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Towards a more significant sociology of friendship

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R A Y P A H L

*Towards a more significant sociology
of friendship*

ANY ATTEMPT to establish the sociology of friends and friendship more centrally in the sociological enterprise must surely be welcomed. In his article Michael Eve poses the question whether friendship is a truly sociological topic to match the importance of the role of friendship in social psychology or social anthropology. In developing his case, Eve refers to other sociologists who have, seemingly, helped to trivialise or marginalize the topic by focussing more on the dyadic and informal nature of friend-type relations, hence neglecting any larger and putatively more significant role in the development of those class, status and power relationships traditionally taken to be the core of sociology (1). Eve claims that sociologists writing about friendship have marginalized themselves from such larger concerns. Thus, he quotes O'Connor admitting that 'friendship is a residual category in Western Society' (O'Connor, 1998: 126) and also notes that Graham Allan concedes that its effects appear invisible and are marginal to core sociological issues such as power and stratification, although this rather misrepresents Allan's current position (Adams and Allan, 1998).

Part of the reason for this apparent marginalization, suggests Eve, is that sociologists, unlike social anthropologists, have adopted the terms and methodologies of social psychology, thereby over-emphasizing dyadic relationship, which seemingly float freely from any connection with the broader social structure.

(1) This point has, of course, been made before but not developed in any significant way. See, for example, Ruth A. WALLACE and Shirley F. HARTLEY, *Religious Elements in Friendship: Durkheimian theory in an empirical context in Durkheimian Sociology: cultural Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1988): 'Only a few social theorists have

seriously analyzed the phenomenon of friendship as an important unit of social solidarity. Many more theorists have alluded to it only peripherally or implicitly in their writings and most have simply ignored it' (p.93). The authors go on to claim that 'Durkheim viewed friendship as a functional alternative to religion for individuals in modern society'.

A further and rather telling criticism Eve makes of his fellow sociologists is that they are able to marginalize the significance of friendship in contemporary society on theoretical and not simply on empirical grounds. Taking Anthony Giddens' work as representative, Eve suggests that by making a sharp, dichotomous contrast between 'traditional society' and 'high' or 'late' modernity, Giddens is able to allow friend-type relations to be generally subsumed in personalistic relations generally. He argues that, whilst in 'traditional' society power and social structure were based on personal relations, this should be contrasted with the modern world where, as Eve puts it, the basic ways of conceiving social structure, authority, and power tend to be cast in terms which implicitly exclude 'personal relations'.

The empirical and theoretical positions converge by focussing on the purportedly modern emphasis on personal choice as being the essence of friend-type relations. The growth of individualisation is the context in which we are able to confirm who we are through our personal choices. We choose the material decorations of our 'personal spaces' and then we inhabit them with the friends of our choice. By doing this, some contemporary theorists argue, we affirm or confirm our personal identities. Thus, Ulrich Beck, a recent protagonist for this idea, argues,

To adapt Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase: people are condemned to individualisation. Individualisation is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the education system, the welfare state and so on (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002 p.4).

Earlier social commentators have taken up similar positions. For example, in 1908 George Simmel published his text *Soziologie, Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, which was full of insight but lacked any great empirical underpinning. With, perhaps, closer affinities to a Balzac or a Proust than to 'modern' sociologists or social anthropologist, Simmel's view of friendship has been very influential:

...complete intimacy becomes probably more and more difficult, as differentiation among men increases. Modern man, possibly, has too much to hide to sustain a friendship in the ancient sense. Besides, except for their earliest years, personalities are perhaps too uniquely individualised to allow full reciprocity of understanding and receptivity, which always, after all, requires much creative imagination and much divination which is orientated only toward the others. It would seem that, for all these reasons, the modern way of feeling tends more heavily toward differentiated friendships, which cover only one side of the personality, without playing into other aspects of it (Simmel in Wolff, 1950, p.326).

This position is echoed by those such as Zygmunt Bauman, who has a sceptical and pessimistic view about the quality of personal relationships

in identity-obsessed modern society and implies that superficial relationships dominate at the expense of deeper, trusting and more meaningful ones (e.g. Bauman, 1994, 2001).

This argument put forward by Simmel, Bauman and others assumes that *all* friend-like relationships are differentiated—that is we have one relationship to play golf with, another to give us a lift to work and another to confide in when our personal life is in turmoil and so on. This is an empirical question and should not be prejudged. Are friend-like relationships specialised rather than complex, or rather, more accurately, what proportion of a person's friendships fall into the differentiated category that the confident social commentators quoted above assume encompass all friend-like relations?

