

BEST FRIENDSHIP FORMATION: THE ROLE OF CONTEXT AND INTERACTION

THESIS

**Presented to the Graduate Council
of Texas State University-San Marcos
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements**

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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**San Marcos, Texas
December 2006**

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family who supported me throughout my academic career. None of this would be possible without their love and assistance. I dedicate this work to my grandfather, David M. Whitehawk, who always wanted me to succeed and shares my passion for intellectual pursuits. To all the respondents who took time to advance social science, thank you very much.

My thesis committee deserves a tremendous amount of thanks; they will always have my gratitude. Dr. Day, I credit you for changing my life. Words can not express the amount of admiration I have for you and the sociology department you courageously lead. Special thanks goes to Dr. Majumdar whose work and advice prompted this thesis, and to Dr. Martinez who took a personal stake in my work and who always made me feel at home.

This manuscript was submitted on August 7th, 2006.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

An emerging sphere of scholarship is presently examining the best-friend dynamic. Currently, there are very few qualitative studies that examine perceptions of best friend formation. This study is an exploratory qualitative study on a small sample ($n = 14$) of persons between the ages of 17 and 19. Adolescent best friends supply each other with social support that has been shown to protect them from risky behaviors. Having a best friend has the potential to improve life chances or protect the life condition of adolescents. In order to implement or foster the positive effects of best friendship for school or other intervention paradigms, the adolescent best friend relationship must be understood. Specifically, 1) what constitutes best friendship? 2) How does the best friend relationship develop within a social context? 3) What role does level of social embeddedness have in influencing members of a best friendship? 4) How do best friendships prevent adolescents from engaging in risky behaviors? Studying late adolescents in the midst of friendship formation is an excellent population for providing clear perceptions of these inquiries. Answering these basic questions is crucial to begin

applying sociological insight of best-friend benefits associated with adolescent well-being.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the twentieth century, the social status of children changed in America. What developed was the emergence of a new lifestage socially carved from childhood on one side and adulthood on the other, effectively creating a distinguishable period in life between the two. This distinctive category is characterized by extended dependency, formal education, and ambiguous role expectations (White 1989). This study will help fill a gap in sociological literature since little is known about the social idea of a “best-friend” among adolescents. Although, making friends, and similarly making a best-friend, is so fundamental to our lives that lifespan and personality researchers have described making friends as a culturally prescribed “life task” (e.g. Cantor, Norem, Langston, Zirkel, Fleeson, and Cook-Flannagan 1991; Erikson 1950; Havighurst 1953.) Life tasks are mutually shared within various subcultures and are expected behavior for individuals in certain life phases. According to Cantor et al. (1991), making friends is a central life task for college students, as is academic success and gaining personal autonomy.

Friendship in general has been shown to provide social support, but when the adolescent life stage is the focus, the crux of research has centered on negative influences, effectively creating a pessimistic view of adolescent friendships (Crosnoe, Cavanagh and Elder 2003:331). Researcher Willard W. Hartup (1996) has synthesized much of the evidence surrounding the friendship versus non-friendship literature for children and adolescents. His work suggests that most studies distinguish children from one another simply by whether they have friends or not. Hartup argues that by distinguishing between “having friends, the identity of one’s friends, and friendship quality” researchers could be more specific about adolescent developmental consequences and could predict developmental outcomes (1996:1). Therefore, this research intends to increase the sociological understanding of best-friend formation, identity, and quality.

More recently, research has begun to make a distinction between peer and friend influences, by not treating one term as a proxy for the other (Majumdar 2006; Regnerus 2002). Through this distinction between friend and peer influences, a new sphere of study has emerged extending sociological concern to the influencing factors of best friends. It is possible that best friends provide a significant amount of intimacy and social support during adolescence, perhaps second only to parental involvement. Urberg (1997) found that in comparing the influence of best friends to the influence of friendship groups, there were specific discrepancies. For instance, the onset of drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes was influenced solely by the best friend and not the friendship network. In contrast, only the friendship group was influential in increasing the

consumption of cigarettes, whereas both the best friend and the friendship network influenced an increase in alcohol consumption (Urberg 1997).

When studying best friend informal ties, the individuals involved in the dyadic relationship are undoubtedly of crucial importance. However, those individuals cannot be removed from the social and economic context in which their relationship resides, is influenced, and is structured. Thus, it is the principle aim of this current research to describe best friend formation in perspective of its foci of activity, which is a place of recurring social interaction and formative context. In this study, the broad term “context” is defined as “the conditions external to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of specific friendships” (Adams and Allan 1998:4). To simplify, context is extrinsic to friendship development while the best-friend relationship is intrinsic to context. The seemingly boundless extrinsic elements of context are confined, for these purposes, (1) to the embedded networks of the adolescent, (2) the origins and the maintenance of their best-friend relationship and (3) to the respondents’ social/cultural and sub-cultural settings in which the best friendship dyad resides.

Best friend formation (BFF) does not occur in the ideological vacuum of free choice. Urberg (1999) suggests that best friend formation should not be taken out the social context in which it occurred. The phenomenon of BFF is a salient example of the limitations placed on human agency. The commonly purported idea of freedom in American culture suggests that adolescents are free to choose their friends. However, the homogeneity of friendship dyads indicates that other forces are at work and structure friendship through access to social contacts. The literature shows that adolescents tend to choose friends that are similar to them and new friends that may characteristically

resemble older friends. Studies have found that observable characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender and grade level are more predictive of friendship selection than values and personality characteristics (Shrum, Cheek, and Hunter 1998). Similarity and frequent or proximal contact have been identified as definite causal variables in friend selection, but both of these things can be strongly affected by social forces. For instance, family restraints such as curfews or direct instruction from parents as to which friendships are approved of or tolerated and which relationships are unacceptable constrain an individual's choice. Family selection of educational venues and neighborhoods further provide indirect control through the proximal variable of friendship. This efficiently limits friendship selection pools to homogeneous candidates.

The constraints of human agency are also seen at the institutional level. Tracking in the educational system creates proximal situations where youth frequently interact with other youth of allegedly similar intelligence and are isolated from youth who have been classified differently by educational authorities. In another area, Urberg (1999) explains that youth who befriend similar people contribute to the stability of their own behaviors, whereas friendships formed with people of differing character enhances the likelihood of behavioral changes. This is demonstrated in the social context of higher education; one can argue that fraternities and sororities maintain a specific membership based on socioeconomic class largely because of the monetary aspect of joining. Recent research on race (Tatum 2004) points to the importance for friendships in much the same way. Thus the friendships in these groups effectively remain homogenous, in effect, isolating groups like fraternities and sororities in forms of self segregation. In contrast, college students who are not members of exclusive social groups have more opportunity for

diverse friendships. In contrast to homogeneous groups, their behaviors are subject to more variation during college.

Studies concerning adolescent risky sexual behaviors also exemplify the difference between best friend influence and friendship network influence. Pedlow and Carey (2004) argue that sexual risk reduction interventions should be tailored specifically for adolescents because there are specific criteria that differentiate between adolescent interventions and interventions for other populations. Pedlow and Carey's (2004) data indicate that the specific criteria needed would be peer involvement because of the interventions studied; peer norms had the most significant effect on adolescent behaviors. Examinations of intervention strategies indicated that peer educators had a significant effect on reducing risky behaviors, delaying the onset of sex, and improving the rates of condom use. Furthermore, if youth attended the intervention session in the company of their friends, then condom use improved even more. In another study that addressed the effect of individual friendships, Majumdar's (2006) study goes one step further and found that best-friend influence has significant positive and/or protective aspects for adolescent risk behaviors and choice making, in particular risky sexual behaviors and early sexual debut.

Similar to peer influence, best-friend effects operate in both directions. Best-friend support either protects young people from detrimental conditions or encourages risky behavior. The quality of influence from best friendships may be strongly related to the social context where the friendship originated. For example, "Adolescent relationships that derive from a church youth group are likely to be subject to a set of collective norms different from those that derive from a local video arcade," (Feld and

Carter 1998:137). In this sense, the large social context from which friendships originate can have predictable consequences for the quality of friendships. The work of Scott Feld (1981) contributed the concept “foci of activity” as a particular aspect of the social context that functions to draw a limited set of people together in recurring interactions. Herein lies a contextual mechanism for friendship formation. It is apparent that a relatively small group of adolescents, given the opportunity to interact on a regular/semi-regular basis at a church group on one hand, or a video arcade on the other, may develop friendships with each other while incorporating the norms and values of the social context from which their friendships emerge. It is the stability of the social context from which the best friendship forms that is most likely to provide insight into the constructive or destructive properties of the relationship. The forms taken by foci of activity can vary from families, to occupational settings, to local markets, neighborhoods and educational settings. Much remains to be known about the educational setting as a focus of activity for adolescent best-friend formation. Public schools and universities do offer adolescents a range of recurring interaction possibilities, however, how this translates into best friendships with specific qualities remains an empirical question.

Of course, many relationships developed at school do not become friendships, and certainly not best friendships. Teachers, classmates, and rivals all develop within the same focus of activity. It is the voluntary aspect of friendship that makes this relationship distinct, separate from coerced institutional arrangements (Palisi 1986). However, Urberg (1999) notes that an individual’s desire for friendship with another individual may not come to fruition because conditions are not always feasible. The popular youth cannot be friends with everyone who wishes to be his or her friend. Indeed, the norms of social

groups such as “nerds” and “jocks” may preclude people from becoming friends with the constituents of alternate groups. Furthermore the stigma of being labeled a nerd, or a member of the “bad” crowd, may dissuade certain people from seeking friendships with particular persons, and draw other people to friendships with these individuals (Brown, Murry, and Kinney 1994).

The web of other (non-friend) relationships is also very important in developing the character of the friendship relationship. According to Feld and Carter (1998), “The crucial aspect of context captured in the idea of a ‘focus of activity’ is whether a relationship between two people is accompanied by relationships of those two people to many others who are themselves related to one another” (p. 137). Feld and Carter use the term “embedded” (borrowed from Granovetter 1985) to describe relationships of network webs. The principal consequence of embeddedness is that it assists and supports communication among shared contacts (Feld and Carter 1998). The more heavily embedded two people are in a network, or the more they associate with a set of interrelated people, the more others in the network beyond the friendship dyad can become involved and influence the relationship between the two, thereby, effectively shaping the norms and expectations of the network (Adams and Blieszner 1992; Milardo 1982). Conversely, when two best friends reside in a loosely embedded network, or their associations are with unconnected friendship cohorts, the contextual or network influence from others is more attenuated (Feld and Carter 1998). Therefore, the level of embeddedness is crucial and this study aims at an understanding of network relations on quality outcome of best friendships.

In a qualitative study examining friendships, Azmitia, Ittel, and Radmacher (2005) interviewed adolescents and found that transitioning between or out of schools were the most damaging events for friendships, but such transitions also provided the opportunity to make new friends. However, research suggests that, especially for late adolescents who have moved from one foci of activity to another, (for example beginning college) there is a tendency to keep small, heavier embedded networks and to engage in less prestigious or popular positions in their networks (South and Haynie 2004). Additionally, researchers Sanderson, Rahm, and Beigbeder (2005) concluded that college students, in general, spend extensive amounts of time with their friends, which compounds the influence derived from heavily embedded networks. In this circumstance, it would be expected for the contextual network to exert a greater amount of influence on the quality of the friendship dyad within adolescents. Presumably, understanding the network relations and dynamics surrounding the best-friendship relationship will facilitate an understanding of the best friendship character and potential for beneficial effects.

