



## Friendship Dynamics Between Emotions and Trials

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze friendship ties and the emotions connected to them in some particular phases of life: periods when subjects are faced with difficult challenges such as mourning, separation, job loss or illness. Under these circumstances, friendship ties and emotions take on exceptional intensity. To investigate these moments I will use the analytical concept of trial and I will outline its heuristic utility in the analysis of friendship ties. The article is based on a research project on the dynamics of friendship relationships among adults conducted in the urban area of the city of Milan. In order to shed light on the dynamics of friendship in difficult moments of life, the article is organized in three sections: in the first part, I will introduce some narratives collected during the research. In the second part, I will shed light on the way that trial phases of life are the periods in which the relation between friendship and emotions becomes more visible, in particular through the way that friendship bonds offer the possibility of narrating and sharing emotions themselves, thus introducing an element of reflexivity. In the third part, I will conclude by underlining the way that this kind of analysis of friendship ties can reveal some more structural dynamics of contemporary individualized society.

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**Keywords:** *Friendship, Emotions, Trial, Recognition, Individualization*

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### Introduction

**1.1** Friendship is an inter-subjective bond that has gained significant importance in individualized contemporary societies, becoming a privileged relationship that is sought after for its dynamics of recognition, identification and mutual support. In addition, friendship relationships are highly regarded throughout the various phases of life – not only the formative and adolescent period – and often become a point of reference that takes priority over family and romantic relationships (Jamieson, Morgan, Crow, Allan, 2006). The fact that friends are freely chosen and the negotiability of friendship, in particular, have emerged as elements inseparable from contemporary individualism (de Singly 2003). The modern, singular and unique subject is in fact characterized primarily by his or her voluntary ties, in that the very choice to form these ties, as well as the freedom to sever them, significantly contributes to processes of identity construction.

**1.2** Sociological literature about friendship appears to have become consolidated around research investigating various aspects such as the composition of friendship networks, the interpretations of friendship in different social strata, the dynamics of mutual recognition, the critical phases and its common sense representations. This literature has proven that there are many different cultural interpretations of the friendship bond and that there are different degrees of intensity, intimacy and mutual trust within the general concept of friendship (Allan, 1989; Silver 1990; Bidart 1997; Pahl 2000; Ghisleni and Rebughini 2006; Ghisleni, Greco, Rebughini, 2011).

**1.3** In all cases, however, friendship is defined as a relationship powerfully imbued with emotional dimensions. The significance of friendship as a privileged relationship appears to be associated with the greater importance of the emotional and expressive dimensions granted to social actors in contemporary societies (Nussbaum 2001; Illouz 2004; Flam 2000; Lupton, 1998). Specifically, friendship comes to be defined as the main frame within which individual singularity and authenticity can find expression through the mutual narration of one's own emotions and feelings, as well as actions and decisions.

**1.4** This article deals with the issue of emotions associated with *trials* in the friendship dynamics. The purpose of the article is to analyze friendship ties and the emotions connected to them - such as trust and

compassion - in some particular phases of life: periods when subjects are faced with difficult challenges such as mourning, separation, job loss or illness. In these transitional periods which can also be defined as 'existential trials', friendship ties and emotions take on exceptional intensity. Under these circumstances, the importance of friendship – and the mutual trust and intimacy that characterize it – is more clearly visible. The same is true of the possibility – and, sometimes, the difficulty – of sharing the emotions and pain associated with these trying moments with a friend. Specifically, I will use the concept of *trial* here in its double meaning of “being put to the test” (a test of the strength of the friendship bond) and in the sense of “undergoing a trial” on the part of the subject who is facing a difficult phase of life and who seeks support in his or her affective friendship relationships.

**1.5** In order to shed light on these dynamics, the article is organized in three sections: in the first part, I will introduce some narratives collected during the research about friendship dynamics during difficult moments of the subjects' biographies. I will draw on the analytical concept of *trial* and outline its heuristic utility in the analysis of friendship ties. In the second part, I will shed light on the way that these trial phases of life are also periods in which the relation between friendship and *emotions* becomes more visible, in particular through the way that friendship bonds offer the possibility of narrating and sharing emotions themselves, thus introducing an element of reflexivity. In the third part, I will conclude the article by underlining the way that this kind of analysis of friendship ties can reveal some more structural dynamics of contemporary *individualized society*.

