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## The borderology of friendship in academia

Claus Emmeche\*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay is a contribution to a borderology of friendship in academic research. Borderology is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of two or more sets of phenomena that are informationally complex, interrelating, and involving both real phenomenal and disciplinary conceptual borders. Academic research and the ties of friendship may, more often than not, be interrelated, though few scholars have studied these interconnections in any detail. There is a certain messiness to both phenomena, related to demarcation problems, e.g., how to define friendship as distinct from other interpersonal relations like acquaintanceship, collegiality, parental or romantic love, etc. Some of the sparse literature on friendship in academia is reviewed, and an interview-based study from the perspective of sociology of science is presented, aiming at elucidating the benefits and perils of close ties of friendship among researchers at universities. In a borderological attempt to make space for interdisciplinary approaches to friendship as a cluster of important interpersonal relations in human life, some remarks are finally made about friendship as a messy category that has been partially investigated from the perspectives of different disciplines.

**Keywords:** borderology, work friendship, intellectual friendship, collaboration and competition, collegiality, cronyism

### On the cooperation of researchers – an introduction

*For all trouble there is sympathy, and for love there is memory, and these are the head and the heart talking to each other in quiet friendship.<sup>1</sup>*

It was philosopher of science Karl Popper who famously described the special relation among working researchers as “the friendly-hostile cooperation of scientists” (Popper, 1994: 7, 93, 209). Popper called attention to the fact that scientific objectivity cannot be ascribed to a pure stance of disinterestedness or impartiality of virtuous individuals, but is rather a social feature of scientific methodology and scientific institutions’ approach to knowledge production, exposing competitive participants to mutual criticism. This tension between friendly relations and competitive (or even hostile) relations can be seen as a reflection of the normative system of science and scholarship, as studied by the sociology of science. In this essay we will ask what friendliness and friendship more generally may mean, both inside and outside academia, and how various degrees of

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friendship and collegiality play a role in the whole fabric of public research that unfolds within universities as modern institutions. Researchers are expected to communicate openly about their findings, and improve work by collaboration as well as constructive criticism. The formal or semi-formal roles of scientific colleagues and peers are enacted within complex institutional settings that may vary according to national or cultural contexts, but they also share some normative similarities across epistemic cultures, at least to the extent that we deal with research in the sense of inquiry, be it in the domains of the natural and social sciences or in the humanities. The rather informal norms of friendship – enacted in all spheres of human life – interact in interesting ways with the formal roles that are institutionally defined. Both natural scientists and scholars of the humanities can be considered as inquirers or researchers sharing some fundamental norms about rational investigation (Anderson et al., 2010), but one should acknowledge marked differences in styles of thinking and inquiring, depending upon the topics and chosen methods. Similarly, we can acknowledge both continuity and difference between knowledge produced within a formal institutional setting such as a university, and the knowledge, much more informal, implicit, and personal, created among a pair of friends knowing each other well; even so well that the very description of this as knowledge ‘produced’, as if on par with some commodity, is invoking a wrong set of connotations about the kind of communication that is the basis of this interpersonal relation. We should expect scientific knowledge and personal knowledge to share some similarities, as they are both of a dialogic nature, and yet be different, making their interrelationship quite complex.

This opens up a set of more general concerns and questions about borders, and how to study them, how to do a ‘borderology’ (see below): What are the borders between friendship and collegiality, between formal and informal norms, between being inside and outside an institution? Researchers are not just institutional agents acting according to formal norms within a system of education and research, but real people with all the psychic and social complexity this entails. What do we know about friendship and its borders to other relationships in such a setting? What role does the identity as a researcher (or the multiplicity of identities among researchers) play for friendship formation among researchers, and how can various disciplinary perspectives within the social sciences and the humanities (and even the biosciences) inform us about that? This essay does not claim to answer all these questions, but asking the right questions may be as difficult as finding answers, so I hope that starting to discuss precisely how to ask such questions is at least a beginning.

In the following section, I introduce borderology as an interdisciplinary way to frame complex questions involving human beings. This is followed by a brief review of some literature on friendship within academia, for a large part appearing as scattered observations. Next, I will introduce a recently started study on friendship and collegiality among researchers at Danish universities, with a focus on the normative ambivalence of its character. In the final section, the notion of friendship will be related to the possibility of combining different disciplinary perspectives.

### **Borderology as an approach to human complexity**

Borderology<sup>2</sup> as used in this essay can be defined as an interdisciplinary study of borders between different phenomena that are 1) *informationally complex* in the sense of being non-compressible into simple descriptions, especially phenomena involving human beings in an organized context of culture, history, society, psychic constitution, etc., 2) studied and theoretically framed by two

or more disciplines. The notion of complexity has a well-defined formal grounding in algorithmic information theory (Chaitin, 1992), and fits the modernist idea that the very aim of science is to give brief, concise and general schemes (natural laws, explanatory schemes, theories, models, principles of regularity) for understanding complex phenomena. However, this idea has also met widespread scepticism, both from within science, underlining emergent phenomena (Anderson, 1972), from philosophy of science, focusing on multiple perspectives (Giere, 2006), and from science studies, foregrounding irreducible messiness (Law and Mol, 2002). Apart from economics, few sciences of human and social phenomena could deal with complexity in formal ways. Borderology accepts the formal definition of informational complexity, but opts for informal and comparative approaches as well, in appreciation of the limits of formal reductionist strategies. The 'incompressibility' of descriptions in the human and social sciences simply becomes a metaphor for the need to work with 'thick' descriptions (Geertz, 1973), or what would be seen within the hermeneutic tradition as a steady process of expanding our culturally determined horizon of understanding. 'Complex' in this sense refer to phenomena that need to be described by two or a multiplicity of irreducible perspectives (cf. Gallopin et al., 2001), often rooted in different research disciplines.

