“How you make friends in Finland”
An intersectional analysis of friendship formation in adulthood

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Abstract

The present thesis explores how people’s gender with its various intersections shape their experiences of making friends in adulthood in the Finnish context and presents an intersectional analysis of the processes and challenges of making friends. The intersections I focused on were those of gender with ethnicity, race, religion and migrant or non-migrant status. Additionally, it discusses how the decolonial concepts of “world”-travelling and diatopical hermeneutics can be used to explore how making friends could become easier. The data was collected through two focus group discussions with participants I recruited at an event which provides a space for people of various backgrounds to meet people and make friends. The research shows that making friends requires conscious effort and the challenges for people who inhabit certain intersections can be bigger than for others. There are many barriers that need to disappear for friendship formation to become easier, and that can happen by challenging our own prejudice and having an open mind. Making friends requires us to be able to travel to others’ “worlds” and welcome them to our own, which can only become possible if we encounter people that are different to us without prejudice. Meeting and listening to each other is key to making friends, while also education from a young age may be the key to combat and most importantly prevent discrimination and promote positive relationships between people of different backgrounds.

Key Words: Friends, Adulthood, Intersectionality, Intersectional Analysis, Decoloniality, Finland
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1. Introduction

In contrast to friendship formation among children or young adults, making friends in middle adulthood has not been the focus of research to the same extent (Sherman et al., 2000). Making friends tends to happen “naturally” in childhood, at school, at university, and sometimes at work; unless it does not. For those people who for different reasons cut ties with or take distance from their childhood or teenage years friends and seek for new, for those who move to new countries where they have no social networks and connections to depart from, making friends becomes a conscious process. What ignited my interest in the topic of the present research are my personal experiences of making friends in adulthood (as someone who has lived for the past ten years in Finland), as well as the experiences of other adults who currently reside in Helsinki and have been contemplating the processes of making friends. I heard a lot of people trying to explain why making friends has been difficult for them often saying that “Finns don’t mix their groups of friends”. I had felt too that in Finland the opportunities I had to meet new friends through other friends were very rare, at least compared to what I was experiencing in Greece. I was a bit reluctant to accept that this is the only reason, but at the same time I was also confused about whether making friends becomes challenging because of individual or societal reasons, or which ones weigh the most. As it seemed to be a topic of interest for many people around me including myself I decided to conduct the present research in order to get some interesting insights into how people have experienced making friends in adulthood, hoping to reveal the complexity, intersectionality and the frequency of this issue, to move away from fixating on narratives about Finns and to rather focus on ways in which people can understand and support each other in finding friends and communities.

2. Aim and research questions

The aim of this research is to explore how people’s gender with its various intersections shape and have shaped their experiences of making friends in adulthood, and to carry out an intersectional analysis of the processes and challenges of making friends. This research also aims to create a platform where people can come together and talk about these challenges and their experiences of making friends within the Finnish context where they all currently live. Additionally, my aim is to generate ideas from discussions among the research participants on how making friends among people with different genders, ethnic backgrounds, and stories
of how they ended up in Finland can become easier. I aim to understand in what ways and in which spaces people have made or tried to make friends, what are the challenges they have faced during this process and to what they attribute these challenges.

With this research I aim to add new insights into how people make friends in middle adulthood, as well as to help build bridges between people and create a space where people can share their experiences and stories of making friends, regardless of how long they have lived in Finland, regardless of the circumstances of their arrival, and regardless of their different identities.

The research question I aim to answer is:
What are the processes and challenges of making friends in adulthood in Finland and how could making friends become easier?

3. Theoretical framework

For this research I have chosen two theoretical perspectives to frame my analysis, namely intersectionality and decoloniality or the decolonial option. Intersectionality is especially relevant to the first part of my research question which pertains to the processes and challenges of friendship formation. It will allow me to examine and deepen my understanding of the factors that shape the processes of making friends and the integral role gender plays in these, as well as the factors that make these processes more challenging for some people than others, by examining how power is distributed and negotiated among people with different intersecting identities in certain contexts. The decolonial option provides useful and inspiring concepts which I will use to explore the second part of my research question, namely, to analyze how making friends can become easier if people consider decolonial ways of thinking and encountering the world and each other. When making the decision to approach the world in decolonial ways, however, I find it important to understand how “stereotyping” and “othering” work. In chapter 3.2 where I present the decolonial option I also explain how I draw from Hall’s work on stereotyping (1997) to support my analysis.
3.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is one of the concepts that play a central role in this research by providing a theoretical, methodological, and analytical framework through which I approach my research topic. The concept of intersectionality appeared already in 1851 during a speech that Sojourner Truth gave at the Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio, where she talked about her experience as a Black woman, that of being excluded from both anti-racist and feminist battles (Brah & Phoenix, 2004), and reappeared in 1908 in Russia when Alexandra Kollontai criticized feminist movements for being exclusively addressed to Bourgeois women while excluding women belonging to the lower classes (Lykke, 2010). Sojurner Truth’s speech became influential for future Black feminist movements as well as feminists who emphasized the importance of intersectionality (Brah & Phoenix, 2004) and eventually the term "intersectionality" was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) used the term to describe the reality of Black women who experienced both race- and gender- based discrimination but whose struggles were not addressed by either the anti-racist or feminist movements.

Over the years the concept of intersectionality has developed and expanded and nowadays, except for gender, race and class, it takes into consideration other identity markers as well, such as sexuality, ethnicity, religion and more (Lykke, 2010). While initially it was used to understand and account for women’s oppression and marginalized positions due to their different intersecting identities, it came to become a useful concept for exploring how the interweaving and co-constitution of people’s different identity markers create and reconstruct power relations in different contexts (Davis, 2014). Intersectionality has been understood and used by scholars as theory and as methodology (Davis, 2008; Davis, 2014) and it has received its fair amount of critique as it started becoming increasingly popular among feminist scholars (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013).

Even though intersectional theory was born out of trying to understand the specific struggles of women of colour by taking into account their intersections of gender, race and class (Collins, 1990), Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality has often been misunderstood and misused by academics, activists and conservatives as it has been taken “beyond the context and the content” (Coaston, 2019). Intersectionality is not only concerned with how identities
are formed, but how power structures are formed. “Intersectionality primarily concerns the way things work rather than who people are” (Cho et al., 2013, p.797). One of the common pitfalls of intersectionality is that it is often used as a tool for identity politics that focus on people’s various identity markers and on measuring oppression in oversimplified ways (Coaston, 2019). What Crenshaw aimed to do when she coined the term intersectionality was to “emphasize political and structural inequalities” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 797) and to create a tool for examining and eliminating current power dynamics (Coaston, 2019). Therefore, even though identities are important when we talk about intersectionality, intersectionality should be seen as a concept that helps us raise questions about power more than about identities (Cho et al., 2013). As Tomlinson (2013) writes, “If critics think intersectionality is a matter of identity rather than power, they cannot see which differences make a difference. Yet it is exactly our analyses of power that reveal which differences carry significance” (p.1012).

What makes the present research fall into the category of intersectional feminist research is that it is characterized by self-reflexivity, accountability, an attempt to recognize my blind spots throughout the research process, and situating myself as a researcher (Davis, 2014). In this research I use intersectionality as an analytical framework through which to examine the processes and challenges of making friends among adults, while taking into account the research participants’ intersecting identities and the way these shape their experiences of making friends in the Finnish context.

3.2 The decolonial option

Decoloniality or decolonial option is a way of thinking, of being and of encountering the world, which challenges and seeks for a way away from and out of the norms as dictated by modernity and coloniality which uphold the belief that the western ways of being, thinking, perceiving, and producing knowledge are the best ways (Madina, 2019). Decoloniality is a way of being in the world while maintaining awareness of our positioning within colonial powers and the gender and race classifications that modernity and coloniality have imposed on us (Open University, 2015). According to Tlostanova (2023) decoloniality is not and should not be perceived as a theory or a methodology that can be chosen and applied on research topics. The decolonial concepts I will focus on in the present thesis are “world”-travelling and diatopical hermeneutics, as introduced by Maria Lugones (Lugones, 1987) and
Raimundo Panikkar (Tlostanova, 2022) respectively. I will also use the concept of stereotyping and its relation to the production of “the Other” as described by Hall (1997).

“World”-travelling is a concept introduced by Maria Lugones (Lugones, 1987; Tlostanova, 2019), who is a key figure in decolonial feminism and has offered major contributions to decolonial thought. “World”-travelling is a concept Lugones (1987) has used to describe the experiences of those women living in the margins of the mainstream society (in her case women of colour in the US) who inhabit more than one “world” and travel from one to the other. Her own experience was that of a Latin American woman of colour, who had to “travel” to White/Anglo worlds during her life in the US. According to Lugones (1987) the worlds we inhabit sometimes can be hostile, so then the travelling happens out of necessity; other times, travelling between worlds is a choice, it can be “willfully exercised” (p.3), requires skill and is imbued with creativity and love.