An emerging body of literature has focused on the behavioral maintenance of friendships and how personal characteristics affect friendship quality. Oswald, Clark, and Kelly (2004) created a typology of factors relating to dyadic friendship maintenance. The primary factor concerning the upkeep of friendships is “positivity.” Positivity includes behaviors such as expressing appreciation and shared laughter. Adversely, “negativity” was the most damaging to friendship maintenance. Ironically, Azmitia et al. (2005) also found that adolescents only examined the meaning of friendship when conflict emerged in the relationship. Examining models of friendship, Furman (2001) discovered that

people tended to exaggerate their own personal contribution to any given friendship. Furman (2001) concluded that interviewees portrayed themselves as being on the receiving end of negative friendship interactions and the primary initiators of positive relational events. The other major component of friendship continuation is supportiveness, with openness and interaction playing significant but considerably less vital roles in the dynamic (Oswald et al. 2004).

An important difference emerging from Azmitia et al.'s data (2005) was the difference in the quality of friendship displayed by high and low self-esteem adolescents. Both groups shared the same friendship philosophies, yet the individuals with low self-esteem were more likely to give negative narrations of their friendship experiences. While this seems to indicate that low self-esteem affects friendship quality, this does not preclude the possibility that friendship experiences affect self-esteem. The importance of the quality of best friendship should not be underestimated. A high-quality friendship may protect one individual from engaging in risky behaviors even if the counterpart in the relationship is involved in risky behaviors (Urberg 1997). It is not inevitable that a person who engages in risky behaviors encourages others to do so, and thus it is presumptuous to claim that they would encourage this behavior in people that they care about.

It is possible that a close friend can discourage the other person from participating in risky behaviors. This is reminiscent of Matza's (1964) theoretical assertion of drifting back into conformity. In the context of a subcultural deviant group, close dyadic friendships occur. Matza (1964) explains that within these dyadic friendships, disclosure about ambiguity or ambivalence concerning delinquent behaviors from one person will

likely elicit the same disclosures from the counterpart. This mutual sharing bolsters the confidence of both individuals who begin a path to maturing out of delinquency.

While quality of friendship is evidently important in influencing behavior, the stability of friendship does not appear to be as vital concerning negative behavior. For clarification, “quality” suggests degree of closeness and intensity. “Stability,” on the other hand, indicates duration of the relationship. Urberg (1997) found that the stability of a friendship was unrelated to influenced behavior. This occurs primarily because negative behaviors, such as alcohol or drug consumption only need one exposure, thus the behavior change can happen rather rapidly. The problematic issue is the researcher’s ability to identify and capture positive social influence where as negative influences can be more easily denoted. It is likely that positive behaviors such as school achievement and athletic activities rely more on the stability of friendship due to the investment of time to the situation.

Another important realm of sociological study that must be discussed is gender differences in relation to adolescent friendships. Years of survey research suggests that girls use intimate self-disclosure and emotional support in friendships more than boys, while male adolescents have a greater probability of experiencing “activity-oriented” friendships (Bell 1981; Buhrmester and Furman 1987; Savin-Williams and Berndt 1990). However, the in-depth and nuanced sensitive nature of qualitative research has led to quite different conclusions concerning gender differences in adolescent friendships, suggesting that boys seek out intimacy in their friendships equal to that of girls (Way 1998), and are in tune with the intricacies of same-gender affect in friendship (Chu 2005). Oswald et al. (2004) found that females felt their friendships with other females were

strongest. On the other hand, males felt that their friendships with females were strongest. While far from conclusive, this may indicate that the gender socialization of females encourages the exhibition of positively valued friendship attributes.

Way et al.'s (1999) qualitative study identified trust as the primary aspect in the degree of closeness in friendship; however, trust was conceptualized differently by males and females. Females indicated that sharing and keeping secrets to be the litmus test for trust; males, on the other hand, identified holding money and help in a fight or prevention of harm as the indicator of trust. Interestingly enough, providing and receiving help was also important in determining the closeness of a friend. The variation occurred along ethnic rather than gender lines in this case, with Hispanics and African-Americans identifying help with housework and chores, whereas Asian-Americans indicated help with academic homework. Male and female discrepancies call for further investigation.

A body of literature shows that adolescents are an at-risk population for many problematic behaviors, such as risky sexual behaviors, substance abuse/tobacco use, theft/minor delinquency, poor school performance/behavior problems and low self esteem/depressive symptoms (Bauman and Fisher 1986; Berndt and Keefe 1995; Cheryl et al. 2001; Longmore et al. 2004; Majumdar 2006; Maxwell 2001; Regnerus 2002; Roche et al. 2005). A significant amount of attention has been given to the influencing and mediating factors affecting young people's problematic behaviors. The effects of parenting styles, family structure and socioeconomic advantage are often cited as features influencing the choices of young people. For example, the work of Roche et al. (2005), suggests that neighborhood context affects parenting practices, which relate to initiation of adolescent sexual intercourse. However, peer influence, in particular, has been studied

extensively. Although peers have been found to have constructive or protective effects (Shields and Pierce 2001), the main thrust of adolescent peer influence research has described peer effects in negative terms, that is, for the delinquent/risky aspects of their influence (Akers et al. 1979; Aseltine 1995; Haynie 2001; Maxwell 2001; Piquero et al. 2005; Piquero, Brezina and Turner 2005). One possible reason for the focus on deviant influence is the rapid, visible manifestation of delinquent behaviors as opposed to positive behaviors that gradually become visible over time (Urberg 1997).

If risk reduction for adolescents is the goal, then an accurate understanding of contextual best friend formation and development must be produced. Does voluntarily entering a best friendship vary by social context or degree of network embeddedness? The implications of this study for school programs and agencies concerned with adolescent well being are practical. Beneficial arrangements can be fostered for at-risk adolescents using “buddy systems” or other interventions designed to exercise best friend relations. The results of this study may be applied toward the development of interventions that address or promote adolescent well-being. The current research is a first step in this direction toward understanding the consequences of adolescent best friendship and thereby facilitating its creation.

Much remains to be learned about adolescent friendship for a thorough understanding of best friend formation. A qualitative understanding of the progression of the stranger-to-best-friend continuum is needed. Presently, there is a lack of knowledge concerning the distinctions made by adolescents between peer acquaintance, friendship, and best friendship. What specific characteristics turn a friendship into a best friendship with its apparent benefits? Some qualitative studies have inquired about friendship

advancement, but have not primarily or systematically focused on the topic (Way and Pahl 1999.) A clear appreciation for these distinctions will benefit researchers, school administrators, and caregivers alike. The present research study investigates late-adolescents who have long-term, recently created, or are in the midst of best friendship formation, in order to describe the boundary distinctions and the possible subtle maturity from one relational condition to the next. These research questions are best answered with a qualitative research design. These topics require in-depth levels of inquiry to begin to understand the complexities of best friend development patterns and meanings. The quality of life for our youth may well depend on the quality of their friendships, qualitative inquiry of context and networks will further sociological understanding of the best friend phenomena.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Randall Collins (2004), in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains*, has provided a theoretical framework for analyzing group interactions, including the dyad, by making the situation not the individual the analytical starting point. Analyzing best friendship formation and dynamics in this light helps place the relationship in context where motivations and the mechanism for best friend patterns are realized.

The theory of interaction ritual (IR) was developed with a strong basis in classical sociology. Collins draws upon the work of Durkheim and Goffman, where he synthesized their research and developed his theory. Collins viewed these fundamental insights through the perspective of an unlikely source, Goffman (1959), in order to produce a fresh theory. This is an unlikely combination because of the theoretical macro/micro guise, which usually is seen as sharply dividing sociological subject matter and hence theory. Classical Durkheim (1893; 1912) helped fashion what was to be the science of society. This was largely done by systematically demonstrating connections between large scale social forces and individual behaviors. Micro level sociology began

with classical theorist Georg Simmel (1971) and was largely expanded by George Herbert Mead (1934) and others including Goffman (1959). Micro-interactional level analysis stresses the intimate and small scale where our sense of self is said to derive, where order is negotiated and meaning created.

Collins has expanded and made contemporary insights of one of sociology's most renowned micro theorists. Goffman (1959), clearly emphasizes the situation over the individual in the often cited "not men and their moments, but moments and their men." Within this theoretical framework, the context of the situation takes precedence over the incumbents of any particular encounters. This is a useful basis for our current purpose, more than because it avoids the traps of the ideology of the individual, but also because agency thrives at the micro level. Collins purports that, at the micro level, the local structure (social context) of the interaction is what produces and molds the *energy* of the situation. In this spirit, Collins draws from symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, social constructionism, and sociology of emotions. However, the ritual mechanism is placed at the center of all these approaches to form, as we shall see, an encompassing theory of human behavior.

According to Collins (2004), the term "ritual" is "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership" (7). In this definition, a "successful" ritual has three main components. First, the ritual engages its participants in focused and collective attention and or emotion that lends to temporarily sharing a reality. Collins uses the concept of mutual focus of attention in much the same way as George Herbert Mead's (1925, 1934) key to human consciousness, taking the role of the other.

There are many examples of this on greater and lesser scales, large sporting or concert events on one end and sharing a cigarette break or salutations with verbal interchanges that make up polite conversation on the other. As one and all shout out in exuberant joy or sigh mournfully simultaneously after a goal in a World Cup futbol match, a shared reality of focused attention and emotion is reached. On the other end of the spectrum, talking for the purpose of maintaining friendly contact, “sociable conversation,” is the most basic form of interaction ritual that Collins chronicles, insofar as the exchange constructs solidarity by maintaining a rhythmic flow (Collins 2004:78).

Consequently, both of the previous examples are of different sorts. Collins distinguishes and classifies “natural rituals,” meaning spontaneous, and “formal rituals.” Both sets increase the momentary emotional buzz formed from mutual focus and group solidarity, but natural rituals do so without formally stereotyped procedures. Formal rituals are born from their opposite. They are initiated by a commonly recognized and possibly anticipated system of ceremonial procedures. With that said, many sporting events are not purely formal rituals, but to the extent that the encounters are scripted, for example the seventh inning stretch, they can be seen as rituals or, at least, ritualistic. In the other case, if two contacts call each other by their first names or not is a Goffman-style “natural” ritual.

The second aspect of ritual, symbol creation is derived from the first component of the ritual definition resulting in cohesion generation. A symbol often created from sport interaction rituals is the team itself frequently extended as its logo. Collins states emotionally charged symbols are usually taken from whatever the audience focuses. Symbols can prolong the sense of the experience. Even more, they are needed to

recharge emotional entrainment since Collins contends that they are fleeting, which consequentially accounts for flux and dynamics of societies. For soccer fans, the team is often a symbol of their shared emotion, for music enthusiasts it is usually the performers, or perhaps a specific tune that becomes what Durkheim (1912) called the “sacred object.” However, Collins explains that focused crowds retain relatively “...weak long-term solidarity; their symbols, although charged up by the crowd’s moment of collective effervescence, do not reinvolve the crowd itself, which on the whole is anonymous to most of its participants” (83). Participants in these types of situations can only identify with each other through what they cheered for, although group membership identification is often elevated.

The third component of Collins’ ritual definition, emotional energy (EE), is also central to his theory. It should be conceptualized as a continuum ranging from positive enthusiasm, confidence, or initiative on the one side, down to passivity and depression on the other end. Plus, EE has short-term or dramatic qualities that also transforms into long-term emotional energy resulting from variation in gradations and frequency of uncontested domination or belonging. Gathering of this emotional energy is a principal motivating force for individuals because it feels good and because it is the basis of one’s ability to achieve in social interaction and build up his/her personal identity and strength. Collins insists EE is an empirical phenomenon that can be measured from consciousness flows and physical cues and he devotes considerable time to demonstrating the various ways in which thinking and posturing is linked to emotional entrainment, as well as what is now commonly thought of as personality types.

