Friendship and Formations of Sociality in Late Modernity: the Challenge of 'Post Traditional Intimacy'

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Abstract

Starting from the vantage point of a 'relational ontology' this paper explores the complex relationship networks of people who are single or are not living with a sexual partner. The ways in which people make sense of the boundaries of their connections is analysed. It is argued that the meaning of individual social bonds emerge relationally and that by asking why and how friendship matters to people, we begin to see what other kinds of interpersonal relationships also mean and why they matter. This lends insights into the ways relational networks operate within conditions of detraditionalisation and the emergence of non-linear life courses. In particular consideration is given to both the epistemic and ethical dimension through which friendship operate in daily life.

The Challenge of 'Post Traditional Intimacy'

> …individuals do not generate their relationships in a social or economic vacuum, any more than they do in a personal vacuum. Relationships have a broader basis than the dyad alone; they develop and endure within a wider complex of interacting influences, which help to give each relationship its shape and structure (Adams and Allan, 1998:2).

1.1 That intimate relationships, rather than being a purely private matter, are constituted in part through wider social structures is not a new claim to make. Indeed the social nature and significance of intimate relationships has featured centrally in the feminist agenda for a considerable length of time. More recently an interest in these kinds of relationships has also become a key focus of theories that seek to explain the effects of social change within late or post-modernity[1]. From this perspective, a post-traditional social order is characterised by processes of detraditionalisation that produce conditions within which the power of external sources of authority erodes. As this occurs individuals 'are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of disorder and contingency which is thereby generated' (Heelas, 1996:2). The concern with regards to intimate relations is that this condition effects a shift away from taken for granted traditions. However, the actual impact this has upon the 'shape' and 'structure' of personal relationships is a contested area (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Beck-Gernsheim, 1999; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Jamieson, 1997).

1.2 Debates concerned with the assessment of diminishing conventions are related to a set of demographic trends cited as evidence that personal relationships are undergoing a series of significant changes. Rising divorce rates; the increasing proportion of women not having children; an increase in births outside of marriage; an increase in lone parenting; increasing rates of cohabitation; and the rise in numbers of single-person households are among the trends considered as indicators of significance change within the realm of personal relationships. While a theoretical interpretation of such statistics remains contentious, it is generally accepted that the movement into late modernity brings with it not only a set of

challenges for the creation and maintenance of intimate bonds but also a concern for the consequences that these forms of relationships have for social life. In particular the need to acknowledge the diversity of patterns of intimate life despite the continuing normative force invoked by the ideal of the nuclear family has emerged as an important line of inquiry (Morgan, 1996; Silva and Smart, 1999; Wright and Jaggar, 1999).

1.3 In view of debates regarding the nature of post-traditional intimacy, the aim of the study on which this article is based [2] was to examine how personal networks were being constructed by individuals living within conditions of individualisation. Following on from the claim that the influence traditions have in directing the practice of intimacy has diminished, the interest here was to explore the role and meaning of friendship in the lives of those individuals who were not 'conventionally partnered'[3]. Not only has the significance of the intimate lives of single people[4] and those living outside of conventional norms of intimacy been overlooked within current debates but non-familial patterns of sociality and intimacy have also received inadequate attention (Roseneil, 2000; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). The approach taken in this study challenges the often assumed 'hierarchy of intimacy' reproduced in many studies of personal life in which one's sexual partner and family of origin are presumed to take precedence over friendships within personal networks. Within the context of individual interviews we aimed to have our respondents narrate the meaning of their affective relations and patterns of sociality. Our questions required them to focus on friendships, as well as, the role and meaning of lovers, ex-partners, family, kin, neighbours, work colleagues and housemates and the inter-relationships between these categories.

1.4 Understanding the meaning and significance of the various intimate bonds people create in day-to-day life means attempting to 'pull apart' what are extremely complex articulations of relationships. Indeed these networks are dynamic, particularly, when placed within the context of non-linear life courses associated with late modernity. The constitution of intimate lives in late modernity takes place within the parameters of a life course trajectory that to some extent displays signs of de-standardisation. Commentators who hold this view have argued that while the contours of a linear life course model still retain considerable normative purchase, 'there *is* evidence that the contemporary western life course has, in reality, become a much more fluid endeavour, offering scope for individual choice and innovation' (Hockey and James, 2003:58)[5].

1.5 In the early twentieth century a set of key institutions, notably the family and employment patterns, served to define life course transitions and the tendency was towards a relatively stable ordering of key life events. From a normative standpoint in late modernity there is less certainty about how one should engage with key decisions such as when to get married, how to raise children, which qualification to acquire and where to live. The patterning of life courses becomes less predictable and requires us to think about how the resulting configurations are a product of both transformations to these institutions *and* to the ways in which individuals reflexively engage with and respond to structural features of the life course.