Thus, borderology can be seen as a middle way between the two extremes of either renouncing any aim for generality of knowledge, or clinging to reductionist approaches in situations where simplified models only lead to reification or useless formalisms. Borderology as an interdisciplinary approach works in the risky trading zones between general theories and recalcitrant observations, it balances between an aim for rational coherent understandings and a due regard for phenomenal messiness, mediating between established paradigmatic preconceptions that tend to disregard anomalies, and the serendipitous findings of uniqueness and surprising phenomenal irregularity, shaking the observer and stimulating further inquiry. This epistemological stance of borderology is supplied with an investigatory approach that focuses upon various types of borders, both *de re* and *de dicto*, phenomenal and conceptual, borders in the world and borders between research disciplines and their corresponding perspectives.

By investigating friendship in academia, we meet both relational borders of friendship, (like questioning if a person is just a colleague or also a friend of some kind) and disciplinary borders between attempts to investigate the very notion and practice of friendship more in detail, such as the vague borders between anthropological, sociological and historical studies of friendship. The later, disciplinary border is investigated as part of a study of interdisciplinarity, with friendship as a case, to be reported separately; in this essay the focus is the relational border between friends and colleagues. Moreover, research as being situated within specific institutional settings can be scrutinized from a borderological perspective, discerning borders between distinct regimes of governance, like what is typical for a modern research university, or, for instance, liberal arts colleges, and it is relevant to ask how such settings may influence intellectual friendship among researchers and/or students.

### **Collegiality and friendship in academia – a brief review**

In a comment to Popper's above mentioned labelling of the critical attitude of scientists, Hildur Kalman remarks that even though critique among colleagues is well meant, and given in order to improve the work, it may be hard to handle on the emotional level. Critique may take the form of "outburst of irritation and impatience with what one perceives to be a completely mistaken way of tackling a research issue" (Kalman, 2014: 40), and though it is sometimes perceived by the receivers as useful and supportive, it may also cause frustration and seem uncomprehending. This ambivalence raises questions about how researchers handle collaboration and competition in

research and the interplay between formal and informal work relations as mentioned in the introduction. What is the role of friendship among research colleagues, and in general the role of friendship in science and scholarship? These questions pertain to the intersection between friendship studies in general and the history and sociology of science, but the research literature (at least the English part that I have been able to access) seems to be quite sparse and far from being systematic. So what follows is a slightly impressionistic account of a rather dispersed literature.

For the self-organized formation of the first scientific societies in Europe and the 'Republic of Letters' of the early modern period, informal friendship among scholars had a vital importance (Kühn, 2011) in addition to the learned societies' general emphasis of friendliness or sociability and civic improvement for the public good (Honeybone, 2005). One of the places this can be traced is in the mutual exchange of ideas and how individual scholars could have a lasting impact upon their fellows. In his amazing historical mapping of the intellectual sociology of philosophy in the East and West, Randall Collins (1998) emphasizes the importance of such personal ties. In his many fascinating maps of intellectual networks among philosophers Collins distinguishes between ties of acquaintance, ties of master-pupil, and ties of conflict, but unfortunately he does not analyse intellectual friendship as such.

One may think that the formation of friendship among individual scholars and natural philosophers played a crucial role especially in the formative phase of science in the early modern period, in contrast to late modernity. Today, as science is professionalized and institutionally entrenched, friendship between scientists or scholars are often seen as potentially problematic, and even as something "marginalised in the practices of scholarship" (Goodrich 2003: 25). One of the synonyms of friend in English is 'crony', a word that may invoke the negative connotation that mutual benefits shared by cronies are realized at the expense of others. Thus, cronyism denotes the appointment of friends and associates to positions of authority, like a professorship, without proper regard for qualifications, merits, or fair hiring procedures (similar to nepotism; the favouring of family and kin in appointments).<sup>3</sup>

The historian of friendship Eva Österberg locates the dangers of cronyism in public life at large within the formation of national states of the early modern period (Österberg, 2010: 74ff). Here, the advent of bureaucratic rules, financial controls and state monopoly of violence were the crucial elements of state building, a process that in principle should lower the importance of informal contacts, friendship alliances and patron-client relationships in public life. In practice, though, bureaucracy and meritocracy on the one hand, and personal loyalty on the other hand, existed for a long time in parallel. Nevertheless, state building was a central part of what transformed friendship, love and sexuality into phenomena mostly viewed as private, personal and informal relations, while in the classical and medieval period, they were not seen quite as sharply demarcated from the public sphere. According to the classics, a virtuous friendship between two good men would not only lead to the individual's increase of self-knowledge and integrity, it would also enrich society. Österberg notes that with the advent of democracy and welfare states, patronage and networks of friends and kin "lost something of their charm in public life. Instead, formal instructions, and written rules, the principles of unbiased meritocracy and rational bureaucracy, increasingly characterised public life" (Österberg, 2010: 79). Of course this pertains also to the public institutions of science, although the details of this story remains to be written.

It is difficult to say why there are so few (or zero?) studies having cronyism in academia in focus; the phenomenon may be rare, invisible and too difficult to investigate, or simply a taboo. Sociologists have pointed out that cronyism can be institutional as well as cognitive, where 'cognitive cronyism' means a behaviour of researchers acting favourably towards members of a school of thought to which they belong themselves, while treating members of other 'schools' adversely; Travis and Collins (1991) illustrate this with material drawn from observation of grant-awarding committees of the British Science and Engineering Research Council, finding that committee members sometimes make decisions based upon their membership in scientific schools of thought. Travis and Collins may be right about their worry that cognitive cronyism acts in a conservative way, making it difficult to maintain a vital level of "adventurousness, diversity, and risk-taking in science" (Travis and Collins, 1991: 337), but is this an instance of favouritism at a level involving personal friendship between particular researchers? It seems to be more like a group phenomenon, perhaps related to a political notion of friendship as organized by a basic friend-stranger, friend-enemy, or own group-foreign group dichotomy, and thus similar to more archaic understandings of friendship among *hetairoi* (comrades, cf. Konstan, 1997) or political groupings (cf. Smith, 2011, on Carl Schmitt).

