



# Between friends: Making emotions intersubjectively



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## ABSTRACT

Analysing qualitative interview material from a project on friendship and spatiality, this article examines the relationship between friendship, emotions and context. In the project's data the workplace emerged as a key site in which people meet new friends and practice friendships. Using the workplace as a case study, the article analyses how context can shape friendships, how emotions are woven throughout the very constitution of friendships, and how friendships can impact upon people's emotional experience of workplaces. Further, I analyse how emotions are actively generated between friends. In this understanding, emotions are not pre-existing states that are located in individuals; rather, emotions are created intersubjectively between friends and in specific contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

This article draws on a qualitative, interview-based project to explore the relationship between emotions, context and friendship. The project's respondents consistently figured their close friendships as emotionally significant relationships that develop in, and are shaped by, specific contexts. To explore the complex texture of people's relational and contextual experience of friendships, I take an interdisciplinary perspective inspired by work in geography, sociology and cultural theory which emphasises the intersubjective and emotional character of selfhood. Following Bondi (2005), I do not presume that emotions are *located* in individuals, and therefore I frame my analysis in ways that aim to be sensitive to the relational qualities of emotions. My relational approach has a twofold character: I analyse how emotions arise in the context of workplaces – emotions are thus relational to specific spaces. But I also examine how emotions emerge and are shaped by intersubjective friendship relationships in that context: emotions are *created* in relationships between people. I explore this dynamic by focussing on respondents' accounts of 'sharing emotions' as a key aspect of close friendships, and by examining how the workplace influences this intersubjective relationship.

My intention is not to suggest that all emotions are produced intersubjectively; rather, it is to examine the specificities of friendship's emotional bond and what is generated within that bond. Although I focus on the workplace context, the article does

not aim to provide a sociological analysis of changes in employment patterns or the meaning of work, nor an organisational studies account of work practices or the management of workers. Instead, I analyse how this project's respondents 'do' emotions and friendships in a particular context, and the workplace was identified by respondents as a key site for friendships. Although friendships at work exhibit features commonly found in friendships – such as reciprocity, support and affection – I explore how the workplace shapes their characteristics in distinctive ways.

The next section of the article offers a review of the literature on friendship and emotions, and signals the significance of the workplace as a space that influences such relationships. The following sections outline the project and discuss its methodology, and goes on to introduce the project's interview material, focussing on two core ways in which the workplace actively shapes both emotions and friendships. The final section focuses more closely on the intersubjective quality of friendships and emotions. The article argues, firstly, that the demands of the workplace shape emotionally close friendships and, secondly, that workplaces 'throw people together' and facilitate friendships which may not have developed elsewhere. Thirdly, I argue that the relationship between emotions and friendship is co-productive – friendships provide a space in which emotions are made, and making such emotions intersubjectively can act to strengthen friendship bonds.

## 2. Placing emotions and friendship in context

Friendships have been recognised as significant social relationships which often comprise strong interpersonal bonds (Nardi,

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1999; Pahl, 2000). Studies have found that friendships are important for good mental and physical health, and provide key forms of emotional and practical support (Gouldner and Strong, 1987; Oliker, 1989; O'Connor, 1992; Phillipson et al., 2004; Willmott, 1987).<sup>1</sup> But it is recognised that the form and significance of friendships can shift in tandem with social change in other areas, such as family relationships or sexual partnerships (Jamieson et al., 2006; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). In the context of such societal shifts, sociological research has been re-evaluating the social status and place of friendship in people's personal lives. Indeed, Allan (2008: 14) has argued that "friendships are becoming of greater consequence under conditions of late modernity, not least with regard to the role they play in establishing social identities".

Claims about the intensified role of friendship today relate not only to these broader shifts in personal life but also to friendship's distinctive character. In the west, friendship has generally been framed as an 'achieved' and 'chosen' relationship in contrast to other relationships such as those of family whose status is socially ascribed, although studies recognise the potential porosity of such boundaries (Morgan, 2009). The significance individuals ascribe to friendship is shaped by discourses of choice which can act as key signifiers of contemporary individuality: because they are *chosen* relationships, friendships are popularly thought to represent our 'authentic' identities (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Additionally, the discursive framework of friendship is considered to be less rigid than more socially institutionalised relationships such as family or sexual couple relationships (Allan, 2008; Budgeon, 2006; Paine, 1969). Friendships are subject to less surveillance by socio-legal institutions and tend to be less socially 'scripted' than other personal relationships. Indeed, Foucault (1997) notes that friendships have an intriguing status precisely because they are not fully contained by the normative discourses of the western nuclear family and heterosexual coupledness. Because of this, he argues, friendships may offer counter-normative possibilities for living differently.