1.6 Since the life course is no longer lived as a set of relatively fixed stages but rather more as a set of non-linear events, which are not necessarily demarcated by unambiguous boundaries, it becomes much more difficult than in the past to conceptualise the formation of identities across time. In response Hockey and James (2003:59) advocate a 'historio-biographical approach' which takes into account ways in which historically situated structural change contributes to individual identities across the life course and, secondly, addresses the agentic self authoring of individual lives as they experience various transitions across their own culturally and socially located life courses. This study focuses on this activity of self authoring via individual understandings of the role personal relationships play in their everyday lives.

1.7 In order to understand this process of self authoring a relational ontology provides the starting point for the argument presented here. Post-traditional society is cast as a social order in which lives are increasingly dis-embedded from the local as daily life is dispersed across an ever increasing set of discontinuous sites. This poses questions about the extent to which individuals are able to form durable bonds. A relational ontology, however, stresses the condition of inter-relatedness despite these structural features of late modernity. The social world is constituted by a condition of relationality and social interaction. This informs the process of self-authored identities and the ways in meanings are produced by social actors.

1.8 For this particular study the interest is in how friends and non-familial relationships as relations of care provide an important normative reference point in late modernity. Unlike the abstract individualism privileged in liberal political thought, feminists have advocated the need to conceive of the subject as constituted through concrete social relations. This metaphysical conception of selfhood 'acknowledges the fundamental role of social relationships and human community in constituting both self-identity and the nature and meaning of the particulars of individual lives' (Friedman, 1993:232). From the perspective of an ethics of care flow both epistemological and ethical consequences. In particular through our connections to others we acquire knowledge about ourselves and the world around us. Because we are inter-connected with others, our connections to others are normative in nature. We are able to formulate moral judgements in a way that occupying a position of separateness prevents.

Narratives of Self and Other

2.1 The narratives that individuals produce about their identities are significantly related to the ways in which they understand their personal relationships. Reflexively ordered biographies are constituted in large part through the condition of interconnectedness with others. As such a narrative analysis yields important insights into the meaning of post-traditional intimacy. The use of narrative methods in this study reflects a commitment to engage with the biographical turn; a concern with individual lives in the historical context of post traditional intimacy; and our interest in those approaches which clear

> … the theoretical ground for investigations which begin with the identification in individuals of distinctive life-strategies, trajectories, or kinds of self-recognition, as building blocks from which a larger understanding of society can be imagined (Rustin, 2000:47).

2.2 It is important that the narratives here were constructed by individuals who were not conventionally partnered, and thus, may be seen as living particularly individualised lives falling outside the normative expectations of heteronorms[6]. Because it enables people to define the meaning of their other intimate bonds, friendship operates in significant ways to give these narratives their structure. The analysis in this study reveals how value is assigned to interpersonal bonds. Further to this, it is argued that friendships are of moral significance within the practice of post traditional intimacy. This perspective relies upon an epistemological position, which Friedman (1993:197-98) refers to as a 'moral empiricism'. Consistent with a relational ontology, this position emphasises the lived experience of one's connections to others. Moral guidelines, whilst often codified in abstract terms, are actually 'tested' by concrete human lives (Friedman, 1993: 196). From this perspective one's experience of concrete practices provide a crucial epistemological base upon which to critically reflect upon moral guidelines. Our connection to others expands our experiential base and thus offers the opportunity for moral growth.

> The needs, wants, fears, experiences, projects, and dreams of our friends can frame for us new standpoints from which we can explore the significance and worth of moral values and standards. In friendship, our commitments to our friends, as such, afford us access to whole ranges of experiences beyond our own (Friedman, 1993:197).

2.3 The study of friendship offers a useful counterpoint to those accounts of contemporary social forms which interpret transformations to familial and communal structures as a loss of normative standpoints and the source of moral and social decline (Davies et al., 1993).

The Significance of Friendship

3.1 It is often proposed that there is something distinctive about friendship that places it apart from the values, expectations, and responsibilities that define familial and sexual relationships. For this reason, studying friendship allows us to move beyond a privileging of family and sexual partnerships - the primary objects of research into the character of post-traditional intimacy - so that we may consider the nature of wider social networks and communities. However, the ways in which we think about friendship are *also tied* to how we think about couple and family relationships as friendship is practised alongside and across all of our other relationships. Sets of personal relationships derive their meaning from the very relations within which they are embedded. Therefore, in order to consider, for instance what being a best friend means we also may need to know what being a sibling or lover means.