This usage of ritual is quite different from common parlance where it is analogous with ceremony or formality, and anthropology where ritual is seen as part of the structure of society, including formal methods for order and pattern maintenance. Unlike IR theory, these traditions have largely kept the term narrow, referring to routines by which behavior is directed by historical expectations. This conception may very well be engulfed by the ocean of potential action accounted for by IR theory. Collins' self described "radical" form of microsociology maintains the local source of action where the situation is the analytical starting point, but at the same time, retains fluidity and agency through the principle of ritual chains, where previous encounters exert influence on subsequent situations. This contrasts with mainstream microsociology where ritual is an entryway to larger, higher, and essentially static macro arrangements.

Durkheim (1912), with his work on religious ritual, discussed a mechanism for situational interaction that is still the most compelling to date. His model combines the ingredients for a successful ritual, or the lack thereof for those that fail. Collins reminds us that it is always possible that the ritual will not carry on successfully, that it could fail and become a source of contention or cause future avoidance. Durkheim's work also unambiguously notes that moral beliefs are derived from ritual practice. Goffman (1959) expanded the relevance of ritual by demonstrating how it is brought into being in various degrees throughout everyday life. "Manipulation (self-interested action) is possible precisely because ordinary life is an endless succession of situations that have to be acted out to be defined as social realities, and that constrain both actor and audience to take part in the work of keeping up the impression of reality" (Collins 2004:21). These are important points for Collins theory. Interaction rituals are broad phenomena

encompassing much of our lives, and they can fail or succeed depending on certain factors. Moral boundaries arise from IR that lead into the sociology of emotions capable of investigating the passions of righteousness, retribution, as well as anger, love and much more. Important for the current purposes, Collins points out, “New social connections can be established by extending rituals to new participants; and those excluded by rituals from group structures can fight their way into membership” (12). Here is a starting point for an IR theory explanation of friendship formation, and then on to the more intense emotionally charged best friend relationships. It is possible that jointly participating in IR activities with another person over time, in grand audiences and personal communications, form interpersonal bonds derived from emotional energy built up in one individual and stored in the other as a symbol of shared experience and sentiment.

At certain points Collins assumes extensions of Durkheim’s theory. For example, in *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim (1912) establishes a model of how solidarity and shared symbolism are produced by interaction in small groups. Collins’ logical extension supposes these groups as local, ephemeral, or mutually conflicting, rather than integrated into one large society. In this way, “collective conscience” can exist in little pockets rather than as one huge overarching umbrella that every person in the society is subjected. This is a reapplication of classic sociological concepts into new arenas.

The mechanism of IR theory answers fundamental questions about our complex fluctuating society, essential questions that Durkheim posed during the infancy of sociology; i.e. what holds society together? The answer can be found with a mechanism of social rituals. This mechanism varies in intensity. “Society is held together to just the

extent that rituals are effectively carried out, and during those periods of time when the effects of those rituals are still fresh in people's minds and reverberating in their emotions" (Collins 2004:41). People are united more powerfully at some times than at others, and Collins reminds us that society hanging together is not functioning as an abstract accord. It is composed of groups of people assembled in actual places who feel solidarity with others involved through the results of ritual participation and ritually charged symbolism.

To compare key elements, "status rituals" is Collins' term for sense of belonging or not belonging. On the plane of the personal encounter, in IR theory, status is the aspect of inclusion or exclusion. This should be conceptualized as a continuum in daily life; it manifests as popularity versus unpopularity. "Power rituals" operate when people with disproportionate resources share focus such that some are "order-givers" and some "order-takers."

The IR chain model proposes that individuals acquire or lose emotional energy in both power and status interactions. Order-givers maintain and sometimes gain EE, order-takers lose it; being in the focus of attention and thereby successfully enacting group membership raises EE, experiencing marginality or exclusion lowers it. Interaction rituals are connected in chains over time, with the results of the last interaction (in emotions and symbols) becoming inputs for the next interaction; thus EE tends to cumulate (either positively or negatively) over time. (Collins 2004:18)

As situations unfold, emotional and symbolic capital engages with, or fails to, with people who meet. The extent that these interpersonal encounters are successful IR rituals depends on emotional energy developed through chains of previous encounters. The results of these meetings, in turn, affect the individuals' levels of emotional energy. The final outcome is motivation for repeating those kinds of encounters with particular people and to steer clear of others. Although Collins did not address best friendship

relationships directly, this is a clear theoretical channel of pursuit for explaining best friendship formation.

As mentioned before, IR theory contains great explanatory power even for macro phenomena like stratification and class conflict. In Collins' own words, "...some groups have more resources for carrying out their rituals than others, so that some groups have more solidarity and thus can lord it over those who have less; and that these ritually privileged groups have more impressive symbols and fill their members with more emotional energy" (41). Collins also examines stratification within small groups. Here, we see that some people are more privileged than others by their proximity to the nucleus of the ritual than others. In this way, rituals have twofold stratifying outcomes, between ritual insiders and outsiders; and, within the ritual itself, between ritual leaders and followers. Implications for processes of conflict and control are abounding with such a conception; however, Collins maintains a high degree of consistency. The targets of aggression, the "stuff" people fight over, have also been shown to be created by patterns of social rituals.

For purposes of theoretical accuracy and summation, the following are Collins' premises for IR theory. The first grouping Collins calls "ritual ingredients," the second "ritual outcomes," which are held to the degree that the first are effectively combined.

Ritual Ingredients

1. Two or more people are physically assembled in the same place, so that they affect each other by their bodily presence, whether it is in the foreground of their conscious attention or not.
2. There are boundaries to outsiders so that participants have a sense of who is taking part and who is excluded.
3. People focus their attention upon a common object or activity, and by communicating this focus to each other become mutually aware of each other's focus of attention.

4. They share a common mood or emotional experience.

Ritual Outcomes

1. group solidarity, a feeling of membership;
2. emotional energy [EE] in the individual: a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action;
3. symbols that represent the group: emblems or other representations (visual icons, words, gestures) that members feel are associated with themselves collectively. Persons pumped up with feelings of group solidarity treat symbols with great respect and defend them against the disrespect of outsiders, and even more, of renegade insiders.
4. feelings of morality: the sense of rightness in adhering to the group, respecting its symbols, and defending both against transgressors. Along with this goes the sense of moral evil or impropriety in violating the group's solidarity and its symbolic representations (Collins 2004:48-49).

Interaction Ritual Chain theory attempts to connect cognition and emotion to social structure through situated action. To what extent that these attempts succeed remains to be seen. It is a relatively new model, with a grand breadth and range. Taking theory that is sound on face value and exploring its assumptions, testing its premises, and linking its extensions to the observable world is the business process of science. The intellectual community has begun this task. Book reviews by Gary Fine (2005), Richard Munch (2005), and Paget Henry (2001) have evaluated and commented on the Collins' work; mind you, not without criticism. However, this emerging theory has garnered considerable attention and some support judging from the cited book reviews. IR theory does enrich our knowledge about core processes in social life. The aim of this study is to continue the scientific enterprise and use Collins' perspective along with the sociological approach he built on in order to help understand one of society's most influential of relationships, best friends.

CHAPTER IV

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

This study is concerned with placing best friends at the center of inquiry. The reason for using qualitative methods is to explore the manifestation of best friend relationships from the view points of late adolescents. In addition, the qualitative method allows the participant to share his or her personal experiences and opinions with “insider” knowledge about the topic. Respondents are “vessels of knowledge” (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002:16). From this point of view, we can learn of the “deeper” self by conducting in-depth interviews with informants. As a discipline, we gain a deeper understanding about how best friend formation (BFF) is perceived to occur within a social context.

In any scientific investigation of social phenomena, it is necessary to address the concerns, flaws, and gaps of previous studies. Several issues have been raised concerning the study of peer/friend influence. While it is unrealistic for this study to settle all of these issues, I do intend to address some of these methodological arguments. Urberg (1999) raises some issues concerning the methodology used for studying peer influence.

The primary issue is that most researchers use cross-sectional data, which may show correlations but are not necessarily useful in proving that peer influence was the causal factor in explaining similarity among friends.

For clarity, a specific example of the issue of correlation is similarity. Many studies attribute the similarity of friends to peer influence. This idea ignores the possibility of reverse causality, in which it was the adolescents' similarity that led them to be friends. It seems likely that the relationship is circular with similarity causing friendship and friendship influence causing similarity, but a third possibility can occur. It may be that an outside experience shared by both individuals, such as intervention programs or even tragedy, caused the similarity. Ideally, a longitudinal study of best friend influence would be superior in identifying whether this influence is a causal factor in behavior. For instance, if a specific behavior such as substance abuse appeared between the beginning of the study and subsequent interview intervals, then pinpointing the onset of the behavior of one individual in comparison to the other individual will create a clearer picture of influence. Unfortunately, a longitudinal study is costly and extremely time consuming. Thus, I am prevented from embarking upon this path. The time allotted, and availability of resources limits this study to the cross-sectional sphere. However, the qualitative nature of this study will examine the issue of similarity from the stated viewpoint of the respondents. Focusing on the positive influence of best friendships, my research will allow the interviewees to narrate influential occasions in their relationships.

Another methodological issue called into question is the sampling used in previous research. Many studies of peer influence use students in specific schools as

their respondent base. This approach ignores the fact that many students have friends that are not in the same school, or possibly friends that are older or not in school at all. Thus, studies that focus on school students may be inaccurate concerning peer influence and friendship dynamics. This study will rectify this methodological flaw by using first year college students as proxies for late adolescents. By studying people at the young adult life stage, this study is not limited to the school setting, and I am able to interview the other member of the friendship dyad without regarding to location or contextual setting.

To take full advantage of the data, triangulation of two sources of data was used to conduct this research. The first data set came from a content analysis of paragraphs (N=115) written by students, the second from in-depth interviews with late adolescent best friend dyads. The sample for the second data source was derived from asking volunteer respondents from the first to participate further in an in-depth interview and elicit participation from their designated best friend.

The second data source sample consists of 17, 18, and 19 year olds. Faculty members in the College of Liberal Arts granted me access to freshmen-level “University Seminar” classes at Texas State University San Marcos (Texas State) for research purposes. The University Seminar course is required for all entering freshmen in the university. A purposive sample derived from these classes tends to be consistent with the typical composition of Texas State freshmen at large.

In an effort to understand best friend formation and possible predictors of influences within the formative context and level of network embeddedness, a dyad level of analysis is needed. One individual’s perspective about the best-friend relationship

may provide initial information; however, a perception by both adolescents includes important advantages for analyzing the intimate relational meanings of this especially influential friendship. For instance, level of friendship reciprocation and verification of common experiences can be determined. Researchers have also found data from single-respondent studies on behavior similarity between friends to be erroneously overestimated (Moffitt 1993; Regnerus 2002). Therefore, this research on best friend dyads was obtained through in-person interviews conducted separately for each individual.

In order to achieve a sample at the dyad level, age demographics and contact information were requested from the students in an invitation letter during the first data collection. After the students read an introduction of the study and a confidentiality assurance statement, participants were asked their age, which was later used for sample selection. Presumably, the students who read the introduction and confidentiality statement, and filled out the name and contact information section of the letter intended to participate in the study. Next, the respondents were asked to name and provide contact information about their best-friends, but in effort to focus the study, the respondents were asked not to include romantic partners or relatives. Finally, the class of student-respondents was asked to write, in their own words, a short paragraph on the question, “What is a best friendship to you?” These data were used for content analysis and are included in the results section of the research. For analysis purposes, initial coding was primarily employed creating categories of responses, which were tallied for frequency. (See Table I.)

Having access to large numbers of first-semester students is an excellent opportunity for examining the complex conception of best friend meaning. This initial content analysis of respondent writings gave the research a starting point and informed questions for the expansion of the interview guide. In an attempt to disguise who decided to be included in the study, when finished, the class was asked to fold the letters of intent and written paragraphs in half and give them all to me whether completed by students or not.

