Why We Should Care About Friends: An Argument for Queering the Care Imaginary in Social Policy

1 author:

Sasha Roseneil
University College London
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Why we should Care about Friends: An Argument for Queering the Care Imaginary in Social Policy

Sasha Roseneil

ESRC Research Group on Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA), School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds
E-mail: s.roseneil@leeds.ac.uk

This paper sets out an argument for the re-imagining of care in social policy on three interrelated grounds: epistemological–theoretical, substantive socio-historical, and normative political–philosophical. It takes up the epistemological challenge offered by queer theory to propose a different gaze be cast on care which recognizes the practices of care which take place outside normative heterosexual couples and families. Following on from this, it suggests that the care that has been the object of study in social policy has failed to keep up with transformations in the realm of sociability which characterize the contemporary world. It outlines findings of research which show the increasing importance of friendship to those at the cutting edge of processes of individualization. Finally, it points to the new and valuable lens that the study of caring practices of friends might cast on the ethics of care, and it ends with some pointers to what it might mean for social policy to take friendship seriously.

Friendship is a virtue . . . to say so much implies that friendship is a noble thing – i.e. that it is worthy to be pursued as an end in itself. Further, friendship is among the most indispensable requirements of life: it is, in fact, valuable not only as an end, but as a necessary means to life . . . It is an observed fact that men find friendship indispensable in good fortune, in bad fortune, and at all periods of their life. (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, By Aristotle)[1]

I'll Be There For You
By The Rembrants[2]

So no one told you life was gonna be this way
Your job's a joke, you're broke, your love life's D.O.A.
It's like you're always stuck in second gear
When it hasn't been your day, your week, your month, or even your year,
Chorus
I'll be there for you
(When the rain starts to pour)
I'll be there for you
(Like I've been there before)
I'll be there for you
('Cause you're there for me too)

Sasha Roseneil

Introduction

From the symposia of ancient Athens to the sofas of Central Perk, philosophers – professional and lay – have believed that in terms of *care, values and welfare* friends matter. What was recognized by Aristotle,[3] and is the central conceit of one of the world's most successful television series, has, however, largely failed to register in the social scientific literature on care, or within social policy more widely.[4] This paper proposes that for those of us who are interested in the social organization of care, the values that underpin its provision and practice, and the welfare systems which enable its flourishing,[5] friends should similarly matter. Drawing on queer and feminist theory, and on empirical research conducted under the auspices of the ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA), I set forth an argument about why those of us concerned to develop a radical, generative understanding of welfare should begin to think differently about care – an argument about why we should care about friends. My case for the re-imagining of care rests on three interrelated grounds, which have fed into, or are derived from, my CAVA research: epistemological–theoretical, substantive socio-historical, and normative political–philosophical.

We should care about friends because...

We should think beyond the heteronormative (the epistemological–theoretical argument)

The first strand of my argument that friendship deserves a place in social policy is derived from the insights of queer theory.[6] This rather amorphous body of work shares a critique of the minoritizing epistemology which has underpinned most academic thinking about homosexuality, and stakes a claim for knowledge produced from queer theory and from the analysis of queer lives way beyond its immediate, and obvious, audience. In the words of Eve Sedgwick (1991: 1), rather than seeing the 'homo/heterosexual definition . . . as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority', queer theory suggests 'seeing it . . . as an issue of continuing determining importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities'. Thus one of queer theory's foundational propositions is that an understanding of heteronormativity – the 'institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged' (Berlant and Warner, 2000: 312) – must be central to any analysis of modern western society. From this, I would suggest that social policy, like all social science and humanities disciplines, should reject the 'epistemology of the closet' which both silences sexual difference and regards those living outside normative heterosexual frameworks as marginal to our interests.

This means we should seek to frame research questions from non-heteronormative standpoints, making a conscious effort to think outside and beyond heterosexual familial relations, and allowing lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and all those whose lives transgress heteronormative assumptions a central place in our analyses. It means both being open to seeing differences between homosexual and heterosexual lives, and according analytical importance to these, but at the same time not treating the categories of 'homosexual' and

'heterosexual', and the individuals who carry these identities, as essentially different, as fixed and firmly constituted.

