relational domains. Though previous work on those with close, non-kin bonds has found that these relationships are formed because of a “family deficit”, this

study found that many respondents maintained supportive relationships with both kin and friends (Braithwaite et al. 2010). The integration of friends and family networks seemed to facilitate this kind of network structure.

Finally, one theme wholly unique to this study is that most respondents did not view their networks as competing or hierarchal. Instead, they viewed room for all their connections and spoke about them as complementary to one another. Although the average respondent of the study was heterosexual, married and from a conservative region of the United States, their beliefs about relationships fit remarkably well into a framework that has been associated with radical, queer, polyamorous, feminist philosophies (Nordgren 2006).

Future Research

Although there were few quantitative trends uncovered in this study, these exploratory findings indicate the need for future research. All participants discussed having strong, supportive and long-lasting close friendships. This suggests that friendships can be maintained throughout the life course in a variety of network contexts. There are existing typographies of family networks (Widmer 2010) and friendship networks in limited age ranges (Belotti 2008), but there are very few studies that examine the intersections of these relationship domains in different life stages. Though the quantitative measures (such as density) provided limited insights into these intersections in the current study, interview data captured many complex dynamics and ideologies involved in balancing of these network structures. Future work can clarify how different network structures

function and provide a deeper understanding of the multiple (and potentially evolving) avenues of social support and companionship possible across the life course.

Limitations

This research focused on individuals with close friendships. Although this research found that participants view these relationships as integral to their networks, the study's focus on "close friend" is potentially limiting. Friendships come in varying levels of closeness (Lee 2022) and capturing wider friendship networks with differing levels of closeness may allow for the creation of network typologies and broader understandings of adult's friendship networks. Since this study focused on the close relationships of the participants, they may have underestimated the connections between their network members (since the nominees often did not have "close" relationships with other network members). This may be one reason why the overall density of networks was quite low. Additionally, while a few study members spoke about difficulties in maintaining friendships and dissolved friendships, the sample focused primarily on adults with successful, long standing friendships. Conducting a comparative analysis involving adults without these kinds of relationships could yield valuable insights. Finally, this study's sample is diverse in terms of age, gender, and marital status. In some senses, this sample diversity is a strength. However, the sample is also limited in size (N=43), making it difficult to draw quantitative conclusions based on demographic variables.

CONCLUSION

Despite its limitations, this study provides multiple unique contributions to the literature. First, it is one of few mixed methods studies of adult's friendships. The dual methods of

data collection are a strength of the study, as shown by the findings derived by both data types. Additionally, this study considers the network context that surrounds friendships and its impact on them. This work unites different strands of literature to discuss how individuals manage, negotiate and maintain their social networks throughout adulthood. It lays the groundwork for future network studies, as well as qualitative work exploring adults' sources of support and connection.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation is an examination of friendship's meaning, functions, and place in the life course, adding to the small and growing line of research on friendship in adulthood. The first objective of the research was to examine how adults ascribe meanings to the relationship of "friendship" and what they perceive its significance to be in different life stages. Through in-depth interviews, participants provided rich descriptions and definitions of friendship. In Chapter 1, study members spoke in impassioned ways about their friendships. Their descriptions and personal narratives demonstrated that this relationship type is far from fragile or insignificant as people age. Instead, the friendships of study members were incredibly durable and provided layered and varied forms of support. Rather than being connections prone to dissolution in the face of confrontation, among members of this sample with strong friendships, accountability and growth were encouraged relationship characteristics.

Even as study members clearly listed the qualities of friendship, they struggled to define their friendships without comparing it to other, more legally and linguistically defined relationships. This pattern indicates that we may not have language to adequately describe the value of different kinds of friendships. In addition to comparing friendship to other relationships, participants were keenly aware of "levels" of friendship intimacy. While a wide variety of relationships might be considered "friends", study members noted that many of their relationships transcended this designation (sometimes referring to them as "true" friends, among other terms). For researchers, this chapter signals the need to carefully consider how the relationship of friendship might be defined by those

we study, as well as the assumptions we make about the term. Only by investigating friendships' wide variety of meanings will we be able to truly capture the potential of this relationship.

The second objective of the dissertation focused on exploring friendship change in relation to life events and how friendships develop over time. In Chapter 2, I identified many kinds of significant turning points in friendships. While the findings of this turning point add to previous turning point literature through the discovery of new turning points unique to adults in different life stages, this research reveals the dynamic and flexible nature of adult friendships. The findings showcased the adaptability and resilience of friendships in navigating life transitions and highlighted participants' ability to nurture and maintain these connections throughout the life course.