Qualitative analyses of the second data set consisted of sixteen in-depth dyadic face-to-face interviews with individuals designated from the initial letter of intention. This purposive sample was designed so that four best friendships are represented for each of the possible same-sex configurations, male-male and female-female. Due to data loss, one female dyad interview was not recorded in its entirety; therefore only seven dyads were analyzed for this research. For this reason, unfortunately gender analysis was not included as part of the final analysis. Each interview was audio tape recorded and lasted approximately one hour. The respondents were also informed of their right to stop the interview or audio recording at any time. All data collected were stored under lock and key, and no personally identifiable information was associated with any of the data. All respondents' names and identifications they mentioned were changed to pseudonyms. A coding system implementing both initial and focused techniques was implemented for the analysis of data and transcription processes. As the sole researcher, I maintained confidentiality as I contacted sets of best friends in order to set up meeting arrangements. I maintain the right to reuse data collected from this study for future purposes with the condition that all respondent confidentiality assurances be maintained.

The strength of this research lies in the depth of contribution it will bring to sociology, qualitative literature, to the voice of adolescents themselves and, it is hoped, to adolescent quality of life. However, there are clear limitations with qualitative methods. The predominant weaknesses include an inability to generalize to populations, and a limited number of institutions that affect social change who utilize qualitative data to the method's full potential. The work of Majumdar (2006), Maxwell (2001) and others have already quantified some of the significant protective influences of best friends. However, I identified a significant gap in the literature concerning the process of developing best friends. This process could be encouraged by adults interested in achieving the protective effects of best friend formation. More needs to be known about friendship formation if schools or agencies are going to use the information. Perhaps a more important question I propose with this research is, "Are there conditions that can be created or fostered that will promote the factor of adolescent best friendship and thus protect adolescents from risky behaviors?" This is vital information for any discussion of adolescent welfare and the application of best friend relations.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS: CONTENT ANALYSIS

As discussed previously, the notion of best friend is virtually absent from the sociological literature. Through the sociological tradition of scientifically examining taken-for-granted associations, a content analysis was conducted in order to save the concept of best friendship from cursory explanation. Students from three entry level courses at Texas State were asked to write paragraphs for two open-ended questions administered by a researcher. The questions read: *What does it mean to you to be a best friend*, and *what does it mean to you to have a best friend?* These two closely related questions were both asked so that respondents were provided ample opportunity to express their thoughts on the subject. 115 college students responded to these questions. In the analysis, responses to both questions were combined, categories were established and instances of reference were tallied. Only categories with 15 or more references were used for analysis, the discussion of which follows. (See Hierarchy of Best Friendship Qualities, Table I.)

The category, *There for each other* was referred to (77) times, which is 67% of the sample, by far the most cited sentiment from the respondents. The importance of this category is obvious. Being “there” for a best friend was at the forefront in the descriptions, often mentioned in the first sentence of the paragraphs. The phrase was used with only small variations, for example “there for me,” “there for you,” “there for him/her,” “being there.” However, this broad sentiment was described more thoroughly by many students. The descriptions include dimensions of social support and interpersonal action. In the most general way, “being there for each other” could encompass many of the categories laid out in this analysis, which points to importance of this dimension for best friendship. Categories that may overlap with “*There for each other*” are: *Share experiences* (26 references), *Help me/you out* (24 references), *Rely/Depend on* (16 references), *Support* (17 references), *Listens to problems* (18 references), and *Do stuff with* (15 references). A typical response from the sample is, “It (best friendship) means being there for someone. Having someone to do things with that you both enjoy as well as talking about personal things.” It is evident in this statement that “being there for someone” is an umbrella statement, and qualified by statements of interpersonal action and intimate disclosure.

However, there is another aspect to this sizeable category. The *There for each other* grouping was subdivided with another category, *Through thick and thin* (43 references), to point to a qualitative difference important to many respondents. When speaking of being “there” for best friendships, 37% of the sample indicated availability and readiness for support/help and opportunity for disclosure during both good/easy and

sad/hard times. There is an unconditional element to “being there” that respondents stress is influential in lasting BF relations, as this passage serves to show.

It (best friendship) means that I have an inseparable relationship with someone who I care about and love more than anything. We are always there for each other through the bad times and the good. She is the only person that truly understands me and knows how to make me feel better.

Implicit in this quote and reminiscent of other responses as well, friendships are relationships that envelop positive and superficial experiences that are kept upbeat. On the other hand, *best* friendships adhere to social norms that allow for and perhaps require periodic “heavy” or serious interaction resulting from or described as “bad times.”

Responses in this vein communicate that best friendships as essential, or at least convenient, for deep and pressing emotional extraction and console.

Many of the paragraphs analyzed for this research cover several of the main categories derived from the data. For instance, one respondent’s complete statement was,

Being a best friend to me means always being their (sic) for that someone. No matter what you are doing if your best friend needs something you drop it and go to their aid. It is a lot of little things like knowing that you can tell them anything and they will not judge you. They know everything about you and you talk all the time. It means a lot to me to have a best friend. If you have a best friend you know that you always have someone to be there for you no matter what is going on in their lives.

It is apparent in this statement that best friends should be willing and able to help each other cope with the pressures and tribulations of life, even if one is “busy” at the time. This sentiment was shared by eight others in the sample, which does not reach a critical level of instances but is indicative of the *Familial* (15 references) like qualities to best friendship that respondents spoke of. Family members are often expected to abandon any task when one of their own is in crisis. This attitude spills over for some into best friendship normative expectations.

The previous quote also mentioned “not judging.” In one category, a *Non judgmental* character of acceptance, which allows for more complete disclosure, was described by nineteen of the respondents as an import characteristic for best friends. Likewise, another respondent stated, as a best friend “Your (sic) someone who the person can express insecurities to w/out judgment and/or seek advice in how to manage them.” In this way, a best friendship may be more ecumenical than family relations where instilling moral values often trumps tolerance. However, this finding implies a conflict couched in BF relationships. Candor in guidance or advice is a form judgment; knowing what is “best” for another suggests a critique of behavior or opinion. Although this process may be closely related to the protective achievements of BF relations, it may also be an example of adolescent desire ambivalence.

Moreover, many respondents like the one above, articulated that being able to tell their BF anything or having *No subject off limits* (19 references) was important to them. This may lead into a need for many respondents who express a want of *Honesty and frankness* (20 references) from their best friend counterpart. For example, one student wrote, “A best friend should hold their friend accountable and tell them the truth even when it hurts.” Or another who said, “They (best friends) don’t judge you and they always give you an honest opinion, even if it’s not what you want to hear.” Taken together, these two findings that best friends should divulge all on one hand and be candid on the other, suggests BF relationships have familial benefits of genuine concern, but preside over issues possibly withheld from actual family members.

In some respects, this combination of relations may account for another prominent category of responses, *Be yourself* (15 references). Some respondents account for

feelings of unfettered exposure of their inner essence. For instance, “It (best friendship) means that you are the most comfortable, the most like your ‘true self’ when you are around that person.” It appears that many of the late-adolescents in this sample engage with best friends for reasons of self affirmation. Another student echoed this reasoning with a Goffmanesque response, “To be a best friend you are someone who your best friend trusts more + can feel comfortable displaying what goes on ‘backstage.’” In clearly sociological terms, this respondent analyzed his own experience of sharing aspects of his impression management process with his best friend.

Final issues derivable from the block quote above concern extent of interpersonal knowledge and quantity of communication. A *Knows me best* (17 references) category was fashioned from references like, “To be a best friend to someone means knowing all sides of them,” and “To me a best friend is someone who you know very well on a different level than you know anyone else. A best friend knows what you think about things without you telling them and they know how you will respond to things before asking you.” These quotes point to how zealous some respondents were about their claims of cognitive familiarity. Presumably, interpersonal knowledge increases as quantity of communication increases; the category *Investing time* (13 references) was created for respondents who were explicit about spending large amounts of time as characteristic of their best friendship.

The second most cited category in the analysis dealt with issues specifically surrounding the concept of *Trust* (38 references). This means nearly one-third of the sample referenced trustworthiness when answering the research probe. It is apparent that these respondents, who have already been shown to desire intimate disclosure and

forthrightness, also require prudence with information exchanged. The same is true for the intentions of advice and direction. For many respondents, trust meant steering your BF in the “right” or positive direction. Similarly, a *Protects me* (12 references) category tallied responses indicating BF interpersonal safeguarding. Or as some responded, having your best friend’s “best interests at heart.” The sample described trust as one or all of these dimensions. For example,

Someone to rely on and trust with what you share, as well as someone who you can be frank with who will always point you in the right direction. You’ve invested enough time and trust in this person to be able to do away with the ‘walking on eggshells’ state. A best friend is someone you don’t have to try and impress because they know and respect you for who you are and what you do, not what you portray. They will keep you out of trouble.

Trust is an important issue for respondents who sometimes set up situations or come across circumstances that test the trustworthiness of their best friends. For instance, “Trust is the most important factor to me. I knew I had a best friend when she refused to date my ex-boyfriend. Because she wouldn’t jeopardize what we have.”

Another substantial category, *Fun* (22 references), covers all the references to enjoying time and activities together. Many respondents certainly convey a sense of joy and enthusiasm when describing their BF relations. Having fun together is an essential component to maintaining strong BF associations, or so these respondents maintain, “...to have a best friend means having someone to tell joke to and make coke come out of his nose when he laughs so hard.” Likewise, another student wrote, “I have a great time with my best friend. We have so much freakin (sic) fun together! If we didn’t then we probably wouldn’t be together so much and not be there when we really need each other.”

Puts me above (19 references), is a category dedicated to the references that compare members of the BF dyad to other people, and state in effect, that individual in

the BF relationship are superior, or at least enjoy time with each other more than time with others. Case in point,

It (best friendship) means to me that someone enjoys their time with me more than other people. I am someone to be cherished and loved. There will always be someone there for me and they can always depend on me to be there for them. There's always someone I can have fun with because they are greater than everyone.

The comparative nature of best friendship did lead to some respondents expressing feelings of success reminiscent of victory in competition. To demonstrate, one respondent stated, "This guy is really cool and he picked me to become best friends with. That made me feel great and I became more popular." This quote also highlights individuals who gain in social status as a result of forging BF relationships.

From the evidence provided here, and from the data collected in general, it is an accurate assessment that most respondents feel best friendship is crucial to their well being. Furthermore, many respondents included *Praises* (18 references) of the BF relationship. This quote is representative of both these findings. "Having a best friend is great! I feel less lonely with a best friend. My best friend means everything to me and I wouldn't be me without her." This statement relays belief that interaction with others and her best friend in particular, is at least partially responsible of her sense of self. Others in the sample reaffirmed this, creating the category, *Wouldn't be me* (8 references). Similarly, another respondent wrote, "Having a best friend is one of the greatest gifts I could ever ask for. I am where I am today thanks to him."

Taken together, this analysis outlines the social idea of best friendship. The most salient norms and expectations of the respondents have been communicated in their own words along with a quantifiable hierarchy of priority. It is a stated purpose of this

research to illuminate the BF relationship. This small content analysis provides a foundation of what best friendship means for individuals. These conclusions are key for an understanding of what adolescents think they want as well as gain from BF interactions. As a BF, each wants an individual who will “be there for them,” but it is important to be specific about what that entails. These respondents indicated desires for a combination of durability, stability, availability, competence, enjoyment and uninhibited free expression. Best friend relations can exhibit benefits similar to family support, but often extend past family boundaries especially when concerning sensitive issues or deviance. Plus, best friends want to trust each other and that means divulging vulnerabilities without regret, and protecting each other from mistakes; be they risky behaviors or simply social blunders. Knowledge of what constitutes best friendship is the first step toward a comprehensive understanding of this complex and highly valuable social arrangement. What follows next is a data driven representation of best friendship formation.

