11

Interlocutorial friendship

Emily Kneppers

ABSTRACT

While kinship is a key and thoroughly analyzed tenet of anthropology, friendship has not been afforded the same status, as it is notoriously difficult to categorize. This paper seeks to contribute to the widening of this field through analyzing the experiences and definitions of friendship of four interlocutors, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of friendship between interlocutor and anthropologist in ethnographic fieldwork.

SETTING THE STAGE

In early September of 2014, I had an epiphany. Alex and I had been friends since the ripe age of five, when our mothers decided that we should play together. Since we were both in the same first grade class of about 15 people in a small private school, over the next five years we became as close to siblings as you could get without sharing a parent or a home. However, in 2014, Alex started sixth grade in public school.

When we met in the park at the end of her first week of classes, she was in tears. "This is awful, I hate it. I don't know anyone. I'm going to try transfer back". In that moment, I suddenly came to the glaringly obvious realisation that I had never had to make a friend, and neither had Alex. Our class (roughly four girls, six boys) had grown up together and had, as Alex put it, "never had to make friends before". To this day, this group, which includes two of my interlocutors, is my primary support network, and the closest thing I have to siblings. We never properly 'became friends', because we grew up together, but that is also what keeps us together – I know these people so well that I have grown into them, and our shared pasts provide a solid base for a shared future. Then I arrived in St Andrews, and while chatting to my flatmate, May, I was surprised to discover that she had grown up in a similar environment to mine, yet she doesn't speak to a single one of her childhood friends. This discrepancy greatly intrigued me, and paved the way for what would later become my first ethnography.

In my initial research on the subject, I found that while kinship is a key tenet of anthropology, friendship has not been afforded the same status. This can be attributed in part to anthropology's early attempts to "establish ethnology as a science as exact as physics or chemistry" (Bouquet 1993: 114), and, by extension, the dif-

ficulty in pinning down a universal and standardised definition of "friendship" in comparison to the almost obsessive categorisation of kinship (Desai and Killick 2010: 1,4). I myself encountered this difficulty with a mere four interlocutors, as Alex viewed friendship transactionally, "[friendship] never stopped being entangled with 'what can this person bring to me?' ", while Xander saw friends as people who he could "do things with". However, despite differences in definition, all four of them shared the same fundamental experience of the action of friendship. As such, my research seeks to shed further light on the experience of making and maintaining friendships, as someone who is a made and maintained friend to all my interlocutors.

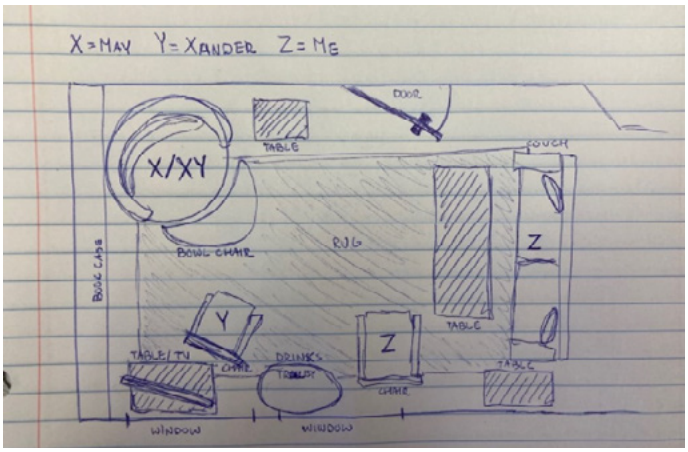
Methods

The idea of befriending your interlocutors is not entirely radical in the world of anthropology, but studying those with whom you already have an established friendship certainly is. The typical paradigm of fieldwork requires "a separation between the researcher(s) and the participant(s), on the basis that any kind of personal involvement would bias the research, disturb the natural setting, and/or contaminate the results" (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014: 284). However, I chose to work with Alex and Miranda, whom I have known for the better part of 16 years, and my flatmate May, as well as my friend (and May's boyfriend) Xander, both of whom I see on a daily basis. I did this intentionally: while being friends with your interlocutors isn't an automatic shortcut to a more profound dialogue, if executed well, it can generate richer data with a much broader and deeper context, especially if friendship itself is the object of the research (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014: 302).

