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What you don't know about your friends

Our closest acquaintances are nearly strangers to us - and that might not be so bad

By [Drake Bennett](#)
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ANYONE WITH A passing familiarity with American daytime television knows "The Newlywed Game," where fresh-faced young husbands and wives flub basic personal questions about their spouses, revealing an often comical ignorance about each other's habits, beliefs, and sexual quirks. In many cases, the newlyweds seem to grow visibly apart on-air, and after the laughs die down it's hard not to be struck by this cluelessness about a person that someone has pledged their life to.

Would most of us do any better? What if we played the same game with our longtime friends? If researchers who study relationships are to be believed, the surprising answer is no.

A growing body of experimental evidence suggests that, on the whole, we know significantly less about our friends, colleagues, and even spouses than we think we do. This lack of knowledge extends far beyond embarrassing game-show fodder - we're often completely wrong about their likes and dislikes, their political beliefs, their tastes,

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their cherished values. We lowball the ethics of our co-workers; we overestimate how happy our husbands or wives are.







"Our friends will surprise us much more than we would imagine," says David Dunning, a psychology professor at Cornell University who has done influential research on how we perceive ourselves and others.

Although such blind spots might at first seem like a comment on the atomization of modern life, the shallowness of human connection in the age of bowling alone, psychologists say that these gaps might simply be an unavoidable product of the way human beings forge personal bonds. Even in close relationships, there are holes in what we know about each other, and we fill them with our own assumptions.

Whatever the cause, such findings challenge our idea of what friendship is. Friends and spouses are people to whom we are supposed to be able to confide anything - we draw support and a sense of well-being from the thought that our friends know us better than anyone else in the world, and like us nonetheless. Instead, it appears that there are whole regions of our personalities that they

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miss entirely, and we do the same with them.

The news is not all grim. Other researchers argue that people are pretty good at seeing at least the building blocks of their friend's personalities. And in certain realms, like judging intelligence and creativity, there's evidence that our friends are actually more perceptive about us than we are, if only because any illusions they may have about us are dwarfed by the illusions we have about ourselves.

But perhaps most surprisingly, these blind spots might not be a bad thing, and may even strengthen relationships. Many of the benefits that friendship provides don't necessarily depend on perfect familiarity; they stem instead from something closer to reliability. And it may be that a certain ignorance of our friends' weaknesses, or of the realms where we disagree, may even help sustain the deep sense of support that friends are there to provide.

People need friends. Aristotle said so, as did Dionne Warwick. Modern psychology agrees: Several recent studies have shown that one of the best predictors for a healthy and happy life is having a vibrant social circle.

But the dynamics of friendship remain mysterious, in part because friendship isn't easy to quantify. The problem of amassing data on friendships has long bedeviled social psychologists interested in the topic; it is difficult and time-consuming to take detailed surveys not only of individuals, but also of the circles of people around them.

To solve this problem, one team of researchers working for the search-engine company Yahoo! - Duncan Watts, an expert on social networks; Sharad Goel, a mathematician; and Winter Mason, a psychologist - has enlisted Facebook as a research tool, taking advantage of the way the social-networking site can create enormous troves of cross-referenced information about its users.

The researchers created a survey of 80 yes-or-no questions and an application called Friend Sense in which users took the survey - both for themselves and for whichever of their Facebook friends had also downloaded it. More than 2,500 people downloaded the application, and most took at least part of the survey, the bulk of which dealt with political issues, including high-profile topics like abortion, illegal immigration, nuclear weapons, and universal health care. While online social-network "friendship" isn't the same as the face-to-face version, research suggests that Facebook friendships do largely grow out of and mirror offline ones.

The team's as-yet unpublished finding was that while people do have some idea of the political beliefs of their friends, especially their close friends, they also made significant errors. The most common one is assuming their friends agreed with them on issues where they didn't. Psychologists call this projection: in situations where there's any ambiguity, people tend to simply project their feelings and thoughts onto others. The Friend Sense study found that this tendency was a stubborn one: its users incorrectly assumed their friends agreed with them even if they had regularly discussed political topics with them.

"When you get down to the nitty-gritty, when you ask specific questions about specific friends, it's surprising how often you don't know the answer," said Watts.

A similar effect arises when people are asked questions about right and wrong rather than politics. Recent research by Francis Flynn, a psychology professor at Stanford, and Scott Wiltermuth, a doctoral student there, looked at people in tight-knit workplace and graduate-school settings. The researchers found that people assumed, often unquestioningly, that their responses to a series of ethical dilemmas were shared by the majority of their close colleagues. In reality they often were not. More strikingly, it was the more socially connected among the test subjects who were more likely to be wrong. (The resulting paper has been accepted by the Academy of Management Journal but not yet



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published).

