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Author(s): Scott L. Feld

Source: *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (Dec., 1982), pp. 797-801

Published by: [American Sociological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2095216>

Accessed: 21/09/2011 18:43

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## RESEARCH NOTES

### SOCIAL STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF SIMILARITY AMONG ASSOCIATES\*

SCOTT L. FELD

SUNY at Stony Brook

*This paper shows how the social structuring of activity leads people to develop relationships with others who are similar to themselves. Most relationships originate in foci of activity that bring together disproportionately homogeneous sets of people. The more homogeneous these sets of people are, the more relationships tend to be with similar others. A sample survey and a study of friendships in one large factory illustrate the importance of the social structuring of activity for age similarity. It is suggested that the neglect of structural factors has led to the overestimation of the extent to which people "prefer" to associate with similar others.*

Sociologists have often observed the tendency for people to associate with others who are similar to themselves, but the causes of similarity among associates are not well understood. It is not surprising to find that people prefer friends who are similar to themselves (c.f. Richardson, 1940; Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954; Cohen, 1977; Verbrugge, 1977; Kandel, 1978). However, "individual preferences" can be overemphasized. Individual preferences can only affect the choices of associates within limited sets of available alternatives. The purpose of this paper is to show how the social structuring of activities tends to bring similar people into frequent contact with one another, and thereby encourages the development of relationships among them. The structure of opportunities must be understood before one can estimate the importance of preferences for similarity as a cause of observed homophily.

Fischer et al. (1977) have shown that the social origins of associations (e.g., work or neighborhood) are related to the nature and extent of homophily (e.g., work associates are especially socioeconomically similar). They explain their findings as arising from the tendency for various social settings to "constrain

choices" to sets of people which are disproportionately homogeneous in particular respects. The present paper elaborates this idea and explains how social structures in the form of foci of activity organize the constraints and choices of individuals. I have previously defined foci as "social, psychological, legal or physical objects around which joint activities are organized" (Feld, 1981:1016). Foci can be formal (e.g., a school) or informal (e.g., a regular hangout), large (e.g., neighborhood) or small (e.g., a household). Although relationships can develop from a single encounter, most relationships originate in activities organized around foci. The present paper presents a theory of "focused choice," emphasizing the precedence of foci as social structures which systematically constrain choices to form and maintain relationships.

#### FOCUSED CHOICE

Individuals have little choice in becoming associated with certain foci (e.g., their families). When they do have a choice, the personal characteristics of people associated with a focus are generally less important than other factors (e.g., they choose a workplace for the job rather than for the coworkers). Whatever the basis of their initial association with a focus, it may be difficult, costly, and time-consuming to disassociate from the focus and/or become associated with others. For all of these reasons, an individual's associations with particular foci may have unintended consequences for him or her. Specifically, people tend to choose their friends from among those with whom they have regular contact in one or another of their focused activities; the set of people who are available through these foci tends to direct their choices to individuals with particular personal characteristics.

\*Direct all correspondence to: Scott L. Feld, Department of Sociology, SUNY-Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11794.

Originally prepared for presentation at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, August, 1981. I appreciate the helpful comments provided by Jill Sutor, Stephen Cole, Mark Granovetter, Claude Fischer, Charles Kadushin, Andrea Tyree, and two anonymous reviewers. I would like to thank Claude Fischer for making available the Northern California data (collected with the support of NIMH grant MH-26802), and James A. Davis for making the woollens factory data (collected by John James) available from his sociometric data bank. I thank Steven Appold for helping to prepare the data.

## FOCUSED CHOICE AND HOMOPHILY

The choices of others sharing a focus lead to homophily where the particular sets of people associated with each focus are homogeneous. There are many factors which lead foci to bring homogeneous sets of people together. For example, the interests of organizations and individuals lead similar people to the same places at the same time; efficiency encourages people who are similar in particular respects to work together and play together; and access to many places and social contexts may be limited to people with certain characteristics (e.g., wealth). In each case, the similarities that directly bring people together tend to be correlated with other characteristics, so that individuals who are similar in one respect are also similar in other respects.

