

## 1

## Contextualising friendship

Rebecca G. Adams and Graham Allan

It is clear that friendships play a significant part in many people's lives. Yet sociologists in general have paid these and other similar relationships relatively little attention in their efforts to understand the nature of social organisation. Even when their concern is explicitly with aspects of social integration, little heed is normally given to the specific realm of friendship. There are of course exceptions to this, as the work referenced in this volume attests, but generally sociologists have been content to leave the study of friendship to social psychologists. Most sociologists appear to take the view that, with modernity, and late modernity in particular, friendship and other linked informal ties are of small consequence socially and economically. The dominance of formal organisations is taken as synonymous with a decline in the importance of informal ties, though, as Silver (1990) has shown, the evidence for such a view is anything but convincing. Yet, with informal solidarities defined as being of only personal significance, analysis of them has largely been ceded to psychologists.

This is a challenge which social and other psychologists have taken on very actively. Over the past fifteen years, there have been major changes in the ways in which researchers analyse and understand friendships and other personal ties (Duck, 1990; Duck, Dindia, *et al.*, 1997). The starting point of this approach was a rejection of the dominant 'attributes' perspective within psychology, particularly for its disciplinary insularity and its focus on the properties of individuals within relationships rather than on the relationships themselves. Those involved made quite deliberate efforts to bring together specialists from a range of allied fields to inform one another of the different theoretical perspectives that could be applied to the study of relationships and to create a fuller and more sophisticated understanding of the internal dynamics of different personal relationships.

By the 1990s, this new paradigm of relationships was receiving considerable attention from scholars in different disciplines. Extensive research networks had been developed and new journals specialising in the analysis of personal relationships had been successfully established. Exciting new lines of research opened up, focusing on different aspects of relationship processes (i.e., affective, behavioural, and cognitive) and on different phases of relationships. (See Blieszner and Adams, 1992, for a summary of findings on these topics regarding friendship.) These researchers recognised the importance of treating relationships, be they ties of friendship, love, parenting, or whatever, as emergent ties with their own properties rather than as the consequence of the individual attributes each actor brings to the interaction. Put simply, this perspective recognised that it was *interaction* which mattered, and not just action. As part of their concern with relational properties, these researchers have highlighted *process* – the dynamic aspects of relationships and how they develop and change over time – far more than earlier attributional approaches did. They have also paid somewhat more heed to aspects of social structure lying outside specific relationships, particularly the effects of gender.

Yet, while the new paradigm has been interdisciplinary from its point of origin, this has been true more in principle than in practice. The new field of personal relationships is to be welcomed for generating fresh lines of enquiry and providing far better understandings of pertinent relationship processes than existed previously, but from a sociological perspective the portrayal they provide remains somewhat partial. To a degree, this is a criticism of sociology for its relative indifference to analysing informal ties like friendship at all, but especially in a fashion which fosters interdisciplinary discourse. The focus, however, in much of the research on relationships which has developed from a broadly psychological perspective over the past fifteen years remains very much at the dyadic level. While relationship research is no longer as individualised as it once was, the dominant framework is still relatively narrow and concerned mainly with the particular individuals who are the direct actors in the relationship in question (though see Duck, 1993; Duck, West, and Acitelli, 1997).

Of course, the individuals involved in a particular relationship are of crucial importance; no one would claim otherwise. The point, though, is that those 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. If we are to understand fully the nature of

friendships, or for that matter of other personal ties, these relationships need to be interpreted from a perspective which recognises the impact of this wider complex, rather than from one which treats the dyad in relative isolation. Yet most empirical research on friendship has focused only on the internal form and dynamics of friendship without much regard for variation in setting and without much thought given to contextual explanations of findings.

In other words, what is largely missing from the new field of personal relationships is a consideration of the broader *contexts* in which such relationships are embedded (Duck, 1993). In essence, it lacks a sociological framework which locates the relationships within their broader environment. This is the concern of the present volume. Its aim is to show that a sociological perspective can not only make a contribution to our knowledge of personal relationships, but furthermore that studying these apparently personal ties can also increase our understanding of social change and thus inform more general sociological discourse. To achieve this, the volume brings together some of the foremost researchers now investigating aspects of the sociology of friendship. By looking at the different ways in which friendships have been constructed in different social milieux and in different historical periods, the chapters in the book demonstrate both the importance of context in the development and organisation of these ties and the advantages which accrue from bringing a sociological viewpoint into play in analysing them.

