Personal Communities: Not Simply Families of 'Fate' or 'Choice'

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ABSTRACT AND NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This paper makes a substantial empirical contribution to the debate about the degree to which 'families of choice' are replacing traditional, 'given' families. It reports research on *personal communities* – the set of active and significant ties which are most important to people, even if geographically distant. Sixty in-depth interviews based on a purposive sample, were carried out in England and Wales. Evidence that certain family relations can be seen as more 'friend-like' led to an analysis of the forms of a process of social suffusion between friends and family. This suffusion process is unpacked in an analytically innovative way. Distinct patterns of suffusion of friends and family in personal communities are demonstrated. The 'family of choice' thesis is shown to be overstated and the subtleties of actual forms of suffusion ignored. Similarly, those such as Anthony Giddens who stress the importance of 'pure relationships' in what he calls *The Transformation of Intimacy* ignore the degree to which such relationships may be combined with more traditional, given relationships. It is argued that by adopting the concept of personal communities a better and more realistic understanding of contemporary issues surrounding family, friends and community may be achieved.

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Being judgmental about the nature and quality of people's private and personal intimate relationships has a history as long as most of the world's religions. Similarly, the huge empirical variations in the relations between kin, on the limits and restrictions on marriage partners, on rules about the transference of property, and many other features have been documented by social anthropologists in very great detail over the last 150 years. Those being judgmental and those being ethnographical have traditionally spoken with different vocabularies to different audiences. However, in recent years, there has been a growing convergence between judgmental and empirical perspectives. Thus Robert Bellah and his colleagues in their widely-noticed book *Habits of the Heart* (1985) evoked the support of a sociological investigation of the personal lives of middle Americans in order to find answers to their problem of "how to preserve or create a morally coherent life." They concluded that the problems facing America are not just political: "They are moral and have to do with the meaning of life" (ibid. 295)

Bellah and his colleagues point to the growth of ontological individualism – the idea that the individual is the only form of reality – as undermining the essential forms of social obligation that are necessary for the development of a "morally coherent life". This notion has become somewhat uncritically accepted as part of the contemporary conventional sociological wisdom (Beck and Beck – Gernshaim, 2001). One consequence of this individualism, Bellah et al. claimed, is that

> "The idea that people must take responsibility for deciding what they want and finding relationships that will meet their needs is widespread. In this sometimes sombre utilitarianism, individuals may want lasting relationships, but such relationships are possible only so long as they meet the needs of the two people involved. All individuals can do is to be clear about their own

needs and avoid neurotic demands for such unrealizable goals as a lover who will give and ask nothing in return" (ibid. 108)

This general idea was later developed by Giddens (1992) and sceptically assessed by Jamieson in her judicious review of the literature in her book on *Intimacy* (1998, see also 1999).

Some social scientists - referring for example to *The family: is it just another lifestyle choice?* (Davies, 1993) - place particular emphasis on the importance of what might be called the traditional family of fate (Abbott and Wallace, 1992; Etzioni, 1993). As Davies put it "can we, within the overwhelming ethos of *Privacy and Appetitive Individualism*, accept an endless variety of sexual and procreative relationships which lack both internal stability and a clear articulation within society in general" (Davies, 1993:99).

Other social scientists, particularly, perhaps, those most involved in empirical research on non-heterosexual relationships have been moved to celebrate what their colleagues with different perspectives have deplored. Thus Jeffrey Weeks et al. quote with approval Robert Goss "Everyone has the right to define significant relationships and decide who matters and counts as family (Goss, 1997:19 in Weeks et al. 2001:9). Relying on this judgement and on their own empirical research, Weeks et al. conclude firmly and categorically "We are witnessing the development and public affirmation of 'families of choice'" (ibid.)

Those who subscribe to the thesis of a secular trend from families of fate to families of choice typically adduce a range of social statistics which, they claim, correlate with such an imputed trend. Thus increasing rates of cohabitation and divorce, greater social and geographical mobility, increasing levels of education (particularly for women), increased female participation in the labour market, and the growth of non-heterosexual household arrangements are seen as combining with the deeper trend of individualisation to lead to more families of choice.

There are, of course, other social statistics demonstrating more continuity than change which could be also readily found. For example, in a recent empirical survey concerned with ties between family and non-family members, Park and Roberts claim that their data show that family ties are in "seemingly robust good health" (Park and Roberts, 2002: 204) and suggest that there is little evidence that friends are replacing family: "Family clearly remains most people's first source of support when things go wrong" (ibid. 203).

Indeed, some of those exploring the reality of 'traditional' family relationships (Finch and Mason, 1993) and those more concerned with non-heterosexual relationships recognise implicitly or explicitly that some kind of social suffusion – or blurring of roles - between friends and family exists. Thus Weeks et al. characteristically assert "many non-heterosexuals are experimenting with ways of living that challenge all (*sic*) the assumptions of traditional heterosexual family life. Friendships – including those with ex-lovers – are being celebrated and held in an esteem comparable with that of kin in traditional families" (Weeks et al 2001: 98).

