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## **Researching workplace friendships: Drawing insights from the sociology of friendship**

Although organizational research on workplace friendships is well established, it has been criticized for its predominately postpositivistic outlook, which largely focuses on how workplace friendships can be linked to improving organizational outcomes such as efficiency and performance. As a consequence other aspects of the lived experiences of work and friendship are obscured, in particular how these friendships are important in their own right and how they function as social and personal relationships. Supplementing postpositivistic research on workplace friendships, this article shows how researchers can derive theoretical insights from a ‘sociology of friendship’. The main contribution of this article relates to the development of a sociology of workplace friendship that understands the porous and mutable nature of these relationships and considers the social and personal factors that influence their role, place and meaning in the workplace. As such, three sociological frames of analysis are elaborated that encourage researchers to examine friendships at work as a set of contextually contingent social practices and as historically patterned social and personal relationships. This article articulates an agenda of research to inspire and guide researchers using these frames, one potential outcome of which is generating much needed scholarship that explores how workplace friendships contribute to human flourishing.

### **Keywords**

Friendship, human flourishing, organizational relationships, social practices, sociology of friendship, workplace friendships

## **Introduction**

The study of workplace friendships is now well established (Bader, Hashim & Rahamin, 2013; Berman, West & Richter, 2002; Chen, Mao, Hsieh, Liu & Yen, 2013; Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Song, 2006). Much of this literature focuses on how workplace friendships can be linked to improving organizational outcomes such as productivity and performance (Berman et al., 2002; Shah & Jehn, 1993; Song, 2006; Song & Olshfski, 2008), reducing employee turnover (Feeley, Hwang & Barnett, 2008) and helping employees subscribe to new organizational values (Gibbons, 2004). At the same time, research provides insights into how the individuals involved in workplace friendships can garner instrumental and emotional support (Kram & Isabella, 1985), share high quality information (Sias, 2005), improve the experience of tedious and repetitive work (Pettinger, 2005), protect individuals from workplace bullying (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011) and develop feminist identities to challenge organizational patriarchy (Andrew & Montague, 1998). While this scholarship has approached the significance of workplace friendships from the perspectives of both employers and employees using different methodologies and theoretical frameworks, the reigning paradigm for conducting organizational research on workplace friendships is postpositivistic (Fritz, 2014; Grey & Sturdy, 2007; Sias, 2009).

Postpositivism is a philosophy of science that has its roots in the various forms of positivism that broadly accept the natural and social worlds can be understood through the application of scientific objectivity and structured method/ologies. According to Corman (2005, p. 21), postpositivism is the outcome of an ‘appreciative critique of...different types of positivisms’. For instance, strands of postpositivism

acknowledge, albeit in different ways, that human subjectivity plays a role in scientific research and that the social and natural worlds are not isomorphic. Sias (2009, p. 5) points out that postpositivism retains some similarities with positivism such as the ‘search for causal relationships that enable us to predict and control our environments’. In this vein, postpositivism treats organizations as though they have an objective existence that is independent of the people who inhabit them. Human behavior within organizations is considered observable and postpositivistic research generates knowledge that can be used to develop predictive theories and improve management practice. Relevant to the focus of this article is the argument that postpositivism conceptualizes workplace relationships as ‘real entities that transcend our perception’ (Sias, 2009, p. 9). Observational indicators of workplace relationships are therefore considered important in conducting research on these relationships (e.g. communication, network ties and attitudinal measures), as studies demonstrate (Feeley, Hwang & Barnett, 2008; Methot, Lepine, Podsakoff & Christian, 2016; Nielsen, Jex & Adams, 2000). While postpositivistic research on workplace friendships has produced valuable empirical insights into predicting how these relationships can be effective in specific work contexts, Sias (2009, p. 2) rightly avers that the dominance of this philosophy as single lens through which to study workplace friendships ‘narrows our vision’ because it focuses on ‘one aspect of that subject’ to the neglect of others.

For example, scholarship on workplace friendships guided by a postpositivistic perspective largely centers on the economic and organizational outcomes of workplace friendships. This research exhibits a managerial bias in which the goal of postpositivistic studies is to ‘enable management to more effectively...control employees’ (Sias, 2009, p. 12). By extension, a managerial bias

