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4 Intimacy in young women's friendships: symbols and rituals

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Introduction

The phenomenon of friendship and its function and purpose within social work and social care is significantly under-researched. This chapter outlines the function of symbols and ritual in relation to ideals of 'friendships' among young women. It draws principally from a small qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with five women aged 18–25 years during which they discussed their friendships. We discuss key themes from the data analysis and draw out the importance of intimacy in friendships for young women within this stage of the life course. The findings indicated that not only do rituals and symbols create and support internal intimacy, but also constituted practices informed by a cultural ideal of what it means to be a 'friend'. The implications for how social work assessment and interventions takes these into account when working with young people and other service user groups is then explored.

Theoretical perspectives on 'friendships'

The term 'friend' or 'friendship' is inherently problematic (see Allan, 1979; Pahl, 2000; Spencer and Pahl, 2006) with idealised voluntarism and non-beneficial characteristics (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Friendship has been described as the archetype of a "pure relationship" (Giddens, 1991:6); one that is entered into freely and exists for the sole purpose of whatever rewards the relationship can deliver. It may also be based on reciprocity if there is an exchange of goods or help. The assumption that friendships are always a positive experience has also been questioned (Davies, 2011; Smart et al., 2012). Smart et al.'s (2012) study found that women were more likely than men to persevere with "difficult" friendships. Women were found to have "a strong moral regime of friendship", which meant they were unable to abandon friends even when the friendship became a chore (p. 96). Spencer and Pahl

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(2006) identified eight categories of friendship ranging from “associate” (someone who shares a common activity or interest) to “soul mate” which they identify as the most multifaceted type of friendship (p. 69). “Soul mate” friendships involve opportunities for confiding, providing emotional support, helping each other out and enjoying each other's company. “Soul mate” friends may feel they have a similar outlook on life, and the friendship is characterised by a high level of commitment and a strong sense of intimacy. The study reported here focuses on this latter category of friendship. The literature also suggests that the more complex the relationship becomes the more there is a sense of trust and intimacy and that high levels of intimacy are found to correspond positively with ritual enactment (Bruess and Pearson, 1997; Smart et al., 2012).

Gender differences are highlighted in the literature, including same-sex friendships. Hook et al. (2003) suggest that women are more likely to be socialised into forming and valuing close relationships. Their study found that women tried to create and maintain intimacy through talking and discussion, whereas men utilised activities and “doing” (p. 465). Tannen (1990) looked at male and female conversations from a sociolinguistic standpoint, and described more “rapport talk” (the elaboration on why and how) between women whilst men tend more towards “report talk”. These ‘why’ and ‘how’ function of rituals and symbols formed the focus of interest in this study of young women's same-gender friendships. We have also incorporated the concept of “doing” (Morgan, 1996, 2011) and “display” (Finch, 2007) into our current understanding of rituals and symbols. Whereas existing literature tends to focus on the internality of ritual/symbol function, by integrating theories of “doing” and “display”, there is greater potential to increase the depth of analysis of this phenomenon, particularly in relation to the externality as well as internality of ritual and symbol functions.

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Relevance of friendships for social work and social care

The individual nature of friendship differentiates it from other types of relationships, such as colleagues or other formal role positions, because friends cannot be substituted or interchanged and may be entered into for the pure enjoyment of interaction and other non-instrumental reasons (Allan, 1979:42). Colleagues or family members may also be 'friends', for example, siblings describing one another as one's closest "soul mate" (Spencer and Pahl, 2006:33). However, differences in these relationships include the exercise of free choice that allows interaction to go beyond prescribed organisational or familial affiliations (Allan, 1979). When thinking about social work and social care, these dynamics come into play in relation to identifying and valuing people in somebody's support and care networks and being aware of any nuances in the nature of relationships where there may be dependency. Further, our interventions have the potential to disrupt or challenge the making and sustaining of friendships and thus impact on young women's well-being at a time of crisis as well as longer term. Friendships may also be instrumental in bridging gaps in support and services not otherwise provided (Galupo et al., 2014).

The implicit assumption that friendships are a positive experience also belies that they may also involve a sense of guilt and obligation, especially in more complex relationships such as "soul mate" friendships (Smart et al., 2012). The termination of "difficult" friendships is much harder and there a range of examples in the safeguarding literature, for example, the rise of 'mate crime' in the experiences of people with learning disabilities (Landman, 2014) and the exploitation of vulnerable older people (Crosby et al., 2008). In their study of the friendship networks of homeless people with problematic use of drugs and alcohol, Neal and Brown (2016) found eight categories of friends emerged from their data, with family-like friends appearing to offer the most constant practical and emotional support. Yet the

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environment within homeless hostels operated strict rules and policies which banned visitors or imposed curfews, which can undermine relationships and create tensions and mistrust between individuals (Stevenson, 2013). Weeks et al. (2001) identified the increased importance of friendships for people in gender and sexual minority communities. Friendships were found to buffer people from the social isolation or rejection associated with homophobia and transphobia, and friendships were emphasised during times of social change, which is particularly salient when an individual's identity is at odds with social norms (Galupo et al., 2014).

