

A Qualitative Study of the Friendships of People with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, people concerned about the quality of life of people with handicaps have come to the conclusion that many individuals still lack strong friendships and support networks (McKnight, 1989; Perske, 1988; Taylor and Bogdan, 1989). Despite having been "integrated", sometimes for years, many people with disabilities are very isolated and lonely, having few relationships with non-disabled citizens. Furthermore, many families and advocates are noting that individuals become overdependent on services and professionals, reliant on volunteers as a main source of companionship, and vulnerable to institutionalization (Lord and Hearn, 1987; Lutfiyya, 1989; Mount et al., 1988; O'Connell, 1988; Strully and Bartholomew-Lorimar, 1988).

Recreationists are beginning to realize the importance of extending integration to include the provision of supports and structures which facilitate friendships. They now know that presence in programmes or community alone does not guarantee that relationships will develop and be long lasting. Increasingly, changes are being considered which would enable leisure and recreation to have a more significant impact on the lives of thousands of people who still live isolated lives in institutions, group homes, or at home with elderly parents with few friends or community experiences (Bridge et al., 1988; Gold and McGill, 1988; Hutchison, 1990; Hutchison and McGill, 1990; Lyons, 1987, 1989).

While there seems to be increased recognition of the value of people with disabilities being part of the community, research is lacking into critical friendship issues (Lutfiyya, 1989; Tyne et al., 1988). This study was initiated and published by The G. Allan Roehrer Institute as a way of learning more about the friendships of people labelled developmentally handicapped, since they are seen as being one of the most vulnerable groups of individuals when left without friendships and other close relationships. The results of this study are published in a book called Friends: Creating Opportunities for Friendships to Flourish (1990).

The research questions identified for this study were the following:

1. are there unique reasons why people with handicaps need or desire friendships, including and in addition to, those needed by all citizens?
2. what are the obstacles to friendship experienced by individuals who have handicaps?
3. what ingredients of friendship are seen as being important in friendships between persons with handicaps and other citizens?
4. what are the most widely used strategies for facilitating friendships between people with handicaps and other citizens and what do people perceive as their strengths and limitations?

METHOD

The method of this study was designed to understand friendship from the perspective of a range of people concerned about friendship, including people with handicaps themselves. Thirty key informants, mostly from Canada, were identified from the literature and known friendship projects, as participants to be interviewed for this study. Key informants included: people with handicaps themselves (n = 7); parents (n = 9); friends of people labelled mentally handicapped (n = 2); and professionals, researchers, and advocates facilitating friendship through deinstitutionalization and other integration projects (n = 12). Only adults with handicaps were selected, relying on parents of children to share their learnings. A sample size of thirty is considered more than adequate for in depth qualitative studies of this kind (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1980).

An open-ended interview schedule was developed based on the four research questions and used as the framework for each interview. Throughout the interviews, the researcher asked probing and clarifying questions in order to encourage participants to relate their stories, experience, and knowledge about friendships between people with and without handicaps related to each of the research questions.

A five step qualitative analysis process was designed to ensure that patterns and themes which might emerge from the data could be carefully verified. These included: *transcribing* the notes from the interviews; *coding* the data with key words as a way of identifying commonalities and variations; *identifying* common and variable patterns; and *identifying themes* which link or explain the data (Lord and Hearn, 1987; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1980). In addition to having a comprehensive, in-depth interviewing process as a way of strengthening validity, key informants were sent a draft of the report to comment on whether their perspective as presented represented an accurate viewpoint.

RESULTS

The data from the interviews were organized in four sections according to the research questions. The results are presented using examples from people's actual experiences and stories.

People interviewed seemed very concerned about talking about the *value* of friends for people labelled mentally handicapped people. The major themes which emerged included intimacy and affection; feeling valued; companionship; confidence to risk; less reliance on services and family and greater interdependence; support and advocacy; and greater chance of a normal life.

