Friends and Family in Relationship Communities: The Importance of Friendship during the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract
This article investigates the meaning of friendship during the transition to adulthood. In-depth interviews were conducted with a small sample of primarily white young adults from middle-class backgrounds. Friendship was a source of support for respondents during relationship, education, and residential transitions. Respondents described how friendship externally supported marriage and family relationships and could develop into a distinct relationship bond within marriage and family relationships. Respondents experienced instability in their personal communities and pursued friendship for its individualized social support and value in addition to marriage and family relationships. Respondents’ descriptions of friendship in their personal communities reflected a culture of individualism, which helped them to develop adult, middle-class identities.

Keywords: friendship; transition to adulthood; culture; personal communities

Ann Swidler’s (2001) Talk of Love: How Culture Matters challenges cultural sociologists to find out what elements of a cultural schema enable it to control and organize other cultural elements. Swidler considers the explanation that public cultures, consisting of particular beliefs authorized by society, organize action in periods of instability. Swidler also argues that in the dearth of formal institutions, contracts, and government regulation, Americans believe that the voluntary choices of individuals organize action.

In American society, the de-institutionalization of marriage and the shift to companionate and self-actualizing marriage has made marriage a powerful symbol of individualism and middle-class adulthood (Cherlin, 2004). Emerging
adults delay marriage (Gerson, 2009) and live with their parents at higher rates than they did at the turn of the century (Payne, 2016). During the transition to adulthood, people are less likely to have stable, physically close relationships. The diversity of transitions during this life stage means that people cannot rely on their parents’ experiences for guidance (and may not want to) as they form adult identities.

The prevalence of social networking platforms and communications technology might suggest that young adults have unlimited access to social support over time and distance. However, based on socioeconomic position, these types of connections are used differently due to accessibility and affordability. They are also limited in their ability to provide meaningful social relationships and support when people have immediate and physically situated needs.

There are certain contexts during this young adult life stage, like the college environment, being married, and having children that strongly influence the structure of people’s relationships and the formation of adult identities. For people who are not in these contexts, how do they develop adult identities? How are their social relationships organized? How does an individualistic culture matter for the way that people respond to instability in their personal communities?

I analyze respondents’ relationships using the community of personal relationships framework (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). I build on a personal community framework by exploring a specific relationship between culture and class. I ask how the varying use of culture on the individual-level within a homogenous group may shape the way that class differences manifest in personal communities on the collective-level. In this study, I interview a fairly homogenous group of middle-class, young adults to understand how they engage an individualistic culture to respond to instability in their personal communities.

Literature Review

Friendship in Personal Communities

A personal community refers to the relationships a person considers important at a particular time and can include family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, as well as people who represent multiple relationship types (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). This framework offers a typology of seven personal communities differentiated by: amount and types of relationships included, their relative importance to the focal person, the kinds of friendships included, the changing nature of those friendships, the degree of fusion between family and friends, and the pattern of reliance on given or chosen ties. Relationships are not necessarily dyadic and there is no assumed dichotomy of “given” (kinship) and “chosen” (friendship) relationships. Instead of analyzing relationship types separately, this framework assumes there is a “suffusion” of friend-like and family-like relationships that produces a highly variable and individualized personal community.

Friendship is crucial to the management of marital and familial relationships. It influences how people conceive of relationships and intimacy (Burns, 2002; Harrison, 1998; Oliker, 1989; Sapadin, 1988; Walker, 1994).
Friendship is a source of feedback, information, comparison, and reflection. Friendship can help people to understand the disjuncture between romantic ideals and the realities of long-term, intimate relationships (Hacker, 1981; Titus, 1980). Yet marriage weakens ties to relatives, neighbors, and friends because married couples think that they should be self-sufficient. They are more likely to depend on each other for shared financial and emotional needs and are less likely to have spontaneous interactions with friends and neighbors (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006). Marriage changes intimate ties in personal communities, more than having children, moving residences, or changing employment status (Wellman et al., 1997). Married parents are more likely to interact with friends, neighbors, and extended kin more than childless, married couples. However, their reason for interaction is usually in relation to child rearing (Hansen, 2004). Single and married parents spend less time in informal leisure settings, “hanging out” with friends and neighbors (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006).

Middle-Class Friendship and Culture

In a study of middle-class Americans, Swidler (2001) found that people integrated culture with their personal experiences when they were actively developing their sense of self in relation to the world and when they were socially isolated. In other words, respondents used culture to engage with their experiences more when they were attempting to change themselves or maintain a changed self. During the transition to adulthood, when family, close friends, and marriage may be distant in their own ways, how do people use culture to develop adult identities and personal communities? Marriage and parenthood may be relationships when people do not actively try to develop themselves in relation to the world and when they are more socially isolated than in previous life stages (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006).