Rituals and symbols in friendships

The study reported here explored the role of rituals and symbols in the friendships of young women and attempted to bridge a theoretical gap on friendship rituals from other areas of literature on personal life. Rituals are "behaviour [that is] jointly enacted and shared by relational partners" (Pearson et al., 2010:465) while symbols are "markers of group identity" (Collins, 2005:36). Both can be seen as ways to communicate identity (Suter et al., 2008:30). Baxter (1987) argued that symbols are statements about the relationship that communicate its level of intimacy and solidarity. Rituals and symbols can be identified by two components; a 'textual' meaning (physical characteristics of the symbol/actual behaviour of the ritual) and a 'social' meaning (the unique meaning that artefact/behaviour takes on to the people in the relationship) (Pearson et al., 2010:465). The significance attributed to these behaviours through repetitive enactment helps our understanding of how everyday practices become ritualised, and how passive artefacts become symbolic. The type of intimacy found in familial and committed romantic relationships is often mirrored in "soul mate" friendships (Hook et al., 2003) making it reasonable to deduce that many types of rituals and symbols found in

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studies on familial/romantic relationships may also be present in "soul mate" friendships. The study described here has therefore mainly drawn on research done on romantic or familial rituals and symbols, though attempts are made to highlight when and where differences will occur.

Rituals have two distinguishing features: routine behaviour and the associated meaning for that behaviour. Bruess and Pearson's study consisted of semi-structured interviews that probed the nature of rituals that couples/friends enact or had enacted in the past. They identified five different types of rituals: social/fellowship, idiosyncratic/symbolic, communication rituals, share/support/vent, task/favours.

Baxter's study on friendship **symbols** (1987) highlights the importance of their 'textual' meaning (physical characteristics and how they may be interpreted to people outside of the friendship) and their 'social' meaning (the unique meaning it takes on to the people in the relationship). She argues that no two relationship symbols are the same, but they can be linked or categorised, and has identified five distinct categories: physical objects, cultural artefacts, special places, special events or times and behavioural artefacts. Bell and Healy (1992) argue that friendships also develop 'personalised codes' or linguistic symbols, which may develop naturally over time or form specifically to deal with certain situations.

Further within the literature there appears to be two different types of functions of rituals and symbols, their internal and the external functions. The internal function is concerned with the individuals involved in a friendship and the external function is concerned with outsiders of the relationship. Rituals and symbols are a way for participants in a friendship to create a unique friendship. Symbols are statements about the relationship that communicate the level of intimacy and solidarity. Secret symbols, particularly language codes, shut other people out of the relationship and "establish a boundary" (Betcher, 1987:48). Baxter (1987) identified

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many uses for symbols in relationships, such as linking the past to the present, allowing the relationship to withstand periods of change. In their study, Bell and Healy (1992) found support for their hypothesis that increased idiom use in a friendship would be positively correlated with the perceived intimacy.

Bruess and Pearson (1997) argue that rituals “create a historically significant shared sense of the relationship” (p. 26), which help to provide a sense of stability and normality during periods of change. From the perspective of those who enact them, Pearson et al.’s study (2010) showed that couples with a higher number of rituals also had a higher level of perceived intimacy. This was attributed to rituals providing the opportunity to be emotionally close, and as individuals participate in being open with each other the perceived intimacy of the relationship is increased. Rituals can be ways in which individuals “do” or perform relationships. “Doing” relationships facilitate the creation of identity through the completion of mundane or ordinary tasks on a regular basis (Suter et al., 2008:38). Further, Morgan’s (1996) work on “doing” family shows the ways in which an identity of a family emerges through family practices which need to be sustained in order for the family’s identity to be sustained. In Suter et al.’s study, the identity created was that of a mother and a lesbian, however it is more than feasible that the identity of “friend” can also be created by “doing” friendship.

Study design and methods

This qualitative study aimed to study friendship through symbolic interactionism and how these interactions help individuals to negotiate their friendships. The research questions were:

1. In what ways do different categories of rituals add to the perceived intimacy of the friendship?

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2. In what ways do different categories of symbols add to the perceived intimacy of the friendship?
3. How important is “displaying” these rituals/symbols to outsiders for the participants in order to legitimise the friendship?

