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Everyday and eternal acts: exploring children's friendships

in the primary school

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Abstract

This paper looks at the different ways that children practice, understand and invest in friendship during the last year of primary school. Drawing on ethnographic data gathered at 3 primary schools, it explores how children in Year 6 (aged 10-11) organised and understood their friendships by looking at the salient aspects of these relationships: how friends were determined and defined with reference to the everyday practices and symbolic culture of friendship; the way that discourses of gender and heterosexuality governed who could be friends with whom; and, how certain 'best friendships' were romanticised, allowing the children to accomplish what I call 'friendship escapes,' where they created symbolic bonds that provided security against their everyday and transitional anxieties.

Best friends stick together

Lilly, aged 10

Friends… are an important and unacknowledged source of social glue

Spencer & Pahl 2006

What is a friend?

As a general sociological topic, friendship has mostly been overlooked by theorists and researchers (Pahl, 2000; Spencer & Pahl 2006). This is surprising as people invest a great deal in those they classify as friends. When friendship is discussed, many of the 'late-' or 'liquid-modern' theorists (e.g. Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000) argue that the bonds of solidarity we commonly call friendship are now more transient and replaceable compared to those of earlier epochs. However, there is significant evidence that this may only be the case for a certain class of late-moderns; many people still invest a great deal in social bonds with friends that they consider to be, and actually are, extremely durable or even life-long (Spencer & Pahl 2006). Moreover, by ignoring the 'horizontal solidarities' (Hey 2002) between friends, an important aspect of social life is overlooked, because people's everyday friendship practices, and their accounts of these practices – their relationship cultures – are significant sites for the re-production and negotiation of social and cultural institutions, narratives and discourses. At the same time, the constitution of friendship is shaped by factors such as social class, ethnicity, gender and one's position in the life course, as well as other social institutions like schools, work places, and media representations[1]. Therefore, Pahl (2000) explains that friends and friend-like solidarities, while they may seem like private aspects of people's lives, are actually an important part of the public, social world. Pahl also argues that "friendship exists largely through involvement in certain activities, which generates sentiments which, in turn, encourage further activities. Such iteration between sentiments and activities may be specific to particular contexts and stages in the life-course" (Pahl 2000:14). Yet, as Spencer & Pahl (2006) highlight, academic research concerned with people's friendships has often focused on the number of friends a person claims to have, or descriptions of the 'ideal type' of friend.

This is certainly the case for research about adult friendship communities. However, researchers with children and young people have shown that friendship bonds and solidarities are vitally important to their participants. Indeed, it is within social studies of childhood that the concept of friendship has received some of its most productive

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[1] For example, the formation and maintenance of friendship bonds during the 1990's and early 2000's could have been affected by the discourses of solidarity present in the US sitcom *Friends*, which was exported across the globe and, in effect, universalised a particular white, urban, middle class version of friendship.

analysis (see for example, Hey 2002; Corsaro 2003), while feminist research with girls and young women in particular has emphasised the significance of friendship in the organisation of social ties (Hey 1997; Walkerdine et al 2001). The cultures of children then, present fascinating cases of the micro-social worlds of friendship and solidarity.

The aim of this paper is to look at the structure and organisation of the friendship practices of a cohort of children aged 10-11, in the last months of primary school. I pay particular attention to how the school context and intersecting discourses of gender and sexuality shaped the way girls and boys understood, invested in and practiced friendship. The data discussed here stem from my PhD fieldwork, which was undertaken with children in the Year 6 classes at 3 primary schools, and many of the same children after they had made the transfer to secondary school (Mellor 2006). This project was located within a body of work that investigates schools as sites for the construction and performance of hetero-gendered identities and subject positions (e.g. Epstein & Johnson 1998; Mellor & Epstein 2006; Renold 2005). My aim was to research how children drew on and articulated narratives of romance and romantic love in their everyday lives. The project was situated during the transitional phase between primary and secondary schools as this has been shown to be a significant rite-of-passage in children's lives, where many narratives about identity are constructed (Jackson et al 2000; Pratt & George 2005).