It is easier to access researchers' positive experiences of academic friendship – a term that suggests an easy balance between the Mertonian norms of science (the free sharing of knowledge, objectivity, disinterestedness, universality, etc. (Macfarlane and Cheng, 2008; Anderson *et al.*, 2010)) and the norms of friendship (including a certain exclusivity and preferential care for the friend) – but there seems to be a lack of empirical inquiry into the tensions within such a balance. The proposal by higher education scholar Jon Nixon to advance friendship as an ideal implicit in shared academic practices aspiring to "a virtuous university" (Nixon, 2008), in contrast to the current trends of running universities in terms of economic efficiency, is highly inspiring and timely, but appearing as a philosophical-political programme it needs a complement in the form of a deeper analysis of the relation between the virtuous and the more 'political' forms of friendship at the university. That relates to the above-mentioned border between different regimes of governance in higher education, especially a difference between, on the one hand, a modern research university, in which an instrumental approach to 'knowledge production' is often predominant, putting high emphasis on ranking and measuring performance, and, on the other hand, liberal arts colleges and programmes with problem based learning, that emphasize the process of common exploration and acquisition of knowledge. Though strategic political friendships exist in both types of institutions, the research university may have forgotten the possibility of cultivating shared processes of learning together, collectively, that are closer to the classical forms of intellectual or virtue friendships (Brann, 1979; Kronman, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

There is much anecdotal material on scientists as friends, even science as a "medium for friendship" (Keller, 2006), for instance in obituaries or research biographies dwelling at length on stories of close intellectual friendships, like the ones Niels Bohr had with Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg and other scientists. A study of friendship between archaeologists around the World War II shows the force of common beliefs in science as an objective and international collaborative enterprise across ideological divides, even though political tensions indeed influenced the research (Díaz-Andreu, 2007). A recent study focusing on the positive aspects of academic friendship, conceptualized within a framework of networked social capital, shows that collaboration with friends has a positive effect on scientists' publication productivity, and the study claims that this type of personal relationship is an underutilized resource in academia that could aid integration of the scientific community (Kiopa, 2013).

While friendship in the modern sense is a rather non-institutional relationship, more formal relationships like marriage may obviously include qualities of close friendship between the

companions. Historians of science have studied cases of companionship in science, a relationship that in the shape of marriage becomes an institutionally visible relation, and thus more prone to anti-nepotism regulations.<sup>5</sup> One may wonder about the extent to which friendships in contemporary science are clandestine, or relatively downplayed by the friends, or simply neglected by the work environment, even in the context of research collaboration.<sup>6</sup> The recent disquisition by Shenk (2014), not about friendship as such but about the powers of collaboration in general, makes exciting claims about the intellectual synergies of couples, drawing on examples from science, business, art, music, and literature, and admits that no sharp distinctions between creative desire and physical desire can be drawn.

Mentorship is a familiar relation between research colleagues at different career stages in science and education, a relation that can easily develop into some form of friendship. Sassi and Thomas (2012) review literature on the mentor-protégé relation and use their own story to make a case for the possibility of using such a relation as a method in qualitative research on education, especially related to the fields of literature and multicultural studies. They posit that “future researchers who have been mentored into the profession through participation in their mentor’s research project may be better able to cope with the challenges of their own research later” (Sassi and Thomas, 2012: 840).

To conclude this section we can say that before science was institutionalized and clearly demarcated from philosophy, friendship among researchers may have had a more unambiguous and positive value than it officially appears to have after the institutionalization of research and the ‘privatization’ of friendship. Thus, Vanessa Smith and Richard Yeo, who edited a special issue of a history journal that considered the role of friendship in the conduct of philosophy and the sciences in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, note that “friendship in all its varied and extended forms, often transcending religious and national affiliations, was one relationship through which ideas and information were swapped and debated, intellectual debts incurred and paid, reputations made and broken” (Smith and Yeo, 2009). There is no doubt that the contingencies of history have influenced the later status of friendship, both generally and within science. To quote Österberg again, “the great classical and medieval minds generally held that an ideal friendship aspired to do a good for a higher end: for Aristotle, by associating with the best friends to become as wise and just a man in civic life as in private; for Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux, by joining with a friend to seek God. In modern society, the emphasis is instead on friendship as private, personal, and emotional” (Österberg, 2010: 118). Let us then ask how this ‘privatized’ notion of friendship tallies with the notion of professional research colleagues.

### **Talking with researchers about friendship and collaboration**

The study presented here is part of an empirical research project within philosophy and sociology of science.<sup>7</sup> The project aims to investigate the structural relationships within a university as an academic and educational work organization between different kinds of interpersonal relationship roles, such as the roles of being professional colleagues (collegiality) collaborating on research projects and educational programs and competing for reputation, positions, and funding; or being mentors and mentees (mentorship) at different levels of the career hierarchy, including seniors supervising and advising doctoral students; or being good friends in some sense of social, intellectual, or other types of friendship – and eventually, just to complete the picture, being in

other intimate relationships like being lovers, or family (parent, child, uncle, cousin, etc.). The focus here will be collegiality and friendship.

Considering academic science and scholarship as reputational work organizations (Whitley, 2000) that focus on the quality of the output produced, i.e., knowledge, competencies, we are interested in how the professional norms of such organizations *interact with, balance, or collide with* the more informal norms and expectations of an intimate relationship like friendship (with norms like equality, voluntariness, reciprocity, trust, loyalty, honesty, self-disclosure, confidentiality). In what situations will intellectual collaboration be conceived of in purely professional terms and kept separate from different kinds of work-related friendships, and what conditions may allow for a closer balance or even synergy between collegial collaboration and genuine friendship? How do academics handle the threat of favouritism understood as the practice of giving unfair preferential treatment to one person or group at the expense of another, especially in its forms of favoring kin (nepotism) or friends (cronyism)? How is that threat perceived? Are nepotism and cronyism seen as bad in themselves, or is it rather the disclosure of such behavior that is the source of concern? Do academics distinguish between good and bad forms of favoritism? In other spheres like small private family firms there may be no fear of nepotism, it may even be cultivated. Moreover, not all forms of favoritism are institutionally prohibited, as a university can have policies for recruiting young rather than elder talent, women rather than men in areas with an unequal gender distribution among the staff, or enact affirmative action and quota systems for ethnic and other minority groups.