3.2 One issue that is encountered in trying to study the role and meaning of friendship is its definitional ambiguity. In general, these bonds are described as informal, chosen, non-institutionalised, and egalitarian. It is, however, also a relational term rather than a categorical one and as such is defined through emergent properties rather than externally imposed criteria, as is the case with categories such as work mate or neighbour (Adams and Allan, 1998). Thus, a process-oriented model which appreciates the working out of an understanding between the individuals involved is a useful approach to employ[7]. In this study narrative interviews were used to elicit this 'working out' of what friends are.

3.3 After largely being ignored the study of friendship has recently received increased scholarly attention. This has been prompted by the suggestion that transforming social structures have resulted in, and continue to move towards, a social formation in which friendships, disclosure and intimacy play increasing importance in the lives of individuals (Jamieson, 1997). The loosening and reconstitution of traditional ties, such as kinship, which historically operated to structure and organise individual lives has been considered from two different positions. The first response proposes that because traditional ties have been lost, greater levels of uncertainty, as well as, choice in how to organise one's relationships constitute modern life. Writing in the tradition of Georg Simmel these theorists argue that unlike the social bonds characteristic of traditional communities, modern social conditions prevent or inhibit deep and meaningful connections with others making true friends difficult to make and keep. From this point of view 'the present age is one of great superficiality, of networking and filo-faxing, of contrived forename mateyness at work and gushy luvvies calling each other darling' (Pahl, 2000:68-69).

3.4 In contrast to this position it has been argued that *it is because* social forms have become more fluid that friendships are becoming more important and central to people's lives as a source of continuity. This is particularly relevant for the contention that within late modern social forms processes of individualisation require individuals to reflexively organise their own self narratives rather than rely upon ones shaped through existing relations of gender, class, or race (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). As Pahl (2000:69) states 'sometimes the only continuity for increasingly reflexive people is provided by their friends' and that because so many aspects of one's life may be transitory (jobs, marriages) 'men and women may come to rely on their friends to provide support and confirmation of their enduring identities' (Pahl, 2000:69). This link to identity is an essential social fact of late modernity: 'as people focus more and more on sustaining and maintaining distinctive identities that are not formally provided by family or employment, so the social meaning of friendship will continue to increase in salience'.(Pahl, 1998:115).

3.5 In the analysis that follows the ways in which interviewees narrated their personal relationships will be examined, with particular attention given to how the relation of friendship was utilised as a reference point to define and demarcate the definitional boundaries of other types of relationship and to explain their significance.

Narrating Post-Traditional Intimacy

Sexual Partners

4.1 One of the contradictions of post-traditional intimacy is that a variety of relationships are being re-ordered through the tension produced by the pursuit an individualised identity while also having to manage a longing for a meaningful connection (Bawin-Legros, 2004). Within the study of post-traditional intimacy this tension has largely translated into a concern for what it means to be in a sexual/couple relationship (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). What it means to not be in a couple or to seek care, intimacy and belonging in other relations, however, is a question that has not been asked often enough. The concern in the analysis undertaken here, therefore, was with how intimacy is practised outside of what we conventionally know or assume to be 'the couple'. Not everyone is part of a couple and many people who are may organise their relationship in ways that challenge dominant assumptions regarding the role and meaning of such a bond. When interviewing people about their emotional lives they often expressed a fundamental desire for intimacy, for disclosure, for honesty, for a *durable* bond – in short an affirmative space for self and another, or self and several others. For many of our respondents the place, however, to look for this was within the realm of friendship which for many constituted a more realistic and reliable spaces within which to give and receive care, and to share intimacy.

4.2 The placing of friendships alongside partners raises some interesting concerns. When someone says about their closest friends, 'I'll love them forever', or 'They will always be there for me', is this the same expression of desire for endurance that is sought in the context of a sexual/love relationship? Do the contradictory binaries of autonomy and affiliation which proponents of reflexive modernisation use to describe intimacy describe the dynamics of friendship ties as well? If saying to a partner, 'I'll love you forever' actually means, 'I'll love you until I've had enough', what does it mean when it is said to a best friend? Such questions require a consideration of the sets of values, meanings and practices that constitute different forms of post traditional intimacy and their link to the enactment of commitment, responsibility and obligation within daily lives and the realm of personal communities.

4.3 When constructed in relation to partner relationships, the definition of friendship at times reflected similar values, such as respect and trust. However, a clear boundary was often drawn between sexual partnerships and friendships. This demarcation relied upon the belief that friendships offered a greater degree of stability than sexual relationships. Therefore, friends were seen to offer something that in practice partners did not. For Sylvia, it is the greater degree of fluidity of friendships that makes them more durable. This characteristic of friendship derives from these relationships being based upon acceptance and respect for difference.

