



Friendship and Befriending

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What is friendship?

Defining the essence of friendship is elusive; the precise meaning of 'friend' is culturally and historically varied. Even one person, in the particular culture and time of more or less here and now, might have a range of everyday usages of the designation friend, they might have different categories of types of friend, and the meaning of friendship may shift depending on the very immediate context. Some people define friendship very narrowly. For example, in a 1980s study, some working-class men defined a friend simply as 'someone you can meet for a drink' (Wilmott, 1987, 98). However, most of the respondents in that study offered a wider repertoire of the key characteristics of friends. These included 'their reliability as sources of help, their trustworthiness, their respect for privacy and readiness to act as confidantes, and the pleasure they gave as companions' (Wilmott, 1987, 94).

Another way to start is with friends as a category of relationship which is distinguished from other categories of relationship – personal versus impersonal, informal versus formal, people who are known and 'with you' versus people who are unknown or known and 'against you'. We often speak of 'friends and family' as our personal relationships and both are implied in 'nearest and dearest', a 'personal community' of people with whom there is some association, who are known to us and know something about us, and who are in some sense 'with us' rather than against us, care about us and perhaps care for us. Both friends and family are typically taken to be the opposite of strangers and enemies. Normatively, neither should be strangers nor enemies, although, of course, it can happen that friends can come to be experienced as both.

However, it has also been very common in the sociological literature until very recently to pose friends and family or kin as different and even contrasting categories of relationship. Friends involve informally designated relationships, usually between equals, that are chosen, voluntary. Kin are formally designated as kin, and can be hierarchical relationships as well as relationships between equals. They are given not chosen and can be obligatory rather than voluntary. Becoming and 'being friends' is achieved informally, often initiated spontaneously and developed by mutual negotiation. Friends are typically regarded as friends because of appreciation of something about the qualities of the person and the pleasant quality of interaction with them. Kin can be reckoned formally without regard to the person or quality of interaction. Kin are classified as kin by a culturally accepted and, in the case of many societies, legally sanctioned system of claiming links through blood and marriage. In this sense the relationship is given and not achieved or chosen. We have to be resigned to our family in a way that, theoretically at least, we don't with our friends; this is expressed in the adage 'you cannot choose your family'. The 'given' nature of kin, prescribed by an institutionalised classification system, is sometimes supported by normative notions of permanent obligations, family should be 'people who are always there for you' and at the same time, the voluntary nature of friendship is generally recognised as making friendships a more fragile relationship. The phrase 'blood is thicker than water' suggest that, when the going gets tough, less can be expected of friends than kin. On the other hand, a friend who is 'always there for you' is particularly special, precisely because this is not a normative requirement, It

is the informality of friendship and the lack of any overarching set of framing rules that that perhaps sets it aside from family relationships.

On the other hand, by the end of the 20th century, family relationships are meant to be friendship like. Studies of who gives what to whom suggest that the rules of reciprocity operate in both many kin and friendship relationships. Only modest giving or receiving is generally regarded as appropriate if there is little hope of return, with the possible exception of the inherently asymmetric relationships of parent-child and grandparent-child relationships. In contemporary Anglo-American culture, friendship-like relationships are often idealised as more precious than formal hierarchical kin relationship or impersonal instrumental relationships. A philosopher recently described friendship as a form of love in which we love our friends for themselves, their unique qualities, and not for tasks they perform for us which could equally well be performed by others (Professor Alexander Nehamas, University of Princeton, Gifford lectures, 2008, on the theme of friendship). However, since the 1950s sociologists have observed that modern family relationships and romantic sexual partnerships are not supposed to be instrumental. The route to 'good relationships' that is particularly valorised in contemporary popular culture and by contemporary relationship experts is that of sharing thoughts and feelings, a mutual dialogue of disclosing innermost selves. This is supposed to occur between partners and friends, and also to some extent between parents and children who are also supposed to know each other through talk. British research demonstrates that active kin relationships often have elements that are typically friendship like. With the possible exception of parent-child relationships, kin relationships are quickly allowed to atrophy if they feel like pure obligation devoid of pleasurable quality. [This does not mean that there is no power at all in the notion of the permanence of kin. Long lasting friendship relationships that come to be seen as life long relationships are often described as kin-like, like sisters and brothers, in order to convey their special character.] Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl's recent study published as the book *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* uses the word friendship to encompass relationships with partners, kin and friends because some people call partners, particular kin and friends, 'friends' when they sum up the positive quality of their relationship. Again the authors find a range of qualities attributed to friends and conclude friendship 'at its strongest, it is based on trust, commitment and loyalty' (2006, 210).