**1.6** This article is based on a research project carried out between 2007 and 2009 on the dynamics of friendship relationships among adults. The project comprised 50 in-depth interviews with adults (25 women and 25 men) between the ages of 35 and 65 years old, conducted in the urban area of the city of Milan. The interviews focused on analyzing the experiences and characteristics of friendship relationships during difficult or transitional phases of the interviewees' lives.

## **Friendship “put to the test” and “trials” of life**

**2.1** In difficult moments of our lives, the people we interact with and who share with us the meaning that we attribute to these transitional phases become fundamental. In fact, some events occur - more or less suddenly or dramatically - during the course of a biography that put us “to the test” in the sense of interrupting our routine, certainties and habits; these events thus force us to reflect and detach ourselves. Affective relationships such as friendship play an important role in these periods and can influence, in one way or another, the re-positioning of a person's perspective on his or her own biography and the resumption of daily routine.

**2.2** In this first section of the article, I seek to analyze how the emotions that come into play in difficult and turbulent periods of life are experienced within friendship relations, thereby acting to transform them – sometimes reinforcing them, other times weakening them. I employ the analytical concept of *trial* to take account of these transitional periods. Given its multi-faceted meaning, this concept lends itself to recounting both the tensions that friendship relationships undergo in periods of *crisis*, during unexpected or dramatic events, as well as the modifications that these friendship relationships undergo as a result of changes in their habitual balances caused by a traumatic event suffered by one of the friends; this event can provide a chance to renew the relationship.

**2.3** The concept of *trial* occupies a marginal position in sociological scholarship, yet it is a remarkably heuristically useful idea that has been widely used in philosophy, especially in the work of Michel Foucault (2001). In contemporary sociological literature, this concept has been used primarily in France, in particular by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991) and by Danilo Martuccelli (2006, 2010) with different heuristic meanings and applications.

**2.4** The idea of trial may be primarily associated with arbitrariness, probability and the idea of an attempt: trying to reach an objective. In this case, the trial is identified with a voluntary act under circumstances that are so uncertain that the outcome is cast into doubt. Alternately, the trial may take on the meaning of a test, in the classic sense of “being put to the test”; this test may also represent a way of assessing the strength of an emotive bond such as friendship.

**2.5** In both of the senses outlined above, the trial may turn out to be either useful or devastating, in that it can alternately consolidate or destroy the relationship that is being put to the test. Friendships are usually put to the test as a result of events that are outside the control of either party, but which can be used by one of the friends as a chance to assess the friendship tie. This almost always involves a test of trust and the friends' ability to understand and relate. We see a clear example of this in the words of these interviewees:

I'm gay, if other people don't understand that is their limit. I told my friends: if you care about me, you should know this thing...luckily, all of them were completely understanding, practically all of them told me “I was waiting for you to tell me”...it was a test, and it confirmed for me that I had already found real friends.  
(Mauro, 36 y.o., M)

I underwent a pretty complicated surgery. I remember that, when I got out of the operating room, I didn't expect to see my friends, because I hadn't told anyone when exactly my surgery would take place...I was really glad. But I realized that I had subtly used this experience as a way to evaluate my friendships, I put my friendships to the test... I realized that some people were close to me, and some weren't.  
(Luna, 59 y.o., F)

**2.6** On the contrary, other interviewees pointed out that the friendship trial can take place not only in times

of need when the availability of a friend is assessed, but also in terms of the ability to share a friend's achievements or successes without feeling envy.

You can tell who is a real friend not only in moments of pain, but also in moments of success – if someone is able to rejoice in your success, he's a real friend, because it's always hard to sincerely rejoice in someone else's success... when this happens it proves that they care. Friendship is not necessarily a two-way relationship, sometimes it only goes one way, it's purely altruistic.  
(Achille, 46 y.o., M)

**2.7** According to Michel Foucault (2001), the trial (*épreuve*) is above all a way for the subject to undergo or be subjected to a kind of self-evaluation, and therefore the trial often comes to constitute a *trial of strength* within the dynamics of subjectivation; the trial is also a chance for the subject to test the potential extent and limits of his or her concrete action and to reflect on these, as well as his or her margin for action, through “experiencing the boundaries.” For Foucault, the trial consists of a border activity, a survey – always partial and contextual – of the limits within which individuals, and their relationships, are inevitably positioned.

