

The Contemporary Context: Approaches to themes of Friendship in East and West

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In these two sessions the aim is to discuss and compare interpretations of - what we – at this preliminary stage - call ‘friendship’. Although the meaning may appear self-evident, when more thought is given to this concept, historical and cross-cultural differences and shifts in meaning emerge.

Among anthropologists and social historians, the concepts of ‘family’ and ‘kinship’ seem to have been predominant, pushing a concept such as ‘friendship’ into the background. In contrast to ‘kinship’, ‘friendship’ seems to have been considered too ‘fluid’, ‘private’ and lacking in ‘social structure’ to theorize about. It was once even apologetically characterized as a topic “too narrow and too rhapsodical to be worthy of a work unto itself” (Blosser and Bradley, ix, 1997).

Nevertheless, exceptions are found, as Bell and Coleman’s ‘the Anthropology of Friendship’ (1999). The authors point out the potential overlap of kin and friends as well as to the specific high flown ideals of freedom, flexibility and creativity attached to “Western” (particularly middle class) views of friendship (14, 1997). Moreover, at times glimpses of an emerging debate can be found. For example, among social historians and anthropologists the goal of the recent study ‘The Friend’ by Alan Bray (2003) was to re-shape existing analysis of ‘the history of the family’ since the Late Middle Ages in Northern Europe.

In the sessions on ‘Contemporary Contexts of Friendship in East and West’, we are seeking contributions about ideals of friendship as well as how these are enacted. How are friendships formed and celebrated? How are misunderstandings or conflicts in such relationships handled? How are continuity and discontinuity expressed? What expectations and obligations are bound to the relationship? Although not often articulated, friendship tends to rest on different underlying images of the social world and specific ideas about conviviality; sociability; (in-)equality, intimacy, sexuality, trust, (dis)continuity, reciprocity and in- and exclusiveness. Borders of family intimacies can resonate in the shaping of friendship relations. Likewise, borders of gender, age, caste, class, (in-)equality can and do

facilitate or inhibit the emergence of forms of friendship. In other words, extensive cultural scripts of friendship do exist, even though they are not easily articulated. In addition, languages worldwide differ substantially in their degree of idiom to express a variety in meaning and practice in friendship relations. See for example Mayfair Mei-lui Yang's well-known book: 'Gifts, Favors and Banquets, the art of social relationships in China' (Cornell, 1994), which discusses the differing shades of friendship besides the well-known 'Guanxi' or Martin W. Huang's recently published 'Male Friendship in Ming China', (Brill, 2007).

The elusiveness of the concept can also be traced in increasing present-day mobility, leading to (new) varieties of cross-cultural friendships. In such contexts people can have or share the experience of realizing or enacting various scripts of friendship alongside their own.

It is also a context in which shifts in meanings and practices of friendship and forms of bonding can be created. Likewise, the rapid increase in urban space world-wide can impact on a person's networks and the arenas of sociability where friendship can be given shape ("... the triumph of privacy and discipline in the modern West": Jeff Weintraub, 1997: 20). Much less is known about this theme of shifts in (personal) relationships in the rapidly rising South and South East Asian metro poles.

The arenas of 'sociability' and/or 'sociality' within which forms of bonding as friendship are contextualized and enacted in differing settings are relevant in order to understand the (unsaid) contours of shaping much of the matter-of-fact ways of 'being social', 'style of relating', 'bonding', 'ways of keeping company or distance' as well as 'managing conflict'. Although not directly dealing with 'friendship', the existing subtle and well-documented studies of social historians about 'sociability', most of them situated in West European history, could be mentioned in this context (for example: Brown, 2006; Whyman, 1999).

In recent studies in anthropology on the other hand, the relative lack of existing idiom in the discipline, to describe and understand 'relationships', compared to the extensive existing literature on 'personhood' has been pointed out. (Overing and Passes, 2000; Ingold, 1996: 62/7). In this context, the well-known anthropologist Marilyn Strathern points to what she terms the conceptually "huge investment...in the language and imagery of individuals and groups", whereas it is the "fresh ways" of speaking "about the complexities and ambiguities of relationships that is needed" (2005: 27).

With the contributions to these sessions, we aim to improve insight into the scope of existing studies in this field and bring concerned scholars together and stimulate further debate and knowledge of each other's work. We hope to deepen insights into the cross-cultural and historical diversity of meanings given to relationships between 'friends' of a kind.

Presentations can be both more analytical in their approach and the presentation of the results of specific case studies. Historical contributions (from approximately 15th century onwards) analysing shifts in meaning through time as well as contributions dealing with the challenge of comparison will be especially welcomed.

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