

FRIENDSHIP IN ADOLESCENCE AND ITS PITFALLS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELATIONAL DIALECTICS

Maria-Monica POPESCU-MITROI, PhD.

Politehnica University Timișoara, Department for Teaching Training
monica.mitroi@upt.ro

Abstract: *This study is based on a descriptive research on a sample of 80 teenagers, built on three fundamental questions: What qualities do adolescents value in a friendship? Are there significant differences between the two genders when it comes to these qualities? What are the main relational dialectics to be solved in the case of friendship in adolescence, starting from the main qualities valued? The investigated teenagers mention the following qualities as relevant: sincerity, help, trust, loyalty, respect, honesty etc. The study also reveals that there are significant differences in terms of gender, in the sense that boys appreciate sincerity more in friendship, while girls appreciate stability more than boys. In terms of the pitfalls of relational dialectics associated with these qualities, they are at the level: expressiveness – protection (sincerity, trust), and independence – dependence (help, stability), respectively, according to W.K. Rawlins. According to Baxter & Montgomery's theory, there are tensions between the following opposite values regarding in friendship in adolescence: expression – nonexpression, integration – separation (help), stability – change (in the case of girls), expression – nonexpression in the case of boys).*

Keywords: *adolescence; qualities of friendship; relational dialectics; opposite values;*

1. Introduction

Does the relationship of friendship differ from other types of relationships? Common sense shows that people interact differently with friends and non-friends. Therefore, it is natural to ask: *What are the defining aspects of friendship? What is specific to friendship in adolescence, in terms of valued qualities?*

William K. Rawlins (1992, 2008, p.12) in *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course* points out that friendship is

a relationship that has five special features: it is a voluntary relationship, it is a personal relationship (by virtue of the individual qualities of the person), it is an affective relationship based on an emotional attachment, it is a mutual relationship based on common elements, and is a relationship built on equality. In adolescence, friendship gains stability (Bradford & Klute, 2009, p. 373), reciprocity and equality, similarity, these being its fundamental criteria.

In adolescence there are a number of explicit or implicit expectations in a friendship, often mentioned as qualities valued in friendship. Thus, the study by Roberts-Griffin (2011, pp. 7, 15-16) mentions the following qualities appreciated in friendship by the 15 to 30 age group: *trust* (44%), *honesty*, *support*, common interests, loyalty, humour, kindness, acceptance, communication, etc. For the 31 to 45 age group, the order of valued qualities is different: *trust* (36%), *honesty*, humour, kindness, support, common interests. These qualities with small inversions are mentioned as important in a friendship for the 46 to 60 age group as well: *honesty* (40%), *trust*, *support*, common interests, humour, kindness, communication. In the 60+ group, the qualities invoked are somewhat different: *communication* (29%), *honesty*, humour, loyalty, *trust*, etc. In terms of gender differentiation, women mention the following qualities as relevant: *trust*, *honesty*, fun, *support*, humour, common interests and loyalty, while men mention: *honesty*, *support*, common interests, loyalty, humour, communication.

Do these qualities influence a good friendship relationship? In the dyad of friendship, there is a chance of equally or unequally benefiting from these qualities or, on the contrary, of being caught in a toxic friendship relationship with a partner who does not share these values at all. Friendship relationships, especially in adolescence (as extra-familial relationships), can have both positive and negative effects on physical, psychological, emotional health, and may influence the start of risky or problem-causing behaviour (Bradford & Klute, 2009), raising the issue of the importance of managing friendship relationships in the educational sphere.

Social life is a process of contradictory discourse, whose central theme is relational dialectics (Baxter, 2004, p. 182). **Relational dialectics** is a theory of interpersonal communication about opposite trends. Therefore, according to the author, tensions exist between opposite values such as: expression – nonexpression, integration – separation, stability – change. According to Baxter & Montgomery (1996), each of the three relational dialectics has its characteristics:

- the *expression-nonexpression* dialectics can be internally present through the tension that arises between *openness-closeness* (how much information about myself do I tell my partner), while externally tension

appears between *revelation-concealment* (how much of our common information do I share in the social network).

- the *integration-separation* or *me-we* dialectics (how independent or dependent should I be) can be experienced internally as a contradiction between *autonomy-connection* (how much should I rely on my partner), and externally refers to *inclusion-seclusion* (how much we should be connected with others).