**2.8** This way of interpreting the trial – understood as an existential trial of strength that occurs in certain moments of one's biography – appears most often among interviewees who chose to react to the traumatic events in their lives by temporarily isolating themselves and breaking off their relationships. Their reaction was to “prove they could do it alone”, initiating a process of self-redefinition that did not necessarily involve a dialogical sharing of the traumatic event. Rather, in these cases, what they expected from their friends was a discreet and silent presence, potentially available but not invasive.

When I have a problem, I rarely lean on my friends, I don't like to overload other people. (...) Anyway, when my father died I felt that my friends were close like I wanted them to be, close but not too close...for me it's enough to know that my friend was thinking about me and that, if I needed it, he would be available. Grief has to be worked out individually in order to be properly overcome.  
(Lucio, 44 y.o., M)

**2.9** Unlike Foucault, the concept of trial developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) refers to the normative frame in which the trial takes place. Putting an action or a bond to the test therefore draws on the values and referential norms that contribute to granting meaning to the trial itself; the trial is not, therefore, reduced to a simple instance of rupture, as in the Foucauldian interpretation. In his most recent book, Boltanski (2009) elaborates this concept, referring explicitly to *existential trials*. The French sociologist uses this notion to analyze the individualized trials that run through the lives of individuals in contemporary post-industrial societies and which function to detach the trial experience from a feeling of sharing with and belonging to a collectivity. In fact, individualized existential trials are more evident and intense in a society like ours where people no longer think collectively. For this reason, elective ties such as friendship take on increasing importance as a form of recognition and support.

**2.10** Danilo Martuccelli (2006, 2010) has also developed a similar but more elaborated exploration of the concept of trial. Martuccelli agrees that the concept of trial is useful from a heuristic and analytical point of view to aid in describing the particularity of the relationship between social structures and the individual as he or she appears in highly individualized contemporary societies. In fact, the concept of trial sheds light on social change within individual biographies without getting trapped in the direct articulation between structure and individual (as in functionalism) or, vice versa, in the complete negation of this link (as in methodological individualism).

**2.11** Specifically, Martuccelli identifies at least two main characteristics of the concept of trial:

- it is inseparable from the singular and subjective narration that highlights the individual uniqueness of how the trial is understood, experienced and responded to.
- The trial is an exam, a test that the individual must face and which tests or threatens his or her certainties, trust in the self, relationships, world and the way that he or she is accustomed to living. In this way, the trial is also a mode of social selection because not everyone undergoes the same kind of trial with the same intensity, frequency and resources available to respond to it.

**2.12** In this model, friendship ties are an interesting point of observation: individual trial, personal narratives, emotions and resources to face of that trial can be investigated as a part of a friendship story and as an inter-subjective relation. Moreover, friends represent a store of social ties and relationships that can take on various roles and meanings: for example, some interviewees assert that friends “were useful” for giving advice about doctors and finding the most appropriate hospitals in times of illness; others acknowledge that friends offered practical help in moments of difficulty (coming to cook, doing grocery shopping, giving rides). In some cases friends did not appear to have been capable of moral support, in other cases moral support was not expected of them.

**2.13** In any case, *putting to the test* trust and the friend's availability represents a primary means of evaluating the solidity of the relationship. In most of the research published about friendship, trust is presented as an essential element of the relationship and its continuity. Naturally, trust is an important element for maintaining many other inter-subjective relationships and perhaps can even be considered a key function of the social system (Luhmann 1979); however, trust takes on a distinctive character in the electivity that characterizes friendship relationships. In fact, it is not considered so much a functional element of the relationship as the very reason for the relationship; that is to say, it is seen as a characteristic that grants stability to a friendship despite the reciprocal individual freedom that is an essential element of the friendship bond. Trust therefore comes to be recognized by all interviewees as a

cardinal element of the relationship, and its lack is seen as a form of betrayal.

Friendship is free from competition and envy (...) Trust means that the other person will never betray you. Betrayal is the most difficult trial for a friendship.  
(Alessandra, 52 y.o., F)

Trust is the most important element of a friendship, if I know really personal things about a certain person, I will never betray that person, because that would mean destroying the relationship.  
(Chiara, 50 y.o., F)

**2.14** The importance granted to the theme of trust correlates with the definition of friendship as a *deep feeling*, an important and essential bond for the enrichment of a person's emotive life, exchanging opinions, emotions and living out experiences.

