How to Find Your People - 1 – Friends

What do we mean by 'friends' and what might impact the size and composition of our friendship group? (24 minutes)

Introduction

This podcast series is for anyone who has worries about friendships while studying at the University of Oxford, whether as a newly arrived undergraduate or post-graduate, or as a more established student who has been studying here for some time.

We can all have worries about friendships. These might include how to make friends and whether we have enough of them, why we might at times feel lonely, even when we're with people, and what to do about this if we do, how to deepen our existing friendships, and why, even though we usually get on with our friendship group, we might occasionally find ourselves falling out with them.

Sometimes, it can also just be really hard to know if someone is a friend, more of an acquaintance, or someone with whom we just want to network. Or indeed, we might be curious as to whether someone might be more than a friend – and perhaps a potential romantic or sexual partner.

Overall, then, it's more than likely that, like most people, you will have different kinds of worries about your friendships and social life at different times in your university career. So, in this first podcast, we'll think, first of all, about what we might mean by a friend, the different kinds of social circles to which you might belong, and some of the factors which might impact how many friends you have and of what kind. In the second podcast, we'll go on to consider how you might go about meeting people – both in terms of where you might look for potential friends and what you might say to them when you find them. We'll then go on to reflect on how to make closer personal connections with people with whom you might already be on friendly terms. In the third and final podcast, we'll talk about how to circulate and network at social events – something that can feel a bit daunting at Oxford, at least until you get the hang of it - and we'll also reflect on loneliness versus solitude, the pros and cons of being on your own, what makes us feel lonely, and how you might address these kinds of feelings if you experience them. Finally, we'll also have a brief think about some of those trickier areas, and what you might do if, over a longer period of time, you begin to notice negative patterns in how you relate to others.

First some definitions and background

When it comes to defining friendship, the different kinds of social circles to which we might belong, some of the key factors which might impact how many friends we have, and the specific quality of the friendships that we do have, some well-known and influential research in the area has been conducted by the University of Oxford academic, Emeritus Professor Robin Dunbar. There is also some very recent and exciting research that suggests that who we might become – and remain - friends with might be determined, at least in part, by some of the ways in which our brains are structured neurologically.

Dunbar defines friends as 'the people who share our lives in a way that is more than just the casual meeting of strangers' (Dunbar, 2018), and as members of what he terms our 'personal social networks' (2018). It's a pretty broad definition, isn't it? And it encompasses what most of us might term 'people we know' rather than friends *per se.* For Dunbar, then, 'friends' might include people in our extended family, people we are familiar with from a professional context, such as teachers and lecturers, as well as people we might feel closer to and stay in touch with regularly. Dunbar's

definition of a friend even includes people we've been involved with romantically or sexually. So, for Dunbar, then, the term 'friend' is very wide ranging.

Using anthropological research from a range of cultural contexts and drawn from several different decades, as well as some clever statistics, Dunbar and colleagues argue that most of us have between 2 and 7 people who are what would usually be referred to as 'close friends and confidants', but who Dunbar et al. refer to as a 'support clique'. Dunbar and colleagues include in this 'support clique' close family members and partners, as well as close friends. These are the people, then, from whom we might seek support and advice if we are feeling emotionally distressed, and with whom we might be in touch at least once a week (Dunbar, 1993; Dunbar and Spoors, 1995; Stiller and Dunbar, (2007); Zhou et al., 2005; Dunbar, 2018). Although the average number of people in this group usually turns out to be around 5, there are absolutely no hard and fast rules here, and no ideal number you're meant to be aiming for, so the number of close friends and confidants you have will all depend on what suits you best emotionally.