In demonstrating how a sociological perspective can add to our understanding of friendship, the chapters in the book draw on a wide set of contextualising factors to examine the structuring of these relationships and to account for the different forms they take. By doing this they all illustrate a simple yet key theme in this volume, and in the sociology of friendship more widely: that friendships do not operate in some abstract, decontextualised world. Like all other types of personal relationship, they are constructed – developed, modified, sustained, and ended – by individuals acting in contextualised settings. As the chapters which follow demonstrate, these contexts impinge directly on the emergent construction of the relationships, shaping the behaviour and understandings of the friends in myriad ways, some obvious and some more subtle. Some scholars view contexts deterministically, as shaping the relationships embedded within them but not as being shaped by the behaviours of the actors participating in the relationships. Others see contexts as social constructions. A good example of this pertinent to friendship is provided by Hochschild (1973) in her description of the ‘unexpected community’ that emerged in an age-segregated apartment

building. Both types of scholars, however, think relationships need situating within a contextual framework if they are to be understood.

What do we mean by context? This is not as simple a question to answer as it seems, for, by its nature, the concept of 'context' is broad. Boundaries cannot easily be put around what is to be included within the term. Essentially, though, by 'context' we mean the conditions external to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of specific friendships. In other words, we are referring to those elements which *surround* friendships, but are not directly inherent in them, the extrinsic rather than the intrinsic. The difficulty is that the range of extrinsic elements which do 'surround' friendships are, in a literal sense, boundless. What counts as context, where boundaries are drawn around the extrinsic yet pertinent, is a question of interpretation and judgement rather than of fact. Researchers can contextualise a given phenomenon in quite different ways, each carrying its own assumptions, strengths, and limitations. In this sense there is no right or wrong; rather there are more or less informative ways of creating knowledge and understanding. What should be included as context is an open-ended question, the answer to which depends, at least in part, on the intention, perspective, and vision of the analyst.

It should be apparent that we would like to see a comparative sociology of friendship developing. As yet, we are some way from reaching this level of accomplishment. Even those studies which are germane to understanding the connection between context and friendship tend not to be comparative. Very few friendship researchers, for example, have used a longitudinal design that would allow for change in context to be studied. Instead, they have offered snapshots of contextual effects. So, too, few researchers have compared the friendships that form and flourish in different settings at the same point in time. Nor, in the main, are the papers in this volume explicitly comparative. None the less, we believe they do offer a starting point for such a comparative effort by identifying some of the key aspects of context which need to be considered in understanding friendship. We would hope that future studies will be able to build on the analyses they contain.

### **Characteristics of context**

Contexts are not unidimensional. Many of their various aspects are of sociological importance. Certainly the structural and cultural qualities of context, as well as its spatial and temporal organisation, are relevant to understanding relationships embedded within them. It is important to

remember, though, that these broad characteristics of context do not act independently of each other. It is in their interaction that the complexity of context emerges. For example, distinguishing between what counts as cultural and what as social structural is often problematic, as the boundaries inevitably merge. Jerrome (1984), for example, has shown how middle-class lifestyles shape the friendship behaviour of older middle-aged women in Britain. Stack (1974) demonstrated a quite different pattern of ties in her analysis of friendships in a poor black community in the Midwestern United States. There the exchange of material resources was a key element to compensate for the economic uncertainties they faced. And, in a quite different setting, Oxley (1974) demonstrated how the culture of egalitarianism in small-town Australia influenced the patterns of 'mateship' which developed. Similarly, the distinction between the effects of temporal and spatial aspects of context is often blurred. Duneier's (1992) description of interaction among customers of a restaurant in an integrated neighbourhood in Chicago illustrates this point. The establishment's regular schedule made it possible for patrons to see one another without planning to do so and thus provided opportunities for them to forge ties with one another. The regularity of the temporal structure and of having a convenient place to meet was so important to these people that, when the restaurant closed temporarily for repairs, they replaced their routine visits to the restaurant with visits to other settings nearby.

It is also important to remember that dimensions of context are not static; they are constantly changing. The characteristics of a context during one period of time may vary considerably from its characteristics during another. One needs only to consider for a moment how neighbourhoods, schools, and the work-place have changed over the past several decades to realise the importance of this observation. On a broader scale, think how different relationships can be during times of war and times of peace, during affluent periods and in the midst of massive depressions, or in eras when men and women are not allowed to be alone with one another as against eras in which they are free to interact whenever they like. Over time, the social structural, cultural, spatial, and temporal situations surrounding individuals can all change, and so the constellation of the characteristics we are subsuming under 'context' changes as well.

### **Continuum of contextual analyses**

Friendship researchers have approached the study of contextual effects in different ways. In turn the methods they have used to study context are

related to the level of context they have studied. By 'level of context', we mean how near to the individual the boundaries of the context in question are. In the discussion that follows, we describe the traditions that examine the personal environment of individuals, the social network, communities or subcultures, and societies. (See Adams and Blieszner, 1993, for a discussion of contextual levels, and Praeger, 1995, for an elaboration of their treatment.) The discussion thus proceeds from the individual level of analysis to levels of analysis more remote from the individual. As we have already noted, these boundaries between levels of context are heuristic. By their nature, they are not delineated from each other in a discrete way.