Friendship in personal communities is distinct for young adults in the middle-class compared to young adults from less-privileged class backgrounds. Middle-class friendship may include friends from different parts of their lives who do not live near to each other. Middle-class friendship emphasizes shared leisure activities, emotional support, and intellectual development. Middle-class friends rarely ask each other for material help or an instrumental exchange of services. In difficult times, middle-class friendship can leave people feeling isolated and alone because their friendships are focused on shared interests and leisure (Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Walker 1995). Why does friendship operate this way in the personal communities of the middle-class?

Culture teaches a person how to think and feel in certain ways. Culture teaches skills, styles, and habits that a person uses to live in the world. Culture also teaches a worldview to support the self and the use of skills, styles, and habits. Strategies of action are the routines that people use to accomplish their goals. Culture coordinates action by supporting or limiting the strategies of action that people can use to reach their goals (Swidler, 2001). This study investigates how young adults from a middle-class background use a culture of individualism to respond to relationship instability in their personal communities and how they use their personal communities to develop adult identities.
Friendship and Kinship during the Transition to Adulthood

Emerging adulthood, young adulthood, and the transition to adulthood are all terms that have been used to refer to the years between eighteen and the early forties (Arnett, 2012). The young adult years are a time of “demographic density” because of multiple transitional events. Young adults may transition between student to worker, single to married, non-parent to parent, and employed to unemployed. These transitions occur at different times in diverse sequences, in different quantities and duration, and with diverse qualities (Rindfuss, 1991).

Residential transitions that position young adults as self-sufficient and allow them to live separately from their parents and siblings offer the chance to establish friend-like relationships with these family members (Aquilino, 2006). Friends are especially important for the health and well-being of adults who live alone. In the absence of close, healthy, or supportive kin-relationships, people may use friendship to substitute for marital or family relationships. Friends become “chosen family,” especially for women, older adults, and sexual minorities (Bellotti, 2008; Klinenberg, 2012; Oswald, 2002; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Weston, 1991).

Research is inconclusive about the importance of friendship in young adulthood. If frequency measures the importance of friendship during this life stage, the frequency of making new friends and seeing old ones is less than in earlier life stages, particularly due to immersion in work and family. If the way people feel about their friends or rely on friendship measures importance, friendship is extremely important to young adults with friend-based communities (Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

Friendship can provide emotional support, small services, and companionship (Pahl & Pevalin, 2005; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). In a study of relationship profiles and well-being, best friends were able to provide supplementary support, but did not compensate for low-quality family and spousal relationships. For people who had a best friend, having at least two high quality relationships, which did not necessarily include a spouse, was associated with higher well-being. For people without best friends, well-being was especially dependent on the quality of spousal relations (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007).

Delaying marriage allows a longer period of time for people to date and experience more turnover in their dating relationships (Fischer, 2011). How do people respond to relationship instability during the transition to adulthood? People use culture differently depending on whether they have “settled” and “unsettled” lives (Swidler, 2001). In settled lives, culture provides a “tool kit” of habits, skills, and styles that people use to construct strategies of action. These strategies are well-established, so that culture does not seem to have a unique or particularly influential effect on action. In unsettled lives, culture appears to be more “visible” because people actively use culture to reorganize strategies of action and to create new strategies of action. How do young adults use culture to organize their personal communities? Turnover in dating and marital relationships may affect the quality of friendships in a personal community and may motivate an individual to revise their strategies of action.
Methods

Study Aims

The study aims to answer the following questions:
1. How do young adults from a middle-class background use a culture of individualism to respond to relationship instability?
2. How do young adults from a middle-class background use personal communities to develop adult identities during the transition to adulthood?

Sampling and Method

I conducted qualitative research using in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Interviews were one to two hours long with eight men and eight women, aged 24-38 years, residing in the Boston area (see Table 1). I chose this age group because I wanted to talk to participants that would be in emerging adulthood and young adulthood.

I mostly interviewed non-Hispanic, white, middle-class, heterosexual, U.S.-born citizens because this population would be most likely to feel or be expected to feel the shock of having to adjust to diverse transitions in emerging and young adulthood. Their parents would belong to the baby-boomer generation who were socialized to expect or idealize a normative middle-class sequence of transitions from school, to work, to marriage, culminating in a “traditional” nuclear family structure. This structure is centered on the married, heterosexual couple and their immediate children and was representative of a small portion of the population, for a short period of time, namely white, suburban, middle-class families from 1940 to 1960. This structure does not represent the life course of racial and ethnic minorities, poor or working-class families, or demographic trends in family structure over time (Coontz, 1992; Stacey, 1993).

