



## Interactions that Matter: Researching Critical Associations

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### Abstract

Against the backdrop of research that has tended to emphasise the positive aspects of non-familial relationships, particularly friendships, this paper considers the methodological challenges involved in generating data about what we term ‘critical associations’: relationships with friends and other associates that are critical in people’s lives in both positive and negative ways. The paper focuses on three methods that were used in a multi-faceted qualitative study of critical associations in different research settings. These included an ‘Era Memory Workshop’ that was focussed on personal associations amongst lesbians and gay men, ‘Situated Interviews’ that were concerned with non-familial relationships amongst people living in a rural ‘overspill’ housing estate and a Mass Observation Project directive that was framed in terms of the ‘ups and downs’ of friendship. The paper considers the distinctive opportunities and challenges that each method presented for generating personal narratives of critical associations. These opportunities and challenges were linked to the research interactions that the methods promoted, their temporal dimensions, and their location within narrative environments. Multi-faceted research methodologies that use different research methods in different research environments present distinctive possibilities for exploring the complexity and multi-dimensionality of personal associations, and especially the critical nature of these.

### Keywords

Methods, Narrative analysis, Friendships, Temporality, Qualitative Interviews, Mass Observation, Facet methodology

### Introduction

Historically, sociological research on personal life in the UK has been dominated by the ‘family frame’ with friendships and informal solidarities being seen as of secondary importance to family ties (Smart, 2007; Weeks et al, 2001). This has partly been influenced by a voluntaristic view of informal associations compared to the ‘given’ binds of blood or legal family (Smart et al, 2010; Davies, 2011). This view, expressed in the old adage ‘you can choose your friends, but not your family’, goes some way to explaining why friendships and informal solidarities have been understudied as personal relationships in comparison to family. While family relationships have often been assumed to be essential (in biological, legal, social and/or personal terms), the logics of electivity that underpinned cultural ideals about friendships and informal associations (see Bryan, 2009) construed them as less personally significant or as dispensable. Willmott also raised a methodological problem linked to the blurred nature of informal relationships when he asked how the relevance of friends could be examined if there is no agreement about what constitutes a friend (Willmott, 1987).

More recently, however, there has been a surge of interest in how informal associations are becoming *as* (if not more) personally and socially essential as family. This interest is partly influenced by the idea that, because of the social changes associated with detraditionalisation and individualisation, the family has

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become a 'zombie institution' (Bauman, 2003; Beck, 2000). Thus, friendships and informal associations are said to be better suited to the flexible, mobile and contingent lifestyles that are demanded of people in late modernity (Allan, 1998). The recent literature on friendships illuminates this point. Put briefly, theorists such as Giddens (1992) suggest friendship to be a model for the kind of relationships deemed to be personally important in late modernity because it embodies the principles of reciprocity, choice and autonomy. Giddens argues that such principles inform aspirations to 'pure relationships' that are reconfiguring contemporary personal life. In a similar vein, a number of Western European and North American studies suggest that families themselves are being reconfigured in line with the principles of friendship; that the value of family relationships is being judged and evaluated in these terms and that family relationships are nowadays so thoroughly social that friendships can *be* families (for studies and discussions see Allan, 1998; Pahl, 1998, 2000; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Nardi, 1992, 1999; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Smart, 2007; Weston, 1991; Weeks et al, 2001). Other studies see family, friendships and informal solidarities as 'suffused' relationships, where the boundaries of friendships, families and personal communities - and the 'goods' associated with them - are more or less thoroughly blurred (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). Despite the insights that these theories and studies might generate, they raise interlinked conceptual and methodological challenges that the UK based study discussed in this paper sought to address.