Eve does not engage with such issues, since he, also, tends to refer to the noun 'friend' with few qualifying adjectives. Furthermore, he does not distinguish between the qualities of friendship which may occur to a greater or lesser extent in all friend-like relationships and 'friend' as a designation for a given category in an individual's social network. Before extending, commenting upon and, to a degree, dissenting from Eve's polemic, it may be helpful to clarify, in parentheses as it were, the salience of these distinctions.

Evidently a friend is a *person*: he or she may also be a wife or husband, a sibling, a workmate, a neighbour, an old school or college mate and so on. Typically, married people often refer to their partner as their 'best friend'. Evidently, the word 'friend' is being forced to do too much work. Whilst some individuals would insist that their only true friends were members of their families, others might refer to everyone they greet in the street as their 'friends'. These later 'filofax friends' may run into hundreds of people for some obsessive networkers.

Given the lack of any strong normative consensus on the meaning of either the noun or the qualifying adjective, there is evidently scope for considerable ambiguity and confusion. Even the social psychologists who have been assiduous in their empirical analysis of dyadic relations have only belatedly grasped that they may be uncertain of the qualitative content of what they so enthusiastically measure (2).

(2) In an authoritative review of psychological research on friendship, the authors conclude 'there has been very little descriptive research on its natural formation and maintenance in ongoing relationships... Most work has been conducted in the laboratory... This dearth of knowledge about the processes of friendship and acquaintanceship has resulted in a very small data base for generating hypotheses and

constructing theories about the nature of friendship in adults'. Dorothy GINSBERG, John GOTTMAN and Jeffrey PARKER, 'The Importance of Friendship', page 41, in *Conversations of Friends: speculations on Affective Development*, edited by John M. GOTTMAN and Jeffrey G. PARKER (Cambridge University Press/Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Cambridge and Paris, 1986).

To make my point in a different way—imagine if anthropologists were faced with a tribe who referred to all their agnatic and affinal relationships as simply ‘kins’. Would anthropologists simply ask: ‘How many kins do you have? How often do you see them? What tasks do they perform? How far away do they live? If a kin living at some distance and rarely seen were thereby designated as a ‘weak tie’, what difference would it make if that ‘kin’ was the person who had given birth to the person concerned? If that person, although rarely seen, provided some valuable service, would the anthropologist concerned then write an article about ‘The Strength of Weak Ties’ in the manner of Granovetter and discussed by Eve? This may all seem very fanciful but it may help to show some of the difficulties to be encountered in exploring the hypothesis that in certain important respects friends may be replacing kin in contemporary society. In our ESRC study we were struck by the language of suffusion used by our respondents, illustrating the way in which some used kin and friendship terms interchangeably, with very distinctive meanings. When a family member was perceived as being ‘like a friend’ and, conversely a friend was considered as kin, the comparison was positive and strengthened the quality of the tie, except where a friendship was seen as a ‘duty’ and was then pejoratively described as ‘family-like’. Kin were seen to resemble friends when the relationship was based on choice and fun rather than obligation; where there was a strong emotional bond and simply a feeling of duty and where the relationship involved confiding. (Although discussions between parents and children were not as open as with friends (3)).

The idea of ‘friendship’ is also highly contested. The large and interesting literature on the topic stretching over 2,000 years continues to explore the classical ideas of Aristotle, Cicero and others. Modern philosophers find much to exercise their minds (see, for example, Cooper, 1980, Hutter, 1978 and Stern-Gillet, 1995). Aristotle’s distinction between friends of pleasure, friends of utility and friends of virtue still generates discussion. The pure friendship of virtue or communication is of particular significance: is such a person ‘another self’? (Millgram, 1987). The concept of ‘soul mate’ is qualitatively distinct from the friends of pleasure and utility, which may indeed be highly specialised. The modern equivalents of Aristotle’s friends of virtue are based on deep and reciprocal trust. Given the importance of trust as an essential form of social glue, it is clear that exploring the nature of friendship

(3) See R. PAHL and E. SPENCER, Final Report to ESRC on Grant No. R000237836 *Rethinking Friendship: Personal Communities and Social Cohesion*, April 2001.

could have profound sociological significance. I have discussed some of these issues in a highly condensed form in my essay *On Friendship* (Pahl, 2000).