The first school I visited, Hartnell, was a rural primary set in the countryside of southeast England, where the majority of pupils came from middle class families. At the time of the study there were 34 children in the Year 6 class. The second school, St. Troughton's, was in an urban area of south Wales, and was the smallest school involved in the study with only 15 children in Year 6 at the time of the fieldwork. The pupils at St. Troughton's all came from working class and financially disadvantaged families. The third primary school, St. Pertwee's, was also in an urban area of south Wales, although in contrast to St. Troughton's there were 59 children in Year 6, split between two classes. St. Pertwee's was situated in an area identified by the government as high on the index of multiple deprivation. I then followed many of the children from St. Troughton's and St. Pertwee's as they made the move to Year 7 at a

local secondary school, St. Baker's, although in this paper I will focus on their friendships while in Year 6.

Working broadly within what has been referred to as 'the new social studies of childhood' (Prout 2005; Qvortrup 1994), the focus of this research was on the children's relationship cultures – their own practices and systems of value – which scholars working in this field argue must be understood and appreciated in their own right if a view of contemporary childhood is to be assembled that does not frame children as simply proto-adults (Corsaro 1997; James et a 1998). Moreover, by adopting this perspective on children's activities as 'culture' as opposed to 'play', we are able to appreciate children's lives in and for themselves, and explore how children participate in and help construct the social spaces and institutions of their own childhoods. It is perhaps a sign of the lasting effect of old forms of socialization theory that children's relationships with each other have not been seen more widely within sociology as productive areas for investigating the 'social glue' (Spencer & Pahl 2006) of the contemporary world. Even Spencer & Pahl (2006), who are attuned to the sociological significance of friendship, reproduce adult narratives that focus on school-friendships as foundational for those experienced in adulthood. While these friendship narratives are undoubtedly significant in the processes of constructing identities and maintaining ties at later stages of the life course, it is important, I argue, that the friendship experiences of children be considered significant friendship communities *in their own right*.

During the fieldwork data were gathered using a range of ethnographic methods, including participant observation in classrooms and on playgrounds, group interviews, diary keeping and creative writing[2]. In undertaking the analysis in this paper I draw from data gathered across these methods to map out the main forms of friendship practice, understanding and investment in these children's cultures. In doing this I look at three specific areas. Firstly, I discuss friendships in the separate peer groups of boys and girls, and the gendering of these relationship practices. Secondly, I look at how girls and boys negotiated the possibility of being friends together and how these

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[2] For a detailed discussion of the ethical and methodological issues involved in my research, see Mellor 2006; 2007. For further indication of the arguments that inform my position, see (Christensen & James 1999; Qvortrup 2005)

cross-gender relationships were governed and disciplined by others. Thirdly, I discuss how some children developed narratives about romantic same-sex friendships, which I call 'friendship escapes.'

Friendships in the primary school

In this section I will explore how gender shaped the children's understandings of friendship and their everyday friendship practices, taking St. Pertwee's primary as a particular case study in order to consider the situated, contextual character of friendship. There was a strong friendship discourse in all the schools, which was supported by posters on the classroom walls and through the curriculum. At St. Pertwee's for example, one particular discourse of friendship was inscribed on the everyday architecture of the children's school day; it was spoken *to* them in assembly, during PSHE and religious education, and through the resolution of conflicts ('what sort of friend are *you* being?' I heard one of the Year 6 teachers Mr. Jones say on a few occasions). This 'official' friendship discourse was sometimes non-gender specific – in assemblies for example – while in other contexts, especially when teachers were speaking to individual pupils, it became highly gender specific (Mr. Jones for example, often excused boys' 'rough and tumble' – i.e. fighting – as a normal part of their friendships, but thought such behaviour in girls' groups deleterious and improper). It is important to note then, that the children's own understandings of friendship were negotiated through a mixture of the moral education provided by the school, readily available cultural scripts, and knowledge built on experiences from the playground to the street corner.

The text in the poster below (see Fig. 1) was developed by Mr. Jones in conjunction with his previous Year 6 class at St. Pertwee's. It illustrates many of the common themes in which the children invested (although it predominantly represents themes raised by the boys, which could be a result of the way Mr. Jones managed his class[3]). In the next sections, I map out the ways that boys and girls spoke about their everyday friendship practices during the group interviews. As noted, in doing this I focus on

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[3] Mr. Jones was often preoccupied with the boys' behaviour and, as a consequence, would often ask them more questions during group activities than the girls. It is likely that this resulted in the predominance of boys' voices in the friendship poster.