For something to be a "world" in my sense it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people. That is why it cannot be a utopia. It may also be inhabited by some imaginary people. It may be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants of this "world" met in some other "world" and now have in this "world" in imagination (Lugones, 1987, p. 9-10).

The concept of “world”- travelling is relevant in my research due to all the different worlds and “worlds” the research participants come from and inhabit and due to a need to create friendships between people of different “worlds” in worlds where some people may be more at ease and more at home than others. According to Lugones (1987), the ways in which we construct ourselves in certain worlds may not be in accordance with the ways others construct us, for example when others construct us in stereotypical ways. I see the practice of “world” travelling as a means and a necessary step towards “cross-cultural and cross-racial loving” (Lugones, 1987, p. 3) and towards creating friendships. As Lugones (1987) argues, when we cease to perceive each other in arrogant ways, that is when we can identify and relate with one another, and that is when we can love and receive one another into our worlds. To fail to transcend the borders of our worlds in order to meet others and to fail to let others into our worlds means to fail to create loving connections and friendships. But without loving connections and friendships we cannot be fully at ease in our worlds. “World”- travelling
with a loving perception is a “border way of being in the world and communicating with others” (Tlostanova, 2019).

Diatopical hermeneutics, a concept introduced by Raimundo Panikkar, is “an art of coming to understanding across places or across traditions, which do not share common patterns of understanding and intelligibility” (Tlostanova, 2022). It is a tool that helps us understand and make sense of others with whom we do not share the same culture, traditions, language, and ethics, without assuming that everyone has the same self-understanding as we do (Tlostanova, 2022). I see diatopical hermeneutics as a pre-requisite if we want to travel in others’ worlds with an open mind and a loving perception. It requires a process of unfamiliarization, meeting others without preconceived ideas and a willingness to learn, but mostly to unlearn. It also requires developing awareness of one’s own prejudice and rejection of stereotypes which construct and uphold the idea of “the Other”.

Stuart Hall (1997), who draws from Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and the construction of “the Other”, describes stereotyping as a representational practice based on naturalization which perpetuates binary oppositions and classifies people according to a norm, reducing them, sometimes in violent ways, to just a few essentials. Stereotyping contributes to “the construction of ‘otherness’ and exclusion” and in oversimplified ways it presents a fixed and universal image of “the Other”. It emphasizes difference and occurs wherever there are great power imbalances. Another function of stereotyping, according to Hall (1997), is that this representation of others and the focus on difference creates a binary of normal and abnormal, which then dictates what fits and what does not in a certain group or society. In this research I use the concept of stereotyping to examine and understand better the power relations that are at play in the processes of making friends, mostly but not exclusively, between native Finns and migrants.

4. Previous Research on Friendship

Literature on friendship is mostly found in the fields of childhood (Maguire, 1997) and gerontological studies (e.g. Baeriswyl & Oris, 2023; Fiori et al., 2020), whereas friendships in middle adulthood remain somewhat understudied (Sherman et al., 2000). Although the definitions of friendship may differ at different stages of life, various scholars agree that adult
friendships are defined as valuable, lasting, voluntary close relationships which are based on reciprocity and trust (Sherman et al., 2000; Pezirkianidis et al., 2023; Greco et al., 2015). Often approached from a psychological point of view, friendship has been studied in relation to happiness and wellbeing. Pezirkianidis et al. (2023) in a study that focused on adult friendships and wellbeing found that friendships are very unique relationships that promote individuals’ wellbeing in various ways. According to their study, the main characteristics of friendship that contribute to wellbeing are dependent on the quality of friendship, the number of friends, the efforts that friends make to maintain the friendship, mutual support, socializing together and the value the friends place on positive experiences (Pezirkianidis et al., 2023).

Friendship has also been studied from other than psychological perspectives. The book *Happiness and friendship* examined the relationship of friendship and happiness across the life span from a philosophical, sociological, and evolutionary perspective, as well as the gendered and cultural aspects of friendship in relation to happiness (Melikşah, 2015). From a sociological perspective Greco et al. (2015) argue that friendship shapes people’s perception of themselves and contributes to the construction of one’s identity and sense of self. While friendships can have many benefits related to wellbeing on an individual level, in the field of sociology there is also a discussion about the potential role of friendships in reproducing social inequalities, as “Friendship networks can help some individuals ‘get ahead’ but may keep others linked to violent or dangerous communities or make life difficult for the lack of the ‘right’ connections” (p.31).

Regarding previous research on the gendered and cultural aspects of friendships, Galupo et al. (2012) conducted a survey on friendship values and cross-category friendships, focusing specifically on the intersections of gender with sexual orientation and race, in order to examine whether having cross-category friendships or not influences individuals’ friendship values. The values that were selected in this study were trust, respect, being there when needed, similar lives and experiences, similar values and lack of judgment (p. 782). The study results were analyzed using a feminist intersectional theoretical framework. Their findings showed that cross-category friendships are more likely to flourish among individuals who do not place a high value on similar lives and experiences when forming friendships and also that majority and minority individuals experience cross-category friendships in different ways, therefore the researchers deem important to also consider power relations and how those produce inequalities in friendship formation. They also suggest that the role
“similarity” plays in friendships is closely linked to cultural concepts of “otherness” that are embedded in friendship structures and that cross-category friendships are not based on the overlooking of differences, but rather on an exploration and negotiation of differences between friends (Galupo et al., 2012).

The challenges of making friends have been previously studied by Apostolou and Keramari (2020), who conducted a study using qualitative and quantitative methods on the reasons that prevent people from making friends. Their results demonstrated that certain personality traits such as introversion and low trust, as well as certain pragmatic reasons, such as lack of time or health problems which prevent people from spending time outside of the home, are all reasons which pose obstacles in the friend-making processes. Apostolou and Keramari (2020) claim that there has been no prior research on this same subject.

Existing research on the processes and challenges of making friends among adults in middle adulthood seems to be scarce, and that is a gap I aim to address with the present research. The present research contributes to the discussions about making friends in middle adulthood and the challenges that come with it from a sociological, critical, and intersectional perspective while it also explores how by choosing decoloniality and decolonial ways of encountering the world making friends in adulthood could become easier.

5. Method

5.1 Choosing the method

My interest in this research topic was born several months ago in one-to-one conversations with other people, therefore I wanted to collect empirical material through conversations. As one of the aims of this research is to bring people together, I decided early on during my research design that I was going to hold focus group discussions to collect my data, rather than individual interviews for example, as focus group discussions provide an opportunity to “create a sense of the communal and celebrate collective togetherness” (Kamperelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 72). While interviews are the best tool for exploring individual experiences in-depth (Brinkmann, 2013), focus group discussions are suitable methods for exploratory and explanatory research projects, among others (Hennink, 2014). Exploratory
research explores topics that are still understudied and seeks to acquire the research participant’s perspectives on them, while explanatory research seeks to explain certain phenomena, the circumstances in which they occur and the reasons for their repetitive nature (Hennink, 2014). My research falls somewhere between the two as I aim to hear people’s experiences of making friends in Finland, understand the reasons for which making friends might have been challenging, and explore how it could be made easier. Focus group discussions seemed a good method for my research for a number of reasons; first, the circumstances under which they take place resemble social interaction, second, if done properly they provide a comfortable environment for the participants where everyone can share their own experiences and views and be in dialogue with others, third, they can generate a big amount of data and last, they allow for many different views and perspectives to emerge (Hennink, 2014). They also allow for new issues to be raised and identified (Hennink, 2014), as well as for new ideas to be generated.

For the data analysis I used thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). The process I followed was that of listening to the focus group discussion recordings, transcribing them, coding them, and extracting themes by moving back and forth and searching for shared patterns of meaning within my data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, I familiarized myself with the data by listening to the focus group discussions and taking unstructured notes of things that sounded important and relevant for my analysis. During the second listening I started the transcription, which helped me become even more familiar with the data. Once I had transcribed each focus group discussion, I started the coding process for each by adding comments on Word documents. In the end I used MindMup and handwritten notes on paper to look at all my codes and extract themes. By the time I held the second focus group discussion I had already started coding the first one, and once I had transcribed both I went back and forth and in between them searching for patterns of meaning, coding, creating maps and extracting themes.