How does friendship contribute to people's wellbeing? How do we know this?

One of the core themes of the academic discipline of sociology is theorising the development of the self. This is an interest shared with some other social sciences including social psychology. Many traditions of sociology and other social sciences see the acquisition of a self as simultaneous with the process of being socialised becoming part of a wider social world or society. We are born into a social world that predates our birth and the development of our sense of self is bound up with induction into that social world. Similarly, sustaining our sense self across our life-time is bound up with the process of contributing to and sustaining a social world. Friends and family are 'our significant others', our most important immediate social world. They are key players in affirming and shaping our sense of self and society; those

with whom we do the most to acknowledge and distinguish ourselves, and to create a sense of moral order.

Because our first, most encompassing and enduring significant relationships are usually with parents and perhaps siblings, in many traditions of sociology and psychology carer/parent-child relationships are seen as the most significant relationships in terms of the basic architecture of our sense of self. Relationships with significant others are typically emotionally charged, they involve affect feelings for, caring about, affection, love and perhaps also more negative emotions. It is not only Freudian psychoanalysts who believe the quality of relationship between a child and his or her main carer can shape the foundations of emotional life. However, childhood friends are often also theorised as key relationships in terms of development of the self in childhood. Successfully developing friendships is seen as a necessary step in growing up, making a shift from emotional dependence on the given relationships of family to finding social and emotional support in more autonomous and direct negotiation with a wider social world.

There are different understandings of how we maintain and recreate ourselves as whole people who are and believe ourselves to be worthwhile and worthy human beings. Some theorists see selves as shaped early on in life and then continuing to run in moral order through the vagaries of life, many theorists see us as more malleable and literally remade through our everyday social interactions both face to face and with more mediated discourses. If the self needs constant rebuilding then friends have an enduring significance as key players in sustaining a sense of who you are and what you are about. Hence friends are key players in our wellbeing.

If positive personal relationships are fundamental to wellbeing then it is possible that friends might sometimes compensate for deficits in family relationships. Certainly there are some suggestions of this in research. People who have not partnered or had children are often more reliant on friends in older age than those who have 'family', for example. However, the research also suggests that being rich or poor in family support sometimes goes together with also being rich or poor in friends. For example older working class men lacking family often also lack friends. A number of studies have shown that children living with foster parents have few friends and children living with one parent have fewer friends than children living with two parent families (Brannen et al.).

Psychologists identify positive personal relationships as the key factors in maintaining wellbeing and friends can play a major role. At the last conference Bridget Daniels was talking about children's resilience, factors that protect and enable children to thrive despite adversity. Resilience is associated with at least one secure positive familial relationship, positive peer relationships and good friendships. Bridget talked about how friends can help buffer the effects of stress and boost wellbeing through fun and companionship. In my own work with Gill Highett on children's social support systems when experiencing family change, children themselves talked about the importance of their friends. Some valued talking to friends they knew they could trust or could 'keep a secret'; being able to talk to those who had experienced similar family change to themselves was particularly valued. But others didn't want to talk to friends about their family or didn't seek friends as confidantes. Rather they just

wanted to have fun with friends. They much preferred being diverted from feeling sad by being with their friends without focusing on their problems with their friends.