We are interested in these questions seen in the context of the academic workplace – a department or a local research group – as being not just a space for collegial collaboration and competition, but also a space for conflicts on a professional as well as a personal level, conflicts that could, but need not, be about nepotism/cronyism. In dialogues conducted as semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008), we enquire about the employee's general experience of not only academic collaboration and competition but also other work-related conflicts. What are the experiences of such conflicts, how are they handled and reflected upon? In conducting the interviews we were open to the fact that far from all may be willing to tell about serious conflicts. All the researchers interviewed were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality as prescribed by the standard norms of qualitative research.

The interview guide, developed to help facilitate the dialogue, opens with questions concerning the individual researchers' social work situation, the nature of collaborations, etc. We aim at an open conversation making it possible to deviate from the guide to explore unexpected details in more depth than is possible in quantitative surveys. Two research assistants conducted 24 interviews with research staff employed at university campuses in the Copenhagen area housing departments of the universities of Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Aalborg. The semi-structured qualitative research interviews, of about an hour each, were audiotaped for later analysis. As this study is a spinoff from a project mapping the humanities in Denmark, we targeted research staff (professors, associated professors, assistant professors, senior lecturers, post-docs, Ph.D.-students) primarily within the humanities (departments of language, history, culture, literature, communication, media, etc.), but also staff from a few social science, health science and natural science departments was included as a comparative contrast.

The aim is thus to gather confidently told stories about concrete experiences by anonymous interviewees as an empirical basis for reflecting on and theorizing about normative systems in academic workplaces. The project is explorative, without a specific hypothesis to test, open to surprises and inviting the contacted researchers to use the conversation as a space for reflection on their own experiences. As a preliminary exploration the study is realized in a spirit



of fallibilism and allowed to fail from certain points of views. Considering this area of research is underexplored and in need of new ideas and hypothesis-generating approaches, the project is open for conceptual play and musing and we hope to inspire our readers to further reflection and new critical questions.

So what do the researchers say about their “friendly-hostile cooperation” within the academe? Some examples are presented below. No representativeness regarding sociological factors (age, gender, class, discipline, career stage, etc.) is intended. Many of the interviews reveal interesting examples of normative ambivalences (Merton, 1973; Carolan, 2010; Nielsen, 2012; Kiopa, 2013) that influence the very experience of interpersonal relations in the academic workplace and the normative system of science. The points presented here are grouped in themes dealing with borderlines between collegiality and friendship; hierarchy; working collaboratively; and the awareness of conflicts of interests and nepotism/cronyism.

### **Friends at work? Miracles and minefields**

An associate professor in a language department mentioned in passing some of his old ‘collegial friends’<sup>8</sup> and was then asked if he distinguishes between colleagues and friends?

That’s a good question. It is a continuum. Among the people I have worked with, there are some of my closest friends, personal friends, people I would confide serious events in my private life. And she who’ll arrive here, if I may interject this, I collaborate with her within the (...) -field, she has also become one of my very good friends along the process. So that’s it. And then there’s the whole continuum, down to people it’s nice to have met at a conference, so it’s easy to send them an email; people you may well have academic exchanges with, but you’re not sitting confiding in extensive detail, you wouldn’t call them when things come to a head. So it is ... I cannot always distinguish between them; and sometimes, as a professional, you spend a very large part of your social life by dealing with colleagues.

— *But is it possible to have a so-called real friendship while working together?*

Certainly, I do think it’s possible. You know, NN, with whom I’ve written a book, is absolutely one of my closest friends. And we were so before we started writing the book, and *mirabili dictu* our friendship survived to write the book – a book we started to write in 1997 and it was published in 2011! (Professor D, q213).

There is often this awareness of type differences when one categorizes relationships, and also an acknowledgement of continuity between the types, and a valuation of the different advantages of these types. In a collaboration with a close friend, according to this professor, if one is temporarily troubled by disease or some other circumstances of life, he trusts his friend will show a supportive understanding of his lower performance; “I do not have to be afraid to lose face academically, because I don’t have that much face to lose to him, as he knows me very

well at the outset” (D, q223). Knowing each other closely sets the energy free to concentrate on the work, rather than showing off one’s excellence.

Another associate professor from a department of education takes a more sceptical stance on the nature of close friendship combined with collaborative relations, and hints at a classical view of real friendship as having no external or instrumental purpose:

Well, then you must define what friendship is. I thought about that when I got this invitation. I will divide it into three categories: There are genuine friendships, there are colleagues, and in between there are the more friendly or friendship-like relationships. If you have the classic definition that friendship is something that is an end in itself, there is no instrumental interest at all. So I would say that it is naïve to think that one’s collaborators are friends in that sense: Because you are together, in order to ... well because *thinking* is a social occurrence, you cannot think alone. If you are excluded from social contexts, it is not possible to think. There are certainly exceptions in this world. But if you are completely isolated, there is no real thinking. So that implies that in so far as we have relationships with someone, it’s because, well, there is an interest. But then you have those relationships, such as old high school friends, there is no instrumental interest, but you are bound to them anyway. And then there are the colleagues that you can have a good relationship with, but besides work you have nothing to do with them. And then there are those in between, where it becomes a bit more of a mix of both, they are both somewhat instrumental, but also where a sort of bond of tenderness emerges. And it’s interesting these bonds, as they are so precarious. (Professor E, q586).