The notions of ‘friend’ and friendship’ can be understood only in specific historical contexts and it is debatable how far Aristotle’s concepts, for example, are readily transferable. In present contexts it is likely that Aristotle’s pure form of friendship would appear at its best in heterosexual or gay partnerships, a point acknowledged by Simmel (Simmel, in Wolff *op. cit.*, 326-29). At each historical period the salience and significance of friendship has to be re-evaluated or explored afresh—whether this be in the monastic communities of the eleventh or twelfth centuries or in later treatises such as that written by Taylor in 1662 (Taylor, 1984).

Allan Silver has put forward an elegant thesis in which he argues that the coming of commercial society in the eighteenth century led to a radical reassessment of the nature and meaning of friendship. He draws on the work of political economists such as Adam Smith and his contemporaries to support his argument that there was a sharp and distinctive break between the meaning and significance of friends and friendship before and after this period (Silver, 1990). His argument fits well with those who see a sharp dichotomy between traditional and modern societies. However, the recent work by Tadmor would seem to undermine the logic of Silver’s thesis, since her findings suggest striking parallels between the concerns of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and accounts of friendship in contemporary research. As with so many other matters, the golden age of traditional society is always a century or so ahead of the time being studied (Williams, 1973). The questions Tadmor raises in the eighteenth century context are equally well applicable today (Pahl and Spencer, 2001).

How can friends be loved in a way that is both universally Christian and selective? And how can friendship be described as selective, while so many friendships are obviously predicated upon existing kinship relationships? How can friends be loved both for their virtue, and for their usefulness? And what happens if non-selected ‘friends’, such as parents, other patrons, or siblings are useful but not virtuous? How can love between friends be mutual, while also being restricted by proper notions of deference and duty, as befits the ranks and degrees of the friends concerned? And can select friendship exist among women, or between men and women, or can it exist only between men? And if the latter is the case, how, then, can friendship be described as Christian and universal? (Tadmor, 2001, 238-239)

Silver is right to question whether the intense loyalties before the arrival of commercial society were of the same ‘conceptual stuff’ as the loyalties of modern friends in market societies. This is an empirical issue which Silver does little to resolve, relying, as he does on contentious

sources such as the much-criticised historian Lawrence Stone (Stone, 1977).

Tadmor's recent fine study is based on a detailed textual analysis of the diaries of Thomas Turner, a Sussex shopkeeper, between 1754 and 1765 (see, Vaisey (ed.) 1985). Turner used the term 'friend' to cover both kin and non-kin. Tadmor carefully distinguishes between all those to whom the term is applied and sets out the context, presenting as much detail as possible about all Turner's non-kin friends. She is able to distinguish a circle of 'select friends—'a small but impressive network of men in the "middling sort": literate and capable men, pillars of their community, bound together in long-lasting connections of friendship and trade' (Tadmor, 2001, p. 200). That is, pretty much the sort of people to be found in contemporary Rotary or Lions clubs. Such a local social system was well documented for Banbury in the mid twentieth century by Margaret Stacey (Stacey, 1960).

These select 'friends' were people in whom Thomas Turner trusted, for whom he felt special regard, and of whose acquaintance he was particularly proud, either because they were reputable businessmen, or because they were particularly cultivated or both. In the case of the select 'friends' as in the case of other 'friends', the language of friendship posed moral expectations. Thomas Turner clearly enjoyed the company of his select 'friends', however, he saw friendship as a moral relationship and expected his 'friends' to be honest, virtuous, and godfearing people: if they were sober and moderate, he applauded them all the more. Reciprocity and fair-dealing were always important, and Turner was quick to detect selfishness and ingratitude. In addition, he valued his friends' education and was eager to benefit from an intellectual exchange (Tadmor, 2001, p.205).

Such an analysis seems remarkably similar to what was found amongst friends in the personal communities analysed in the ESRC *Rethinking Friendship* project (Pahl and Spencer, 2001). Equally similar was the way that Turners' friendships straddled kin and non-kin. In the same way that the ESRC project recognised that the category of friend could include familial and non-familial relationships, so was it the case with Turner:

A careful analysis of Turners' personal diary has shown that there was a group of people, whom Turner designated as 'friends', and who were also closely bound to him in ties of sympathy, loyalty, mutual interest, and many reciprocal exchanges and 'services', these friends included Turner's wife, near and distant relations, as well as select associates and companions...

The range of Turner's 'friends' was thus broad and his relationships with his spectrum of 'friends' also manifested some shared characteristics. One important characteristic of these 'friendship' relationships was that they were affective and sentimental (*ibid.* 212).