Conceptually, these theories and studies are concerned with friendships, informal solidarities and personal communities as personally and socially 'good' relationships. Put another way, in comparison to the wealth of work since the 1960s on the 'dark side' of family, the new theory and research on friendship and informal associations tends to be underpinned by a rather rosy and glossy view of these relationships. This raises the overarching research objective of the study that is discussed here, which was: to explore conceptions, experiences and practices of 'non-familial' personal relationships for the insights they generate into critical associations. We deployed the term 'critical associations' to refer to relationships that people deemed to be important in their lives. On the one hand this allowed us to explore friendships and personal solidarities in a way that could include more suffused relationships (for example, neighbours that are seen as friends, friends who are confined to particular social and leisure activities, colleagues with whom people socialise outside work, elective and political community-based relationships that might also be viewed as friendships and so on). On the other hand, the term 'critical associations' signalled our interest in how such relationships might be experienced as critically important in more *and* less positive ways. Rather than reproducing culturally normative narratives about the 'goods' of friendship we sought to explore how critical associations can ebb and flow through the life course, becoming 'critical' at certain moments but also how they might be experienced as fulfilling, supportive, loving, difficult, draining, cloying or even 'toxic'. This raised a methodological challenge which was linked to the question of how to generate data that could (i) do justice to the complexity of personal relationships, and (ii) generate personal accounts of the multi-dimensional nature of personal relationships like friendship where there may be a cultural pressure to present them as 'good'. In other words, what kind of methods might be best suited to getting beneath the gloss of simplistic stories of 'good' personal associations (and especially 'good' friendship)?

In the following sections of this article we describe the multi-faceted qualitative research strategy we adopted and reflect on the different ways in which three of the facets enabled us to address our overarching concerns. In doing so, we highlight the opportunities and challenges encountered in generating *critical* narratives of associations in differently situated research settings. These research settings were linked to broader 'narrative' environments (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009) which influenced the stories of critical association that participants narrated. The research interactions in each setting were shaped by these narrative environments, by the different methods used in each setting and especially by the temporal dimensions of the different methods. In all, we consider the value of a multi-faceted qualitative research strategy for generating situated personal narratives of critical associations that can be linked to broader cultural, sub-cultural and academic narratives about the 'goods' and 'shoulds' of relationships.

### **The Critical Associations study<sup>1</sup>**

Our multi-faceted methodology incorporated a number of mini-studies which offered different lenses on the research problem, the aim being to experiment with different methods applied in various specific contexts in order to look at critical associations from a number of angles. The study began with a Mass Observation Project (MOP) directive which generated written responses from an established panel of lay writers to a set of questions specifically about the ‘ups and downs’ of friendship. Other facets of the project focused on specific experiences or eras in people’s lives where different personal associations may be particularly ‘critical’. These facets included music elicitation based interviews with people who were involved in an iconic nightclubbing scene in the 1980s and 1990s; situated interviews (SIs) (as well as participant observation and archival research) with people who had moved from an urban city centre to a rural local authority housing estate as part of a 1960s slum clearance project; and group interviews (or as we termed them ‘era memory workshops’ [EMW]) using various forms of memory-based elicitation with particular groups of people who shared a personal or socio-cultural ‘era’. The EMWs included a group of women who had been part of an academic feminist movement and a group of women and men who had ‘come out’ as lesbian or gay. We also included a facet using ethnographic interviews to explore friendship practices in the context of the social networking site Facebook.<sup>2</sup>

These facets produced very different research interactions in different research environments. The facets also had different temporal dimensions, linked to the length of time participants had to narrate (and formulate) their personal stories of critical relationships. This paper will explore three of the aforementioned facets - the ‘Coming Out’ EMW, the SIs and the MOP - in order to assess the differences in *how* personal stories of critical associations were told, and *what* stories were told. In doing so, we show how different methods in different settings illuminated diverse linkages between personal narratives and broader cultural (and sub-cultural) conceptions of how relationships ‘should’ be.

Overall, our approach generated narratives of conceptions, experience and practices of mostly non-familial personal relationships. We adopted a largely storied approach to the analysis of the data because, as Riessman (2008) argues, it is through storying that people make sense of themselves and the social world around them. In generating narratives of critical associations we were interested in exploring how people *worked with* narratives (their own, others’ and broader cultural and sub-cultural narratives) in storying their personal associations. Gubrium and Holstein view personal narration ‘as reflexively linked to the *interplay* of discursive actions and the circumstances of storytelling’ (1998: 164, original emphasis) and focus upon the ‘socially situated practice of storytelling’ (2009: 2). They are interested in narrative analysis beyond ‘the text’, and provide a framework for considering the reflexive relationship between ‘narrative work’ (the interactions through which narratives are constructed, sustained and reconfigured) and ‘narrative environments’ (the social and research contexts in which narratives are constructed and communicated) (2009: xvii). In identifying useful entry points for analysing what they term ‘narrative reality’ they include ‘activation’ (2009: 42) which refers to the ways stories are provoked in research interactions and ‘linkage’ (2009: 55) which attends to the ways stories acquire meaning in both social and research contexts. Gubrium and Holstein suggest that social actors do not merely reproduce wider socio-cultural norms in their narratives. Rather, agency can be explored through the ways narratives are composed and performed.