The third aim of the dissertation was to contextualize friendships within participants' social networks and examine how these relationships fit into their social landscapes. This study used a novel, mixed methods analysis that integrated qualitative interview data and quantitative SNA of adults' ego networks. This section provided insights into the interconnectedness of friendships with other types of relationships. This interconnectedness was both literal (in the form of social network connections), and conceptual, as individuals discussed hierarchies, normative perspectives, and their own perspectives on the value and interplay of different relationship types. While the analysis revealed few quantitative patterns in participants' ego networks, the qualitative analysis was instrumental revealing the ways friendships can coexist, compliment, and thrive in the context of other social connections.

This study was limited by time and resource constraints, sample and scope. The time, experience, and resources available to an individual graduate student impacted this study. Initially, it was my goal to reach theoretical saturation in my qualitative findings (Gerson & Damaske 2020). My interviews and network data collection resulted in complex, rich, and plentiful data. Instead of theoretical saturation, I found many avenues for future research which would have benefited from further analysis. I focused on friendships that were flourishing, rather than those that had not been successful, or individuals who struggled to make and maintain friendships. This focus likely originated from my positionality as someone who desired to have these kinds of relationships throughout the life span.

Additionally, as mentioned in the chapters, my sample included individuals of various backgrounds. However, I was not able to fully explore variation in demographic characteristics due to my small sample size. We know that most friendships are homophilous (McPherson et al. 2001), but less about how factors other than gender impact platonic connections in adulthood. Other relationships that confer social capital and societal benefits (i.e., marriage and kinship ties) are differentially available to people based on intersections of privilege and disadvantage (Pfeffer and Killewald 2018; Stewart 2020). Friendship may be a form of social support that is more unilaterally accessible, or it may reproduce societal inequities (Eve 2002). It is worth investigating whether the importance and functions of friendship in adulthood differ based on people's social location, and I am regretful that this dissertation had a limited scope in this regard.

Still, the dissertation highlights friendship's untapped potential to address the issues of loneliness and social isolation in our changing society. As future research builds upon these findings, it is crucial to continue exploring dynamics of adult friendships across diverse populations and varied contexts. While this dissertation provides a broad overview of friendships of adults with attention to the commonly explored areas of age and gender, examining the complexities of friendships through varied demographic intersections will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social connections. This dissertation paves the way for future work to further demonstrate friendship's impacts across the life course.

Collectively, my chapters demonstrate that friendships hold profound significance in the lives of adults and contribute to wider social integration, support, happiness, personal development and overall well-being. The findings challenge the notion that friends become less impactful in adulthood, and affirm that these relationships continue to be vital sources of connection across the lifespan.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYERS

Figure 14. Original Recruitment Flyer (Social Network and Interview Data Collection)



HAVE "BEST FRIENDS FOREVER"?

We need you for our research study!
We're looking for adults of all ages who have prioritized friendship in their lives!

This study will look at the importance of friendship throughout the life stages and the social networks of people with close friendships! Research tells us that friendships are crucial to wellbeing and life satisfaction, but are rarely valued by society in the same ways as other relationships (like family and romantic partners) are. Most people view friendships as influential in adolescence and young adulthood, but not as important as other relationships as people age. However, some people continue to have long-lasting, influential, and valuable friendships over their lives. We are currently doing a project to find out more about these types of friendships and the individuals in them.

Are you eligible?

- 19 or older
- Have or have had at least one significant & close friendship
- Friendship is an important part of your life

Participants will be asked to:

- Complete a network study
- Complete an interview
 - Via Zoom or in-person

Participants will receive:

- \$10 Amazon Gift Card for the network study
- An additional \$40 if they decide to complete the interview

If you'd like to participate, please contact the research team via email or phone: grace.kelly@doane.edu or (402)705-3001

Figure 15. Recruitment Flyer (Social Network Data Collection)



DO YOU HAVE 'BEST FRIENDS FOREVER'?

WE NEED YOU FOR OUR RESEARCH STUDY!

We're looking for adults of all ages who have prioritized friendship in their lives!



This study will look at the importance of friendship throughout the life stages and the social networks of people with close friendships! Research tells us that friendships are crucial to wellbeing and life satisfaction, but are rarely valued by society in the same ways as other relationships (like family and romantic partners) are. Most people view friendships as influential in adolescence and young adulthood, but not as important as other relationships as people age. However, some people continue to have long-lasting, influential, and valuable friendships over their lives. We are currently doing a project to find out more about the networks surrounding these types of friendships and the individuals in them.

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE?