> Sylvia: Best friends are nice…I think partners tend to do your head in a lot more. Partners are more likely to want to change you I think. Or, you're more likely to want to change them and little things become a lot more important. It becomes more important to get everything resolved and everything talked through whereas with best friends you can go 'oh well' and it will just blow over (age 25. Queer, single, living with a friend).

4.4 Compared to sexual partnerships friendships were also perceived to be based to a greater extent on equality. This ethic of reciprocity meant that a greater return was reaped from the emotional investment made in friendships. Carol, who was seriously contemplating ending the relationship with her partner of 5 years, expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the lack of parity characteristic of her sexual relationships compared to the level she shared with friends. Not surprisingly references to friendships figured centrally in her narrative.

> Carol: It sounds awful to say it but if I were to put it on a balance sheet for what I get out of the relationship, I pay a heavy price for it. Whereas the friends that I have, I don't feel as though I pay a price there and so I would spend more time with people who give as much as I give them in a sense…It's not that I don't want to be in a relationship but this particular one, like my marriage before, I know it's run its course. It's not I want to be alone. It's just that neither of them were right for me and I think I've probably got a little bit cynical now and I think 'well there isn't anybody that's right for you so you might as well just get on with your life and go out with friends and enjoy yourself and do what you want to do' (age 40, heterosexual, in a relationship, living with children).

4.5 In some instances the boundary between the category of 'partner' and 'friend' was much more fluid. When partners were defined as friends it was more likely that the partner relationship was *valued specifically* because it was possible within the terms of the relationship to extend the category of 'friend' to describe the nature of the connection. In these cases emphasis was placed upon the friendship aspect of the relationship because this is what was seen to be more likely to endure over time whereas the sexual nature of the relationship would wane.

> Margaret: We're both looking for things rather than finding them at the moment. We're not actually in positions that we want to be long term and I think that gives us a good friendship in a way, sort of empathy and it means we are able to talk about ourselves as individuals and our paths rather than feeling that it's got to be us together. We don't live together. I haven't lived with anybody for 28 years! (age 49, heterosexual, in a relationship, living alone).

> Brad: I've been with him for 18 months and that's a very important friendship at the moment, more than anything else. I value the friendship side of it more than any other part of the relationship in some ways because we do get on very well as friends…If we broke up I think

he would have more difficulty keeping the friendship side of it without separating that from any other sort of relationship we've had... We have talked about it in those terms, if we were to break up then we would still want to be friends. I'm not saying that he isn't good for me in some ways because he is but I suppose I'm more realistic about the relationship than he is (age 40, gay, in a relationship, living alone).

4.6 In these cases it was openly acknowledged that as sexual relationships these were transitory and likely to end at some point in the future thereby demonstrating characteristics of the pure relationship (Giddens, 1991).

Ex-partners

4.7 The transition from partnership to friendship while often valued within these narratives did not always take place in practice; nonetheless, relationships with ex-partners contributed in important ways to self understanding. These relationships tended to fall within three broad categories. In the first instance it was striking the extent to which ex-partners, while no longer in contact, figured in the structure of the narratives. Relationships with ex-partners contributed significantly to how interviewees were able to narrate their life course because they provided important 'signposts' indicating key turning points in their lives. Such points often required profound re-orientations for those involved.

4.8 Secondly, there were cases where ex-partners remained in contact but this was because people found themselves tied by factors not of their own choosing - the most common tie being the condition of co-parenting. Many interviewees admitted that if not for the constraint of a practical consideration, they would not have contact. Nevertheless, while not a chosen relationship, in these instances the tie to ex-partners was perceived to be a relationship of considerable consequence, requiring ongoing negotiations and conciliations.

4.9 Finally, in more optimistic situations the continued involvement with ex-partners occurred as a matter of unencumbered choice because the relationship could be recast as a friendship rather than an imposed obligation. As friends ex-partners were a seen as a source of emotional and practical support.

> Question: Do people ever react to the fact that your ex-partner and you are so close and that he is also very close to your son?

> Annie: I think a lot of people get confused because we are really close and he's really close to Steven [her son]. Especially when I try to get him fixed up with other women. They can't understand it. They really can't. He's a better friend to me that he ever was boyfriend and that's how I see him. I hate describing him as my ex-partner because fundamentally he is my friend and that's what he is to me (age 27, heterosexual, single, living with son).