How can you measure the impact of friendship on people's wellbeing?

Precisely measuring the impact of friendship on wellbeing is near impossible. However, attempts at measurement are made particularly in the psychological literature. For example there have been large scale surveys that have asked people questions about how happy they feel which are taken as a subjective measure of their wellbeing and correlated the answers with how many friends people have (Myers, 2000). This generally shows that people who have few friends are less likely to be happy than people who have many friends. The authors go on to cite other research which 'confirms a correlation between social support and well-being. For example, those who enjoy close relationships cope better with various stresses, including bereavement, rape, job loss, and illness.' Again these studies have used measurement in similar ways seeking correlations between number of friends and answers to questions about coping. The importance of friendship can also be evidenced if not measured by what people say about what helped them when they were living through difficult periods, as in the study of children experiencing family change.

Can you separate out which elements of friendship it is that make the greatest contribution to wellbeing?

There are many elements of friendship and no clear agreement about what makes the greatest contribution to wellbeing. Feeling accepted, a sense of belonging, feeling able to take it for granted that we are known, valued for ourselves and cared about by people that we know, value and care about are important for the stability of our selves and the social fabric of our world. People are very varied in the part friends play in their everyday life and this can change radically across a life course. The way that people talk about friendship suggests that there is comfort in knowing friends are there, even when they are not seen or actively drawn on in any major way. Feeling there is 'someone to turn to', people you can trust and confide in may be more important at some stages of the life course and people to relax with, or have fun with may be more important at others.

Can friendship have a detrimental effect on wellbeing? And can we identify why and when this might be the case?

Research also shows that everyday friendships do not necessarily match the idealised picture of friendship. Friendships are not exempted from becoming burdensome and obligatory. In some circumstances, friendship relationships can become more chore than pleasure. Also research continues to find people talking in ways which suggest more instrumental and sometimes exploitative concerns with what friends can do for you.

There is also a possibility that good friends are not always good for you. If friends make living in bad situations tolerable then people are less likely to develop exit strategies. So for example, a study of a very deprived housing estate in the North of

England shows that young people wanted to stay in the area despite its bad reputation and poor amenities because the only supports they had were from family and/or friends in the locality and they had very limited access to experience of living anywhere else. In some contexts, friends might be providing support for a self that neutralises or valorises actions that others regard as anti-social behaviour or for behaviour that can ultimately be self-destructive such as heavy drug and alcohol abuse.

The flip side of the significance of social interaction with friends to being supported in a sense of self as worthy and worthwhile human beings is the possibility of selves being shaped by the fear of being ostracised, criticised and excluded. Studies of children's interactions in school settings document many instances of negative sanctioning and policing of identities, particularly of each other's gender and sexual identities. It is through interactions in peer relationships and sometimes also in friendships that racisms, sexism and homophobia are most strongly communicated in school settings.

How are friendships created? What makes people 'gel'?

If there are significant social divisions in a society, then, not surprisingly, friendships are much more common between people in the same category as themselves. In our society friendships are more common among people of the same sex, age, ethnicity and social-class background than they are across any of these divisions. Although of course friendships across divisions can happen. The main reasons are both simple and complex and can be summed up as opportunity, predisposition and social sanctioning and these can be illustrated through children's friendships.

- **Opportunity:** For children, the social composition of their classmates frames their opportunities, and contains them in age-specific cohorts and often also socio-economically, religiously and ethnically specific cohorts.
- **Predisposition:** Even before arriving at school, early socialisation may have made us unconsciously more comfortable with certain sorts of people, for example talking and acting like others we know, and to varying degrees of wariness rather than curiosity about difference.
- **Social sanctioning:** This is easiest to recognise with respect to gender. A great deal of research shows that being a boy or being a girl has often already taken on considerable significance for children by five. Those who feel relatively unmarked by gender may learn not to sustain this in the face of others declaring its significance. Girls make more friendship bids to boys than boys to girls and strong cultural pressures still remain in place to make boys more fearful of being seen as 'being like a girl' than vice versa.