All of the eight male participants in my interview sample were in their twenties. One man had Canadian citizenship. One African-American man identified as Nigerian. One Latin American man identified as Chilean. One man came from a working-class background. One man was married and had two children. Two men were in exclusive couple relationships, meaning that they were dating or having a romantic relationship with only one other person. Two men were in non-exclusive dating relationships. Three men were single and not in couple relationships. There were four female participants in my interview sample in their early thirties. One woman was married and had two children. Two women were engaged. Three women were in exclusive couple relationships. Two of those three women had been previously divorced. Two women identified as single and were not in couple relationships.

I used convenience, snowball, purposive, non-random sampling to recruit my interview sample. I did initial outreach sending e-mails and a flyer to organizations on campus and to personal contacts who had connections to participants falling within the demographics I had selected for the study. Seven participants were graduate students. Six participants were undergraduate students, and five of those six participants were from an adult education program at the
university. There were three participants that were not students and had full-time jobs. All participation was voluntary and uncompensated. I use pseudonyms to protect participant identity.

Individual interviews took place in private rooms at the university campus center or nearby. I gave each participant a consent form to sign and a sheet for background information. I used an interview guide (see Appendix B) and I audio-recorded the interviews with participant permission. For the first half of the interview, I asked participants about what their friendships were like, why their friendships were meaningful to them, and for descriptions of specific instances where the respondent had to deal with conflict in their friendships or navigate the flexible definition of friendship.

For the second half of the interview, I asked participants about how their friendships compared and related to marital, familial, and dating relationships. I asked participants to describe what makes a good marriage and their favorite family relationship. I also asked participants to prioritize their relationships. I asked participants to describe the people that they felt closest to, and to describe the relationships that they felt were the most important to them and had lasted the longest. I asked questions informed by a personal community framework; I did not want to assume which types of relationships would be most important to participants and I wanted to understand why participants had chosen to talk about those relationships.

In-depth interviews allow interviewers to connect cultural beliefs about what is good and honorable to individual narratives through different levels of emotions. The first level reveals what culture tells people they should feel about something. The second level reveals how they actually feel about that thing. The third level reveals meta-feelings (how people feel about the way that they should feel about a thing). Meta-feelings reveal the relationship between collective and individual, and how culture continues through an iterative process on the level of individual aberration from a cultural norm (Pugh, 2015).

Limited research about young adult friendship motivated me to do inductive research instead of hypothesis-testing deductive research (Esterberg, 2002). I followed a “grounded approach” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and issue-focused analysis (Weiss, 1994), including coding, sorting, local integration, and inclusive integration. Analytic categories emerged from systematic analysis of the transcripts and were used to construct theory in response to my research questions.

As I transcribed audio recordings, I did open coding, where I generated a running list of terms, concepts, and themes linking the content in interview transcripts to a literature review on marriage, family, and friendship. After transcription, I summarized recurring open codes into concepts that became the codes that I used in my second round of focused coding. I used a color system to mark the presence of focused codes in transcripts and then compiled relevant transcript quotes into separate code documents in Microsoft Word. These were some of the relevant open codes from the first review of transcripts: age cohort, disrupting move, individual affirmation, close friend, physical proximity, significant sharing, need of a friend, personal biography, technology, safe space,
vulnerability, time spent, equal exchange, prioritizing relationships, durability, dealing with conflict, flexibility, obligation, perspective, stability, reliability.

Next, I sorted the previous codes into code clusters and locally integrated these open codes by writing about how the open codes were related to each other in code cluster documents. These were some of the relevant code clusters: external support, internal support, individual growth, cross over relationships, friend in kinship, personal community. Finally, I did inclusive integration by writing about code clusters in analytic memos about the social value of friendship, and friendship and kinship in personal communities.

Results
The Need for Friendship During the Transition to Adulthood
Young adults have high residential mobility rates, especially in their twenties (Rindfuss, 1991). Participants talked about their need for friends during changes in residence, employment and educational contexts, and relationship status, including transitions between dating, marital, and parenting statuses. Participants struggled to find friends who met their specific needs for friendship. Reflecting the diversity of personal communities during the transition to adulthood, even when people were of similar ages or shared work and educational contexts, these shared experiences were not reliable indicators of compatible friendship needs. Needing friendship seemed more urgent for participants that had recently moved to the area than for married participants or long-time residents of the area.