Like many contemporary sociologists Weeks et al. employ a rather soggy notion of 'traditional'. Presumably they are not referring to the homoerotic world of ancient Greece in which Aristotle first formulated his classic discussion of friendship - implicitly between men (Stern-Gillet, 1995). Nor, presumably, are they referring to the eighteenth century where the suffusion of friend-like relations between kin and non-kin was well established (Tadmore, 2001). The celebration of same-sex friendship stretches back to the Biblical account of David's love for Jonathan and doubtless well beyond.

In the hope of introducing some conceptual clarity we see the issue as being about some kind of social shift between those relationships that are *given* (primarily, but not necessarily exclusively, through kinship ties) and those relationships that are *chosen* which, again, may include both kin and non-kin. A further significant distinction may be made between those ties that involve high or low commitment. These dimensions may be expressed diagrammatically in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: COMMITMENT AND CHOICE IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

	High commitment	**Low commitment**
Given relationships	**A**	**B**
Chosen relationships	**C**	**D**

Box A, with given relationships involving high commitment, would be the *locus classicus* of the 'traditional' family, whether extended or nuclear. However, there are various other categories that could be classified here. There would include godparents and other 'fictive kin' – the unrelated "uncles" and "aunts" that may be part of a child's given social world. Likewise, children who, for whatever reason, are in state institutions may recognise certain professional carers, highly committed to them, as 'given'. Gerontologists have documented the importance of professional carers as pseudo-kin for the very elderly. In practice there may be a wide range of people with family-like ties and responsibilities who play an important part in the household. "Traditionally" service or apprenticeship brought a transference of familial ties from one's family of origin to the family of service or apprenticeship. Even as late as 1851 "25 per cent of nineteen-year-old girls and 17 per cent of nineteen-year-old boys were living-in servants or living-in apprentices in Britain" (Snell, 1985: 321n.4). The mean age of leaving the family of origin for the family of service or apprenticeship between 1700 and 1860 was 14.3 for males and 15.5 for females (Snell, 1985: 324). Even today, in certain circles, maids, nannies and au pairs continue to be highly committed and family-like in their given status.

In Box B we find the "uncommitted" given relationships characterised as being the product of the individualisation and decline of duty and obligation on which critics

such as Bellah or Etzioni, discussed above, have written at length. The degree to which there has been a decisive shift from Box A to Box B is an empirical question.

In Box C we would expect to find very close friendships but also family members who are also specifically recognised as friends. Given that both boxes A and C involve relations of high commitment – whether given or chosen – then evidently people could have allegiances to both. The idea that the two are necessarily in opposition to each other requires empirical verification. Finally, in Box D we find the relations bemoaned by those determined to subscribe to moral panics: here are the rampant and irresponsible individualists moving promiscuously between relationships, discarding older models for new ones and being content with transient and superficial friends.

This typology avoids the stark contrast which both the judgmentalists and the partial ethnographers tend to exploit. When social ties move from those that are given to those that are chosen, this may or may not lead to greater commitment. Thus a move from B to C (from low commitment given relationships to high commitment chosen relationships) might even be acceptable to Bellah and Etzioni as being morally more beneficial and adding to social cohesion.

We have set up this typology for heuristic purposes only and recognise that there will be considerable blurring of boundaries: even those adopting the most exciting, innovative and adventurous sets of non-heterosexual relationships can remain stolidly traditional in relation to their mothers and fathers.

Studying personal communities

In the research project which forms the basis for the rest of this paper, we began by assuming that people have a set of relationships which are likely to vary in commitment and givenness. We recognised the need to allow for family members and friends to play similar as well as contrasting roles. Rather than seeing a sharp division between the family as 'given' and friends as 'chosen', we were aware from other research (Finch and Mason, 1993) that family members with whom

relationships were close and salient could be as much 'chosen' as the life-long soul-mate friend who, in turn, may come to be seen as 'given'. This led us to devise a strategy to explore in detail people's micro-social worlds and to see how they brought together in their day-to-day lives a range of given and chosen relationships representing different forms and styles of suffusion.

In particular, we were concerned to focus more precisely on friendship and friend-like relations which, compared with the research and debate focussing on the family, had received much less sociological attention. As Willmott had observed at the start of his empirical research on *Friendship and Social Support* (1987) "How can the relevance of friends to informal support be sensibly examined, if there is no agreement about who they are" (ibid. 2). The challenge was to unpack friendship.

Whereas relative, neighbour, work mate and colleague are all categorical concepts, implying an ascribed status, friend is a relational, achieved label: to call someone a friend hinges on the quality of the relationship with that person. Consequently, operationalising the concept of friendship in empirical studies is fraught with difficulties. Although this is sometimes acknowledged, the term friend is often used without further qualification, without adequate exploration of how this label is used, or with no allowance for overlapping relationships whereby a relative or neighbour may also be included in the category of 'friend' (Allan, 1989). In these studies, friendship is usually treated as unidimensional; the *range* and *diversity* of friend-like relationships are not acknowledged. Qualities or attributes of friendship are, of course, examined in psychological studies but these tend to present idealised or 'paradigm' cases (Davis and Todd, 1985) rather than unpack the 'negotiated specificities' of actual relationships. (Finch and Mason, 1993).