Becoming friends is sometimes a process of 'something clicking' (Willmott, 1987) a feeling of being attuned to another person because of something. The valuing of the other person for whatever is perceived as their unique and pleasing qualities, has been identified as a key defining characteristic of the strength of friendship (Wright, 1978).

However, just as romantic love is not always based on 'love at first sight' so friendship can build gradually without any such dramatic moment.

Are friendships different between genders, ages, races? What are the differences?

Psychological literature has long suggested different styles of friendship among girls and boys, with girls tending to form small, intimate, communicative and co-operative groups or pairs and boys large, hierarchical, activity focused and competitive groups. More recent research suggests that differences have been exaggerated and inappropriately isolated from analysis of the cultural and social construction of gender. A detailed study of Californian nine-year-olds at play (Thorne 1993) documented considerable overlap as well as variation between boys and girls. For some boys, the pattern of their friendship was dyadic. She also found girls in large groups of the type which the literature often attributes to boys. Indeed girls who have best friends and do things as a pair may also play in larger groups because interaction varies by activities and context. As well as documenting overlap in the friendship practices of girls and boys, she provided a feminist analysis of the ways in which friendship practices and interactions in play construct gender difference. She showed that many boys already saw being a boy as involving superiority and a mastery enacted in play. Boys controlled more space than girls, invaded girls' space more than girls invaded theirs and acted out games in which girls but not boys were contaminated and contaminating. A number of authors have argued that the dominant form of masculinity in many cultures, with its emphasis on mastery, encourages relationships between adult men which are sociable without being self-revelatory. Many men may prefer to show their care for each other instrumentally through the practical help of fixing, mending or by building up a history of taking pleasure in doing things together.

Just as the different circumstances of being a man or being a woman impacts on friendship patterns, so do the different social, cultural and material and financial circumstance of age, ethnicity, or social class positions. For example, people with fewer resources may self-censor their friendships to prevent entering into exchanges that cannot be sustained. Middle-class people are more likely to invite friend to their home than working-class people who are more likely to keep friendships to the specific contexts in which the friendship formed. Older working-class men are perhaps particularly vulnerable to social isolation because of the combination of gender, age and class circumstances.

'Older men are more likely to seek emotional support from their partners than older women (confiding in a partner, talking to a partner when upset, and talking to a partner about health matters), and women are more likely to seek practical help from men. ... in respect of their own needs, women may seek alternatives to their partner (a daughter or female friend being the most likely confidante). Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips and Ogg, 2001, 123). In the areas studied, gender differences in using a partner as a confidant were much more extreme in the working-class area.

Do you think it possible to reap the benefits of friendship in a monitored, falsely created relationship like befriending?

The similarities between befriending relationships and everyday friendships are both an opportunity and a threat. An opportunity because they will bring some of the protective advantages of more informal support systems as well as drawing on the knowledge base of professional practitioners. A threat because of the potential for those who are befriended to see befriending as the same as friendship and then be disappointed. People who lack friends are often desperate to find them and may be more likely to want befriending to be friendship.

Some of the benefits of friendship can be derived to some degree from any friendly relationship. All friendly relationships involve acknowledging us and affording us a degree of respect as human beings. Also some of the aspects of friendship that are widely valued may be specifically fostered in a more professional befriending arrangement, most obviously trustworthiness, respect for privacy, readiness to act as a confidante.

Befriending relationships obviously deviate from friendships in a number of respects. Being friends suggests equality and choice, but befriending might involve negotiating and managing a degree of inequality and lack of reciprocity because one person has something that the other has not which is being passed on. Everyday friendships, however, sometimes manage and effectively set aside such inequalities. But befriending relationships are not only formally created and given rather than informal and spontaneously chosen but also may have more specific instrumental purposes and known lifespans with definite exit points.