For this professor, the very context of work, the production of an output, even an intellectual one, for the benefit of some purpose defined outside the relationship, makes it impossible to see academic collaborations as instances of pure friendships.<sup>9</sup> Her view is connected to a view of colleagues as always potential or actual competitors, especially colleagues at one’s own institution:

Those at your own institution, there will be a stronger competitive situation, and it is deadly, for obvious reasons, for a friendship. But the competitive dimension is also with people from the outside, those colleagues you have friendship-like relations with. Also there may come situations where you are going to have an impact on their employment conditions. One can lose a friendship in such circumstances! Because you may have to disregard or pass over someone ... no matter how objectively justified it is and so on. So it’s a minefield. (E, q576)

Academics are not just objectively contesting knowledge claims within their field of expertise, they are simultaneously evaluating their peers applying for jobs, for funding, and in the critical review process before publication. And a genuine friendship would have to be very strong (even miraculous?) not to be susceptible to the pressures due to strong competition that easily lead to conflicts, personal withdrawal, etc.

## Closeness and distance

Close friendships within academia may have their roots outside, at earlier meeting points like sport clubs or previous education. A close friendship may help newcomers to survive the experience of a strongly hierarchic and competitive workplace, even though the friend is located in another department or university. A female Ph.D. student tells that

I have a really good friend, we've just spent some days in a vacation cottage, she writes a thesis at [another] University, and we use each other very much. But not as much as I would like, nor as much as she would like, I think – it's just that you have so many other things to do" (...) "There is only an overlap in our projects in theoretical background and general interests" (...) "Well, it's actually the friend I've had for the longest time, I knew her since high school. So she is a very very close friend in terms of personal relationships. I think that one of the reasons we've been able to continue to be friends, is that we've evolved much in the same direction – we've had the same educational interests and that's why we're like ... you know, it's a huge part of the joy of being together, that we can discuss these things, which we both miss having more people to talk to about. So, well, it's more like this: That because we have these professional things in common, we feel we are not kinda strangers to each other, and then, we get closer to each other, right? (Ph.D.-student A, q191).

There is a sense of friendship where the joy of being together with someone with whom you can be yourself is the essential part (Little, 2000), compared to its specific contents, like the sharing of interests and ideas and the mutual support, and its enabling conditions, like a non-competitive situation and some degree of equality. In the interviews done so far there are some indications that in general, having a relation of friendship to a person (in addition to being colleagues) is easier and more common when the two persons are at the same level of the meritocratic hierarchy. A postdoctoral fellow involved in a research group with several Ph.D. students and senior researchers at a big humanities department develops this reflection on the question:

My closest collegiate friendly relations, they are certainly here, at the department.

– *Also to people you work with?*

Yes.

– *Are there any of them that you would characterize as your friends?*

Yes.

– *And not just merely colleagues?*

Yes, many of them actually, I would say.

– *Is it the same kind of friendship that you could have outside work?*

Yes, it, ... uh, so, sometimes there may be, well, colleagues at the same level as yourself, other postdocs and things like that, so quite sure, yes. Eh, if you are in a more professionally unequal relationship, for example, you have a boss, then you may well mutually feel some kind of friendship, but there's also a professional relationship that must be upheld to some extent, that may interfere and conflict with the way we behave towards each other, compared to a similar situation outside the workplace, right?

– *Such as NN? [the boss]*

Yes, him for instance. Now that it is anonymous, he and I have a super good relationship, but he's also somehow my boss, right? You just have to keep that in mind sometimes. But there is another one, which I really also want to consider as my friend: MM, my former PhD supervisor, but I think that went well, however it means that there's like an extra dimension to it, which means that there is sometimes a greater distance.

– *Do you think it's easier to enter into a friendship with someone at one's own level?*

Yeah ... possibly. (Postdoc B, q131)

The interviews show some variation as to how discriminative individual staff members are regarding relationships seen as distinct types, or end points on a continuum, or both. It seems that younger staff like Ph.D. students are less discriminate regarding collegiality and friendship than senior staff – especially seniors in relation to young staff in non-permanent positions, probably in part because senior academics are often acting as supervisors, research leaders and evaluators in thesis committees, and may feel a need for professional reasons to keep some personal distance because of the unequal power relation involved. Conversely, colleagues that in fact also are friends within the same field of research may have a certain hesitance regarding collaboration. As a head of research and associate professor in a humanities department explained,

I think that people may be a little reluctant to be personal friends with academic collaborators. It's because at some point the professional cooperative relationship may break, or disappear, right? And what then about the personal friendship? (...) For example, I'm very good friends with NN, sitting down the hall, and it's clear that if I'm doing something in the (...) -field, which is his area, then I would talk to him about it and say 'do you want to join?' or 'how do we see this?', right? I would never do something that he felt was in competition or as in any way a problem for him. (...) And conversely, there is someone I know and we collaborate professionally, so you get a kind of professional friends, but I'm a little bit worried if they would also be my personal friends. (...) An example might be a graduate student or postdoc I work with, but at some point I might have to make a decision like 'now I cannot raise more grants for you', or 'I don't think you're good enough' or 'someone else need a grant', right? If we are personal friends, and I have to make such a decision, I actually have a problem. (...) Yes, it's because there is a power relationship involved. (Professor C, q821)

### **Working together – that feel for how much you should say**

A common stereotype is that researchers in the natural sciences work together in big teams, while the humanities are populated by loners who work in isolation on their own research projects, only in contact with other scholars via the archives and written monographs. This is often linked to the conventional image that interdisciplinarity is common in the natural sciences (think of topics like nanoscience, bio- or information technology) but not so for the human sciences. The reality is more complicated. In a study of the use of different sources and modes of interdisciplinary work, Palmer and Neumann (2002: 109) found that while “it is true that the scholars we studied did not usually work in formal research teams or coauthor many papers, they were all engaged in ongoing working relationships with other scholars and appeared much less isolated than the humanities scholars characterized in other studies.”