5.2 Choosing the target group

I wanted my target group to consist of adult people who are looking for friends. As I am at this stage of my life also looking for friends, I was aware of different events, places and digital channels which exist in order for people to meet new people and find friends in
Helsinki, where I also reside. Practically, I had already encountered people from my target group before the idea for this thesis topic had even emerged. My initial idea was to target three different groups of people, namely a group of people who have arrived in Finland as adults, a group of Finns who have always lived in Finland, and a group of Finns who have also lived abroad during their adulthood. The reason for this idea, which I ended up rejecting, was that I expected the conversations within each group to be very different from the others. Eventually I decided to not divide participants according to my expectations of what their experiences and views would be. Instead, I decided to target people who attend a bi-weekly event by “The making-friends network” which is organized in Helsinki as part of a wider project, is open to all and its aim is to provide a space for people to meet others, spend time together, chat and dance. As the event is open to everyone, I expected that my target group would vary in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, and other factors, depending on the people who were present when I handed out the focus group invitations. Having been to this event before, however, I did have certain expectations as to what kind of people I was more likely to encounter there. For example, I expected that a big part of the potential participants would be people who have come to Finland from elsewhere as adults.

5.3 Recruiting participants

When I joined the “The making-friends network” event, I handed out 28 paper invitations to potential participants, asking them to contact me if they were interested in participating in my project. I hoped that I could host two focus group discussions with 3-5 participants each and my aim was to recruit at least 10 people. I avoided inviting to the focus group discussions the people who I have met there that I am in more frequent contact with because I felt that my familiarity with them could potentially compromise my role as a moderator during the focus group discussion. I also refrained from inviting the organizers of the event to the focus group discussions in order to avoid reproducing hierarchical relationships among participants. A few days after the event a couple of people reached out to me to express interest in participating in the project, and I reached out to a few more, so this is how the first focus group came to be formed. At the same time, however, I tried to reach out to more people who I contacted via the Bumble BFF application, which in principle is a dating app with a separate section for making friends. At the same time, I started recruiting participants for the second focus group discussion. The reasons that determined who participated in the first and who in the second group discussion where mostly practical, namely participants’ availability, my
ability to reach them through social media even if we were not previously connected, and to a certain degree, also, the degree to which I felt comfortable contacting them. Therefore, I first recruited the participants who contacted me, then I contacted people with whom I was already connected on social media and then some people who were not in my contacts but I had met in person once or more and had at least introduced ourselves to each other in the past. As more people from “The making-friends network” were showing interest in participating, I decided to not proceed with recruiting anyone from Bumble BFF. One day before the first focus group discussion one participant had to cancel their participation, so I moved someone from the second group to the first. The person I chose to move was someone who I happened to meet on the day before the discussion and was willing to change their date of participation. Hence, the composition of each focus group in terms of gender, ethnicity, migrant or non-migrant status was not intentional, and it did not serve a specific research purpose. I acknowledge, however, that the reasons which determined “the degree to which I felt comfortable contacting” the participants are most certainly influenced by my own positionality, intersections, and my brief experiences of encountering them in the past. Once each one of the groups was formed, I proceeded with the data collection on the agreed dates and times.

5.4 Collecting the data

The data for this research was generated through two focus group discussions. The discussions were held on two consecutive Saturdays in April 2023. The first three participants who showed interest in participating were given the opportunity to influence my decisions in terms of the time and location that the groups would assemble, and this helped me determine the time and location for both groups. Both groups were organized in Helsinki libraries, as I wanted to ensure a calm and private space for sharing and recording the conversation. I thought about requesting to use the spaces where the event of “The making-friends network” usually takes place, as I thought that the familiarity with the spaces would contribute to participants feeling more comfortable. However, as I would need more time to arrange that and I was not sure I could get permission, I decided to book library workspaces which were easy to book online. The choice of day was based on my knowledge that many of the people participating in the event are free from work on weekends. The choice of place and time of the discussions were also very intentional. One of the libraries I used is located in the center of Helsinki which is usually a convenient place to meet even for people who live in opposites
sides of the city or even in Espoo and Vantaa. Moreover, it was already announced that on the day of the discussion another event by “The making-friends network” was taking place in the evening quite close to the library. I thought that the location would be very convenient for people who would join the event in the evening, which could increase the possibilities of people deciding to join the discussion, and I also thought I would use the event as an incentive, which practically meant that I said to the participants that after the discussion we could go to the “The making-friends network” event together. The other library is located in East Helsinki, which I knew was an area familiar to and visited by several participants from “The making-friends network”. As planned, after both discussions some or all of the participants and I ended up socializing together.

The first focus group consisted of five participants and was conducted in East Helsinki, and the second focus group consisted of four participants and was conducted in Helsinki center. In every group some of the participants had already known each other for a longer time and some had met in the same setting once or twice before. Therefore, there was a varying degree of familiarity among nearly all participants. Both discussions lasted for about two hours, including a 10-15’ break. I recorded both discussions on my phone and laptop, and soon after they were over, I uploaded the files on Linköping University’s internal servers as part of the ethical matters I had to consider.

5.6 Ethical considerations

To ensure confidentiality and to protect the participants’ anonymity the participants’ names and other identifying details are not revealed in this thesis and the event’s name has been changed. On the day of the focus group discussions the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form provided by Linköping University and tailored to the needs of my research project, which I sent to them on the day before our meeting to provide an opportunity for them to become familiar with it and ensure that everyone consented to our discussion being recorded. Before our discussion started, I explained again to everyone the purpose of my project, the structure of our discussion and the ethics, such as anonymity and confidentiality, and what those practically meant. In addition, I reminded everyone that they should only share in the group as much as they wanted and they felt comfortable with, and that they had the possibility to refuse to answer questions that felt too personal. As a

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1 See appendices
moderator one of my tasks was to allocate speaking time to everyone, especially the participants that would not take up a lot of space and to make sure everyone had a chance to share. Since almost all participants were already familiar with each other, another one of my tasks was to constantly ensure that people didn’t reveal personal information about each other. Except for the ethical considerations while conducting this research, I had to also consider and be aware of my situatedness as a researcher (Haraway, 1988)

5.7 Situatedness

Conducting intersectional feminist research (Davis, 2014) as well as engaging with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) require continuous self-reflexivity and situating oneself. The various positionings I occupy, and my multiple identities related to my gender, ethnicity, age, migrant status and more, shape all aspects and processes of this research (Davis, 2014). My research questions, my choices of method and theoretical framework, the language I use, the way I analyze the data, as well as all the questions I have not thought about asking are closely tied to my situatedness (Davis, 2014). I do not claim that the knowledge produced by this research is objective, but that it is partial, embodied and situated (Haraway, 1988). Since situating oneself is not just about listing one’s various identity markers (Davis, 2014) I prefer to think of my situatedness as the interplay between the multiple identities I occupy and have occupied throughout my life as well as my personal experiences and the ways these have shaped the lenses through which I (am able to) perceive the world today. The ways in which I relate to the topic of my research, the assumptions I hold about my topic, the way the participants perceive me and the positions of privilege and marginality that I occupy in relation to my topic are just some examples of what I need to be aware of and be reflective about when conducting thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), as well as during the whole research process. Regarding my position in relation to the participants of the research, I position myself mostly as an insider researcher, which means that I see myself as a member of the group I am researching (Braun & Clarke, 2022). However, as the boundaries between insider and outsider positions are not fixed and identities are complex (Braun & Clarke, 2022), at different times of the discussions and in relation to different participants I find myself moving from an insider to an outsider position and vice versa, according to how much I relate to them and their experiences (Best, 2003). My prior familiarity with the participants and the setting in which I have met them is likely one of the reasons that explains my feeling
of an insider researcher. However, I do acknowledge that my familiarity with the participants as well as other aspects of my situatedness are also posing certain limitations to my research.

5.8 Limitations

Identifying the limitations of my research is another process that requires self-reflexivity, becoming aware of my situatedness and the ways in which it shapes my research. As mentioned above, my familiarity with the participants, as well as the fact that most of them already knew each other to varying degrees most likely contributed to building rapport within the focus groups but could have also potentially influenced the amount and the content of what they shared with the group. This is closely related to the next limitation, which is specific to focus group discussions, which is that participants’ contribution to the discussions is affected by the group dynamics, potential hierarchies that may develop among them (which I as a researcher may or may not become aware of) and by social pressure. Another focus group specific limitation is the difficulty of entirely protect participants’ anonymity and confidentiality, as the researcher cannot guarantee that none of the participants will share what was discussed in the group with others who were not present (Hennink, 2014). As the researcher, of course, I ensured that no one other than myself had access to the recording and the transcriptions. Furthermore, when I chose the target group, I was already expecting that people of certain intersections would likely not be included in my research, because in my experience they are usually absent from this event (for example native Finnish men). If the participants’ identities were different or if each group’s composition was different, the findings of the research would certainly be different too. In addition, according to Braun and Clarke (2022) a researcher who engages with thematic analysis acts as a “subjective storyteller” (p. 55), therefore the way I processed and analyzed the data is very influenced by my theoretical and epistemological positions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which in turn reflect my situatedness. Last, but not least, during the first focus group discussion I did not raise the question of how making friends could become easier, due to a miscalculation of time and because the participants still had a lot to say on the other topics, therefore this was not explicitly discussed. Moreover, I made the decision to conclude the first focus group discussion after two hours while the conversations were still going on actively, because one of the participants needed to leave.
6. Analysis and Discussion

In the following chapters I give a description of the participants and I analyze and discuss the four themes that were produced during the thematic analysis of the two focus group discussions. The quotes I have used to name each one of the themes are quotes from the participants’ words during the two focus group discussions. The four themes are “The friendship needs to be defined; what friendship means.” (Focus group 2), “I mean it’s just like different kind of friendship.” (Focus group 1), “It’s a hard process to me.” (Focus group 1) and “If these barriers they disappear then both parts could be meeting halfway.” (Focus group 2). For purposes of anonymity, and because I wanted to make it impossible for the reader to follow each participant’s individual story throughout the analysis, the participants have not been ascribed names in the analysis. Therefore, every time I use “P1” and “P2” I aim to demonstrate a dialogue between participants, without implying that “P1” and “P2” refer always to the same participant.