Although potentially more open to individual negotiation than other relationships – and perhaps perceived as deeply personal and individual because they are chosen – empirical research has shown that friendships are nevertheless strongly socially patterned.<sup>2</sup> Understood by sociological accounts in terms of homophily, our friendship groups tend to be composed of individuals who closely resemble ourselves in terms of age, class and ethnicity (Li et al., 2003; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). But as Allan (2011) notes, there has been relatively little analysis of the emotional aspects of friendship in sociological research, although feelings have long been recognised as a key constitutive element of friendships (Gouldner and Strong, 1987; Oliker, 1989).

Recent debates about the emotions, particularly in social and cultural geography, offer useful conceptual resources for thinking about the emotional qualities of friendship. Bondi et al. (2005: 3) propose: "a non-objectifying view of emotions as relational flows, fluxes or currents, in-between people and places rather than 'things' or 'objects' to be studied or measured." In my analysis I explore emotions as relational – generated in the intersubjective spaces between friends – and as *constitutive* of friendships (as a particular form of relationship). Similarly, Ahmed (2004) asks not what emotions *are*, but what emotions *do*. My analysis places an emphasis on how emotions *are done*, and specifically how they are

done intersubjectively. This is necessarily socially embedded for, as Hubbard (2005: 121) argues, emotions "arise in the midst of the (inter)corporeal exchange between self and world". I explore this exchange by focussing on how emotions are patterned across people in friendship relationships and simultaneously across contexts such as the workplace.

So while friendships can be understood as relational in terms of their intersubjective, emotional bonds, attention must also be directed at friendships' relational connections to socio-spatial contexts. Sociological and anthropological studies examine how particular contexts can influence the form and intensity of friendships (Adams and Allan, 1998; Bell and Coleman, 1999; Santos-Granero, 2007), and the workplace has been seen as a key context in which people meet new friends and engage in friendships. Workplaces present particular challenges for employees, and it is clear that friends at work offer emotional and practical support to one other (McGuire, 2007; Parris et al., 2008). Friendships at work can help women negotiate specific difficulties they may encounter in male-dominated, hierarchical workplaces (Andrew and Montague, 1998), or may assuage problems gay men experience in workplaces organised around heteronorms (Rumens, 2008, 2010). Further, studies have noted that "the workplace context does not function merely as a 'container' for friendships, but rather that it plays a significant role in the friendship development process" (Sias and Cahill, 1998: 290).<sup>3</sup> But while acknowledging the workplace's active role in shaping the character and depth of friendships, other studies emphasise that the workplace context does not *determine* them (Bidart, 1997).

Such accounts provide a useful backdrop for an analysis of the emotional qualities of workplace friendships. In popular discourse, the workplace is not generally seen as a space of intimacy and emotion although, as Gregg (2011) argues, employees utilise various strategies for managing the stresses and emotional demands of work.<sup>4</sup> Also, employers may attempt to harness and benefit from the social skills, goodwill and ambience created by workplace friendships (Pettinger, 2005). Academic analyses of emotions and work have generally focused on the concept of 'emotional labour' developed in Hochschild's (1983) influential work, or more recently on debates about immaterial or affective labour (e.g. Gill and Pratt, 2008). However, emotions suffuse organisations in many complex ways (see Flam, 2002; Lively, 2007), and there is a growing recognition of how affect is implicated in capitalism's drive (Thrift, 2008) and the myriad ways in which capitalist enterprises exploit emotions (Illouz, 2007).

But people's everyday experience of workplaces is composed of a range of relationships, emotions and motivations that are not necessarily aligned with, or determined by, an organisation's aims and character. As Massey and Thrift (2003: 295) argue, "though places are gatherings that are diagrammed by the various networks of organisations, they are also confluences of all kinds of planes of affect that exceed these networks, even as they are manipulated by them." Certainly, corporations attempt to organise and manipulate work practices through the design and layout of office spaces (see Gregory, 2011; Meerwarth et al., 2008). But this article focuses on the more intangible aspects of people's experience of the workplace through the relational character and emotional weight of people's workplace friendships. In this way I hope to offer some

<sup>1</sup> Many sociological debates on friendship have pivoted on Giddens' (1992) claims about social change and intimacy. See Jamieson (1998) for a critique. My focus in this article is a more finely grained analysis of emotions and friendship in context rather than a broad scale account of social change in personal life.

<sup>2</sup> Much sociological work takes as its focus friendship's role in generating social capital and reproducing social relations and hierarchies, often using Social Network Analysis (e.g. Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Classic sociological studies of work have noted the importance of friends in the workplace (e.g. Cavendish, 1982; Goldthorpe et al., 1968; Westwood, 1984). But these studies focused primarily on employment practices and the experience of work rather than on friendship.

<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the workplace may be experienced as a haven from the stresses of home life (Hochschild, 2001). I did not find this in my study, perhaps because the interviews took place in a period of intense job insecurity.

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