Table I. Hierarchy of Best Friendship Qualities.
(N=115)

Category	# of References
Through thick and thin	43
There for each other	34
(above combined)	77
Trust	38
Share experiences	26
Help me/you out	24
Fun	22
No subject off limits	19
Puts me above	19
Non-judgmental	19
Listens to problems	18
Praises (BF relationships)	18
Support	17
Knows me best	17
Rely/Depend on	16
Familial	15
Do stuff with	15
Be yourself	15
Investing time	13
Protects me	12
Many similarities	12
Wouldn't be me	8
Busy (aid even when busy)	8

Figure I. Dyad Characteristics.

DYAD	Age	Length of Relationship	Foci of Activity	Agent of Interaction	Level of Embeddedness
Chris & John	17/18	8 years	Neighborhood		Heavy
Frank & Robert	19/19	4 ½ years		Girl friend	Light
Ken & Steve	18/18	5 years	School/Bus route		Light
George & Jack	18/18	4 years	School		Heavy
Mary & Beebe	17/18	2 months	Dorm		Light
Summer & Susan	19/19	2 ½ years	Work		Light
Gabby & Katrina	17/17	6 months		School friend	Heavy

CHAPTER VI

RESULTS: SOCIAL MODEL OF BEST FRIEND FORMATION

Researchers have indicated that making friends is a culturally designated goal or life task (Cantor et al. 1991; Erikson 1950; Havighurst 1953), and it is the position of this researcher that this culturally designated process extends to best friendship. It logically follows that if friendship and best friendship are cultural expectations, then a socially constructed direction or formula exists for accomplishing this task. This process does not seem to have been explicitly communicated; thus, it is the purpose of this qualitative inquiry to examine the process of best friend formation and explicitly identify this process. This goal is accomplished by late adolescent in-depth interviews among a small sample of 7 dyads.

The respondents of each dyad in this study indicated similar experiences, fitting into a pattern of formation that aligns with the findings of previous research on friendship. Although the data from this investigation reinforce the findings of previous studies, these preceding studies discuss friendship alone and neglect to include the

distinction of best friendship. The social model I am introducing builds on the friendship findings and explains the progression into best friendship.

While it is important to note that “interaction rituals” (Collins, 2004) can emerge at any point in the process, the Social Model of Best Friendship (SMBFF) begins with the social context in which people may encounter one another (Adam and Allen 1998; Urberg 1999). The social contexts of neighborhoods, schools, and work limit the available candidates for friendships. It is at this stage that individuals meet people and become acquainted, and thus, acquaintances.

S: How did you meet you BF?

Ken: At school, I met him at school; when I moved into the town.

S: How did you first meet your best friend?

Larry: I first met John when I moved from Austin to Waco. And we had just moved into a house and he actually came by selling chocolate door-to-door. And I answer the door and I was pissed because my mom wouldn't let me buy any. And he says that my mom went to the door later and said we were new in the neighborhood and to get to know me.

While attending the same school and living in the same neighborhood certainly increases the chances of two people meeting, many relationships are formed due to more specific aspects within the social context. The second stage of the model emerges through the foci of activity (FOA) or the agent of interaction (AOI). The FOA serves to repeatedly bring the same group of people together for an activity (Feld 1981), such as in a classroom where the same students will repeatedly interact with each other for a relatively long time period. The FOA narrows the available candidates further by

constraining interactions of certain individuals with other specific individuals. It is in the FOA that people tend to move from acquaintances to actual friendships.

S: *How did you meet your BF?*

George: *I met my best friend in a high school class. Pretty much what happened was we started talking the first few weeks of the school year and you just keep talking and keep talking and then you say like "Where do you live?" And so when you ask them where they live and they tell you You know, that kind of strengthens the bond between you two's relationship. And then you start to hang out.*

S: *How did you meet your best friend?*

Beebe: *We are actually suite mates in the dorms and we met in January when I moved back in the dorms. We met in the bathroom.*

Distinguishing the foci of activity from the social context is a very important aspect of best friend formation. Existing within the same social context may not be sufficient for formation without the FOA. Jack's recount clearly demonstrates the distinction.

I did four years ROTC in high school, which pretty much ended up being a mistake. But, he actually moved here his sophomore year. We didn't actually know each other until senior year. We were in the same ROTC class together.

Furthermore, Interaction Ritual chains begin to form through the foci of activity.

Steve: *I'd get on the bus and sleep because my mother was the bus driver so the route would start at my house. And it takes me fifteen minutes to get to town. But we'd take this big loop, about an hour and ten minute bus ride, just go loop all throughout the back roads. He was about halfway on. So he'd get on and we'd wake up and talk and if there was homework we didn't do for class, we'd do our homework. You know, and we'd tell stories and all that kind of fun stuff.*

In many instances the foci that allow the initial and repeated interactions are not activities, but a person—the agent of interaction. The AOI serves as a gatekeeper because he or she knows two people who do not know each other. The AOI introduces the other two people to each other either with the express purpose of creating a

relationship, or as a latent effect of some other action. Because the AOI is a medium that focuses the interaction of one particular individual with another particular individual, the AOI also constrains the selective process of friendship. Using the AOI method, people become acquaintances and through repeated events mediated by the gatekeeper, there is ample opportunity for the acquaintance to progress to friendship. Robert provides a poignant example of the AOI.

Robert: Me and this girl I was living with at the time, we were in Florida. I just finished up high school and was going to move back to Austin, she was moving back with me. She had a girlfriend that lived here in Austin. They grew up together and knew each other. It was one of the contacts that she knew and wanted to get in touch with her so she would know somebody in town. When I drove into town, those two hooked up Kathy and Karla, and Karla was hanging out with Frank, like she just brought him along...And then after that, you know, since the girls were pretty good friends, they were hanging out with each other and Frank would come over to my house and we would hang out and we would start to talk and it just kind of grew from there.

After the social context and the FOA/AOI have constrained the available friendships candidates, the human agency of the individual is partially asserted. The individual selects friends from the strata available. While people may believe that they can freely choose their friends, selection is, according to previous research and the present data based on proximity and similarity (Shrum Cheek, and Hunter 1998; Urberg 1999). People's friendship choices are structured spatially near them and that share similar interests, history, or characteristics. Proximity of the other person as a major factor in the creation of friendships was cited by some of the respondents.

Steve: We rode the same bus route. And so we were always sitting in the back of the bus you know. We'd always get to talking and we had an English class together and a couple of other classes because it's a pretty small high school.

Beebe: We share the bathroom and see each other everyday---multiple times a day. And she comes into my room all the time and we talk about our day and I go talk to her. I don't know how it happened so fast.

Similarity of the respondent dyad was also frequently indicated

Robert: *We were into the same kind of movies and then we started talking about you know where we came from. We both had pretty ***ked up childhoods. And a lot of them were fairly similar as far as a loss of parent, the black sheep of the family, you know that kind of stuff and there was just a lot of stuff that we could relate to.*

Frank: *We just had a lot in common I guess—musically and our sense of humors are really similar. So yeah it was really like that like right off the bat we started hanging out immediately.*

Mary: *Like we clicked a lot. We had a lot of the same interests like in TV shows, and music and things like that. We are both outgoing. We clicked a lot faster than I thought we would.*

Beebe: *We both have similar personalities. We share a lot of the same interests. We have the same pet peeves.*

In the SMBFF, filtering friends through proximity and similarity is called Selection Bias. It is at the stage of selection bias that a person chooses a potential best friend. Anybody interacting in the FOA/AOI stage has the potential to be chosen as a possible best friend. However, the people who are actually given the opportunity are given this chance because of proximity and similarity, which are the primary variables in the progression of friendship. People selected at this stage are allowed increased intimacy and the relationship becomes a close friendship.

The next step in the friendship process is Progression/Trial. All of the respondents indicated that their friendships progressed by the process of communication. The topic of communication was irrelevant, as long as the two individuals were able to continuously communicate with one another. Once comfortable communication was established, one member of the dyad would introduce the relationship trial. This trial could be used to determine whether the relationship would advance to best friendship.

The other individual might be tested by being entrusted with some secret, other personal information or by being called upon for assistance in times of hardship. If the individual receiving the trial reacted in a positive or supportive manner or if the secret was kept, then advancement to best friendship could follow.

Chris: And I saw him after a football game and he let me know that she (John's grandmother) had passed away and I gave him a hug and I saw his emotions for the first time and that was one of the times where he let me know you know what was going on in his life and it was a difficult time for him no doubt. And just the fact that he opened up to me and that we were able to be there for each other, that's when I realized that I had a really you know, I had a really good friend.

Beebe: We talk about a lot of the same stuff we share. You know, I tell her about my day and she tells about her day. You know we can talk together about a lot of stupid things that I can't share with other friends. Ah, Oh God, we talk about personal stuff. We talk about periods. We talk about sex. We talk about all that stuff together that I couldn't have shared with any of my other friends from high school and anything like that.

John: He had a lot of problems with his girlfriend at first. He would come to me every single time. He would call me at four in the morning once he got done fighting with her and I realized you know like this kid could tell me anything. I'm not going to say it to anybody else and I'm going to give him my honest opinion of what I think. Looking back on it I realize how close of friends we actually were without even realizing it.

Summer: Well, I was spending a lot of time with my really needy boyfriend who kept me from doing my work. I was doing OK in my classes, but I couldn't do this one paper. I didn't have enough time and I really didn't know to get it done. I could have failed and that might have been the end for me. I started to think who could help me. When I explained my situation to Susan she made me feel a lot better. She said we could do it together and she really helped me focus. We stayed up all night. I never wrote such a good paper. I needed her and she rose to the challenge like amazingly. That changed the way I looked at her and I'll spend forever repaying it.

The Progression/Trial phase occurs simultaneously with the Defining Moments aspect of the model. Interaction rituals chains occur consistently throughout the model, but it is at this point that a solidification of interaction rituals particular to the friendship occurs. The activities that the dyad engages in become symbols of the friendship.

Usually these activities are conventional, such as playing sports or playing video games, yet quite often they are risky activities like drinking and partying. There is nothing particularly extravagant about any of these activities in that the vast majority of people could participate in them, however the previous steps in the friendship model has led particular people to share these experiences together.

Beebe: Well mainly we just go to Cowboys Dance Hall, in San Antonio. That's basically where we go; we go every Thursday, or almost every Thursday. That's pretty much the only place where we go or we'll go sit at Jill's apartment and we'll drink.

George: We just hang out at the house. We play video games, we talk, we go just joy riding.

Ken: We go to the Rec, play sports, or play intramural together. We did a lot of online gaming together, computer games that sort of thing.

Chris: We would go to his house and his grandma would make us food and we would play video games. We played this one particular 007 on Nintendo 64.

All friends in a group may participate in an Interaction Ritual, but certain members share more vivid memorable experiences. Occasionally some significant moment is captured in a memory snapshot. These memory snapshots are evidently significant because in spite of the countless interactions and memories in a dyadic relationship, there tends to be just a few specific memories that are frequently cited by the dyad and obviously hold emotional significance.

Chris: It was a revolutionary thing and I managed to spill a soda, a red soda, in his house almost everyday in a new way.

George: We just have a night on the town. And it's funny because he doesn't usually act so wild. But this night he was like in rare form. So it was a bonding experience because he was so hilarious...not so stiff...like he had just come out of a trance or something. And that's pretty much the thing that brought us closer.

John: He flipped my bike on me when I was in the fifth grade. Yeah, we are standing outside the yard but I'm riding my bike and he has a little basketball.

And I said, I bet you can't hit me with it. And he goes, bet you I can- he yells from the yard. Tosses the thing, you see between the spoke and the wheel like that metal bar right in middle in the wheel...I watched my front wheel just stop, my bike flips all the way over. I fall on straight asphalt. He brings it up every time we have to meet somebody; yeah I flipped this kid on his bike.