- 19 or older
- Have (or have had) at least one significant and close friendship
- Friendship is an important part of your life

PARTICIPANTS WILL BE ASKED TO:

- Complete an ~15 minute network mapping study and a short demographic survey (via Zoom or in person)

PARTICIPANTS WILL RECEIVE:

- \$10 Visa Gift Card

TO PARTICIPATE:
Please contact the research team via email or phone at grace.kelly@doane.edu or (402) 705-3001

Figure 16. Targeted Recruitment Flyer (40+ sample)



WE NEED YOU FOR OUR RESEARCH STUDY!

We're looking for adults age 40 and up who have prioritized friendship in their lives!

This study will look at the importance of friendship throughout the life stages and the social networks of people with close friendships! Research tells us that friendships are crucial to wellbeing and life satisfaction, but are rarely valued by society in the same ways as other relationships (like family and romantic partners) are. Most people view friendships as influential in adolescence and young adulthood, but not as important as other relationships as people age. However, some people continue to have long-lasting, influential, and valuable friendships over their lives. We are currently doing a project to find out more about these types of friendships and the individuals in them.

Are you eligible?

- 40 or older
- Have or have had at least one significant & close friendship
- Friendship is an important part of your life

Participants will be asked to:

- Complete a network study
- Complete an interview
 - Via Zoom or in-person

Participants will receive:

- \$10 Visa Gift Card for the network study
- An additional \$40 if they decide to complete the interview

If you'd like to participate, please contact the research team via email or phone: grace.kelly@doane.edu or (402)705-3001

APPENDIX B: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Social Network Data Collection

Identifying Social Networks:

For this part of the study, I'm going to ask you about your relationships with friends, family and significant others. I'll use these questions to create a network map of your social connections. In social network analysis, we call them "ego networks." As you tell me about your connections, I'll be creating a diagram of your ego network. I'll share my screen so you can see the network as we create it. Do you have any questions for me before we start? **[Pause, wait for response.]**

1. Please think about the people you have the most significant, long-lasting relationships with
 - People you would feel comfortable confiding anything to, relationships that you foresee lasting your whole life
 - These can be any types of relationships, including friendships, family members or romantic relationships.
 - You can list up to ten names.
2. For each person, I'll have you tell me how you know them, and the type of relationship you have with them.
3. Are any of the people connected to one another?
 - If so, how?

Thank you! Here is your ego network. The squares represent each person in your network, and then lines between them represent how they're connected. Do the connections look correct? Is anything missing? **[Confirm the connections between listed individuals]**

Interview Protocol

After Social Network Data Collection:

Today we will be talking about your friendships and their significance in your life. You've identified many of your important relationships in your ego network. **[Pull up and reference ego network diagram created in social network data collection]** Is there one friendship in your network that you would like to talk about during the interview, or several connected friends? You should pick the person or group that is most important to your life or that you have the closest relationships with. **[Pause, wait for response]** Okay, perfect. Before we start, I want you to know that there are no right or wrong answers. I want to understand your friendship experience from your own vantage point. Feel free to ask me for clarification, give me example, tell me more if I am not asking the right question that gets at your experience. Does that make sense? **[Pause, wait for response]**

Friendship Narrative & Significance

- 1) Please tell me the story of how your relationship with [friend's or friends' name(s)] began.
 - a. In other words, how did your relationship with them come to be?
- 2) How would you describe the relationship you have with [friend's or friends' name(s)]?
 - a. What are the best features of this relationship?
 - b. What are its challenges?
- 3) After thinking about this [person/group], what role would you say they play in your life?
 - a. Why is this/these relationship(s) important to you?
- 4) How would you define friendship in general?
 - a. Role of friendship in your life?
- 5) Is your relationship with this [person/group] different from your friendship definition?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. Are most of your friendships similar to your relationship with [friend's or friends' name(s)]?
 - i. Why or why not?

Friendship in Context

- 1) Now I have a few questions about your friendships and other relationships. For this part of the interview, we'll look back at your ego network and talk about the people in it, and their connections to one another.
 - a. Ask about friendships and other relationships, depending on network structure.
 - i. I.e., Your friends and romantic partner aren't connected in the network map. Could you tell me a little bit more about this?

- ii. I.e., Your family members and friends all have ties to one another. How did these people become connected? Were they connected prior to or after your relationship with them?
- 2) In your current network and in the past, have you ever had trouble balancing your friendships with your other relationships? Please tell me more about this.
 - a. How did you balance these tensions?
- 3) How are your other relationships similar to or different from your friendships?
 - a. Expectations?
- 4) Thinking about your relationships in general, is one type of relationship most important to you?
 - a. What kind of relationship?
 - b. Why do you think this is?