Snowball sampling was used to recruit five women in the target age group 18–25 willing to discuss their personal friendships. Details of the participants are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Characteristics of sample

Pseudonym	Age	Profession	Length of friendship being discussed (years)
Rachel	22	Student	3
Jordanne	23	Teaching assistant	3
Michelle	19	Au pair	10
Faye	22	Student	17
Scarlett	23	Office manager	9

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes were used to explore participants’ personal friendships. An inductive approach (Bryman, 2008) posited questions such as: What did you do the last time you saw each other? Do you usually do that? Do you have any special phrases or language you only use with each other? Questions permitted “travel” with respondents down avenues of thought that spontaneously appeared (Best, 2012:78). For example, the first question “tell me about the friend you have chosen, who are they?” evoked some responses as simple as “I’ve chosen Fiona who I live with now and have known for three years”. Sometimes it also yielded data in the first very first instance such as “it’s my friend Kelly... well we always used to walk to school together”. The term “always”

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and “used to” were verbal signifiers that some kind of ritual or symbol may have been identified. Thus these were then probed immediately, rather than being bound to a set list of questions. To ensure that participants were able to participate fully, the terms “rituals” and “symbols” were avoided as much as possible.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Ethical approval was granted by Manchester University. Data analysis drew on a framework constructed around four of the five types of rituals identified by Bruess and Pearson (1997); types of symbols identified by Baxter (1987) and the concept of ‘personalised codes’ identified by Bell and Healy (1997).

Table 4.2 shows the broad categories used to code the interview data.

Table 4.2 Characteristics of rituals and symbols from the data

1. <i>Social ritual</i> : Rituals that involve enjoyable activities and socialising.
2. <i>Idiosyncratic ritual</i> : Rituals that are unique to that friendship such as play rituals or celebration rituals.
3. <i>Communication ritual</i> : Rituals that support regular communication such as phone calls or emails.
4. <i>Share/support/vent ritual</i> : Rituals that support emotional sharing.
5. <i>Tasks/favours ritual</i> : Rituals that involve doing something for or with a friend.
6. <i>Physical symbol</i> : Physical objects such as gifts, photographs etc.
7. <i>Cultural artefacts</i> : Symbol Intangible symbols such as favourite song, shared culture or genre.
8. <i>Special places</i> : Symbol Places with significant meaning.
9. <i>Special times/events</i> : Symbol Times of the day/week/month/year with significant meaning.
10. <i>Personalised codes</i> : Symbol Nicknames, special words, language patterns.

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Interpretation using these frameworks occurred on many levels; from the primary experience of the ritual/symbol by respondents, to their telling of it, including how the researcher related to the experience, analysed and presented it (Miller and Glassner, 2011:134). Embedded in this approach is the notion that the interview itself was a form of symbolic interaction; where respondents and the researcher constructed a narrative about the social world (Miller and Glassner, 2011:132). Many questions had emphasis on the respondents' subjectivity, for example, "how do you think that affected your friendship?" rather than "how did that affect your friendship?"

Transcripts were searched for "central themes" (Best, 2012:85), following the colour coding of rituals, symbols, internal functions and external functions no matter how trivial. All possible rituals and symbols were then listed separately for each respondent, and sorted into the ten categories noted in Table 4.2. Transcripts were further coded along the lines of "internal functions" and "external functions". Secondary analysis involved going back to the lists of rituals and symbols and eliminating any that did not fit the definition entirely. For example, Rachel acknowledged, "always going to the club together" which in the initial analysis was identified as a ritual. During secondary analysis, this "routine behaviour" appeared to have no "associated meaning" (Pearson et al., 2010:465), and was therefore decoded as a ritual in the final analyses. This introduced an element of subjectivity in the analysis but was necessary within the limitations of this study. This transparency should be acknowledged to appreciate the validity of the findings within this context.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the findings from the study within three key themes.

Findings

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Rituals

Seventy-six rituals were identified, averaging 15.2 rituals per respondent. All five categories of rituals (social, idiosyncratic, communication, tasks/favours, share/support/vent) were identified. Most were enacted regularly but a few were behaviours respondents "used to do". Rituals were used to both create and sustain intimacy. Physical "enacted behaviours" more often than not did not involve talking; however, the reason most rituals existed were to facilitate the start of some type of discussion. Exceptions involved task/favour rituals, enacted when a seemingly boring or mundane task required completion. However, even in this category, the women occasionally identified that the main reason the friend was enlisted was to create opportunity for talking. This echoes Hook et al.'s (2003) claim that talking is preferred way in which women try to create intimacy.