- the *stability-change* dialectics targets internally the tension between *predictability-novelty* (how monotonous or dynamic is the relationship), *certainty-uncertainty* (how certain or uncertain is the relationship), and externally between *uniqueness-conventionality* (how different is the relationship from the others, from existing conventions).

We note that *internal dialectics* addresses the tensions existing in the relationship between relational partners, while *external dialectics* refers to the tensions that exist between the relationship and the outside world (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

It is difficult to find a balance, to integrate aspects that are so different. In contrast to the first-generation relational dialectics that wanted to integrate two voices, the effort now focuses on the formation of a “multi-voiced story in centripetal and centrifugal flow” (Baxter, 2004, p. 189), social life being an “open dialogue” characterised by the fusion and simultaneous differentiation of voices. The central concept of *social-dialectics theories* is contradiction. Contradiction is the dynamic interaction between opposing units (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 8, Dialectical Theory).

William K. Rawlins (1992, 2008, pp. 15-23) in chapter *A Dialectical Perspective on Communication in Friendship* refers to the tensions that arise between contradictory elements in friendships. Rawlins’s friendship dialectics theory shows that the following dialectics appear at *contextual* level:

A. *Public - Private* – the difference/tension between how society sees the friendship and how friends see the friendship.

B. *Ideal - Real* – the difference/tension between how friendship should be (the cultural, social ideal) and how it is actually lived in relation to these standards.

In terms of *interactive dialectics* (communication), it includes all the conflicts that friends endure to maintain the friendship relationship (Sivertsen, 2003, pp. 5-9). They appear as tensions between (Rawlis & Rawlis, 2005, pp. 12-18):

1. *Independence - Dependence* – the difference/tension between the desire for freedom in individual activities and the desire to receive support, to be helped.
2. *Expressiveness - Protectiveness* – the difference/tension between the desire to reveal personal information and the desire not to reveal too much to avoid being hurt.
3. *Acceptance - Judgement* – the difference/tension between the desire to accept a friend as he or she is and the desire to feel free to criticise and give advice.
4. *Affection - Instrumentality/Utility* – the difference/tension between the desire to focus on affection in the relationship of friendship and the desire to base the relationship on concrete tasks in achieving a goal.

It can be argued that friendship is a social construct based on the subjective experiences of members, its evolution being influenced by the resolution of these dialectics at the contextual and interactive level. The dialectical approach based on the *and/both* contradiction is a challenge in that a variety of contradictions must be managed. Friendship relationships thus appear in a dynamic that can generate positive effects by strengthening the relationship, or negative/destructive effects for both partners or one of them. The ability of both partners to resolve this relational dialectics is essential for the proper functioning of the relationship, all based on each person's concept of friendship.

2. Methods and Discussions

The sample consists of 80 teenagers (40 boys, 40 girls), first year students in technical faculties at the Politehnica University Timișoara. The study is based on a descriptive research, having a referential-informational function on the qualities that ensure the functionality of friendship relations. The generic question is: What qualities matter in a positive friendship relationship from your point of view? The students have mentioned three important qualities in a friendship. Of course, we excluded the naming of ideal qualities that give identity to friendship, but the relationship between the qualities that define me as a good friend or the qualities expected of a good friend remains unclear, as sometimes there may be a contradiction between giving and receiving, while friendship itself presupposes this transaction based on reciprocity between receiving and giving. The questions on which the study is based are: What qualities do adolescents value in a friendship? Are there significant differences between the two genders when it comes to these qualities? What are the main relational dialectics to be solved in the case of friendship in adolescence, starting from the main qualities valued?

The statistical processing was based on the inventory of all mentioned qualities, and the following statistical indices were then calculated using SPSS17: the frequency tables for the correlations between the identified qualities (for the entire sample, and for boys and girls, respectively), the Chi-Square test for the association or independence between qualities identified depending on gender.

The data identified (Table no. 1) reveal that sincerity is the quality most valued by adolescents (87.5%), followed by help (36.3%), trust (27.5%), loyalty (26.3%), respect (26.3%), honesty (23.8%), understanding (16.3%), communication (13.8%), stability (12.5%), resemblance (11.3%), humour (8.8%), sacrifice (6.3%) and different (3.8%).

As regards the qualities mentioned by boys, the following order is noted: sincerity (95%), help (40%), loyalty (32.5%), trust (27.5%), respect (30%), honesty and understanding (20%), communication, similarity and humour (7.5%), stability and differences (5%) and sacrifice (2.5%). In terms of the qualities mentioned by girls, the following order is noted: sincerity (80%), support (32.5%), trust and honesty (27.5%), respect (22.5%), communication and stability (20%), understanding (12.5%), humour and sacrifice (10%), differences (2.5%).