4.10 The process of renegotiating a sexual relationship so that it may become a friendship was not taken for granted as something which would be effortless to achieve. It was often remarkable the extent to which people valued this possibility even though the sexual relationship itself had been deeply problematic.

> Question: It is important for you to remain friends with someone after you split up?

> Terry: I think it is with some people. Take Dianne who I felt let me down but there are lots of things about Dianne that I liked besides, you know, our sexual relationship. There are lots of things I think are great about her and I think why throw that away? You don't have to lose these people you know...there are hurts and things that can't get repaired but there are a lot of things that you can get over (age 49, heterosexual, single, living alone).

Thus, a sexual partnership, reconfigured as a friendship, provides a source of continuity across the ruptures that a relationship break-up brings to one's life course.

Families of Choice?

4.11 In studies of non-heterosexual kinship networks, it has been noted that the term 'family' has been claimed but reworked such that it is defined by chosen ties and bonds rather than blood relations or relations formed through marriage (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). Many studies have shown that non-heterosexuals do see themselves as being part of a family but their definition tends to be much more flexible and diverse than traditional heterosexual definitions because it is less easy for non-heterosexuals to simply adopt the predetermined roles associated with heterosexual kinship patterns. Within this model of family, kinship is not defined by biological ties but ones which are freely chosen and created. In this regard, the models of kinship created by GLBT people do not fit neatly into the conventional categories of their heterosexual counterparts.

4.12 It was very unusual for our interviewees to rely upon the types of values which tend to underpin western cultural constructions of the family, such as the notion that 'blood is thicker than water'. The ways in which most interviewees engaged quite critically and reflexively with dominant familial ideals is indicative of post-traditional intimacy. Colin was an exception, however, as he relied upon abstract principles when explaining his relationship to family. His narrative was constituted through a set of unquestioned traditional 'family values'. In talking about those closest to him it was clear this position was reserved for family members - not because of any intrinsic qualities of these individual relationships, however, but because of their definition as 'family'.

Question: Why are these people most significant to you?

Colin: Because they're my family. They're important to me and they're people that I would go out of my way to help if they fell on hard times…it *goes without saying*. You stick by your family. You help them out if they ever get into trouble (age 52, heterosexual, single, living with children).

4.13 In other narratives the category of friend and family intersected in a number of important ways. Firstly, family relationships, while acknowledged as important were often described as being difficult to negotiate. Family relationships in practice did not live up to the cultural ideals invoked by Colin above. The significance of being able to 'choose' one's friends but not one's family emerged as an explanation for why friendships tended to be more successful and rewarding relationships. As voluntary relationships appreciated for the intrinsic quality of the connection, friendships were valued as being more central than family yet also defined relationally through the ideals which family relationships failed to deliver.

Question: Why would you say that you feel that your relationship with your friend Emily is like a sister relationship?

Annie: It's how I would want family relationships to be but I just don't have them. It's because we forged our own relationship and we know that we're there for each other twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, whatever happens. Up until recently when my son's father got more involved in his life, Emily had custody of Steven if anything happened to me …Basically they say you don't choose your family but Emily and I have chosen to be this close (age 27, heterosexual, single, living with son).

Angel: I'm not close at all to any of my family apart from my mother and my brother to some extent but I have no contact whatsoever with any other family members. It's always been like that…don't exchange Christmas cards, make phone calls and so have lost contact with them which means that maybe that is why my immediate circle of friends is that much more important to me because my family isn't (age 46, heterosexual, single, living with a friend).

4.14 Again the moral significance of chosen relations is relevant here. The special nature of the friendships Annie and Angel speak of above resides in their status as freely chosen relations that are not based in externally imposed obligations or relations of dependency (Friedman, 1993: 213). Family relations often involve status and power disparities based upon age or gender inequality. When such disparities exist, they may produce a situation in which the provision of care and support are not given freely but are products of subtle forms of pressure or influence (Friedman, 1993:214).

Ambivalence and Community

4.15 The concept of 'community' for many of our interviewees produced a considerable degree of ambivalence. This was most evident when the term was interpreted as a reference to the ways in which people saw themselves connected to those living within their immediate geographical locality. Most people admitted that neighbours were 'friendly' or 'nice' but this sentiment was far from being regarded as a sufficient condition for community.

Question: Do you feel any part of a community?

Liz: I have to say no because I don't know many people. I know the young couple next door a bit, but they're out at work or wherever but she's quite friendly. And there's a hedge dividing the two houses, so, when she cuts hers, she sort of bobs across and does ours too, which is quite nice really…But no there doesn't seem to be any sort of neighbourhood communities any more because everybody goes out to work, and those that stay at home of course don't see other people, because they're all out at work. There's no real sort of community. Not as I remember it as a young child (age 60, heterosexual, in a relationship, living with father).