Creating intimacy

Although share/support/vent rituals were the least frequently occurring, (six identified), these were vital in the creation of intimacy and supported emotional sharing between friends or signified a "heart-to-heart" discussion. Rachel, for example, identified always playing a certain song, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow", when her friend is upset. The effect was two-fold; first it immediately makes her friend laugh which releases tension and lightens the mood. Second and more importantly, it signifies Rachel's availability for emotional support and discussion. This example also highlights the intrinsic link between ritual and symbol, thus making the two phenomena inseparable (see Durkheim, 1918:231). In this example, the symbol (the song) became an integral part of the behaviour enactment and would have lost significance if a different song were used in the same situation. Similarly, if the song were played in a different setting it would take on a different meaning.

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Share/support/vent rituals incited an encouraging reception and were perceived to be a positive occurrence; indicating a level of intimacy and trust in the friendship.

Share/support/vent rituals allowed respondents and their friends to be both physically and emotionally close, which in turn increased the perceived intimacy (Pearson et al., 2010).

Further, a "heart-to-heart" needed to happen more than once, and be regular and ritualised because that's what "keeps [the friendship] going".

Idiosyncratic rituals were the second most occurring category, with 14 rituals identified. This ritual was often borne out of a single past event, enjoyable and so repeated until it took on ritualised characteristics. Bruess and Pearson (1997) comment that idiosyncratic rituals often represent some kind of aspect of the couple's relational history. This was evident in Jordanne's account of herself and her friend having a special dance move; "the hula hoop", displayed to each other any time music was played, such as in a club.

I feel like, hahaha that's so funny... it probably reminds you of why you're close to that person. Coz you're thinking, oh yeah I remember that shared experience and it was really funny. It probably reinforces in my mind that she's a fun person, we have the same sense of humour, things like that.

A shared sense of humour is known to be one of the most important aspects of friendship (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Further, this sense of shared history supports friendships during periods of instability or change. Faye recalled her friend getting a video camera at age eight or nine for Christmas, and together making a Celine Dion music video. Making performance videos is now a regular behaviour for the friendship:

Faye: "Every time we're together she finds this song, and then we just make up these most ridiculous videos. Like these dance videos. We've been doing that for years. Like years.... From when we were really young and she still has this obsession with making these dance

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videos so every time we're together we'll do something that involves... making something up and recording it.”

The context of friendships is also important because Faye may not physically see her friend for months at a time as employment took her to another country. More so than other respondents who saw their friends more regularly, Faye's idiosyncratic rituals highlight the “shared history” (Bruess and Pearson, 1997:35) and reinforced their closeness to each other when they met again.

Maintaining intimacy

The maintenance of a high level of intimacy was of paramount importance. Social rituals existed to support (rather than create) high levels of intimacy within these “soul mate” friendships. Thirty-two rituals were identified in this category. Social rituals involved activities done recreationally and for pleasure, for example, regularly baking together or watching a certain TV show. These seemingly normal and everyday activities were attributed with personal meaning that distinguished them as rituals, rather than general everyday activities. Faye noted how she and her friend usually did activities inside rather than outside, and describes what ‘usually’ happens when they spend time together:

We have an obsession with things like E-Television; together that's our thing. Like ‘The Kardashians’ or ‘Chelsea Lately’ and stuff, so like we'd like be all night watching things like that. That's our thing... it's just like a blanket and something really crappy on TV.

The phrase “our thing” is used twice within this short quote, so clearly this behaviour has “associated meaning” for Faye (Pearson et al., 2010:465). Further, whilst watching “crappy” TV may be an activity undertaken by many people, when probed, Faye noted that she only shared this activity with that particular friend; never on her own or with other people. Thus,

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both components of a ritual, the “enacted behaviour” and the “associated meaning”, were present.

The “doing together” of these activities provided an opportunity to talk, fulfilling the main aim of rituals in this category. Share/support/vent rituals supported deep and emotional “heart-to-hearts”, but social rituals supported ‘catching-up’ and general discussions. Rachel describes types of conversations during her social rituals as “just talking rubbish really”, whilst Michelle expresses them as “very light hearted”. Further humour was important in these types of discussions (in comparison to “heart-to-hearts”). Michelle notes:

Yeah we talk... the funnier the better basically... anything to make you giggle.

Bruess and Pearson (1997) argue that social rituals are important in maintaining friendships. Even seemingly trivial and “nothing”-ness rituals attribute to the maintenance of intimacy, through spending time together and keeping in touch (p. 38). Their significance cannot be overlooked, nor the function of mundane conversations trivialised. Twelve communication rituals were identified for keeping in touch, and all respondents reported making an effort to communicate with their friend regularly, emphasising the high use of technology (phoning monthly, Skyping weekly, and texting/WhatsApping daily). When questioned about these efforts, Scarlett responded:

Just to touch base with each other. To find out what's been going on. Yeah I guess that's what you do with friend's right?