presumes that what is good for employers is good for employees. Such a proposition chokes out any light we might wish to shed on other aspects of workplace friendships such as the personal and social significance of workplace friendships in *their own right*. Grey and Sturdy (2007) argue in a similar vein by underscoring how workplace friendships are often subsumed under organizational topics such as social networks, social capital and relations of trust. Articulating workplace friendship only in these terms is to foreclose the possibility of thinking differently about how relations are organized in the workplace and the wider social and economic milieus within which places of work are enmeshed (Silver, 1990). Methodologically, postpositivist organization research treats workplace friendships as fixed and stable entities disembodied from the social realm that can be differentiated from other informal workplace relationships (Sias, 2009). This is apparent in the studies that deploy *a priori* definitions of workplace friendship drawn from psychology and earlier organizational research on peer relationships (e.g. Mao, 2006; Morrison & Nolan, 2007; Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery & Pilkington, 1995). When researchers fix ‘workplace friendship’ as a stable and identifiable relational category (e.g., Berman et al. 2002), they risk losing sight of the multiplicity of meanings that converge on the notion of workplace friendship as well as its porous and mutable character.

This article does *not* suggest that positivistic research on workplace friendship is fatally flawed; rather, its primary aim is to *supplement* this body of research by advocating sociological frames that help researchers to examine these relationships as a set of contextually contingent social practices and as historically patterned social and personal relationships (see also Fritz, 2014; Sias, 2009). While some inroads have been made to that end (Andrew & Montague, 1998; D’Cruz & Noronha, 2011; Pedersen and Lewis, 2012; Sias & Cahill, 1998), there is still enormous scope for

more research in this area. As such, the main contributions of this article are twofold. First, it challenges and moves beyond a managerial bias in extant empirical organizational research on workplace friendships by drawing on a sociology of friendship (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan, 1989; Pahl, 2000; Silver, 1990) to develop a sociology of workplace friendships. Such a move reminds us of our responsibility for attending to how workplace friendships can contribute to human flourishing, helping individuals to pursue a meaningful existence along different pre-established and new pathways. Second, this article contributes to the sociology of friendship by installing sociological frames of analysis into the study of workplace friendships, with the view to showing how these relationships are historically situated and socially constructed, and how they overlap with other relationships in and outside specific work contexts. As such, this article encourages researchers to study how the social aspects of workplace friendships shape the personal value they are accorded, and vice versa.

To begin, this article outlines the organizational research that has started to examine the personal and social dimensions of workplace friendships before drawing on available resources and insights from the sociology of friendship. In this section, the article articulates how friendship scholars can mobilize the sociology of friendship in three ways: 1) workplace friendships as a set of social practices; 2) workplace friendships as social relationships; 3) workplace friendships as personal relationships. In so doing, this article highlights exemplary studies, available resources and examples of research questions to inspire and guide researchers interested in using these frames of analysis.

### **The sociology of friendship**

This article refers to a ‘sociology of friendship’, labelled as such within sociological circles (Holmes & Greco, 2011), that emerged in the late 1970s as a response to the neglect of friendship within a tradition of sociology that had accorded more attention and significance to the study of familial and couple relationships (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan, 1979, 1989, 2008; Morgan, 2011; Nardi, 1999; Pahl, 2000; Pahl & Spencer, 2010; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Roseneil, 2007; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001). This notwithstanding, issues of social integration and networks which include friendship ties have occupied sociologists for some considerable time. For example, Georg Simmel (1900/1978) is an early example of a sociologist who understood friendship as an important social form between individuals who occupy the same social position, arguing that such friendships contributed to the continuity of social institutions and society. Simmel’s work, alongside the sociology of Emile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, Talcott Parsons and Harrison White, among others, have in different ways formed a major sociological paradigm in social network analysis (Granovetter, 1973; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). However, the more recent sociology of friendship differs from prior sociological research on social networks and friendship ties because the latter has ‘tended to emphasize “objective” characteristics of [these] relationships – such as frequency of interaction, home visiting and exchange of services – at the expense of the actor’s own definitions and constructs’ (Allan, 1979, p.5; see also Allan, 1989; Holmes & Greco, 2011; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Indeed, the pertinence of this criticism still holds, as Spencer and Pahl (2006) and Ingram and Zou (2008, p.180) reason that the mathematical and structural bias in social network research ‘denies much of the dynamic nature of social relations’. For instance, processes of interaction that link social networks with

outcomes such as knowledge creation are poorly accounted for (Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

The sociology of friendship literature that sprung forth during the late 1970s represented a significant point of departure from scholarship on the psychology of friendship, which dominated the field of study during the 1960s and 1970s. While friendship is regarded as being notoriously difficult to define, psychologists had typically examined friendships as voluntaristic relationships, entered into freely, (Wright, 1969) but without paying sufficient attention to context (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan, 1989; Pahl, 2000; Spencer & Pahl, 2006), although later research in the field of social psychology started to address this omission (Duck, 1991, 1993). While acknowledging friendship as a voluntary relationship, sociologists of friendship argued trenchantly that studying friendship is as much about understanding how the individual attributes of friends help constitute friendship, as it is about examining how friendships are enmeshed within and across multiple social contexts (Adams & Allan, 1998). Lifting the perspectives of the individuals involved in living the relational experiences of friendship, sociologists have conceptualized friendships as personal relationships, wherein individuals respond to changes in wider social and economic milieus in how they construct intimacies, identities and selves. At the same time, friendship is a social relationship in the sense that the form it assumes is influenced by the 'wider organization of social life' (Allan, 1996, p.99; Silver, 1990).