This particular lack of local community did not seem overly problematic for most interviewees. Indeed the term 'community' was often interpreted as a negative, normalising or restrictive force.

Question: Do you know your neighbours at all?

Brad: I know them to say hello to and that's it and that's the way I like it! [laughs]. Well I think the street I live in is quite quiet anyway and there isn't particularly a lot of friendship. I know them to say hello to and that's as far as it needs to go I think.

Question: How long have you lived on that street?

Brad: I've lived there ten years and I've lived next door to the same set of neighbours for ten years, on one side but they keep themselves to themselves and I do as well (age 40, gay, in a relationship, living alone).

4.16 The slippage Brad makes above is interesting. He moves from talking about 'community' to talking about 'friendship' as community. Because he feels there is no friendship amongst his neighbours, he concludes that there is no sense of community either. The term 'community' had its most resonance for interviewees when it could be interpreted as something that was chosen and constituted through friendships. Community in many of these narratives was defined as something that people had chosen to

create for themselves and not as something that they had become part of through the circumstance of living in a shared locality. These forms of community contrasted with the relationships categorised as 'neighbours'. Communities in many cases were actively constituted through practices such as people moving into an area in order to be geographically close to friends.

> Sylvia: …Everyone seems to be moving into the Woodbourne area. We're starting to call it the 'Woodbourne Collective'. I think it makes a difference to the friendships because it means you can pop around for a cup of tea and it's a lot more casual or you can just ring at 5 minutes notice and say 'can I come over?' so it's a different kind of friendship but it's still a friendship rather than just being neighbours. I haven't put any of my actual next door neighbours on because I try not to talk to them (age 25, Queer, single, living with a friend).

> Question: One thing that's struck me very much is how local so many of your friends are. Do you put more effort into your local friends than people who are further away?

> Molly: I think a lot of us have made choices to be here because we're friends. I think it's that way round really.

> Question: Rather than you've made friends with people who happen to live locally. You've all chosen to live fairly close to each other.

> Molly: Mmm. Some of these people like Allan and Louise moved away briefly and then came back because you know it's important to them. Friendship's more important to them than other things and I think similarly I wouldn't move somewhere else because friendships are important (age 52, heterosexual, single, living alone).

4.17 Chosen communities provided a very important source of support for the kinds of identities under construction in these narratives. For example, Margaret below describes at length the importance of living within a locality where she feels others acknowledge the kinds of non-traditional lifestyle choices she has made.

> Margaret:…I don't see that because I'm forty nine I've got to be in a regular job and be doing one thing and yet on the other I do have goals I am aiming to achieve but I think a lot of people have come here to live because it's quite a special place in a sense and because of the things going on. It gives them that kind of leeway to give up some of the responsibility of age and things and of family you know. A lot of people have children and live separately and things like that. They don't go into the traditional thing of well it's not really traditional any more is it living together because you've got children but you know they don't conform in that sense. And so all the people I know are doing their own young thing in some way really… it's quite common to be forty or fifty or a bit younger here - you've been married, you're not now, you've been living with somebody, you're not now, you've had children but you're not with them now. There's this mish mash of people doing their own thing. The picture I get is a lot of them are doing their own thing (age 49, heterosexual, in a relationship, living alone).

4.18 In the following excerpt Claire makes reference to her specific geographical locality, her chosen community of friends, and a wider community that is based upon her sexual identity. Community then exists as a multiple set of relations. Any tendency to lament the loss of community and social cohesion can be countered here with the argument that communities based on choice and the value of voluntary care and support are central to the narratives constructed here.

> Claire: Possibly the choice of where I live has to do with my sexuality because that would be the major factor I think, in terms of if I did think of moving somewhere. I would think, 'Well, am I gonna be isolated?' and 'What's that gonna be like?' and 'How am I gonna deal with it?' That's actually stopped me going abroad a few times. Can I cope with it? So there is an element of that, that maybe I stick around this city because there's lots of people I know, including quite close friends. That would be a major thing. I'd be moving away from my friends. At one time on this street there was loads of my friends that lived on it. Kate lived on this street at one time. There was other lesbians that I know, on this street but there's only me, now, that I know of (age 40, lesbian, single, living alone).

Discussion

5.1 While Giddens emphasises the centrality of gender equality as a precursor to the pure relationship, within these narratives equality was associated much more strongly with friendships, rather than sexual partnerships. As evidenced by Duncombe and Marsden's (1999) research on the performance of emotional labour within heterosexual relationships, women are more likely than their male partners to find themselves at a disadvantage. Friendships, on the other hand are more likely to approximate the kinds of values associated with the pure relationship. These include mutuality, trust and choice. These characteristics are idealised in partner relations but in practice they were often evaluated as lacking. The moral significance of friendship emerges from its voluntary nature and unlike socially ascribed relationships the commitment shared by friends is freely given.