Like social rituals, communication rituals provide the platform for discussion. However, where the function of social rituals can be subtle, or less explicit than “doing” activities (such as baking), communication rituals are obvious in their purpose. Bruess and Pearson (1997) assert that communication rituals are common among friends, and can help to sustain

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friendships during periods of change (p. 39). Scarlett, who had the longest friendship in length (19 years), noted that she and her friend “had been through a lot... first boyfriends, moving away from home, serious illness... going away to college and uni”. Communicating on a regular basis meant her friend was “not going anywhere”, thus Scarlett felt she could “rely on her in a different way [from her other friends]”.

“Doing” friendship

All categories of rituals supported the “doing” of friendship. Respondents enacted these rituals as ways of confirming their identity as a ‘friend’. Smart et al. (2012) found that friendship can generate feelings of obligation and expectation, as echoed here. However, whilst Smart et al. focused on how feelings of obligation are experienced in a negative way, feelings of obligation were both a positive and a negative aspect of friendship. This is best illustrated by looking at examples of tasks/favour rituals.

Twelve tasks/favour rituals were identified, including examples where the women had to complete a mundane or non-enjoyable task, and where doing this with a friend made the activity seem more enjoyable. These examples reinforced the desire for talking opportunities, as discussed earlier. “Doing” friendship was seen in the second subcategory of tasks/favour rituals, which involved doing favours for the respondent’s friend, without any material reward. Examples included frequently “doing her [friend’s] roots” or giving lifts in the car. Jordanne’s reasons for this were:

Maybe it’s like that feeling of having a duty to someone. And maybe that’s about feeling we’re in this together, I can get you this... it reinforces that you like them enough to do that.

Rachel responded:

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I think it would be returned in some way or another at some point eventually... I think its just part of the friendship... she'd do it for me.

For both Jordanne and Rachel, the sense of obligation is not a negative aspect of friendship, but a way of proving to themselves and to their friend that they are able to fulfil a selfless and altruistic role of 'friend'. For Rachel, favours were part and parcel of what friendship involves; neither positive nor negative emphasising perceived reciprocity which Allan (1979) maintains as a key characteristic of friendship. Smart et al. (2012) observed that feelings of obligation can also be experienced in negative ways. Scarlett stated that even though they had been friends a long time, sometimes her friendship could be quite difficult. When asked if she ever did favours for her friend she replied:

Not so much physically. I guess sometimes she... it sounds really bad, but she complains a lot about things. So she wants my time and opinions on things that I don't necessarily think are that important.

Here the sense of obligation to discuss issues with her friend was perceived as a chore. When probed further about why she allowed herself to be pressed, she replied:

Just to be supportive. Coz it was important to her. And I just think, I wouldn't like it if something really mattered to me [she was like] well I don't care I don't want to talk about it. That's kind of selfish.

For Scarlett, the sense of reciprocity involved expectations of a similar behaviour from her friend in the reverse situation and a sense of obligation; to not be "selfish", the antithesis to being a friend. Although focused on tasks/favour rituals specifically here, it was noted that for all respondents, the completion of rituals in any category constitutes practices of "doing" friendship by sustaining practices that are socially associated with friendship (Morgan, 1996).

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Symbols

Seventy-six symbols were identified in this study, with an average of 15.2 symbols per respondent. All five categories of symbols (physical, cultural artefact, special time/event, special place, personalised code) were identified and sustained the friendships in many ways. They provided feelings of comfort, they highlighted the uniqueness of the friendship and they created boundaries between the friends and the outside world. Symbols are often a result of ritualised behaviour (Collins, 2005:36), therefore many symbols were also linked to a certain ritual. However, where rituals are an active and conscious way for the respondents to maintain friendship solidarity, symbols demonstrated that this maintenance had happened. Symbols provide the function of reminding respondents that they were engaged in an intimate friendship and gave a feeling of comfort, with physical symbols being the most obvious examples. Physical symbols were the third most frequently occurring symbol, with 14 symbols identified. Many included gifts given by their friends and pictures of them together. Michelle took a little wooden "love spoon", given to her by her friend, to France when she moved there:

I don't know (why), I just like it, it's nice to have a piece of home and a piece of her.

The love spoon represents a physical manifestation of the intimacy Michelle experiences with her friend and provides comfort and a sense of familiarity in a foreign place; thus "bridging a transition between the familiar past and forces of novelty and change" (Baxter, 1987:263). This is similar to the way in which rituals also help friendships to withstand periods of change. The "love spoon", like many other physical symbols, was seen to provide a "certainty about the relationship" due to its tangible properties (Baxter, 1987:263).

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Photographs also provided an important physical source of comfort and all respondents recounted being together in photos even if not displayed:

It's a good memory, of second year. That is just one instance of being in a club but it makes me think of all the times we've been out and had fun nights.

