

How diverse is your social network? The answer may reveal something about your values

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A new study out of Wellesley College sheds light on the role of beliefs about the value of diversity in fostering attitudinally diverse friendships. Led by Angela Bahns, a social psychologist studying similarity and diversity in friendship networks, the study demonstrates that people who place a higher value on diversity are more likely to have friends of different races, religions, and/or classes, as well as friends with different sociopolitical views.

Bahns' research contributes to our understanding of friendship formation, as well as to growing interest in the benefits of diversity. In recent years, diversity has become an institutional buzzword on college campuses seeking to diversify their faculty and student body, and in organizations promoting employee diversity. In most institutional diversity policies and research studies, diversity is associated primarily with race and ethnicity.

Bahns' study, by contrast, employs a broad conception of diversity in order to highlight "how celebrating differences of many kinds can promote the formation of diverse relationships." According to Bahns, "Encouraging dialogue among people of differing backgrounds and [beliefs](#) can reduce prejudice and lead to a greater appreciation of diversity." But can beliefs about the value of diversity contribute to diverse friendships? Bahns' study is one of the first to suggest that positive beliefs about diversity may increase the likelihood of seeking

out diverse [friends](#).

Individual attitudes and beliefs about a wide range of sociopolitical topics, including birth control, gay marriage, and prejudice towards various social groups, as well as beliefs about the value of social difference were measured by questionnaires distributed to pairs of friends in two neighborhoods of Boston, Jamaica Plain and the North End. The two communities were chosen for their high and low degrees of racial and income diversity, respectively. Although participants in the more diverse Jamaica Plain on average valued diversity more highly, participants in both neighborhoods who recognized the benefits of diversity were more likely to have diverse friendships.

While previous studies have shown, on the one hand, that racially [diverse communities](#) are more likely to foster interracial friendships, other studies suggest that larger and diverse communities are more likely to foster attitudinally similar relationships because it becomes easier to select similar friends when one has access to many different social choices. In fact, a large body of research suggests that, in general, people tend to make friends with those who are similar to themselves in upbringing and beliefs. Bahns' study helps to clarify these seemingly contradictory findings by suggesting that diverse communities offer greater opportunity to seek either similar or diverse friends. Importantly, the study implies that individual differences in valuing [diversity](#) may influence a person's tendency to seek similar friends.

More information: The study, "Fostering Diverse Friendships: The Role of Beliefs about the Value of Diversity" is published online by *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*:
[m.gpi.sagepub.com/content/earl ... /26/1368430214566893](http://m.gpi.sagepub.com/content/earl.../26/1368430214566893)

Provided by Wellesley College

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