Obstacles to friendship had several major themes. Low expectations of family and professionals regarding the person's need, interest or ability to have friends, especially non-disabled persons, make it difficult for friendships to develop. Communities are not seen as being capable of or interested in being receptive to having friendships with people with disabilities and therefore are not encouraged. Few opportunities exist for people with handicaps to make friends with non-disabled people due to segregation and the structured nature of human service settings, services, and programmes. Finally, there are inadequate supports provided for friendships to develop because people see facilitation as interference in a natural process; there is a tendency to spend time and resources on more basic needs; and professionals and parents do not know how to involve the person in a process which, by the very nature of friendship, necessitates the person's involvement.

Themes related to *ingredients* of the friendship fell into two categories: qualities of a friend and conditions enhancing friendship. The themes related to qualities of a friend included: being able to make the other person feel valued and appreciated; being able to communicate with the other person, and making a contribution or being reciprocal. Conditions enhancing friendship, the second category, included several themes: a pleasant first impression; commonalities and shared interests; chemistry; and availability.

Finally, primary *strategies* which people are using to facilitate friendship were identified including: one-to-one or matching; community development with self-advocates; using social networks to build friendship; and using "connectors" to bridge people from services to the community. While the last two strategies had the fewest limitations, there are still more general concerns that facilitation of friendships not become a popular technique or professional role.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study, similar to the literature, showed that some of the reasons why people with handicaps need or desire friendships are similar to those we all share, such as for intimacy, affection, and companionship. Others, however, were more unique or important to people with handicaps because of their vulnerability, such as having less reliance on services and family, advocacy, and greater chance of having a normal life (McKnight, 1989; Perske, 1988).

This study showed that extensive obstacles to friendship exist in families, communities, and services. As a result of these obstacles, people interviewed in this study reported knowing about very few real friendships which exist between people in their communities with handicaps and other citizens. This finding that the majority of people with handicaps still have few or no non-disabled friends is consistent with other findings (Lutfiyya, 1989; Taylor and Bogdan, 1989). As a result, concentrated efforts at decreasing isolation and segregation, raising awareness regarding the person's need, interest or ability to have friends, and about the capacities of communities to be receptive are beginning to happen (McKnight, 1989; O'Brien, 1986; Walker, 1987). While work on more basic needs such as housing are very important, friendships are seen as being essential to quality of life.

The study indicated that there are several *ingredients* of friendship needed for friendships to flourish between people with handicaps and other citizens, some of which have not been considered possible for most people with handicaps. For example, making a contribution or being reciprocal contradicts the stereotype of handicapped people as patients, clients, and passive recipients of services, needing others, such as counsellors, therapists, and programme leaders to advocate on their behalf. This study, similar to other studies, has shown that people with handicaps, when given the chance, are capable of learning how to be friends (Bogdan and Taylor, 1989). This learning necessitates new roles for parents, recreationists and other professionals which are less patronizing and instead more empowering (McGee et al., 1987).

The strategies which are seen as being most useful are those which lead to the person with a handicap developing a broader base of support and friendships in the community (Gottlieb, 1985). This is an alternative to more traditional volunteer models which tend to reinforce the idea that the person with the handicap only needs one friend and that volunteers, rather than real friends provide this (Gold, 1988). In this sense, there is caution about the use of professionals and volunteers as primary bridgers, rather than the more natural use of citizens themselves who are well connected and have their own strong personal support networks to utilize (Community Life Project, 1988).

This study and others (Bridge et al., 1988; Gold and McGill, 1988; Hutchison, 1989; Hutchison and McGill, 1989; Lyons, 1987) indicate a new role for recreationists and other professionals including the following:

- understand the limitations of formal services and programmes for relationship development and the possibilities of community and more informal groups for connecting people with others in the community.
- focus less on getting people with handicaps into recreation programmes which rarely lead to the development and continuation of important relationships and friendships.
- re-assess traditional volunteer programmes and other aspects of service which could be changed to be more facilitative or conducive to friendship development.
- re-orient services in a way that will lead to people becoming less reliant on services over time and more interdependent in their communities with citizens, family and friends.
- contribute to people with handicaps having more opportunities to develop friends by eliminating all segregation in services and offering supports for people to participate in their communities with other people.
- recognize the limitations of recreation professionals to actually facilitate friendships and instead seek out others who are more appropriate for the role such as fellow teenagers, colleagues in the workplace of the person with the handicap, and valued community members who are well connected themselves.

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