Of course, having a shared history has its own difficulties, which are not limited to the supposed bias, contamination, and disruption of raw data (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014: 284). I conducted several phone and video interviews with both Alex and Miranda, in which we would chat while I simultaneously typed out a rough summary of what they were saying. However, having spent over three-quarters of our lives conversing, we are intimately familiar with each other's speech patterns. This worked to my advantage with Miranda, who speaks slowly, so I could predict the pauses and general direction of her words well enough to type and maintain a normal conversation, but Alex and I have a much more rapid dialogue, so trying to catch all the relevant data while maintaining our established rapport proved very difficult.

Being friends with my interlocutors also led to some interesting negotiations of power dynamics. As George Allen said, "friendship is a bond in which issues of hierarchy and authority have no bearing" (1989: 20), so introducing my hierarchical role as anthropologist to my previously egalitarian friendships produced noticeable reactions. Alex took it as an opportunity to give me an overview of how friends are made in middle school, high school, and university. She took an authoritative position, acting as the middleman between me, the foreign anthropologist, and friendship dynamics in American public schools in general. Miranda, on the other hand, was more concerned with participating in the interviews "correctly" despite my attempts to make them democratic 'chats', asking if she could "go off topic, if that's okay", whenever she changed the conversation's direction. My conversations with May and Xander took place face-to-face, so I elected not to take notes while talking, in the hopes that it would facilitate a more natural conversation. This approach worked very well for May, although it was difficult to recall the nuances of our conversations after the fact,

and was reinforced by Xander, whose second interview I recorded. We were talking in the living room after dinner, and I unthinkingly jotted down the age ranges for his primary school, which he found funny, but which also stilted the conversation by highlighting the awareness that I was overtly collecting data, rather than simply engaging in a normal, friendly chat.



Sketch in my notes of our living room, where the majority of May and Xander's interviews took place. The letters denote seating arrangements during the interviews, which do not differ from the normal seating arrangement in our flat.

Making and maintaining friends

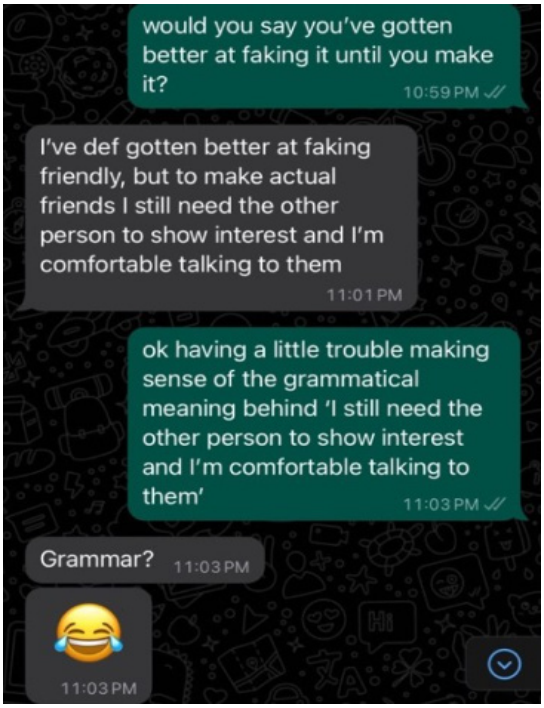
Despite their differences in nationality, gender, and relation to both me and each other, all four of my interlocutors related to the experience of making and maintaining friendships. Alex was the first member of our class to leave without moving several states away, and was consequently my first proper window into the world of befriending. When recalling her first weeks at Timberlane Middle School, she paints a slightly different picture from the sobbing 11-year-old I recalled sitting in the park with. "It was sort of mostly convenience – I'm in your class, and we both have lunch next period, so let's walk-to-lunch-together kinda thing." Most of Alex's recollections weren't deeply personalised, and she leaned more into giving me the general dynamics of how befriending worked, rather than personal anecdotal experiences. When I asked about her friend Sasha, who I'd met briefly and who was one of Alex's closest public-school friends throughout middle and high school, she said she "vaguely remember[ed] meeting her" in theatre class. They bonded over "not knowing anyone else" and "slipped into becoming friends". They maintained their friendship through consistent proximity, something which Alex notes carried into university. She doesn't see Bridget, her roommate from last year, "except for big events, but since we're not living together anymore she doesn't come over for the small things, which creates a gap". She identified consistent, small interactions as the main factor in keeping friendships from fading.

Alex was keen to emphasise the stages of friendship: in middle and high school you made friends out of convenience, such as being paired to sit together, and in university, you made friends out of choice, such as "making conversation while in the bar line". She also took a generalised standpoint when talking about our shared school experience, saying "[our school] really fucked us over in terms of making friends", because there was a "subtle art of talking to strangers" that we weren't exposed to until we left or graduated.