Not married, no children
Unmarried participants without children were particularly aware of the need for friends, recognizing their cultural value by referring to making friends as if they were investing effort to cultivate them. Respondents recognized the value of less intimate ties like friendly acquaintances for social interaction and support. Dan was a 27-year-old white male and graduate student. He was in an exclusive couple. Dan explained:

My best days are days when I’m interacting with…friends and even classmates, who I’m friendly with them but they’re not necessarily friends…when I see a number of people on campus that I’m friendly with even if it’s just for a quick ‘Howsit going? What are you up to? Grab a quick coffee?’… That kind of stuff’s really important to me. I’m pretty prone to feeling lonely if I have a number of days in a row or a week where I’m not interacting with people.

Dan described the flexible nature of friendship and the benefits of friendship in its varying intensities. He felt the best on the days when he spent time with friends and acquaintances (people he is “friendly” with).

Many participants wished they still had access to a unique environment, like college, where they could easily establish social networks and long-lasting friendships. Mary was a 26-year-old, white, graduate student in an exclusive couple. Mary had recently moved to the area and talked about multiple ways that she was trying to make friends after moving away from her established social

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networks. She realized that she had to find places in Boston that were similar to a college environment, where community was supported and encouraged. She joined a yoga studio and was trying to be more honest about her need for a friend in her graduate classes. Mary said:

What I look for in a friend is someone who’s equally in need of a friend…not just an acquaintance or like a friend in class but an actual outside of class friend…There’s this girl…that I ride on the bus with every time. We don’t ever go past talking about school… I like that she’s there but it’s been clear that I don’t think we’re gonna have each other over for dinner…there’s another girl in my program that I ask her a question about school and I end up hearing about her mom. I’m like, ‘oh maybe we should go have coffee’…Based on what they give you, you see what kinda space they have…for you…

Participants carefully crafted their personal communities. They were strategic about how and with whom they spent their limited time and resources. They described making strategic choices about whom they would befriend and how. Unmarried participants wanted friends who would have time and space for a new leisure-based friendship in their life. Married participants wanted friends who could get along with their partner. Parents wanted friends in a similar life-stage who would be able to accommodate their parenting obligations.

When participants sought friends, they compared themselves to people who had established networks from high school and college and did not seem to have time or emotional space for more friends. Younger participants who recently graduated from college in the area had larger friend groups than older participants that had moved away after graduating. For participants experiencing the interruption of social network stability by moving away from established networks making friends became a challenge. Mary explained:

It’s a conscious effort. It feels like work. It feels like listening for cues of people who might wanna be friends…I’ve moved enough to realize that eventually it probably will happen but I’m only here for two years so I don’t wanna have to wait for a long time…Now it becomes much more of a proactive, “I know I’m tired but I should meet this girl and have social time cause I know that’s something I need as a person.”

In the previous quote, Mary described her efforts to make friends and felt exasperated because it was a process she had to struggle with during other moves. Even though she had to go through the frustrating process multiple times, she invests in it because she believed the social interaction, even with only a potential friend, was culturally valuable enough to name it as a need that is required in order to be a person.

Participants observed the difference from the college lifestyle of many easy and casual connections. After college, their social networks revolved around careers. They felt that it required more time, effort, and planning to spend time with friends and that it was more difficult to meet new friends that were in similar life situations. Participants that moved a lot, did not attend college, had divorced,
or in other ways experienced instability in their support networks, felt that making friends was particularly difficult. Kylie reflected:

Being on campus, especially with the girls, they’re not necessarily even close, but they go out and they do a lot together. I’m envious of that to a certain extent, I just don’t know how to get it. I’ve passed that phase in my life where you can just grab a bunch of people and go out. Once you get to be in your thirties, people have their groups of friends and they’re not taking applications anymore (laughing). It’s really bizarre.

Kylie dropped out of a prestigious college to marry her now ex-husband. They moved to Santa Barbara and her ex-husband kept her from having friends or talking to her family. She left him and moved into her parents’ basement in Illinois. She cried, recounting the “drought of friendship” and intense loneliness she experienced for those ten years. Kylie had moved a few times during emerging adulthood. By missing a life stage with her cohort, going through a divorce, and an extended period of isolation, Kylie was especially sensitive to the absence of a social support network that her peers possessed.