The two focus group discussions consisted in total of nine participants, the majority of which were people who arrived in Finland as adults for work and study opportunities, to be with a partner or as asylum seekers. The time those participants have lived in Finland ranges from less than one year to 14 years. The rest of the participants were native-born Finns. The majority of the participants were men, and the rest were women. The ages of the participants range from 25 to 48 years old.

6.1 “The friendship needs to be defined; what friendship means.”

All participants are now or have been in the past actively trying to make friends as adults. Migration is an experience which requires people to build their lives anew in a new country where they likely have no or few connections upon arrival. Even Finns, however, who have been born and gown up in Finland may have a need to expand their friend circles and social networks for a number of reasons, such as growing apart with old friends, seeking for different kinds of friendships or returning to Finland after spending some time abroad.

The participants mentioned a large number of online and physical spaces through which they have tried to make friends with more or less success. Online spaces include apps like Couchsurfing, Meetup, Yodel, Facebook groups and online gaming platforms. Most of these
online spaces, apart from online gaming, mostly aim to also provide physical spaces for their members to meet up in person, for example by organizing weekly meetups in bars, language exchange events, sports events or just simply friendship events, which do not require any previous contact between participants. All of these spaces are open to people from all around the world and their operating and common language is English. Other opportunities that provide a framework for making friends are certain projects in NGOs which seek local people as volunteers and pair them as “friends” with newcomers, and usually require some simple sign-up procedure and some sort of commitment for the people who engage with them.

In most of the above-mentioned events people may join the group activities or hangouts once or more times. According to the participants feeling welcomed into the group or making a connection with someone during the first time is a factor that makes them want to return or allows them to keep in contact with someone and then plan to meet them at a different occasion. Meeting frequently or repetitively, for example weekly, seems to be a factor that contributes to building up friendships. But what is it that makes people want to continue meeting up with someone? “Why do we hang out with other people?” (Focus group 1), a participant wondered, what are friendships based on and built upon? The focus group discussions showed that friendships seem to be based on similarities and sharing. Being interested in each other seems to be a factor that determines whether two people will decide to meet again after their first encounter. Factors that can bring people together are shared hobbies, similar interests, shared cultures, or the fact that they do not share the dominant culture, as well as shared experiences. Shared experience is talked about among participants in two different ways; one way is that of having spent time together as in having been through things together and the other way is having shared a similar experience in life, for example the experience of migration. These findings are in accordance which previous research which supports the idea that friendships are relationships based on homophily, a concept which means that people form relationships with others that are similar to them, for example similar in terms of gender, race, class, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. Relationships based on homophily are characterized by notions of mutuality and relative equality, as individuals do not have to constantly negotiate differences between them (Galupo et al., 2012).

Quite at the beginning of the second group discussion one of the participants pointed out that we needed to define friendship: “(…) in every thesis or every research you need to define the
terms that you are using”. The participants reflected a lot on the definition(s) of friendship either at the beginning or throughout our discussions. One participant said that friendship is about trust, safety, and being there for each other in good and in difficult moments:

( … ) I feel like friendship should be like, used in a way that this person that I’m friends with is someone that I can rely on, someone I can trust, someone I feel safe with, someone I could, like, have good days and bad days with, because there are many people in our lives who, like, are only there for good times. I don’t consider those people my friends, to be honest, like, I don’t know, some people might consider those people as friends too, some people to have fun with ( … ) (Focus group 2)

Participants generally agreed that friends should be there when one is in need, communication between friends should take place at the same level where both parties are able to talk and listen, and that an acquaintance usually becomes a friend when people have had some deep conversations between them. Reciprocity and being interested in each other were also mentioned. Trust, reciprocity, and being there when needed have been previously discussed by scholars as characteristics and important values of adult friendships, while having deep conversations with people allows for developing closer relationships which is what friendships usually are (Sherman et al. 2000; Pezirkianidis et. al, 2023; Greco et al., 2015; Galupo et al., 2012). Spending a lot of time together as a prerequisite for creating or maintaining a friendship was something that people had differing opinions on. Some things that were said about spending time with friends were that the more time people spend together the more they want to meet, therefore spending time with people increases the chances of becoming friends with them, and also that being friends means that people meet from once a week to twice or three times a month at least. However, participants also said that the amount of time people spend together does not determine whether two people are friends or not. The participants have online friends whom they have never met in person, but these friendships do fill the requirements of friendship regarding safety, communication and relying on each other. Furthermore, the participants also maintain friendships with people who live in their countries of origin and whom they cannot afford to meet often other than in online spaces. However, they also mentioned that sometimes the connection and chemistry with another person is present from the beginning and even if they don’t end up being in frequent contact, they still know they can rely on each other and call each other a friend.
The more the participants discussed the definition(s) of friendship and the use of the term “friend”, the more complex the conversations became. One could also easily notice the contradictions between how participants used the word “friend” during the discussion and the definition(s) they ascribed to it when they tried to define friendship. For example, even if everyone agreed that a friend is someone who is always there for us, someone we trust and feel safe with, they also said that the term “friend” sometimes can be used more lightly, for example to describe a classmate, a person with whom we spent a nice evening together and then connected on social media or someone who we meet in group situations but we have never met one-to-one. During a break one of the participants went out of the room to get some coffee and when she came back she told everyone “I made a friend”, referring to a person she had just met outside and had a brief conversation with during which they realized they shared a similar cultural background. One participant from the South West Asian/ North African region, describes how in his hometown one often needs to “formalize many friendships” if they want to deal with bureaucracy or other official processes, which he calls “nepotism”:

P1: ( … ) for example, in our city I would consider everybody, I would need to have friends everywhere. For example, I need to have friends who they could work for the police station nearby, I need friends who they could work for-
P2: Those are connections. (laughs)
P1: Yes, but I need to call them friends so I could rely on them-
P2: Yeah.
P1: -and get their help when I need it. (Focus group 2)

Even though friendships are described as deep, intimate, and close relationships (Sherman et al. 2000; Pezirkianidis et. al, 2023; Greco et al., 2015; Galupo et al., 2012) there is still a distinction between close friendships and casual friendships (Galupo et al., 2012), or as per the participant’s words friendship can take different meanings which the involved parties have agreed on within particular contexts (it seems that in the context the participant describes calling connections friends is a deliberate choice and serves specific purposes). For example, something that distinguishes close from casual friendships is that the first ones are based on more frequent interaction regardless of the geographical distance between friends and that they are likely based more on homophily than the latter ones, therefore the criteria for forming different kinds of friendships may differ too (Galupo et al., 2012). For example,
classmates or work colleagues could fall into the category of casual friends if they only fulfill some of the characteristics of friendships but not others. The same participant also talks about a “black and white” use of the word “friend”, where people who are not our friends are enemies and may feel threatened by us:

P1: So, if you ask an Arabic or Iraqi person specifically “How many friends you have?” he will say…
P2: “I have no idea.” (laughs)
P1: - 100? 200? 500? And everybody he meets, he meets a person at the bus stop and he, they just talked a bit, “I introduce you, my friend is here”. So, this is the term they use as a friend, who’s, who’s everyone they don’t hate or everyone who’s not their enemy. So, it’s just like, there is black or white. (Focus group 2)

Similarly, another participant from the South West Asian/ North African region describes how in her culture people invite hundreds of people to their weddings, unlike in Finland where a close family member of hers had a wedding with just 50 guests:

Like children, men, women, everyone, close family, far family, friends, neighbours, the neighbours’ neighbours, the neighbours’ friends, because everyone is like friends with everyone. So, the term friend there is a bit different from the friend term used maybe in, like, European countries or something. (Focus group 2)

Even though friendship is understood as a deep connection between people which requires reciprocity, sharing and commitment, the above examples show that on another level the term “friend” can also be used more lightly in order to demonstrate a welcoming behaviour towards each other, friendly intentions or the lack of harmful intentions, as well as the appearance of such sometimes.

