TOWARDS A MORE FRIENDLY SOCIETY?

By Sasha Roseneil

Are friends the new family? Is friendship an increasingly socially significant relationship? Are people's ideas of who really matters in their personal lives changing? Sasha Roseneil describes her research, which suggests far-reaching changes are indeed taking place.

The huge global success of television shows such as 'Friends', 'Seinfeld', 'Ellen', and 'Will and Grace' suggests that popular culture may be registering social changes which social scientists have been rather slower at recognising. These programmes – and many others – portray close non-familial relationships as at the heart of contemporary social life.

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With just under a quarter of all households in the UK comprising a married couple with dependent children, and one third of households consisting of people living alone, fewer and fewer of us live out our adult lives in the traditional heterosexual family assumed by the post-war Beveridge welfare state. It is time, therefore, for researchers and policymakers to know more about the personal relationships of those outside the conventional family.

Research that I have been carrying out with colleagues at the University of Leeds as part of the ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA), is demonstrating that increasingly it is friendship that really matters in people's lives. In or outside heterosexual couples, the people we interviewed were turning to friends for emotional support. Jools, a 28 year old heterosexual woman from an ex-mining town speaks for many people in 21st century Britain when she says: "I think a friendship is for life, but I don't think a partner is… I'd marry my friends. They'd last longer."

Our research has investigated how the most 'individualised' 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 qualitative interviews with 53 people aged between 25 and 60 in three locations – a de-industrialised ex-mining town which is relatively conventional in terms of gender and family relations, a small town in which alternative middle class, 'down-shifted' lifestyles and sexual non-conformity are common, and a multi-ethnic inner city, urban area characterised 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, sexual orientations, relationship status and living arrangements. This gave us detailed insight into the texture of people's emotional lives, and allowed us to understand them within the context of individual biographies.

Far from being isolated, solitary individuals who flit from one unfulfilling relationship to another, the majority 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 myth of Bridget Jones, there was very little evidence of a yearning to be part of a conventional couple or family. The people we interviewed, both those with partners and those without, were choosing to de-emphasise the importance of the couple relationship. Instead they were centring their lives around their friends. Of those with partners, most had deliberately chosen not to live together. Very few saw co-habitation as the inevitable and necessarily desirable logical next stage of their relationship.

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Many of the interviewees had experienced the ending of a marriage or a long-term co-habiting relationship, and the pain and disruption this had caused 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 all 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

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ESRC RESEARCH
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Care, Values and the Future of Welfare (CAVA)
CAVA is concerned with how we all fulfil our different family responsibilities and how social policies can help us – whether that is looking after children, earning money and going to work, spending time with spouses and partners, caring for other relatives and/or helping friends.

The aim of the research is to develop a new framework of values to underpin the social policies that support us in fulfilling our varied family responsibilities.

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to conventional couple relationships as soon as an opportunity arose. Re-interviewing people 18 months later revealed a remarkably consistent prioritisation of friendship.

We found that people were self-consciously seeking to create a particular way of life for themselves, which would meet their need for connection with others whilst preserving their autonomy and independence. They placed a high value on the way in which friends offer care and support, love and affection to each other, without infringing each other's personal boundaries, and without the deeper emotional risks of sexual/love relationships. 'Autonomous relationality' is the phrase coined by feminist philosophers to describe this mode of being, which values both attachments to others and self-determination.

Friends were very much part of everyday life – in good times, and in times of trouble. Most of the people we spoke to put considerable effort into building and maintaining friendships in the place where they lived. A considerable number of people had moved home, or had persuaded friends to move home, in order to create a local friendship network which could offer reciprocal childcare, help at times of illness, and most importantly, a source of 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.

With this new emphasis on friendship, 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 in each other's homes, or having people round to dinner, for parties and barbeques. Friends were invited to stay during periods of homelessness, when out of work, or when they were depressed or lonely.

The people we studied are at the cutting edge of social change. The way that they are de-emphasising the heterosexual couple in their everyday lives, and instead re-valuing friendship, suggests that the hegemony of the conventional family is experiencing significant challenge. Intimate lives, and social mores about relationships, have undergone fundamental transformation in the past twenty years. In this era of divorce, unmarried parenthood, co-habitation, and increasing public visibility and recognition of lesbian and gay partnerships, the family can no longer be taken for granted as the basic unit in society. Processes which sociologists refer to as 'individualisation' and 'detraditionalisation' are releasing people from traditional heterosexual norms. Participation in traditional family life is shifting from being a given to being a matter of choice, and people are driven increasingly by an ethic of individual self-fulfilment. Women's greater economic and social independence, the decline of patriarchalism, and the normalisation of homosexuality are all challenging the social centrality of the conventional heterosexual couple and family. Policymakers need to start thinking creatively about how we can recognise and support a more friend-orientated society ■

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