In summary, the processes of focused choice lead to homophily to the extent that people draw their friends from foci, and foci bring homogeneous sets of people together. The following are the three basic propositions:

- 1) Most relationships originate in repeated interactions organized around foci of activity.
- 2) Sets of people brought together by foci are often disproportionately homogeneous in many respects.
- 3) The more homogeneous are focused sets, the more likely it is that relationships will be between similar people.

## STUDYING THE HOMOPHILY OF AGE

Processes of focused choice are important determinants of the extent of homophily for a variety of different characteristics. To illustrate the processes, one of these characteristics, age, is analyzed.

Age provides a good illustration for three reasons. (1) Age is a characteristic that people bring with them into interaction and cannot be changed by interaction. In general, homophily can arise from processes which lead people who already have relationships with one another to *become* more similar to one another, but age is not subject to such conformity processes. (2) Age is important as a characteristic which consistently segregates and stratifies individuals in most societies. (3) Age is a characteristic of respondents and their friends that is relatively easy to measure (c.f. Laumann, 1973).

The extent of age similarity can be described and measured in a variety of ways. For the present analysis, the extent of age homophily is indicated by the proportion of "same age" associates.<sup>1</sup> "Same age" is defined as being

within 5 years of age, i.e., from 4 years younger to 4 years older.

## THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF FOCUSED CHOICE

The following sections provide evidence that (1) most associates are drawn from focused sets, (2) focused sets tend to be relatively age homogeneous, and (3) the more homogeneous the focused sets, the more age similar are the associates of the individuals. Since there are no data sets including the composition of focused sets for each individual in a large representative sample (and such data would be difficult to collect), the present analysis is based upon two separate data sets. The Fischer Northern California Data (Fischer, 1982) contain information on the characteristics and sources of associates of a sample of residents of Northern California. These data show that associates are drawn from a few main types of focused sets and provide indications that most of these focused sets are disproportionately age homogeneous. However, these data contain no direct information on the homogeneity of each focused set. The James Woolens Factory Data (James, 1951) contain information on the friends of workers in one large factory and on the age composition of the specific work departments within the factory. These data show that the focus of the factory brings together similar age people more often than in the general population, the subfoci of the work departments bring together similar age people more than in the factory at large, and the proportion of similar age people available within one's own work department (subfocus) is an important determinant of the proportion of same age friends that one has. The two data sets taken together indicate that the homogeneity of focused sets may generally be an important determinant of the similarity among associates.

## THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA STUDY

Fischer's Northern California Data are especially useful for illustrating the present theory because they include information on the sources and personal characteristics of a large and reasonably representative sample of associates. Personal interviews were conducted

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bly better characterized by "same age" or "different age" than by the number of years between ages; consequently, the proportion same age is a more appropriate measure of age homophily than the mean age difference. In any case, replications of the analysis using different measures of age homophily indicate that the substantive results are similar.

<sup>1</sup> The social meaning of an age difference is proba-

Table 1. Focused Sources of Relationships

	Source					
	Family	Work	Neigh- borhood	Organi- zation	Other	Total
freq	1281	514	714	306	1338	4153
%	31	12	17	7	32	100%

with 1046 respondents, and detailed information was collected on up to 5 associates for each respondent.<sup>2</sup>

Each respondent was asked where he or she met each associate.<sup>3</sup> These data indicate that four of the five most common sources of relationships (families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and voluntary organizations) are foci. Respondents were asked whether each pair of their associates "know one another well." It is clear that these sources act as "foci" by the fact that two associates drawn from the same source are much more likely to "know one another well" (81%) than associates from two different sources (29%). "Meeting through friends" was the only nonfocus source among the five most common sources of associates; 12 percent were met in this way. Table 1 shows that 67 percent of the associates were met through the four most common foci. "Other" sources include foci (e.g., school) and sources which were not identifiable as specific foci (e.g., through friends).