Because of our concern to explore 'real' friendships, we were wary of adopting a social network approach for our study. A common criticism of network studies is that they concentrate on form at the expense of content. Questions focus on features such as the length of time known, proximity of residence, frequency or recency of contact, rather than on the nature or quality of the relationship. In this context Boissevain has remarked, "Networks are compared with regard to density, size and even composition, much in the way butterfly collectors compare the colouring, wingspread and number

of spots of their favourite species" (1979: 393). Where the quality of a relationship is assessed, proxy measures have often been used, as in Granovetter's (1973) much-quoted study of 'strong' and 'weak' ties, which used frequency of contact as an indicator of 'strength'. The problem with measuring by proxy is that conceptual tools sometimes develop a life of their own, so that, for example, the concept of 'weak' ties is popularised to help combat the problems of 'social exclusion' (6: 1997), without acknowledging that weakness and strength have been *inferred* and not established directly. Such considerations led us to a research strategy which examined the quality and role of different kinds of personal ties directly rather than relying on indirect measures.

Rather than beginning with assumptions about the relative significance of family or non family we set about identifying and exploring the set of active and significant ties in which people were embedded. We adopted the notion of 'personal community' (Barton, 1981; Wellman, 1988) rather than social network. Although in an ego-centred set of relationships some of the significant others could be characterised as a social network – e.g. workmates, or neighbours or family members, it cannot be assumed that these distinct sets know each other. A sibling living some way off may have no knowledge or awareness of ego's work-mates for example. So, in this sense, a personal community is not itself a network but may contain networks within it.

Our chosen method was in-depth individual interviews so that we could examine the nature of personal communities in some detail. An initial purposive sample was drawn up to ensure a broad cross section of respondents, chosen according to demographic characteristics such as age (from 18-75) stage in life course, social class, sexual orientation, geographical mobility, ethnic background and type of neighbourhood. Locations included North West England, Mid-Wales, the South East of England and London. Iterative sampling was then used to identify under-sampled cases, such as people who were unemployed, in manual occupations or living alone, and to snowball from the initial sample according to types of friendship. Finally, extreme case sampling was used in order to explore and illustrate experiences in depth: we selected young care leavers and people with mental health problems who might be at risk of exclusion. A total of 60 interviews were conducted, each lasting from 1½ to 3 hours.

Before the interview, we obtained from the respondent a list of up to twenty people "who are important to you now". We then began the interview by getting respondents to place these names on a 'map' of concentric circles. The meaning and role of friends and friend-like relationships were explored in a number of ways throughout the interview by discussing the way in which names were allocated to different circles, by comparing relationships with friends and family, by exploring the role of members of personal communities in providing various forms of social support, and by establishing detailed accounts of the formation and development of selected friendships. By focussing on significant life events such as divorce, coming out, moving home or coping with a personal tragedy we were able to explore the relative salience of chosen and given relationships.

At the end of the interview we asked respondents to consider the map of their personal community which they had constructed and to review it as a whole. This gave them a chance to reflect on the relative importance of different relationships and sometimes prompted them to make changes. For example, some realised that they had felt constrained by normative expectations about the importance of family and subsequently opted to move some family members out of the central ring, while others decided to retain 'duty' family in the centre because they happily subscribed to these norms. Some were interested to see that they had placed friends more centrally than family.

All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Detailed interpretative analysis of the data was carried out using Framework, a rigorous and transparent method which facilitates the classification and synthesis of qualitative data in matrix-based form (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994; Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connell, 2003).[1]

[1] There is not space here to elaborate on our method which in both the collection and analysis of the data was in many ways innovative. A more substantial account appears in Pahl and Spencer (2003) *Exploring Personal Communities*. We acknowledge support for our study from ESRC Research Grant R000237836

Friendship repertoires and convoys

Before we were able to identify different kinds of personal communities and the way in which these might reflect different forms of suffusion between given and chosen relationships, we had to move through a series of analytical stages by establishing a number of 'building blocks'. Our first block we termed '*friendship repertoire*'. This involved unpacking the notion of friendship and we found that although *in theory* people associate friendship with a range of qualities, *in practice* people have friendships which do not necessarily encompass all these elements and strands. So, for example, some friendships are simple, based on just one main form of interaction, such as sociability or neighbourly favours, whereas others are more complex and multi-stranded, involving the exchange of personal confidences and emotional support as well as common interests and companionship. We were interested in the range of types of friends people might have in their personal communities, that is to say, in their friendship repertoire. Further analysis revealed four main types of repertoire:

i. The basic repertoire

This includes only simple and single-stranded friendships, such as those who are solely 'fun friends' or companions or 'neighbourly friends' where contact is limited to small favours of one sort or another.

ii The intense repertoire

This can also be seen as a narrow repertoire but the friendships are all close and multi-stranded. Other relationships are considered relatively insignificant acquaintances and are not included in the personal community.

iii The focal repertoire

Here some respondents had a small number of special 'soul-mates' but also a much larger group of fun friends and companions.

iv The broad repertoire

This is a wide, all-encompassing repertoire which includes many different strands and kinds of friendship. People with this kind of repertoire were very aware of the nuances of relationships and distinguished between, for example, "high maintenance" and "low maintenance" friends, "soul mates" and "champagne friends".

