

“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

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'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

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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.

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Age Range of Respondents

Age band	Men	Women	Total
20-29	3	9	12
30-39	11	19	30
40-49	13	19	32
50-59	7	23	30
60-69	15	28	43
70-79	11	26	37
80-89	10	11	21
90+	1	0	1
			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

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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)

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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)

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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.

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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

* * *

'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)

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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)

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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)

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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

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Acknowledgements

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