The negative case for friendship: married with children
Married participants with children wanted to make friends but were aware that many of their peers did not have children. They recognized that they faced different barriers to making friends than their peers and prioritized their commitment to their marriage and their kids over attempts to make or spend time with friends. For these participants, friendship may not have been as important for development of adult identities because the companionate marriages they described and marital childbearing are symbols of adulthood for the middle-class.

Emma was a 33-year-old white graduate student. She was married and had two children. Married participants had greater demands on their time, especially if they had children. They also expressed a desire for more time to spend with friends or to spend making friends. These respondents were more aware about the costs and benefits of making and maintaining friendships than their childless peers. Emma said:

My husband and I have made family a priority for ourselves and I don’t make friend time as much of a priority…The people where I do prioritize their friendship are people that understand that about my life. I do make time to see them and often they will want to see my kids. The graduate program went out for karaoke on Thursday night and I would have loved to go but I couldn’t go because of family stuff.

Emma talked about how people in her graduate program would go for drinks after class, but that she could not participate in such spontaneous activities. She sounded tired as she listed out the pre-planning and coordination that would have to happen with her partner in order for her to get drinks on a weekday evening.

Logan was a married 26-year-old white male, undergraduate student, and father of two children. Logan said:
One reason that I don’t have many close friends in my day-to-day life is that I’ve never met anybody who’s in the remotely similar situation to me. Things that really define my life right now are my family, kids, academics and my intellectual pursuits… There are people who are as smart as I am, who have as many kids as I do (laughs) but there aren’t any who I’ve found that are under thirty and similarly for all the other combinations.

Married parents needed friends that would be invested in their families and would understand that family was a top priority. These participants wanted potential friends to meet and get along with their families, or at the very least they had to be willing to talk about them. For married parents, their family and particularly their spouse were critical components of their social identities. These participants often said that their spouse was their most intimate relationship because spouses were heavily involved in day-to-day logistics, financial commitments, and children.

Participants talked about a shift in friendships from youth to adulthood by describing their younger selves as less likely to care about social consequences of their behavior. Conflict was described as less significant and more ephemeral during childhood and adolescence. Logan said:

> It’s a small campus…I have a fairly limited number of people with whom I interact regularly. I not only consciously worry but implicit in the ways that I interact with people worry of saying the wrong thing or getting the wrong reputation and then having that snowball and cause problems in my life that are more than social… When I was younger I was much more open…I was able to form close friendships relatively soon after meeting people. But also I had a lot of… people who really didn’t like me because they found me offensive. I’ve managed to become less offensive to people. When I was younger…I didn’t mind offending people and I didn’t have concern for my future.

This quote showed that even though Logan had experienced the transitions of marriage and fatherhood, he still struggled with intimacy in his relationships. It even seems to suggest that he may have been better at establishing intimacy when he was younger, despite having also offended many people. People who are socially isolated have less support and less conflict, while people who are socially engaged have more of both. Conflict and friendship were depicted as more abundant and less meaningful in youth. Conversely, negotiating conflict in friendship seemed more significant in adulthood because participants had more to lose; they did not have as many friends, could not make them as easily, and engaging in conflict required resources of time and effort that many participants did not have.

**Friendship in Personal Communities**

Family was always considered the most durable of relationships because most participants did not think they could end a family relationship. However, intimate friends were often considered as durable as kinship relations. When participants were asked to assess how important their different relationships were
to them, the marital or romantic couple came out on top. Yet, participant accounts described relationship types as being unique with distinct strengths and weaknesses. Confirming the empirical generation of the personal community framework, it seemed that all relationship types had the potential to provide valuable support to respondents. Friendship strengthened personal communities by providing external support to the marital couple and by becoming a unique relationship bond within family relationships. Friends provided multiple perspectives, opportunities for individual growth, access to resources, social capital, and diverse compatibilities to meet the individual needs of respondents.

**Support external to the family: Friends supporting kin relationships**

Gina was a 32-year-old, previously divorced white, female, undergraduate student, in an exclusive couple relationship. Gina said:

People need various people for different reasons… Kathy [best friend] brings stability and reliability and Amanda [other best friend] brings the party. Brian, my fiancé, he’s always nurturing … A couple years ago I got pregnant and it was two months before I was supposed to come back to campus…and that was not something that I could talk to my parents about… I talked to my friend Kathy… ‘cause I think Mike [brother], he would have been more supportive, but you need a girl sometimes to talk to about those things.

In this quote, Gina described how she was able to use different relationships for different needs. Having a balanced and cohesive support system seemed important to participants. When participants felt that they were missing or seeing problems in their relationships, they focused on the weak link of their personal community as something that they wanted to fix. Participants believed that they could and should craft personal communities to fit the needs of their developing adult identity.