Baxter (1987) argues that symbols provide "concrete metacommunicating statements about the abstract qualities of [friendship]" (p. 263), and Jordanne notes that photographs remind her of the good memories her and her friend share. Special time/event symbols were also seen to provide a sense of familiarity within the friendship. Special time/event symbols were the fourth most frequently occurring symbol, with five symbols identified. These represented a special day or period in their life reminiscent of their friend which provided comfort when the friend was absent.

Highlighting the uniqueness of the friendship

A function of symbols that emerged was the emphasis of the idiosyncratic characteristics of particular friendships. For example, personalised codes are ways in which respondents highlighted to themselves and to others the "uniqueness" of the friendship (Bell et al., 1987:50). Personalised codes were the most frequently occurring symbol, with 37 symbols identified. Within personalised codes, nicknames (both for themselves and for other people) were the most common type of symbol, with examples including Voldemort, Farm Girl, Handsome Man, Airey Fairy and The Overgrown Baby. Phrases or sayings were also identified within this category, examples including "oooh that's a bit posh", "I've squashed my banana" and "where can I put my piano?"

Personalised codes were used only within these specific friendships. Most were language based but not limited to linguistics. Non-verbal signals, i.e. body language or moves, were

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included in this category. Faye demonstrated a specific look that her and her friend always give each other if they do not like someone else:

She'll pull that face and I'll know exactly what she means. She won't have to say anything I'll just know... and I'll pull it back, if I agree. I don't do that with anyone else.

A “unique language” is cultivated, and it transmits the feelings and values of the friendship members (Bell et al., 1987:47–48). Therefore, one function of this personalised code is to show that Faye and her friend share something that no one else understands.

Cultural artefacts served to highlight the uniqueness of the friendship and were the second most occurring category, with 16 symbols identified. Scarlett acknowledged a shared Jamaican heritage where she and her friend were brought up on a “similar kind of music” and understood references to “typical Jamaican” aspects of their lives. The context is important because Scarlett went to a majority-white private school and being able to share with her friend knowledge about a certain culture meant that Scarlett regarded that friendship as unique.

Creating boundaries

It is argued that personalised codes help to establish boundaries between the outside world and the relationship, and that intimacy is maintained through this exclusion of outsiders (Baxter, 1987; Bell et al., 1987). This was supported to some extent in this study. Rachel and her friend always refer to an ex-boyfriend as “Voldemort”, a nickname chosen due to slight physical resemblance between the ex-boyfriend and the character from the ‘Harry Potter’ series. More importantly, this private verbal signifier to the other established who they were talking about to the exclusion of others:

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She never calls him by his real name, [if she referred to him by his real name]... that would be really strange. Coz not many people know about him and her, so it's like a code name so she can... so people don't know who she's talking about when she says something about him.

These linguistic symbols were used in both private and public settings, but in public functioned to maintain privacy when talking about a personal issue. Rachel gave the example of saying "S.F." instead of "sexually frustrated":

Now we can use that and people don't know what you're saying, coz you're not gonna walk around saying, oh I'm so sexually frustrated, you know? So if we're out shopping or something we'd say, oh I'm so S.F.

Other respondents stated similar nicknames, phrases or non-verbal signifiers used in public places to create a boundary between them and outsiders to the friendship. However, in 25 out of the 37 personalised codes identified, the women stated that there was nothing inherently private or personal about their idiomatic communication. Many respondents identified making an effort not to use personalised communication in front of other people because it felt rude and exclusionary. There were mixed findings of whether personalised codes were used to establish and maintain privacy.

Special places

The special places category did not yield much data and were the least frequently occurring symbol, with four symbols identified. These symbols were places where respondents and their friend frequented, and came to be associated with each other. In some instances, its function was to highlight the uniqueness of the friendship, for example, playing a certain genre of music in a nightclub that only they enjoyed or was exclusive to them. In other cases,

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these special places provided a sense of comfort and familiarity. Further study could be done on these types of symbols to provide a more definitive case for their function.

Doing friendship

There are two key components of Morgan's theory on 'doing' families in this study; the sense of the active, and the linking of history and biography (2011:7) were asserted with less focus on mundane and ordinary tasks. In four out of the five friendships investigated, time spent together was categorised by a sense of fun. Rituals can contribute to being "active" in the friendship (Morgan, 2011:6). Morgan argues that families should be seen as "doing" their relationships through seemingly trivial or meaningless tasks, which moves away from the idea of family as a static structure. Rituals in this sense added to a sense of actively "doing" the relationship. When asked why Jordanne completed the task/favour ritual of routinely starting a new fad diet (inevitably given up within a few days) with her friend, she stated:

[I do it]... to think, oh we're still doing things together... we're in this together.