interviews from St. Pertwee's, using them as a case study[4]. All the extracts are in response to the questions such as 'how do you know who your friends are?' or 'what is a friend?'
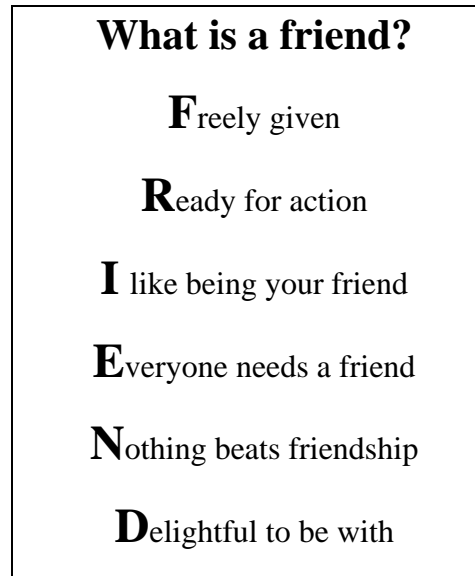
What is a friend?

Freely given

Ready for action

I like being your friend

Everyone needs a friend

Nothing beats friendship

Delightful to be with

Fig. 1. Text from poster on classroom wall, St. Pertwee's

Boys' friendships

For the boys, friendship was defined predominantly in terms of physicality and fun. The following extracts illustrate how they conceptualised and explained these themes in various ways.

> Dafydd: You can tell who they are by the way they acts.
> Luke: Yeah.
> Ryan: They offer you crisps and stuff.
> Luke: I'd say a friend is someone you mess about with.
> Dafydd: Someone you cause trouble with.
> Ryan: Me and Elliot we're always out and like causing trouble.
> Dafydd: Mucking about.
> Ryan: Yeah that's right.
> Dafydd: Joking and making fun, that's what friends are all about.
> Ryan: Joking, playing mob and stuff.
> Dafydd: Having a laugh.

Interview, St. Pertwee's

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[4] The attitudes of the children at St. Pertwee's were echoed by the children at St. Troughton's and reasonably similar to many of the children at Hartnell, particularly in terms of the gender differences. Differences in the way friendship was expressed at Hartnell are discussed in the following sections.

…

Simon: You hang around with your best friend more.
John: You'd invite your best friends, in the summer holiday right, over to your house but you wouldn't have just normal friends over.
Simon: You'd play with them, but not have them sleeping over or nothing.

Interview, St. Pertwee's

…

Kenzie: A friend is someone who's ready for action.
DJM: What sort of action?
Kenzie: Play, messing about.
David: You play with them everyday.
Kenzie: Those are your best friends.
DJM: Does that mean that everyone you play with is your best friend?
All: Yeah.
DJM: Not one particular person?
Kenzie: No, all the people we play with are our best friends.

Interview, St. Pertwee's

Friends then, are the 'people you play with' – as the poster says and Kenzie repeats, they are 'ready for action'. This was most frequently explained in terms of football, but other common activities included fighting, and the rough, physical, gang games 'bulldog' and 'mob'. They were also the people who you hung around with, spending idle time eating crisps while sitting on the benches (this often occurred during morning breaks when the 'tuck shop' was open and there was not enough time for what the boys deemed to be a 'full' football match). 'Messing about' and 'having a laugh' were also key indicators of friendship, certainly because they were central components of 'proper' boyhood culture at St. Pertwee's (and to varying extents at the other schools). When not in school, hanging around happened 'down each others' streets', as the boys occupied the external, urban spaces of their leisure time. The idea of the singular 'best friend' had some currency – they were the one's who came to your house during the holiday or to eat – but the boys' strong, active homo-social cultures sometimes made it difficult for them to segregate their friends; in some senses and contexts, best friendship was extended to everyone who played together. However, sometimes a best friend could be defined as someone who was a friend inside and outside of school, illustrating one of the ways in which the daily structures of the boys' lives affected their emotional and social attachments.

Girls' friendships

For the St. Pertwee's girls, the most important aspects of friendship were symbolic.

