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- Calendar
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- Travel
- Health
- Autos
- Home & Garden
- Food
- Image
- Books
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- Video
- Photography
- Obituaries
- Crosswords/Sudoku
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- Blogs
- Columnists
- Print Edition
- Readers Rep
- Corrections
- All Sections

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You saw it on 'Survivor': Alliances matter

11:44 AM, June 11, 2009

Who would have thought it? The reality show "Survivor" actually demonstrates reality -- when it comes to friendship, at least.

While they didn't study the hit television show, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania conducted experiments on the motives behind human friendship. The prevailing theory is that humans build friendships in order to exchange goods and services, Penn psychologist Peter DeScioli, a co-author of the study, said in a news release. But that theory doesn't explain studies that show people usually don't keep tabs on the benefits they get from a friendship and will often help friends who are unable to repay them.

The new theory, called the Alliance Hypothesis for Human Friendship, argues that friendships form because of cognitive mechanisms aimed at creating alliances -- or ready-made support groups of people. Under this theory, how you rank your best friends is closely related to how they rank you. And friends tend to be valued according to who is the most helpful in settling conflicts and based on how many strong commitments they have to others.

"Friendships are about alliances," said psychologist Robert Kurzban, the other co-author of the study. "We live in a world where conflict can arise and allies must be in position beforehand. This new hypothesis takes into account how we value those alliances. In a way, one of the main predictors of friendships is the value of alliances. The value of an ally, or friend, drops with every additional alliance they must make, so the best alliance is one in which your ally ranks you above everyone else as well."

The researchers came to this conclusion by performing a series of question-and-answer studies in which participants ranked their closest friends in a number of ways. Friendship rankings were most strongly correlated with individuals' own perceived rank among their partners' other friends.

"In this hypothesis," Kurzban said, "it's not what you can do for me, it's how much you like me."

The study is published online in the journal [PLoS One](#).

-- Shari Roan

Photo credit: Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times

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Our Bloggers

Tami Dennis

Tami Dennis, who takes the word "skeptical" to previously uncharted territory, is the Times' Health and Science editor. She's adamant that pitches promoting awareness days, weeks or months are, by their nature, non-stories. And, because she's an adult, she refuses to use words like "veggies," "tummy" and "yummy."

Rosie Mestel

Rosie Mestel, deputy Health and Science editor, studied genetics before abandoning flies, fungi and DNA for health/medical writing. Her hero is the biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose jellyfish paintings inspired snazzy chandeliers. Her favorite toast-spread is Marmite, a British delicacy made of yeast extract. Her least-favorite word is "millenniums."

Melissa Healy

Melissa Healy is a staff writer for the Health section reporting from Washington D.C. Healy's a veteran of The Times' National staff, having covered the Pentagon, Congress, poverty and social welfare, the environment, and the White House before shifting to Health in 2003. She writes frequently about mental health and human behavior, about federal health policy, prescription medication and ethics in medicine. More wonk than wellness freak, Healy chooses to believe in the health benefits of coffee and wine, and considers water a better work-out