If we take this epistemological–theoretical argument to heart and look to the growing field of lesbian and gay studies as a resource for thinking about social policy, there is considerable evidence to suggest that friendship is of foundational and particular importance in the lives of lesbians and gay men.[7] Networks of friends, which often include ex-lovers, form the context within which lesbians and gay men tend to build their personal lives, offering emotional continuity, companionship, pleasure and practical assistance. Building and maintaining lives outside the framework of the heterosexual nuclear family, and sometimes rejected, problematized and marginalized by their families of origin, lesbians and gay men have tended to ground their emotional security and daily lives in their friendship groups. Many groups of lesbian and gay friends refer to themselves quite consciously as 'family' (Weston, 1991; Nardi, 1992, 1999; Preston with Lowenthal, 1996). For some lesbians and gay men the boundary between friends and lovers is not clear and shifts over time – friends become lovers, and lovers become friends – and many have multiple sexual partners of varying degrees of commitment (and none). These practices de-centre the primary significance that is commonly granted to sexual partnerships and the privileging of conjugal relationships, and suggests to us the importance of thinking beyond the conjugal imaginary.

A lesson of queer theory is that we should resist the tendency to trivialize, infantalize and subordinate relationships which are not clear parallels of the conventional, stable, long-term, cohabiting heterosexual couple. We should avoid a 'life-course mindset' which focuses on generational reproduction within the heterosexual family as *the* significant, productive activity and space, at which analytical attention should be directed. Queer theory can encourage social policy to focus on the non-normative, on those who, knowingly or not, challenge the expectations, assumptions and regulations of heteronormativity. Queer theory's attention to the constructed nature of the homosexual/ heterosexual binary, to the fluidity which exists between homosexual and heterosexual identities and practices, suggests that we work from the knowledge which exists about the salience of friendship to lesbians and gay men, to explore its relevance in the lives of heterosexuals too.

Friendship is becoming more important (the socio-historical argument)

Historical, sociological and anthropological writings on friendship point to historical and cultural variability in the meanings and practices of friendship.[8] Drawing on the idea that friendship is socially constructed and changes over time, the second element of my argument that we should take friendship seriously suggests that we do so because friendship is a relationship of increasing social significance in the contemporary world. The particular version of modern friendship which emerged in the mid-twentieth century, which promoted the companionate intimate heterosexual couple as the primary arena of intimacy, and emphasized a new culture of mutual disclosure between husband and wife and the importance of joint leisure activities, has recently started to be unsettled. Shifts in gender and family relations, processes of individualization and the postmodernization of relations of sexuality are socially and culturally de-centring hetero-relations and destabilizing – or *queering* – the distinctions between heterosexual and homosexual

ways of life.[9] As geographical mobility increases, as marriage rates drop and marriage takes place later, as divorce rates have soared over the past 30 years, as births outside marriage, and indeed outside any lasting heterosexual relationship, increase steeply, as the proportion of people living in single person households rises and the proportion of women not having children climbs, patterns of sociability – as well as the more widely discussed patterns of intimacy (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 1995) – are undergoing transformation. A smaller proportion of the population is living in the heterosexual nuclear family of idealized mid-twentieth century form, and fewer people are choosing or able to construct their relations of cathexis according to the symmetrical family, intimate couple model. In 2003 only 22 per cent of households in the UK comprised a heterosexual couple with dependent children (ONS, 2004). This increasingly means that ways of life that might previously have been regarded as distinctively 'homosexual' are becoming more widespread. As Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy and Catherine Donovan (2001: 85) have suggested, 'one of the most remarkable features of domestic change over recent years is . . . the emergence of common patterns in homosexual and heterosexual ways of life as a result of these long-term shifts in relationship patterns'.

The significance of these processes of individualization calls for attention to the relationship and caring practices of those living at the leading edge of social change. Evidence from the British Household Panel Study shows that men and women who are divorced are more likely to see a close friend during the week than those who are married. Moreover the British Social Attitudes report suggests that people are more likely to have seen their 'best friend' than any relative who does not live with them in the previous week, and whilst there has been a decline in the proportion of respondents seeing relatives or friends at least once a week between 1986 and 1995, the decline in contact with friends was considerably smaller (Pahl, 1998). Peter Willmott's (1987) research also suggests that friends were, by the mid 1980s, more important than relatives or neighbours in terms of providing practical help with everyday tasks. It seems highly unlikely that this will suddenly change and that there will be a reversion to the forms of familial and neighbourly assistance which were reported in the working class localities researched in the community studies of the 1950s (e.g. Hodges and Smith, 1954; Young and Wilmott, 1957).