This typology of friendship repertoires conveys a somewhat static impression and it was clear that some friendships strengthen, some fade and some are lost or even dumped. During the course of the interviews we examined respondents' friendships in relation to specific stages in the life course – such as leaving school, going to college, starting work, living with a partner/getting married, having children, getting divorced, moving home, retiring and so on. Each of these can be a source of new friendships but they can also threaten existing ones. People varied in their commitment to friendship – or their friendship orientations, that is how much importance they attach to having friends, and in the degree of turbulence in their life course, for example ill-health, separation or divorce or very frequent geographical mobility. Following Antonucci and Akiyama (1995), we adopted the term *friendship convoy* to depict the degree of changing membership within a friendship repertoire, and *friendship convoys* are the second building block in our analysis.

We identified three main types of friendship convoy with a fourth variant which could occur at some point in the other three

i. ***The stable/static friendship convoy***

Most of the friends of those in this category were made at one particular stage in the life course, very often during late teens and early twenties when people were single and friendships revolved around 'going out', or a bit later, when people settled with partners, and friends were formed around children and family life. Some of these friends made in this 'golden era' have been lost but very few, or none, have been added since then.

ii. ***The serial friendship convoy***

This is very different from the first, for here the friendship repertoire changes almost completely at each new life-course stage or new work or home environment. New friendships are made to replace those that are lost through the changes.

iii. ***The open friendship convoy***

This is a hybrid convoy including elements of both the first and the second type. There is likely to be a partial change-over in membership but there is also a degree of continuity and this, unsurprisingly, was the most common pattern we found.

Our fourth variant we termed the *watershed pattern* where there is an almost complete break and change in the pattern of friendship following some dramatic change in circumstances, which for our respondents included a serious illness, divorce, a marital scandal, coming out as gay, moving abroad and so on. Before leaving this particular building block, we should acknowledge that the convoys were constructed retrospectively and we cannot of course know what pattern the younger members of our sample will follow in the future

Towards a Typology of Personal Communities

Having explored friendship repertoires and convoys, we then turned our attention to the nature of personal communities. This was a central part of our analysis. We took into account a range of factors including size (our personal communities ranged between 5 and 41), and the density and links between members. However, because one of our main concerns was to explore the distinctive role and significance of friends and friend-like relationships within personal communities, we finally decided to classify personal communities in terms of the centrality of friends and family on the map, the relative balance in numbers between friends and family, the type of friendship repertoire and friendship convoy. From this analysis there emerged six distinctive forms of personal community, as shown in figure 2 overleaf.

1. Friend-like
2. Friend-enveloped
3. Family-oriented
4. Family dependent
5. Partner focussed
6. Professional dependent

Friend-like personal communities contain more friends than family and include a wide range of types of friend. The importance of friendship is directly reflected in the way the personal community is mapped, with long-term, confiding and multi-faceted friendships being placed in the central ring, and more light-hearted or casual friendships further from the centre. Family members are only given a central place if they are very close, otherwise they are placed further out or excluded altogether. In *friend-enveloped* personal communities friends also outnumber family and provide a wide range of social support. However, not even very close friends are placed in the central ring, which is reserved for close family members, usually a partner and children. In *family-oriented* personal communities family members outnumber friends. Although people with this kind of personal community have a small core of confiding or supportive friends, these close friends are not placed in the central ring because family ties are seen as the most important. In *family dependent* personal communities, family members outnumber friends and are relied on for a wide range of social support. Friends, by contrast, play a restricted role, usually confined to sociability and fun, and are placed in the outer circles of the map. In *partner focussed* and *professional dependent* personal communities family and friends play only a minor role.

If we return briefly to our earlier typology of chosen and given ties and consider the boxes A, B, C, D in relation to our typology of personal communities we can see how communities vary in the way different kinds of relationships are mapped. We might imagine that people would have highly committed (A and C type) family relationships at the core of their map, together with highly committed (A and C type) friendships.

FIGURE 2 A TYPLOGY OF PERSONAL COMMUNITIES

Friend-like personal community	**Friend-enveloped personal community**	**Family-oriented personal community**	**Family dependent personal community**	**Partner focussed personal community**	**Professional dependent personal community**
Friends in centre of map with close family	Family, not friends, in centre of map	Family, not friends, in centre of map	Family, not friends, in centre of map	Partner and family in centre of map	Professionals in centre of the map
Friends outnumber family	Friends outnumber family	Family outnumber friends	Family outnumber friends	Varies (but small personal community)	Varies (but small personal community)
Rich or focal friendship repertoires	Rich or focal friendship repertoires	Focal or intense friendship repertoires	Basic friendship repertoire	Basic friendship repertoire	Basic friendship repertoire
Open convoy	Open or watershed convoy	All types of convoy	Static convoy	Static convoy	Static convoy