Friendship could also provide support to a marital relationship by providing another perspective on the couple’s conflict and another source of support during stressful moments. Clara was a 29-year-old white female and graduate student. She said:

…when Nelson [fiancée] is really upset; he’s stressed about work, feels like he’s a failure, he’s having trouble with his family. My anxiety level raises along with his, but I can’t possibly ask him to be calming me down (laughs)… I try to remember to go to them [my friends]…Then I have somebody who’s really just worried about me… My support system supports our relationship because it allows me these outlets to deal with things that aren’t appropriate to deal with in the relationship… As much as your romantic partner might be somebody who is also a friend, it’s good to have other friends too… you’re not so invested in this one person to be everything for you all the time.

Clara needed friends to support her so that she could support her partner. The idea that she needed other people so that she could have a high-quality relationship...
with her romantic partner speaks to the importance and effort invested in companionate marriage often attributed to and valued by the middle-class.

As peers started to have children, participants said they had fewer close friends and more of their close friends did not know each other. Participants were also concerned for their parents who seemed to become more isolated by turning inward to their marriage for primary companionship and social interaction, especially after retirement. Clara said:

I would never want my life to be such that my support system or my emotional supports and my day to day activities were all built around one person because you never know what’s gonna happen both in terms of relationships failing and in terms of people dying… I wanna have a fluid relationship with who’s providing me with both logistical real-world tangible and emotional supports. That’s the all-eggs-in-one-basket thing, never do it, bad, bad (laughs).

Shrinking social networks meant that the loss of any relationship—for example, a marital divorce or death of a friend—had severe repercussions for an individual’s social support system.

**Internal support: friendship in kin relationships**

Participants talked about friendship appearing in many relationships types (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Participants described friend-like acquaintances and friendship as a bond in marital, dating, and family relationships. Suffusion of friendship into other relationship types demonstrated the potential of friendship to strengthen all types of relationships and demonstrated the fluidity of relationship boundaries (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Duncan was a 24-year-old male Latin American graduate student, in a non-exclusive couple. I asked him to describe the ideal intimate relationship. Duncan replied:

You’re not stuck up on your appearances… or if what I say right now… matters in the next ten minutes… [My sister] she’s also a really good friend that’s almost more important to me than we have the same mom. We’ll be teeth and nail fighting each other about the most ridiculous thing… In the same car ride by the next red light we’ll have forgotten it… it’s kinda this release but we know from experience that it doesn’t change a thing. We’re forever close maybe by virtue of being family—who knows—we’re stuck there but she’s cool people.

When Duncan described the rest of his family, he said that his most intimate familial relationship was with his sister. He had siblings, two parents, and an extended family that he stayed in contact with on a regular basis. However, the fact that he considered his sister to be a friend even more than a sister strengthened this relationship and enhanced its supportive benefits for him in contrast to other comparable kinship relations.

When friendship was a recognized bond that emerged in family relationships, the respondent prioritized that relationship above others in their personal community because the respondent benefitted from the strengths and
weaknesses of different relationship types. For example, family relationships existed regardless of the quality of the relationship itself. When respondents voluntarily chose to invest in a friendship with their family member, a family relationship was reliable, enduring, and enjoyable. Moreover, unlike marital relationships, unmarried respondents could usually choose when and how to activate the different benefits of family relationships because respondents did not usually live with family members. Gina said:

My brother and I have periods of time where we don’t talk for months…But things happen, and we’ll drop everything to deal with that. Like my brother, his son was born premature…He called, I flew down the next day…When I separated from my ex-husband… I called my brother and said, “I need to leave here now” (starts crying). He drove up that night in his truck, drove 12 hours and packed up my apartment with me (sobs while laughing). My brother is an ideal intimate relationship… He came up here a couple months ago and we went to a patio bar. We spent seven hours just sitting out on the patio chatting, laughing, enjoying the sun and each other.

In her interview, Gina stressed her dislike for “drama” in relationships, which seemed to have been a problem not only in her previous marriage, but also in numerous potential friendships that became too dramatic for her to continue investing into them. It seemed that the characteristics of a kinship relation with her brother and the benefits of friendship with him produced an enduring, low-maintenance, and supportive relationship that seemed tailored to her individual needs.