Dunbar and colleagues go on to argue that there are likely to be a further 6 to 20 people in our wider social network who are what most of us would refer to as 'friends' in a looser sense, and which they have termed a 'sympathy group' (Dunbar and Spoors, 1995). This might include people to whom you probably feel connected socially in some way or other, and towards whom you feel reasonably well disposed. So, for example, people you sit with regularly for dinner in college, people you know on your corridor or in you student flat or house with whom you maybe go out from time to time, or team mates or peers from a sports club, a choir, an orchestra, a craft group, or another club or society of which you are a regular member – people, in other words, with whom you have some sort of emotional connection and with whom you might be in touch perhaps around once a month or so (Dunbar and Spoors, 1995; Hill and Dunbar, 2003). Again, although Dunbar et al. suggest that most people have an average of around 15 people in this group, there is likely to be a wide variation, and so this is not some sort of 'target' or 'norm' that you should be aiming for. Everything will depend on what works for you emotionally and, as before, there are no right or wrong answers, here.

Beyond that, for Dunbar and colleagues, there are then usually a further 50 or so people with whom you might have some sort of friendly contact from time to time and with whom you might have at least something in common – what most of us might call 'casual acquaintances' rather than actual friends, and what has come to be known in the literature as an 'affinity group' (Kempnich et al., 2024). This might include, for example, people you know a bit from your college or from lectures or tutorials, or people you don't actually know personally, but whom you see at clubs and societies, say, and recognise well enough, perhaps, to say hello to or pass the time of day with.

And finally, if you add to your 'support clique', your 'sympathy group', and your 'affinity group', all the other people with whom you have some sort of connection, however vague – including, for example, people you sort of recognise or people who might be a source of information or assistance to you (Dunbar, 2014)– such as people who work in the supermarket or bookshop, college admin staff, college catering and gardening staff, the people you see at the bus stop or in the university library from time to time, or your scout, your College Doctor or Nurse, or members of your College Welfare Team – that is, people you might only be in contact with occasionally, or even just once a year or so – then you are likely to get to what has come to be known as 'Dunbar's number' of around 150 people– with some people finding they have fewer than this in their overall social circle – maybe 100 or so, while others find they have more, say, 250 or so (Dunbar, 2018; Hill and Dunbar, 2003).

Now 150-ish people might initially sound like a rather large and intimidating number, but don't panic! This doesn't mean that the average person has 150 friends in the conventional sense of what

most of us mean by that term, but if you look in your mobile phone contacts list, your email list, and if you include people you vaguely know or recognise from school, or people who provide you with services, or with whom you have some sort of contact online (Carron, Kaski, and Dunbar, 2016), then you'll probably find you have something like this number of people in your overall group. A useful way of thinking of this, then, is in terms of these groups forming concentric circles, a bit like the rings on a dart board, in a kind of overall social hierarchy, with the people closest to you in the centre and the people you vaguely recognise in the outer rings (Dunbar, 2018).

Dunbar (1993) goes on to suggests that what limits the number of people with whom we have some sort of connection is the human neocortex – that is, the part of our brain that is linked to complex functions such as communication. And, he argues, the human neocortex has not really changed much for the past 250,000 years. We'll see shortly how more recent research has gone on to develop this idea and how our own personal neurology might well have quite a big part to play in who it is we become friends with, and even on how many friends we might actually have.

So, apart from the limitations of the human neocortex and our own specific neurology, what else might determine how many close friends we have, then? Well, there are likely to be lots of factors here, including, for example, age, gender, whether we are going through a life transition, such as going to university, and whether we are extrovert or introvert in how we relate to others.

When it comes to age, it probably won't come as a surprise to you to learn that on the whole, young people have more friends than older people – so the average 20-year-old will probably have a wider social circle say, than the average 60-year-old (Dunbar, 2018).

With regards to gender, there is some evidence to suggest that when it comes to support cliques – what most of us would call 'close friends' - women usually have more close friends in their support clique than men, for example, and tend to maintain their support clique size for longer, often into their late 40s (even if some of the people in it might change) (Dunbar et al., 2024). Nevertheless, major life transitions, such as going to university, leaving home, moving countries, or getting divorced, can all have an impact on our ability to maintain relationships (Kempnich et al., 2024).