For example, Oliker's (1998) study of middle-class women's friendships in the US reveals how the process of industrialization sharpened the public-private divide, with more men entering into a public realm of work, while the private realm became heavily associated with the presence of women. The public-private split is, as Oliker (1998) observes, a consequential gender formation that has shaped the pattern



of friendships between and among men and women. Notably, the domestic sphere occasioned opportunities for women to develop intimate same-sex friendships that were supposedly unavailable or limited for men within the public domain of work. Such shifts in the socioeconomic situations of men and women also shaped friendship ideologies about how men and women are supposed to enact friendship in distinct ways; in particular, the assumption that friendships between women are believed to be more emotionally intimate than those between men, although this dichotomy has been contested (Walker, 1994).

Despite these significant contributions, the sociology of friendship has yet to make substantial inroads into the study of workplace friendships, although this is not to say that sociologists have not been attentive to the importance of friendship in the study of organizational life and work (e.g. Dalton, 1959; Lupton, 1963; Pollert, 1981; Roy, 1959), or that sociologists of friendship have overlooked the workplace as an important context for friendships to emerge (Allan, 1989; Pahl, 2000; Silver, 1990; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Rather, it is to suggest that in the case of the former, sociologists have often touched upon but not developed sustained analyses of workplace friendships in their own right (Morgan, 2011). In the case of the latter, sociologists of friendship have paid more attention to friendships in non-work contexts, leaving unanswered questions about how a sociology of friendship might enrich organizational research on the topic. In building and developing connections and dialogues between these two bodies of work, it is important to outline, albeit briefly, a wider landscape of qualitative research on workplace friendships.

### **The qualitative turn toward studying workplace friendships**

The call for friendship researchers to draw on a sociology of friendship is in synch with wider shifts that have taken place in the study of (in)formal workplace relationships at the level of meaning and action (Fritz, 2014; Sias, 2009). For example, Fritz (2014) notes the dominance of postpositivistic research on workplace relationships, but also the relatively recent ‘qualitative turn in organizational communication studies’ (2014, p. 462) that has inspired some scholars to examine friendships using research questions that encourage the generation of qualitative data. For example, Rawlins’s (1989, 1992, 2009) work has cut a path for communication studies scholars to research qualitatively the contextual and interactional dialectics of friendships. Notably, dialectic theories on friendship examine the contradictory elements within these relationships (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996). Rawlins’s (1992) qualitative research on the dialectics of friendship has yielded insights into how the public view of friendship, typically informed by the idealities of friendship (e.g., that friendship should be marked by equality, intimacy, reciprocity and so on), may differ from how friendships are practiced privately and attributed meaning between friends. As an interpretative approach to the study of communication within friendship, dialectical theories of friendship focus on action and meaning making within these relationships, rather than searching for an objective definition of what friendship is.

The qualitative turn in disciplines such as communication studies has opened up new opportunities for studying workplace relationships that bring to the fore how the meanings attributed to these relationships are contingent on participants’ sociocultural standpoints, hierarchical positioning and the social contexts in which they are embedded and enacted. Fritz’s (2014) compelling case for cultivating qualitative studies on workplace friendships converses with Sias’s (2009) similar

recommendation to examine workplace relationships from a range of different theoretical perspectives, in order to illuminate the aspects of these relationships occluded by postpositivist research. Studied from different theoretical perspectives, friendships take on different shades and hues in terms of how they are qualitatively understood and experienced in the workplace. This is apparent in the growing number of options available to researchers wishing to study workplace friendships beyond postpositivist theoretical frameworks.