> Stepheni: I had a friend and she had someone who she thought was a friend but she wasn't cos they only just met and she made up a secret about her and then told everyone.
> Kat: Made up a secret? What happened?
> Mia: They broke friends.
> Alex: I can trust me friends inside school more than outside, cos they talks about me behind my back.
> DJM: How do you find out about it?
> Alex: Cos it comes back to me.
> DJM: Does that happen to all of you?
> All: Yeah.
> […]
>
> Stepheni: It's like, we're best friends really, all of us, don't you think?
> All: Yeah.
> DJM: Do you have one friend who you think is most special or not?
> Stepheni: Like a BEST, best friend?
> Mia: It doesn't really matter.
> Stepheni: Some people you are like closer to though.
> Mia: We like having a laugh together.
> DJM: Is that very important?
> Kat: It's a bit important.
> Stepheni: I have to know if I can trust them.
> Kat: Trust is the most important thing, definitely.
>
> Interview, St. Pertwee's
>
> …
>
> Demi: [Friends are] Kind to you.
> Renae: You can tell them anything.
> Ellis: They are true to you and look after you, when you need a big hug.
> Renae: I cheers her [Ellis] up when she's upset.
> DJM: What about best friends?
> Renae: If I like, tell Ellis a secret then she won't laugh, she won't spread it about, and she don't tell no one.
> Ellis: When I wants to laugh I have to go away from her!
> Demi: My best friend, even though she laughs at my secrets, she's still mine.
> DJM: Do you have one best friend?
> Demi: Well, no, but yes.
> Renae: We're all like best friends together, but we still has one best friend within that don't we.
> Ellis: Yeah, we all have a best, best friend.
> Demi: I've got two.
> Renae: I like having friends, if I didn't have friends I'd be so upset, I'd be so lonely, I don't know what I'd do.
> Demi: You'd be a loner!

Friends then, are the people you can trust – they are the girls who you can confide in and rely on for emotional support. This was frequently explained in terms of the symbolic capital of sharing and keeping secrets, which was vital to the construction and maintenance of friendships. So important were secrets in fact, that the making of a new friend could result in the 'making up' of secrets, or another transgression of the code of trust, like 'talking behind my back'. This code required a great deal of investment over time – for new friends, trust had to be earned, otherwise the girls 'broke friends' with those deemed untrustworthy; it was vital that you could 'tell them anything' and know they would look after it. What constituted a secret was sometimes unclear, however certain information – about which boy someone fancied for example – could be used to function as a secret in order to secure or repair the bond between two girls or a group of girls (occasionally as a way of excluding others). Through this action, 'best friends' could be identified. Moreover, the girls considered their own best friendships to be more 'real' than similar relationships expressed by the boys. They invested in the idea of a group of best friends, using the term 'best' as a marker of solidarity. But a singular 'BEST, best' friend remained important, as this was the person who was positioned as a specific and principal confidant. The temporal-spatial context of the school is once again significant in the maintenance and performance of friendship; for instance, Alex claims that her friends in school (those sitting with her in the interview) are more trustworthy than those outside. As Mia notes, the girls also enjoyed 'having a laugh' and messing around, but this was not as important for them as it was to the boys. Similarly, they mentioned 'hanging out', particularly when leisure shopping, although this was a lesser identifier for who was friends.

In St. Pertwee's then, the discourse of friendship existed across three particular domains: the curriculum, teachers' classroom practice, and children's cultures. Although friendship in the curriculum was, on the whole, gender neutral, friendship in terms of classroom practice and children's cultures was understood and organised in highly gendered ways. Being the right kind of friend involved successfully performing gender – 'doing' girl or boy – in particular ways (Epstein & Johnson

1998). Dominant discourses of gender then, were key in the formation and maintenance of group bonds and solidarity. However, for many children – both boys and girls – there was a significant other, a true best friend, in whom they invested a great deal. These romantic friendship narratives were produced in a number of the group interviews, and were also visible in other research contexts and elsewhere in their school lives. I explore these friendships below, but first I turn to the difficulty experienced by girls and boys who attempted to maintain cross-gender friendships.

Hetero-gender and friendship: Aaron *and* Katherine or Aaron *for* Katherine?
In a similar ethnographic study of children's relationships in the primary school Renold (2005) observed how the girls and boys she was working with had to negotiate 'heterofriendships'. Renold uses this term to explain the heterosexualisation of girl-boy friendships, showing how attempts at cross-gender friendships were almost always read by others as girlfriend-boyfriend relationships. Whether or not the girls and boys wished to be positioned in this way, they often had to negotiate and/or resist the heterofriendship discourse (Renold 2005:103). Drawing on the work of Butler (1990, 1993) and other theorists (e.g. Rich 1983) Renold explains this in terms of the 'heterosexual matrix', arguing that children's bodies, genders and desires are governed by dominant, normative and compulsory notions of heterosexuality, which are deployed by peers, teachers and family members (see Butler 1990:151; Renold 2005:7).