Through the data, these memory snapshots give a clearer identification of best friends. Furthermore, in the case of multiple best friends these snapshots distinguish the ultimate or primary best friend. Due to the definitive factor of these memories, they are referred to as Defining Moments in the social model of BFF.

S: How is your BF different from your friends that are less close?

George: I think one of the key differences would have to be experiences. Meaning Jack and I, to be more grammatically correct, we have a lot more experiences that bond. For instance like, there was a time when we were driving at night and the roads were slick and spun. We didn't crash, thank god; the car did not tip. We just spun and we ended up on the other side of the street. That was funny! But that's like a unique experience that only him and I share. And now that's a best friend. Now with a regular friend you don't have as many experiences. You know, your experiences extend to seeing a movie or hanging out at the local pool club down here or just playing video games and stuff. Now with best friends you have experiences that make it a unique type of thing.

John: I didn't know what was going on with him, but he said before you say it I'm in. I said I want to go to Florida and he said I already said that I'm in I'm there for you. So he helped me drive to Florida one day when I went to go visit a friend. He is one of those kids if I asked him to do anything, put his life on the line, the kid would do it. He is my absolute best friend.

Robert: I just found out that my girlfriend that I was living with was seeing somebody behind my back. And when I came home in two weeks I had to find a place, move, pack all that stuff. He came back (from Seattle) New Years Eve and the next day, New Years Day I had all of my stuff packed. He was in San Antonio staying with some friends. I was up here in Austin packing and all this stuff. He drove up from San Antonio, New Years Day by himself. He helped me get a U-Haul. He helped me load everything and I mean he just landed in Texas hours before and he drove all the way from San Antonio to Austin to help me load up all my stuff and put it in storage. And that was a pretty big deal; that was one of the defining moments in our relationship.

The final phase of the model is the current disposition of the relationship.

Emerging from the data were three possible relationship dispositions. The first is Maintenance, in which interaction rituals have continually been successful and they are currently ongoing. The best friendship is stable and emotional energy is continuously recharged in this dyad through the Interaction Rituals.

S: Ok, how have you kept up this best friendship over time?

John: I call Chris once every day and a half or so. I call and say what's up. I call all of them a lot of the time, but me and Bill probably talk the most though, because he is so close. Like 30 minutes away, I can drive over there anytime I wanted to or he can come here. So you just keep remembering to call every now and then.

George: The big thing is contact, because if you don't keep contact...it's kind of like, when you're taking a plant and you're putting it in the soil, you have to keep watering it. Well you've got to keep watering a friendship over time otherwise it's just going to wilt. So, over time I've been keeping in contact with him. We've been ...every now and then when he's available and I'm available we go hang out. You know either just play video games or just chill. Phone calls and Internet really help a lot because you can stay in constant contact without actually having to physically see the person. So it makes friendships easier to maintain.

A second possible disposition is Failure, in which one or both parties have failed to correctly perform the interaction ritual, and, thus, the friendship is currently defunct and the emotional energy is diffused. This relationship status seems to be characterized by at least one individual in the former dyad embarking on a destructive path of negative behavior.

Robert: After they were dating I went through a bad breakup and I don't know what really happened, but he kind of disappeared off the face of the Earth through all of my bad stuff, which is probably one of my lowest points. And I think a lot of that, from what he was telling me, I think he was kind of reading it as me being jealous of this new girl taking all of his time, which wasn't the case at all. I just needed my friend to be there even to be on the phone saying, hey man it's all going to be all right if you need me; I'm here. It's not like I needed to come over and offer me support, I just needed to know that if—you know he was there if I needed to call him.

Frank: *I guess in a sense I kind of abandoned him dealing with my own junk while he was going through all of this and whatever. So that was a pretty big rift for a little while even though nothing was said about it. I got arrested. I didn't have anybody else to call.*

Chris: *I had a falling out...It was a pact that we had always had and we never let...he had tried to take this girl from me. Me and this girl were just hanging out. I didn't even know that he liked her...I had no idea he had a crush on her he didn't tell me. He went behind my back and tried to get her over to his house. And when I found out about it I was really upset.*

Chris explains that this incident was resolved and the pact renewed for three years. But failure occurred after he dumped a cheerleader girlfriend.

I don't know what her motives were but late that summer she waited until he got drunk and she told him she liked him, she told him she didn't care how many girls he had been with. He thought he had a chance with her. And I told him the number one rule of friendship—you don't go for your buddy's old girlfriends and he said he had to see for himself that if he was in love with her...And I told him I'm not going to hold this against you if you do go for her, but I'm not going to be there for you. We made a pact together. We made a promise, it is something I would have kept for the rest of my life, no exceptions...I said O.K. and it hurt and I walked away and things haven't been the same since.

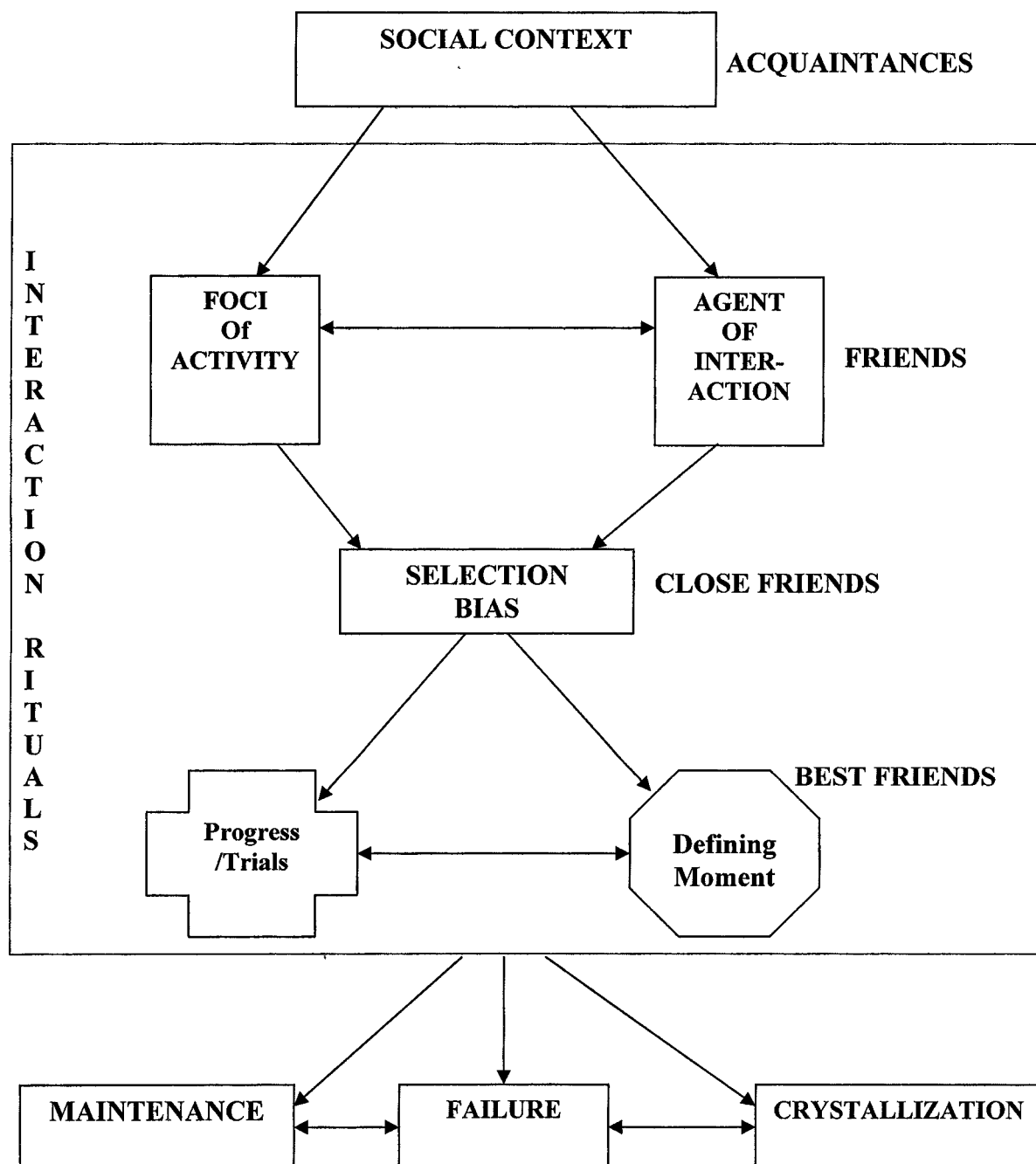
A third possible disposition is Crystallization of the best friendship. This status primarily occurs as a result of major transitions such as changing schools, leaving for college, moving, or changing jobs. The primary variables of proximity and similarity decrease due to this transition. In other words, people become spatially distant and take on new and differing interests. The Interaction Rituals between the members of the dyad have not failed, however they are no longer enacted and a cooling of emotion ensues. Although the IR is not being performed and the other person in which emotional energy is being stored is not physically seen, the members of the dyad symbolically crystallize their relationship by referring to each other as best friends. The process of friendship

does not appear to be ongoing or in a Maintenance state, thus the duo symbolically preserves the relationship that had existed. This symbol is still very powerful and on occasions that the two are reunited symbolic energy is temporarily reactivated.

The Disposition categories are not immutable, or even necessarily two-sided. Of course, Maintenance can turn to failure or crystallization and it is evident from the data that failure and crystallization can return to maintenance. Furthermore, the status of the best friendship may be failure for one part of the dyad but is crystallized for the other side of the dyad.

The social model of best friendship demonstrates the intersection of greater social forces, human agency, and interaction rituals that form best friendships. These relationships have a patterned evolution, the culmination of which is ever-changeable. This social model indicates that best friendship is not a specific event, but a dynamic process in our lives; therefore, best friendship is changeable and ultimately pliable to social influences and interventions.

Figure II. SOCIAL MODEL OF BEST FRIENDSHIP FORMATION.



Social Embeddedness

A subsidiary goal of this research is to examine the level of embeddedness of friendship networks surrounding best friendship dyads. This was largely accomplished by asking respondents open-ended and probing questions regarding the degree of continuity and association between their various friends. Put another way, respondents were asked if they had separate friendship networks (light) or one (heavy) group of friends that all knew and interacted with each other. While no dominant patterns emerged from the data, there were intriguing findings. Friendship networks ranged from loose or light embeddedness to tight-knit groups, with no prevalence of either extreme. However, respondents who fell on the extreme ends of the continuum appeared to have intentional philosophies concerning friendship networks. For instance,

Chris: The way our personalities are, we attract the same people so any time we meet someone it's like hey I want you to meet my buddy John. You're going to love him; he's a great guy and vice versa And I think that we've really been able to connect our relationship with other people and bring everybody in and that's what's really fun about things... We're all about bringing people together.

Here Chris indicates that the inclusion of other people in the friendship is intentional, and perhaps a recurring interaction ritual within the best friendship. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Robert explains how he purposely prevents heavy friendship embeddedness.

Robert: Yeah, I have separate groups and that is how I like it. If I get tired of one group I can go to the other group and they don't know each other. Cause they all

have their drama and a lot of them don't know how to handle it. ...And I just think it's things like that is why I don't like to co-mingle my friends.

S: So does Frank know your different groups?

Robert: ...Like right now, this new girl I'm seeing, he's only met her and hasn't met any of her friends. I don't know how long before he does, if he does, or when he does. That's just kind of the way I am.

S: Depends on how long you stay with her?

Robert: Exactly, exactly. If you get 'em to close and then stuff goes bad then it is bad for everybody see. That's what I'm talking about, trying to keep everything separate.

Robert demonstrates knowledge that heavily embedded networks might pose a problem if a relationship fails, because more than the two members of the dyad are involved. Of course, this is merely an assumption, and another respondent provides evidence to the contrary. The best friendship of John and Chris was heavily embedded with two other close friends, and Chris had a falling out with one of these friends. According to John, this has not severely strained the network.