Against this backdrop, the findings of the 'Care, Friendship and Non-Conventional Partnership' project[10] within CAVA add weight to the idea that friendship is an increasingly socially significant relationship. This research has investigated how the most 'individualized' in our society – people who do not live with a partner – construct their networks of intimacy, friendship, care and support. We wanted to find out who matters to people who are living outside conventional families, what they value about their personal relationships, how they care for those who matter to them, and how they care for themselves. We carried out in-depth interviews with 53 people aged between 25 and 60 in three locations – a former mining town that is relatively conventional in terms of gender and family relations; a small town in which alternative, middle-class, 'downshifted' lifestyles and sexual nonconformity are common; and a multi-ethnic inner-city area characterized by a range of gender and family practices, a higher-than-average proportion of women in the labour force and a large number of single-person and non-couple households. We talked to men and women with and without children, of a diversity of ages, ethnic origins, occupations and sexual orientations, and with varying relationship

statuses and living arrangements. This gave us detailed insights into the texture of people's emotional lives.

We found that, across a range of lifestyles and sexualities, friendship occupied a central place in the personal lives of our interviewees. Whether they were in a heterosexual couple relationship or not, the people we interviewed were turning to friends for emotional support. Jools, a heterosexual woman of 28 from a former mining town, spoke for many people when she said: 'I think a friendship is for life, but I don't think a partner is . . . I'd marry my friends. They'd last longer'. There was a high degree of reliance on friends, as opposed to biological kin and sexual partners, particularly for the provision of care and support in everyday life, and friendship operated as key value and site of ethical practice for many. Far from being isolated, solitary individuals who flit from one unfulfilling relationship to another, most of the people we interviewed were enmeshed in complex networks of intimacy and care, and had strong commitments and connections to others. In contrast to the mythology of the singleton in desperate search for a marriage partner – exemplified by Bridget Jones – very few showed any yearning to be part of a conventional couple or family. A great many, both of those with partners and of those without, were consciously placing less emphasis on the importance of the couple relationship. Instead, they were centring their lives on their friends. Of those with partners, almost all had *chosen* not to live together. Very few saw cohabitation as the inevitable and desirable next stage of their relationship.

Many of the interviewees had experienced the ending of a marriage or a long-term cohabiting relationship, and the pain and disruption this had caused had made them question the wisdom of putting all of their emotional eggs in one basket. Only one of the interviewees saw her partner as the most important person in her life, to the exclusion of others. She was a recent migrant to Britain whose family lived overseas. For everyone else, the people who mattered were either friends or a combination of friends, partner, children and family. This was not a temporary phase and people did not return to conventional couple relationships as soon as an opportunity arose. Re-interviewing people 18 months later, we found a remarkably consistent prioritization of friendship.

Friends were an important part of everyday life in good times and bad. Most of the people we spoke to put considerable effort into building and maintaining friendships in the place where they lived. A good number had moved house, or had persuaded friends to move house, with the aim of creating local friendship networks that could offer reciprocal childcare and help in times of illness, as well as pleasurable sociability. It was friends far more than biological kin who offered support to those who suffered from emotional distress or mental health problems, and who were there to pick up the pieces when love relationships ended. Many of the people we interviewed were opening up their homes to people who were not part of their conventionally defined family. It was not just the twenty-somethings who spent much of their leisure time hanging out with friends at each other's homes or having people round to dinner, for parties and barbecues. Friends were invited to stay during periods of homelessness, when out of work or when they were depressed or lonely.

What this research suggests is that social researchers have often failed to see the extent to which, often as a matter of preference, people are substituting the ties of friendship for those of blood, particularly in terms of everyday care and emotional support.

Friendship offers us a new and valuable lens on the ethics of care (the political/philosophical argument)