We now turn to consider processes of narrative work, activation and linkage in the situated narrative environments of our three facets, illuminating how they generated personal stories of critical associations which engaged with cultural and sub-cultural ideals of personal relationships in different ways and focusing on the processes whereby *critical* associations are narrated.

### **Era Memory Workshop (EMW)**

The EMW discussed here comprised seven participants who varied in age, social background and ethnicity<sup>3</sup> but shared the personal experience of having come out as lesbian or gay. Participants were recruited by the distribution of a flyer to one of the researcher’s professional networks, who then distributed them through their personal networks. Two of the group were known to each other before the workshop, the rest were strangers and the group was facilitated by two researchers (one gay identified and one heterosexual). The workshop was a one-off discussion, held in the city of Manchester in the North West of England and was

limited to two hours. In terms of activation, the researchers began the EMW with a video clip from the iconic 1990s UK television show *Queer as Folk* which centred on the relationships of a group of gay men and lesbians in Manchester's gay village. The clip represented multiple views of the implications of coming out for 'suffused' relationships. Following this, the researchers prompted participants on topics linked to the implications of coming out for critical associations, non-familial relationships which have ended or were disrupted and the enduring nature of 'good' and unsatisfactory friendships.

In terms of the research setting, this was mostly a group of people who were meeting for the first time in a one-off time limited workshop. Participants were therefore interacting and narrating their critical associations 'on the hoof', in most cases with no prior knowledge of each other. This contributed to an inquisitive interactional context, but also a highly respectful one. During the discussion a dynamic was established whereby all members of the group listened carefully to each other's stories, making efforts not to interrupt and providing each other with non-verbal cues of encouragement. In this respect, the EMW seemed to take the form of self-organised 'sharing experiences' or 'coming out' groups, which are not uncommon in lesbian and gay cultures. The transcription of the EMW, with its many paragraphs of uninterrupted text looks entirely different from those made of the SIs (discussed below), which are littered with the interruptions and overlapping speech characteristic of a highly conversational interview between just two or three people. Participants often took advantage of the interactional dynamic of the group to take 'time out' of the conversation to think about how the narratives of others related to their own experiences. On a number of occasions a participant would return to an issue raised earlier in the conversation declaring that it had 'sparked' an idea or memory. Thus, the activation of personal stories emerged through the temporal dynamics of the workshop as well as through the interaction between research participants, not only with the researchers. Temporally, the constraints on time also encouraged 'turn taking' in speaking. This facilitated the relational construction of personal stories, which were often told in response to each other. The research setting, the method and the modes of interaction they promoted thus shaped *how* personal narratives of personal associations were told.

In terms of the broader narrative environments, all the participants had a coming out story to tell, had engaged with lesbian and gay culture to some degree and, initially at least, saw friendships as a personal 'good'. All participants were familiar with the suffused lesbian and gay relationships represented in the *Queer as Folk* clip. While participants generally endorsed the view that friendships reflected 'who you were' and that friends should ideally share the same values, the fact that this was a group of respectful strangers seemed to encourage participants to take risks in narrating the more complex realities of relationships. This was evident when Keith spoke of friends of his who were sympathetic of the BNP<sup>4</sup>. This activated strong moral statements about friendship:

*Elizabeth: I think I'd fall out*

*Ann (laughs): I don't think I'd be friends in the first, I am convinced I wouldn't be friends in the first place. That's my thing, I think that I don't see how...*