6.2 “I mean it’s just like different kind of friendship.”

Most participants’ understandings of friendship are shaped by and within more than one culture, the culture(s) they grew up in and the Finnish culture. Participants from the South West Asian/ North African region, South and North America, and Southern Europe seemed to share a similar understanding of friendship before coming to Finland. Nonetheless, there
was a lot of discussion about how friendship in Finland seems to be defined differently, and all participants who have come from abroad have had to negotiate their definitions of friendship throughout their lives here. One participant talks about a Finnish friend he made when he first arrived in Finland, with whom they are still friends, and he describes how as friends he would expect to meet several times a month, but for his friend it is enough to meet just once every three months. He says:

(…) I think that’s more like a cultural shock in a way, you know? More like a definition what’s a friend, and I know I can count on him but it’s…but that’s more maybe like how you make friends in Finland in a way, you know? (Focus group 2)

Having Finnish friends is discussed differently by the participants to having “foreigners”, “international people” or “immigrants”\textsuperscript{2} as friends. For the participants having a Finnish friend still means to be able to trust and rely on one another. Two participants mention that friendships in Finland are very highly valued relationships, and once you make a friend they can become friends for life. Participants’ friendships with Finns mostly revolve around common hobbies or common activities which require planning very much in advance. In considering the gender aspect of this claim, the participants who claimed the above (even if not every participant commented on this specific subject) were all men. Previous research on same-sex friendships has suggested that even though women’s friendships are more often characterized by intimate interactions, emotional support and sharing, men’s friendships tend to revolve more around shared activities and interests (Beverley, 2004; Migliaccio, 2009; Lewis et al., 2015). It is important though to also acknowledge the possible heteronormative aspect of research on same-sex friendships and the fact that the participants did not specifically disclose their Finnish friends’ gender identities as their statements were more focused on ethnicity differences. However, these examples highlight even more the need to examine these friendships through an intersectional lens in order to acquire a better understanding of them and their complexity and avoid explaining the findings in oversimplified ways. Additionally, in the participants experience it is quite uncommon to make a last minute plan with their Finnish friends, to meet spontaneously or to meet just to hang out without a more specific agenda. A participant who has been in Finland for long and has many Finnish and non-Finnish friends, says: “(…) I have the [friends] with whom I cycle, 

\textsuperscript{2} These are all terms the participants used to describe themselves and other non-native born Finns.
with whom I motocross, like dangerous stuff. But they’re Finnish, like. And I have the
foreigners that we, we hang out. Like, we have more like we go out, chill out at night or
whatever.” (Focus group 1). Another participant, who has been in Finland for less than one
year, has had to reflect a lot on what it means to have a friend and even seems unsure of
whether some of his new relationships in Finland are considered friendships. He says that he
has gotten a lot of support from his workplace and his colleagues who make sure to keep him
socially active after work, but he does not talk about them as friends:

    P1: I’m thinking so much the definition of friendship here…because I don’t know,
maybe I have friend- Finnish friends, I don’t know…
    P2: Yeah, yeah yeah. (laughs)
    P1: …maybe they’re considered as my friends, but I don’t know that, because I have
some other definition of friendship. (Focus group 1)

One of the Finnish participants says that in her late 20s she started pursuing new friendships
when her friends started creating families and having children, because her friends’ limited
availability and focus on their families changed the nature of their friendship. She is still in
contact with them, but nowadays she also has other friends who she made within activist
circles who she meets more often; “I have two different lives with friends” (Focus group 2),
she says. Activism, as well as volunteering, have also been previously discussed as
particularly interesting ways that enable friendship formation (Häberlen, 2016; Fiori et al.,
2015), which I will discuss further in chapter 6.3.

In the discussions the participants ascribe certain behaviours and characteristics to Finnish
culture or Finnishness, and according to them those shape their friendships with Finns
differently from those with foreigners. One participant says that Finns value a lot their own
space, own time and having control over what is happening in their own life and “bubble”, so
they appreciate some predictability, and that is why they make plans in a way that does not
leave much room for spontaneity when meeting friends. Another participant says that in
events where internationals meet, such as at “The making-friends network” event, there are
no “Finnish rules”, and that is why it is easier to make friends there (either with Finns or with
non-Finns). Friendship events where lots of international people gather are then presented on
the one hand as spaces where Finns would feel uncomfortable and “stand by the side, a bit
worried about how they seem” (Focus group 1), and on the other hand as spaces where Finns show “their foreign side” (Focus group 1), meaning that they are more open to conversation, they feel free, they are not worried about being judged, they “go there for this vibe” (Focus group 1), for example for the noise, the music, the dancing.

Throughout the discussions and as the participants share their opinions and personal experiences, they try to be respectful of the differences and not to reproduce stereotypes. Some participants say explicitly that “we (…) as foreigners” can talk about making friends here in Finland and compare it to our experiences in other countries, but “we should not judge it” (Focus group 1). Others, when describing their experiences of being friends with Finns also add that some things do sound a bit stereotypical and that some characteristics and behaviours could be personal preferences and ways of being and should not be attributed to Finnishness or one’s ethnicity. What I found interesting was that some participants were explicitly cautious about talking about Finns in stereotypical ways, while at the same time mentioning more casually (I thought) how government and media discourses in Finland stereotype migrants and asylum seekers by presenting solely negative images of them, on which I elaborate more in chapter 6.3, page 28. According to Hall (1997) stereotyping is a representational practice that highlights difference, promotes racialization and hierarchization of cultures and has “essentializing, reductionist and naturalizing effects” (p. 257). Hall (1997) argues that:

Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant' the 'normal' and the 'pathological' the 'acceptable' and the unacceptable' what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other' between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them. It facilitates the 'binding' or bonding together of all of Us who are 'normal' into one imagined community'; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them- ‘the Others’ -who are in some way different- 'beyond the pale' (p. 258)

As mentioned earlier, however, stereotyping occurs where there are obvious power inequalities and where most commonly the power departs from dominant towards marginalized groups (Hall, 1997), such as in the case of stereotyping and discrimination.
against asylum seekers in their destination countries. Why are migrants and asylum seekers then so concerned about stereotyping Finns? What power does that hold?

One participant from the South West Asian/ North African region says that:

( … ) most of the foreigners here are like more comfortable with making friends with another foreigners. It doesn’t matter from which country they are. I mean they’re…I mean, this is my own opinion, it doesn’t need to be true ( … ) Because they match in more things than with a Finnish person. And still, there is nothing wrong with Finnish people ( … ) It’s just like, this is their lifestyle. (Focus group 1)

When I ask what it is in his opinion that brings foreigners closer to each other than foreigners with Finns he says, “It could be many reasons, culture…I don’t know, culture, weather, travel, yes, because they’re travelers already, they’re in a foreign country.” (Focus group 1). Anyone could argue that not all other cultures are more similar to each other than the Finnish culture. Therefore, what this participant seems to be saying is that for people who have an experience of migration to Finland it is easier to connect with people who share the same experience, than with locals who are not familiar with it, and therefore are more likely to create close friendships. Moreover, he seems to be saying that it is the shared experience of feeling "otherness" from Finns and the Finnish culture that bonds people with migrant experience, even if their respective cultures are not similar. A Finnish participant who has also lived abroad and returned to Finland, who described herself as “almost a foreigner now” talks about this explicitly:

I think that shared experience is probably one of the biggest things that you build any connections on, because it’s kind what you need for that in a way, and like in this context of this making friends with Finns or non-Finns, like, immigration or moving to a new country itself is such a huge thing, and if you’re like someone who’s never done that, it’s very, like, you could have perceived it very differently. And I think finding people who have done that, who understand those things, it, it’s like an immediate connection in a way, like, “Oh, ok”, and especially if you come from maybe a more similar place to Finland or somewhere, and then you get to compare your, your experiences. (Focus group 1)
Another participant later on during the discussion reflected more on this topic:

P1: ( … ) the difference between like talking to, like, a native Finn about moving to Finland, ( … ) and talking to another person who has also moved to Finland, or eh…I mean, for you too (points at P2), as a native Finn who, like, has moved to another country, I mean those are different, right? Like, if I, I, ‘cause I’m close with some Finnish people and then the…like, I have to tell them about the experience of moving to another country…I have to share all of that.

