

Article Evaluation Worksheet

APA 7th Edition Reference:

Doherty, E. F. (2021). "It's just like a break-up": A qualitative analysis of turning points in female friendships in early to middle adulthood. *Communication Quarterly*, 69(1), 43–66.
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What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study was to explore turning points in the context of friendship between women during the post-college years through middle-age because the limited literature that does exist on friendships is focused mainly on friendships among college students. Therefore, the present study expanded on scholarly research exploring female friendships by identifying turning points related to changes in closeness in significant same-sex friendships during adulthood. The study sought to understand *how* and *why* these important relationships change throughout the course of the adult years.

Another important purpose of this study was to expand the scope of interpersonal contexts that the turning point theoretical lens has been used in. A number of studies have employed a turning points approach to the examination of romantic relationships, but studies exploring turning points in the context of friendship are relatively scarce. However, this study identified friendships as being "ripe for study from a turning points perspective" because they encompass many relational changes and contradictions similar to those found within romantic or family relationships, yet they also differ from those relationships in important ways. Because most theories of relational development have been based on romantic relationships, friendships need to be examined to determine if existing conceptualizations of relational development also accurately describe friendships, and so this study contributes to the literature surrounding friendships and turning points because it illustrates the importance of examining friendship levels *across* the history of a friendship, rather than examining only the current friendship level, especially as women navigate the changing landscape of adulthood.

How does the study utilize your assigned theory?

Turning points was used in this study as a theoretical lens to view close relationships. As a result, it functioned to view relationship development as constantly being modified, rather than just viewing relationship development as a process of serial growth. Therefore, a turning approach to relationship development focuses on events or occurrences associated with change within relationships. The turning points perspective was used in this study to "questions traditional views of friendship as developing linearly from casual, close, to best friends, with a drop in friendship level foreshadowing the end of the relationship." This study reflects the turning point approach by emphasizing the **history** of the relationship, an essential component in understanding the present state of the friendship, regardless of friendship level.

What is/are the research question(s) and/or hypotheses?

1. What types of turning points emerge as salient among adult women describing close, same-sex friendships?

2. How often, if at all, is increased closeness described as an outcome of each friendship turning point type?
3. How often, if at all, is decreased closeness described as an outcome of each friendship turning point type?

Is the study a quantitative or qualitative article? How do you know?

This study represents a qualitative article. The purpose of qualitative research methods is to understand an experience, explore a process, or seek to answer a question rather than testing a prediction. The presence of research questions and a semi-structured interview protocol as well as the transcriptions of the interviews using grounded theory methodology is evidence of qualitative methods. Furthermore, qualitative research methods go beyond surface-level understandings to explore the contextual meanings of behaviors, and this study employed a very in-depth interview process to provide a thorough examination of participants' experiences with turning points in their close friendships with women. Additionally, coders employed open coding, which is another indicator of qualitative methods because the coders carefully reviewed participants' descriptions of their experiences, compared their experiences identified in each successive interview with experiences and categories previously identified, refined the categories, and modified the overall coding of turning points as needed. Lastly, the authors explicitly note in the literature review "Given the exploratory, qualitative nature of the current research, this study also utilizes a conceptualization of closeness that is primarily grounded in participants' personal definitions of the word." Overall, this study represents a qualitative investigation because it seeks to explore what turning points adult women identify in their friendships later in life and whether these led to feelings of increased or decreased closeness.

How were the data collected? Describe in 1 or more paragraphs.

Participants completed their interviews face-to-face, or over the telephone. The interview process began with informed consent, followed by a brief demographic questionnaire, and it followed a semi-structured protocol. The interviews were also digitally recorded, and at the start of the interview, participants were asked to identify a close female friend they've had in adulthood who they would describe as being very important in their life." For the purposes of this investigation, "adulthood" was defined as being 25 years or older. A friendship would still be eligible for inclusion if: a) the friendship was initiated before the participant was 25, and/or b) the friendship had ended before the time of the interview. Once participants identified the female friendship that would serve as the focus of the interview, they were asked to provide some brief background information regarding the friendship (e.g., when and how they had met, whether or not they were currently friends). Afterward, they were asked to create a graph of their friendship turning points, utilizing an adaptation of the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT), illustrating a respondent's perceived changes in closeness to an important female friend over time. A graph was created to show the path that each friendship followed to reach its current (or final) level of closeness, with closeness charted on the ordinal axis from 0 to 100, and participants responded to a series of prompts regarding each turning point identified on the graph. For each turning point identified, participants were asked the following: "How old were you when this turning point occurred? How old was your friend? Why did this turning point

change the amount of closeness between you? In what other ways did this turning point affect your relationship?” Follow-up questions included the following: “How did [the turning point] affect the communication between you and your friend? How did this turning point affect you personally? How did it affect your commitment to the friendship? How did this turning point affect your friend, to the best of your knowledge?”