Friendship is a special thing for me, it's an empathic bond. You choose your friends, nobody imposes them on you, you choose a person who you share a vocabulary and common feelings with (...) You always need to distinguish between friendship and superficial acquaintances. Friendship is a deep and intimate thing.  
(Nina, 51 y.o., F)

**2.15** Additionally, many interviewees state that there are limits to the subjects that can be dealt with: not all friends are the same, emotions and experiences can be shared to different extents in different cases, and it is necessary to accept the limits and deficiencies of the other person. As Giddens argues (1992:105), intimacy does not mean melding with the other person, but rather knowing their characteristics and making your own available. According to Giddens's well-known thesis, intimacy and mutual disclosure are increasingly sought in interpersonal relations. This is considered a consequence of democratized and individualized societies where people are able to build up ideal-typical dyads without overarching social structures to sustain them (the 'pure relationship'). However, scholars such as Lynn Jamieson (1999) have pointed out that such ideal-typical dyads are frequently structured by gendered and generational inequalities. This means that intimacy within friendship tends to be multidimensional and that disclosure in mutual dialogue can be developed within it and despite practical inequalities.

**2.16** More generally, in adulthood the definition of friendship appears flexible, smoothed by experience, and less demanding but not ready to renounce the depth and intensity of the bond as a result. Friendships which have been built over time and survived many different experiences, changes – or inequalities – appear to be more solid, reinforced by the numerous times they have been "put to the test," the outcome of a selection process over time.

I think being friends also means understanding how far you can go in confiding in someone about certain things...for me, pushing means pushing the friendship, insisting in order to put it to the test... it's not like you necessarily have to tell your friend everything. For me it's important to understand the boundaries of the relationship.  
(Francesca, 35 y.o., F)

Catching up is the most demanding element of friendship, you have to find a friend who is willing to listen to you, you have to have the time and willingness to talk about what's up... we all have families, work, lots of problems, none of us have much time for this kind of relationship maintenance, so you have to be selective.  
(Nina, 51 y.o., F)

**2.17** The crisis of trust therefore arises in moments that can be identified as phases of putting the relationship to the test, moments that arise when one of the friends believes that his or her expectations of trust in the other have been disappointed. In fact, disappointment creates a negative emotive experience that sometimes can be dealt with through the help of other friends. Friendship and the emotive bond that supports it are "tested" especially in the most difficult biographical moments through the consolation received or the disappointment experienced.

My mother died eight years ago, and I really needed my friends...I called this one friend, thinking that she would drop everything and come running...but she was getting ready for her wedding and the answer she gave me was, "sorry, I don't have time!" After that, I didn't want to have anything else to do with her! She really shocked me, I told her, "I understand," and it ended there.  
(Elda, 38 y.o., F)

**2.18** Obviously, the intensity of existential trials and the ways that they are lived out varies among different subjective experiences; however, friendship plays a fundamental role in all of them. In this respect, descriptions of the need to be alone – although with the virtual support of friends – alternates with narratives in which the closeness of one or more intimate friends was fundamental in overcoming a trauma and/or helping a person face a difficult period of illness or injury (Pockney 2006). There is not, therefore, a single script for the dynamics of friendship relationships that are triggered in particular moments such as these. The friendship bond established between two people always has specific and unique elements.

**2.19** In general, however, times of pain – especially when connected with grief – tend to be lived mainly in solitude. During these moments, friends are above all *witnesses to one's emotions*. In moments when a person seeks out solitude and needs time to reflect, what is mostly appreciated is the discreet presence of friends, the fact that they are potentially available but not necessarily present; what matters is the belief that your friends are thinking about you and that they share and understand your suffering. In fact, as

Simmel (1908) has pointed out, discretion is one of the fundamental aspects of the intimacy that characterizes a friendship relationship. In the friendship dynamic discretion is a necessary quality of the listening friend, as well as disclosure being the contextual need of the speaking friend. In Giddens's (1992) analysis, mutual self-disclosure and the appreciation of each other's uniqueness is a fundamental characteristic of the 'pure relationship'. However friendship also implies a sort of therapeutic dynamics in which the capability to listen to the other is strongly connected to tact and discretion (McLeod, Wright, 2009).