We found in our research that the moral expectations of 'friendship' were not always fulfilled—even with kin or in-laws who were sometimes significantly less important than true or non-related friends. This was

echoed in the eighteenth century. 'The fact that Turner complained so much about the selfishness and coldness with which he was treated by his related "friends" shows that he expected his "friends" to be supportive, considerate and warm' (*ibid.* 214).

Such evidence appears to contradict Silver's assumptions about the instrumental and exchange-dominated nature of friendship in pre-commercial England. He might, however, counter that the period when fathers warned their sons of the perils of friendships that could turn nasty was in the previous century and he quotes various sources to make this point. Yet there is another source that brings some doubt to bear upon Silver's thesis. Jeremy Taylor's treatise on *The Measures and Offices of Friendship* was published in 1662. 'The good friend, according to Taylor, should be virtuous, wise, merciful, true and honest, open and ingenuous, however also tenacious of a secret' (*ibid.* 241). Furthermore, whilst Taylor stresses that richer and more intelligent friends can be more useful, the principle of choice is very important. 'He is not my friend till I have chosen him or loved him' (Taylor, 1662, p.35 quoted in Tadmore, 2001 p.241). This poses the problem of those personal relations where 'natural' friendship cannot be relied upon: those kin that have good friend-like qualities may be confirmed as friends whereas those lacking such qualities may be eliminated. For example, 'if a brother is a "fool or a vitious person"' (Taylor, *op. cit.*, 68), one can choose not to develop the existing relationship with him into friendship, and only allow him the "pity and fair provisions, and assistances" (*ibid.* 74) he deserves' (quoted in Tadmore, 2001, p. 242).

This advice about choosing the relatives that are congenial and not expecting all relatives to be especially privileged on account of the blood connection seems particularly modern. The research by Finch and Mason (1989 and 1993), and the commentaries by Giddens (1992) and many other sociologists have documented this selectivity in contemporary society and hailed it as some modern counterpart to traditional order.

The suffusion of friend-like relationships made us cautious in our study of accepting any sharp division between kin and non-kin. Friends could be classified into distinctive types—not simply of pleasure, utility and virtue—but in a more complex way reflecting the social, psychological and material realities of contemporary life. We found that people had different ranges or mixes of differentiated or more complex friendships. We also found that whilst some friends and kin in an individual's personal community knew each other and could be said to be part of his or her 'social network', because they were cross-linked with

each other to some degree, others had no links with the rest of the personal community. However, this did not necessarily imply that these latter ties were thereby weaker. Often such relationships were separated geographically if ego had moved away from the locale of initial friend making or the person who had once been a close school or college friend later went off on a different career or marriage trajectory. Since we were at pains to gather information about friends through the life course, thus providing some understanding of an individual's social convoy, we could, in some instances, identify 'best friend' or 'friends of virtue', who were largely absent in ego's day-to-day world. However, their salience and significance was out of all proportion to the actual time spent communicating by phone, email or by rare visits.

It was very common in our study for friends to refer to their partner or spouse as their 'best' or 'closest' friend. For Taylor in the seventeenth century, 'the marriage is the Queen of friendships, in which there is a communication of all that can be communicated by friendship... It is the principal in the kind of friendship, and the measure of all the rest' (Taylor, 1662 p.80 quoted in Tadmor, 2001, p.243). This is not, to say, of course, that the norms and social practices of friendship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not different in several important respects from those in the contemporary world. Of course, there were differences—for example, in the importance of accommodating a Christian view of friendship—but there are clear similarities and Tadmor's study makes the neat dichotomies of the classical sociologists hard to sustain on empirical grounds.

To summarize, both Eve and Silver overstate their cases about the contrast between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies. In the early eighteenth century people had a range of different friendship types; friendship was seen as a moral and trusting relationship; there was a degree of suffusion of qualities of friendship between kin and non-kin, including the notion of the spouse as a best friend. All these elements were found to be true in our empirical study 'Rethinking Friendship' (Spencer and Pahl, forthcoming).

However, despite the need for caution, where Michael Eve's position remains potent is in relation to the argument that ties of friendship helped to form the social order in Turner's life-time in the mid eighteenth century, in a way which is not applicable in contemporary society. Tadmor affirms that 'friendship' had a role in the making of social order in eighteenth century England and in mediating relationships within it. 'For people of the middling sort... "friendship" relationships were indeed crucial, for it was along the lines of "friendship" that these

people mobilised many of their social and economic interests, thus forming regional networks well beyond their immediate neighbourhoods' (*ibid.* p.214).