Table 2 shows the proportion of associates drawn from each type of focus that are the same age as the respondent. Associates drawn

Table 2. Focused Sources and Percent Same Age Associates

	Source			
	Family	Work	Neigh- borhood	Organi- zation
% same age	18	45	38	37
N	(1274)	(572)	(709)	(302)

from every type of focus except families (which contain multiple generations and are consequently unlikely to be age homogeneous) are the same age as the respondents more often than would be expected by random association.<sup>4</sup>

The high proportion of same age associates from these foci can arise from selection of same age associates from each focus set and/or from the homogeneity of the focused sets. If each focused set is age homogeneous, then two associates both drawn from the same focused set are more likely to be age similar to one another than are two associates drawn from two separate focused sets. It is clear that the family includes different age associates from the other foci. In addition, where two associates are both drawn from the same focus of either work, neighborhood or organizations, an average of 37 percent are the same age as one another; but if two associates are drawn from two different foci, then only 26 percent are similar age to one another.

These findings thus provide evidence that focused sets tend to be age homogeneous, and consequently suggest that the homogeneity of focused sets is a determinant of the extent of age similarity of associates drawn from that focus. More direct evidence requires measurement of the actual composition of the focused sets, including those individuals who do not become associates of the respondents. The James Factory Data include such detailed information for one large factory.

#### THE JAMES WOOLENS FACTORY DATA

James (1951) collected data on each of the workers in a woolens factory. He asked each worker to specify his or her age and the names of his or her friends within the factory. For each of 368 respondents, between 1 and 12 names of friends were originally recorded, and

<sup>2</sup> This sample of respondents is generally representative of residents of Northern California, except for some overrepresentation of residents of small communities and underrepresentation of nonwhites; these biases are unlikely to affect the substantive results.

Information was collected on associates who were each the first named of associates who performed the specific functions of house sitting, being sociable, discussing personal problems, providing reliable judgments, and lending emergency money, respectively. Pretests indicated that the names elicited in this way were reasonably representative of associates serving a wide variety of functions, and first-named associates were similar to subsequently named associates, except for being more intimate and frequently seen (see McCallister and Fischer, 1978, and Fischer, 1982 for a complete discussion of the selection procedure and its consequences).

<sup>3</sup> Respondents were specifically asked "Where did you meet this person?" and the answers were coded into one of the following 10 categories: (1) We're in the same family; (2) Grew up together; (3) in school; (4) At work; (5) As neighbors; (6) In a group or organization; (7) Through a friend; (8) Through my (husband/wife); (9) Through my child; (10) Other (How: ).

<sup>4</sup> The proportion that would be expected to arise from random association is the proportion of same age people in the population. Although there are various ways to define the relevant population (e.g., using the adult population as represented by the Northern California Data, 18% are the "same age"), the substantive conclusions are similar.

the present analysis includes up to 8 friends for each person. Based upon the self-reported ages, each friend was determined to be the "same age" (within 5 years) as the respondent or not, and the proportion of each respondent's friends who were the same age was calculated. Age homophily is indicated by the fact that the respondents averaged 31% same age friends.<sup>5</sup>

In the American population at this time (as described by the 1950 census), 13 percent of the people were the "same age." The woollens factory did not include a representative sample, but was limited to adult workers; specifically, the youngest person in the factory was 17, and the oldest was 74, with a slight concentration in the middle ages. Consequently, using the actual age distribution within the factory, each person had an average of 18 percent same age people within the set of people working within the factory.

In addition, the specific work department is the primary subfocus of activity and interaction among the workers within the factory. Fifty-nine percent of the named friends were others from within the same work departments. Consistent with the theory previously described, the work departments tend to be somewhat more age homogeneous than the factory at large. An analysis of the age distributions within departments shows that each person had an average of 22 percent same age people working within the same department.

The fact that work departments are more age homogeneous than the factory at large suggests that this homogeneity leads people to have same age friends. However, workers had the opportunity to make friends outside of their own departments (41 percent of the named friends were outsiders), and there were enough people of all ages within the factory that every worker could easily have chosen all same age friends if he or she had so desired. Nevertheless, the data indicate that the availability of

Table 3. Percent Same Age People in the Work Department and Percent Same Age Friends in the Factory as a Whole

	Percent Same Age in the Department					
	<10	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-100
Mean percent same age friends in the factory	20	26	32	37	50	62
N	(66)	(100)	(85)	(59)	(26)	(19)

same age people within a work department is related to the proportion of same age friends in the factory overall.