This is also the overall impression we get from this study. Although many scholars still prefer to author their own text, they do not write it completely on their own and they feel dependent upon (and gratitude for) the comments they try to get from colleagues, collaborating on anthologies or similar joint projects. However, collaboration on the production of academic texts, with its focus on achieving the best scientific quality of an article, book chapter or report, easily put some strain upon relaxed collegial relations, and may tend to make seniors or group leaders opt out of friendship. A research group leader told about her problems of getting her subordinate research colleagues and contributors to a collective work to accept the tedious process of re-writing papers: “We’ve been through a lot of wrangling about ‘yes, *but you have to re-write this one more time!*’” (Professor B, q003). Her colleagues were not used to this direct peer criticism as for them, peer review had either been relatively absent, or at least anonymous, and if you got a harsh feedback, you could soothe yourself that the unknown reviewer was simply ignorant. But faced with a direct critique, some had difficulties not taking it personally or turning it inward; as if they thought “I’m not good enough”:

and it is very very difficult when you sit and provide feedback and see the process within a person who really have ... who interpret things and ... I mean *it's about being professional and not personal!* - to keep this distinction! Because we are so much our disciplinary profession. We find it difficult to distinguish the person from the text: ‘what I write, *that* I am’. (Professor B, q999)

In a more secure and equal setting, a give and take of keen professional criticism could combine collegial collaboration and friendship, especially if the peers in question ranked equal at the same level of the academic hierarchy. However, for the research leader quoted here, it was important to get beyond ‘the personal’ and have a broad acceptance that criticism is a professional element, that it goes along with respect, and need not affect personal relationships. Thus asked about friends at the workplace this research group leader said that

I see all my colleagues as my friends, but they are not my personal friends. They are colleagues, work friends, and it has been quite important to me ... but we know a lot about each other, and we do have time in our academic work life to ask ‘how are the kids?’ or ... we also follow each other’s life, right? But it’s not that we see you at home, privately, on weekends, but we do take part. Part of being colleagues,

especially here, is that you also know who they are, what are their relationships - and when they are sad! (B, q864)

The aim seems to be a kind of balance, to achieve (*pace* Popper) not a hostile, but a friendly collegial sphere for relations at work (corresponding to professor E's middle category, see above). It is important for the smoothness of interactions to have a relaxed atmosphere so colleagues know a bit about each other's private aspects as persons without being close friends:

It's here we spend so much of our time. If you cannot be the person, be personal, uh, it gets boring, right? If you cannot relax and be yourself, if you are constantly just a professional and maintain a façade, so I think it ... I think in the workplace it's important that you sometimes can show who you also are. Tell about stuff that is not about one's profession. (...) But you also need to be aware that sometimes you have to ... it's like to have that feel for how much you should say and how much you shouldn't say. (B, q586)

Perhaps in part because being close friends may demand some emotional work at times, it can be experienced as too intense to combine collegial collaboration with personal friendship. This researcher had experienced such a close combination together with a few research colleagues previously, and told that "we had to withdraw a bit from each other, otherwise we got a little too close and you get easily a bit annoyed, like in a bad marriage [laughter], you have to know everything as friends – [sigh] but then it get's damn much work!" (B, q836). Often another concern is expressed, about other colleagues' view on such close personal bonds, creating potential tensions and suspicions about preferential treatment at the workplace.

### **Mentorship, friendly promotion or cronyism?**

At a university, as a public research institution, the border between, on the one hand, formal norms, explicit rules and legal provisions related to recruitment of new talent for research positions, and, on the other hand, informal norms and different forms of help, advice, support, mentoring and networking, may at times seems fuzzy, and these borders have to be enacted continually by senior researchers and officials in charge of hiring new research staff. Talking about the usual open competitions for positions, a senior researcher was asked

— *Are there specific problems due to competition? How about nepotism?*

Uh, let me say, if you observe us at the administrative level, then there is no doubt whatsoever that we are so nervous about being caught on anything. I can tell you that even if we just come close to something that conflict with the Public Administration rules on impartiality, we would simply jump out of the window! [roar] arrrrrhh! The legal officials who sit two doors further down, they simply begin to scream! So, I have a pretty good test for whether something is a disqualification issue, that is, I take it down to them, and if they don't scream, then I can continue. So at that level there is no doubt that ... what you *can* say, on the other hand, that is, that a lot of this stuff, it takes place – as one of my good colleagues says – by patronage. That is, you will find some people who are, uh,

some talented young people whom you can help, then, to line up and put forward. And along the way, you train them into your own ... I think, by the way, this has always occurred.

— *You mean, related to appointment?*

You can coach them into Ph.D. scholarships, you ... that type of thing. There'll be a lot of it. Eh, I cannot think of any pure case of nepotism. I can bring to mind people who make it through by patronage, right? And I can also recall that people have been hired to ... in order to lobby a particular point of view of a head of department, I can come up with that. But not something where you can say 'this stuff is like clear-cut nepotism, I like this person and therefore, such must be.' And competition is incidentally also too hard, they have to be able to perform independently, and if they cannot do so, there will come another and knock them out. (Professor D, q202)

This interesting testimony about patronage – in the standard sense of having the power to control or influence appointments to office – may not be surprising to academics who know the unwritten rules of the game. However, it disturbs any preconception that legal and transparent rules about fair hiring procedures, focusing exclusively on academic merit and teaching competences, is the only story to be told about safeguards against cronyism in the sense of patronage or clientelism, so difficult to document.<sup>10</sup>

There are good reasons for highlighting any special institutional context of testimonies like the quoted one about patronage. They often illustrate ways in which a *normative ambivalence* between formal and informal norms related to interpersonal relations can exist and be expressed: Namely as a system of legal checks against conflicts of interests and disqualifications related to peer based judgements that ought to be disinterested, objective, professional, and taking into account the documented merits of the persons involved – coexisting with informal ways of mentoring, promoting and protecting particular individuals within a local network, based upon a mixture of professional recognition and personal chemistry. It is clearly true, to use the expression of Österberg (2010: 79), that though patronage and networks of friends have lost their charm in public institutional life, the phenomena on both sides of the official private/public border – bureaucracy and meritocracy on the one side, and personal loyalty and various forms of friendship on the other side – still exist in parallel, also within the public institutions of science.