If you are a fresher, then, you are probably finding out about, or already familiar with, some of the dilemmas involved in the first of these major life transitions, that is, the transition from home to university, when many people, initially at least, feel they want to keep in touch with any friends from home, as well as wanting to make further friends in their new environment. As psychoanalytic psychotherapist, Margot Waddell (2018), points out:

> 'Transition' at any age or stage…suggests instability, loss, change, uncertainty, the unknown: the shift from something familiar, and therefore relatively safe, to something foreign and potentially threatening.

Although some people might find this new situation exciting and interesting, perhaps it's not surprising, then, that others can find it a bit difficult at first to make new friends in what can initially feel like a pretty anxiety provoking and overwhelming environment. Most people will eventually find a way of overcoming their initial anxiety, however, and will start to try and meet some new people, even if just to feel the comfort of talking to peers who might be going through something similar. Once they realise that they are not the only people experiencing this, and that many of their peers will also be feeling a bit anxious and will be equally keen to make friends, things can often start to feel a bit easier, but much can depend on your previous experiences of transitions and how much practice you've had before at dealing with them. So, it's really just about doing your best and reflecting on your previous experiences and how they might be impacting your current experiences.

If, however, you find – whether in your first term, your first year, or subsequently, that you are really struggling socially, are staying in your room all the time, not really meeting anyone, and starting to feel very socially isolated, which is much more common amongst university students than you might think, then this can feel particularly difficult. So please do remember that there is a range of support available to you, including peer supporters in your college, junior deans, the University Counselling Service, or your College Counsellor, all of whom will be willing to support you or to think through with you what it is you might be finding challenging and how you might work towards overcoming any difficulties. You can also see your College Nurse or Doctor if you feel that you have specific mental health difficulties that would benefit from more specialist support, that might be making it harder for you to find and build friendships.

Most freshers do eventually start to make friends, however, and many then go through one of two recognisable patterns in how they form friendships in their first term and first year. This is a time when most people– however confident they might seem – are likely to be trying to cope with all the challenges that being away from home for the first time can bring or at the very least, if they've lived away from home before, to be trying to adapt to a new and often quite demanding environment that is at least somewhat different from what they were used to previously. Most people want to make friends when they first arrive, and some might even know each other already from school or home and might fall back on these friendships initially, until they make new ones. Some people might go about this by meeting lots of new people very quickly, and striking up what are perhaps relatively superficial relationships, just to feel that they know at least a few familiar faces. They might then quite quickly establish some very intense and close relationships with a smaller number of people, and by the end of the first year, they will often have started to set aside from their friendship circle some of the people they got to know fairly superficially in their first term, but with whom they might now have come to realise they don't really have that much in common. Other people might take more time to get to know their peers, and might be more selective in who they decide to socialise with. They might build friendships more slowly and carefully, taking their time to work out who it is they get on with and who they don't, and then, by the end of their first year, they might have developed a small group of people they know and like, and might then proceed to get to know them better as time goes on, rather than getting to know lots of people and then going through a process of what we might informally term 'social deselection'.

Thus, in your first term and first year, expanding your 'affinity group' in your new environment might feel very important to you, as you go to various social events and parties, as well as keeping in touch with friends from home, but then, as the year goes on, workloads increase, and time for face-to-face interaction becomes more limited, you might find yourself spending what time you have with a smaller number of people you have got to know better at university, while links with not so close friends from home might start to loosen (Kempnich et al., 2024). Your 'support clique' and 'sympathy group', then, are also likely gradually to change over the course of your first year at university, and as the year progresses, you might also find yourself sorting out who you do and don't want to keep as a friend, and importantly, who you do and don't want to live with in your second or subsequent years.