P2: And a lot of it is difficult to explain somewhat, if you have no idea what you’re talking about, kind of like, it’s very difficult to explain everything from the beginning. (Focus group 1)

The above examples are good reminders to not fall into essentialist pitfalls and demonstrate that there is not really something inherent to Finnishness but not in other cultures that would not enable foreigners to make friends with Finns; it is rather a shared experience of having left one’s home country and being in the same foreign land with all the challenges that this poses and the processes that one has to go through as a migrant, which may create a faster bond between people. Another factor that came up that can create a bond between migrants and distance between migrants and Finns is migrants “complaining” about Finland when talking about the challenges they face here. The participant who mentioned this said that she understands this “complaining” also “as part of dealing with the differences [and] with the integration” (Focus group 1), but as a Finn- who has also had an experience of living abroad- she feels annoyance when migrants tend to focus only on their negative experiences of living in Finland.

The participants talked a lot about “culture” in their attempts to highlight differences, but also similarities, and their necessity to adapt to new elements in a new environment. Hall (1997) describes culture as dependent on difference, in that it creates cultural meaning and classifies things. Within every culture a symbolic order of things is created, which is based on classification and consequently hierarchization, with its own imaginary boundaries which distinguish it from other cultures and dictate what is part of a culture and what is not. As Hall (1997) says, “Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic
boundaries keep the categories 'pure', giving cultures their unique meaning and identity. What unsettles culture is 'matter out of place'- the breaking of our unwritten rules and codes.”. (p. 237).

6.3 “It’s a hard process to me.”

Making new friends as an adult does not come without its challenges. Cross-category friendships require active and continuous negotiation of differences between friends, as they defy rules of similarity and homophily which often constitute the core of close friendships (Galupo et al., 2012), therefore they can appear to be more challenging. The participants attribute the challenges they have faced to either cultural differences and specific characteristics to Finnish culture or to barriers created by discrimination. The characteristics associated with Finnish culture that pose challenges in making friends processes as discussed by the participants include a culture of planning, sticking to the people and the routines that are familiar, a difficulty in welcoming new members in an already established friend group, a general culture of individualism and lack of empathy. Many of the above are described as cultural differences and as those characteristics that make the definition of friendship different in Finland. In addition, the participants’ various identity markers such as gender, religion, ethnicity and migrant or non-migrant status in the context that this research takes place are all factors that influence their friend making processes and make it easier or more difficult for them to connect with other adults. Making friends as an adult in Finland, especially when one does not have any previous connections and needs to start over, takes effort and requires people to be very active and deliberate about it. As mentioned earlier, participants have been actively using apps, joining groups, attending friendship and other events, and looking for social circles and communities through hobbies, activism, and such.

In the focus group discussions women’s experiences of making friends seem to be characterized by certain challenges that men have not faced and may not even be aware of. One of the participants mentions that even though nowadays her friends are of different genders, in the past she had difficulties making friends with boys and men. “I think many people are better at that, for me it has been a long road.” (Focus group 2), she adds, without elaborating further. Another participant shares that making friends with men is more challenging for her than making friends with women:
I think [gender] is a big uh, player when it comes to ( … ) meeting people and becoming friends, being like comfortable and open from the beginning, because there’s always certain expectations and there’s like a, it’s a safety thing as well to not maybe always be so open and share everything about you right away because you don’t want people to get the wrong idea ( … ) [T]here is always this thought at the back of my head that ok, but don’t be too friendly, because then they will get the wrong idea. (Focus group 1)

One of the male participants in the same focus group responds to the quote above by saying “Actually that was a nice thing to hear, because I have received cold shoulders from the opposite sex and…maybe that was the reason, that makes sense ( … ) because there are a lot of guys that act under the first impression.” (Focus group 1). In line with what the participants were discussing are studies which have shown that in cross-gender and cross-sex friendships there are costs that are greater for women than for men, like the concern that a friendly behaviour may be misinterpreted as physical desire and men’s inclination to sexualize their friendships (Lewis et al., 2015; Bleske-Rechek, 2012). In the discussion around the role of gender in friendships some of the men say that they appreciate diversity among their friends, while another says that he has friends of different genders, but his closest friend would always have to be a man because he believes that people of different genders have different perspectives on life and having a close male friend would mean sharing the same perspective which would increase understanding between them. Another participant says that even though he has close friends of different genders, for him “it’s always been much easier to connect deeply with women than with men” (Focus group 1).

The discussion around the role of gender in friendships extends to a discussion on intersectionality in friendships, namely how people’s intersecting identities shape their experiences of making friends. A male participant from the South West Asian/ North African region shares that when it comes to friendships with Finns it has been easier for him to connect with women than with men. As he speculates what the reasons for this could be, he says:

I don’t know if it’s coincidence or is it in general women, Finnish women are more open minded to meet with immigrants ( … ) I don’t know if I would say it and men
would accept it, women are more open minded, in general eh, when it comes to this discriminations and knowing the other part (…) And if I could just point one evidence, uh, if we could see the percentage of female activists in human rights and that comes to immigrants comparing to male activists, I really, well in my, if I could take just the samples that I have known as a personal, my personal witnesses, over 90% of the volunteers I have met they were all females. (Focus group 2)

This participant arrived to Finland as an asylum seeker and describes that all of the volunteers working at the reception center were he lived upon his arrival to Finland were women, except for one who was a man. As mentioned earlier, making friends is likely also through activism and volunteering. Except for NGO projects which are specifically designated to pairing newcomers with locals in order to make friends, friendships can become possible when those activists and volunteers who support asylum seekers decide to call them “friends” instead of “migrants” or “refugees” (Häberlen, 2016). A difference in a word can come from or can result to a difference in perspective and create a more equal relationship between activists and asylum seekers, where their relationship does not have to be purely limited to one party supporting the other implying an unequal distribution of power, but can expand to a two-way relationship where everyone involved learns something new, becomes more open and learns to negotiate and live with differences (Häberlen, 2016). Häberlen (2016) argues that forming friendships with asylum seekers is a deeply political act. Friendships are characterized by notions of equality, therefore forming friendships within systems where the structural inequalities are plentiful can be highly political and an act of resistance. Another participant from the South West Asian/ North African region describes how her personal intersecting identities of gender and religion can often stand in the way of becoming friends with others:

(…) there’s a lot of prejudice just because of [the way I dress] or because of my religion, or because I am a woman. So there’s like so many factors that play, like, a huge role in whether these people can be my friend or not. (Focus group 2)

The words “walls” and “barriers” come up a lot in the discussions by the participants of foreign background when they describe their experiences of approaching and becoming friends with Finns and we end up talking about racism and discrimination. As one of the participants from North America says:
(… ) it’s impossible to have this conversation about the difference between, eh, making friends with Finnish people in like a Finnish context, or making friends with, with people in like a, you know, foreigner context…or like [“The making-friends network”] or whatever (… ) without talking about racism. (Focus group 1)

Another participant from the South West Asian/ North African region describes that a common experience of his is that when he starts a conversation with a Finn the conversation stumbles when he says where he is from:

I felt that there are some people that are eager to hear about it when you’re, I don’t know, from the United Stated or Canada, but they don’t like to hear that, even, for example, if you are asylum seeker or if you’re from Middle East, so I don’t know if we have to consider them as being racism or being not interesting enough. (… ) In so many occasions I’ve hit the wall with, yeah, conversation, because I want to, to, to show them some clues that you can take this and ask some more questions from me, but they don’t do that. (… ) When I say I’m from Iran they’re not, they don’t have anything to say, they don’t have anything to talk. (Focus group 1)

He admits that sometimes he has lied to people and said that he comes from the USA, and in those cases the conversation carried on a bit more because people made an additional comment or asked a question about that. As Tlostanova et al. (2016) have pointed out “the North may easily remain ignorant of the South but the opposite is never allowed” (p. 212). Another participant from South West Asian/ North African region says that he has also lied about coming to Finland as an asylum seeker and has said instead that he came to Finland for studies. According to the participants the barriers are usually there because of people’s migrant status, gender, skin colour, religion. One of the participants of African background describes how sometimes people call him names expecting him to get angry, but they become very surprised when he answers “Thank you” to them. When he has tried to confront racist behaviours by asking people why they talk to him like that he has received answers like “Ah, because my friends are saying you guys are like this” (Focus group 1). Similarly, another participant discusses that “sometimes people they just want to create reason” (Focus group 2) for their racist beliefs and behaviour. He continues by saying how the government and the media in Finland shape people’s perceptions of certain countries and create an environment
where racist attitudes are cultivated towards immigrants (towards some immigrants more than others). On a personal level this has caused him to have to work more on establishing and also maintaining certain friendships, because he has had to break the barriers created by racism in order to create connection and maintain it, while at the same time fighting against ongoing racist discourses. He describes how his friendship with an older Finnish man started:

( … ) the first time when we met he had all this prejudice, because he watches the news and I am from a place where lot of bad news about us. And that he just like look at me in the same eye how he heard, because that’s the only source of information.