Central to our collective project in CAVA is the grounded, sociological development, and normative elucidation, of the concept of an ethics of care, which holds as axiomatic the fundamentally relational, interdependent nature of human existence. We regard an ethics of care as important in countering the overwhelming emphasis in current, individualistic political discourse which promotes the ethic of work above all else.[11] However, many feminists have expressed reservations about the wholehearted embracing of an ethics of care, regarding it as over-reliant on a model of care developed from thinking about the fundamentally gendered care practices of mothers for their children, and fearing that it brings with it a diminution of concern about the ethics of justice and social equality.[12] I fully appreciate such concerns, and wish to keep a critical eye on the model of self with which an ethics of care operates, on the types of relationship from which it is theorized, and on the implications of these for the *welfare* of the *care-giver*. We should be wary that advocating an ethics of care might involve endorsing a model of self which is so fundamentally relational that any sense of individuality, separateness, and capacity to act autonomously is negated. I concur with Marilyn Friedman (1993: 5) in her call 'for introducing into care ethics a cautiously individualistic strain of thought, one that is consistent with a care-ethical conception of persons as inherently social beings'. With consideration to issues of politics, I am concerned that an ethics of care does not always adequately take into account the unequal, highly constrained, and even oppressive conditions in which many practices of caring, particularly those carried out by women, occur. We need to think about issues of equality and reciprocity, and about the needs of the carer for care. As Peta Bowden puts it: 'The challenge directed to care theorists is that their ethics fails to confront the morality of gender inequality itself, and in fact, perpetuates the reign of the dominant by encouraging self-sacrifice and servility in the guise of care' (1997: 8). We need to think not just about 'gendering ethics', as an ethics of care does, but also about 'the ethics of gender'.[13]

Attention to friendship can facilitate a useful reconceptualization of our notion of an adequate ethics of care.[14] Friendship is a significantly different relationship from that of mothering, lacking controlling institutions and firm cultural expectations and conventions. It is 'a sphere of social activity that is both exhilaratingly free from regulation and profoundly fragile' (Bowden, 1997: 60). It is, as Aristotle stated, a relationship (at least ideally) between equals, based in mutuality and reciprocity, to which the partners come of their own free will, not out of need, and which requires a firm sense of the separateness of the parties. Or, as Andrew Sullivan puts it:

> Friendship is for those who do not want to be saved, for those whose appreciation of life is here and now and whose comfort in themselves is sufficient for them to want merely to share rather than to lose their identity. And they enter into friendship as an act of radical choice. Friendship, in this sense is the performance art of freedom. (Sullivan, 1998: 212)

If we take friendship seriously we will have to confront the question of how care may be given and received by equals, without violating individual autonomy, without self-sacrifice and subservience, and maintaining the affection which constitutes the relationship. Aristotle offers an ethical theory based on a conception of the self as situated, particular

and enmeshed in relationships, but as also concerned with its own individual needs and development which sets limits on the obligation to care. And his identification of the detrimental effects of excessive humility – which he sees as robbing the individual of what he (sic) deserves, as causing others to think badly of him, as evidence of a lack of self-knowledge and as leading him to fail to perform the noble actions of which he is actually capable – offers, Ruth Groenhout argues 'a healthy alternative to the complete self-effacement sometimes portrayed as "good mothering" in the popular press' (1998: 181). Finally, Aristotle's notion of the virtuous practice of friendship (see the quotation at the start of the paper) also militates against subservience, because subservience by the carer produces selfishness in the cared for, and the virtuous friend cannot act in such a way as to prevent the development of moral excellence in the other.

Returning briefly to the Care, Friendship and Non-Conventional Partnership project, we found that the people we interviewed were consciously seeking to create a way of life that would meet their need for connection with others while preserving their autonomy and independence. They placed a high value on the way in which friends offer care and support, love and affection without infringing personal boundaries, and without the deep emotional risks of sexual/love relationships. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar's (2000) phrase 'autonomous relationality' captures well this moral ontology (Butler, 1999), which values both attachments to others and self-determination.

And if we did care about friendship…

Taking friendship seriously, for each of these three reasons, can offer those of us interested in a progressive agenda for a welfare society important discursive resources. Firstly, it provides an important counterpoint to the pessimistic tone which characterizes the work of sociologists such as Zygmunt Bauman (2001, 2003) and Robert Putnam (2000), whose ideas have been taken up in a widespread public discourse about a supposed crisis in personal relationships and community. Such ideas feed into, and implicitly express, a patriarchal, conservative hankering after a lost golden age of stable families and seemingly more secure structures of care. A recognition of the value that people place on extra-familial relationships, and the care and support that they offer, also offers a challenge to the familialism that runs through the policies of New Labour (notwithstanding its commitment to diversity) (Stychin, 2003). From this we can start to map a policy agenda which moves beyond the rhetoric of 'supporting families' (Home Office, 1998), to consider how we can support, and recognize the importance of, friendship.[15]

