

Where Does Homophily Come From?

A Bachelor's Thesis in Sociology

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Abstract

This study evaluates the evolution of friendship networks amongst first year undergraduate students at the beginning of college. While homophily, or the tendency to associate with similar others, is a network trait that sociologists have extensively studied, less is known about how it arises. Current research focuses on homophily dynamics but fails to adequately address if it plays a direct role in match selection or whether it arises indirectly. I address this gap by employing a qualitative, semi-longitudinal approach to evaluate college student personal networks as they naturally form and evolve due to random happenstances and individual choices. Specifically, I ask how does homophily arise in personal networks, and how do these contexts affect subsequent patterns of interaction? Participants, recruited through a combination of random and snowball samples, were interviewed periodically over their first two quarters of college to determine who they are associating with, how they are associating with them, and where they are looking for friends. These answers were then compiled and analysed to evaluate trends in network evolution with respect to homophily, heterophily, and propinquity. The findings suggest that individuals engage in a dual filtering exercise to identify friends. First, they choose environments based on the desired level of baseline similarity and then filter the subset based on personal preferences. By considering how the concept of shared experiences varies between different spaces, I explain common patterns in collegiate personal networks

Introduction

How do people become friends? Sociologists have long been interested in how people create and maintain strong ties for social support and fulfillment. One answer to this question is homophily. Coming from the Greek roots homo and philia, homophily refers to the tendency of people to make ties with others who are similar to them. While this trend has been largely studied in its effects, the distinction between patterns of homophily and the preference for homophily are not always clear. Homophily can emerge from various sources such as individual preferences where people choose to friends because of their similarity or structural network features where individuals end up with friends similar to them because of opportunities within their networks. To understand where homophily comes from it is important to examine the whole history of a friendship. Early collegiate environments allow for this type of analysis. The transition to college is a critical period of social adjustment where students must navigate the

complexities of forming and maintaining friendships. Students are initially placed into random housing and orientation groups and then over time begin to branch out as they choose classes, activities, and ultimately their friends. By evaluating how students make and maintain friendships at the start of college I answer the question: how do patterns of homophily emerge in friendship formation and how do they subsequently influence friendship maintenance in collegiate spaces?

Background

Since the early periods of network theory, sociologists have sought to understand why individuals form ties. One of the most widely observed patterns in social networks is the idea of homophily, or the tendency to associate with similar others. This pattern is readily observed across various levels of differentiation, with individuals associating with others like them across various dimensions such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and shared interest, among others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Broadly speaking, homophily is “the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar with respect to certain attributes” (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970:526). These attributes are generally divided into status and value homophily, with the former describing ascribed traits and the latter describing achieved traits and can be either readily apparent or discoverable through interaction (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; McPherson et al. 2001). In other words, status homophily represents socially constructed characteristics that are observable and used as cues for interaction, such as race or age. In contrast, value homophily encapsulates values, beliefs, and interests that become apparent over time through interaction (Kandel 1978). For example, students at the University of Chicago would be homophilous with respect to status since they are both members of the same university

or could be considered value homophilous as they adhere to the principles of the life of the mind¹. Regardless of the dimension of interest, homophily can also be analysed in terms of its source.

Homophily emerges through both structural and preferential mechanisms. Baseline homophily, sometimes referred to as induced homophily, describes the expected rates of matching based on the demographic composition of a given population; matches above this baseline are referred to as inbreeding or choice homophily (McPherson et al. 2001). To illustrate this point, one study found that even amongst MBA classes of predominantly white students, minority students formed same race friendships at rates higher than what would be expected from a random sample (Mollica, Gray, and Treviño 2003). The results here indicate that the students made a conscious choice to associate with others of a similar background. Similarly, other studies have found students forming friendships with peers who share the same academic goals or values, further emphasizing the role of preferences in creating homophilous patterns (Rivera, Soderstrom, and Uzzi 2010; Smirnov and Thurner 2017). Rogers and Bhowmik suggest that homophilous ties are preferred as they facilitate trust, empathy, and effectiveness in communication (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). However, patterns of homophily may emerge irrespective of preferences.

Structural elements can give rise to homophilous patterns by limiting or increasing the opportunities for interaction. Propinquity refers to the notion that frequent interactions with individuals in shared contexts are likely to result in stronger ties (Veenstra and Laninga-Wijnen 2023). The ties formed here are dependent on network composition and can exhibit homophily irrespective of individual preferences (Doehne, McFarland, and Moody 2024; Volker 2017). The key insight of structural homophily is that ties are limited by our access to individuals – in some

¹ The life of the mind is a slogan associated with the University of Chicago. It represents a deeper commitment to learning for the sake of learning and the enrichment of life.

cases a person might prefer homophilous friendships but exists in a highly heterogenous network and so will be restricted to heterophilous tie formation (Thomas 2019). This concept of opportunity-based matching is readily apparent in collegiate spaces where students' majors, class schedules, residence halls, and extracurriculars mediate their access to other students (Biancani and McFarland 2013; Jackson et al. 2022). Each space will have its own baseline homophily, and the frequency of interactions in these spaces can result in the emergence of homophily due to opportunity rather than preferences.