In this interaction Keith did concede that the friendship would be different if his friends actually joined the BNP party rather than merely support it. However, he defended them in the face of criticism from others, seemingly unconcerned about how this particular 'choice' of friend might reflect upon him and his own political views. Despite Ann raising the idea that one's choices of friend are a reflection of one's own moral character, he responded:

*Keith: They're lovely, they're absolutely, they'd do anything for anybody...they're really kind people but they just, when it comes to politics they're just so naïve and innocent that they just don't get it.*

Thus, the EMW generated different conceptions of what 'good' friends were, with different conceptions of morality at their heart. While Ann drew on political-personal conceptions of good friendship that assume friends to share moral-political views, in response Keith engaged in a degree of narrative work to justify his

friendship. In doing so he drew on broader cultural narratives that suggested that the affective quality of friendships, in this case kindness, trumped politics as a shared moral value. The important point is that the EMW involved interactions in the mode of respectful strangers and this enabled participants to take risks and to gently interrogate each other. Of course, participants in the EMW were also constructing their narratives in interaction with researchers who were also able to trouble and probe their narratives. For example, in response to the *Queer as Folk* clip, Ann talked about her friends in a way that reflects lesbian and gay sub-cultural and academic accounts of friendship as an ideal 'chosen' alternative to relationships with family, particularly for sexual minorities (see Nardi, 1992; 1999; Weeks, 2001; Weston, 1991):

*Ann: that [the idea of having a group of chosen friends who become 'like family'] was familiar to me, so the way I am with my friends is, there's a lot of closeness without sex with my friends..., that's just my life so.*

However, in response to the researcher probing the downsides of such friendships, Ann referred to her disappointment when a friendship ended:

*Ann...I made friends with someone and I imagined that we would always be friends, she was a lesbian, she was just coming out at the time. And we didn't.*

While the second quotation from Ann signals the disappointing side of culturally idealised relationships, the first quotation signals how participants in the EMW were also constructing their narratives in relation to lesbian and gay sub-cultural narrative environments. The story of 'friends as family' is well rehearsed in lesbian and gay cultures, and academic discussions of lesbian and gay informal relationships have drawn on these to suggest that such relationships are imbued with the positive features of friendship (Nardi, 1992; 1999; Weeks, 2001; Weston, 1991). These stories have also found their way into mainstream culture through series like *Queer as Folk*. The EMW (re)generated such narratives but also troubled them. The following examples from Emma and Juan are typical in that they indicate how participants' narratives of friendship contained some relationships reminiscent of idealised depictions of non-heterosexual friendships and some which were at odds with this representation:

*Emma: ... what happened [when she came out and moved to Manchester] was lots of the gay people who I met, er, some people have become, you know, am still friends with ... because they're people who I've got other things in common as well as just being gay... But other people, we soon realised that we didn't have anything in common, we didn't have the same values or life ambitions or, you know, anything like that.*

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*Juan: I can't say I relate much to it [the friendships in *Queer as Folk*] in the sense that I never had a big gay and lesbian group of friends, maybe because I just don't have groups of friends, I have mostly individual friends, not groups. I don't hang out in groups really... I did have a couple of great friends during the process of coming out, but they eventually disappeared...*

Participants were generating their narratives in the situated research context of the EMW, but the broader linkages to lesbian and gay sub-cultural narrative environments were also evident. In fact one participant even referred to a classic academic study of non-heterosexual friendships to support her personal story. Through narrative work participants assembled meanings from the various cultural narratives available to them, and brought these to bear on the interactions within the EMW itself. We now turn to focus on the rather different narrative environments informing the narrative work of participants in the SIs.