John: Yeah, the mediator, between F4 and Chris. I don't think they hang out and they are still at the same college now, but if I was to call those guys up both of them would be here at the same time. Just cause I am still really good friends with F4, I'm really good friends with Chris and F3. But over the years I think that F4 and Chris kind of got into a little argument their senior year in high school. And I wasn't there.

In this comment, John expressed his perceived ability to draw a strained, heavy embedded friendship network back together. The aspect of embeddedness in social networks may be highly relevant, but the results of this study were inconclusive on this subject. The emerging data is intriguing and future investigations are necessary to examine this issue further.

One finding that did emerge because of this line of inquiry concerns the issue of multiple best friends. The designation "best" implies singularity, and when beginning

this research, the BF relationship was considered to be only a dyadic phenomenon. However, several respondents spoke of experiences that involved multiple best friends at once. Therefore, this finding could not be ignored and soon became part of the interview process. Often specific questions from the interview were reiterated for the different best friends respondents mentioned, leading to paralleling lines of inquiry from a single interview. This was sometimes the case when BF relationships were separated over space for some time. This was true for John's situation. Chris and John have been best friends since grade school, but left their hometown for different universities, Texas State and Texas respectively. This distance (approximately 30 mi) allowed for continued contact, "but lately it's been every weekend," Chris remarked. However, the change in proximity opened opportunity for John to, as he described, formulate "another best friend" from the foci of activity at his university. The development of this best friendship was chronicled extensively and was referred in transcription as "UTBF."

Furthermore, for Chris and John's heavily embedded network before it was disrupted by spatial separation, data revealed that multiple best friends were identified. Chris stated, "...one of our brothers, and I say this because there were three of us when I went back to the 8 guys forming a group together in high school. We always said there was a group within the group, which consisted of myself, John, and BF3." BF3 was named by both respondents as an equal BF during high school. However, spatial separation interceded here as well, when after high school he left for the United States Marine Corps, effectively dissolving the described three-way BF relationship.

After another respondent, Mary, spoke of a BF she had in her home town as well, she was asked directly about multiple best friends and replied, "Yeah, I think you can

have more than one BF. I think you can. Yeah.” Respondent Steve volunteered this statement, “Because, I guess at that time I had another BF, you know. And that is how I look at it you can have more than one BF, because a BF is based on trust. It’s the people you trust most that are your best friends.” The issue of multiple best friends does complicate a conception of best friends, but it does not undermine it. These are perceptions of relationships from adolescents themselves who experience their own reality. Plus, the present research suggests that the beneficial aspects of best friendship could be compounded by protections derived from multiple BF sources.

Best Friends Protection/Encouragement of Risky Behaviors

The works of Majumdar (2006) and Regnerus (2002) are largely responsible for inspiring this research. Their efforts exposed best friendships as an important field of study that had previously been overlooked by the social science community. Moreover, their research has informed interested parties of some significant findings, namely: Best friends protect adolescents from risky sexual behaviors and theft-related delinquency. Of course, more research should be conducted in these and other related areas. The current research supposes that best friends may protect each other from additional risky behaviors. It is likely that continued research will reveal further characteristics of BF protection. In any case, protective aspects of the BF relationship are valuable for the promotion of adolescent health and safety. The crux of the current research was not to necessarily reveal further aspects of BF protection, but to more deeply understand the BF relationship and its development in order to advance its expansion for the known and possible future benefits. With this goal, what follows are the major themes respondents

voiced concerning BF protection and encouragement involving all risky behavior (RB) discussed during the interview process.

As expected, underage drinking, binge drinking, and drunk driving were the most common risky behaviors encountered with respondents. Marijuana use was discussed by over a third of the sample. Use of the drug ecstasy was mentioned by one BF dyad. Surprisingly, sexual risky behaviors were not topics of discussion with any of the respondents. Possibly the individuals interviewed did not equate RB with their sexual practices. Other risky behaviors included various forms of vandalism, driving at high speeds, and physical altercations or fighting.

Common protective behavior best friends in this sample engaged in was designated or sober driving, when one half of the BF dyad was intoxicated. Jake said,

He drinks, but only a little, and whenever he drinks, I drive. So we basically know what's right and what's wrong and what's going to get us in trouble. But I do know that if a situation ever came to that, we would be able to help each other out.

Evident in this state statement is also a caveat of moral and practical aptitude. A contradictory conveyance that became familiar with respondents was, on one side, students claimed they knew what was best and or that they did not necessarily engage in RB so it was not a concern for them. On the other side, respondents' stories were filled with precarious and unsafe behavior captured from one side of the dyad interview or both. This does not mean respondents failed to indicate a sense of danger concerning their social environment.

The presence and pressure from RB is a real concern for many interviewed. For example Chris said, *"And now there is a lot of responsibility and it's very easy to get*

caught up in the mainstream of partying, you know drugs, alcohol and let things get to you and effect what you have to do during the week and effect what we're ultimately trying to do, which is be successful in life."

The traps associated with risky behaviors were genuine concerns for the respondents, but some felt that their own actions were in accordance with "good" sense, but perhaps their BF counterpart was not. For instance John alleged, that *"there's not many moments in my life when I would have done something completely dangerous to where I put something that was really stupid on the line, but I can think of a few with him (Chris), if that counts?"* John went on to describe an episode precipitated by heavy drinking where he had to stop his BF Chris from driving intoxicated to a house, with intent to assault, another adolescent male who was described as spending time with Chris' ex-girlfriend. Or in John's own words,

And he drank heavily at the time and he just wanted to go over there and just fight who ever was there. Chris literally hit me and F3 trying to pull him out of a car to stop him from driving over there. He had just came over to my house just completely obliterated and it was just having to stop him from doing things like that, having to stop him from any type of rash actions that he would want to take towards any guy that was there. And sometimes Chris just takes it too far when he drinks and just doesn't know what's going on. Yeah, just stopping Chris from making any rash actions with his girlfriend was one of the main things we had to deal with.

Then John indicated how often these potentially violent occurrences took place.

Once every three months cause that was a bad deal. He just broke up with his girlfriend again last week. He calls me up last week, four in the morning, and I had to stop him from doing anything stupid again, like over the phone. Even over the phone I can always talk to the guy and calm him down. I almost try and put him to sleep. Let him sleep things off, let him rest his mind; let him not be so rash about his actions. Cause he is one of those guys who first thing that comes to his mind he's going to do it. And I'm one of the guys who thinks about once he does it, what's going to happen to him? And I was the kid who always had to stop a lot of our friends from doing stupid things. So it was never really the other way around, cause if I lost control then where does it go? We all end up in jail.

According to this account and other statements, John, maintained he has protected Chris and others from multiple risky behaviors on many occasions during their years spending time together. However, despite John's assertion that he did not engage in much or as much risky behavior some of his statements indicate a more convoluted portrait of his influence and role. For example John also stated,

But not till the end of my senior year did I drink like at all. So I would always be The DD (designated driver) with F3, and Chris, and F4. And so once I wasn't the DD anymore I don't know how we got home. Ha ha ha ha ha ha.

In addition, John described "Car Fishing", which he and his heavily embedded network of friends engaged in.

It's when you get a stuffed animal, it was like a dog, and you put a string on it. When cars drive by you pull it across like it's an animal running across the road.

S: And they swerve?

John: *Oh yeah this was my favorite. Ha ha ha ha ha. You try to get to see how many cars you can swerve on the road. Not a bright thing to do, nonetheless its high school and you're bored.*

Finally, John spoke of a time he was encouraged to engage in RB.

Another thing that we would do is we would take, looking back on it it's kind of bad, sometimes your friends just get destructive. We would, like trash cans, like on trash day, and I had my mom's SUV and they'd be like, John, let's go. And I'm like well, I'll drive. Cause I didn't really want to do it per se, but you know, they would always talk me into it cause I was in. What was I going to say? I'm not going to say 'no.' So we would get trash cans and we would hang outside the window of my mom's SUV and drive like forty miles per hour and throw it into the road or throw it into a car.

From Chris' perspective, John, did engage in and even encouraged delinquent and risky behaviors. When Chris was asked to talk about a time when his BF, John encouraged risky behavior, Chris replied, "Oh, oh yeah I got many stories about that." Interestingly

though, when Chris was asked about a time when John had protected him from doing something risky his reply included,

But honestly we haven't had to protect each other from personal issues too much because we are strong-willed guys, and we know what's best for each other, and we know the focus of where we want our lives to go and not get negatively influenced by some things in life that can bring you down. And so we keep each other accountable and just having that person in your life.

These vexing findings can be reconciled, and they must be, other dyads in the sample followed the same pattern when discussions covered or uncovered RB. Respondents often minimized their own participation in risky behaviors although their narratives frequently mentioned or revolved around just those or similar class of actions. It may be the case that the set of collective norms that derive from a BF dyad are strong enough to override larger social concerns. Put another way, if the interaction rituals members of a BF dyad engage in are strong enough and successful, the emotional energy derived from those interactions may dominate more abstract notions or internal warnings concerning risky behaviors. Yet at the same time, individuals seek to minimize their own role of detaching their behavior from important social standards, or that of their BF counterpart. For example, George said, *"You know, he'd (BF) encourage risky behavior but only in the spirit of fun. Not like to cause real harm or anything. I mean, you know, it might lead sometimes to causing harm, but it's all in the spirit of fun really."* This finding has great magnitude. It suggests a "new" social order is created within the microcosm of the BF dyad verses societal social norms.

According to these data, the adolescents interviewed did encourage risky behaviors, but that is only part of the story. As we saw with John and Chris, adolescents are capable of both protection from and encouragement of RB. This conclusion is in

complete agreement with conventional sociological thinking, which often stresses all social phenomena have opposite consequences at the same time. The BF dynamic can be viewed for its positive and negative functions just as any social policy, legislation, institution, or observable fact can be analyzed for their intended and unintended outcomes. However, when taken as a whole, the respondents in this sample emphasized the positive and protective aspects of their relationship much more than risk promotion. In fact, many respondents spoke of internalizing the perceived approval of their BF counterpart to the point of using this assessment as a basis for their behavior or deciding to change it. In this way, respondents revealed that BF protection does not necessarily have to take place within the same space, timeframe, or have their BF aware to exercise protection benefits.

Robert: *I don't know, I mean because if there was really anything that I was going to do risky, like I said, I would probably think about if it would let him (BF) down and that would help me decide of whether or not I wanted to do it. So I guess he helped me without even being there...So, like I said, if there was anything that I was going to decide that I was going to do that I may think to be risky I guess subconsciously I would think about would that let him (BF) down and that would really have an impact on whatever I might do.*

Chris: *You (BF) made me able to say 'no' to different people and not care what they thought about me. That's—I mean when you have a friend like that, when you have a BF it's just easier to stand up against people and for yourself. And not necessarily have him there just knowing that you have that person to keep you accountable makes life easier and makes you make better choices and decisions in life for yourself.*

Frank: *I remember one day in particular I was doing a bunch of drugs, all kinds of shit, and I mean really going down the wrong path. It was a combination of several things that had happened that week coming up it just happened to be that day. That's the day that I quit do all that stuff and I didn't do any drugs after that. But we (BF) met shortly after that. I mean, I guess without him knowing it he protected me from falling back into that a lot of times.*

S: Because he wasn't into that?