For each respondent in the factory, the proportion of workers within the same department who were the same age as the respondent and the proportion of named friends who were the same age as the respondent were calculated. Table 3 shows that there is a strong association between these two proportions ( $r=.33$ ), such that the individuals who had less than 10 percent same age people within their department had an average of 20 percent same age friends, while those with a majority of same age coworkers had an average of 62 percent same age friends. The proportion same age in the department had its main effect on the proportion of same age friends *within the department* ( $r=.48$ ), and had a small effect on proportion of same age friends outside the department ( $r=.13$ ); the effect on friends outside the department may have resulted from the tendency for people to introduce their friends within the department to their friends outside the department.<sup>6</sup>

These data provide the strongest and most direct evidence that the availability of same age people within the immediate subfocus is a major determinant of the amount of age similarity of one's friends. These data also provide consistent evidence that there is age homophily beyond that which would be expected based only upon the age homogeneity of the work departments; there is generally a greater proportion same age friends than the proportion same age people in the department; and consequently, the overall proportion of same age others within departments (an average of 22 percent) cannot account for the overall proportion of age similar friends (31 percent).

<sup>5</sup> As indicated in footnote 4, there is no single population baseline; 31% same age is more than the 13% in the American population at the time, and more than the 18% in the factory population.

The 31% same age in this factory is less than the 45% same age coworkers in the Northern California Data. The different frequencies of age similarity may partially arise from the factory being less age homogeneous than most work settings (i.e., few work settings include the full range of ages included in this factory), and partially from differences in the measurement procedures; the Northern California Data include only first-mentioned names (the first-mentioned names in the factory data were 37% same age), and the Northern California Data included respondent reports of their associates' ages, which could bias the measurements in the direction of more same age associates.

<sup>6</sup> Variation in the proportion same age people in the factory as a whole (i.e., there were more same age people for 45 year olds than for 20 year olds) was only slightly related to the proportion of same age friends ( $r=.09$ ), about the extent that is expected from the fact that the proportion same age available in the department is correlated with the proportion same age in the factory as a whole ( $r=.28$ ).

Many researchers would quickly conclude that the unexplained similarity is due to people deliberately choosing same age friends; but the present theory suggests that before attributing findings of age similarity to deliberate age selection, one must consider other foci and subfoci encouraging the association among same age people. There is some tendency for people to deliberately choose same age others, as indicated by the fact that people in departments with a low proportion of same age people are more likely to choose their friends from outside their departments, but data on the full diversity of structured activities within the factory would be required to separate the contributions of structural factors and deliberate choice to the age similarity among associates.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided evidence that homogeneity of focused sets is an important factor contributing to homophily of age, and suggests that the homogeneity of focused sets may also be an important cause of homophily of attitudes, behaviors, and social statuses. Social structure alone cannot explain homophily, but the present analysis indicates that variations in the homogeneity of focused sets can have large effects on variations in homophily.

The present paper extends theory integrating the structure of social life with the patterns of social relations. The emphasis on the causal importance of social structure is the central point of this paper and related research on foci (including Feld, 1981, forthcoming). Sociologists and social psychologists are often interested in the emergent aspects of social relations, including their consequences for individuals, and it is important that consequences of patterns of social relations be investigated with some understanding of the origins of those patterns.

This paper has discussed and illustrated basic processes of focused choice. Specifically, the choices of people are often constrained by the disproportionately homogeneous focused sets in which they participate. Further work must investigate the organization of activities and interaction in specific contexts ranging from the minute analysis of everyday activities (e.g., Collins, 1981) to the social class

organization of elites (e.g., Domhoff, 1970) that determine the nature and extent of homogeneity of focused sets and contribute to homophily of personal characteristics.

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