Further towards the periphery in the outer circles, we might expect less committed (B type) family relationships and some less committed (D type) friends. And this is, in fact, what we find with *friend-like* personal communities. Because of the normative importance of family ties, however, we find that degree of commitment is not always reflected in the maps of other kinds of personal community. So, for example, in *friend-enveloped* and *family-oriented* personal communities, although committed (A and C type) family relationships are in the central ring, committed (A and C type) friendships are placed in the second, and sometimes third ring. In f*amily-oriented* and *family dependent* personal communities, both committed and less committed (B type) family members are given a central place. There are clearly a variety of permutations and combinations, illustrating different patterns of suffusion.

It is important to note, in parenthesis, that unlike those such as Weeks et al. who claim some novelty in the centrality friends may assume in contemporary personal communities, we do not make such claims. The mantra-like repetition of the term 'traditional family' in much contemporary sociological analysis has become a substitute for critical thinking. The personal community of Ralph Josselin, an Essex clergyman in the early seventeenth century, constructed by Macfarlane, provides at least a clue to the degree of suffusion which could be found at that time. Macfarlane brought together in diagrammatic form the feelings that Josselin expressed in his diary to deaths of relatives and friends respectively (Macfarlane, 1970: 156). This provided a view of what Macfarlane calls his "community of suffering". The order in which he placed various categories of people when praying to God exactly mirrored their placing on the diagram. In the centre is Ralph Josselin. In the next ring are those whose deaths appeared to have shocked him most, namely his daughter Anne and his friend Mary Church. In the next ring are friends and relatives, including his parents, and in the outer ring are those whose death was noted without comment and here are uncles, aunts, cousins, grandchildren and various neighbours and friends. In his prayers he put friends before kindred - apart from his daughter.

The process of suffusion: expectations and practice

In order to understand the process of suffusion, we must first understand the nature of expectations in relation to family and friends, and then compare this to actual lived

relationships. Drawing on our qualitative material we show that family are not always treated as 'given' but may have 'chosen' elements and similarly friends are not always perceived as 'chosen' and may have 'given' qualities. This process of suffusion is reflected in the sometimes overlapping roles played by friends and family, and acknowledged in the way people talk about key friends and family, for example by calling a cousin a friend, or a friend a brother or sister.

One recurrent expectation relating to family is that they should be of central importance. When respondents were constructing personal communities, however, we noticed that relatives were not always listed as they were not considered "important now" and, whilst these excluded relatives tended to be extended family or step relatives, there were cases where brothers and sisters, children and parents were simply "off the map".

Typically family relationships involve unquestioning loyalty and, even if they are estranged, family members may still feel obliged to each other. Thus Elroy, a social care professional in his forties, referred to his relationship with his brother "he's just drifted away… if I see him he's still my brother and I would make sacrifices for him. But that would be through obligation, I think, more than a desire to do so". Interestingly, Elroy felt quite differently about his cousin Harry "apart from being family, we're also friends… because it's not only about obligations, it's not only about blood relations, it's about other things that we have in common that we could do, that we could talk about…. you know, the warmth that we feel in each other's company".

Family relationships are also seen as distinctive because there is an expectation of continuity. Family relationships give a structure, a sense of where you come from – "it's one of the foundations of my life that my family are there". Even if there are rows and family members fall out with each other, "they are still your family". "All my family are close, I do feel like killing them sometimes, but with family it doesn't matter what happens, we will always look after each other". Knowing that family relations will continue means that they can be taken for granted – "family relationships seem to be almost carved in stone… I don't question them, I don't nurture them, nor do I withdraw from them as such. It's almost like I expect, because

they're family, that they will be on-going. I don't expect to fall out with family, or particularly fall in with them". In practice, of course, people do fall out with members of their family and, although they are technically still related, they can cease to have any communication. We found people who had no contact whatsoever with certain members of their family, for example, after dishonesty, cheating, or an acrimonious divorce.

It is generally assumed that you will love your family because they are family, even if you don't like them. Liking family, on the other hand, is seen as a bonus, adding to the value of family relationships. Friends, by contrast, are expected to like each other as this is seen as one of the key ingredients of friendship. Love, on the other hand, is reserved for special friends who have grown closer through shared history and experience. Muriel, a retired financial adviser in her sixties, described some close and long standing friendships as "deeper than a friendship…. you know them so well that you get to really love them".

Towards a Model of the Suffusion Process

It is not possible in the present context to give the full details of our analysis of the suffusion process as illustrated through our qualitative material. However, the diagram below encapsulates rather neatly much of the material in the chapter of our forthcoming book. (See figure 3)

Whilst our study shows clear evidence that some suffusion is taking place, it is important to remember that this is only in relation to specific and special relationships. Where family members are bound only by obligation, where they do not like each other much, and where they do not feel they can confide, it is unlikely that a friendship will develop. There are other factors which limit the possibility of friendship within families, such as rivalry between siblings, and, with parents and children, issues of responsibility, authority and lack of equality. Similarly, only certain kinds of friendship are likely to be considered family-like. More transient, light-hearted ties are unlikely to qualify.