Studies of mentoring relationships and of relationships between vulnerable adults and their carers have shown that formal mentoring and caring relationships are often interpreted as friendships by those who are mentored or cared for. Studies of mentored young people describe the bewilderment of some when their relationship with their mentor failed to become a friendship relationship (Colley, 2003). The factors that young people across different types of mentoring schemes particularly valued in mentors were friendship like: mentors who accepted them 'on their own terms', were prepared to 'share a laugh', and with whom they shared mutual trust, reciprocity and a sense of continuity of the relationship (Philip et al, 2004, Philip, 2008). Such a list could also be found in studies of friendship (Willmott 1987, Allan 1998). Young people are often keen to point out what it is that makes their relationship with a mentor 'special' and not just a formal relationship, for example, apparently simple affectionate gestures or acts that seemed to go beyond the requirements of their role (Clayden and Stein, 2005)

Research on relationships between support staff and people with learning difficulties also shows that possible confusions and asymmetries in understandings can arise. One project asked people with learning disabilities living in residential care and the paid support staff members who looked after them to map their social networks. They used a technique of mapping the closeness of relationships to the self on a diagram consisting of three concentric circles with the self in the middle. People with learning disabilities typically placed at least one paid member of staff in the inner circle of

their map. Carers rarely placed people with learning disabilities anywhere on their map and the few who did placed a client with learning disabilities on the periphery.

The reasons for the asymmetry are to do with different opportunities for friendship as well as the fact that professional caring roles have friendship like elements. The residential arrangements and social world of the learning disabled adults resulted in repeated and regular contact with a pool of paid carers who performed a range of practical caring and mentoring roles. While the carers had extensive social worlds elsewhere, the service receivers or clients did not. Hence, they may not have had other relationships which involved the routine physical contact and elements of self disclosure that characterised their relationships with staff. When asked to describe what they valued about the staff, friendship like elements were emphasised: 'they could talk to them easily, they would listen to their problems, helped them with their college work, spoke clearly, gave them individual attention, made them laugh, took them out, and were enjoyable company. In short, the data suggested that staff were valued because they accepted clients for who they were, could offer practical assistance and information, and provided emotional support and advice' (Pockney, 5.5, 2006). But paid worker almost never described their clients as friends and resisted an erosion of the boundaries between their position as paid carers and their clients.

Service providers and service users also had different perspectives concerning the degree of choice and reciprocity involved in their relationship that reflected their different circumstances and opportunities for making relationships. When clients identified staff as friends they were choosing individuals from the possible pool of carers with whom they interacted. The paid workers, on the other hand, saw their contact with clients as obligatory, the stuff of their paid employment. This was reinforced by an ethos of maintaining professional distance by treating all clients the same. Staff also took it for granted that their relationships with clients were asymmetrical; they gave care and clients received it. But many clients thought they had reciprocal relationships with staff because they spent considerable amounts of time and energy devising acts of kindness which they saw staff accept. The smooth and friendly running of everyday arrangements relied to some extent on the tacit collusion of staff in the idea that friendly relationships were friendship relationships.

This is an extreme example but it illustrates the potential blurring of befriending and friendship, the delicacy and importance of openness about the nature of the relationship, and of planning and forewarning and easing of exit.

On the other hand, some blurring between professional practice, being friendly and friendship is common across a wide range of relationships. In everyday life, trust is earned and built up over time and is a particular characteristic of exclusive intimate relationships. In professional practice, service providers promise their clients confidentiality and ask for trust by offering the guarantee of a system of rules of professional conduct. However, many client groups do not automatically hear this as meaning that they can indeed trust professionals. Children, for example, are often wary of taking their problems to professional 'strangers' (Highet and Jamieson, 2007). Hence professionals often resort to everyday techniques of building trust which can easily be confused with building friendship.

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