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May I “Zuckerberg” You?

By David A. Kenny

I realize that most of the older readers (i.e., those over 30) have little idea what Facebook is all about, and many of us think that it is just a way to self-aggrandize and show cute pictures of children and pets. However, we need to realize that Facebook is making relationship research more difficult. Here is why: Many of us in this organization study friendship. However, it is now almost impossible for us to study friendship because Facebook has changed its meaning. Let me explain.

As relationship researchers, we know quite a bit about friendship, and a brief summary is as follows: Unless you are four years old, you do not ask someone to become your friend. Friendship just happens, and need not necessarily be reciprocal. In fact, some studies estimate the probability of reciprocation as less than 50 percent. So, perhaps about half of your friends consider you to be their friend. Ordinarily, there is no breakup in friendship. Think about your adolescent friends. You are no longer friends with many of them, but you never broke up. Also, you do not have that many friends. There is the “Dunbar number” which is the total size of your network, and that number is 150. However, about only 12 or less

people in this network are real friends. If you do not believe me, take a look at Michael Argyle’s rules of friendship and you will see that not very many members of your network would qualify as friends. For instance, how many people would help you move the books in your office to another office? Not that many. Besides, friends are real people. Of course, some of us have imaginary friends, like Bogus (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115725/>), but by and large, for almost everyone, a friend is a real person. Lastly, “friend” is a noun.

Facebook has changed friendship. First, “friend” is now a verb: You “friend” someone. (Changing nouns to verbs or denominalization is an ugly trend in language: Stewardesses now say that they have “beveraged” the passengers.) Second, becoming a friend now requires a conscious choice. Thus, you know exactly who your friends are. Third, friendship is reciprocal. If someone “friends” you on Facebook, you have to accept or reject them. The norm is that if someone “friends” you, you have to accept them. It would be very rude to reject their request, and you would need to come up with all sorts of excuses for not accepting the invitation. Fourth, you have a lot of friends. A friend (both real and Facebook) of mine’s daughter has 576 friends and I know a graduate student who has 434 friends. Solange Sfeir from Beirut Lebanon, who owns Smile Dental Journal (no I am not making this up), has 4,986 friends! She seems to collect friends the way Kardashians collect boyfriends.

Fifth, if you are friends with someone, it is difficult to no longer be their friend. Defriending someone is just not done. In fact, Facebook etiquette dictates that it is only acceptable to defriend an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend. But normally, you would not even do that, because you want to know what they are up to. In fact, one recent survey found that 81 percent of all respondents would not defriend an ex on Facebook, and 75 percent admitted to constantly checking an ex's Facebook page.

Sadly, we can no longer study friendship because Facebook has distorted the meaning of the term. As a case in point, I looked at the 63 friends that I have on Facebook and a good number are family members, some of which I would consider friends and some not, and others are coworkers, not all of whom are my friends. Several of my best friends are not on Facebook and so they are not included. So my Facebook "friends" are not really my friends.

Something needs to be done and I have sent the following email to Mark Zuckerberg, son of a Psychiatrist and a dentist and the founder (I guess co-founder with those blond Harvard Winklevoss twins and that Brazilian dude, Eduardo Saverin) of Facebook:

Mark: You do not know me (unless you have seen my 1000 acre farm on Farmville for which I paid over \$2000), but I think it is really cool that you get to party with people like Justin Timberlake, are worth

(according to Forbes) \$13.5 billion, and Obama comes to you for advice. We owe so much to that BU coed who dumped you, which led to you inventing Facebook. By the way, even though I am a dude too, I think it still ok for me to say that you are much sexier than Jesse Eisenberg. That dude has not memorized passages of Homer's Iliad and does not know the difference between an épée and a foil, like you do. I have a cool suggestion for you, dude: Because you are so awesome (over 3.7 million people like your Facebook page!), why not change the word on Facebook from "friend" to "Zuckerberg"? So you would Zuckerberg someone and deZuckerberg someone else. Think if you branded your name, you could then sell it for all sorts of things, and you would then be worth more than Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and that Mexican oil guy Carlos Slim combined! Also, if you change "friend" to "Zuckerberg" maybe Syria, China, Vietnam, and Iran would no longer realize that Facebook is a social networking site and no longer ban it. By the way, when you use this idea I promise that I will not sue you for stealing my idea. I would however ask you to Zuckerberg me.