While patterns of homophily can emerge due to tie formation, these patterns can also be influenced by tie retention. That is, individuals make and break many ties over time, particularly in school settings. Fischer and Offer propose two main aspects that influence tie retention: opportunities for interaction and rewards from the tie (Fischer and Offer 2020). Once a tie is formed, it will persist if it can easily be maintained and if it is rewarding to maintain. Longitudinal studies support this claim, suggesting that homophily remains a stable preference throughout college but network composition evolves over time as contexts change. In some cases, these contexts make it preferable to produce and maintain heterophilous ties (Rivera et al. 2010; Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). In any case, opportunity and preferences mediate the extent to which ties are maintained, suggesting that tie retention involves a more complex cost-benefit analysis than tie formation as individuals weigh current and future considerations.

To deal with the intertemporal elements of homophily, I propose adopting the framework proposed by Emirbayer and Mische for the dimensions of agency. Agency, as they conceptualise it, is a dynamic, embedded process. Social actors engage with their environment in ways shaped by past habits, future orientations, and an understanding of present concerns and conditions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This understanding of agency can better illustrate how individuals

form and maintain ties. Emirbayer and Mische identify three intertemporal dimensions of agency: iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative.

Iterative agency refers to how experiences leverage past experiences, routines, and social structures to guide their present interactions. This dimension deals with the habitual reproducibility of human behaviour as agents consistently draw on past patterns to guide their actions in the present. By selectively recalling and applying relevant schemata, individuals maintain social structures and continuity through learned behaviour.

In contrast, projective agency is oriented towards future engagements and highlights the imaginative ability of social actors. Rather than applying and maintaining past behaviours, individuals construct alternative trajectories by envisioning potential futures, hopes, and goals. As individuals respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, actors are capable of reconstructing and innovating upon their iterative elements. The essence of this dimension is the hypothesization of experience to move beyond themselves into the future. Put more simply, can the individual conceive or imagine future experiences or behaviours? Agents here orient themselves amongst other actors and negotiate a path forward while navigating the intricacies of social life.

Finally, practical-evaluative agency reflects the capacity of individuals to assess and respond to immediate, unfolding situations. While the past provides a foundation for action and the future offers direction, the present state involves a continuous evaluation of social contexts that responds to the demands and contingencies of the present. This dimension underscores the contextualisation of social experiences. By exercising situational judgement, actors mediate between social considerations and can orient themselves accordingly. Practical-evaluative agency highlights the practical wisdom and reflexive flexibility inherent in human action.

These dimensions of agency can be used to understand how individuals mediate the different considerations that influence relationships. As I will explain in more detail later in this paper, tie retention and friendship dynamics are primarily influenced by experiences. Homophilous associations are influenced by a sense of shared past experiences and can be understood through the iterative dimension. In contrast, propinquity-based ties are more likely to be influenced creating shared experiences in the present and can be understood through the practical-evaluative dimension. As mentioned earlier, tie retention depends on opportunities for interaction. Thus, the projective element described here can be used to understand the possibilities of future interaction and any decisions that emerge from them.

This study will evaluate the assortative² matching that occurs voluntarily and compare it to the convenience³ matches that occur structurally early in the undergraduate career. By tracking how the network evolves over time and observing which ties are replaced and how those ties are chosen, we can gain further insight into the role of homophily in matching. I aim to evaluate how and if individuals engage in trait screening processes and their consequent effects on tie emergence and maintenance. Furthermore, I recognize how college contexts structurally influence the matching process that occurs in network development and tie formation. I hypothesise that initial tie formation is predicated by contextual features, which are exacerbated by homophily dynamics that influence friendship maintenance and evolution over time.

² Assortative matching refers to the systematic matching process that occurs based on individual preferences

³ Convenience matches are those that emerge due to proximity and easy association rather than from a conscious search process

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were 10 students attending the University of Chicago. Students were interviewed during the 2024-2025 school year. The recruitment for this study was done in two stages. The initial participants were recruited through flyers posted electronically in house⁴ newsletters. Given that the aim of the study is to evaluate the change in networks due to individual selection criteria, I chose to limit the span of the study to one house. This would ensure that all participants had access to the same random network at the start of their time in college and facilitate the observation of changes and choices. Hence, the house with the largest participation rate from the initial flyer was selected for further study. The second phase of recruitment was conducted by a snowball sample. The original participants were asked to refer other students from their house who fit the selection criteria. This referral would ensure that the study remained limited to the same house. The snowball sample also served the purpose of conveying further network information by identifying the closest alters within the house network. This choice will be further expounded upon in the following section.

To more effectively study the change in network, the sample is restricted to first year students only. This group was selected because friendship selection is more profound at this stage. When students enter college, they, for the most part, arrive without a prior network. Instead, their initial network will be one of convenience and random assortment. In this case, the house system provides a randomized group with ample opportunity for interaction, with core

⁴ University of Chicago student dorms are separated into houses. These houses serve to structure student social life, particularly for first years, by hosting events and encouraging interaction with other students. First year students are randomly sorted into houses by the university

classes doing so as well to a lesser extent. These students are then presented with a variety of choices for social activity and organisation, namely extracurricular activities, study habits, and class choices, which will slowly expand and replace elements of their initial network and reveal their friendship trait preferences. Thus, the participants were all first-year students who lived on campus and were all a part of the same house. Any student who met these criteria and volunteered was interviewed; no screening was done based on demographic traits.

