

## Emerging insights on the role of social networks in intergroup friendship

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## Abstract

Research on intergroup friendships has historically focused on individuals and dyads. Only recently has research begun to examine intergroup friendship in the context of the broader web of social relationships in which individuals and dyads are embedded. This review highlights emerging research on the role of social networks in intergroup friendship, with a focus on interracial friendship. In particular, we examine how social networks shape opportunities to form intergroup friendships, influence intergroup attitudes, and affect ongoing intergroup interactions and relationships. This emerging work reveals how friendships across group lines are shaped not only by the individuals involved, but also by their other friends, the attitudes of those around them, and the structure and context of their broader social network. Though nascent, social network research has already begun to offer novel insights into foundational intergroup theories and inform future interventions to foster intergroup friendships.

People's likelihood of forming friendships across social divides is shaped by their environment in many ways. In the context of race, persistent racial segregation limits opportunities to meet, interact with, and befriend people belonging to other racial groups. Even racially diverse communities are often structured to limit opportunities for people from different racial groups to cross paths, whether through physical barriers, policies, or individual choices (for a recent review, see Shelton & Turetsky, 2024).

Research on the role of the environment in forming intergroup friendships has traditionally focused on the physical world, as in the examples above—factors that shape who is physically present in the local environment and therefore available for friendship, and who is not. In contrast, an emerging line of intergroup research highlights the unique role of the *social* world, and in particular the relational structures in which people are embedded: social networks.

Social networks represent the structures of connection within groups. Rather than examining individuals' perception of their social environment, relationship to a specific single individual (e.g., their roommate), or behavior in an isolated interaction, social network research examines the social ties between many individuals at once (and often over time). In doing so, this approach provides insight into the broader social structure of a particular environment, enabling researchers to examine connections between a wide array of individuals, the social context underlying these ties, and the ways in which these structures shape and are shaped by attitudes, beliefs, and behavior.

In this article, we give a brief overview of recent research examining the role of social networks in the development of intergroup friendships, with a focus on interracial friendships. From this research, we identify three ways that people's social networks shape how they form and maintain intergroup friendships: They guide opportunities to form intergroup friendships,

influence intergroup attitudes, and affect ongoing intergroup interactions and relationships. Overall, this emerging work illustrates that friendships between people belonging to different racial groups are shaped not only by the two individuals involved, but also by their other friends, the attitudes of others in their network, and the context of their broader social network (see Figure 1).

### **Networks shape opportunities to form intergroup friendships**

Emerging research examines how social networks structurally facilitate—or, perhaps more often, constrain—opportunities for intergroup friendship. One of the most basic properties of social networks is that people are much more likely to form friendships with the friends of their friends than people with whom they have no connection or a more distant connection (a phenomenon called *triadic closure*; Granovetter, 1973). Reasons for this phenomenon include a greater chance of meeting and interacting when people have a mutual friend, the initial basis for trust and commonality that a mutual friend provides, and pressure (implicit or explicit) for friends of an individual to become friends themselves (Easley & Kleinberg, 2010).

Recent research has revealed the implications of this network property for the likelihood of developing intergroup friendships. Even if a person has no preference for same-group friends themselves, if their friends have even a slight ingroup preference such that *their* friends are more likely to belong to the ingroup, the impetus to befriend friends of friends will lead the person to form more same-group friendships over time (Asikainen et al., 2020). At the network level, even small ingroup preferences can be amplified by triadic closure over time, pushing the network to become more segregated and further reducing opportunities for any member of the network to form intergroup friendships. Although triadic closure could also theoretically lead to more diverse friends over time (if a person's friends have more outgroup friends than they do), in

reality, it is usually more likely to produce more same-group friendships given normative tendencies to befriend similar others (McPherson et al., 2001). In other words, networks can provide an additional constraint on opportunities to form intergroup friendships, even in environments where people of different racial groups occupy the same physical space.

In some cases, people may play an active role in contributing to this network constraint. For example, one longitudinal study of adolescents' social networks in the Netherlands suggested that ethnically prejudiced Dutch students had fewer Turkish and Moroccan friends largely because they avoided befriending other Dutch students who had Turkish and Moroccan friends (Stark, 2015). As a result, their friends of friends were mostly Dutch, so, over time, with triadic closure, they were more likely to make Dutch friends. This study suggested that the combination of avoiding friendships with ingroup members who had outgroup friends and triadic closure explained ethnically prejudiced Dutch students' lack of Turkish and Moroccan friends more than their active avoidance of Turkish and Moroccan students. As such, just as prior research has demonstrated that majority group members can actively shape their physical environments to avoid intergroup interaction (Anicich et al., 2021), these students created a network structure that limited opportunities to form intergroup friendships.