Thus diets are always done together, never separately. This ritualised behaviour proves to Jordanne that she is active in the friendship, and that it is still alive. Jordanne is not only "defined" herself as a friend, but can be seen to complete certain tasks in order to "do" her role (Morgan, 2011:6).

"Displaying" friendship

Although respondents indicated a level of "display" through physical symbols, particularly photographs, and the interview itself was a tool for "display", the concept of "display" should not be hastily applied to friendship rituals and symbols.

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Within the category of displaying friendships through physical symbols, photographs were highly indicative of a degree of “display” within the “soul mate” friendships. When asked about having photographs on display of her and her friend, Scarlett said:

Erm... I dunno, coz she's someone that I care about and I have other pictures of people that I care about, like close friends or family members. She's a special friend so I wanted to have a photo of her up.

Although a seemingly trivial detail, consider if Scarlett were to use the word “and” in place of the word “so”. “So” implies a relationship between the displaying of a photograph and the level of “special”ness of the friendship. Only “special friends” deserve a place on the wall; that is how outsiders can gauge how important the friend is to Scarlett. Dermott and Seymour (2011) also conclude that “displaying friendship” may be more necessary if the two people involved do not easily ‘look’ like friends from the outside. Although Faye and her friend were of the same ethnicity, gender and age, Faye said, “me and her are quite different, and she's different to my other friends”.

Faye described a picture she has on display in her room of the two of them:

It us when we were a lot younger and we both got these lilac shirts and these white trousers, and we both thought we were absolutely amazing. So we're standing in my kitchen doing the Spice Girls peace sign. And I remember on the day I was like, come on do the peace sign, and she was like, no I don't want to do the peace sign! [because she didn't like the Spice Girls]. And I just remember that showed how different we were, and it always makes me think that... So in the picture I'm really giving it the bit, the full throttle with the peace and the pouted lips and this whole Spice Girls thing, like proper Baby Spice. And she's fucking Grumpy Spice standing beside me. And that always stands out to me.

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The photograph is telling of the character of the friendship; the differences between Faye and her friend are summed up. However, Faye stated that she wanted it up on her wall because

... because she is my best friend and obviously I want the most important people. At the time I think, I just remember being so proud that we were best friend, it was like, this is me and my best friend.

Faye uses the photograph to show that “this is my [friendship] and it works” (see Finch, 2007:70). Similar views were expressed by other respondents within the physical symbol category, particularly in regard to photographs or gifts. We can conclude that these are indeed used as “tools” that support the “display” of these friendships (Finch, 2007:77).

“Displaying” in the interview

Another way of thinking about “display” is by considering the interview itself as a “display” of friendship, where respondents set out to show that through the use of rituals and symbols, they were in fact “soul mate” friends. Finch argues narratives are “tools for display” (2007:77) whilst Weeks et al. (2011) also comment that “through narratives individuals... affirm their identities and present relationships as viable and valid” (p. 11). The narratives about rituals and symbols told throughout the interviews provided ways for respondents to communicate “their friendship” and its character.

Rituals seemed to provide a positive experience for respondents; many of which are characterised by a sense of fun, particularly idiosyncratic rituals almost exclusively done to provoke the shared experience of laughing. As fun is an important characteristic of friendship (Spencer and Pahl, 2006:69), in telling about these rituals respondents were able to “display” that their relationships fit the cultural ideal of friendship well. By indicating rituals that supported emotional sharing and support (share/support/vent rituals), they were able to

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“display” that their friendship involved confiding and trust, confirming them as “soul mate” friendships. Further, by indicating different types of symbols (nicknames, gifts, special times) respondents proved to the interviewer that the friendship was also characterised by a level of commitment.

Finch argues that through the telling of stories “people attempt to connect their own experiences... to a more generalised pattern of social meaning” (2007:78). The “pattern of social meaning” here could be seen as the norms and values associated with friendship. As Morgan (2011) argues, relationships should be seen to be influenced by cultural definitions. Rituals should be seen to constitute some types of ‘friendship practices’ through which the respondents actively “do” friendship, and the telling of these practices to the interviewer was how they “displayed” them (p. 207).

Why “display” may not work

Whilst an element of “display” was present through the use of physical symbols and through narratives told in the interview, there were more indications of “doing” friendship, rather than “displaying”. Many of respondents noted that they felt they did not enact rituals or show symbols for the benefit of an audience. Jordanne noted:

I think [thinking about it] makes me really wrapped up in how I look to other people, rather than thinking about how you actually feel? Are you happy or sad? So it changes how you feel about the relationship. Coz you think, this is who I'm seen to be friends with, not this is who I feel closest to.