Table no. 1. The main qualities valued in a friendship by adolescents, and by boys and girls, respectively significant sex differences

Qualities	sincerity	help /support	trust	loyalty	respect	honesty	understanding	communication	stability	similarity	humour	sacrifice	differences
All %	87.5 (1)	36. (2)	27. (3)	26. 3	26. 3	23. 8	16. 3	13. 8	12.5	11. 3	8. 8	6. 3	3. 8
Boys %	95 (1)	40 (2)	27. 5	32. 5	30	20	20	7.5	5	7.5	7. 5	2. 5	5
Girls %	80 (1)	32. 5	27. 5	20	22.	27. 5	12. 5	20	20	15	10	10	2. 5
Chi-Square	p<0.05								p<0.05				

Below, we will analyse the first three qualities identified as important from the perspective of relational dialectics: *sincerity, help and trust (for girls), and sincerity, help and loyalty (for boys), respectively.*

Sincerity as an attribute that signifies confession, disclosure, saying what you think, without lying or deceiving, involves solving conflicts on the dimension of *expressiveness – protection* (Rawlins) and on the *expression – nonexpression* dialectics (Baxter), because there are many risks assumed by the two contradictory poles: to be an open book (maximum self-disclosure) and to be an enigma (closeness, hypocrisy, duplicity, pretence, pharisaism).

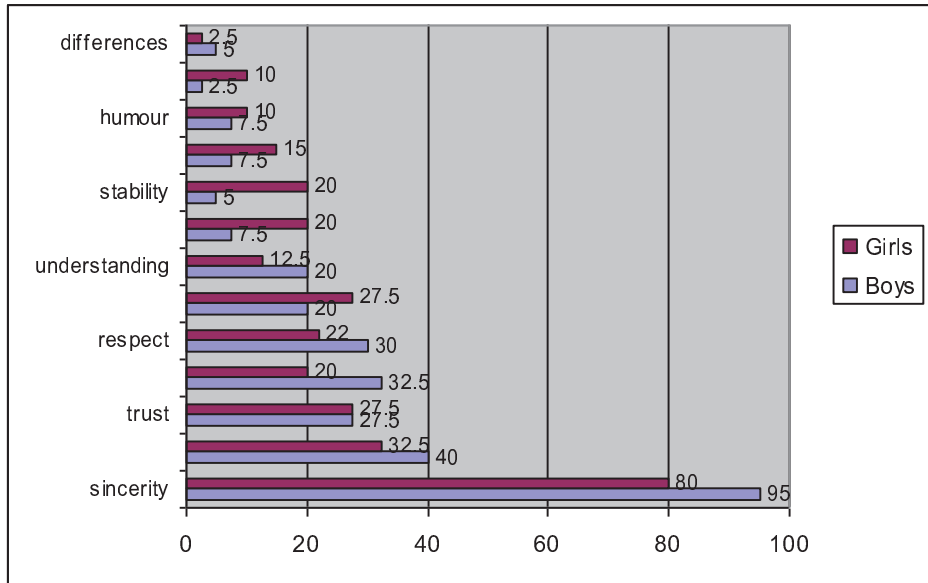
Help involves participating in the effort of the other, helping someone, protecting, supporting, protecting the other. The conflicts that appear here are on the *independence – dependence* dimension (Rawlins), the *integration-separation* dialectics (Baxter), and aim to negotiate the following: involvement vs. non-involvement, interference vs. abandonment, asking for/accepting help up to becoming dependant on the other vs. rejecting/not accepting help to maintain independence.

In terms of trust, ranked third by girls, it is part of the process of resolving the expressivity – protection dialectics (Rawlins), *expression – nonexpression* (Baxter), because it is aimed at feeling safe, mattering, being able to rely on the other, on his or her good faith, without any doubt or suspicion. Friendship involves mutual trust (Pahl, 2000, p. 54, cited by Albu, 2005)

Loyalty, ranked third by boys, means to be steadfast, devoted, loyal, trustworthy, and stable, to be there for each other, and is part of the *independence – dependence* dialectics (Rawlins), *stability – change* dialectics (Baxter). A problem in this respect would be to find a balance between certainty vs. uncertainty, discretion vs. public exposure etc.