It is important to note that closeness was chosen as the outcome variable of interest based on the well-established literature identifying closeness as being an important marker of life and relational satisfaction.

Who participated?

The sample in this study consisted of women ($N = 30$) ages 25 to 45 who self-identified as having had at least one significant friendship with another woman during her adult years (i.e., after age 25). Fifty-one women made initial contact with the interviewer, but only thirty women completed the interview. Participants contacted the interviewer (author) to volunteer participation after seeing an announcement of the study. The author utilized their social network to recruit participants for the current study, and recruitment was undertaken through the following channels: word of mouth, a publicly available Facebook post describing the study, and a post advertising the study within the “Volunteers” section of Craigslist in the New York City area.

Ethnicities of the sample included: 17 (56%) White, 5 (16%) Black or African American, 4 (13%) Hispanic, and 4 (13%) South Asian. The majority of participants had a college degree (86%); 12 participants reported having a Master’s degree, and five reported having a Ph.D. Regarding marital status, 43% of participants identified as single, 43% identified as married, three were engaged to be married, and one was divorced. In regard to children, 50% of participants reported having no children, 46% reported having at least one child, and one participant was expecting her first child at the time of the interview. Most participants (90%) identified as heterosexual; two participants identified as bisexual, and one participant identified as pansexual. There was a variety of different ages that participants identified their friendships beginning at, but on average, participants identified friendships as beginning at the age 17 ($SD = 7.43$), with a range from 5 to 36 years of age. Fourteen participants (47%) discussed a friendship that started before age 18, 11 participants (37%) discussed a friendship that started between the ages of 18 and 25, and five participants (17%) discussed a friendship that started between the ages of 26 and 36. The friendships discussed had an average duration of 15.9 years ($SD = 7.95$), with a range from 2 to 32 years in length. Out of the 30 total participants, five discussed a friendship that had ended, while 25 discussed a friendship that was ongoing.

How were the data analyzed?

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Coders identified initial themes in participants’ experiences of turning points and examined the closeness graphs developed during participant interviews. Turning points were identified any time a numerical change in closeness was indicated on the graph, and interview portions corresponding to these changes were then thoroughly analyzed. For each numerical change indicated on the graph, coders indicated whether the change was an increase or decrease in closeness, and correspondingly coded these changes as “increase” or “decrease.” Afterward, an open coding technique was used to identify types of turning points deemed particularly significant by participants. Through open coding, coders identified 244 references to specific relationship

turning points. Axial coding (i.e., the process of identifying categories and subcategories of the themes identified in open coding) was then used to develop a hierarchical organization of these turning points. Links between categories were discussed in order to further refine the coding frames.

What were the results?

Twelve turning points were identified as being given by three or more participants and had the potential to positively or negatively influence the closeness of female friendships, which included: romantic escalation (dating, engagement, marriage), romantic de-escalation (breakups and divorce), crisis, changes in geographical location, betrayal (turmoil surrounding romantic relationships or dating ex-partners), conflict, having children, reunion (sustained meaningful face-to-face contact), cohabitation (close proximity created new tensions), shared activities, self-disclosure, and travel. The most frequently identified turning points were those related to romantic relationship escalation or de-escalation, and crises of some kind, with 80% of study participants described these types of events as turning points within their friendships. A change in geographical distance between the friends was identified as a turning point by 70% of participants. 50% of study participants identified having children as a turning point. Conflict and reunion were both identified as turning points by 30% of participants. Turning points identified by fewer than ten participants included sharing living quarters, betrayal, shared activities, self-disclosure, and traveling together.