When my father died, I moved to another city and I lost lots of my friends, but many others stayed with me even though they were distant and discrete, they never abandoned me ...when you change, your friendships have to change with you.  
(Francesca, 35 y.o., F)

**2.20** A friend is essentially someone who is able to understand the incommunicability of pain and deeply negative emotions and who knows how to respect what Goffman calls the *personal sacred space* that contains such emotions (Schudson, 1984). A friend's discretion and tact mainly takes the form of respecting the "proper distance" that also involves, however, the availability of nearness and the concreteness of presence.

After my grief, this friend was close to me in a really discreet way...he helped me without asking anything in return, without asking for explanations about what I was feeling at that time...he knew how to give me space, something that I really appreciated and that even today is an aspect of our relationship that I appreciate.  
(Kira, 35 y.o., F)

When I got divorced, my friends listened to me, they comforted me and gave me advice, they knew that listening is an art. (...) But when I had a heart attack I really appreciated the discretion of one of my best friends, he came to the hospital that same night, I only wanted him near me, I knew he was there without pitying me.  
(Marco, 48 y.o., M)

**2.21** Many times in the course of the interviews there were references to the *compassion* of friends, their ability to show their nearness and emotive participation through words, actions, tone of voice or memories about details that may appear insignificant. On the other hand, what interviewees dreaded and disparaged was behavior seen as *pitying*, which was seen not only as a negative element but sometimes also as a false and affected behavior linked to a temporary and ritual display of nearness that was usually quite brief.

Having a friend means having a reference point when you are doing badly...friendship is based on trust, if the other person instead uses my weakness to grow stronger, it is all over ...Friendship is a space of truth. When you can suffer and pray together in order to overcome the suffering, a strong bond is created, a bond of indestructible human solidarity. That was how my friend reacted when my partner left me.  
(Alice, 40 y.o., F)

In my case, it was sharing the suffering and pain that helped me find a good friend: I hardly knew this woman, but when I knew she was seriously ill I dedicated practically all my spare time to being close to her. Now three years have passed and our relationship is deep and wonderful, it has taught me a lot.  
(Nina, 51 y.o., F)

**2.22** All the interviews show the importance of the emotions at play in these situations of trial, the sharing of emotions that is at the foundation of compassion also shows how the friendship tie can be reinforced by exploring a new threshold of intimacy. In this way, the existential trial faced by one of the two friends becomes a testing ground for the friend who offers help, thus transforming the dynamics and intensity of the friendship bond.

### **Immanence and reflexivity: emotions and narrations of friendship**

**3.1** Emotions – such as trust and compassion but also envy and pride – are an integral part of friendship stories and they are also part of these trial moments that we have been examining. Although it is difficult to give a shared definition of emotion – as Turner points out, emotions operate at many different levels: biological, behavioral, cultural, structural and situational (Turner 2009: 341) – many authors acknowledge their relevance in friendship relationships (Barbalet 2002; Rimé 2009; Nussbaum 2001). In fact, emotions come to be shared, acknowledged, narrated and expressed in friendship relationships just like in other intimate relationships, even if friendship seems to offer a more general frame of reciprocal recognition and a privileged narrative space for the analysis of emotions themselves. As our interviewees pointed out, emotions are always more intense in the moment of trial and it is in that very moment that self-reflexivity towards one's emotions became more evident and capable of being expressed through narrative.

In a friendship, people narrate themselves, their emotions, feelings, experiences... A friend is someone who listens to you, who understands what you mean, who feels empathy and maybe identifies with what you're going through. A friend is not just someone to count on, but also someone who can help you analyze yourself.  
(Lorenzo, 35 y.o., M)

**3.2** According to many authors who are attentive to the theme of emotions, friendship constantly feeds on the emotive confirmations that manifest in practices, episodes and moments of concrete life shared with a friend (Pahl 2000). In this vein, a friendship bond has to be understood and recognized through the

intimacy and emotions that characterize “typical” friendship ties; however, this means that, sooner or later, a friendship has *to be proved* to be a “true” friendship. As Roberts writes (2009):

The friendship cannot be an actual friendship without the parties ever having episodes of thought, feeling, and action characteristic of friendship. Thus, while it is true that friendship is a disposition, on the part of two people, to act, think, and feel with respect to one another in ways characteristic of friendship, and the friendship is expressed in these episodes, the episodes are also constitutive of the friendship, in the way that an episode in a story is partially constitutive of the story. Without the right emotions, neither the thoughts nor the actions would constitute a friendship. (...) My first comment, then, is that actions are not constitutive of a friendship proper unless they express the emotions characteristic of friendship (Roberts 2009: 286).