Having explored the friendship practices of gender peer groups, here I look at one girl-boy friendship to illustrate how cross-gender friendship practices were governed in terms of heteronormativity; this friendship was between a boy called Aaron and a girl called Katherine. Theirs was the only self-identified 'best-friendship' between a boy and a girl at Hartnell primary and therefore struck me as interesting from the outset of the fieldwork. During several of the activities that I undertook with sections of the class, Aaron and Katherine both identified each other as their best friend in a very matter-of-fact fashion, choosing on several occasions to speak to me together. In his friendship story, Aaron tells of a time when he and Katherine were playing in Katherine's family's garden after school when he accidentally hit her on the nose. They both blamed each other for the incident and the friendship was declared 'over'. But as Aaron explains,

It was later on when Katherine said sorry to me and I said it back and we both said "We will be friends forever."

Aaron, Hartnell

Aaron and Katherine did not think that being a boy and a girl was important to their friendship. Indeed, they were quite insistent that the central factor and original reason for their being friends was the fact that their parents were friends. The rest of the class however usually spoke of Aaron and Katherine as a heterosexual couple, as if they 'fancied' each other or were 'in love'. Also, rather than just 'seeing' each other, their relationship was given the heightened status of 'going out' (see Mellor 2006); so the rest of the class interpreted their friendship in terms of compulsory heterosexuality. During an activity I called 'friendship mapping', which involved placing the names of all the class members on a table according to who they were friends with outside school, all the children placed Aaron and Katherine together, often stating that this was because they lived near each other. In this and other contexts such as group interviews, they were talked about as 'just' friends, but outside of the organised research activities talk of Aaron and Katherine was deeply heterosexualised. Even Katherine's mother remarked during an after school conversation that 'they'll probably marry someday'.

One factor that made the heterosexualising of Aaron and Katherine's friendship interesting was the way it clashed with the Hartnell children's general liberalism towards normative gender discourses. During my time at Hartnell I discovered that gender was regulated differently dependant largely on the sites and times where identities were negotiated. In the school, the boys were given several spaces in which to assemble their gender subject positions in counter-hegemonic ways (Connell 2005; Frosh et al 2002). During a role-play session about people's occupations one boy took a turn and mimed the pirouettes of a ballet dancer. His impersonation drew no criticism from any of the other children, who guessed the occupation correctly and complimented him on his convincing performance. Elsewhere in the school the boys had similar licence. Aaron, for example, regularly played on the Year 6 netball team. There was also a high level of integrated play on the playground, between boys and girls of all years. To a degree then, masculinities within Hartnell were fluid and able to flow into activities often culturally designated as 'feminine', such as ballet and

netball. (Although it could be argued that these are physical activities and thus in 'easy reach' for boys. For example, some of the boys considered ballet as helpful training for football[5]).

By contrast, the activities outlined in the Hartnell diaries were often strongly gendered. Aaron's diary for example is full of what were typical boys' diary entries involving playing football, playing on games consoles, and staying up until the early hours of the morning. Katherine's diary, in contrast, demonstrated how many of the girls were able to emphasise the things they did that were less normatively feminine, like playing football, alongside the more usual girl peer group orientated activities like shopping. For Aaron then, being in school offered a safe and unquestioning space for the adoption of certain counter-hegemonic masculinities. While for Katherine, the opportunities for fluid gender boundary maintenance seemed much greater outside school[6]. Therefore, a close cross-gender friendship appears anomalous in terms of the children's locally situated frameworks of understanding. What Aaron demonstrates in his story is that, despite recognising that his friendship with Katherine is largely due to factors beyond their control, their friendship must be framed as transcendental; they will be 'friends forever'. But when he says 'friends forever' he is not confessing their intention to marry, but displaying a romanticism that was common in his classmates own friendship stories (as will be discussed in the following section).

The borders of hetero-normality were patrolled by the children in the class, as underlined by the 'hetero-branding' of Aaron and Katherine's close friendship. As the extracts in the following section show, one could speak of a member of the same sex in touching, emotional terms of companionship, but such a platonic relationship was impossible between a boy and a girl, as any statement of admiration for a member of the opposite sex was coded as 'fancying', as Aaron explained:

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[5] It is possible, of course, that the members of the class were also familiar with the film *Billy Elliott*, in which a working class boy becomes a successful ballet dancer, and therefore able to take a sanctioned position from which to adopt counter-hegemonic masculinities.