> The sort of close relationship in which personal choice and commitment ought to determine (a substantial part of) what is morally required is a relationship whose circumstances facilitate the most authentic expression of choice and commitment. Friendship is precisely a relationship that provides for the morally unimpaired expression of personal commitment. This is far less true of personal relationships that lack *equality and mutuality* (Friedman,

1993:214, emphasis added).

5.2 In attending to the specific needs and interests of close friends we learn to respond to others on the basis of respect for their individuality. Experiencing and learning to respond to others' preferences may potentially contribute to the development of respect for more generalised others – a moral commitment to those whom one has no particular affiliation (Benhabib, 1992).

5.3 The de-centring of sexual partners within people's live in favour of friends emerged as a central theme throughout these narratives (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Friendship, it would seem is a key relationship within post-traditional intimacy offering the opportunity to disrupt heteronormative[8] institutions and contribute to the making of alternative life narratives.

> …we need practices that can inspire people, when necessary, to unconventional or disloyal *action*. It is here that our voluntary friendship practice makes a distinctive contribution. Friendships can support unconventional values, deviant life-styles, and other forms of disruption of social traditions (Friedman, 1993:219).

5.4 Unlike family or kin, friendship is not constituted by socially defined purposes or functions. Therefore, it allows for the recognition of individually defined needs which evolve within the terms of the relationship itself. Foucault (Rabinow, 1997: 137) similarly argues that friendship exists outside of the regulatory force of 'ready made formulas' and social institutions associated with heteronormativity. It is necessary for relations falling outside these norms to invent their own codes, practices and values. Friendship as a voluntary, non-institutionalised relation provides a foundation for what Foucault names a 'way of life' that can 'be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalised' (Rabinow, 1997:138). An emphasis upon friendships makes possible the 'formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force' (Rabinow, 1997:136). For Foucault, a way of life based in friendship is a life founded upon a particular ethic. Although Foucault is writing here about homosexuality, it has been argued that post traditional intimacy is characterised by a blurring of the former boundary between hetero and homosexual lifestyles (Weeks et al 1999; Roseneil, 2000b). As such friendship groups may be of increasing importance to heterosexuals and the simultaneous de-centring of sexual partnerships indicate a significant reworking of heteronormative culture in which the heterosexual couple has occupied a position of central importance.

5.5 The support of friendships and elective communities introduces the possibility of living outside of heteronorms in a way that more circumscribed relations do not.

> …people are somewhat free to evolve new shared values and pursuits in other relationships besides friendship. But those other relationships are often bound up with socially defined purposes that transcend what individuals, as individuals, might want or need. Marriages, and the families that result have the socially defined purpose of reproduction and rearing of children, and this may circumscribe the options and opportunities for participants to sustain socially disruptive activities. By contrast, friendships seem to have no socially defined purpose other than those friends themselves evolve…thus, the context that friendship provides for the development and support of unconventional attitudes and behaviours constrains the participants far less than the contexts provided by other close personal ties (Friedman, 1993:220).

5.6 The creation of elective communities allows for the development of a notion of 'community', which challenges a model grounded in the heteronormative imagery of familial relations, neighbourhood and nation[9]. Communal norms may or may not facilitate the flourishing of particular identities and expressions of selfhood. As argued earlier, selfhood is constituted through a condition of relationality. From a feminist perspective this model of selfhood replaces abstract individualism of liberal political thought and carries a different conception of community based not in competition, but, rather, care, nurture and mutuality (Friedman, 1993:232). This focus is particularly important for understanding the normative implications of post-traditional intimacy and the expression of friendship as what Foucault (1994) terms an ethical way of life. Involuntary sets of social relations are constitutive of identities to a limited extent. What are far more relevant are the relations and communities that one actively enters into, rather than finds oneself in. Such a model emphasises voluntarism and the active creation of self biographies.

> …the discovered identity constituted by one's original community of place may be fraught with ambivalences and ambiguities. Our communities of origin do not necessarily constitute us as selves that agree or comply with the norms that unify those communities. Some of us are constituted as deviants and resisters by our communities of origin, and our defiance may well run to the foundational social norms that ground the most basic social roles and relationships upon which those communities exist (Friedman, 1993:245).