In addition to shaping structural opportunities to meet and form friendships, social networks also shape perceived opportunities to develop friendships across group lines by signaling openness to outgroup members. Specifically, people use the racial composition of outgroup members' social networks as an indicator of their racial attitudes and receptiveness to interracial friendship. In reality, such information is often gathered through direct observation in person or online (e.g., observing who someone interacts with at school, at work, and on social media), although research often uses profiles identifying friends to convey the racial composition

of an individual's network. For example, both Black (Wout et al., 2010) and White (Shapiro et al., 2011) participants expected better interaction outcomes with outgroup members who had friends belonging to their ingroup. Recent extensions of this work show that any diversity within an outgroup member's social network can signal openness to friendship. Black participants had fewer rejection concerns and were more interested in friendship with a White interaction partner with Asian, Latinx, and White friends (vs. all White friends), due to reductions in perceived prejudice and stereotyping (Milless et al., 2022; see Claypool & Trujillo, 2023 for similar findings for White participants). However, ingroup representation within a potential friend's social network provided the strongest signal; Black participants viewed a White interaction partner with Black friends (vs. all White friends or diverse non-Black friends) as the least prejudiced, prompting the fewest rejection concerns and greatest interest in friendship (Milless et al., 2022). Thus, in addition to providing a structural constraint on intergroup friendships, social networks inform perceived opportunities to form intergroup friendships with specific individuals.

### **Networks shape intergroup attitudes**

Social networks can also affect intergroup friendships more indirectly by influencing intergroup attitudes and norms. One mechanism for these network effects is social transmission of attitudes between connected individuals, whereby friends influence one another's intergroup attitudes over time (also called social influence or socialization). Recent research using a social network approach has found that people's intergroup attitudes, such as attitudes toward interacting with outgroup members, become more similar to their friends' attitudes over time (over and above tendencies to form friendships with those who already have similar intergroup attitudes; Rivas-Drake et al., 2019; Stark, 2015; Zingora et al., 2020). Individuals who were more popular (i.e., were nominated more as friends) within a school network had a particularly strong

influence on their friends' intergroup attitudes (Zingora et al., 2020). Given that intergroup attitudes affect the likelihood that one will engage in intergroup interaction and friendship (R. N. Turner et al., 2020), transmission of intergroup attitudes within social networks may encourage more or less intergroup friendship, depending on whether friends' intergroup attitudes are positive or negative.

Longitudinal social network research has also begun to successfully distinguish between contact effects (the effects of interacting and forming friendships with outgroup and ingroup members on intergroup attitudes) and transmission of attitudes. Intriguingly, some recent network research has found that only transmission of attitudes, and not contact effects, predicted intergroup attitudes over time (again, over and above the tendency to befriend already-similar others; Bracegirdle et al., 2022, 2023). In some studies, contact had no effects on intergroup attitudes (Bracegirdle et al., 2023); in other work, contact with outgroup members predicted individuals' intergroup attitudes in isolation, but after accounting for transmission of attitudes, no significant contact effects remained (Bracegirdle et al., 2022). Although nascent, this developing network research enriches the traditional intergroup contact literature by enabling researchers to examine multiple routes by which friendship can affect intergroup attitudes simultaneously and suggests that more research is needed to understand the conditions under which contact and transmission each affect intergroup attitudes.

Notably, this recent work points to the importance of the transmission of *ingroup friends'* attitudes in particular. Adolescents' attitudes toward a racial outgroup were most strongly predicted by their ingroup friends' attitudes toward the outgroup, rather than the attitudes of their outgroup friends or their number of ingroup or outgroup friends (Bracegirdle et al., 2022). Moreover, adolescents' attitudes toward the outgroup grew more similar to their ingroup friends'

attitudes over time, but not to their outgroup friends' attitudes. Similarly, among ethnic minority adolescents and adults, friendships with ingroup members (not outgroup members) predicted perceived discrimination over time, and perceptions of discrimination became more similar to ingroup friends' perceptions over time (Bracegirdle et al., 2023; see Jugert et al., 2020 for similar findings for ethnic identification). Findings that ingroup friends were more influential are consistent with classic research in social psychology showing that people are more likely to evaluate their attitudes in comparison to similar (vs. dissimilar) others (Festinger, 1954) and conform to ingroup (vs. outgroup) norms (J. C. Turner et al., 1987), although more research is needed to better understand the relative influence of ingroup versus outgroup friends (see "Conclusions and Future Directions").