For example, research conducted from social constructionist perspectives (e.g., Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, & Fix, 2004; Sias, Pedersen, Gallagher & Kopaneva, 2012) understands workplace friendships as socially constructed entities that are dynamic and contextually contingent. For instance, departing from previous organizational research on social networks in the workplace (e.g., Ibarra, 1995), Sias and Cahill (1998) focus on the processes (e.g., interactions, conversations) by which the multiple and overlapping realities of work and friendship are created and sustained between friends at work. Similarly, Parris, Vickers and Wilkes (2008) examine how intensified work regimes and demands to work longer hours put the friendships of Australian middle managers under severe strain. Although not labelled as a social constructionist study, Parris et al. (2008) demonstrate the qualities of this theoretical approach as the interview data reveals how middle managers construct and struggle to make sense of the competing realities of work and friendship, in particular as they try to integrate work and personal life. As such, social construction exposes the contingencies of workplace friendship that we might wrongly assume to be inevitable. In this regard, social constructionism links to a sociology of friendship in how it clears a channel for understanding workplace friendships as constructed and contextually situated entities.

Indebted to but extending beyond social constructionism, given its focus on political, cultural, economic and social relationships and how these are shaped by ideology and relations of power (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), critical theory has also been utilized by scholars to study friendships at work (Andrew and Montague, 1998; Ashcraft, 2000; Costas, 2012; Rumens, 2011). Critical theory may serve as a broad label for different theories that address issues of power and domination, often motivated by a political goal to transform punishing norms and the potent and inimical effects of organizational power relations on employees. For example, Andrew and Montague's (1998) personal account of their workplace friendship within a UK university shows how friendship can be used as a relational context to organize as 'women' and 'feminists', in order to challenge the dominance of men's practices and male privilege in the workplace. Likewise, Rumens (2011) draws on feminist research but also a sociology of gay men's friendships (Nardi, 1999), demonstrating how gay men can use workplace friendships to contest the assumption and privilege of heterosexuality in work contexts. In both studies, qualitative data enables us to understand the generative capacity of workplace friendship inasmuch as they can occasion opportunities for friends to develop alternative, sometimes more equitable, forms of relating and organizing that encourage human flourishing at the level of identity and intimacy.

On a slightly different tack, D'Cruz and Noronha (2011) combine phenomenology (a multi-branched school of philosophy that examines conscious experience) and insights from a sociology of friendship to explore the subjective work experiences of employees in a number of Indian call centers. Examining the lived experiences of workplace friendship and bullying, D'Cruz and Noronha (2011) show how workplace friendships provided not only protection to call center employees who

experienced bullying behaviors from colleagues, but also how friends helped targets of workplace bullying by enabling them to seek support from human resources and approach bullies directly to challenge their behavior. Where bullying behaviors emanated from managers and supervisors, workplace friendships helped employees to question whose interests are served by ‘bullying’ management practices.

Research that draws deeply on a sociology of friendship is limited. Pedersen and Lewis (2012) is an exception as they delve into the sociology of friendship to conceptualize workplace friendship as a set of practices. Understood in terms of ‘practice’, as a process of doing and as a constructed quality of human interaction (Morgan, 2011), Pedersen and Lewis (2012) examine how the changing nature and demands of work raise concerns about how workers can find time for activities such as friendship and leisure, which the authors’ assert are vital for human well-being. Despite living work lives characterized by time dilemmas, blurred work-life boundaries and employee/er-led flexible working, study participants devised strategies for making time for friendship by blurring boundaries between friends and family and between friends and work. As such, the study provides insights into workplace friendships as a social and personal relationship in two respects: (1) in how they cut across private and public spheres of life; (2) how, as a set of practices, they suffuse other (in)formal relationships in ways that disrupt the artificial boundaries between work and home and relationship categories that are culturally imbued with a sense of stability.

In summary, as noted above there are progressive signs of developing a sociology of workplace friendship. Yet further scope exists for cultivating sociological accounts of workplace friendship, which it is hoped will create a more theoretically diverse literature on workplace friendships in general. Again, we can be

inspired by sociologists of friendship who have conscripted concepts from critical theories such as feminism (Cronin, 2015) and queer theory (Roseneil, 2007; Rumens, 2011) to illuminate more aspects of the role, place and meanings of workplace friendship. With this in mind, the aim of this article is entirely congruent with the ambition and scope of the qualitative turn in the study of workplace relationships more generally, and of workplace friendships in particular. As such, this article proceeds to guide the researcher into the sociology of friendship using three complementary and overlapping frames of analysis: workplace friendships as practices; workplace friendships as personal relationships; workplace friendships as social relationships.

### **Workplace friendships as practices**

Sias (2009, p.90) argues that workplace friendships are ‘unique in two primary ways’: first, they are voluntary, not imposed; second, they have a personalistic focus that other workplace relationships do not. Work friends will communicate with each other as ‘whole persons’, not simply as occupants of job roles. They may be constituted as such in the types of conversations individuals engage in, that span work and home life, and a shared commitment toward intimacy that may be absent in friendly relations between colleagues. Such assertions are persuasive and concepts from a sociology of friendship might enable scholars to probe more deeply how, or whether, workplace friendship are ‘unique’ and what sets of practices constitute them as such.