[6] Of course, this picture of cross-gender identity work is certainly contingent. Thorne (1993) has noted the opposite, that cross-gender play is more accessible to both boys and girls outside of school. What may be reflected in the children's diaries is the way they feel able to legitimately report 'doing' boy or girl though that genre.

My next door neighbour is Katherine who sits next to Sarah, and we play, but even though she's a girl, because, even though she's a girl she's not really into girls' stuff she's more into boys' stuff. We get on really well but I don't really play with her in school because I've got better friends, well, not better friends but about the same friends, but I like playing with boys a bit more… If I was just friends with her [Katherine] then everyone, eh, used to think that I fancy her, but it's cos I used to play with her cos she was my next door neighbour.

Interview, Hartnell

Here, Aaron is glad to have Katherine as a friend, but is keen to stress that she is a 'boyish' friend who, even though she is a girl, is more into boys' stuff, thereby positioning her as a 'tomboy' and ascribing her a 'female masculinity' in order to maintain a symbolically non-heterosexual relationship with her (Kehily 2002; Renold 2005). The boundaries of their friendship lay to some extent at the school gates, because in school, despite his access to apparently counter-hegemonic performances of masculinity, Aaron could not escape the communal governing of his relationship with Katherine in terms of *hetero*-masculinity and 'straight thinking' boyhood. Moreover, girls and boys at all the schools used discourses of gendered heterosexuality in order to understand and organise their relationships with each other. As has been observed in previous studies, gendered sexualities were an important resource for the making and governing of friendships (Epstein et al 2003). The children's solidarities were formed on gendered divisions – this was the most significant 'difference that made a difference' to their peer groups – and these divisions were maintained by a fluid mixture of both gender and sexuality discourses, which the girls and boys employed to make sense of cross-gender relationships. Due to their open closeness, Aaron and Katherine were constantly subject to the heterosexual disciplining of their friendship, even within the relatively gender-liberal setting of Hartnell. No friendships of this sort existed (at least, not openly) at either St. Pertwee's or St. Troughton's, and certainly not at St. Baker's, where the cultural imperative of compulsory heterosexual became especially powerful.

Making friendship escapes

During my first visit to Hartnell, a white board was placed in the classroom and Year 6 were asked to take a photographic self-portrait of themselves and place it on the board along with a sentence or two about their feelings regarding the transition to

secondary school. Some of the boys' contributions (see Fig. 2) alluded to a further, romantic form of friendship, which co-existed with the gendered and heterosexualised friendship practices discussed above.

> My friends were an eternal act, permanently marked in my memory – Ollie
>
> Without friends it would be pointless going to school – Stephen
>
> The greatest aspect of my time at school was my friends. It will be sad when we split up and go to our different schools – George

Fig. 2. Some of the boys' contributions to the 'portrait board'
Hartnell

In a similar vein, some of the girls at St. Troughton's produced poems about friendship during the creative writing task.

Friendship is my life
Friendship is my soul
Every time I lose it
I will be black as coal

Extract from poem, Eheda, St. Troughton's

Best friends stick together
They never leave each other, 4eva
Some R good, Some R bad
Some R happy, Some R sad
Although friends break friends
They R always best friends
The next day
We all stick together and
No matter what happens
Inside we really are best

Friends 4eva.

These poetic statements reflect an opinion that was common to many of the interview groups: that one's best friend is at least as important, if not *more* important than one's 'true love'. As many of the children believed that they would not meet their 'true loves' until later in their life this might not be surprising. However, many did not think that the true love would be a replacement for the best friend; on the contrary, the best friend would remain primary. Somewhere beyond the practice of group friendship therefore, many of the boys and girls invested a great deal in the notion of friendship as being a spiritual experience – 'an eternal act', situated within the 'soul', that will last '4eva'. Embedded in the children's narratives therefore, are forms of Romanticism that shape their social/emotional bonds and investments (the effect of this 'residual culture' (Williams 2005), it can be argued, is, at least symbolically, a dominant framework at all stages of the life course). While notions of 'true love' allowed them to talk outside and beyond their experiences – into heterosexualised imagined futures – similarly, notions of best friendship gave them opportunities to construct and perform bonds with others that were symbolically deep and lifelong. This was most strongly conveyed by the common idea that one could not choose one's best friend, as Lucy at Hartnell explained:

> Best friends shouldn't change. Yeah, you can make new friends, but best friends they just sort of happen, you can't *make* best friends. No.