For instance, work-life balance policies are called for which are framed in terms of the range of important personal relationships and commitments within which people live their lives, rather than narrowly with reference to family responsibilities.[16] Employment benefits should be redefined to extend bereavement leave to apply to all the people about whom an employee cares or with whom he or she shares a special relationship. More radically, it is time to explore an extension of the proposed legislation on civil partnerships for lesbian and gay couples to recognize any significant relationship – sexual or otherwise – and to open up fiscal benefits, inheritance and other 'next of kin' rights to those whose intimate lives do not map on to a policy framework which focuses on conjugal couples and families.[17] Interestingly, it is the Conservative Party and the queer campaigning group, Outrage,[18] who are currently voicing the demand for the recognition of diverse forms of caring relationship, against New Labour's determination to offer relationship recognition

only to lesbian and gay couples. It is a queer world indeed in which these two groups find themselves bedfellows – and a queer world, by its very nature, throws up strange alliances which disrupt old binaries. In such a queer world, a radical, generative social policy is one that seeks to enable all of those who care for others, whoever they are, to do so with maximum social support and recognition, whilst never forgetting those – the strangers – who exist outside the charmed circle of love and friendship.

Notes

1 Aristotle (1940: 1–2).

2 The theme song from the global hit television show 'Friends': http://www.geocities.com/ TelevisionCity/4151/theme.html

3 For a discussion of Aristotle and later philosophers of friendship, see Roseneil (2000a).

4 There is a small literature on the role of friends in the provision of care and support, for instance on caring for people with AIDS (Kurdek and Schmitt, 1987; Hays, Chauncey and Tobey, 1990; Adam, 1992; Turner, Pearlin and Mullan, 1994, 1997, 1998), for the elderly (Allan, 1986; Jerrome, 1992) and the dying (Seale, 1990; Young, Seale and Bury, 1998). Willmott (1986, 1987) provides policy-oriented reviews of the research on friendship networks and social support. See also Wellman and Wortley (1990).

5 This is the agenda of the ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (ESRC award M564281001), under whose auspices this paper was written. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at a CAVA Workshop, and at the Universities of Hull, Greenwich, Swansea, Adelaide University, King's College, London, Lancaster University, RMIT and at the Social Policy Association Conference (University of Teeside, 2003). I would like to thank participants in all of these occasions for their comments and questions.

6 Texts which have come to assume foundational status within queer theory include: Sedgwick (1991), Butler (1991), de Lauretis (1991), Fuss (1991) and Warner (1991). There is a small literature at the intersection of queer theory and social policy/socio-legal studies, notably: Stychin (2003), Moran, Monk and Beresford (1998), Bell and Binnie (2000).

7 For example, Altman (1982), Weston (1991), Nardi (1992, 1999), Weeks (1995), Preston with Lowenthal (1996).

8 See Roseneil (2000a) for an overview of these writings.

9 For a detailed exposition of my 'queering of the social' thesis see Roseneil (2000b, 2002). Also relevant is the work of Maffesoli (1996) which sees the contemporary period as 'the time of the tribes', an era of affinity groups, networks and affective bonding, and which is taken up by Heath (2004).

10 This project was led by Sasha Roseneil, with Shelley Budgeon and Jacqui Gabb as research fellows. For a more detailed discussion of the methodology and findings see Roseneil and Budgeon (2004). For other work on intimacy and care beyond the conventional family, see contributions to Budgeon and Roseneil (2004).

11 On an ethics of care, see Tronto (1993) and Sevenhuijsen (1998). In relation to CAVA, see Williams (2001, 2004).

12 For feminist critiques of an ethics of care see Ferguson (1984), Card (1995), Spelman (1991), Hoagland (1991), Friedman (1993), Groenhout (1998) and Bowden (1997). Sevenhuijsen (1998) offers a reworking of an ethics of care which incorporates an ethic of justice.

13 See Hogan and Roseneil (2001).

14 This point is made by Bowden (1997) whose work seeks to explore the implications of three relationships of care which have been largely ignored by care theorists: friendship, nursing and citizenship.

15 A Law Commission of Canada (2002) report sets out an agenda for the support of close personal relationships beyond conjugality.

16 On 23 April 2004 Tony Blair announced an intention to explore the extension of rights to flexible working to those caring for elderly parents and friends. http://money.guardian.co.uk/news/story/ 0,1456,1201654,00.html

17   The opening up of relationship recognition to friends has occurred in France, with the introduction of the PACS, and in 2003, in Tasmania.

18   On Conservative proposals, see http://politics.guardian.co.uk/conservatives/story/0.9061,1160289, 00.html. For Outrage's position on this matter see http://outrage.nabumedia.com/pressrelease.asp

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