"I have found it hard to make real friends since this time": Difficult friendships, guilt and ontological insecurity

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The Realities Node (ESRC NCRM)

- Methodologically driven
- Two substantive research projects
- The Critical Associations Project
- Consists of a number of methodological ‘facets’
- The focus is on how ‘associations’ e.g. with friends, colleagues, acquaintances, allies etc can have a critical impact or influence on one’s life
- Critical here means good, bad, disruptive, empowering etc

Realities, part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods
‘You can choose your friends’ and other clichés

- Sociologically we are aware of the limitations on the ‘choice’ of friends (e.g. homophily)
- But of equal significance are the limitations on divesting oneself of friendships which have become difficult or problematic
- The ‘Individualisation Thesis’ would suggest that once a friendship ceased to be mutually beneficial it could be ended
- However, while this does happen, we were interested in the hidden stories of friendships enduring beyond mutual satisfaction, friendships which are negative, and also the whole domain of ambivalence around friendship.
- The term friendship is value-laden in a positive way, and so we wanted to explore whether there was a downside to friendship.

Mass Observation Directive

- The Directive on ‘The Ups and Downs of Friendship’ was sent out in November 2008.
- It went to 547 writers on the MO panel and we received responses from 135 women and 71 men.
- The age profile of respondents suggests a largely middle aged and elderly composition, the numbers of writers under the age of 29 is small.
- The occupational status of writers favours professional, public sector and highly skilled employees and a large proportion are retired.
- The vast majority of the men and women were married (43 and 79 respectively), 13 men and 13 women were single, 4 men and 10 women were cohabiting, 2 men were in same sex relationships and the rest were either widowed, divorced, one case of a LAT or their status was not known.
Age Range of Respondents

<table>
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<th>Age band</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td>70-79</td>
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<td>26</td>
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<tr>
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N = 206

Difficult Friendships

- Persevering with a friendship was often seen as a matter of duty (i.e. friend going through a bad patch, or has no other friends)
- Women were more likely to feel this duty
- If men ‘put up with’ people it was usually for the sake of their wives
- Often women were mocked (by family) for putting up with difficult or boring friends
Morality of (long) friendships

Some quotations from the data:

- “You can’t abandon old friends even when they get tiresome” (R2144, F. age 73)
- “Also by that time I knew that she was terminally ill so it would have been unthinkable to change the situation” (B1475, F. Age 65)
- “Now I am more sensitive to [my friends’] feelings, more tolerant and willing to compromise, and more grateful for what they’ve put up with and how much they have stuck by me.” (B3968, M. Age 42)

Guilt and Grief

- Ending friendships can leave people feeling grief and guilt
- This is especially so if the closure is due to the friend’s misery or grief or depression etc
- “I spent a lot of time supporting her emotionally but I ran out of stamina (or maybe compassion) after a few months and I just wanted the friendship to revert to its original balance.” (M4132 F, age 42)
- Sometimes the friendship becomes tainted: there are just too many unhappy associations, and people want to make a fresh start. (Spencer & Pahl 2006: 94)
Ontological insecurity

- Getting to know others involves allowing them to get to know oneself
- More than this: one comes to know oneself through the eyes of the others who know you
- This is part of the reflexive construction of the self which is an iterative process
- But there are risks are entailed in this process because trust is embedded in this ‘being known’ to others
- When this trust is broken ontological insecurity can ensue.

Unsettling the Self (1)

1. This unsettling relates to a sense of lacking judgement in others. This can be quite upsetting because it seems to suggest a failure to read situations and others correctly
2. This relates to knowing oneself. Thus if a friend starts to avoid you, or to find fault, or to be abrasive in some way then it is possible to begin to doubt oneself, especially if you cannot see a cause for the change in the relationship

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‘It is in this mutual interaction and identification with others that a view of our own self is possible, because we judge our own conduct by viewing it as through the eyes of other people’. (Burkitt 2008: 10)
Betrayal and Doubt

“I felt betrayed and somehow cheated, and I wondered if I had imagined the whole friendship. But in the time we spent together they were constantly inviting me to join them without any obligation to do so [...]. If they simply did not like me why was I apparently welcome for so long? [...] I can only presume it was something more pervasive, something more general about me [...]. I feel that the whole incident with A and her family has left me doubting my ability to make long-lasting friendships. I no longer fret about it specifically but it has left its mark.”

(B1475, F age 65)

Meeting old friends and the Self

- We asked the MOP panel specifically about Friends Reunited and things like school reunions
- It is clear these were experienced as a mixed blessing
- Old friends come with baggage
  - Meeting friends who have changed (too much)
  - Being reminded of unhappy times
  - Being confronted by the ‘self’ that you once were

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Unsettling the Self (2)

Friendship has the potential to carry with it an intangible and disturbing aura when resurrected or revisited.

- "I look back over some of the friendships I have enjoyed year ago, but I don't feel that I'd ever like to get in touch with old friends again. I am a different person from the fellow they knew; my circumstances are different, my views have altered." (W 1382, M aged 84, married)
- "I like to think that I am a much improved model on my young self – much more tolerant, thoughtful, considerate and kinder." (W1813 F age 58)
- "For me, this experience did put a lot of ghosts back to sleep. I won't repeat the experience as that was just right for me." (S3845 M age 42)

The Gender of Friendship

- "have never got close enough to anybody for a friendship to become difficult so have no experiences to relate." (S 3035, M age 61, married)
- Differently gendered modes of 'story telling' or differently gendered styles of doing friendship?
- If doing friendship is entwined with the construction of the self, and if the self is gendered, then we should expect to find gender differences
- But selves can be gendered in complex ways and many men waxed lyrical about really important friendships and amongst those with few friends were those who felt it to be a failing.
- Perhaps friendship should be thought of as one of the mirrors of reflexive self gendering
Acknowledgements

1. Mass Observation material reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

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