Interview Methods

The interviews were conducted in person and in a coffee shop to establish rapport and make the participants feel more at ease. The participants were allowed to select the location of the interview, and in the case where participants were uncomfortable in the proposed location, they were allowed to suggest their own interview location. The study was approved by the human subject committee at the University of Chicago. As an incentive to participate, participants were offered a beverage or pastry at the completion of the in-depth interview. On average, interviews lasted roughly 45 minutes. Digital recorders were used to document the interviews and were later transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities and any reference to their names were replaced in the transcript. Likewise, individuals referenced in the interview were anonymized.

Participants were interviewed two times on average, with the initial interview conducted in the winter quarter. In some cases, participants were not able to be interviewed during the fall and instead were interviewed during the first week of the winter quarter and at the end of the winter quarter. The interviews were split into two sections for data gathering. The first section was conducted in the initial interview and was done using a semi structured interview guide. The

purpose of this initial interview was to establish a baseline for the participants. The interview began with asking the participants to describe themselves and later asked to describe their background. There were no direct instructions as to what about their background or themselves they should describe so that their answers would reveal what they feel is most important about themselves. The participants were then asked to think about their experiences during orientation week and the weeks following. General questions were asked about who their friends were, what traits they possess, where they met their friends, and in what contexts they are spending time together. This set of questions established a baseline network for each participant.

The subsequent interviews, also known as section two, focused on expanding on the data gathered in the initial interviews. A set of general themes were identified, and participants were asked to elaborate on those themes. Questions in this section included topics such as common interests between friends, relations between participants' backgrounds and friends' backgrounds, topics of conversation with their friends, and thoughts about their friends. Questions posed in this section were probing but not directly tied to the research questions of this study to avoid priming the participants' answers. Students were also asked how their network had changed since the last interview, with particular attention to new members in the network or reductions in network size.

Data Analysis

I transcribed⁵ the interviews and recorded initial observations for coding purposes. Initial codes focused on highlighting instances of homophily within personal networks. I further divided these based on patterns of emergence, highlighting differences in structural effects versus choice effects. The second set of codes focused on common experiences between the

⁵ Some transcriptions were transcribed by hand, while others used an AWS automatic transcription service approved by IRB and provided by the University of Chicago.

students and identified key repeated themes and phrases, such as debriefing, yapping, and feelings of uncertainty regarding the tie formation. Using these as a lens, I recoded the transcripts to establish a process of tie formation and tie formation and then separated these outcomes based on the original homophily coding.

Findings

In the following section I describe the process of friendship formation and expansion, as well as participants' general attitudes on friendship. We separate friendship into falling into two parts – breeding, or forming, ties and maintaining ties. Each part of this process is influenced by structural and choice elements. I begin the analysis by discussing structural considerations with respect to baseline homophily across different student spaces. I then I then evaluate tie characteristics of ties formed from these distinct spaces, centering on the notion of shared experiences. I end with an exploration of friendship maintenance, focusing on tie outcomes.

Baseline Contexts

Disentangling homophily from propinquity can present a difficult task as individuals do not generally propose a consistent set of traits or ideas through which they evaluate potential friends. Instead, students often present abstract criteria, irrespective of homophily or opportunity. And yet, collegiate personal networks often display high levels of homophily. The baseline properties of the various overlapping networks present an answer to this type of problem. Sociologists tend to consider these properties to evaluate choices above what would be expected based on the demographics of the sample. However, in collegiate spaces students can, for the most part, choose the demographic traits of their network. The spaces they choose will expose

them to different levels of homogeneity. In simpler terms, structural effects associated with propinquity are the result of individual choices. Before students get a chance to select individuals to form ties with, they first manipulate propinquity by picking the spaces that they look for friends in.

Fig. 1: College Space Similarity Continuum

Space	Characteristics	Examples
Unfocused	The group bears no strong set of binding characteristics. While not exactly random, there are no guaranteed similarities between members	Roommates, housing, dining hall, public university events
Mixed	The group is loosely organized around a similar trait or interest. While the composition is random, there are a limited number of types present in these spaces	Classes, study spaces, campus events
Focused	The group or space has a focused set of characteristics common to each member and vital to the group identity or function.	Clubs ⁶ , extracurriculars, diversity organisations

I sort common student spaces based on the expected level of similarity between students. The categories above are not exact and instead are fluid markers of the continuum. Every space has some level of focus to it, but some present more salient group commonalities. Furthermore, unfocused spaces do not prevent similarity between individuals but rather present a general mix of people. For the purpose of discussion, when I refer to unfocused spaces or friendships

⁶ While clubs are often a good indicator of choice, some clubs are broader or more flexible than others. These clubs could be close to the mixed part of the continuum.

produced from unfocused spaces, I mean ties between dissimilar individuals. If a student were to find a similar individual in an unfocused space, their tie would resemble a tie from a focused or at the very least a mixed space.