### **Situated Interviews (SIs)**

The SIs were conducted with individuals (five, all of them women) and couples (three husband and wife pairs) who lived on a large 'overspill' housing estate in the north of England where inhabitants had been re-housed en masse from an inner city environment in the 1960s. SI participants were (or had been before they retired) in

low paid unskilled occupations and their stories emerged from particular kinds of working class experience. The childhood poverty experienced in the inner city and subsequent stigmatisation of the estate and those living on it by those living in surrounding conurbations are an important background to this facet. Participants, who included original movers to the estate (now aged in their 60s and 70s), were recruited in liaison with a community project on the estate which had collated and published memories of the move using personal stories and photographs. The community project had worked to produce a counter narrative about 'good' people and a strong community in the form of a 'mnemonic community' (Misztal, 2003). Politically, this counter narrative challenged the stigmatisation of the estate. In this facet the research setting and broader narrative environment were closely enmeshed as all but one interview took place in the participants' home in the estate, and the interviews were designed to use the estate itself, *and* the community project about it, as entry points into discussions of participants' estate-based personal associations, their positive and difficult experiences and the ending of friendships. In terms of activation, it became clear that the stories that participants told were often those that have been activated by the community study and not by our study as such. Participants often glossed over our concern with critical relationships and seemed committed to rehearsing the stories of 'good' relationships on the estate that had become institutionalised by the community study.

In terms of the specific interactions of the SIs, participants were interacting with the researcher and in some cases with a partner, but also with imagined critics who had denigrated the estate and its inhabitants. In this facet, class and aged based differences between interviewer and interviewees significantly and very obviously shaped the interaction. This was in contrast to the EMW discussed previously, where participants seemed more interested in sharing different and common experiences of being lesbian or gay, and were relatively uninterested in the interviewers. Whereas participants in the SIs shared a specific working class background, the interviewer had a middle class profession at the University and an 'obvious' middle class background. Crucially, she was not from the estate. These differences pervaded the research interactions from the outset. Take this extract from an interview with Earnest and Kay:

*Kay: Yeah, everybody knows one another on [the estate]; they're very friendly with one another. It's a close community. We do not like outsiders.*

*Researcher: Right. Okay.*

*Earnest: Causing trouble, they can come if they want. (laughs)*

In this extract Kay makes it clear that the shared experience of residents of the estate makes them distrustful of 'outsiders' while Earnest engages in qualifying narrative work. Many of the SIs involved discussions of where the researcher was from. These efforts to place her indicate the centrality of place and geographical and social background to the interview interactions. Difference in age was another key factor permeating interview interactions. Participants were in their 60s and 70s whereas the researcher was thirty at the time of the interviews. The age difference between interviewee and interviewer was especially significant where participants were recounting memories of their relationships when they moved to the estate – part of a historic period of social change that the researcher had not lived through. The point is that throughout the SIs, participants were interacting with somebody who represented, and who they construed as, the 'outsider'.

In some respects the researcher's 'outsider' position had its advantages as it encouraged participants to provide detailed explanations and descriptions of their lives. In most cases the interaction took the form of the telling of their exceptional story, and the interviewer corroborated this with interjections and exclamations of surprise at various points. Conversely, this sort of interaction also meant participants were better able to resist the researcher's attempts to activate more *critical* narratives of their relationships. Participants claimed narrative authority in telling their stories and the researcher's attempts to activate less well-rehearsed stories were often ignored. Other dynamics, related to the interview method, also limited the generation of *critical* narratives. We believed that one-off one-to-one or couple interviews would offer the time for participants and researchers to engage in a more focussed and interrogative dialogue than the EMW. However, the conventions of conversational interaction mean that the opportunities for participants to reflect on the memories and stories

they wanted to tell were much more constrained than in either of the other facets. Thus, the temporal dimensions of this situated interaction, with the rhythms of conversation leaving participants with less time to formulate a response, demanded a high degree of spontaneity. This seemed to produce ‘habitually’ told stories as opposed to highly reflected upon and reflexive ones. Thus, the content of the SI participants’ stories which emphasised their good neighbours, families, friends and communities were linked to their local narrative environment, the insider-outsider interactions involved in the research setting, as well as the *form* of interaction promoted by the method of interviewing.