### *The personal environment level*

The first level represents the 'personal environment' of those who are friends. By this we mean the immediate features of a person's life which affect the character and pattern of the friendships which they develop and sustain. This will include, *inter alia*, their economic circumstances, their domestic responsibilities, their work commitments, their leisure preferences, and the like. It encompasses all those features of an individual's personal environment which either limit or create the opportunities they have for engaging sociably with others and servicing friendships. Researchers do not normally incorporate all these features into any given analysis of friendship patterns, but usually they do concern themselves with one or more in explaining why friendships take the forms they do.

Most studies which draw on context at the level of personal environment do so by specifying how social structural or cultural variables influence an individual's friendship behaviour. In this regard, aspects of this level of context are amenable to being treated as independent variables with a framework that examines the impact different variables have on friendship patterns. As a result, this perspective on context is highly compatible with survey methodology in which both friendships and the factors influencing them can be treated as attributes or properties of the individual. Thus, many studies have looked at how gender, for example, interacts with friendship development or with the interactional styles occurring in friendships (e.g., Fischer and Oliner, 1983; Wright, 1989; Rawlins, 1992; Kaplan and Keys, 1997). Other studies have examined the impact of characteristics such as age, ethnicity, ill-health, care giving, or economic circumstances on the organisation of friendship (e.g., Nahemow and Lawton, 1975; Weiss and Lowenthal, 1975; Fischer and Oliner, 1983; Jerrome, 1990; Lamme, *et al.*, 1996).

Not all research which incorporates context at the level of personal

environment depends upon survey data. Other methodologies are quite capable of producing data which provide information about the ways in which people's commitments and obligations structure their friendships. On the other hand, most survey-oriented studies of friendship are restricted to this level of contextualisation. Because of its individualistic character, it is harder for survey research to contribute to our understanding of other levels of context. This is not to say that context in the sense of personal environment is unimportant. It is difficult to see how an understanding of friendship patterns could emerge without this level of context being part of the analysis. Nevertheless, this is only one level. The range of contextual considerations which play a part in structuring friendship behaviour runs deeper than this type of feature alone. In some ways, the ease of doing survey research quickly and relatively inexpensively has seduced friendship researchers and so, by default, they have ignored the more labour-intensive and expensive methodologies required to reach an understanding of broader contextual effects.

### *The network level*

The second level of context is linked closely to the personal environment level. It concerns the network of personal relationships which each person maintains. There are two basic elements to the network perspective. The first is the more obvious: different people become involved in social networks with different properties through their distinct patterns of social participation. Some have larger networks than others; some have denser networks in the sense that those in it are likely also to know others involved. Similarly, some people's networks involve multiplex relationships, whereas others have less complicated ties. In explaining how networks with different constellations of relationships emerge, researchers typically draw on the type of factor discussed under personal environment. However, networks can also have an independent influence on people's behaviour. Here, the key question is not so much why different patterns of network develop, but rather what the results of these different patterns are for the opportunities open to people and the constraints they face. A feature of this second perspective is that it can be concerned with the network configurations of larger social collectivities, such as work groups or communities, in which no particular individual is seen as central. (For a review of the development of network studies, see Scott, 1991, or Wellman, 1988.)

Both these perspectives indicate that friendship behaviour can be influenced by the overall patterning of networks as well as by the specific



obligations embodied in particular personal relationships. The structural characteristics of the networks in which people are embedded become part of the context of their interactions. A simple way of recognising this with respect to friendship is to consider how patterns of kinship ties can influence a person's friendship behaviour. There is, for example, some evidence from Britain, admittedly now rather dated, that extensive involvement with kin living outside their household limits participation in (non-kin) friendship ties (Allan, 1979; Willmott, 1987). Similarly, people involved in relatively dense friendship networks are likely to develop fewer new friendships at any time than those whose friendship networks are more dispersed (Allan, 1989).

There have been relatively few studies which have tried to specify at all fully how the structure of people's networks influences friendship behaviour. There have been even fewer which focus on this from a perspective which considers networks wider than ego-centred ones (Milardo and Allan, 1997). In part this is because of the difficulties of researching such networks, especially using a social survey methodology. This is not the only approach used for generating data on networks, but it is undoubtedly the most common and the least time-consuming. Often such studies also ask only about a particular portion of an individual's network – those they see most frequently or those to whom they feel closest. (See Adams, 1989, for a discussion of the ways in which researchers have limited their operational definitions of friendship.) Given that different data collection instruments generate different depictions of network structure (Milardo, 1992), how useful more partial studies of personal networks are for providing contextual information relevant for understanding friendship patterns remains a moot question.