The highest level of baseline similarity is found in the focused category. These groups are, by construction, oriented around a particular trait, quality, interest, or value. Thus, ties formed from such spaces will result in strong patterns of homophily, a choice that students make consciously or unconsciously. Gary, a Latino student shared that “The first thing I did when I got to campus was look for a Latino club to join. I wanted to connect with other Latinos and speak Spanish.” Meanwhile, another student, Jinx explained that she has no specific search pattern or intent when it comes to making friends and that she met people she liked in a fortuitous manner. Yet, when asked about her clubs and activities she shared that she is a member of a niche literary magazine on campus that “attracts a very eclectic group of people” and “weird people.” Though she does not realize it explicitly, Jinx was looking for a specific type of environment that mirrored the types of friends she preferred. When asked later about why she saw potential in a new friend she was making, Jinx noted that she “is hilarious... uses weird words and obscure references that are so funny.” This statement reinforces the focused profile of her club. Notably, while unconsciously searching for value homophily in the form of personality, she acquires status homophily from this organisation. In both scenarios, we observe a specific preference that leads to engagement in an environment that increases propensity to encounter friends of a particular type. Individuals in these focused spaces interact iteratively⁷ and relationships are stimulated by commonalities resulting from the past. In other words, past interaction motivates future tie formation.

⁷ I use the term iterative to relate to the iterative dimension of agency described earlier.

Environments with a high level of structural similarity breed relationships that hinge on shared empathetic experiences. Whether individuals are homophilous with respect to value or status, common traits are indicative of a set of common experiences. These experiences make it easier to engage in conversation and develop trust. Junior describes how she sought out a music magazine club because there she could find “her kind of people.” She said that shared interests create “an immediate closeness without having an actual relation with the person.” In essence, spaces focused on a particular trait or interest create environments where others are not wholly strangers due to this vague sense of familiar experiences. In contrast, unfocused spaces draw on new experiences shared in the present to form ties.

As noted earlier, unfocused environments are difficult to categorise as they have varying baseline structures. In some cases, unfocused spaces could happen to be highly homophilous, whereas in others they might be completely heterophilous. Because of this variance, I focus not on the properties of the group itself, but rather on the characteristics of individuals who frequent these spaces. That is; by choosing unfocused spaces, individuals reveal a preference against explicit homophily association. For example, Maude noted that she prefers to have many diverse friends and that her “friends are all different... they wouldn’t be friends with each other.” This level of variance is most often found in unfocused spaces, which explains her choice of hanging out and socializing in coffee shops. Given a lack of established similarity that motivates conversation in such spaces, there must be some other mechanism that allows ties to form. Instead of focusing on iterative schemata, unfocused spaces create the opportunity to create new experiences from which to base a friendship. Instead of finding familiar types, students become familiar through an interpretation of the present. Sophia’s house friend group exhibits a similar behaviour: “we’re not necessarily super similar, but it’s kind of like these we’ve just had these

shared experiences in college, especially early on.” Junior points out the same idea and said that “we don’t bond over interests and instead bond over our time together... we are always debriefing and doing things.” These students undergo an evaluative process of present experience that stretches into the future. Their dynamics as they do things together create an open-endedness to the relation that allows a strong tie to form over time and repeated interaction. While these friends might not resemble each other, they experience one another deeply, which in turn motivates friendship.

Mixed baseline environments take elements from both focused and unfocused spaces. These spaces present consistent patterns of similarity but not necessarily a strong or obvious shared set of traits. Relationships here can be based on homophily but the degree of similarity must be first gleaned through interaction as it is not readily apparent. For instance, Jinx’s story of meeting her best friend initially employs an experiential approach that then allows for homophilous tie formation:

So like one of the days I ended up sitting next to her, maybe I came in late, maybe she did, and I just started talking to her because of like a thing the professor said to like talk to a person and then you like compliment like something like complimented her water bottle and then we were like, do you wanna get coffee and work on the homework together and that kind of started developing into like something⁸ ... I guess on like a very similar values, me and her, we were both raised Catholic but kind of like having different like different experiences in college. She was just very outgoing, and I really liked that and we went downtown together for like a full day and that kind of forced us to just have a very long conversation and really get to know each other and I think that kind of locked us in a bit.

⁸ Transcripts were cleaned up to remove filler words and phrases.

Frequent interactions focused on a particular experience, in this case the class experience led to a functional relationship for work, which over intense exposure revealed that they shared values. Eventually, the students bonded over these values in an explicitly homophilous tie. However, this value homophily would have been impossible if they did not first invest in deeper and more intimate interactions. They shared a fun activity that was new and exciting, which in combination with the discovered value homophily, resulted in friendship.

Ultimately, tie formation across the baseline continuum depends on experience. Friendships seem to build either on a relevant past experiences that results in easy and favourable interactions, constant new experiences that build a sense of camaraderie, or a combination of both. The general pattern surrounding the first stage of tie formation is that students make a choice about where to look for friends. This choice can either be conscious or unconscious and will place them into spaces with specific demographic distributions. Interactions within these spaces will then be mediated by different concepts of shared experience and thus motivate tie formation.

Experience as Homophily

The previous section discussed how different environments result in relationships with different characteristics. Personal histories frame focused spaces, while unfocused spaces tend towards present experiences. In both cases, tie formation was mediated by experience rather than preferences for homophily. While these preferences dictated the spaces which students frequented, the mechanism for tie formation was not explicitly because of homophily. Rather, homophily served as a proxy for experience, and in unfocused spaces where there was no shared past to draw on, new experiences were generated to make connections. What if however, this

understanding of the present that stretches into the future and serves as basis for further interaction was also a type of homophily?