Friendship therefore constitutes a favorable site for the recognition, sharing and narration of emotions. Mutual recognition and trust in particular are associated with the living out of emotions characteristic of episodes of trial.

**3.3** We have seen that the moment of an ‘existential trial’ for one of the friends is usually an important test for the friendship ties. It can test the trust and strength of the relation itself but also the possibility of shifting the relation toward a deeper degree of intimacy. This usually happens through the opportunity to share intense emotions and through the ability to narrate them. Our interviews show that the episodes of trial are also moments in which the tensions between the *immanence of sharing* and the *reflexivity of the narration*, as well as the tensions between the *practices* of a specific friendship relation and the *representation* of typical friendship relations, became more visible.

**3.4** In fact, we have to consider that, even if emotions are immanent, embodied and embedded in practices and experiences – they are *in* the experience rather than being *about* the experience – they are also part of a discursive representation of the experience itself (Flam 2007). Hence, we have to distinguish between the feelings and emotions that characterized a specific friendship bond in that particular moment – the moment of trial - and the thoughts, reflexive narratives and representations of that friendship over time. Emotions are embodied, here and now, but the account of emotions can only be linguistic and is thus usually deferred. At the same time, the inter-subjective, dialogical and intimate connection that constitutes friendship increases the *feeling awareness*, that is, reflexivity about emotions themselves (Nussbaum 2001; Berenzin 2002; Burkitt 2002). As Mary Holmes (2010) points out reflexivity itself is emotionalized: “feelings about and connections to others are crucial to reflexive practices” (2010: 143). In this vein, friendship could also be described as a “structure of feelings” where thought is felt and feelings are thought (Williams, 1977: 132).

**3.5** The sharing and narration of one’s emotions is thus a specific ingredient of the friendship bond. The sociological literature about emotions has repeatedly underlined that emotions are not solipsistic in nature, but are rather socially shared and interpreted. Language is the primary medium for this sharing, in addition to, obviously, the cultural frame that enables the interpretation of emotions in their context (Rimé 2009; Kim 2009). In the realm of friendship, emotions take a particular path through narration in that they can be shared mainly thanks to their linguistic articulation in the moment when friends tell each other what they have lived and the emotions they have experienced. In this sense, friendship is not only a space for intimacy and reciprocal trust where emotions can be expressed more freely through the immanence of empathy and sharing; it is also a space for providing an account of the emotions a person has experienced, articulating them through language and introducing a new element of reflexivity that is based primarily on the friend’s ability to relate and listen.

**3.6** As Kim points out: “in Western cultural contexts, the verbal sharing of emotion seems to carry the meaning of intimacy and interpersonal trust, and therefore it brings the noted social benefit” (Kim, 2009: 92). It follows that, if on one side emotions are about the here and now, on the other side the linguistic expression of emotions – especially through the narrative discourse that characterizes friendship relations – transforms them into an object that can be analyzed reflexively and after the fact. Even though emotions transcend their linguistic and narrative translation, the intimacy of friendship provides a particularly favorable setting for their narration. Within the discursive intimacy that characterizes friendship, emotions cease to be simply *embodied* and become instead a part of the narration of the self: body and emotions become an *account* (Cavarero 1997). And, in this account, emotions are selected and transformed by contingent life experiences into a biographical component.

**3.7** Our research shows that *suffering* is the emotion that emerges as most relevant in this kind of narrative process. Even though we often share carefree moments characterized by positive emotions with friends, suffering and pain are the emotions that better highlight the strength of a friendship bond and the dynamics of its being put to the test.

**3.8** It is clear from the interviews conducted for this research and on which this article is based that suffering – and especially the narration and sharing of this pain with another person – produces a particularly solid bond because it directly affects the intimate relationship. To express your sadness, to cry, to show your own weakness and desperation is not only a means of letting off pressure, although it could be limited to this. Sometimes these moments also work to transform the environment, the grounds, or the setting of the relationship, forcing the friend on the receiving end of the expression of pain to take a position: either the friend offers only a shoulder to cry on, or he or she takes a stand and shares the other person’s pain and essentially accepts that the friendship is entering a more intimate and intense phase.