5.7 Choosing to create a community that supported self narratives which ran against the grain of heternorms was also linked to the experience of oppression for many interviewees and forms of belonging were constructed in relation to this experience. For example, sexuality emerged as a key way of framing the expression of belonging. Here 'community' was invoked as an abstract relation i.e. references were made to the gay or lesbian community. But the term also referred to the organisation of particular physical and geographical spaces people occupied. These spaces, both abstract and concrete, make possible the expression of an identity that is actively created rather than simply found.

Conclusion

6.1 In summary, friendships are important for a number of reasons. Firstly, they offer individuals stable normative reference points for everyday practices. Secondly, through the provision of care and support they sustain non-conventional identities; and thirdly, in a context where the question of what community means is encountered with some ambivalence, they act as a place where a sense of belonging can be claimed and enacted. Within a post-traditional social context and non-standardised life courses, intimate relationships are being negotiated in a wide variety of ways. This is not to suggest that tradition has completely lost its influence in structuring identities and ordering life narratives. Processes of individualisation and detraditionalisation are spatialised and temporal processes. In the study conducted here, the self authoring of individuals who clearly had to create non-conventional narratives of intimacy demonstrates the extent to which friendships are central to their understanding of interconnectedness. This analysis offers insight into the ways in which individuals who are not conventionally partnered rely upon friendships and reveals the importance of further consideration being given to non-familial relationships in the study of personal relationships.

6.2 The condition of being single is one in which many of our interviewees entered into at several points across the life course as sexual partnerships came and went. For others who had partners, these relationships were de-centred in favour of valuing friendships. To privilege family or kin relations in the study of post-traditional sociality, therefore, leads to only a partial study of how the practices of care and intimacy are being enacted today. The narratives that were constructed by our interviewees lend support to the claim that because post traditional intimacy in late modern social conditions is often fragile, friendships provide an important source of continuity for the identities and elective communities under construction. The centrality of friendships to the structuring of individual narratives reveals how individuals are reflexively responding to a set of conditions in which lives are lived more fluidly and with less certainty. However, if a loss of certainty is an effect of detraditionalisation then it is only a partial one. As the relationships which formerly underpinned modern forms of sociality diminish, other relationships assume the position of providing alternate points of normative reference upon which individuals can look to for continuity and ethical knowledges.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1] These terms as they appear here are intended to indicate a historical period beginning around 1970.

[2] .The project on which this article is based was the 'Friendship and Non-Conventional Partnering' study originated and supervised by Professor Sasha Roseneil. This study was undertaken under the auspices the ESRC Research Group on Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (Ref. M56281001) grant holders: Fiona Williams, Carol Smart, Alan Deacon, Sasha Roseneil and Simon Duncan.

[3] The interest in this study lays with lifestyles which are practiced outside of the taken for granted norm of the married, co-resident, heterosexual couple with children that is often held to be at the heart of the social formation and is often the object of analysis in the study of family and kin relations. We interviewed 53 people who were either single or were not living with a sexual partner. The sample was drawn from across 3 localities chosen for their contrasting gender and family cultures. See Duncan and Smith (2002) for the mapping of spatial differences in these cultures. The sample was drawn purposively to include diversity across age, sexuality, gender, relationship status, living arrangements and 'race'. All of the interviewees were single (not currently involved in a sexual relationship) or were not cohabiting with a partner. A total of 53 people aged 25 to 60 were interviewed.

[4] Census data (http://www.statistics.gov.uk) indicate that in the UK single person households are the fastest growing household formation.

[5] Analyses of the life course do not reflect consensus in the nature of social change. Indeed, there have always been variations in the ideal and typical trajectory of life course transitions according to such divisions as class. I am indebted to Lynn Jamieson for this insight.

[6] Berlant and Warner (2000:318) define heteronormativity as follows: 'a whole field of social relations become intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatised sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness – embedded in things and not just in sex – is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance and other protected spaces of culture'.

[7] This internal understanding or set of principles refers to what Allan (1979:12-18) calls 'rules of relevance'

[8] Heteronormativity allows us to conceptualise the ordering of the social world through a privileging of heterosexuality. This privileging is a central organising index of social membership. It is tacit and implicit within a wide variety of social practices and institutions (Berlant and Warner, 2000:312-319). Raymond (1986:7) defines hetero-relations in terms of the 'wide range of affective, social, political, and economic relations that are ordained between men and women by men'. Both terms, however, are not to be conflated

with heterosexuality.

[9]Friedman (1993:233) argues that communitarian perspectives for instance rely upon a model of community that is overly focused upon families, neighbourhood and nation. Such a model is problematic for feminists because the social roles and structures often characteristic of such communities have lead to the subordination of women. The moral authority claimed by these communities is therefore problematic for many its members.

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