I propose that homophily exists in an intertemporal continuum of understanding. Individuals can have preferences that stem from an iterative process or can prefer a joint evaluative process with a projective element.

Fig 2. Dimensions of Agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998)

Dimension of Agency	Temporal Orientation	Key Characteristics	Function in Social Action
Iterative Agency	Past	Repetition of past habits, schemata, and patterns; sustains identity and social structure	Stabilises social life by enabling actors to recall and apply past experiences in present interactions
Projective Agency	Future	Imaginative engagement with the future; hypothesizing and generating alternative responses to social challenges	Facilitates innovation and social transformation by constructing visions of possible futures
Practical-Evaluative Agency	Present	Situational judgement and decision-making; deliberation over means and ends in response to contingencies	Enables actors to adapt to changing circumstances, balancing past routines and future aspirations with real-world constraints

Agency is temporally constructed by actors emerging in different structural environments. Through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, actors are able to reproduce and transform their social structures. Similarly, individuals engage with their environments and orient themselves accordingly to maintain social relations. Homophily most

commonly follows an iterative pattern as it draws on past schema, observations, and thoughts to build present relations. However, drawing on present relations, as observed in unfocused spaces, follows the practical-evaluative dimension. This process contextualises social experiences vis a vis emerging present situations, which have a mediating relational effect between parties. Both of these dimensions deal with a projective element that allows relational maintenance past an initial tie formation.

Ties formed in unfocused spaces draw on practical evaluative mechanics as a basis for interaction. These groups depend on creating and sharing new experiences together as a means of bonding. While this type of interaction might seem irrespective of homophily in the present, the opposite is true ex-post-facto. For instance, if two University of Chicago economics majors met and became friends, we would partly attribute their connection to educational homophily – the cultural dynamics, history, experiences, etc. of their time at the same university would be familiar and serve as an axis for tie formation. However, to reach this degree of status, they must first acquire it through experience. That is, individuals engage in a practical evaluative process in the present in order to engage in an iterative process in the future – in essence students become homophilous through experience.

As a friend group develops and shares experiences, they begin to belong to a coherent unit with unique traits and boundaries. Much like status homophily with respect to larger cultural groups allows students to iterate over past experiences to bond, members of a friend group iterate over the experiences they have embedded into the identity of the group. When students experience things together, they engage in an evaluative process where they contextualise the experience and formalise it into a uniform canon. For example, Lex shared that after every party

or social event they attended as a group, they would spend hours talking about the events of the night.

L: After every party, we would just kind of all pack into someone's dorm or cluster around a water fountain, usually still a little drunk to be honest, and just kind of like break down what happened. It could be like little things like that party was mid⁹ as hell or I fucked heavy with the music. Or more spicy things like so and so made out with someone or like one time when we snuck into a frat laughed about how stupid the door pledges were. And we'd laugh and roast each other and show pictures we'd taken of someone caught lacking and eventually we'd get up after sobering up a bit and call our lyfts or walk to our dorms. Sometimes the debriefs were even more entertaining than the parties, especially if someone was yacking¹⁰ or feastmaxing¹¹.

These discussions ensured a common understanding and interpretation of the group experience and led to the development of inside jokes and shared histories. Through this joint process, the group creates an identity with solid boundaries and membership. Over time, students iteratively draw on these experiences as a group to motivate their friendship. While these ties might not seem homophilous from an outside perspective, they actually are in the sense that, as groups come together, within group ties begin to resemble ties that connect individuals with pre-existing status similarities, even though these group boundaries did not exist before the association. In other words, students acquire a unique status by engaging with their friend group.

While friendships in both scenarios, focused and unfocused, draw on the past and present, they are also contingent on projectivity. In other words, friends must be able to envision

⁹ The term mid is slang for mediocre and typically has a negative connotation.

¹⁰ Yacking is slang for throwing up and feastmaxing is slang for eating

¹¹ The term feastmaxxing is slang for eating.

scenarios for future interactions, regardless of what motivated initial tie formation. If the present group does not provide a stable project, then the tie is likely to suffer:

JP: *How has your friend group changed over these past few weeks?*

F: *Well for starters, we aren't really that close anymore. Like I'll see them around and say hi to people individually, but we don't like hang out or anything.*

JP: *I thought you mentioned that you guys did everything together and were very close, what changed?*

F: *Well, we were. I mean this was my only friend group since orientation and I thought I would be friends with them for a while. I don't necessarily think anything changed in particular. I think we all just kind of got busy and prioritized other things. [My friends] joined a sorority¹² and I didn't and so we kind of weren't seeing each other as much and I sort of phased them out a little.*

JP: *Do you see yourselves reconnecting eventually? Maybe once you're not as busy anymore?*

F: *I don't think so. I don't really see myself with them anymore. We shared a lot of firsts together and had some good early memories, but I just don't see a future as a group. I'd be down to maybe get coffee or something with individuals but definitely not in the same way.*