Interview, Hartnell

Lucy's comments and the theme they represent, I suggest, display a common desire for stability, consistency and comfort that may well be felt particularly strongly at this stage of the life course; especially by children at the brink of the transition between primary and secondary educational phases. What I want to argue is that the romanticisation of their friendships could have allowed the children to symbolically 'break away,' to some extent at least, from the structures that shaped their lives. It is this symbolic act that I term a 'friendship escape,' drawing on the notion of creative escapes from everyday life in the work of Cohen & Taylor (1992). But these escapes

themselves – as narrative forms – were shaped and determined by social forces, just as the character of their everyday friendships were affected by their gendered peer culture, compulsory heterosexuality, and the institutional, spatial contexts in which their friendships were practiced.

For instance, at Hartnell there was a tendency to see best friendships as a universal phenomenon, secured in childhood. In contrast, at St. Troughton's and St. Pertwee's there was more acknowledgement of the ephemeral and contingent nature of friendship, but investments were nonetheless made in romantic best friendships. Moreover, during the interviews at Hartnell there was an upfront investment in romantic friendship, which was modified reflexively – the children realised that their bonds could be affected by structural changes to their lives. While in the interviews at St. Troughton's and St. Pertwee's the children were more aware and accepting of the contingency of current relationships; yet this was counter balanced, after further consideration and at later points in the discussions, with reference to the timelessness of the friendship bonds. The following extracts illustrate these points:

> Gareth: I think that, your best friends or your *best* friend, they last forever.
> DJM: Really, you think that when you're adults, you'll still be best friends?
> Gareth and Stephen: Yeah.
> Gareth: At university, maybe.
> Stephen: You'll always have them, especially if you've had them at primary school.
> […]
> Emily: But when we move, I suppose they'll, like, there may be a difference, we might not be such best friends in the future.
> Stephen: 'Cos we're going to different schools we might lose friends.
> DJM: Even best friends?
> All: Yeah.
> DJM: Or your *best* friend?
> Gareth: I think it could happen, I don't want it to though, but...
>
> Interview, Hartnell
>
> …
>
> Yoris: We might be friends in the future, we don't know.
> Jessica: You two will be though.
> Tyron: We are best friends.
> Lois: You're always messing.
> Tyron: Yeah down his street like.
> Yoris: It's all up to what happens when we goes to St. Baker's though in'it?

Tyron: They's put us in different classes ain't they, see?
Yoris: People changes don't they.
[…]
Tyron: When we met in like, reception, we was like instant friends.
Yoris: It'll always be that, you don'ts just lose your best friend.
Tyron: They won't be that, or do it like.
DJM: A best friend?
Tyron: Exactly.

Interview, St. Troughton's

As these extracts demonstrate, the point of reflexivity and the moment of the friendship escape were affected by the children's positioning within a certain class culture (Skeggs 2004). Both their imagined futures and everyday experiences were shaped by the broader class cultures of the community within which their relationship cultures were situated. So Gareth is able to speak of friends at university as this fits within the middle class habitus of Hartnell, while the boys at St. Troughton's negotiate the more immediate future of the transfer to St. Baker's with reference to their past, younger selves. Furthermore, through the attachments revealed in their friendship escape narratives, differences in the character of their childhoods become visible, and such differences stem from their distinct socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Other examples of the friendship escape were visible in the children's stories. A common theme within the stories was what can be defined as the 'romantic friendship.' Such stories were told by both boys and girls, but it was noticeable that the boys appeared to be more comfortable telling these kinds of stories and loading them with emotion than the narratives they told during informal conversation or during interviews. For example, at Hartnell, Robert tells a story about meeting a boy called Jack at a holiday park when he was several years younger. The two boys meet and immediately they form a friendship that is described as unbreakable. Over the following days they play constantly, until the holiday is over and it is time to leave.

[I] told him my name was "Robert" and he said his name was "Jack" at that moment we knew we were best friends forever.
…I went to the reception and checked out and they gave me a card from Jack so I would never forget him.

Robert's story, although rather short, contains many of the elements of romantic friendship. Through this medium these elements are expressed in a deliberate manner, in a private space, and through a particular genre, which allows the strength of feeling to be spoken more fully than in other contexts. The genealogy of this kind of subjectivity can be glimpsed when Robert's extract is juxtaposed with the following extract from Jane Austen's novella *Love and Friendship*.

