

Like me, you must sometimes receive these « rank your friends » messages through your social network. It starts by saying how high you have been ranked in someone's best friends list, and thereby invites you to return the compliment. It seems like crude ranking and mere reciprocity. But notice, it is limited to the positive side. Be it by conflict-avoidance or some electronic politeness, you are not informed that you are Paola's 74th best friend, nor that Peter really thinks that George is a much better friend than you.



Raffaello: Self-Portrait with friend (Musée du Louvre)

Recent research by Peter DeScioli and Robert Kurzban (download the paper [here](#)), from University of Pennsylvania, tests and confirms these tendencies, while trying to make sense of them. Participants in the experiments are asked to rank their closest friends in a number of ways. These « friendship rankings » turn out to be most strongly correlated with individuals' own perceived rank among their partners' other friends, more than for example, the benefits they receive from the friendship, the number of secrets shared or how long the friendship has been ongoing. I have a strong interest in ranking practices, but what this mostly illuminates is what friendship means.

Good question. What is the definition of friendship - and what's so special about it? Friendship occurs among individuals who are not necessarily relatives nor mates, which rules out key explanations for cooperation such as kin selection. It also probably has to be a long-term relation, by contrast with task-dependent, opportunistic cooperation: « can you be my friend of three minutes, just the time for us to move this table? » seems to stretch the term a little..... Although non-sexual (or not primarily sexual), it is certainly dyadic : X is the friend of Y, not the friend of a group or a couple : not that these cases don't occur, but if X is friend of the pair (Y and Z) , then X is the friend of Y and the friend of Z. So what are these non-kin, non-sexual, long-term, dyadic relationships for ?

DeScioli and Kurzban remind us that our animal friends (an expression which by the way raises another question : is there friendship across-species ?) also engage in such « friendship » - although I am not sure that all their examples fit the above definition : hyenas use partners to gain access to

carcasses, male dolphins employ partners to attain females for mating, juvenile rooks use partners to get food, and numerous primate species groom partners to garner agonistic support. Still, this doesn't exhaust the range of things we put behind human friendship : we certainly share foods and drinks, offer presents, but we also share trivial stories, take interest in other people's friends' stories, spend lots of time to comfort them, and don't necessarily choose our friends for being the most « useful » ones. The question is still what is human friendship for ?

The function question makes sense for evolutionary psychologists, even though it would put off most of those who think that friendship is « a value in itself ». There is a long tradition of them - and many stories and legends also do their best to make it seem plausible that some human relationships might be devoid of any sexual or vital interest, and might not be concerned with any form of reciprocity other than that of feelings. This is yet another examples of the traditional misunderstanding between the evolutionary approach and more normative ones: you say it must have a function, we say it is a value.

The way traditional evolutionary approaches explain human friendship certainly contributes to aggravate the conflict : the theory of reciprocal altruism see friends as « exchange partners, from whom gains in trade can be profitably extracted, provided that cheaters can be avoided. » However, social psychology reveals some problems with the the trade theory. Contradicting a key prediction of reciprocity theories, people do not carefully monitor benefits given and received in close relationships. They also seem to help friends even when they are unlikely to be capable to repay.

Friendship might be illuminated by considering other cognitive systems, in addition to exchange mechanisms, that humans use to manage the complex social world. These cognitive systems function to assemble a support group for potential conflicts. The hypothesis proposes that human friendship is less like trade and more like alliance politics. Human conflicts are usually decided by the number of supporters mobilized on each side (rather than strength or agility). This, the authors claim, is true for a wide range of disputes, from family debates over weekend plans to homicidal attacks (but is it? It seems like a very quick generalisation). Therefore, individuals can increase their power by creating and maintaining a network of allies, well in advance, before the onset of an argument or quarrel. In a way, one of the main predictors of friendship is the value of the alliance. The value of an ally, or friend, drops with every additional alliance they must make, so the best alliance is one in which your ally ranks you above everyone else as well. So in a way, it's still about feelings : you like me best, and I like you best.

DeScioli and Kurzban suggest that people have specialized decision processes that prioritize those individuals who tend to be most helpful in conflicts : e.g. those with fewer stronger commitments to others. This analysis suggests that people would benefit from ranking friends, but also hiding certain friend-ranking, and ranking friends according to their own position in partners' rankings.

It also serves as an explanation for some petty human behaviors not explained by traditional « reciprocal altruism » theories. For example, the Alliance Hypothesis could explain why people are extremely concerned with comparisons to others in their social circle. It also explains how jealousies and aggression can erupt among groups of friends just as alliances are shifted or maintained. And also why people need to gather and store information about their friends' other friendships. In slightly more technical terms, people need to possess egocentric and allocentric representations of the social world : in some circumstances, people are motivated to conceal this information, and egocentric friend-ranking is determined by allocentric representations of partners' friend-rankings more than others' traits like popularity or wealth.

No cross-cultural study is discussed in the paper - so, does the hypothesis (and its predictions regarding concerns for ranking and trustworthy alliances) make sense more broadly ?