When I asked Gina to rank her most intimate relationships for me, she replied:

My romantic relationships are the most intimate, my friends would be the second, and my family would be the least, with the exception of my brother. My brother would fall with my friends. You have family members that aren’t your friends. I actually have two brothers (laughs) one of ‘em I’m very close with and the other, we jus don’t get each other…My family ranks third because there are topics that I can’t talk to my parents about because of their religious status that doesn’t agree with mine and because you can’t pick your family and you pick your friends.

Although she ranks her family last out of the relationship types, her brother is the exception because she “picks” him as a friend, which enhances the benefits she gets from the relationship. Notably, Gina talks about why she does not get along with her parents and her other brother, which reinforces how friendship as an individualized relationship gives her the opportunity to receive social value from her relationships with one brother that she does not get from her other family members. Like Duncan’s preference for his sister because of their intimate friendship, Gina and other participants felt most close to family members that they had also deemed friends or where the relationship had assumed friendship characteristics (if not the label). Specifically, for family members there were

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intimate relationships between siblings that were distinct from relationships with other siblings and relationships with parents because of the presence or lack of friendship in kinship relations.

The negative case for friendly kin relationships

The individualized marriage that helps individuals to develop and grow is a marker of middle-class status (Cherlin, 2004). Respondents wanted their spouse to be a best friend and they recognized friendship as a distinct bond that should exist in their marital relationships. However, the pressure of being best friends with a spouse could make a relationship more stressful. Clara explained:

The reality of living together with somebody who’s also your best friend who you’re also sleeping with… Who’s gonna do the dishes? How much money do we have? Are we gonna have kids someday? We’re both part of each other’s families… Then we’re sexually involved… There’s that many pieces sometimes that feels like it creates a lot of pressure on this one unit. Plus, expectations about young couples in love as we get married and everybody’s like, “You must be so blissfully happy all the time.”

Respondents wanted friends to bring perspective to the marital relationship and to spend time with friends outside of their marital relationship. The belief that anything can be learned, and that learning helps an individual to grow into adult maturity is a middle-class value. Friends helped to solidify a middle-class adult identity by helping respondents to learn how to process conflict and emotions in adult friendships, and how to be adults in their romantic and marital relationships.

Friendship in a parental relationship could also be negative for respondents and did not always strengthen a personal community. However, recognizing friendship in a parental relationship could help respondents to solidify their own adult identities. Evan was a 28-year-old white male and undergraduate student in a non-exclusive couple at the time of the interview. He seemed to come from a working-class background. Evan said:

I don’t have a relationship with my parents or my family. Dad—sometimes we talk, but it’s like friends. We grew up gettin’ high together… So it wasn’t like a fa- so I never had like a family… Even when I got in trouble when I was a kid, my dad would be like, ‘alright we gotta hide you from the cops.’ My dad took care of me with a lotta legal stuff as far as—not getting me a lawyer but, ‘shut your fuckin’ mouth don’t say nu’in we’ll take – you know, this will get handled… I don’t despise ‘em. [Breath in] yeah, we’re friends but that doesn’t mean that I would ask him for help…

Evan viewed his relationship with his father on the level of equal peers—someone to hang out with (and probably not the preferred choice). Even though he uses the term friend when compared to his description of friendship and his interactions with his other friends, Evan did not actually consider his father a friend. He also did not think that he fulfilled the role of a father.

Kendra also viewed her relationship with her mother as peer-like. She often felt that she parented her mother and her brother. She said:
I definitely take the caretaker motherly role in my own family. That’s what my relationship with my mother is. I’m the mother and she’s the sort of mother. I don’t resent it... I also talk about relationship stuff with my mom, but I use that as a teaching tool cause my mother needs guidance... I am his [younger brother] mother... I am big time mothering him.

Kendra and Evan felt that their respective parents were not fulfilling their parental roles. However, Kendra applied more characteristics of friendship, true of her other friendships, to her relationship with her mother. Other participants also had intimate relationships with their parents that shared characteristics of friendship and stood out against the description of parent-child relationships from the majority of the study.

Unlike Kendra, the majority of participants did not feel comfortable talking about partying, drinking, sex, or romantic relationships with their parents. There were a few exceptions, but even then none of those parents were considered friends. The parental role in the cultural structure of the American family meant that first and foremost, parents were expected to be parents. Friendship was beneficial to the relationship, but it was also secondary to the parental role. Participants were conscious of intimacy with their parents and changing dynamics of this intimacy over time. Cindy observed, “You don’t choose your family but at some point, you do choose to accept them. So there is this weird exchange that does happen with choice.” The social expectation that people should care for their family seemed to detract from the significance of caring for family. Recognizing friendship in a family relationship made the act of caring for a family member a voluntary choice and added value to that decision.