### *Community level*

From the development of the Chicago School onwards, field researchers have provided many in-depth descriptions of the social lives of the inhabitants of specific places. The places and settings they have studied have varied widely, fostering a rich tradition in Europe in addition to the United States. (The classic American studies include Whyte, 1943; Gans, 1962; Liebow, 1967; and Stack, 1974. For a review of British studies, see Crow and Allan, 1994.) This body of research provides much insight into the friendships of those studied, though none of them focuses exclusively on these ties. What these studies illustrate exceptionally well is how the contexts in which sociability and friendship are embedded influence their inter-



nal organisation and dynamic. Woven into tapestries comprising threads about family, love, work, survival, and daily activities are narratives about the social lives and personal relationships of the participants. In this body of work the limitations of treating relationships solely as dyadic formations becomes most apparent.

A standard criticism of community studies is that only rarely are they cumulative. Each stands alone, difficult to generalise about or build upon. Researchers designed very few of them in a way that allows others to compare findings about friendship across them. Furthermore, few of the researchers used the results of previous community studies to inform their own research. In the main, they describe the complexities of friendship in one context, but do not evaluate how the different characteristics of contexts combine to affect friendship. None the less, one can begin to develop contextual hypotheses from some of these studies taken in combination.

For example, both Stack (1974) and Liebow (1967) described friendships among poor American blacks and emphasised the importance of friends for providing basic survival resources. This suggests that, in economies of scarcity, friendships become important as instrumental relationships. As the subjects in both Stack's and Liebow's work were American blacks, one might be tempted to offer a purely cultural explanation. The economic hypothesis gains strength when studies of unemployment elsewhere are considered (Binns and Mars, 1984; Wallace, 1987; Morris, 1990), or in the light of research like Hochschild's (1973) which examined the social lives of poor elderly white women living in an age-segregated housing complex. In these studies, too, respondents depended on material exchanges with one another, if not for survival, at least to improve their quality of life.

### *Societal level*

The final level of context we want to discuss is the societal level. This is the level most removed from the individual, but it still frames patterns of friendship in a number of very important ways. In particular, the economic and social structures which dominate at any time have an impact on the forms which different personal relationships take (Silver, 1990). The best-known illustration of this concerns the ways in which industrialisation affected familial and domestic ties. Commonly, this is seen as entailing a move from a more collective past to a more individualised present, often expressed as a shift from an extended family system to a nuclear family one. The causes and time periods involved are frequently specified differently, but the consequences are usually seen as similar. In effect, industrialisation,

the spread of wage labour, increased geographical mobility, and the decline in importance of familial property resulted in marital selection being increasingly based around ideas of love and personal compatibility rather than parental influence, with a concomitant reduction in solidarity and authority between kin outside the immediate household.

Of course, the impact of social and economic change on personal relationships did not stop with the grand nineteenth- and early twentieth-century transformations we commonly subsume under the term 'industrialisation'. Indeed, as modernity developed further, so our understandings of how personal relationships should be organised also altered. Giddens (1992), for example, has developed an account of the ways in which romantic and sexual ties have been modified under what he terms 'late modernity'. While this account can be criticised, it does have the benefit of recognising just how much relationships of intimacy are tied to the economic and social formations within which they occur.

Just as the wider changes occurring in the society affect the patterning of sexual and familial relationships, so too they influence the character of friendship. Perhaps the most dominant theoretical perspective here is that of 'privatisation', though this term actually embraces quite a range of distinct arguments. Essentially the idea behind it is that, with industrialisation and the development of modernity, the more communal solidarities of the past have been replaced by a dominant concern for the private world of home and family. Whereas once the social and economic conditions of people's lives encouraged a wide co-operation and dependency between those living near to and working with one another, contemporary social organisation no longer generates the same needs. In particular, affluence in general and the development of mass communication and personal transport systems more specifically have reduced the salience of the local in people's lives and freed them from any great need to co-operate with others living nearby. There has, as a result, been a major change in the organisation of sociability, though again there are quite different versions of what precisely these changes have been.

Some have argued that this has resulted in nuclear families, or perhaps more accurately nuclear households, becoming increasingly isolated, with individuals leading lives which are firmly centred on their home and immediate family. Others disagree with this isolationist perspective, suggesting instead that what has altered is the salience of structured public settings in people's social lives. Whereas once social relationships tended to be based around ties of locality and employment and enacted communally, this is no longer so. Instead, people are now more able to sustain friend-