

THE IDEAL TESTING GROUND

Student fraternity Augustinus as the ultimate socio-scientific experiment

By Petra Meijer, with the participation of Bart Brown

Friendships have an impact on health as profound and significant as smoking or not smoking. Scientists from Leiden, Oxford and Helsinki have now come up with the perfect setting to test such theories: the Leiden student fraternity Augustinus.

It all started by sheer coincidence, really. Leiden PhD student Max van Duijn happened to visit a conference and introduced himself to his future colleagues from Oxford and Helsinki who were doing research into social relations. "At one point I mentioned I knew an interesting case: social relations within Augustinus, the student fraternity I had been a member of myself for some time."

This got the ball rolling and before he knew what was happening the group of first-year students at Augustinus had become the object of study for an international research team, with Anna Rotkirch of Helsinki University in charge of the study and Van Duijn as the middle man.

"Student fraternities often hit the headlines for the wrong reasons", says Van Duijn, who is doing research into language and people's ability to assess what others are thinking. "Recently an American journalist wrote a rather sour article stating that students would be brainwashed in student fraternities and made to do all sorts of things they would normally not consider doing."

Between the ages of 15 and 25 people build up an essential part of their social network, Van Duijn says. " 'The friends you bury', or, as we prefer to say in the Netherlands, friends who will grow old with you, friends for life. This has been rather uniquely institutionalized in the Netherlands within the social student clubs, which the Finnish and English researchers find particularly interesting", Van Duijn says.

"Of course there are also student fraternities in Finland, but not with this particular structure", Rotkirch explains. "We are studying Augustinus because the way in which they approach the so-called *cordialen* (i.e. societies of students of the same year) strongly corresponds to how professional literature suggests you should forge bonds of friendship".

Van Duijn: "Some determining factors that are often mentioned when it comes to creating social ties are: how often you see each other, shared physical exertion, singing, coordinated activities such as stamping or dancing, competition, preparing food and sharing meals. These happen to be the very activities first-year students engage in together when they are members of a social student club. Indeed, if you had to create some kind of institution to breed friendships based on scientific insight, such an institution might very well look pretty similar to the Dutch social clubs."

Whilst keeping knowledge of the project limited to members of Augustinus and the researchers involved, the first-year students of 2013-2014 were monitored throughout the entire year. At different points in time the first-year students were asked to complete questionnaires. "First we asked them to list their fields of interest and we conducted a number of tests. Subsequently, participants completed an online questionnaire on their friendships and social relations within the *cordial*. Out of a total of 400 students, ultimately some 250 got involved in this study."

Rotkirch: "We are interested to find out how groups are formed and how they develop, how friendships are made. Surprisingly, very little research has been conducted into how this works for adults. As for me, I am interested in gender differences: these *cordialen* are exclusively male or female. How do they differ? Can you see leaders, and if so, how did they come to hold this position? Do they differ in the way they handle conflict? How do those aspects that characterize a group relate to the characteristics of its individual members?"

The Augustinus study did not include ethnographics. "Although it would be great for science, that is not the way we wanted to do it. We did not like the idea of students having a beer with a researcher standing by and making notes, so we tried to be minimally invasive and let students have as much privacy as possible. We did pay a visit to the club one night, though."

While visiting Augustinus, Rotkirch was especially struck by the female *cordialen*. "They sing and drink just like their male counterparts and they have their own dress code. Conventional wisdom within the field of sociology has it that women do not form groups like this."

According to Van Duijn, this visit was a genuine eye opener for the social scientists. Some students came to the party wearing face paint, there was drinking, singing and dancing. It was really one big bomb of endorphins."

The *Fraternity Friendship Study*, as the Augustinus study has been named, is conducted against a background of various debates and theories on friendship, Van Duijn says. " 'Friends are born or Friends are made', for example. Some scientists believe friendship develops naturally when you feel a connection with somebody. Others think doing things together is key. Student fraternities, in particular, focus on students spending time together. 'You *will* come tonight, won't you' is a question often heard."

Another well-known theory on friendship comes from Robin Dunbar who is also involved in this study. Dunbar, the director of the Social & Evolutionary Neuroscience Research Group at Oxford University is one of the most renowned researchers into social behaviour. According to Dunbar's theory, there is a limit to the number of friendships a person can maintain, Van Duijn explains.

"Most people have a support clique consisting of five people. These are their most intimate relations, including family members. The second group, which also comprises these five people, numbers fifteen people, approximately. These are good friends, the ones you often do things together with. "We may know 1500 people, but it is only with some 150 of these that we are actively involved. Someone with 450 friends on Facebook will normally communicate with only 150 of them on a regular basis.

Cordialen are especially interesting in this context, because they enable you to make new contacts for that second group of 15 people on an institutionalized basis.

These may not turn out to be your most intimate friends, although some of them might, but they do constitute high quality friendships, which is of huge significance for your health. It is said that the impact of a stable social network in the long term is as profound and significant as whether you smoke or not."

The data have now been collected for one crop of Augustinus students, but the study into the Dutch student fraternities has only just begun.

Rotkirch: "We have been working on this for only one year now and the first results will not be published until next spring. But the level of response and attention this has generated is something I have never experienced before. Everybody wants to know more about it."

Rotkirch hopes to be able to study the Augustinus students for at least three years.

"Wouldn't forty years be even better? Yes, that would be perfect. A study like this has been done only once before, at Harvard University. It showed that friends and loved ones are more important predictors of life expectancy and well-being than education or wealth."

Van Duijn: "In the future we could cluster data on the basis of certain characteristics, e.g. on socio-economic background or personality characteristics. Do these make it easier for people to relate to each other, or do they make it harder?"

"Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct the same study on non-member students, or on students who have joined other student fraternities. If singing, dancing, stamping and mutual competition positively affect friendship, does this mean that students will develop stronger bonds when they are subjected to harsher initiation rituals? Does the element of humiliation impact social relations in any way or does it only hurt the individual? Some fraternities create distinct in-groups and out-groups. Such a group is where your friends are. Does this lead to stronger bonding?"
Research so far indicates that student fraternities contribute to the development of high quality friendships.

Van Duijn: "All this does not mean that people who do not join a student fraternity or club will be unable to make friends. However, and maybe this especially holds for a more 'studenty' fraternity with all its singing, messing about and people fighting to score points off each other, a club's activities will probably help in this respect."

Rotkirch, too, already sees this study as unique. "Questions like these have been answered more thoroughly for groups of apes or monkeys than for groups of people."

The first results of the study will be shared with the members of Augustinus on 30 September. In the evening there will be presentations by the various researchers during the Symposium of the Fraternity Friendship Study, Hooglandse Kerk, 19:30 hrs, general admission 5 euros, students FREE

[Translation from Dutch by Wilma van Maanen. Original article: 'De ideale proeftuin. Augustinus als ultiem sociaalwetenschappelijk experiment.' *Leids Universitair Weekblad Mare* 38: 4, 25 september 2014. <<http://www.mareonline.nl/archive/2014/09/24/de-ideale-proeftuin>>]