What difference does it make if someone refers to a member of her family as a friend, or even best friend, or refers to a friend as being 'just like a sister to me'. Generally it seemed that family members – sister, brother, cousin, nephew or adult child - may be referred to and understood as a friend when the relationship is based on choice, fun or companionship rather than on a sense of obligation or duty. There is also, typically, an underlying trust based on the exchange of confidences. Friends, are called family where there has been a longstanding relationship, the friends know other members of the family, the friendship has survived many ups and downs and has demonstrated its sturdiness and absolute dependability. The friends know each other so well that they are moved to use familial terminology to refer to each other, reflecting normative expectations about how family members might relate to each other rather than necessarily their own actual experience of the quality of relationships within their own families.

We are aware, however, that the suffusion of family terminology into friendship and friend-like (chosen) terminology into ascribed relationships is not new. Indeed in past times referring to members of one's family as a more or less close friend and accepting others as 'family', was perhaps more common. There is some evidence that 'spiritual kinship' or godparenthood was important in Anglo-Saxon society (Lancaster, 1958), but, in general, servants were probably more significant as adopted family members. Ralph Josselin regarded his servants as members of his family (Macfarlane, 1970: 147) and John Arbuthnot in 1773 speaking of a farm of 800 acres: "If the tract is in the hands of one man, his family will consist of himself, a wife, three children, twelve servants, and ten labourers, each with a wife and three children….. Thus, the farmers' family – 17" (quoted in Snell, 1985: 321).

Patterns of Suffusion

We have described a range of situations where a blurring of boundaries between friends and family is taking place, but it is important to remember that personal communities vary widely in the extent to which family and friends play distinct or overlapping roles and that suffusion only applies to particular friendships and family relationships. Even people with highly suffused personal communities still have some friends and family members who play more restricted and specialised roles.

FIGURE 3 THE SUFFUSION PROCESS

Qualities	Friends	Suffusion process	Family
The nature of the bond			
the extent of choice	a chosen relationship	becoming more family-like becoming more friend-like	an ascribed or given relationship
the sense of responsibility for	cannot expect friends to feel a sense of duty or obligation	becoming more family-like becoming more friend-like	expect family to feel a sense of duty or obligation
the sense of importance	importance linked to quality of relationship	becoming more family-like	importance taken for granted
the sense of continuity	friendships may not last indefinitely, friendships can fade or be ended	becoming more family-like	family relationships are expected to continue and survive "ups and downs"
the nature of affective tie	expect to like friends	becoming more friend-like becoming more family-like	expect to love family
The nature of the interaction			
content and roles	**basic expectations:** shared activities, interests, same wavelength companionship, fun, sociability **additional qualities** ↓ practical help emotional support personal confiding	becoming more friend-like becoming more family-like becoming more friend-like	**basic expectations:** practical help emotional support **additional qualities:** ↓ shared activities, same wavelength, shared interests companionship, fun, sociability personal confiding

Warren, a car sprayer in his mid twenties, single and still living at home, has a highly specialised personal community, looking to family members such as his parents and sister for practical support, and to friends for sociability and fun. Warren does not tend to confide in anyone, or rely on others for emotional support. Others, such as Jack (a retired assembly line worker in his sixties), Brian (a computer consultant), and Dawn (an early-retired typographer in her fifties) also have highly specialised personal communities, with socialising confined to friends rather than family, and confiding, practical and emotional support being provided by key members of their family. In their cases, however, partners play a suffused role, acting as companions, confidants and sources of support. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of these people with specialised personal communities refer to family members as friends, or to friends as family.