There are several reasons why the concept of “display” may not be so transferable. Finch (2007) questions whether there are ever practices that involve “doing family” but not “displaying family” (p. 79). She concludes that these practices are so well understood within

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the framework of family that they do not need to be “displayed”. In friendship, we could argue that when practices are so well understood in the frame of friendship, they do not need to be “displayed”. Having behaviours that support emotional sharing (share/support/vent rituals), a favourite song (cultural artefact) or nickname for an ex-boyfriend (personalised code) were such commonplace and recognisable aspects of friendship that my respondents did not need to “display” them to an audience.

Further, the concept of “displaying family” was proposed by Finch as a tool for sociologists to analyse the changing family structure and fluidity of family life (2007:68). Heaphy (2011) argues that the politics of personal life are important when thinking about when the “displaying” of relationships may take on more or less significance. In family life, for example, the image of ‘the family’ remains central and powerful. The role of ‘the family’ has political and economic implications; both Morgan (2011) and Finch (2007) note the legal, economic and social need to define ‘family’. It is difficult to imagine the same being done for friendships despite policy emphasis in social work on informal caring. Although we argue here that the friendships described were influenced by cultural ideals, friendship is not institutionalised to the extent that family is.

In this context, “display” becomes important as individuals strive to conform to the powerful image of a “proper” family (Finch, 2007). There may be more pressure to prove that your family works, because the cessation of that relationship seems impossible. In comparison, as much as sociologists such as Smart et al. (2012) or Davies (2011) would highlight the negative aspects of friendship, they still assert that in contemporary society friendship is seen to be “highly positive, desirable... and chosen” (Davies, 2011:72). The chosen aspect of friendship is important because it goes hand in hand with the assumption that it can also be terminated. If relationships can be viewed as expendable and they actually didn't work,

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individuals would feel less of a need to prove that they did, and more of an inclination to instead simply end the friendship.

Conclusion

This chapter investigated the functions of rituals and symbols in female “soul mate” friendships to determine what purpose was served by the enactment of ritualised behaviour and acknowledgement of symbols in friendship. It set out to determine whether the concept of “doing” (Morgan, 1996, 2011) and “displaying” (Finch, 2007) could be comprehensively applied to friendship, and how rituals and symbols play a part in this (if any).

This study adds to the depth of analysis of ritual and symbol function by assessing the externality of ritual and symbol function. Whilst individual rituals and symbols are informed by the personal experiences of the respondents, rituals and symbols as phenomenon access cultural ideals about expected friendship behaviour. Utilising Morgan's concept of “doing” helped to theorise this externality. Rituals and symbols should be seen to constitute ‘friendship practices’ which are informed by a wider cultural ideal of friendship; how respondents should behave and what is expected of them. They actively engaged with their role as ‘friend’ by “doing” activities and behaviours that proved they are worthy of having that label, such as task/favour rituals, share/support/vent rituals and/or showing an awareness that a cultural artefact (such as a favourite song) has a symbolic meaning.

“Displaying” friendship, on the other hand, was not a strong theme as respondents did not engage with the concept and at many points disagreed that these rituals and symbols were carried out for the benefit of an audience. Finch asserted that, “display” is provided as something that sociologists should objectively place upon practices, but never as something individuals actively identify themselves as doing. Although Heaphy (2011) discusses the

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issue of reflexivity within “display”, it is reflexivity of the relationship, not reflexivity of whether “display” is happening. This then in turn raises the question of who decides when and where practices get deigned with the label of “display”. Concepts found in the sociology of family were transferred to the sociology of friendship to see if they remained comprehensible. Contemporary families are seen to be fluid and flexible. Weeks et al.’s study (2001) on families of choice suggest that friends can provide the support generally assigned to the family. In this study, when describing their “soul mate” friends, many parallels were drawn between them and family members or romantic relationships:

Rachel: “We speak literally almost everyday... that’s why I think she’s like a boyfriend”

Michelle: “I would describe it as love, as odd as it sounds but not that kind of love... like family love”

Scarlett: “We’re more like family, more like cousins that get along”

These are important findings when we think about how we work with young people who may be separated from their families and their networks. Whilst family and friendships are not the same, the need to establish intimacy and maintain it through relationships is ever important for young women’s well-being, as evidenced here.

Applying research findings to professional practice

We make several recommendations for social work with young women as a result of this study:

- It is important to be aware of relationships beyond the traditional family network commonly conceptualised with social work assessment and care support. This study illustrates the significance of social relationships beyond the family and their functions in providing support for expressions of intimacy, agency and identities.

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- There are significant challenges in making friends when young people are experiencing conditions where their normal networks have been disrupted. It is important to explore these and facilitate existing or new friendships as much as possible and to introduce these discussions into care and support planning.
- Conceptualising friendships highlights the ways that friendship experience is shaped by minority status and inequalities. Young people need support to develop cross group friendships which promote cultural competence or dialogue between different social groups and reinforce their own identities through the life course.

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