**Discussion**

How do young adults from a middle-class background use a culture of individualism to respond to the instability of relationships? Concern for relationship instability came from anxiety around supporting a developing, middle-class individual. Respondents used friendship to create personal communities that would address what they perceived as existing or expected relationship instability in their personal communities. Respondents talked about needing to support themselves as unique individuals by making and maintaining friends that could support specific aspects of their personalities, their emotional needs, and the other relationships that were important to them in their personal communities.

For emerging adults, the quality of friendship during this life stage may reinforce the development of class-based identities. Respondents wanted friendship because they believed that they should. They believed that friends they carefully chose (or did not choose) reflected their personal identities and needs as adults. They were aware that friendship provided economic benefits, like social networks and that it was good for them as healthy adults to be socially engaged. They also knew that it was important for the quality of their romantic and marital relationships that they had friends to confide in and process relationship conflict. Respondents were aware that transitions in romantic relationships, parental status,
and residence would probably affect their personal communities. Establishing friendship as prevention against pervasive insecurity was an ongoing concern, but a worthy investment of limited time and resources. Friendship was a necessary addition to carefully crafted personal communities that would help respondents become well-adjusted adults who embraced middle-class values and reflect individual personalities, interests, and needs.

While friendship in the working-class tends to be context-specific, the middle-class extends the frame of friendship to include a wider range of relationships and to actively participate in the “making” of friends, whose commitment to the social relationship can be abstracted into a variety of contexts (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Establishing and maintaining this kind of friendship requires time, money, energy, and emotional resources, during a life-stage where most people are not in positions of power and have limited financial resources that they can leverage toward relationships (Rindfuss, 1991).

The way people respond to pervasive economic and relationship insecurity in their lives differs by class and gender. Middle-class women used their friendships for emotional support and identity construction that they did not have access to in their marital relationships but were able to engage in because they had the time and resources (Harrison, 1998). People may be more or less aware of systemic risks, more or less able to prepare for them, and more or less willing to accept insecurity in their employment and their relationships (Cooper, 2014; Pugh, 2015).

Future research should study how culture facilitates social mobility (Streib, 2017), using the personal community framework. The transition to adulthood can be a defining moment for upward or downward mobility. Middle-class investment in the developing individual during the transition to adulthood may not necessarily lead to upward mobility. For people who get lost in the transition to adulthood, prioritizing the individual and investing in the friendships of a middle-class identity may keep people isolated from potential social supports.

Class, status, and power not only determine the type of friends that people make, but also how and why people control the kind of personal community they have. It may be that certain types of personal communities do not map onto class differences but rather that people with power are able to choose the kind of personal community they want when they want it. This study begins this conversation by showing how and why emerging adults perceive a threat to their individualized middle-class identities and actively invest in the creation of their personal communities in response to instability.

References


## Appendix A
### Sample Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Relationship/ Marital Status</th>
<th>Kids</th>
<th>Race/ Ethnicity</th>
<th>Family of origin notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Single</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>African-American/Nigerian</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Latin-American/Chilean</td>
<td>Married heterosexual parents with older brother and younger sister and brother with down syndrome</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Programming associate</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Married heterosexual parents and younger brother and sister</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ned</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Employed, not a student</td>
<td>Exclusive couple</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Divorced parents, mother remarried, father remarried and has a younger step sister and step brother</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logan</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
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<td>Non-exclusive couple</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Married heterosexual parents with two younger brothers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B
Interview Guide

Friendship
1) What is your definition of friendship?
2) How does friendship play into your daily life?
3) How did your best friends become your closest friends?
4) Can you give an example of a time when a friend disappointed or hurt you?
5) Can you describe a time when you resolved a conflict or a misunderstanding in a friendship?
6) Was there ever a time when you ended a friendship or became less invested in it?
7) Can you describe a time when you were really glad that you had a friend?
8) How has the way you approach friendship changed over time?

Relationship Interactions
9) What is the ideal intimate personal relationship?
10) Who are the people that are the closest to you in your life?
11) Which of your relationships have lasted the longest/is most durable?
12) What do you look for in a friendship compared to a romantic relationship or marriage?
13) Are friendships important to marital and romantic relationships? How?
14) Are friendships important to family relationships? How?
15) Which of your relationships is most important to you? Why?

Marriage, Family, and Romantic Relationships:
16) Which is your favorite relationship that you have in your family? Why?
17) What makes a good marriage?
18) Can you describe a time when you have had to sacrifice resources or time in other interests to attend to marriage or family needs?