So, if you find yourself as a fresher meeting lots of new people in Michaelmas and feel rather overwhelmed, and then find yourself becoming more selective about who your friends are in Hilary and Trinity, before finding a more settled groups of friends by the end of the year, then rest assured, it's not that you've lost your charm and charisma over the course of the academic year, but rather, it's just that this is a well-established and recognisable pattern, and probably nothing to worry about. If, conversely, you feel, as a fresher in your first term or first year at Oxford, that everyone

else seems to know everybody, or seems to have far more friends than you do, whereas you feel that you don't really know anyone that well and only have one or two friends, if that, then it's worth bearing in mind that this is also a recognisable pattern, and you might just prefer to take your time to get to know people, being naturally more discerning in who you make friends with. Overall, by the end of the first year, you will probably end up with the number of friends that's right for you, and you, too, will probably find people you want to live with and who will want to live with you.

Once that initial transition of leaving home and starting at university has been successfully traversed, however, during the second year, friendships can often change again as you find that some relationships really deepen and flourish, while others don't last the course. And there can be some dramatic fallings out, too, in student houses, as you discover - by living with others day in and day out - that some people you thought you knew and liked turn out to be very different from what you had initially anticipated. The psychodynamics of the student house can also become quite complicated if sexual or romantic relationships develop between housemates, especially if those relationships don't subsequently work out, or if others in the house find them uncomfortable or exclusionary.

When it comes to the third or fourth year of your degree, other friendship dynamics again can develop amongst friends, and some potentially more competitive feelings about how well you're all going to do academically, or who's going to get a good job offer might start to emerge. There might also be some complex emotions around who you want to stay in touch with and who you don't after graduation, and where and with whom you might all be planning to live as you inevitably go your separate ways. So, friendship circles are likely to change again at this point, as some of you transition to life after university with all that that entails, while others might stay on for further study, at Oxford or elsewhere, and continue with student life.

For many, then, the undergraduate years, in particular, are ones where processes of what psychoanalytic psychotherapists call 'projection' and 'introjection' are particularly at play, as you explore with others your identities, hopes, and dreams for the future. Miller (1999, p. 139), for example, points out that students often unconsciously 'lend and borrow' aspects of themselves to each other as they 'work out their ideas, values, and relationships' and explore 'what it is like to be this changing version of themselves: what interests them; whom they get on with, and why' (Copley, 1993, cited by Hardie, (1999). So, if, in Michaelmas of your first year or later on, when you are living in a student house, you find yourself in intense relationships, and feeling all sorts of feelings that don't really seem to belong to you, it might be that some of these unconscious processes are going on, as you all work out your own - often changing and developing - identities and figure out which feelings belong to whom.

For postgraduates, who are often a bit older, the patterns are likely to be similar in some ways but quite different in others, with Master's students often making close friends amongst their seminar or lab groups, particularly if they have a lot of contact time with them, or perhaps making other friends through networking and social events or clubs and societies, while DPhil students might meet people through their colleges, departments, or through clubs and societies, but can often initially feel somewhat more isolated. Not infrequently, both post-graduate groups can feel that they have to do a lot of what can sometimes feel like fairly superficial networking, with a good deal of social churn involved, as they see different waves of people arriving in and leaving Oxford, with this especially being the case over the several years of doing a DPhil. As with undergraduates, quite complex group dynamics can also exist at post-graduate level, too, whether in a student house or where people are working hard in close quarters under a lot of academic pressure or in a highly competitive environment, as in some labs or work groups, for example.