Despite this, the SIs did offer fleeting glimpses of alternative stories of less satisfactory relationships with friends, neighbours and the estate in general. These glimpses were possible due to the temporal dimensions of the interview encounters. The intensive two-hour nature of the conversations allowed contradictions, tensions and complexities in memories and narratives of critical associations to unfold over their duration. At the heart of these possibilities lay the trust built in the time spent together. This can clearly be seen in Mabel’s account. As with most other interviewees, Mabel spoke positively about the estate and about her neighbours and associates, and described her positive memories of one particularly long-standing friend, Olive. During the interview, the researcher made several attempts to prompt Mabel to trouble her narrative of unproblematic associations but failed to elicit any such accounts. However, the researcher returned to the subject of Olive close to the end of the encounter:

*Researcher: So like you and Olive, did you stay friends right through your lives?*

*Mabel: Well, we stayed friends until she did a naughty thing.*

*Researcher: Right.*

*Mabel: And then, she left her children and she went to live in [another country]. And since she went to [another country] I’ve not really bothered with her.*

*Researcher: Yeah.*

*Mabel: Because, to leave her children, no, that’s not me. So...*

*Researcher: Yeah. So did, were you quite surprised when she did that?*

*Mabel: I did, yeah, yeah. Even though they weren’t friendly with her husband, you know, they was having problems, I never thought she’d have walked out on the children, you know.*

*Researcher: Yeah. So have you like ever spoken to her since that happened?*

*Mabel: Oh I have, yeah, I have. But she knows my feelings and I don’t*

*Researcher: Yeah.*

*Mabel: I can’t be the friend I was.*

This story is striking because it so nearly did not get told, and given Mabel’s commitment to emphasising the positives of her personal associations it seems unlikely that this story would have emerged in the EMW or MOP facet. As well as highlighting how a longer duration of research encounter, with its opportunities for trust building and the consistent troubling of participants’ narratives, can elicit less habituated and more complex narratives, this example suggests that other such stories may have gone untold in the SIs.

In the case of the SIs, much of the participants’ narrative work seemed to have been undertaken in the narrative environment of the community memory project. As such participants in the SIs were working with this particular local discourse. Gubrium and Holstein discuss local culture as ‘narrative environments that shape the little stories of habitués and accountability’ (2009: 139). They argue that all places, even those which appear anonymous, shape people’s narratives of identity and interpersonal relationships (ibid: 142).

Others have pointed to the particularly moral and classed stories that people tell about their locale and about belonging to a particular place (Blokland, 2005; Southerton, 2002; Savage et al, 2005; Miles, 2005). Thus, the estate provided a very particular narrative environment that shaped the interview interaction, the dominance of which resulted in interviews that were kept largely to the telling of the estate's story. Thus, despite the occasional glimpse of alternative narratives and some evidence of 'slippage' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998: 167) born out of lengthy and intimate interactions, the narrative environment of the stories told in the SIs had been well established prior to this particular investigation and produced habituated and locally institutionalised stories. We now examine the very different narrative environments informing the 'private' written narratives of the MOP facet of the project.

### Mass Observation

The Mass Observation Project has a panel of writers (some of whom have regularly written for the archive over many years) who respond to 'directives' either formulated by researchers or by the MOP itself.<sup>5</sup> Volunteers are free to write as much or as little as they wish on a given topic and are not tied to addressing each aspect of a particular directive but rather can interpret each directive freely. Thus, panel members are fairly skilled in the narrative work involved in making their private lives public. Our directive asked specifically about friendships, and in terms of activation the panel were asked to define friendship as well as to write about 'difficult friendships', 'when friendship ends' and 'old friends'. The directive went out to 547 writers in the UK in November 2008. We received responses from 135 women and 71 men, who largely reflected the rather middle class, predominantly middle aged and elderly composition of the panel. The responses we received varied greatly from short, terse responses to long in-depth biographical accounts, war stories and anecdotes.

On the surface it appears as though the Mass Observation writers were not interacting with anybody at all in working up their narratives. We can only assume that contributions represent lone accounts as we know nothing of the context in which they were written and produced. Nevertheless, the writers were of course interacting with imagined readers and the data included a number of different modes of writing for an audience. For example, some responses read like novels or stories, some took the form of life histories or confessionals, others engaged directly with the reader with writers explaining why they decided to respond to this particular directive or adding humorous asides. Indeed, Sheridan (1993) argues that writing for the archive can be considered as a sort of collective autobiography which, drawing on other writing conventions (diary or letter writing for example), is forging a new genre of the 'Mass Observation directive reply' (ibid:34) in which participants very much write for the archive.