Friendship Over Time

Questions in this section were adapted from an interview protocol on family turning points (Braithwaite et al., 2010).

You and [friend's or friends' name(s)] have been friends since **[refer to question one]**. In the next few questions, I'm going to ask you how your friendship has evolved over time. To talk about relationship changes over time, social scientists use "turning points."

Turning points are the significant or pivotal events or experiences at a particular time in your life that were important in bringing your relationship with [friend's or friends' name(s)] to where it is today. Turning points come in a variety of forms. Some of these events might be a major event--like a first meeting, wedding, or big fight--or they may be what seems like a minor or everyday event, but in hindsight you realize it was significant in changing your relationship. Most people experience both positive and negative turning points. I am interested in events that changed your relationship with your friend in a positive way, as well as events that were hard or challenging. Do you have any questions about what a turning point is? **[Pause, wait for response]**

Alright. Now we are ready to talk about the turning points in the development of your friendship. Think back to the first time you experienced a significant or pivotal shift that was important in the relationship. Remember, this may be positive or negative.

- 1) Describe for me, in your own words, what this turning was all about.

Additional prompts:

- a. What was the occasion? What was happening?
 - i. Age?
- b. Who was there/involved?
 - i. Involvement of other relationships?
- c. What did you and your friend talk about?

- i. What did you not talk about? Why not?
- d. What were your emotions at this time?
- 2) Did you feel like your friendship became more or less important to your life after this turning point?
- 3) How did this situation affect your friendship in the end?
 - a. Did you maintain your friendship through this turning point?
 - i. **[If a negative turning point and “Yes”]** How?
 - ii. **[If a negative turning point and “No”]** How did you reconnect?

[Repeat for additional turning points]

- 4) Overall, looking back on all your relationship turning points and the past, how would you say your views of friendship have changed over time?
- 5) How has the importance of friendships in your life changed over time?
- 6) What do you think is the overall contribution friendship has made to your life?

Thank you so much for your time and insight! I’ve appreciated hearing the story of your friendship and your views on the topic!

Recruitment

As you know, the goal of this study is to understand friendship across the life course, from the perspective of individuals with close and important friendships, like the ones you’ve talked about. Would you be interested in helping connect me any other friends (or individuals you know with these types of friendships) who may be willing to take part in either the network data collection or both the network and interview pieces of the study?

[If “Yes”] I have some flyers and coupons for you! You can send or give these flyers to people you believe might be interested in the study. We will provide you with \$5 for each coupon we receive from an eligible individual you’ve recruited, after they participate in the study. You can recruit up to 3 individuals (for \$15). After two weeks from today, the **[last available day to recruit]**, I will unfortunately not be able to accept recruiting coupons, as our study’s recruitment period will be over. Does that make sense? **[Pause, wait for reply]**

Okay, great. If you’d like any help reaching out to people, please let me know. Thank you again!

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? [enter a number]
2. What is your gender? [text entry]
3. What is your sexual orientation? [text entry]

4. What is your annual household income?
 - a. Less than \$25,000
 - b. \$25,000 - \$50,000
 - c. \$50,000 - \$100,000
 - d. \$100,000 - \$200,000
 - e. More than \$200,000
 - f. Prefer not to say

5. Which of the following best describes you?
 - a. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic or Latino
 - d. Native American or Native Alaskan
 - e. White or Caucasian
 - f. Biracial or Multiracial
 - g. Other
 - i. [text entry]

6. What is your relationship status?
 - a. Single
 - b. Dating
 - c. Cohabiting
 - d. Married
 - e. Separated
 - f. Divorced
 - g. Widowed

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Table 6. Demographic Characteristics of Final Sample (N=43)

Variable	Category	Freq.	Percent	
Gender	Female	23	53.5%	
	Male	18	41.9%	
	Gender Non-Conforming	2	4.7%	
Race	.	2	4.7%	
	Asian or Pacific Islander	3	7.0%	
	Biracial or Multiracial	2	4.7%	
	Black or African American	3	7.0%	
	Hispanic or Latino	6	14.0%	
	Other	1	2.3%	
	White or Caucasian	26	60.5%	
	Sexual Orientation	.	3	7.0%
		Bisexual	5	11.6%
Gay		2	4.7%	
Queer		3	7.0%	
Straight		30	69.8%	
Relationship Status	Cohabiting	4	9.3%	
	Dating	5	11.6%	
	Married	14	32.6%	
	Single	15	34.9%	
	Separated	1	2.3%	
	Widowed	3	7.0%	
	Divorced	1	2.3%	