Can it be said that such social processes based on friendship work in a similar way in modern society? Counter to Eve's assertions, I believe that substantial evidence can be adduced to suggest that they do. In the space available to me I can do no more than offer illustrations which I believe are stronger than the example of the use of weak ties in the labour market which Eve discusses. There is a substantial literature indicating that friendship links served to support powerful intellectual, artistic and economic elites which had a profound impact on British life through much of the twentieth century. Those, such as Noel Annan, (Annan, 1990; see also Toynbee, 1954) who have written in detail about the Bloomsbury group, the Cambridge intelligentsia (with its specific cotereries such as the Cambridge Apostles), the circle of friends surrounding Keynes, and similar groups, have described in detail the importance of friends and friendship in effecting or preventing change in Britain's cultural or economic life. For example, in Oxford between 1924 and 1930 a group of future literary and political figures came together, united less by their cultural or political interests than by their 'similar social backgrounds and a common circle of friends'. 'By 1928 a coherent group existed, centring around the personality of [W.H] Auden. Called interchangeably the "gang", "the Happy Few", the "Lads of the Earth", the group included Auden, Spender, Isherwood, Day Lewis and their close friends' (Samuels in Rief, 1970, p. 215). Whilst this group—and other groups at Cambridge and the LSE in the 1930s—had an important impact in cultural life, the period ended in 1940 with considerable political disillusion well reflected in the writings of George Orwell. This was the context for E.M. Forster's famous aphorism that if obliged to choose between betraying either his country or his friends, he hoped he would always choose the former. Some commentators, such as Noel Annan, have been insiders, others have been careful analysts of social networks, following the path-breaking study by Lupton and Wilson (1959) on those who benefited from the leak of an impending change in the Bank Rate in the 1950s.

Similar studies of intellectual elites have been done in most European societies. For example in Romania, the 1927 generation that centred round Eliade, Ionescu and others was united in a kind of friendship, despite strong ideological differences. 'The elite was so tiny that one almost needed to be on friendly terms with one's ideological enemies, if one wanted to be in the thick of what was going on intellectually' (Cali-

nescu, 2002, p. 651). As the authors of a detailed account of this group of friends put it, they were 'in the same chamber of resonance'.

It may be objected that these cultural elites are part of the social froth of society and are not involved in the engine room of change. There is much evidence from Eastern Europe before the so-called velvet revolutions of 1989 that this certainly need not be so (McBride, 1999). Apart from the detailed autobiographical account by Vaclav Havel and others, there is a brilliant sociological account by Konrad and Szelenyi (1979), which situates the Intelligentsia in a broad sociological canvass. Writing in the late 1970s the authors remark: 'Nothing is more surprising to the Western visitor who is introduced into intellectual circles there than the absence of ghettoizing tendencies and the extent to which personal connections cut across official hierarchies and occupational boundaries: in one company he may find an academic economist, a physicist, the managing director of a bank, a poet, and a film maker, and he will be surprised to learn that they are "stars" for their whole class... he will soon recognise on the basis of his personal experience alone that his Eastern European friends are all members of one and the same class, that a common class culture unites them...' (Konrad and Szelenyi, 1979, 81-82).

Eve's contention that the study of friends and friendship has not been related to the broader concerns of traditional sociologists has some force but he considerably weakens his case by overstating it. By ignoring the work of sociologists who have attempted to incorporate the study of friends and friendship into the study of power and stratification in modern society, he does no great good for the cause he is attempting to promote.

The first serious omission in his argument is that he does not appear to recognise the crucial importance of friends in the construction of the Cambridge Scale of Stratification (Prandy, 1991). This has played a central role in core debates on class for nearly a quarter of a century and his omission of any consideration of this is very odd. Certainly, the importance of the Cambridge work is recognised in all significant texts on class and stratification (e.g. Crompton, 1998, Savage, 2000). However, it is true that Blackburn, Prandy and their colleagues at Cambridge used a rather rough and ready definition of friend in their survey instrument, given the crucial importance of friends in their theoretical model. If Eve had applied some constructive criticism to one of the core components of the Cambridge Scale he would have some solid justification. However, to accept without discussion some of the looser statements of some sociologists of friendship does a disservice to the profession.