The Chi-Square Test, and ANOVA analysis, respectively, reveals significant sex differences for the following qualities (Figure no. 1.): *sincerity and stability* at a threshold of $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.043$), in the sense that boys appreciate *sincerity* more than girls, while girls appreciate *stability* more than boys. Stability is part of the independence – dependence dialectics (Rawlins), stability and change (Baxter). Friendship is a lasting relationship (Albu, 2005).

Figure no. 1. Qualities valued in a friendship differentiated by sex



Regarding the possible correlations between the qualities mentioned by adolescents, a positive correlation was found at a threshold of <0.01 between *communication and similarity*, both at group level and in the case of girls. Similarity can be a prerequisite, but also a result of good communication. In the case of boys, however, there is a significant positive correlation at a threshold of $p < 0.05$ between *communication and differences*, which may indicate the boys' openness to what is different, to new learning experiences, in which case communication would aim to capture the common elements in spite of the differences, of the novelty elements, of the different elements that require solving conflicts. The correlation between *honesty and sacrifice* can indicate the active involvement of boys in relationships perceived as honest.

Table no. 2 Significant correlations between the qualities mentioned

Variables 1	Variables 2	Pearson Correlation	Significance
communication	similarity	.317	.004** (group)
communication	similarity	.490	.001** (girls)
communication	differences	.370	.019* (boys)
honesty	sacrifice	.320	.044* (boys)
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level			
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level			

How stimulating for communication are similarity and differences between friends must be established by other studies, in our study the data capturing only the perception of the investigated subjects.

3. Conclusions

Sincerity, help and trust are the three main qualities valued in a friendship by the adolescents surveyed. In the real-life supply-offer transaction, will adolescents find a balance?

From the perspective of relational dialectics, these qualities can generate contradictions that require resolution:

- sincerity (ranked 1st) and trust (ranked 3rd) are in a relation with resolving the expression-protection (Rawlins), expression - nonexpression (Baxter) dialectics;
- help (ranked 2nd) is in a relation with resolving the independence-dependence (Rawlins), integration-separation (Baxter) dialectics;

The study also reveals that boys value sincerity more than girls, while girls appreciate stability more than boys. We can say that, from the point of view of relational dialectics, in the friendship relationship, boys lay emphasis on the successful resolution of the *expressiveness – protectiveness* dialectics (Rawlins), *expression - nonexpression* dialectics (Baxter), while girls lay emphasis on the successful resolution of the *independence – dependence* (Rawlins), *stability-change* (Baxter) dialectics.

According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), the most inappropriate strategies to deal with contradictions would be: (a) denial, i.e., focusing on one of the poles and ignoring the other, and (b) disorientation, i.e., a sense of helplessness which leads to giving up on any action. There are also the following dominant communication practices in the negotiation of contradictions, synthesised after *Dialectical Theory*:

- *Spiralling inversion* – focusing on one of the poles and then the other, that is, alternate.
- *Segmentation* – negotiating and establishing that pole A is dominated in the field of activity X, and that pole B is dominated in the field of activity Y.
- *Balance* – finding compromise solutions where both dialectical poles are met, but only partially.
- *Integration* – looking for a complete answer instead of a partial one to both dialectical poles at the same time without causing suffering.
- *Recalibration* – refocusing the situation so that a contradiction is symbolically rebuilt, therefore leading to the dialectical requirements no

longer being regarded as opposite. Transforming contradictions so that they no longer oppose each other.

- *Reaffirmation* – both partners recognising that dialectical tensions will never disappear, recalling successes had and celebrating them.

The study reveals that adolescents value qualities such as sincerity, help, trust, loyalty, qualities that are in the register of character traits that will be confirmed and reconfirmed in the interpersonal relationships of friendship, contributing to the moral, cognitive, emotional and social development of each person included in this dyad of friendship. We could argue that the moral values of those who make up the dyad are at the forefront.

Studies on social influence support the fact that adolescents are influenced by the characteristics of their friends, both positively and negatively, at the level of psychological and behavioural development, depending on the quality of the friendship (Berndt, 2002). Therefore, the characteristics of a friend are becoming relevant to a good friendship, but also the quality of a friendship can cause changes in the characteristics of both persons included in the friendship dyad. Relationships evolve according to how partners react to these tensions (relational dialectics), but it can be argued that these reactions are also influenced by the characteristics of the partners. In conclusion, the only way to have a friend is to be his friend (Emerson, 1968) and finding solutions to these relational dialectics.

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