(Focus group 2)

After spending some days together and managing to connect on a human level they parted and met again two months later, only to have to begin again “from level zero” to build trust, with the participant having to do most of the work to reduce the distance between them. He says:

[T]hat of course made me so much exhausted with him at one point (swears). Just deal with your prejudice and I don’t need to, to…But that’s one example and…of course I could talk about many other examples where the friendship need to be maintained always. (Focus group 2).

6.4 “If these barriers they disappear then both parts could be meeting halfway.”

As discussed in the Method chapter, the question “How can making friends become easier?” was explicitly raised in only one of two focus group discussions, however, participants in both groups reflected on the ways making friends in adulthood could become easier. Big part of the discussion revolved around migrants making friends with Finns, but widespread loneliness among Finnish elderly people and Finnish men were also raised as issues that would need to be tackled in the Finnish society. One of the most important findings from these discussions was very accurately put into words by one participant who said that “Meeting and listening to each other is the key to uh, make friendship.” (Focus group 2). Many of the participants’ experiences that were shared in the groups pointed out that once people get to meet in person and have an opportunity to listen to each other, then the “glass
breaks” and the walls come down. Nevertheless, it takes a lot of effort to even get to meet and listen to each other. One of the participants shares that having friends with whom he shares a home country provides some common references and things that do not have to be explained between them, whereas talking with a person who lacks knowledge that they already have requires explaining and extra work from his side. He calls that “the comfort zone we would all like to be” (Focus group 2). Maria Lugones (1987) has talked about this as one of the ways of being “at ease in a particular world” (p. 12), where people who may not know each other, may not share the same values or a personal bond can still be connected by a shared history; they have a shared memory of a fashion trend like “poodle skirts” (p.12) in Lugones’ example, or “something that has happened in our country” in the participant’s words. Knowing the answer to the “Oh, do you remember that thing happened…” (Focus group 2) as the participant says, provides a sense of comfort and a sense of being at ease in a world (Lugones, 1987). The participant, however, also sees a lot of value in stepping out of one’s comfort zone:

( … ) the brave of us who they went out of the comfort zone, they just felt that people who they are from the other side, who we need, we are just like sharing the humanity, but we are not sharing languages and values and all the uh…cultures, customs, habits. These people are actually the amazing people who you get to know. (Focus group 2)

Häberlen (2016) too argues that it takes “a moment of courage” (p. 69) for locals but also for asylum seekers to talk to a stranger, “from” but also “in” a strange country. We are taught since childhood to be apprehensive towards strangers and to not talk to them, and we are taught to fear some strangers more than others; the more our differences, the more we fear them. However, both Häberlen (2016) and the participant recognize the benefits of taking that step and approaching each other however uncomfortable it may feel at the beginning. “It is a moment of overcoming fear of strangers that teaches both hosts and guests a lesson that trust and solidarity between strangers is possible.” (Häberlen, 2006, p. 69-70).

The participants believe that what would be needed to make friendships develop easier is a change of mindset in people, and even though some discuss that changing our own or others’ mindsets is not an easy or even possible task, they also believe that “change can start from one person” (Focus group 2). Adopting a welcoming attitude towards people who we may
perceive as different from us because of our different origins, religions, genders, or languages, putting effort into having that small talk with someone and being open to listening and to learning can go a long way. Here I would like to note that I do not use the term “welcoming” to indicate that the locals or “hosts” are those who (should) welcome the “foreigners”, which is what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls the “welcoming logic”, which further implies that those who welcome are at home and those who are welcomed are not. By “a welcoming attitude” I mean an openness by everyone involved to meet and receive the other, and the ability to welcome their worlds (Lugones, 1987). When participants talk about differences between their cultures and the Finnish culture, they also acknowledge that not all migrants are the same, and that their experiences of migration in Finland are shaped by their different ethnicities and countries of origin, but they are also shaped differently by the circumstances of their arrival to Finland, their gender and other factors. Despite the challenges that differences can create when they try to establish friendships, they also consider differences great learning opportunities and enriching experiences. One participant shares that:

[W]hen I meet a person from different part of the world, different culture, different language or so, it means, like, it’s plus for me. There is more conversation, there is more thoughts that came up, more things to learn. I will just extend my knowledge. (Focus group 1)

Another participant who talks about migrants in Finland who only seek people of the same ethnic background as theirs, says that “[W]hen you stay within one society or like one group, you’re not gonna learn much, you’re just gonna stay in that one circle.” (Focus group 2). She also says that:

I think that in that way you’re like robbing yourself from the ability to learn about other cultures and to accept other cultures and to learn about how they operate and, I don’t know, have an open mind about it.” (Focus group 2)

Galupo et al. (2012) have argued that one of the main benefits of cross-category friendships, be it cross-gender or cross-race, is being exposed to different perspectives. Since cross-category friendships require negotiation of differences they also require negotiation of inequality. The way majority and minority individuals experience those friendships vary, but
in any case, cross-category friendship can be great opportunities for deconstructing stereotypes, unlearning and re-learning and they can even “lead to more effective political organizing” (Galupo et al., 2012, p. 780).

To make friends we need to be open, and especially when it comes to making friends between Finns and migrants we need to be able to cross the barriers created by our differences and our preconceptions of each other which are indeed deeply rooted and shaped throughout our lives. According to the participants getting rid of our prejudice is a conscious process which requires a lot of hard and intellectual work as well as “soul search” (Focus group 1). To make friends we need to be able to visit each other’s worlds (Lugones, 1987) and meet people without prejudice (Tlostanova, 2023). We need to be able to meet people with a decolonial mindset. What would it mean, here, in this context to visit each other’s worlds? A participant of African background tells us a story about that time when he spontaneously drove his Finnish friends, a couple, to East Helsinki, without informing them in advance about where they were going.

East Helsinki is home for many people of migrant backgrounds and hosts many small businesses that sell food from the South West Asian/ North African region, such as restaurants and markets. According to Ainiala and Halonen (2011) Helsinki is home for many people of Somali background, with Somali being the fifth most spoken language in 2008. Most of Helsinki’s population with a foreign background lives in East Helsinki (Ainiala & Halonen, 2011), with Somalis being the most segregated in the Eastern subburbs (Varady & Schulman, 2007). According to Varady and Schulman (2007) a newspaper article which provided data related to the racial profile of housing in certain districts of Helsinki referred to a part of East Helsinki as “Mogadishu street”, discouraging locals from seeking for housing in that district and contributing to the negative reputation of East Helsinki. When the participant describes this experience he says himself “we call this Mogadishu, Somalia, or whatever” (Focus group 1). The participant says that he told his friends “I have to show you different kind, of, like, the reality of life” and “[W]hen we crossed the road, to this kind of shopping [market], she was shhhocked, like, is this place safe? I say yes, and she panicked.” (Focus group 1). That day’s focus group discussion was taking place in East Helsinki and the other participants laughed at this story and at the “risks” of visiting this area, but it is not uncommon for people who have never visited this side of the city to think of it as a dangerous place. The story also opened up a conversation about racism, but the participant who told the
story focused the most on the learning that happens in these moments. He said that his friends realized that one does not need to have a routine and a specific plan for everything they do, that it is nice to do things and visit places spontaneously. He also said how amazed they were by the freshness of the vegetables in the market that they visited. He talked about the importance of being open to trying new things, because this is how we learn and this is how we can break the barriers between us, which is the first step to becoming friends. On the day of the that focus group discussion in one of the library spaces there was an ongoing celebration for Eid and the participants talked about it as an occasion for people from different religions and ethnic background to meet each other and form friendships:

P1: …if you go out there you will see some non-Muslims, non-Arabs, non-, even though the music out there was Arabic and Somali music, but you will meet some-
P2: I think-
P1: …non- Finnish people, who are here. Hmm, they are interested to be friends or to, to know…
P2: I think this Eid is a really good example, for like-
P3: Yeah.
P2: …in this context. Like, we celebrated Eid yesterday and we kind of like, like, in a very random group, there was one person who was actually fasting and is like celebrating Eid for real, and everyone else was kind of interested, interested in it in one way or another or it’s a cultural traditional thing but are not actually doing it, and we’re kind of just inviting everyone and whoever joined was like people who are somehow interested in that area or in that, like, atmosphere or whatever. (Focus group 1)

Cultural and even religious celebrations could provide platforms for people of different cultures and religions to meet each other without being defensive as long as people focus on the things they have in common, an interest or curiosity in a culture or in music. As earlier mentioned, the media can play a big role in our images of the “Others” and cultivate stereotypes which colour our perceptions of the people we meet. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) says when she talks about the danger of a single story, stereotypes are produced by single stories:
The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. The consequence of a single story is that it robs people of their dignity. It emphasizes how we are different than how we are similar. (Adichie, 2009)