In this case, the friend group originally shared the standard orientation week bonding experiences and grew close in the present. They shared their first party, first day of class, the club fair, and spent significant time together studying or sharing meals. For all intents and purposes, they should have remained together since they built a significant canon to iterate upon. And yet, the group failed because they lacked a joint vision for the future. Here, the central tension arose from the choice to join a sorority – half of the group envisioned a more social set of experiences surrounding sorority life while the others were more focused on work and a different social

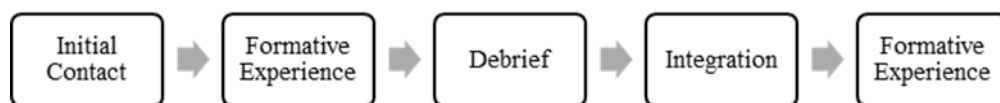
¹² Notably, this student did not attempt to join a sorority and had no interest in doing so at the time of the interview.

dynamic. As a result, the group slowly dissolved over time because they lacked a uniform projective element.

Dynamics and Maintenance

So far, I have identified that different types of environments draw on iterative, evaluative, and projective elements to produce and maintain friendships. Here, I move to an evaluation of friendship trajectories and outcomes¹³, beginning with a comparison of focused and unfocused mechanics.

Fig 3. Friendship Trajectory from Unfocused Spaces



As discussed earlier, unfocused spaces produce friendships that draw on both evaluative and iterative elements. These are characterised by an emphasis on present experiences that motivate future experiences, rather than an initial similarity between parties. The general trend in these types of ties is an arbitrary¹⁴ initial contact in an unfocused space, closely followed by some sort of formative experience. This experience is evaluated and broken down by the members of the group through discussion. The experience and any relevant anecdotes or insights are then integrated into the fabric of the tie. Then, if the experience was positive for all parties and presents an attractive project, a new experience is created and repeats the cycle.

JP: So, what do you bond on?

¹³ The outcomes I refer to are dropped ties, maintained ties, and relegated ties (friendships that were once close but now are not).

¹⁴ The initial contact is arbitrary in the sense that it does not matter where the contact was initiated as long as it is associated with an experience or activity that is later used to form the tie.

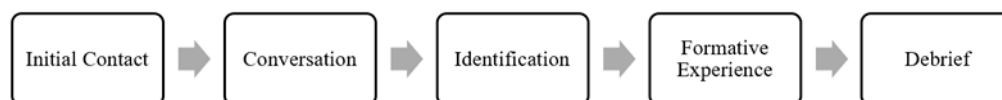
J: I can't pin why exactly we get along so well. I think it has to be more with we're just in the same place as people. I think what happens when you bond with people over interest is that it creates a feeling of your relationship with them being more concrete because there's something literal connecting the two of you and so it feels like it's the connection between you and the other person just becomes more visible. Here we don't right, but the relationship already feels very solid.

JP: Why do you think that is?

J: I feel like a lot about what we talk about is what we are doing. It's a lot of like debrief. It's just like debrief over and over and over again and we're talking about what we did that day and what happened last weekend and what the other person is thinking about this and that and we're analysing experiences we have had together.

The members of the group recognise their lack of common interests and instead focus on each other for conversation. The conversation translates an event and converts into something the group can iterate on in the future. In essence, by evaluating the present, the group creates a set of iterative elements wholly unique to the group.

Fig 4. Friendship Trajectory from Focused Spaces



Focused spaces, on the other hand, depend initially on iterative mechanics to produce favourable experiences in the future. Figure 4 displays the general schematic from this process. In this case, individuals meet in spaces with high propensity for homophilous association. Because of the similarity between them, students are drawn into conversation over shared traits. This identification leads to an interest in further engagement, which is met through some sort of

formative experience. This experience in the present is then integrated into the tie via debrief, much like the process observed from unfocused spaces.

JP: So, tell me about how you became friends with Rodrigo?

G: Well, we technically met in a class we shared but I didn't really become friends with him until we met at the same club. We are both latino econ majors and so we met a club for latinos interested in the business sector. There were a lot of people there but since I had seen him before in class I talked to him first. At first we talked about the people in our class and realised we had very similar takes on the class environment. Then we talked about all sorts of things like Latin American politics and soccer and realised we had a lot in common. After that I started speaking to him more and more. Eventually a party hosted by a mutual friend in the club was coming up so we decided to go together – it was our first real college apartment party so it was pretty fun and we spent a lot of time there drinking and dancing. After the party we got some food and talked about what went down and then after that we just started hanging out more and more.

In this example, two students form an initial tie based on a shared view of the world from their shared background, as well as their overlapping interests; iterative elements dominate the relationship in the early stages as they get to know each other. After a period of interaction, the students are motivated to move beyond general homophily. This interest results in a more elaborate and intimate set of experiences that allow the students to develop a unique tie that incorporates experiences shared together as well as a cultural past. Notably, iterative elements initiate interaction and act as a catalyst for trust and interest, but an evaluative attitude towards present experiences strengthens and cements the bond.

Ultimately, both processes follow the same overarching schematic to develop and maintain ties. As observed above, the functional mechanism that holds groups together is a cycle

of positive experiences that are identified and mediated jointly to form a group identity.

Regardless of initial motivation for interaction, groups eventually shift towards this process.