One of the major findings in addition to these identified categories for turning points was that turning points in adult women's friendships were often accompanied by social support, or the lack thereof. While the turning points described were the events themselves, not the aspect of social support, this finding has important implications for our relationships. Increased closeness with friends after experiencing a turning point almost always included an element of social support, and turning points that led to a decrease in closeness between friends often described an absence of social support in situations when it was expected.

What are the implications of these results? In other words, why are these results important? Describe in 1-2 paragraphs.

This research suggests that turning points in women's friendships are rarely straightforward in terms of their effects and are almost always layered with emotion and meaning. Additionally, the accompanying social support component has major implications for our friendships because results suggest that turning points and social support are closely linked in terms of their impact on closeness in female friendships. This linkage is important for women to be aware of because understanding that both positive and negative turning points are typically identified as being due to a presence or absence of social support from close others helps adult women buffer against potentially negative relational outcomes by emphasizing the importance of having social support in these instances. These findings are, therefore, important because they contribute to an understanding of why closeness levels may fluctuate between female friends during the adult years.

What are the limitations that the author(s) identifies?

The author identified several limitations with the present study. For example, most participants in this study were highly educated, so this research does not speak to the experiences of women from a variety of educational backgrounds. In addition, this data only reveals one side of the story regarding the events that have occurred within these friendships and what impact these events have had on those friendships. There could be significant differences in perception between participants and their friends when it comes to recounting what is considered turning points, as well as the details, or gravity, surrounding these events.

What is your own evaluation of the article? Identify at least one strength and one weakness of the actual methodology of the study.

One strength of this article is that women of color were reasonably well-represented in the current study, comprising 44% of the sample. This is especially noteworthy to acknowledge within the context of increasing representation of the narratives in communication research because samples have historically been very homogenous. Therefore, this study is useful, practical, and demonstrates heuristic value because it represents an important contribution to the literature by being generalizable to a wider demographic sample that is more accurately representative of the larger population.

However, one limitation of this study is that the scope is relatively limited. While the identified subject of adult female friendships is a strength in some instances, because it is parsimonious, the conditions under which the findings of this study apply are relatively narrow. I think it would be interesting to examine these findings by comparing across gender. Research clearly indicates the importance of friendship during adulthood, in general, but it also speaks to the difficulty in maintaining these relationships throughout the adult years, so there may be potentially nuanced findings in the ways in which women and men maintain their friendships as they age. While the study argues that “friendships among women tend to be positively associated with various indicators of psychological well-being,” I would argue that the same is true for men as well, and examining the relative importance of closeness as being gender-specific and how this can influence the turning points identified in adult friendships would be a further application of this work.

Theory Application Reflection Paper

Through this theory application assignment, I learned that while the turning point perspective is typically applied to romantic relationships, it has heuristic value in being applied to other interpersonal settings as well, such as friendships. As individuals construct their joint histories, turning points are likely points of turbulence due to dialectical contradictions, or the tensions experienced in relationships when opposing forces are present, and this is an especially relevant framework to apply to the life stage of adult friendships, as individuals are navigating adulthood, undergoing major life events, and adapting or transforming their relationships to fit their needs as an adult. The most influential takeaway from exploring this research further was the connection to social support. Participants in the study did not identify the presence or absence of social support as the turning point itself, and I can see the application of this finding on a personal level in reflecting on my own turning points. Whether I felt supported or not during major turning points in my life did play a significant role in whether or not some of these friendships were strengthened, or declined, through the process of these experiences. Through investigating the turning point perspective, I learned that there are many different approaches to relationship development, but considering how this process can often be turbulent and nonlinear, rather than proceeding in a systematic stage model, can offer valuable insights into the messy reality that often makes up some of our closest friendships.

In reflecting on my classroom facilitation, I think the media example of turning points through a Big Bang Theory episode was an entertaining example of how the perceptions and valence of turning points in a friendship or relationship are integral in determining relational outcomes, such as closeness or longevity. I think the reflection question at the end was a good way to wrap up the discussion and tailor the presentation to the audience by coming full circle to

consider how we can acknowledge important turning points in our own lives; however, I think it was a little challenging to encourage participation during this portion given how some of these events may have been personal to my classmates. Overall, though, I think the classroom facilitation went smoothly, as it shed important light on an overlooked demographic in the literature and provided the opportunity for meaningful discussion and application of the turning point theory in our own lives.