And as one of the participants says, it can take one meeting and as little time as one hour to start questioning our stereotypes and to realize we can relate to others regardless of where they come from. He describes an event which was organized with the aim of bringing people from different backgrounds together in order to have conversations and share their life experiences:

P1: It has succeeded a lot. Just to make people, two people who they haven’t met each other, people who they just came one week ago to Finland and people who haven’t met any immigrant, who they just came from Kemi or from somewhere from the north. You can see in one hour a big difference from looking at each other from up to down, and to being defensive, to agreeing with each other and having such a common things, because they just discovered that uh, actually the one in front of me is not a monster, he is just like a human being like me. Because he’s just talking about the cat he had lost when he was child and I have the same story when I lost uh, our pet. And he is talking about the love and all these things because in the news they didn’t tell us this, they told us that these Middle Eastern they always fight. And without oil they are all failures and they will die. We have the technology and they have nothing. (…) So, eh, the, the truth is there, it just need to be raised. It just need to find a way to, to be shown to the other part, and then everything will be- because we don’t need to change people’s mind, because people’s mind are not, in my opinion, it’s uh…we weren’t born to be afraid of the other part. We, we were influenced during our life, so…

P2: No one is born racist (laughs)

P1: No, no, no. (Focus group 2)

In a societal level the participants said that perhaps education could play a role in teaching people empathy, encouraging and valuing interdependence instead of extreme independence and individualism and in equipping people from a young age with the necessary skills and tools to build close connections and friendships and to know how to approach others.
According to Killen et al. (2022) promoting cross-group friendships among children is indeed a way to battle racism as well as prejudice and discrimination on the basis of one’s gender, ethnicity and religion later in life, as children are susceptible to bias from a young age and have been found to be “both the victims and the perpetrators of bias”. In more practical terms, one participant suggested that perhaps social media could be a way to promote friendships, in the same way nowadays mental health is promoted, for example. Another participant said that loneliness among elderly people could be tackled by organizing friendship events targeted to older people, something equivalent to “The making-friends network”, while someone else said that discussions in a comfortable place like our focus group discussion led by a facilitator could as well provide opportunities for people to get together, talk, know each other and perhaps make friends.

7. Conclusions

In this research I explored how people’s gender with its various intersections shape and have shaped their experiences of making friends in adulthood. I carried out an intersectional analysis of the processes and challenges of making friends, and I explored ways in which making friends could become easier. My research was informed by the concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), stereotyping (Hall, 1997) and the decolonial concepts of “world”-travelling (Lugones, 1987) and diatopical hermeneutics (Tlostanova, 2022). With this research I also aimed to create a platform where people could come together and talk about these challenges and their experiences of making friends within the Finnish context where they all currently live regardless of the circumstances that have brought them to Finland, and for this reason I decided to collect my data through focus group discussions.

This research showed that the participants have been very active and deliberate in their attempts to make friends in Finland, especially those who came to Finland as adults without other connections. Participants who came from abroad have had to negotiate their prior ideas and definitions of friendship and to develop understanding and acceptance of the way friendships seem to be formed in Finland in order to develop friendships with Finns. Even though friendship is defined as a close and deep relationship with certain specific characteristics (Sherman et al. 2000; Pezirkianidis et. al, 2023; Greco et al., 2015), the use of the term friend can still be quite flexible and used differently in different contexts. Some friendships are close, some friendships are casual, and some serve practical purposes, and
except for cultural understandings of friendships people also have their own more specific ones. When it came to close friendships the shared experience of being a migrant in a foreign country and the experience of being “othered” by the natives, seemed to be bonding experiences for people and offer ground for friendship formation.

Participants’ gender, ethnic and religious identities, as well as their migrant or non-migrant status are significant when it comes to friendship formation and can make their experiences of making friends more or less challenging. One of the biggest and most common challenges seem to be the walls and barriers created between native Finns and foreigners, which at the intersections of certain minority identities can be even bigger. Stereotypes and prejudice against migrants, asylum seekers and certain ethnic and religious groups can sometimes make the processes of making friends rather tiring and laborious for minority people, however, most participants believe that the barriers can also disappear as long as all parties involved make an effort to meet each other halfway and allow others into their “worlds”.

According to the participants “world”- travelling and making friends becomes easier when people meet and listen to each other. If people meet each other without prejudice, if they find the courage to approach others despite their differences and show curiosity in the personal stories of people which are not spelled out by the media or government discourses, then they will be more likely to make friends. It is an uncomfortable process that requires unlearning and re-learning, but it is a valuable process as well which can lead to very enriching experiences. Cross-category friendships and especially friendships between foreigners and natives can constitute powerful statements and offer opportunities for political organizing which transcend the limits of intimate personal relationships and become political acts, as they require negotiating differences and inequality (Galupo et al., 2012; Häberlen, 2016)

Other ways to make friendship formation easier are through education which could really make a long-term difference in dealing with structural discrimination, the use of social media and organizing of different events.

Further research on this subject could include individuals that live in intersections that I did not explore, for example Finnish men or women who have arrived in Finland as asylum seekers, and it could also explore the processes and challenges of community formation in the same context.
8. References


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9. Appendices
9.1 Invitation to focus group discussions

**Looking for people to join a group discussion**

Hei!
Would you like to have an opportunity to share your stories, experiences, and views about making friends?
My name is Despina, I have been in Finland for ten years and I have been part of Friends without Borders since last autumn. We may have already met! This spring I am hosting group discussions on the topic of making friends as part of my Master’s thesis, and I would be very grateful if you joined me and others in an engaging conversation where we can talk about our experiences and exchange views.
The groups will be held in English and will take place in April-May. If you’d like to participate you can reach out to me via Whatsapp/sms _____ or Facebook ______. I am more than happy to answer any questions, so don’t hesitate to contact me. Looking forward to hearing from you!

-Despina
9.2 Focus group discussion guide

Focus group discussion guide (the guide provides the themes and is a reminder for me to cover all the topics, but is not too be followed exactly as is)

- Welcome and thank you
- Explain the process

Start recording:
- Only for the first question, we will do a round and answer “What’s your name?/ How old are you?/ What brought you to Finland and when?” to introduce ourselves and for me to be able to distinguish everyone’s voice in the recording

Opening question:
- Let’s start with everyone telling the group how you learned about “Friends without borders” and why you decided to join.

Key topics & specific questions:

1. Have you made any friends at “Friends without borders”?
2. What have your experiences of finding/making friends been?
   - Where/ How did you look for friends and other social networks?
   - Where/ How did you meet your friends?
   - Where did you try to make friends but it didn’t work out?
   - What challenges have you faced while trying to make friends here?
   - Why was it challenging?
   - Are you part of other social networks? What kind?
3. Are your friends (mostly) native Finnsor migrants? (explain how I use the terms)
4. What does it mean exactly to have friends? At which point do you usually start calling an acquaintance a friend?
5. How would making friends become easier?

Closing question:

- We are now approaching the end, but we still have some time left.
- Is there anything you would like to add that we have not talked about?
Consent to data processing

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data in the form of name, age, country of birth, place of residence, circumstances of being in Finland and audio recording for the following purposes:

The aim of this research is to explore the processes and challenges of making friends and finding social networks in Finland among adults and to create a platform where people can come together and talk about these challenges. The aim is also to discuss how making friends in Finland could become easier. The data collected will serve as the basis for my Master’s thesis.

Information:
Your personal data will be processed in the following way:
The use of information collected from the focus group discussions will be strictly academic. All data from the focus group discussions will be kept confidential and will be anonymized. Your data will be stored on Linköping University’s internal servers in digital form, and I, Despoina Papadakou, will be the only person who has access to the focus group discussion recording and your name.
Personal data controller is Linköping University, 581 83 Linköping, corporate identification number 202100-3096.
Contact:
Despoina Papadakou
Phone number · e-mail address

Legal basis for the data processing: Consent.
Withdrawal of consent/questions/complaints: If you want to withdraw your consent, please send me a message or e-mail stating that you want to withdraw your consent for this research project at:

Phone number/ WhatsApp: ______
E-mail: ______

Your consent will be valid until 31.12.2023. You may withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. We will in that case stop using your personal data that we have collected based on your consent. You may request to have your personal data erased, and if you do so, we will erase information about you wherever possible. You have the right to obtain information about your personal data that are processed by Linköping University. You may request this in writing by contacting the registrar’s office at Linköping University, either by email or letter. You also have the right to request that the use of certain of your personal data be limited.

If you want to know how your personal data are used, or you believe that we have used your personal data in a way that violates the agreement or current legislation, please contact Linköping University’s data protection officer at dataskyddsombud@liu.se. If you have complaints regarding the way in which Linköping University processes your personal data, you
are always entitled to contact the relevant inspection authority, which in this case is the Swedish Data Protection Authority.

I hereby consent that Linköping University processes my personal data according to the information above

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