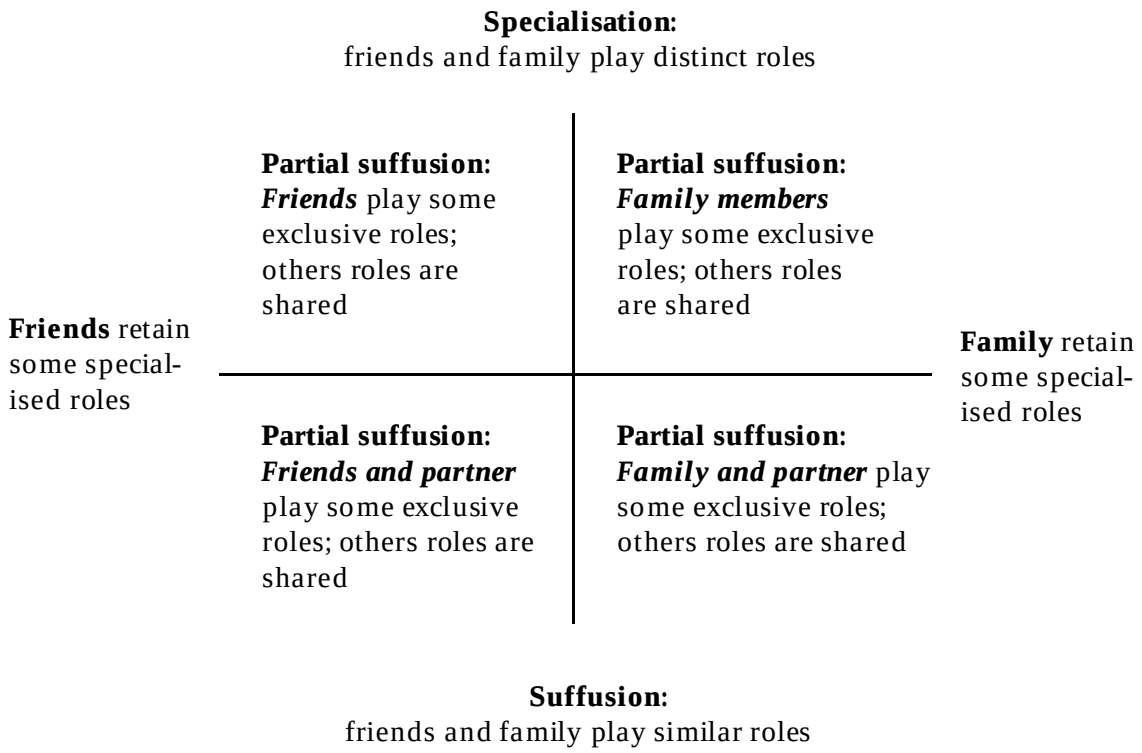
By contrast, others have highly suffused personal communities. For example, Jane, a teaching assistant in her mid forties, married with young children, can confide in her husband, her brother, her sister-in-law and half a dozen friends. Key friends and family also provide practical and emotional support. Whilst friends and partner are her main companions, she also has fun with her brother, sister and sisters-in-law. Jane actually describes her brother and one of her sisters-in-law as friends. Of course, this overlapping of roles does not extend to all friends and family, as some friends are just companions and associates, and her parents are not treated as confidants.

Some personal communities, however, are suffused simply because of the pivotal role played by one or two special friends or family members. Winston, for example, a painter and decorator in his early forties, turns to his family as confidants, for practical and emotional support, and for fun. Most of his friends, on the other had, are simply fun friends, but his best friend Robert plays a much wider role, as confidant and helpmate as well as constant companion. Winston even describes Robert as a brother. By contrast, for Shaun, a pensions administrator in his late twenties, it is friends who play a wide range of roles whereas family are limited to providing practical support. The exception is Shaun's older sister who also acts as a companion and confidant and whom Shaun considers to be a friend.

There are also cases of partial suffusion where some roles are played exclusively either by friends or family while other roles overlap. So, for example, Harriet, single and in her thirties, has a broad repertoire of friends, and it is to friends rather than family that she turns for emotional support, confiding and fun. Practical help, on the other hand, is provided by both friends and family. By contrast, Huw, a retired farmer in his mid seventies, widowed and living alone, leans heavily on his family, particularly his adult daughters and brother-in-law, in whom he confides and on whom he relies for help and support. For sociability and companionship Huw turns to both family and friends.

As these examples show, at one extreme there are highly specialised personal communities with a clear demarcation of roles where people interact with friends and family in very different ways, at the other extreme there are highly suffused communities with some family members and friends playing rather similar roles. Between these two extremes are cases where friends exclusively play certain roles but others can be played by friends or family, and cases where it is family members who fulfil certain functions, while others may be shared. Partners may share a similar role with friends, or be more aligned with family members. Where friends and family do play distinct roles, this often, though not always, follows the general expectations of friends and family with friends specialising in confiding and companionship, and family specialising in providing practical help and support. (These different patterns of suffusion and specialisation are shown in figure 4)

FIGURE 4 PATTERNS OF SUFFUSION



Concluding Discussion

In this paper we have discussed a number of distinct themes. Firstly, we have suggested that the imputed dichotomous contrast between given and chosen relationships is analytically shallow and that in practice, there is a complex process of suffusion between familial and non-familial relationships. Secondly, the imputed contrast between certain contemporary patterns of social relationships and those said to be characteristic of a vague conception of "traditional" society may reflect a lack of awareness of recent historical scholarship. Such a position has been authoritatively and parsimoniously expressed by Steven Ozment as follows:

> "For the last two decades, the argument that a radical transformation occurred in family life between 1400 and 1800 has been on the chopping block and the defining characteristics of the family, past and present, are again an open question. Today historians find alleged distinctive features of the "modern" family appearing from antiquity through the Renaissance; and, unlike the

> historians of the 1960's and 1970's, few blame the ills of present-day family life on the persistence of traditional family values. For every historian who believes that the modern family is a recent, superior evolution, there is another who is ready to expose it as a fallen archetype. And while one worries that today's' family cannot survive its seemingly endless reconfigurations, the other points to the great variety of single-parent, blended, and non-hierarchical families populating the distant past - products then of a mercilessly high mortality rate rather than rampant elective divorce and voluntary lifestyle changes" (Ozment, 2001: 45)

The erroneous notion of a traditional stereotypical pattern in the past, with which contemporary relationships may be contrasted, is also found in many contemporary approaches to friends and friendship (for a review, see Pahl, 2000, 2002). Those who claim to have found novelty in certain contemporary forms of social relationships need to be both more cautious and more attentive to the rapidly expanding historical evidence that is now available.