Insofar as a group aligns projectively, a group canon will form and formalise the friendship over time. The key difference here is the initial level of intimacy between parties. To a certain extent, friendships from focused spaces have a head start on intimacy and require less investment to develop a strong tie because of the properties of homophilic ties. In contrast, friendships from unfocused spaces must build connections from zero and thus depend on a strong investment of time and attention from the beginning. Regardless of the initial intimacy, however, it is imperative that in-group homophily is established for the longevity of ties.

When the cycle of positive experiences is not actively maintained, it can cause otherwise close ties to fall apart, or at least to become inactive. That is, relationships need to be maintained regardless of how much experiential rapport is accumulated between nodes. The following is an example where experiences were established early on to bond a group together, but after the experiences stopped, so did the group:

JP: *Tell me about your first friends here?*

O: *Me and my roommate were completely randomly assigned but we hit it off initially very well. I ended up meeting her friend Caroline, who was from her high school, and they had another friend who they just mutually knew. That kind of was my group from O-week. I kind of met them through my roommate and for the first 4 or 5 weeks, or like right up until around Halloween, that was my group.*

JP: *Tell me a little more about your time with them. What sort of dynamics or things did you do with them?*

O: *Well, they were like any standard O-week group. Like you have a group chat, so you're getting your meals together, studying together, going to the club fair together, stuff like that. Like you're also meeting*

new people together but like you're meeting the new people in the context of this like set group that you've already established.

JP: *So, you mentioned that this was your main group until around week 4?*

O: *Totally. We just had a moment where like it just wasn't working anymore, which is very fair. We just weren't. I don't think we meant to be close friends forever, but it's this classic situation where you kind of cling to each other at the beginning and then like we sort of realized there was a fall off. Like, not ghosting, but just kind of started to stop talking a little bit and then it was kind of like, oh, we're not a group anymore. It just kind of happened.*

JP: *And do you have any idea why you just stopped talking? Did something happen?*

O: *I think it was a personality conflict thing on top of that. My roommate, eventually, explained her side of it to me, she said that like she had people telling her that often times people get locked in to their orientation week group and that it's hard to shake off. I think that kind of freaked her out a little bit and she stopped communicating and that kind of made things dissolve, I guess.*

The example above again displays the cyclical pattern we have been observing. The members of the group meet, some randomly and some through previous connections. Initial dynamics led to continuous interaction and spending more time together. Notably, Olivia notes that even other individuals she met were engaged through the lens of this initial group. That is, her understanding of the college experience was coded through the experiences she shared with her friends. This repeated behaviour focused on experiences should have indicated a strong friendship, and it did initially. Olivia even recognises that had her friend group continued in the same capacity, they could have become “locked in,” or solidified into a permanent unit. However, we observe two factors that led to tensions and an eventual dissolution of ties. First comes from a misalignment of personality and fear of satisficing shared by Olivia's roommate.

Despite getting along and spending considerable time together, Olivia and her roommate were not compatible in the long term. I attribute this to a failure to align projectively and a preference for a particular kind of friendship, irrespective of homophily. Sometimes, despite effort, opportunity, and background, people do not remain friends. The more salient element here though is what led to the eventual dissolution of the tie: a lack of communication. Even though the friendship was formalised through experience, once the members of the group stopped maintaining it, the tie inevitably faded. This result suggests that consistent iteration over shared experiences is necessary for maintaining ties. When the production of favourable experiences ceases, we observe conflicts in the group.

When a group fails to build iterative traits, tensions can arise that lead to dropped ties. The logic behind this concept is that superficial and general commonalities can only hold a tie together in the short term. To maintain a tie, a shared sensibility is necessary. The following excerpt shows an outcome when group iteration is not wholly possible.

JP: Is there anyone who you were close to initially but are no longer close to?

A: There's one person. There's one more girl in our group. She's out.

JP: Tell me a little about that

A: It was a whole thing. So, she was kind of like friends with the group but not friends individually with anyone in the group. Like she's sweet, she's a very sweet girl, and that's why we initially accepted her so well at the beginning. But then after a while we were like, OK, but we don't, that doesn't mean that we have too much to talk about with her or that we laugh at your jokes and that she laughs at ours. My friends identified early on that they essentially didn't want her in the group anymore, but they didn't tell me because I was opposed to it. They waited until I made some sort of comment that expressed that like I, I wasn't like super fond of having her in the group either. I said something like, oh my God, Dana was so

annoying today, whatever. I never talk shit about her because she's awesome. But this one time I think she bothered me, and I was like, Dana's so annoying. And my friends were like she cracked, A cracked, and then they told me we have been wanting to kick her out for a while and I was like, she's such a good girl. And then we arrived at the conclusion that even though she doesn't deserve it, she didn't do anything wrong she had to go.