In addition to friends directly influencing one another's intergroup attitudes, social networks can also more broadly convey norms of intergroup attitudes and interactions. Traditional interpretations of research on extended contact suggest that seeing friendships between ingroup members and outgroup members in one's broader network (or knowing that one's own ingroup friends have friendships with outgroup members) can communicate that positive intergroup attitudes and interactions are normative, improving attitudes toward the outgroup and likelihood of forming cross-group friendships (White et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2019). Some work suggests that people look to the normative intergroup attitudes of different parts of their social networks in different contexts. For example, perceptions of peer normative intergroup attitudes were more predictive of Jewish American adolescents' approval of excluding an Arab American peer from an activity with friends, whereas perceptions of parents' normative attitudes were more predictive of excluding an Arab American from a family party at home (Brenick & Romano, 2016). Given experimental work demonstrating that perceived



intergroup norms affect intentions to interact with and befriend outgroup members (Boss et al., 2023; Meleady, 2021), norms conveyed by social networks may influence the extent to which people engage with outgroup members.

However, recent research using a social network approach also suggests that some of the effects researchers have assumed are indirect—through norms—may be more direct than previously thought. For example, one study on extended contact asked participants about the extent to which their ingroup friends had outgroup friends, similar to prior research (Stark, 2020). However, using a social network approach, the authors additionally assessed whether the participants themselves were also friends with these outgroup friends of friends. They found that ingroup friends having outgroup friends was only predictive of lower prejudice when the participant was also friends with at least some of these friends of friends. This work suggests that extended contact effects may, in some cases, actually be explained by the direct friendships participants have with outgroup friends of friends—and highlights the utility of the social network approach for shedding light on traditional intergroup theories.

### **Networks shape ongoing intergroup interactions and relationships**

Intergroup interaction and friendship research has traditionally focused on dyads, but the field's understanding of the ways in which these dyadic encounters are affected by the broader network context is just developing. Although not network research per se, some work has shown that people external to the dyad can affect behavior in intergroup interactions. For example, witnessing a racial ingroup member act in line with racial stereotypes can change one's own behavior in an interaction with an outgroup member due to identity threat (e.g., Taylor et al., 2018). In this research, Black Americans who witnessed another Black person engaging in stereotypically negative behavior during an interracial interaction with a White partner

experienced greater anxiety, greater concern about being viewed stereotypically, lower desire for future interracial contact, and greater expected engagement in behavioral stress responses (e.g., freezing up or overcompensating to try to distance themselves from the stereotype) during the interracial interaction. Other work (in the context of both gender and race) has suggested that identity threat can also lead marginalized group members to socially reject stereotypically behaving ingroup members (Bergsieker et al., 2021; Jacob & Chen, 2023), especially when they themselves are precariously positioned in the broader social network (Bergsieker et al., 2021).

Other network members can also affect intergroup interactions through the judgments they make about the acceptability of intergroup relationships. Research suggests that people can experience a penalty from ingroup members for befriending or interacting with outgroup members. For example, more prejudiced White people reported liking other White people less when they had Black (vs. White) friends (Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2015) or were comfortable (vs. uncomfortable) interacting with Black people (Jacoby-Senghor et al., 2019). Black people expressed less empathy for other Black people who had close friendships with outgroup members, compared to when they had same-race close friends or no close friends (Johnson & Ashburn-Nardo, 2014). In turn, judgment from network members can affect people's behavior in intergroup interactions and relationships. In the context of interracial romantic relationships, for example, experiencing interracial relationship stigma from family and friends is associated with lower commitment, trust, and communication with one's outgroup partner, as well as higher odds of intimate partner aggression (Rosenthal & Starks, 2015). Perceived disapproval from social network members is more predictive of negative intergroup relationship outcomes than perceived disapproval from society at large (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007).