Thirdly, it should be recognised that despite the prevalence of contradictory assertions about the relative importance of friends and family, which often elides friends with chosen relationships and family with given ones, there is still only very modest empirical research available to support one side or the other. One interesting attempt to confront this issue in The Netherlands focussed on gift giving which the authors considered to be a good indicator of the relative involvement of individuals between friends and family "because it is such a tangible and concrete and, therefore, measurable expression of feeling toward other people. Are different types of feelings involved in giving gifts to family and friends? Have friendship networks taken over some of the functions and meaning of family ties?" (Komter and Vollebergh 1997: 748).

Unfortunately, the authors did not unpack the notion of 'friend' and it was left to respondents to decide for themselves what that might mean. The authors show that feelings of affection are reported more often than feelings of obligation with affectionate feelings being acknowledged most towards children and friends and feelings of obligation being greatest in gifts to extended kin and neighbours. In

general, feelings of affection were reported more often than feelings of obligation, which would support the idea that ties based on obligation are declining in social life. "The percentage of gifts that goes with affection is also significantly higher for friends than for parents, parents-in-law, or extended kin". (ibid. 753) The difference in the significance of gift-giving to friends and to other family members was considered by the authors to be remarkable and they go on to point out that "giving to friends is most common among those who can afford to withdraw from the obligations and dependencies inherent in family relationships: those who are highly educated, non-religious, and not (yet) obligated by material ties". (ibid. 756)

The fourth point, that so far has been more implicit than explicit, but which is crucial to an understanding of the significance of our own work on personal communities, is that much of the debate about "The Transformation of Intimacy" has focussed exclusively on dyadic, chosen, emotional relationships. The thesis developed by Giddens concerning a shift from the ideal of 'romantic' love to that of 'pure' or 'confluent' love is based on intimate sexual relationships (Giddens: 1992). Likewise, Weeks et al. refer to their ethnography of certain same sex intimate relationships as supporting their thesis of *families* of choice. There is surprisingly little information about the links between members of these dyadic relationships and their natal families. When some consideration is given to other social relationships in people's personal communities the 'families of choice' thesis – in the sense of the displacement of so-called 'traditional' models of family - seems overstated. Indeed, Weeks et al acknowledge that "no matter what social and personal hazards may exist, the care and well-being of the child remains the first and ultimate responsibility of same sex parents, over and above the adult relationship itself. This would seem to be the common trend across the diversity of parenting practices. Obligation and duty – though the terms themselves may not always be used – here override the discourse of choice" (Weeks et al. 2001: 72-73).

Giddens makes a similar omission by limiting himself to 'pure relationships', seemingly considered in complete isolation from the personal communities in which, inevitably, both members of the dyadic relationship are involved. Indeed, he even goes so far as to suggest that the inwardly-focussed dyadic relationship would undermine other forms of chosen relationships

> "Of course, a partner in a relationship might make sure that she or he has a circle of friends, as well as others who can be relied upon in times of difficulty. Yet such trust cannot be expanded indefinitely, there are priorities in such decisions" (Giddens, 1992: 139).

The implication is that having a number of close friends somehow dilutes the power of the dominant confluent relationship. This imputed link between type of personal community and the nature of the dyadic relationship is clearly an empirical issue, which Giddens does nothing to resolve.

It is in the context of these four points that we have presented our detailed analysis of 60 personal communities, focussing on the suffusion of friend-like relationships and family-like relationships. We have analysed the friends in people's personal communities with the aid of concepts such as stranding, repertoires and friendship convoys. This has enabled us to show different patterns of suffusion within different personal communities, so illustrating their essential hybrid nature. We have made no assumptions or judgements about the direction or social significance of putative social change. Rather, we have expressed considerable scepticism about the fixed nature of the "traditional" family bound in its community of fate and of "families of choice", seemingly limited to contemporary chosen dyadic pure relationships largely but not completely bound by "plastic sex".

We are able to affirm with some confidence, based on our qualitative research, that people are often embedded in a highly complex set of relationships within and between generations. We are sceptical of Giddens' assertion that the pure relationship alone and in itself "can provide a facilitating social environment for the reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1992: 139). To be sure, chosen partners can certainly be of the greatest significance in individual's personal communities; one category in our typology is *partner-dependent*. Also we did find people who were estranged from their families and for whom friends were indeed their 'family of choice', but, as the detailed analysis in our forthcoming book will show, there is considerable empirical variation. Those who claim that they have ethnographic material that illustrates behaviour at the cutting edge of social change may seriously dilute, if not undermine

their case completely, by having stereotypical concepts of “traditional” arrangements and the social contexts in which their contemporary accounts are embedded. We would encourage both the judgementalists and the partial ethnographers to view their particular concerns through the undistorting lens of personal communities.

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