> We flew into each others arms, and having exchanged vows of mutual friendship for the rest of our lives, instantly unfolded the most inward secrets of our hearts.

Austen 2003:13

In both extracts the idealisation of the romantic friendship is exemplified: Robert's in a short story written in a classroom in 2004; Austin's through a private letter in a novella written in 1790. What this shows is that the narrative material of the romantic is well circulated in Western culture; romance is an easily accessible, if not dominant genre, which can be drawn upon when telling stories about the self and bonds with others.

A similar example can be found in the narratives of a girl called Anna. During the interview sessions Anna often mentioned her best friend Lucy, who had moved away from the area three years ago. For example, when discussing the forthcoming transition to secondary school with the rest of the group and the affect it may have on their friendships, she noted,

> Well, my best friend actually lives 100 miles away so I don't think it'll actually make that much difference. But of the friends I've had at Hartnell I think it'll be hard to keep contact.

There is an interesting contradiction here that suggests an anxiety about transition that is not being faced, which, as will be shown, arises again in Anna's story. In a different interview, Anna explains how the friendship with Lucy is sustained.

> My best friend she moved away and we send letters... And I've got this necklace, I'm not wearing it today cos I usually keep it at home, but it's got like half a heart and she's got the other half, and on one half it says 'best' and on the other half it says 'friends.' We each have half of it and she gave it to me when she left. So we both keep half of it.

As with the girls at St. Troughton's and St. Pertwee's, the motif of the heart was central to many of the girls' most basic symbolisations of best friendship. Here it is manifest in the keep-safe that Lucy gave to Anna, much as the card left for Robert by Jack marked the continuing emotional investment in that friendship. Moreover, there is further evidence here of the way that romantic symbolism is already at play in discourses of friendship, and through the consumption of certain artefacts (Illouz 1997).

The romantic friendship that Anna constructs with Lucy is closely reflected in her creative writing. Anna tells a story about two best friends, Abby and Amy, who are separated when Abby's family move away because her father has a new job in another country. Anna's story ends with the following passage:

> She opened the creaky door and sat on the bed an whispered, 'I now know what is going to happen, don't worry I will visit you every other month and write a letter to you everyday we will still be best friends I promise.' Abby blew her nose and said, 'all right I'll go.' A week later she was at the airport with her luggage when Amy suddenly arrived just before she got to the plane to say goodbye. On the plane she waved England goodbye and water trickled down her cheeks but she started to feel better and to pass time she wrote her first letter to Amy.

The romantic themes in Anna's story, just as in Robert's, indicate a certain way of relating to a largely symbolic or fantasy other. In many instances the activity of writing stories about friendship allowed both girls and boys to construct narratives about the transcendental and romantic character of friendship. Such narratives appear to provide a defence against the anxiety of potential disruption brought about by the transition to secondary school, and the everyday anxieties associated with maintaining successful and secure bonds with a group of peers.

Furthermore, while the friendship escape can be seen as a point of resistance and of creation, it relies on stories that are already available – especially romantic narratives

– rather than being something 'unique,' as the comparison of extracts from Robert and Austin. To echo Skeggs (in her discussion of working class women), these children "are not the originators of their identities but are located in temporal processes of subjective construction… Within these constraints they deploy many constructive and creative strategies to generate a sense of themselves [and their relationships] with value" (Skeggs 1997:162).

Conclusion

As this paper shows, the study of children's relationship cultures and friendship practices has much to offer the broader sociological study of friendship. Children's friendships provide excellent examples of relationships that are negotiated by social actors who are bound by institutions – for example, the school and compulsory heterosexuality – yet who remain capable of creating and sustaining bonds between each other in a variety of self-determined ways. It is through these friendships that certain kinds of solidarity are articulated. For example, gendered peer groups maintain divisions between what it means to 'do' girl or boy, and thus it is through friendship practices that discourses of gender are re-produced. Likewise, dominant notions of gendered heterosexuality are central to the 'social glue' that is deployed to hold girls and boys together. Yet while these heterofriendships are romanticised, other romantic narratives offer the children a means to defend against anxieties brought about by fears about breakages in solidarity. By escaping into romantic friendships they were able to create a sense of value about their self and their bonds with others, even though the resources used to accomplish these narratives were, necessarily, already in circulation within wider culture. Moreover, by self-governing and narrating friendship the children are enacting the social bonds of a relationship culture which is a large part of the micro-social spaces of their own childhood, which is in turn a significant element of the wider social world.

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