### **Discussion. Interdisciplinary friendship studies**

Studying the borderline between friendship and collegiality in academia in the context of patronage and normative ambivalence should not make us forget the positive functions of mentoring (Sassi and Thomas, 2012) or make us wary of friendship at the academic workplace altogether.

Especially in the context of institutions made for education and research, friendship, at least potentially under certain conditions, may be internally related to learning processes as part of the pursuit of truth and understanding. The engagement of friends exploring a topic together, not for the sake of an external purpose or to compete for prestige (see footnote 4), but for the sake of increased insight, may indeed thrive, given the right institutional settings. Friendship is

here not so much scaffolding the disclosure of personal experience in closed dyads, but rather something that fosters collaborative spaces for open exchange and exploration. This would be intellectual friendship as a model for research pursued for a common good, rather than research as modelled upon work as efficient knowledge production. It could be similar to what Flakne (2005), in her interpretation of Aristotle, calls *sunaesthetic* friendship. This term, derived from sunaisthesis, “with one foot in the theory of perception (*aisthesis*), and the other in social life (*suzen*)” (Flakne, 2005: 39) indicates the genesis of a self-relation mediated through the friend, by the sharing of thoughts and perceptions among ethical agents. The friends mutually correct their failures and misconceptions, not by merging their self or consciousness into a unit, but by living together in critical dialogue, making reflexivity possible.<sup>11</sup> Like in research, where a scientist is doubly oriented to an object of investigation and to the knowledge one has of that object, so sunaesthetic friends are oriented both to some object and to each other’s perception of it (Flakne, 2005: 49).

Such a model of friendship, taken up recently by political studies (Salkever 2008; Heyking 2008), may be further explored in educational contexts. Structural constraints and enablements for this type of friendship to unfold are important to consider in further studies: One can envisage a borderological investigation of differences and similarities between, on the one hand, liberal art colleges, explicitly committed to liberal education, where one might expect this kind of friendship among scholars to be more possible, and, on the other hand, research universities, typically under pressure to live up to politically defined performance measures for the production of knowledge and candidates (Degn and Sørensen, 2015; Nixon, 2011; Kronman, 2007; Brann, 1979), probably constraining factors for sunaesthetic friendship, as witnessed in some of the interviews.

Case stories about friendship among academics must be treated with a sensitivity not only to the particular social and cultural situation, but also to different possible conceptions of the interpersonal relations involved. For this purpose, more interdisciplinary approaches to the practices and ideals of friendship may help to better grasp its complexity, appreciate its potentials and identify its challenges. The borderological focus contributes by investigating both the borders of friendship in the real world (relation to other forms of love, the kinds of friendship, and its changing meaning due to historical processes and institutional settings) and in the world of conceptualizations (similarities and differences between, e.g., anthropological, sociological and political science approaches to friendship), and seeks to map out how they interrelate.

Many of the researchers interviewed liked to see their colleagues as friends, though not necessarily as their ‘personal friends’, in part because of the professional and competitive aspects of research. Nevertheless, occasionally, competition and critique of the ideas of members of one’s own paradigm or other schools of thought may bring about a form of collaboration that Nobel-prize winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman called ‘adversarial’. In chapter 22 of his 2011 bestseller on decision making, he described his own adversarial collaboration with Gary Klein from a group of researchers who were very sceptic about Kahneman’s work: “Over seven or eight years we had many discussions, resolved many disagreements, almost blew up more than once, wrote many drafts, became friends, and eventually published a joint article with a title that tells the story: ‘Conditions for intuitive expertise: A failure to disagree’. Indeed, we did not encounter real issues on which we disagreed – but we did not really agree.” This was not a friendship searching for good company or emotional support, but for exploring ideas, and not so much ideas about personal identity — like the kind of friendship Graham Little (2000) would call *communicating* — as ideas about the world; about their topics of research. This form of intellectual (yet barely sunaesthetic) friendship can appear close to the freshness, freedom and iconoclasm that Little ascribes to communicating friends (Little, 2000: 148), but in its aspect of rivalry, it is closer to what he calls *social* friendship, a form of friendship that “doesn’t know” that friendship



can be a “a haven from competition” (Little, 2000: 91) and that may be similar to the friendship-like relation of collegiality, as encountered above.<sup>12</sup>

Interdisciplinary work that brings together scholars from different fields has the potential to create other special forms of inquiry. An example is the collaboration between a sociologist, a psychologist, and a literary critic investigating an American coven of Wiccans (a religious cult of modern witchcraft) who operated in Atlanta, Georgia during the early 1990s. One of the researchers was herself an initiate and practicing Wiccan and thus their joint work gave both outsider and insider perspectives into the coven (Scarboro et al., 1994). A different example of crossing the insider-outsider border is a joint narrative by a Gitana street seller (a Spanish Gypsy) informant and an academic anthropologist who describe themselves as “two women born in the same city, in the same year, two mothers, two friends” who “collaborate, acknowledging that ethnographic knowledge is made by ethnographers and informants, and should be owned by both” (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2012). In their fascinating report, researcher and research subject – a particular culture accessed via the informant – fuse into a single narrative, based upon an emerging friendship, a relation based again upon communication, exploration, curiosity, questioning, and mutual help, dialogue and sympathy.

A theoretical part of the present study investigates friendship as studied by different disciplines (Emmeche, 2013): Friendship in *philosophy* is primarily seen in an ethical perspective, from the ancient tradition of virtue ethics to modern utilitarian or deontological perspectives. The *anthropology* of friendship seems to hover over a basic distinction between a modern, Western notion of friendship as something private and emotional, versus a multiverse of forms, like ritual kinship, *compadrazgo*, blood brotherhood, patronage, or other cultural forms of friendship in Western as well as non-Western cultures. *Political science*, to the extent it deals with the relation at all, is preoccupied either with its potential as a civilizing force, its role in everyday power political struggles, or the differences between personal friendship and the more abstract notion that the very political is structured by a friend–enemy distinction. *Sociology* of friendship deals with friendship in different classes, groups, and societal epochs, and whether late modern society liberates friendship from its earlier ties to social, economic, racial or ethnic parameters and makes it more individual and reflexive. A large corpus of literature in developmental and social *psychology* deals with friendship in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, based on current theories about family, identity, attachment and development of personhood.