The problem, Flynn says, is that interacting with people and sharing experiences with them doesn't necessarily translate into knowing lots of things about them. The main hurdle is the way we talk to those we're close to: our conversations are usually meant not so much to gather information as to establish rapport and to bond - in short, to make friends. And we do that by focusing on areas of agreement and avoiding topics that might cause friction. Our natural tendency toward comradeship makes us, ironically, leery of learning too much about the people we're befriending.

"When we survey people about how often they talk about this stuff," says Flynn of the weighty topics his research subjects had to grapple with, "it's basically never. Occasionally there's a 'rarely.'"

This gap between the amount of time we spend with someone and what we know about them extends even to intimate relationships. Work by William B. Swann of the University of Texas and Michael J. Gill of Lehigh University has looked at dating couples and pairs of college roommates and found that, while their confidence in the accuracy of their knowledge of each other increased the longer the two had known each other, their actual accuracy didn't appreciably improve.

There is, of course, plenty we do know about our friends and spouses. For the most part, we have a clear picture of the broad outlines of our friends' personalities.

"People are very far from perfect, but they seem to have a pretty good idea overall if their friends are politically conservative or liberal, how religious they are," says Simine Vazire, an assistant professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis. According to Vazire, who has done extensive research on how people's friends see them, friends are also usually accurate about each other on broad personality traits like extroversion, friendliness, and emotional stability.

In other words, we're good enough at picking out the important stuff to have a rough idea of what we're getting in a relationship - and a rough idea may be all we really need. Swann and Gill coined the term "pragmatic accuracy" to describe the bounded, everyday knowledge that allows us to establish the necessary common ground for a friendship, or even a marriage. It's just that the knowledge may never get nearly as deep as we think.

If friendship really is the glue of our social lives, and even a sort of elixir that improves our mental and physical health, then isn't it strange that our sense for who our friends are isn't more finely honed?

There are, after all, risks to this ignorance. We vouch for our friends socially, or recommend close colleagues professionally, and when we are wrong it has real consequences. Not to mention the fallout when one's wife turns out to be a compulsive gambler, or one's husband turns out not to be a Rockefeller but a German kidnapper.

But it may be that our selective blindness about our friends provides a clue to what is so nourishing about friendships in the first place. While researchers are in agreement that friendships are good for us, they're still not sure exactly why. There's evidence that gender affects what someone wants in a friend - men seek out "side-by-side" friendships that center on sharing activities and interests, women look more for "face-to-face" relationships that provide emotional support and a chance to comfortably unburden themselves. Both require some measure of mutual knowledge to work, but they depend even more on a sort of nonjudgmental steadiness and presence. As much as anything else, what friends do is simply keep us company.

"It's not clear that you would need to know everything about someone in order to have a deep and fulfilling relationship with them," says Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. "They can talk to you and can be a sounding board to you. They can help you in trouble, none of which requires that you know what they're like."

Indeed, according to Michael Norton, a psychologist who teaches at Harvard Business School, simply believing we have lots of close friends brings the same benefits as actually having them. In other words, if someone's ignorance of one of his "friends" extends so deeply that he's not actually aware that the person doesn't like him, he may be better off for it. Even befriending entirely fictional people seems to do some good - a paper published last year by researchers at the University of Buffalo and Miami University found that television characters actually function as "social surrogates" for viewers, and watching a favorite show can be an effective way to alleviate loneliness.

Even in a close and strong relationship like a marriage, a certain amount of blindness may help. While the idea remains controversial, some researchers argue for the value of so-called positive illusions, the rosy image that some people hold, despite the available evidence, about their romantic partners. The psychologist Sandra Murray at the University of Buffalo has found that couples that maintained positive illusions about each other tended to be happier than those that didn't.

Something similar may be at work in close friendships. And, according to Dunning, a slightly different form of social illusion may also arise. People naturally seek out those they see as most like them, and a falsely inflated sense of similarity may only further cement friendships.

In other words, one of the nicest things a friend can do is let us misunderstand them just a little.

"If you don't know everything about someone else, you still enjoy the time you spend with each other," says Delia Baldassarri, a sociologist and assistant professor at Princeton who has studied people's perceptions of their friends' political attitudes. "In certain ways, you may even enjoy it more."

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