But what about the impact on our friendships and on how many friends we have of being an extrovert or an introvert? And what do these terms mean, anyway? Well, both terms actually have very little to do with whether or not we like being with other people – because in fact, both introverts and extroverts can enjoy other people's company. Rather, these terms have to do with whether we find that being with others and socialising in groups tend to give us energy – in which case, we're probably extrovert – or whether being with others and socialising in groups tend to deplete our social battery – in which case, we're probably more introvert. Many people feel that being an extrovert is somehow preferable to, or better than, being an introvert, but they're actually just different and, far from the usual perception that extroverts have loads of really good friends, research demonstrates that, although extroverts tend to have larger social networks, on average, they also often have weaker relationships – in other words, extroverts tend to spread themselves more thinly, whereas introverts tend to focus their emotional energy more selectively (Dunbar, 2018, citing Pollet et al., 2011). So, if you're an extrovert, you might, at times, feel a bit lonely because you know lots of people, but don't always feel that close to them, and you might want to focus on building closer relationships. If you're an introvert, conversely, you might feel lonely, at times, because you have a handful of close friends, but might not feel you have enough friends overall, so you might want to focus on broadening your social circle. And for any introverts listening, if you don't know it already, you might also find reading Susan Cain's book, *Quiet – the Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* helpful in recognising how valuable being an introvert can actually be.

Interestingly, research is also beginning to demonstrate that different abilities in recognising the possible thoughts, feelings, wishes, and intentions of others and their likely states of mind – what is known as 'theory or mind' or 'mentalising' – and differences in memory capacity – can also both impact the extent to which we feel able to manage our social worlds (Stiller and Dunbar, 2006). Of course, it's not just our personal capacities that matter here, but also the extent to which the environment we find ourselves in is able to respond to our particular ways of being. Moreover, functional magnetic resonance imaging or fMRI scans demonstrate that our friends are likely to be people who perceive and respond to the world in ways that are very similar to our own. Our friends are likely to be people, then, who not only share some of our individual characteristics, but who also have similar personality traits and values to us (Parkinson et al., 2018).

This might, at least in part, be because these kinds of similarities make social interactions more predictable, requiring less effort, and therefore often being more enjoyable and rewarding, because they tend to reinforce our own interests, values, and opinions (Parkinson et al., 2018). When we make friends with people who are different from us in these regards, however, it might be that our relationships are more task-focussed or created for a specific reason which serves a particular need. It's important, too, however, to embrace difference, even if there might be more potential at times for minor misunderstandings or ruptures to occur, as these are often experiences that we can reflect on, discuss, and hopefully learn from. Fascinatingly, there is also recent research evidence suggesting that, although demographic characteristics might partly explain who becomes and remains friends with whom, people who became friends and grew closer over a period of 8 months had distinctive neural similarities in regions of the brain associated with how people process the world around them, linked to interests, tastes, and preferences, although it's not yet clear whether people become friends because of these similarities or if these similarities occur because people become friends (Shen et. al., 2025). What many of us might have experienced in day-to-day life, then – that people with whom we get on tend to have similar values, ways of looking at the world, or perhaps a similar sense of humour– is thus now increasingly being evidenced by this kind of

research. And it might well be that our unconscious mind is deciding on who we get to be friends with, and who we remain friends with, to a greater extent than we might initially have realised!

Finally, whilst most people assume that the very rapid technological and social changes which have occurred over the past few years are likely to have impacted how many friends we all have, contemporary research also shows that the numbers don't change that much whether our social circle is mostly in real life or online (Dunbar, 2016). There is, nevertheless some evidence to suggest that, even if day-to-day communication about arranging social events might often now take place online, for some Gen Z-ers, at least, relationships in real life are increasingly sought after (Seemiller and Grace, 2016, p. 61).

In this first podcast, then, we've thought about what we might mean by a friend, the different kinds of social circles to which we might belong, and about some of the factors which might impact how many friends we have and of what kind. In the second podcast, we'll go on to consider how you might go about meeting people, both in terms of where you might look for potential friends and what you might say to them when you find them. And please do remember that if you're finding it hard to make or keep friends, you certainly won't be the only one, and that there is a range of support available to you, including peer supporters in your college, junior deans, the University Counselling Service, or your College Counsellor, all of whom will be willing to support you or to think through with you what it is you might be finding challenging and how you might work towards overcoming any difficulties. You can also see your College Nurse or Doctor if you feel that you have specific mental health difficulties that would benefit from more specialist support, that might be making it harder for you to find and build friendships.

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