Frank: *Well, yeah I guess, but more than that he just, you know, I had a comfortable place to go to and I wasn't so bored or just stressed or whatever because it was a healthy form of fun or whatever, that I really never even thought about it (drugs) after that. So I guess he protected me from that and I don't even know if he knows that. Yeah, I could have gone a completely different way.*

Gabby: *Yeah, maybe we encourage each other to smoke pot, but I mean the real big things in life. And we lookout for each other. I don't have family here and she doesn't either so I don't think about what my mom would think of what I'm doing, I think what would Katrina think. My mom really doesn't have a clue.*

These responses clearly demonstrate that best friendships can play significant protective roles in each others lives, and that this is often a socialization or re-socialization process of building up motivation to conform to the norm expectations of the BF dyad. The beneficial arrangements that have previously been found through scientific inquiry into adolescent best friendships are likely due to the character of BF relationships. As discussed in the content analysis section, best friends are expected to “be there for each other” this largely means living up to an expectation of genuine welfare. If this is the core of best friendship, then collective norms derived from theses arrangements are likely to be positive.

Although internalization of expectations is important, personal contact and time spent together is also largely responsible for BF protection from risky behaviors.

Ken: *I think that by spending more time with him it kept me out of more trouble. I guess that would be the only way he kept me out of a risky situation and doing something that was probably bad for me. Inadvertently, he-he probably calmed down a lot of high school stuff.*

George: *In a way that (BF driving) protected me from driving while under the influence. And ah, you know just getting into trouble that could really cost me.*

Mary: *Like they, both of them (multiple BFs), we'll be drinking and they like they stopped it. You know, I had too much to drink so they like stopped it, like my intake of alcohol.*

S: They would cut you off, huh?

Mary: *Yeah. Multiple times, yeah. Oh, also drinking and driving, like if I drive somewhere and I drink normally they will take my keys and then we'll get someone else to drive home. Or they'll convince me to stay at their house or something. Stuff like that.*

Beebe: *She kept me from getting too drunk when we were drinking and she pulled shots out of my hand a couple of times. And, of course, I've done the same for her; but as far as anything really big...not really. I think we both pretty much know our limits and if we don't...I know if I ever do anything foolish she'll be there and say, 'Don't, that's stupid.'*

Clearly, the BF dyads in this sample physically intervened on the behalf of their best friends. Taken together this data serves to illustrate firsthand accounts of BF protective benefits, be they internalized or tangible, access to these respondent's specific experiences assists all interested in adolescent wellbeing to prepare for and understand the BF dynamic.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

During the interview process, as the researcher, I was aware that the method may have affected respondents in some way. Especially since the sample consisted of late-adolescents, a relatively young group, it was important that the in-depth interviewing be mutually beneficial to the subjects and the researcher. In a much unexpected way, I found this to be true. In order to derive my sample I elicited participation from entry-level university classes, but it was up to these students to help me contact and set up interviews with their elected BF. As a social science researcher, I observed indications from respondents that this process of identifying, soliciting, and establishing scientific procedures between two best friends for purposes of discussing best friendship, in fact solidified and or reaffirmed their status as a best friend dyad. This information was communicated to me often before or after the interviews begun, since frequently the interviews were arranged in such a way that both participants were together prior to and or following the interview.

The communication that took place during these occasions was informal and repeatedly lead me to believe that the interview process, the opportunity to openly discuss their BF relationship and share it with an interested party, acted to reinforce and bolster the respondents' positive relations with one another. The respondents clearly helped the researcher conduct the study by providing data. It is my contention that the research

process in this circumstance helped respondents better understand their BF relationship, and some to enhance their sense of belonging and privilege. This finding may prove valuable when developing BF intervention and promotion programs. Providing adolescents with an opportunity to validate their best friendships may be an important component to successful models.

This research is strong methodologically. The sample universe is diverse, making use of student respondent's abilities to generate their BF counterpart from whichever social context they reside. Both sides of the dyad were interviewed. This was intended to check for BF reciprocation and experience constancy, which was accomplished, but other positive outcomes were achieved as a result of this methodological choice. For instance, when developing the Social Model of Best Friendship Formation (SMBFF) the "Defining Moments," which are memories of interaction ritual of great magnitude for both best friends, would have never been discovered if lone individuals were used.

It is the position of this research that methodology is driven by subject matter. I do not maintain a sharp procedural stance. This exploratory thesis has scientifically illuminated adolescent best friendship, a clear gap in the sociological literature. Qualitative methods were employed because of intentions to start at the basis of a subject that was in need of inclusive examination. Qualitative methods are prone to answering how situational and cultural variations shape reality (Marvasti 2004). When first attempting to understand best friendship, this is the fundamental question. Thanks to this research, there now exists a template of respondent driven meanings describing the social idea best friendship. Proprietors of adolescent welfare programs, school administrators, or anyone interested in the promotion of best friendship can now call upon this research

to help them understand what adolescents think about and expect from best friend relationships. The first systematic study of the concept of a best friend revealed that a Randal Collins' (2004) style of focus on interaction ritual is effective for understanding what best friendships mean to adolescents. However, based on responses it is interaction rituals centered on helping and providing support, in a myriad of ways, that is distinctive of best friend contacts.

Of potential equal or superior importance to all stakeholders, including caregivers, social scientists, school regulators and the interested public is best friendship formation. "BFF" is an acronym used by grade school aged children and young adolescents to mean "best friends forever." It is apropos that the same acronym is currently used for social science as ellipsis for best friend formation. BFF as used in this research is imperative to understand systematically and analytically if intentions are to deliberately promote best friend relationships.

Recent research on ideal mental health programs from the perspective of the families and youth involved in such services suggests, "Above all, the participants emphasized over and over the importance of creating and sustaining an infrastructure that would embed support for families and youth in every aspect of research, services, and advocacy if we are to meet the shared family and societal goal of improving outcomes for children dealing with mental health challenges" (Dababnah and Cooper 2006:34). Unfortunately, the task of making entirely clear and understandable an ideal or practical program of BF intervention is beyond the scope of this work. Time, resources and other means were not sufficient to enable this research to include the applied assembly necessary to garner the design of a best friend promotion program. However, the

generation of initial research and conditions to make possible just such an applied endeavor is the stated goal of this work; and to the extent that this research is used in the future for this purpose will confirm this objective. Until then and beyond, social scientists should remain poised but aggressive in the pursuit of improving the life condition of adolescents. Best friends explain some of the variation in adolescent circumstance. This valuable relationship is now more than ever a part of the sociological collective intellect because now the Social Model of Best Friend Formation (SMBFF) exists.

This model was entirely derived from sample responses and inspired by Randal Collins' (2004) Interaction Ritual Chain Theory. The BFF archetype begins with the premise that situational interaction of shared focus motivates continued contact between individuals who share successful interaction rituals thereby enhancing emotional energy (EE), which is stored in corresponding members of BF dyads capable of future EE charging. This is an application of Collins' theory to BFF. In the SMBFF, interaction rituals function at all levels once interaction begins between two individuals and remains throughout the life of the relationship. Even the failure of a best friendship is explained by failure in interaction ritual.

Beyond Interaction Ritual Chain Theory, the SMBFF was decided by the patterns respondents described during the interview process and supported by previous research. All respondents fit the configuration of the model, and all respondents were used in developing the acquaintance to best friend progression pattern. Without rehashing the details of the entire SMBFF, the script holds individuals are constrained by large social forces such as social class effectively preventing individuals from meeting or becoming

acquaintances with all possible candidates. The pool of possible friends is filtered further by two potential encountering mechanisms. First, *foci of activity*, is a situation of repeated interaction, which enables individuals to become friends over time. Second, *agent of interaction* is simply a third party that introduces two people and acts as gatekeeper of their initial interactions.

The next phase of the SMBFF is cognitive. *Selection bias* takes place in the mind of individuals as they select a best friend from a small pool of close friends by two criteria. First, *progress/trials*, are continued communications combined with tests of trust, or trials that arise that grant opportunity to verify confidence in a person. These are often accomplished by sharing intimate information or receiving assistance. Second, *defining moments* are the salient memories that BF dyads share as often cited examples of their insider relationship. Defining moments often sum up or exemplify the dyad's desired impression.

There are three possible outcomes in the SMBFF, and they can cycle so that one may lead to another or rotate back depending often on the result of interaction rituals. The first is *maintenance*, this occurs when interaction rituals remain successful, communication is relatively stable, and the best friendship is allowed to continue. *Failure* takes place when the amount of failed interaction rituals supersedes the amount of those that are successful or landmark interaction rituals fail so that positive defining moments are now dwarfed by a senior negative defining moment that ends positive interaction. The final outcome for SMBFF is *crystallization*. This occurs as a cognitive solidification of the BF relationship when physical contact and interaction ritual have ceased. Some BF relationships affect individuals in such a profound way that their

memory is forever associated and referred to as “best friendship.” This can even be the case after one half of the best friend dyad is deceased.

The SMBFF is a major contribution to the emerging sphere of scholarship currently examining the BF dynamic. Other aspects of this research did not prove to be as useful. Level of network embeddedness was examined for possible associations with protection from and promotion of risky adolescent behaviors. The exploratory quality of this research did not find influential connections between these phenomena. However, supplemental data in support of BF protection from risky adolescent behaviors are valuable. The qualitative character of in-depth information revealed that BF protection from risky behavior is both cognitive and internalized and in particular circumstances physical or expressed by intervening action. Although, adolescents are an at-risk population and the data revealed risk oriented behavior is abundant.

A provoking finding in this research pertained to adolescent reporting of RB. Analysis of interview data revealed a paradox. When respondents discussed their own or their best friend’s involvement in delinquent and risky behaviors, the subject was often minimized. However, the interview process frequently revealed a portrait of BF participation in risky behaviors. This contradiction was repeatedly found in the data because of the methodological choice of dyad interviews. One side of a best friendship may indicate no engagement in RB, the other side may often describe, in detail, behaviors that both members took part in that are defined risky.

Another substantial finding introduced the prospect of multiple “best” friends into the conception of the BF dynamic, which may be counterintuitive, but should not be ignored. Many respondents volunteered comments on the subject and more still

addressed the matter directly and specified their experience with more than one BF at the same time. Although this research was designed and conducted with the assumption that best friendship is a dyadic phenomenon, future research should incorporate the complexity that multiple best friends presents.

Other avenues of inquiry opened up by this research that should be expanded are, for one, the impact of age group. How does BFF transpire on various ages? Also the impact of gender should be studied to ascertain how does BFF differ for males and females? The same type of research questions should be examined for race and ethnicity. A triangulation of multiple methods should be employed when further exploring the BF dynamic and a moral scale of adolescent development should be used. Other studies ought to follow individuals or cohorts over time and during the BFF process in an effort to compare the SMBFF. Also, major foci of activities should be identified and followed with social science methods for BFF location comparisons. I do not view these topics as limitations of the current study, but as possibilities for future study that are now ready disposed for replication and enhancement.

There are limitations to this research. A larger sample would clarify and perhaps bolster findings; although it is the belief of this researcher that the saturation of interview and content analysis data were reached. However, there is always more to learn. As with all qualitative analysis, these findings can not be generalized to larger populations other than those directly involved. However, it is qualitative data that could produce information leading to the development of representations of reality such as the SMBFF. Even though not generalizable, I predict the SMBFF does encompass the general formation of best friendship and will more or less withstand the rigors of social science

over time. The advantage of the scientific method is that, in this case, any challenge or further investigation of this area will have positive consequences for the wellbeing of adolescents.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

How did you meet your best friend? (Where?)

How long have you been friends?

What activities do you and your best friend do together?

How much time do you spend with your best friend compared to others?

Why do you feel close to your best friend?

Think back to when you and your best friend were first getting to know each other.

Where did you two spend most of your time?

How have you kept up the friendship over this time?

Did you experience something when the two of you became best friends? (Probe)

Please, define a best friend for me.

How does an acquaintance become a friend, a best friend? Is this what happened to you?

How well do your friends know each other?

How is your best friend different from your friends who are less close?

Can you tell me about a time that your best friend helped you?

Can you tell me about a time your best friend protected you from doing something risky?

Can you tell me about a time your best friend encouraged risky behavior?

What do you not like about your best friendship?

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