The fact that friendship is a messy notion in everyday language reminds us that we should not take for granted that these disciplines study exactly the same type of relation ‘out there’ in social reality. Thus, there is a task to investigate the different ways in which each discipline constitutes its type of object of research by transforming pre-theoretical understandings of the phenomenon of friendship into some model of it, informed by a paradigm. This is a subject for further research.

Finally, for a borderology of friendship, we should not forget the border between friendship’s reality and ideality, and the border between knowledge that rational inquiry can bring and the inexpressible or ineffable aspects of friendship as practised. Let us beware of theories suggesting a standard of practice impossible to be followed; that would make inquiry immoral and sterile.<sup>13</sup> Friendship is better as imperfect practice than as a study of ideals, this also applies to the intellectual forms of friendship.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Spoken by 'the Philosopher' in the novel *The Crock of Gold* (Stephens, 1995: 130).
- <sup>2</sup> As used here, the term borderology was invented within the 'Humanomics' project, mapping the humanities in Denmark to provide material for an empirically based philosophy of the humanities (see acknowledgements and the mapping-humanities website (Københavns Universitet (2015) ). It includes studying disciplinary borders and exploring possibilities for a higher degree of intellectual exchange. The same term with a different but related meaning is used independently by the Global Heritage Fund, stating on their website that "In the Barents Sea region, Norway and its neighbours (...) have pioneered a concept called "borderology" or the "cross-border trafficking in culture" as an agent of economic change. The aim is to increase cultural contacts between border regions" (Global Heritage Fund, 2015)
- <sup>3</sup> The term nepotism is by far the most common and used in both English and Danish everyday language as meaning also the favouring of friends. The use of the term cronyism is not yet very prevalent.
- <sup>4</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point; noticing that "just as friendship can be seen as a good for its own sake, so too liberal education is supposed to be a good for its own sake, which is one of the reasons why it has a close connection to friendship. Friends learning together demand nothing more from one another than their efforts to seek truth together. But the education project conducted in a research university seems to serve the goal of another article, book, or study. Learning is not for its own sake but for a 'product'." The reviewer suggested that this is why university goods, like promotion, prestige, etc., compete with friendship and why researchers are reticent to pursue deeper friendships with one another. This is also why one can get the sense from the interviews, to be discussed below, that they could have been with "employees in a major corporation or government bureaucracy. The same rules incentive structures apply."
- <sup>5</sup> In an anthology on collaborative couples in the sciences, most of them married, several of the authors shows how the scientific careers of both American and European wives were circumscribed by the anti-nepotism policies of universities or other institutions that hired their husbands. However, regarding the research output of these couples, Sally Kohlstedt notes, in line with Kiopa (2013) that "the results seem to be most consistently "better," especially if one of the measures is the science produced; most of these couplings resulted in significant work that continues to be recognized. In fact, for many it appears that where domestic and academic commitments intersected, productivity is higher than one might expect from either individual working independently" (Kohlstedt, 2012: vi).
- <sup>6</sup> Surprisingly, a recent volume titled *The Emotional Politics of Research Collaboration* (the one in which Kahlman 2013, see above, appears) discusses the role of neither academic friendship nor mentorship. Yet both this volume, and Bloch (2012) to which the same applies, are recommendable and inspiring.
- <sup>7</sup> The study "Formal and informal norms, values, and interpersonal relations in academia" (FINVIRA) is located at The University of Copenhagen and is partly funded by the Danish Velux Foundation's research programme 'Humanomics' (grant no. 437810).
- <sup>8</sup> In Danish, 'faglige venner' can mean collegial or professional friends or peers, as 'fag' may mean either a teaching subject, a research discipline, or a profession; in a university context 'faglig' signify 'related to teaching, research, or collegial matters'; 'faglighed' is 'professionalism' or 'academic competence'.
- <sup>9</sup> E.g., pure friendship in the sense of Aristotle, where one loves the friend for what he is, rather than because of the pleasure or use he brings, and cares for the friend for his own sake, rather than for one's own. Thus, the motives for cultivating this kind of friendship "are bound to be disinterested, since the good pursued in the activity in question is not of a competitive nature" (Stern-Gillet, 1995, p.76). There is, however, more to say about pure friendship in Aristotle, related to being devoted to seeking truth, living decent lives and cultivating virtue (cf. the discussion section on sunaesthetic friendship).
- <sup>10</sup> The hiring system at Danish universities has certain peculiarities compared to other countries, but it is not exceptional in its two-phase procedure: First, the applicants are evaluated by an academic committee that must include members external to the university in question. This committee is only allowed to judge each candidate qualified or not qualified for the position, but must not rank the candidates. Secondly, a separate appointment committee governed by the university management (including the department head and some of the academic staff) chooses, eventually after invited interviews and test lectures, among the qualified candidates the one supposed to best fit the complete set of criteria (academic, personal-social, organizational and fund raising skills)

for the job, and based thereupon the dean makes the final decision. This system has little transparency but is managerially efficient. Applicants only see the academic committee's evaluation of their own application (this lowers the frequency of complaints), and the dean is not accountable to justify the final decision. It is an example of how Denmark is "an extreme case" of reforms affecting universities in many countries (Degn and Sørensen, 2015).

- <sup>11</sup> Much can be gained about the role of friends for different modes of reflexivity from Margaret Archer's research (Emmeche 2015). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing to models of friendship that strongly resonate with the purpose of liberal arts education.
- <sup>12</sup> It is tempting to suggest a correspondence with Little's distinction between familiar, social and communicating friends, and mentorship, collegiality and academic friendship, respectively, but Little's interviews were with all kinds of people and his trichotomy does not fit with friendships relating to special institutional forms, such as academia.
- <sup>13</sup> As Pan said to the Philosopher, in James Stephens, *The Crock of Gold* (Stephens, 1995: 77).

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