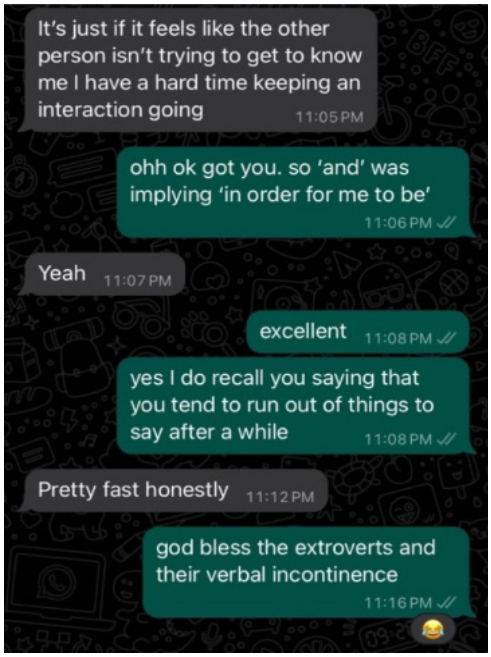
While one could argue that some of Alex's generalised statements are not necessarily universal experiences, her point about our inability to make friends certainly has some grounding. Miranda, who was with me from first grade until we graduated, had a rough time in high school. Like Alex, I remember having several tearful conversations during her freshman year. "It was so hard to make connections, because I keep thinking 'what do I say next?'" After the first

few weeks of high school, Miranda realised that lots of friendship groups had carried over from the local middle schools, and "it didn't seem like most people wanted to make [new] friends".

Additionally, while Miranda was born in the United States, her family is from Taiwan, which put her in the fraught middle ground wherein she couldn't fully relate to the Asian student population, but likewise couldn't quite connect with the Caucasian students. This calls back to the idea of "growing into each other", from another person's perspective. I am a white South African/American/British hybrid, and culturally Miranda and I would have little in common, except that, since we grew up together, I will regularly go over to her house for hot pot, and she covets my mother's biltong. Our friendship wasn't founded on having things in common, but rather being together for long enough that we mutually created commonalities that then keep us bound together.



Some post interview clarifications with Miranda, discussing how she currently makes friends as a 21-year-old in university.



Xander's experience, on the other hand, required commonalities in order to establish a friendship. He had a similar experience to Alex, Miranda and me in that he went to a small local primary school (although his was in Scotland, while ours was in the US), and only started properly making friends in secondary

school, which consolidated all the local primary schools into one big system. Notably, he didn't put the people from primary school into the category of "friend", but since they were "a group of people that were your own age, so you would sort of know everyone".

Xander first met Cameron because they were in the same registration class in year one of secondary school. "I saw him every day, and then we were talking about like, Forza, and then we started playing Xbox together." Cameron and Xander bonded over this shared activity, which expanded to include several other friends who also enjoyed gaming. Gaming acted as a jumping off point for establishing a friendship, but also became an agent in maintaining it, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, while "that whole thing with guys making, like, keeping friends through doing things together" remained the key aspect of Xander's friendships, the mode of shared actions changed as its participants grew up. Now, when Xander goes back to his hometown, he'll "go for a pint with Cameron or we'll like, go for a walk or we'll go out on the bikes". Indeed, whenever Xander or Cameron send me a snapchat of the two of them together, they're always doing something: mountain biking, gymming, or pubbing.

May also came from a small school in a lower income area outside Edinburgh. Unlike Xander, she had solid friends in primary school, but in her case, moving to a nicer area and going to a private secondary school instead of the high school she was "supposed to go to" caused a rift between her and her friends as their parents encouraged the rhetoric of "she's too good for us now".

May's secondary school was all girls and "very cliquish". However, she joined a hockey camp the summer before her first year, which "gave [her] and in" and allowed her to establish a friend group before school started. May has a twin sister, so she always had a "built-in friend" which meant that she was never desperate to make connections. Since she has her twin as a base, May has no fear of putting herself out there, and her go-to method of making friends is by inviting them to a party, pregame, or coffee. This is actually how I ended up in the university friend group that I did – May texted me out of the blue in first year asking if I'd like to come with them to the Safeword Bop at the Union. Since then, I've seen her invite at least 10 people to gatherings at our flat, drinks, and so forth. However, May is a self-proclaimed awful communicator, so unlike Alex, who's friendships rely on constant small connections, May will be out of contact with her friends for months, but as soon as they meet up, they "pick up right where [they] left off".