The second serious omission is surely his neglect of the extensive literature on social networks and their connections with the distribution of power and society. Over the past forty years there has been considerable research on the social connections between elite groups, interlocking directorships and the like, but as the, at the time, more empirically focussed Anthony Giddens remarked, 'it is mistaken to assume that the existence of a high degree of interchange between, or interlocking of, elite positions is, *taken alone*, a sufficient index of the existence of a high degree of social or normative integration among elite groups' (Stanworth & Giddens, 1974 p. 16).

This is, of course, correct and the increasingly subtle and methodologically sophisticated study of networks in organisations (e.g. Burt, 1992) has not overcome the problem. There is certainly much anecdotal evidence that powerful people provide positions and opportunities for their 'friends'. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom appointed as Lord Chancellor one of the senior colleagues in his chambers when he was a barrister. How much this was repaying old debts and how much it was having inside knowledge about the best man for the job is hard to say. The mass media make much of the phrase 'Tony's Cronies' to refer to the personalistic and informal factors, apparently often taken into account by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in the making of senior appointments.

The identification of social networks and their political and economic importance has been well-documented (6,200). What is less certain is how far these crucial networks are based on friend-type relationships. If, to a large extent, they are, then the linking of friendship and friend-type relationships to the central concerns of sociologists would be established. The problem for sociologists would then be more methodological than theoretical: how does one irrefutably substantiate the claim that informal ties of friendship are still considerably important in the appointment of key politically and economically powerful offices? There are the diaries, memoirs and biographies of various elite persons which provide very strong indications that these personal ties and linkages are of great importance in particular cases. But when we read, for example, that Ian Gilmore, educated at Eton and Oxford and who married Lady Caroline Montagn-Douglas-Scott, younger daughter of the Duke of Buccleuch, at 28, while at the bar, despite a total lack of journalistic experience, became proprietor and editor of the *Spectator* magazine, one cannot but suspect that this was with a little help from his friends. Gilmore went on to remark, 'But nothing was known on me at all, so they thought I should be a very good person' (*Financial Times* 27-28 July

2002, Weekend Section III). So who were ‘they’ in this context? Surely his ‘connections’.

The key sociological issue about friendship in this context is about *trust*. Whilst Silver may be right in claiming that trust was more difficult to ascribe to friends with confidence and certainty in pre-contractual commercial society, its importance has certainly not diminished in contemporary society. If it can be demonstrated that friend-type relations are more likely to provide the basis of an enduring trust, then the case for seeing friendship as a significant form of social glue becomes very powerful. Despite the potential significance of such a hypothesis little research has been done. ‘Unfortunately, we lack convincing data to evaluate the extent of connections between trust in members of kin and friendship groups and trust towards members of the society at large’ (Miztal, 1996, p.100). It is still unclear whether a more ‘friendly society’ has more social cohesion or more subversion. The challenge for sociologists is to be more specific about what they mean when they refer to ‘friends’, friend-like relations and friendship. Unpacking these notions is a central concern of the forthcoming book by Spencer and Pahl.

Conclusions

Eve’s polemic is a welcome stimulus to a debate on friends and friendship which is long overdue. In particular, his insistence that dyadic ties need to be seen in the context of a complete configuration of ties and linkages is well taken. In my own research with Liz Spencer, we attempted to describe the emergence of personal communities, formed over time in distinctive domains and fluctuating as social convoys over the life course (*cf.* Kahn and Antonucci, 1980).

We can confirm Eve’s contention that the general assumption that friendship in contemporary societies is primarily an individual matter is misleading and diverts attention away from many interesting sociological issues. In particular, we agree that certain kinds of research methodologies do not reveal the interconnections between all those in an individual’s micro-social world. Hence the main thrust of our work was on our respondents’ personal communities. Perhaps the most significant contribution Eve makes is his recognition that there is a substratum of ties—both personal and organisational—in which an individual is embedded which makes particular exchanges *possible* (his emphasis). ‘It is in the knitting and maintenance of these ties which friendship (as

also other kinds of personal relationships) may have its greatest significance'.

Clearly, friendship must be seen in context but this has already been well argued in the 1998 volume edited by Adams and Allan. However, Eve is right to point up the issue, even though he is not quite the voice crying in the wilderness that he imagines. He cannot be blamed for being unaware of unpublished work, although strong hints of our approach appear in my book *On Friendship* (Pahl, 2000). I hope that Eve's paper helps to generate a vigorous and sociologically-informed debate on friends and friendship that we both believe the topic deserves.

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