

Half of your friends lost in seven years

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Had a good chat with someone recently? Has a good friend just helped you to do up your home? Then you will be lucky if that person still does that in seven years time. Sociologist Gerald Mollenhorst investigated how the context in which we meet people influences our social network. One of his conclusions: you lose about half of your close network members every seven years.

You are stuck with your family but you can choose your [friends](#). Really? For years sociologists have argued to what extent personal networks are the result of your own preferences or the context in which you can meet someone. Would your best friend have been your best friend if you had not been in the same class for three years? And if you had not got to know your wife via mutual friends but in a dodgy bar then would she still have become and remained your wife?

In order to answer such questions, Mollenhorst conducted a survey under 1007 people aged between 18 and 65 years. Seven years later the respondents were contacted once again and 604 people were reinterviewed. They answered questions such as: Who do you talk with, regarding important personal issues? Who helps you with DIY in your home? Who do you pop by to see? Where did you get to know that person? And where do you meet that person now?

Limited in your choices

Mollenhorst investigated, for example, whether the [social context](#) in which contacts are made influences the degree of similarity between

partners, friends and acquaintances. It was expected that the influence of social contexts on similarity in relationships would be stronger for weak relationships than for strong ones. After all, you are less fussy about your choice of acquaintances than your choice of partner. In relationships with partners, Mollenhorst indeed found more similarity than in relationships with friends. Yet interestingly, the influence of the social context on similarity did not differ between partners, friends and acquaintances. This reveals how strongly opportunities to meet influence the social composition of personal networks.

With his research Mollenhorst has confirmed that personal networks are not formed solely on the basis of personal choices. These choices are limited by opportunities to meet. Another strong indication for this came from the fact that people often choose friends from a context in which they have previously chosen a friend. Moreover, the extent to which our friends know each other strongly depends on the context in which people meet each other.

Individualism

Many sociologists assume that our society is becoming increasingly individualistic. For example, it is held that we strictly separate work, clubs and friends. Mollenhorst established, however, that public contexts such as work or the neighbourhood and private contexts frequently overlap each other.

Furthermore, Mollenhorst's research reveals that networks are not shrinking, whereas American research reveals such a decline. Over a period of seven years the average size of personal networks was found to be strikingly stable. However, during the course of seven years we replace many members of our network with other people. Only thirty percent of the discussion partners and practical helpers still held the same position seven years later. Only 48 percent were still part of the

network. Therefore value the friends you have. As long as you have them that is.

Gerald Mollenhorst's research is part of the project Where friends are made. Contexts, Contacts, Consequences, set up by Beate Völker. She received a Vidi grant from NWO in 2001 and used this to set up her project.

Source: Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research

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