Similarly, the temporal dimensions that framed responses in this facet are unknown and likely to be various. Many participants appeared to have conjured memories and narratives for an imagined audience at their leisure. Thus, they had time to think, edit and iron out the memories and narratives they wanted to present. Others appeared to have hastily written down a response with little reflection. Linked to this it is also clear that some participants took the time that MOP presented to address another audience: themselves. In this respect, some participants seemed to engage in an exercise of *self-interaction*: of self-examination or reflexive review of their friendships and relationships at particular times in their lives, and linked this to the kind of person they were, the context they grew up in and the like. In cases like these, the time to confess or reflect often generated less 'glossy' memories or normative narratives of associations. In these accounts friendship in particular could be narrated as personally troubled and troubling.

As well as considering the writer's interaction with their imagined readers, the way we as researchers interacted with the written narratives was interesting. As researchers used to interviewing or observing people it was a rather strange experience to be confronted with only a written narrative. While interviews and observations can be analysed with reference to contextualising field notes and to memories of the research encounter, in analysing the Mass Observation responses we only had the varying contextual clues that people had deemed fit to include in their response. Thus, we decided to interact with the 'participant on the page', resisting suppositions about what sort of person we thought a respondent might be. One of the main characteristics of the Mass Observation responses was that there was no opportunity for a researcher to ask

questions, probe a story or trouble a narrative. Without the sort of rapport and trust built up in our other interactions, it is likely that many stories about difficult friendships that might have been narrated in such encounters remained untold. There are examples of narratives where it is clear that had a face-to-face interaction been possible, a researcher would have followed up a train of thought, or probed for more details about a relationship. Take for example A3573's account (Female, Aged 46):

*Although I am very much a 'people person' I find I struggle to find the right friends...many friends have been attracted to my own ability to listen and give advice and have been very draining. It's only as I get older that I am able to distance myself from those that drain...*

The idea of 'draining' friends is one that has arisen elsewhere in our study and is an idea we find interesting. Reading this account it is difficult not to wonder who these friends were, what they did that was draining, how long the writer put up with it and what led her to become better able to distance herself. Such questions would no doubt have been asked had a researcher been present.

The narratives produced drew upon various styles of 'friendship story' with some clearly following the tropes of 'triumph over adversity', 'making one's own life', 'heroic lives and relationships' and so on. In this respect it was clear that some participants were engaging in a more or less self-conscious 'public' performance of self. Other MOP participants engaged in more naturalised - less self-conscious - performances of ordinary relating selves. Their narratives contained more matter of fact accounts of friendships- how they started, developed, operated, continued or not. Thus, MOP responses comprised a variety of narratives of friendships, some of which drew on broader narratives of friendships as inherently 'good' relationships that circulate in the culture whilst others troubled these in diverse ways. Through their sheer volume, the MOP responses comprised a great array of narratives of critical associations which related to normative discourses of friendship and other personal associations in a multitude of ways.

In many cases the absence of face-to-face interaction with the Mass Observation respondents was conducive to more detailed, less guarded narratives of 'difficult' friendships. Given the strength of cultural links between 'good' friendships and self-worth, it was perhaps less risky for people to narrate 'bad', 'ambiguous' and 'ambivalent' friendships in the anonymous forum offered by the archive. Although this was by no means present in all the responses, some writers did share stories about friendships that had obviously caused emotional distress and perhaps would not have been told in person. One woman, for example, shared a story of her bewilderment at being inexplicably mocked and subsequently 'dropped' by a friend, describing how she was left wondering whether the entire friendship had been imagined on her part and whether there was something about her that had caused the friendship to go wrong. It is unlikely that she would have exposed herself quite so much in a group or one-to-one research context:

*Writing this piece has reminded me of it all, but largely I have now put it behind me. I am no nearer to understanding it, although obviously I had deeply annoyed them in some way. As I really cannot remember any specific incident I can only presume it was something more pervasive, something more general about me... (B1475)*