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

Social network research is revealing the ways in which intergroup friendships are affected by the relational structures in which people are embedded. Many of the studies described above provide compelling evidence that friends “once removed”—the friends of one’s own friends, or the friends of a potential outgroup friend—matter for the likelihood of forming and maintaining intergroup friendships. They shape structural opportunities to form new intergroup friendships, provide signals of openness to intergroup friendship, influence intergroup attitudes, and guide broader norms around intergroup interaction and friendship.

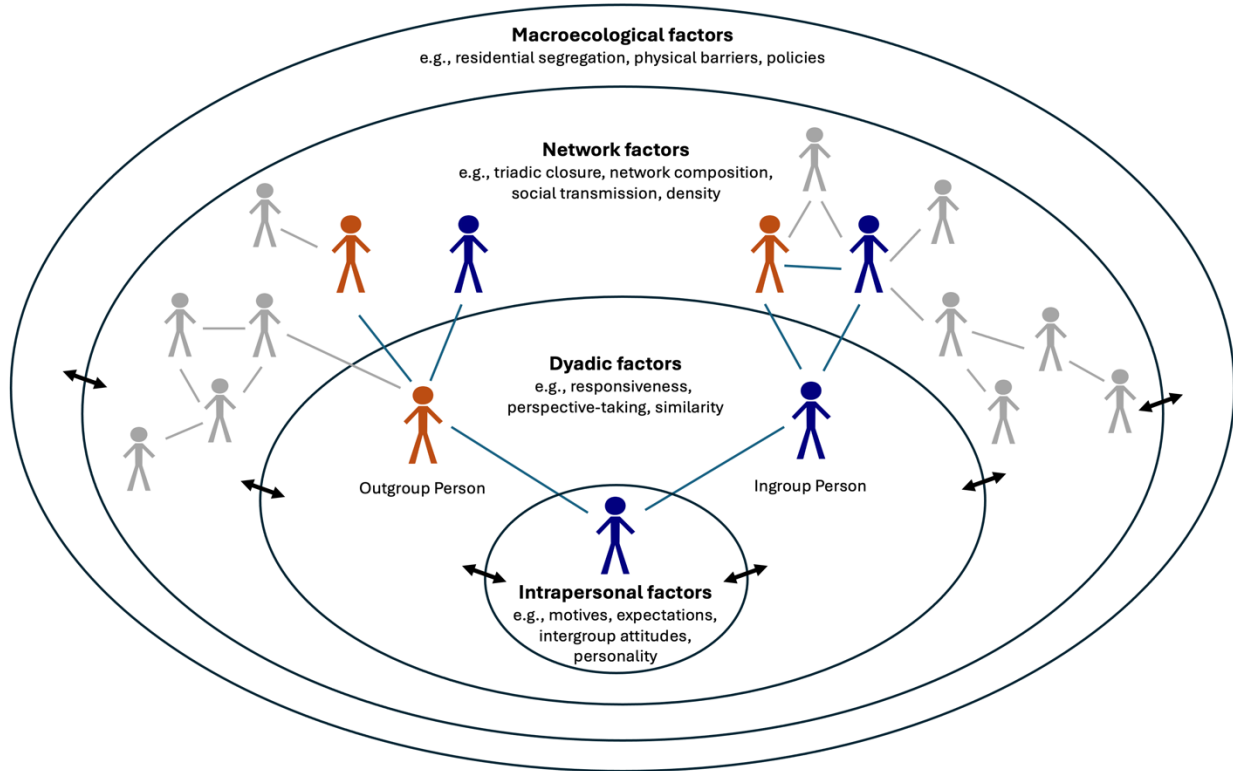
Social network research has also begun to provide novel insights into foundational psychological theories of intergroup relations. For example, decades of research rooted in intergroup contact theory have focused on interactions and friendships with outgroup members specifically. By allowing researchers to examine friendships more holistically, as well as disentangle selection effects, contact effects, social influence, and other social processes, the social network approach is beginning to deepen the field’s understanding of the multiple ways in which friends can shape intergroup attitudes and outcomes. Thus far, this research has underscored the importance of social influence in the context of intergroup attitudes and highlighted the need for greater exploration of how *ingroup* friends shape intergroup interactions and friendships. Additionally, research probing the extended contact hypothesis using a network approach has revealed that some effects attributed to awareness of ingroup members’ intergroup friendships may be partially attributable to the direct relationships individuals have with their outgroup friends of friends. Given the early phase of this research, more work is needed, but it is clear that the social network approach will be generative in the continued development of intergroup theories.

