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The Importance of Friendships for Social Identity Development: Research, Theory, and Practice: A Workshop

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Abstract

This paper is based on a workshop session, and examines friendships as critical components of social networks, fundamental to support systems and providing avenues for learning the nuances of social communication and exchange. Although friendships may vary in commitment level, time spent together, intensity, and intimacy, information exchange is a key component of the interactions of friends. Specifically, through extended conversations and the repetition of shared activities, friends may enact varied social roles and receive a level of feedback that may be specific and important for learning collective values that are relevant across a variety of situations. Friendships, even as they vary in closeness, intensity, and type of contact, may provide information about behaviours, attitudes, and related values, roles and identities.

Friendships are critical components of social networks, as they are fundamental to support systems and also provide avenues for learning the nuanced patterns of social communication. Although friendships may vary in commitment level, time spent together, intensity, and intimacy, information exchange is a key component of the interactions of friends. Specifically, through extended conversations and the repetition of shared activities, friends may enact varied social roles with a level of feedback that may be specific and important for learning social skills across a variety of situations (Gottman & Parker, 1986). Conversations between friends may also permit a high degree of personal disclosure that includes specific and subtle details of social behaviour. For example, friends may exchange information about the how and when to express anger to a co-worker by repeatedly enacting what was actually said during a heated exchange. Through advice-giving, friends may exchange specific information about how to navigate in a social group (e.g., how to get involved in a leadership role and which role would be most advantageous to successful attainment of a paying position). Through accounts of failed interactions, friends may convey how "not" to offer criticism to an authority figure or how to turn down a request without appearing to reject someone. Thus, friendships, even as they vary in closeness, intensity, and type of contact, may provide information about behaviours and attitudes and related values, roles and identities.

These examples indicate the many ways in which social information may be conveyed through discussion, humour, story-telling and enactment. We can extend this to consider how friends may shape important aspects of an individual's personality, behavioural repertoire, and social identity. Interactions with friends may allow rehearsal of specific language, gesture, and action, including tone of voice, direction of gaze, pacing and other details of social behaviour that are part of the interaction style of a particular social group. For example, with close friends, one might rehearse ways to ask someone to

dance, or in a humorous vein, rehearse ways that would be likely to fail. One might practice repeatedly the exact way to stand so as to appear cool and also engaged in what is happening socially. In this way, friends may provide varied opportunities to practice the behaviours, roles, and identities that will allow successful entry and participation in a given social context.

In a similar vein, friends may facilitate movement into new social roles and groups by encouraging the acquisition of new behaviours and by confirming the likelihood that an individual will be successful in a new role or be accepted by a new group (Weisz & Wood, 2005). Validation from friends may facilitate normal developmental transitions such as marriage or retirement (Rawlins, 1996) and may also offer transitional support during unexpected life changes, such as divorce or disability. In sum, the varied exchanges of friendship (verbal, instrumental, and behavioural) may offer nuanced and detailed forms of support, information, and practice, elements of social learning that are critical for participation in the complex roles of the social environment.

Recent psychological research provides ample evidence for the importance of friendship for social development and emotional functioning in all stages of life (Rawlins, 1994). Over the past two decades in particular, lifespan researchers have increasingly recognized that friendships provide important emotional and social resources for individuals as they adapt to the broader social environment, and navigate through varied social roles and groups (Doll, B. 1996). Developmental research examines this process from multiple perspectives, indicating that some friendships may serve a positive function in social adaptation, while others may lead the way to maladaptive behaviours. Thus, the behavioural rehearsal and information exchange described above may be implemented in service of positive social behaviours, or those that lead to anti-social outcomes. Moreover, recent research evidence on high-risk adolescents identifies the role of peer conversations in the social and cognitive mechanisms that disrupt or distort adaptive social development. Peer relationships may increase vulnerability to a range of negative psycho-social and health outcomes (Battin-Pearson et al., 2001; Shortt et al., 2003). These studies stand in marked contrast to those indicating the value of peer mentors that model and support more adaptive behaviour in schools or treatment settings (Clark, 1991; Hartup, 1989;Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; Ollendick et al.,1992).

In this workshop, we will examine friendships from the perspective of social development, and will explore the impact of varied types of friendships, even those considered peripheral, temporary, or unrewarding. Further, we will examine research literature connecting aspects of friendship with adaptive maladaptive behaviour in children and adolescents. We will integrate research, theory, and specific case examples that illustrate the importance and varied functions of friendships in identity development. Following this discussion, we will work together to elucidate specific practices that foster or inhibit friendships across varied settings. For example, we will examine research on adolescent friendships, and outcomes such as juvenile delinquency, but will also discuss intervention programs that foster healthy friendships in young women at risk for incarceration.

Workshop Outline:

We will begin by reviewing social factors that influence adaptation and identity development with a particular eye to psychological research findings that establish the importance of friendship attachments in personal and social development. We will also briefly review evidence regarding the importance of friendships during critical life transitions and changes in social roles. We will focus specifically on social identity development, communication, and social cognition. Through our exploration of the research and cases examples, we will also see how friendships may facilitate, inhibit, or disrupt various aspects of social participation. We will conclude this section with a structural model illustrating a typology of friendships, and the connections between friendship qualities, risk factors, and social identity/role development over time. (35 mins.)

In the second section of the workshop, we will look briefly at research on social identity support (Wood, 1996; Weisz and Wood, 2000, 2005) as it relates to friendship longevity in young adults and to the development of new identities and social roles. The research findings indicate that support for important social identities is a better predictor of friendship status over time than general support provided by that specific friend. We will connect existing findings to theories of group membership and ideas for future research regarding prevention of high risk behaviours. (20 mins)

In the final section of the workshop, we will discuss how educational settings as well as other social programs may work more effectively to facilitate the development of adaptive friendships, inhibit or limit maladaptive friendships, and ways that these practices are influenced by a social identity perspective. We will close by sharing best practices and ideas developed by members in the workshop. (35 mins.)

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