**3.9** It is quite common to close up and feel shame about expressing one’s suffering, especially among people who tend to be protective towards their friends, to listen instead of expressing emotions, and to give advice instead of asking for it. They are often also demanding people who sometimes hesitate to ask

because they are afraid that their friends will not be able to meet their expectations and prefer to avoid risking disappointment; in truly difficult moments, however, a request for help represents a necessary exception and can sometimes lead to a discovery.

In a friendship, friends make themselves available and understand what you need. But I tend not to ask in my friendships, even if at some point I realized that I could ask and I could receive. After this surgery, for instance, I appreciated the help of a friend. I had a need and a friend was there. I wanted to have a friend close to me rather than a relative.  
(Agostina, 44 y.o., F)

It seems obvious to help a friend in a moment of need, in the sense that everyone considers it wrong, if not actually immoral, to refuse to help a friend in need. On the other hand, a friend's help in moments of need also commonly represents one of the main testing grounds for a friendship.

**3.10** However, many interviewees confessed that they sometimes experienced embarrassment when helping friends in serious difficulty, especially when the friend was suffering from serious illness. In these cases sharing is not limited to a temporary aid, practical help or a useful form of support. When facing a friend suffering from a fatal illness, in fact, a friend needs the courage to face an experience of limits: to feel compassion and to relate to a friend's suffering involves admitting one's own limits, seeing oneself in the mirror of a friend's decline, admitting that one's help will not have a positive outcome and that it cannot be rewarded over time but only in the immanent present. In this case, the test of the friendship can be extremely complex, and when facing a friend's suffering we can discover that we don't have the right tools to offer effective aid. As Norbert Elias (1985) notes when writing about the solitude of a dying person, it is difficult for even the closest friends to relate to someone who is being forced by illness and the fear of an impending death into a path of extreme individualization and closure. Among the interviews collected for this research there is no lack of accounts describing how, in the face of a friend's suffering, interviewees felt incapable of offering any kind of support and ended up retreating as a result of the embarrassment, sense of impotence and fear they felt.

I didn't know what to do when this friend of mine fell seriously ill, he was embarrassed as well for being at the center of attention, so I purposefully didn't call him, I didn't want to give him the impression that I was only calling because he was sick... I felt embarrassed...  
(Edoardo, 38 y.o., M)

Illness is a time of weakness, it's horrible to discover that your friends are not there (...) Yet, even I ran away when faced with a friend's illness and this left me feeling so guilty. I ran away because my parents had died of the same illness. (...) Then, when she died I wasn't around, I didn't even have the courage to go to her grave, I feel so incredibly guilty.  
(Franco, 52 y.o., M)

**3.11** Instead of feeling embarrassed, afraid and helpless in the face of a friend's illness, an alternative emotion can motivate a person to offer help and feel actively involved in the situation, thus taking charge, so to speak, of the friendship relationships and feeling gratified and satisfied about his or her ability to help the other person. In fact, relating to a person who is suffering requires working not only on the relationship but also on oneself.

While this friend of mine was sick, I was very close to him, but I was scared, it was really difficult, I was still young and it was the first time that I was coming face to face with the end of life (...) At the same time, the work I did on myself wasn't easy either, in these situations it's easy to feel self important, to say "hey look at how great I am!" ... I tried not to take on the missionary role, which is a horrible and sterile role, I think I succeeded.  
(Valerio, 51 y.o., M)

**3.12** The opportunity to share one's own suffering with a friend by relating to it in a reflexive way, just like the ability to listen with compassion but not pity, are two fundamental characteristics of friendship relationships. At the same time, these moments of trial show how a friendship relation can be shaped and transformed by the capacity to express and to deal, in a narrative and reflexive way, with one's emotion.

**3.13** The past literature about friendship confirms the importance of these ingredients in evaluating the intensity of a friendship relationship; however, the central role that this loyal and intimate relationship has taken on in contemporary society represents a new aspect, one that is closely connected to the processes of individualization.