These developments may also help to suggest effective routes of intervention. If social influence can in some contexts have a larger effect on intergroup attitudes than intergroup contact, this may suggest a need for greater investment in interventions focused on spreading anti-prejudice norms, in addition to creating opportunities for intergroup contact. Should research continue to find that ingroup members have an outsized influence on individuals' attitudes, such interventions may be particularly effective if they focus on spreading these norms among ingroup members. On an institutional level, findings that triadic closure can lead to increased network segregation could point to the potential efficacy of structural interventions such as redesigning algorithms that prioritize friends of friends in connection recommendations on social media platforms, dating apps, and other services.

Many questions remain about the role of social networks in intergroup friendship. One area for future research is greater consideration of how the structure of social networks may influence intergroup outcomes. For example, although one explanation for ingroup friends' relatively strong influence on intergroup attitudes is greater adherence to ingroup norms in general, another explanation could be that the structure of people's relationships with ingroup members tends to be different than the structure of their relationships with outgroup members. Research has found that people whose social networks are more densely connected (i.e., everyone is more connected to everyone else) tend to be more influenced by their friends' behavior (Haynie, 2001); if ingroup friends are more densely connected to one another, whereas outgroup friends are less integrated into the network, ingroup friends' attitudes may set a stronger norm due to the structure of these friendships. Future research should also examine how one's position within one's broader social network (e.g., *centrality*, how well-connected someone is within a social network, or *brokerage*, the extent to which someone knows a wide

array of different people and can connect them to one another) may influence intergroup outcomes. Given aforementioned findings that individuals' network positions can affect the extent to which they befriend stereotypically behaving ingroup members (Bergsieker et al., 2021), network positions may also affect how people interact and develop friendships with outgroup members.

Some of the most exciting directions for future research will examine the dynamic interplay between social networks and factors at other levels of analysis, including intrapersonal, dyadic, and macroecological factors (see Figure 1). For example, research has begun to examine how perception of the racial composition of one's friends changes depending on the racial composition of the broader environment (Eason et al., 2019), finding that children generally infer positive racial attitudes when classmates befriend peers belonging to the numeric minority (but not majority) racial group. Other research has begun to explore the interplay between individual-level characteristics and social networks in shaping intergroup outcomes (see, e.g., Bobowik et al., 2022; Kunst et al., 2022). Continued research integrating social network approaches with other levels of analysis will, over time, lead to a fuller understanding of intergroup friendship and how best to promote healthy relationships across group lines.



**Figure 1.** Recent research reveals that social networks are an important layer to consider in an integrated, multilevel perspective of intergroup friendship. Individuals are nested within dyads, which are nested in social networks, all of which are situated in a broader macroecological context. Factors at each of these levels influence the formation, maintenance, and outcomes of intergroup friendship.

## Recommended Reading

Bracegirdle, C., Reimer, N. K., van Zalk, M., Hewstone, M., & Wölfer, R. (2022). Disentangling contact and socialization effects on outgroup attitudes in diverse friendship networks.

*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000240>

**A recent longitudinal social network analysis distinguishing between the effects of contact and social influence on intergroup attitudes, as well as the role of both ingroup and outgroup friends**

Clifton, A., & Webster, G. D. (2017). An Introduction to Social Network Analysis for

Personality and Social Psychologists. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 8(4), 442–453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617709114>

**An accessible primer on social network analysis for further details on network methods and analytic strategies**

Milless, K. L., Wout, D. A., & Murphy, M. C. (2022). Diversity or representation? Sufficient factors for Black Americans' identity safety during interracial interactions. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 28(1), 103–111.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000492>

**A recent extension of earlier work showing how people use the racial composition of people's friends as a cue of intergroup attitudes and receptiveness to intergroup friendship**

Shelton, J. N., & Turetsky, K. M. (2024). Diversity. In *The Handbook of Social Psychology* (6th Edition). Harvard University.

**A comprehensive review of the diversity literature, including a detailed overview of the layered factors contributing to intergroup interaction and friendship**

Stark, T. H. (2020). Indirect contact in social networks: Challenging common interpretations of the extended contact hypothesis. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 23(3), 441–461. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430219846337>

**A set of studies demonstrating how social network approaches can provide novel insight into fundamental intergroup theories**

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