Central to Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) framework for analysing narrative reality is the use of ethnographic fieldwork in conjunction with the analysis of narrative texts for the purpose of analysing narrative environments. As such it might appear fruitless to attempt to analyse the extra-textual narrative work and environments of MOP responses. However, by interpreting MOP participants as interacting with their selves and with imagined audiences, it was possible to conceptualise these interactions as 'conversations' that entailed narrative work to negotiate the 'slippage' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998: 167) between cultural ideals of friendship as 'good' and friendship as it was experienced - in more complex, ambivalent and sometimes clearly negative ways. Thus, while we were not privy to the specific circumstances of their articulation, the 153 MOP responses confirmed the pervasiveness of the cultural ideals about friendship, and the fairly broad ways in which friendships in practice often fall short of these ideals. They also suggested the 'self' narrative work that is entailed in reconciling cultural ideals and lived realities.

### Conclusion: situated interactions that matter

In researching critical associations we aimed to explore the informal relationships that are important in people's lives in a more critical way than is usual. This was informed by our belief that it was timely to explore the ways in which culturally and academically 'idealised' relationships like friendships are more complex than is often assumed. Substantively, our research has illustrated that friendships are not always or universally experienced as 'good', but also as painful, undermining and challenging to a positive sense of self (see Smart et al, 2010). In this paper we have focussed on *how* we generated the data that in turn generated these substantive insights. To generate this data we engaged in methodological experiments, that we now conceive of as a 'facet methodology' (see Mason, this Issue). At the heart of our approach was a conviction that to explore the multi-dimensional and complex nature of personal relationships, and to get beneath the gloss of simplistic stories of 'good' personal associations, required a multi-dimensional methodology (see also Gabb, 2008). We have resisted the temptation to evaluate which one of our facets was most successful. In fact, this would run counter to our overall argument, which concerns the value of facet methodology for addressing the 'goods', 'bads' and ambivalences that personal relationships involve.

It is clear from our discussion here though, that some facets were more successful than others in getting at the kind of narratives we set out to explore: *critical* narratives of friendships and personal associations. However, this is not the sole or even primary basis on which we would wish to evaluate our methodology. Rather, the 'success' of our methodological experiment is linked to how it illuminated the possibilities *as well as* the challenges and difficulties of generating critical narratives, and how these are linked to broader cultural, sub-cultural and spatially located narrative environments. It is the interaction between these environments and the narrative environment that the particular research methods enable or constrain that matters in shaping the stories of personal relationships that are generated by research. In summary, used in combination, different research methods in different environments are useful for exploring the complexity and multi-dimensionality of personal relationships and for understanding the interactive narrative processes through which such relationships are given meaning in situated contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> The Critical Associations study formed part of the ESRC Realities node of the National Centre for Research Methods based at The University of Manchester (RES-576-25-0022). The project team comprised Katherine Davies, Brian Heaphy, Jennifer Mason and Carol Smart.

<sup>2</sup>For more details see the project website: [www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/research/associations](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/realities/research/associations)

<sup>3</sup> The group comprised four men and three women aged between 27 and 63 years old. The group included two public/third sector professionals, three people working in education (one retired) and two people who were unemployed. Participants' descriptions of their ethnic origins included 'White British', 'Irish', 'Mixed' and 'White Portuguese'.

<sup>4</sup> The British National Party (BNP) is a controversial far right political party known for its racist policies.

<sup>5</sup> See Sheridan (1993) for a discussion of the motivations of MOP writers.

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## Biographies

Katherine Davies is a post doctoral research associate in The Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life based at The University of Manchester. She has been a researcher on two nodes of the National Centre for Research Methods where she worked on projects exploring the use of qualitatively driven methods for understanding personal relationships with regards to the social significance of family resemblances and the ebbs and flows of non-familial critical associations through the life course. Her PhD research explores young people's understandings of 'being' and 'becoming' with a particular focus on sibling relationships.

Brian Heaphy is Professor of Sociology and a member of The Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life at the University of Manchester. He has researched personal life and social change through projects on relationships, sexualities and gender, families, friendships, ageing and living with HIV. He has published methodological articles in the journals *Sexualities* (with C. Donovan and J. Weeks), *Sociological Research Online* and *Qualitative Research* (with A. Einarsdottir, forthcoming). With colleagues he is currently involved in two research projects: on young couples' civil partnerships in the UK and on 'critical associations'.

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