## **Friendship and emotions in the individualized society**

**4.1** As the first part of this article demonstrates, the concept of trial can be useful for analyzing the dynamics of the friendship relationship and for highlighting its relevance in contemporary societies. If we take into account the fact that our societies – as Ulrich Beck argues (1992) – are ever more individualized (in the sense that actors are alone in facing the systemic contradictions in which they find themselves) it is easy to understand why friendship comes to be considered a fundamental resource, a form of personalized support, and a privileged site for the recognition of one's own uniqueness. At the same time, friendship represents a particularly interesting field for observing the singularization of the life pathway that characterizes contemporary biographies and 'existential trials', which are decreasingly influenced by class structures and increasingly subject to the pressure of responsabilization. In this sense it is the processes of individualization themselves that have transformed friendship relationships into a privileged frame for the narration of the self and for the reflexivity that it gives rise to, reinforcing the role of recognition in which friends reciprocally play the role of witness to the other person's existential story (Rebughini 2009). Friendship stories grow out of the interweaving of individual biographies; these stories are imbued with

trials, attempts, mistakes and, above all, emotions that are increasingly less a part of collective life experiences and more appropriately understood as part of an individualized biographic pathway.

This friendship was a big comfort and help for me in a very difficult moment. This friend helped me to understand and rationalize, to see more clearly, not to be ruled by my emotions and frustrations... I felt alone and this friend supported me, because he was much stronger than I was. There are times when you just don't understand anything about what's happening to you, and a friend can help you understand, give a meaning to what you're going through.  
(Ivan, 35 y.o., M)

**4.2** Among the various intimate relationships, friendship appears to be less tied down by social norms, or at any rate less influenced by socially defined expectations than family or romantic relationships (even if this does not mean that we can automatically consider friendship as a 'pure relationship'). It is precisely this element that makes friendship an elastic and negotiable interpersonal space in which it is easier to expose yourself, express your own doubts and fragility, and ask for help with the self-analysis of your own life experiences. Consequently, it is this elastic character of friendship that makes it such an indispensable and precious form of support for facing the moments of turbulence that impact our biographies. In our societies, where uncertainty and risk are on the rise, friendship relations thus offer a "tailor-made" reference point through which it is possible to gain a comparative perspective and consolation and to analyze together those existential trials that, despite their shared foundation, are experienced as unique and personal.

Your friends don't always have to be there with you, it's enough to know that they are there, that when you turn to them they will understand what you're talking about, because even though what has happened to you seems so unique and extraordinary, in the end it's possible that it is happening or has already happened to them as well.  
(Piera, 35 y.o., F)

**4.3** To conclude this analysis, we can therefore reaffirm that the interpersonal relationships that characterize friendship are a privileged site for the observation of biographical events that, in their turn, represent an individualized miniature of larger social transformations: transformations that affect the sphere of work and therefore the professional biographies of people – with their increasing instability and financial difficulties – but also transformations that involve the instability of personal relations themselves and of the bonds that are no longer maintained – or contained – by role expectations or an external normativity. In this respect, the analysis of what the experience of friendship relations undergoes in moment of turbulence and personal difficulty can be a useful indicator for understanding how the effects of the progressive individualization of life trials impact on relationships; as well as how and to what extent relationships are themselves imbued with expectations and meanings as a result of the singularization of the trials that people undergo. Difficult periods such as illness, losing a job, separation, or the loss of dear ones are experienced less and less in relation to communitarian or shared reference points and become instead periods linked to the singularity and specificity of one's own biography. Hence the intense emotions that characterize this individualized moment of trial can be shared and narrated mainly to friends and inside intimate relations, based on the mutual recognition of that unique experience.

**4.4** This fact causes friendship bonds to take on a role that is increasingly central and filled with expectations. The electivity of a friendship bond comes to mirror the process of individualization: support, comfort and compassion can only be offered and accepted on the basis of reciprocal acceptance, and at any rate beginning from a choice that fulfils the individual's need to have his or her own specificity recognized. Moreover the analysis of emotions associated to the trials of friendship shows the significant importance of emotions, such as compassion and trust, in interpersonal relationships and the presence of a critical attitude towards the instrumental reasoning.

**4.5** Putting a friendship relationship to the test, together with the analysis of emotions and experience this involves, thus represents a point of observation that is detailed and privileged, although necessarily limited, from which to analyze individualization processes, as well as structural and contextual changes that extend far beyond the friendship relationship itself.

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