Many thoughts and few conclusions:

Between my four interlocutors, there were many differences and scant commonalities. The process of making friends varied drastically from person to person, as did the method of maintaining those friendships. However, as Killick and Desai put it, "friendship is interesting precisely because it evades definition: the way in which friendship acts to express fixity and fluidity in diverse social worlds is exciting and problematic for the people that practise friendship, and for the social scientists that study it" (2010: 1). Amongst my interlocutors, no single definition of friendship emerged, but I did find some common ground within their experiences. All four people wanted to make, and put effort into making, friends, and once they had established connections, they all sought to maintain them.

This broad experience certainly creates problems for people within friendships, as well as the anthropologists studying them, but ar-

guably the most exciting and problematic aspect arrives when you are simultaneously inhabiting both roles. As someone who shared a past with my interlocutors, I was able to access a deeper context much more rapidly than if I had been interviewing strangers. I was part of Alex's experience of attending a new school, and watched her friendship with Sasha unfold in real time. I took walks into town with Miranda to buy bubble tea and listened to her struggles with making connections, and later met her new friends when those connections finally clicked. Cameron has told me many stories of him and Xander covered in mud, manhandling their bikes over sodden ramps in the woods. I was on the receiving end of one of May's inviting texts, and have since become one of the friends that comes back from a summer holiday of no contact whatsoever and immediately picks up where we left off in April.

Our shared experiences allowed for a certain level of comfort and confidence in even the earliest conversations, as well as a stronger rapport, since we were both working off a shared history, which de-snagged the dialogue. However, this also proved to be a hindrance, as since it was assumed that I knew certain things, there was no need to break the flow of conversation to clarify a point or provide context. This was not the fault of the interlocutor – the problem was that I knew the context, so oftentimes it didn't occur to me to get their perspective, because I already had mine, from my side of the experience. This also caused me to ask some biased or leading questions, because I knew both the interlocutor and the context of the conversation well enough that I could predict their response. Perhaps one of the best examples of this was during an interview with Miranda.

Me: (sarcastically) *"So tell me about your many friends in Taiwan"*.

Miranda: (no words, just torrents of laughter)

I already knew that Miranda didn't make friends easily, and that since she only visited Taiwan for a few weeks of the summer each year, she didn't have a solid friend group there, so instead of asking her to explain this context to me, I based my statement on our previous shared knowledge. While perhaps not an egregious imposition, moments like this remove "the degree of difference required for dialogue" (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014: 298) and make a self-centred monologue of what should have been an interlocutor-based conversation.

I do not agree with the idea that a clinical distance between ethnographer and interlocutor produces more 'accurate' data, but there is always something to be said for getting a wider range of perspectives and experiences. Bringing in the voices of people with whom I shared no prior history or relationship would certainly contribute to both the depth and breadth of this ethnography in that regard. Further, Killick and Desai argue that "the most important aspect of friendship to its practitioners [is] that it is a relationship that stands in contrast to other ways of relating" (2010: 2). This study contrasted various forms of friendship as an action, but it would be interesting to contrast it to other ways of relating such as kinship, which occupies a similar space in terms of relatedness, yet receives vastly different treatment in traditional anthropology.

Despite its relative lack of exploration, friendship is a valuable aspect of anthropology. It contrasts to other ways of relatedness in its refusal to be neatly categorised. Xander relies on commonalities to make friends, whereas Miranda creates commonalities with people to maintain connections. Alex fosters friend-

ships through constant, small interactions, while May establishes friendships through a few large events and then expects them to maintain themselves. Friendship presents an inherent difficulty in definition, but that is precisely what makes it so engaging to study. However, "friendship is not only a valid subject of anthropological inquiry but also an important part of the process of ethnographic knowledge production itself" (Killick and Desai 2010: 3–4). Being friends with your interlocutors certainly poses some significant challenges, but also allows for greater contextual understanding, as long as the anthropologist's positionality is reflexively and consistently acknowledged. In this way, friendship not only contributes to a diversification of ethnographic study, but to the methodology of the anthropologist as well.

References

ALLAN, G. (1989) Friendship: Developing a Sociological Perspective. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

BOUQUET, M. (1993) Reclaiming English kinship: Portuguese refractions on British kinship theory. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

DESAI, A. & KILLICK, E (eds). (2010) The Ways of Friendship: Anthropological Perspectives. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

OWTON, H. & ALLEN-COLLINSON, J. (2014) Close But Not Too Close: Friendship as Method(ology) in Ethnographic Research Encounters. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 43(3), 283-305.