JP: *What happened next?*

A: *We made a new group chat without her, which was kind of evil, but I mean that's a very 18-year-old girl thing and you know, that's just how it plays out sometimes. After that, the plan was just to give her a hint or make her think that it was like her idea. It was so intricate but anyway we gave her a hint that no more, sorry. She got the hint and now she's with this other group which I'm sure she's having a great time in but yeah, Dana's gone.*

The example above shows a group that was initially formed through a randomly assigned orientation programme. Over time, the members of the group developed their own language, humour, and dynamics based on their experiences. Initially, Dana fit because of some base level of intimacy or perhaps simply due to availability. Regardless, as the group evolves and becomes established, she gets pushed to the periphery as she does not pick up on the group subtleties. For some reason, she was unable to properly iterate over the group experience and found herself isolated, eventually leading to the tie being dropped altogether. This example illustrates two important concepts. For starters, creating a group is a nuanced activity that requires careful consideration and activity – experiences are important, but they must be adequately incorporated and applied jointly to maintain ties. Secondly, a minimum level of bonding is required to form a solid base for future interactions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to evaluate where homophily comes from and what implications the source of homophily has on friendship outcomes. Particularly I sought to differentiate between homophily as a pattern and homophily as a preference. My findings suggested that homophily emerges and operates at three stages in the process of friendship formation. First, homophily emerges at the structural level. Findings from previous studies suggested that the choice for friends is limited by the structure of the network; if an individual has a preference for homophily but no access to homophilous alters, then they will form heterophilous ties. I found that this trend is generally true, and add that spaces that students operate in lay on a spectrum of similarity, with some spaces being tightly focused on a particular trait or characteristic and others being completely unfocused. The places where students look for friends will determine what type of friendships will arise. However, this structural element is not an arbitrary property of networks but rather is influenced by the individual. Students can for the most part pick the spaces they inhabit and in doing so have some agency in the resultant homophily. Notably, the choice of spaces here does not necessarily imply a preference for homophily. As shown earlier, students can consciously pick focused spaces because they want friends that share attributes with them, but they can also arrive at these spaces by happenstance. Regardless of how they end up in the space, the degree of homophily in their friendships stems initially from the structural dynamics of the space.

The second instance of homophily occurs at the point of tie formation. Once students have filtered out the body by picking a space, they then filter it again to make specific friends. These friendships are motivated by the degrees of similarity found in the original space. In

focused spaces where homophily dominates, ties are initially formed around shared past experiences. Individuals draw on familiar habits, stories, and schemata to converse with similar others. This notion of a shared experience is what breeds intimacy and elicits feelings of trust, empathy, and an ease of communication that many studies highlight about homophily (Rogers and Bhowmik 1970). Notably, I found no real difference in mechanisms between friendships formed around values and friendships formed around status. In both cases, similar pasts motivate relationships and facilitate emotional closeness.

In the case of friendships from unfocused spaces, or heterophilous ties, homophily still emerges, albeit in a unique way. These types of friendships are initially oriented around sharing experiences together. Students in these spaces share very little so they cannot bond in the same way as others do in focused spaces. That is, there is nothing shared that would draw them together. Instead, ties in these spaces form by doing things together. By doing activities, they can essentially break the ice and establish a degree of closeness or intimacy with others in their space. As they experience things together, they talk about the experience and through the process of debriefing, they reify their relationship. Over time they begin to accumulate a relational capital based on inside jokes, memories, and feelings. This shared group gives the members a sense of similarity that is different in degree, but not in kind, from those who have similar origin stories. While this finding might sound similar to the idea of propinquity, it is not exactly the same. This type of relationship goes beyond simply being around someone for prolonged periods of time. The homophilous-heterophilous process described here hinges on producing the right types of experiences and then consolidating them jointly. If the experience does not produce enough content so to speak or the content is not incorporated into the tie, individuals will not

produce a strong relationship. Propinquity can explain the initial impetus that motivates deeper experiences, but in the end, it is this cyclical process that results in friendship.

The third and final instance of homophily emerges in the process of tie maintenance and tie retention. Much like the literature suggests, not all ties are the same. The process that allows heterophilous ties to propagate is a time consuming, and sometimes difficult process to go through. I discussed some examples of when the process can fail, leading to a dissolution of ties. Homophilous ties, on the other hand, are easier to maintain because of the initial intimacy drawn from a shared past. While these ties eventually shift to the production of experiences to create stronger ties, much like the heterophilous process discussed, they require a smaller effort to maintain. Thus, we observe the process of dropping heterophilous ties in favour of homophilous when resources are scarce. Out of the students who shared that their orientation week friend group collapsed, all of them ended around the middle of fall quarter. This is a period of time where students begin to consolidate their schedules and have less time to spare; it is at this time where midterms begin, clubs formally begin their programming, students begin to look for jobs, etc. Hence, students tend to reduce their efforts to make certain relationships work and replace them with other ones that are more productive. The result is a network that overexpresses homophily.

Ultimately, homophily comes from experience. Different spaces can be categorised by their ability to produce or draw from past experiences for the formation of friends. The choice to frequent a space and preferences for homophily also come from experience. Positive past experiences motivate students to find friends that can produce the same type of positive experiences that they have enjoyed in the past. As a result, they will choose spaces they think will produce the most enjoyable outcomes. Regardless of why they pick a space, experience will

dominate the ties they produce. Both heterophilous and homophilous ties will converge towards the same cyclical mechanism of producing fun and enjoyable experiences that they share with their friends. In doing so they will produce a new type of homophily that is limited to only those they shared memories with and draw them closer together. Because of this, I propose a new set of terms micro-homophily or pseudo-homophily that describe the group microcosm that close friends iterate over. In doing so, we can adequately distinguish between cultural similarities and the unique group dynamics that bond students together.

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