The idea of friendship as practice is rooted in Morgan’s (1996, 2011) seminal work on rethinking the notion of the family as ‘family practices’. Morgan (1996) argues that family is usefully understood as a set of social practices rather than an

institution to which individuals belong. In this frame, attention is fixed on the family as an active process of *doing* and as a constructed quality of human interaction. Family practices refer to the activities in people's everyday lives such as caregiving, conversations and doing domestic chores. As Morgan (2011) maintains, in carrying out these practices, individuals are reproducing sets of relationships within which these activities are carried out and from which they derive their meaning. In that sense, Morgan's (1996, 2011) work on 'family practices' is an influential contribution to the growing critiques of standard sociological collectivities, for it underscores action and doing and a concern with the everyday. Crucially, for the purposes of this article, Morgan (2011) argues that the idea of practice can be extended to the study of friendship.

In this frame, employees may be viewed as doing workplace friendships insomuch friendship does not materialize from an essential truth about human interaction but is an iterative, enacted practice. Viewed in terms of process, wherein workplace friendships are constituted through practices in, around and away from organizational settings, research on workplace friendship may examine more closely how individuals do friendship-type interactions in the workplace, with the view to disrupting the hegemony of using employees' experiences of friendship as a resource for improving organizational outcomes such as performance and efficiency. Organization researchers might study the practices of friendship as being important in and of themselves (cf. Holmes & Greco, 2011; Morgan, 2011): conversations, daily encounters between employees, interactions with managers and clients, acts of caregiving and support and activities of work associated with and beyond performing an assigned job. These are practices which might matter the most in how workplace friendships are understood, beyond organizational prescriptions or descriptions about

how friendships should/not be organized at work. Acknowledging this is to recognize that friendship practices are entangled within power relations, and tensions are likely to arise between how friendship practices are understood and ascribed meaning and 'value' by employees and employers.

Crucially, understood as a set of practices, researchers can problematize fixed and uniform notions of workplace friendship, becoming more attuned to how workplace friendship is not just an indication that another work colleague is a 'friend', but much more a matter of practices that reproduce the experience of friendship at work. Here, then, researchers can garner insights into how the experience of workplace friendship overlaps with practices associated with other informal workplace relationships such as being friendly, acquaintanceship, romantic and sexual relations (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Rumens, 2011; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Additionally, there is scope for research that examines how practices of workplace friendship overlap with practices of other relationships outside work such as non-work friendships and familial relations. This observation is relevant for researchers outside the sociology of friendship. For example, Morgan's (1996, 2011) family/friendship as practice frame may be marshaled by scholars from family studies seeking to understand family members' meanings about family interactions and relationships. As Ganong and Coleman (2014) maintain, qualitative data has an important role to play in providing the detail about the lived relational experiences of family insiders' views about family interactions, the contexts in which 'family' is attributed meaning and giving voice to marginalized families and family members. Pursuing these goals, a friendship as practice frame may help family studies researchers generate the rich qualitative data Ganong and Coleman (2014) advocate.



In light of the above, what is surely particularly beneficial about theorizing workplace friendships as a set of practices is that it allows us to register the contingency and fluidity of everyday work and friendship practices in a way that counters the facile treatment of friendship as the ‘Other’ of formal organization and work (Grey & Sturdy, 2007). Indeed, a workplace friendship as practice frame is an analytical device that shatters the metaphor of organization as a mere container for workplace friendship (Sias & Cahill, 1998). It underscores the constitutive power of friendship practices in (re)shaping organization and processes of organizing (May, 2012). Additionally, it trains attention to how workplace friendships are constituted as such by how they are understood and experienced in regard to other types of relationships in and outside the workplace.

### **Workplace friendships as social relationships**

By shifting the pendulum of organizational research toward a sociological consideration of friendships as sets of practices, new horizons come into view that allow us to examine workplace friendships as social rather than merely organizational relationships. Salient here is the idea promulgated within the sociology of friendship that friendships are patterns of social relations that extend over time and space, shaping wider social structures (Allan, 2008; Pahl, 2000). Stephen (1994, p. 192) makes a similar observation, one that underpins his concern for interpersonal communication theory research to be ‘informed by the historical record’. In other words, addressing the ahistorical character of interpersonal communication studies in regard to studies of communication in marital and family interaction, Stephen (1994) calls for historically situated research. The wide span of history provides context to

situate processes of interpersonal communication that underlie how marital relationships are variously constituted. One benefit of adopting such an approach is that interpersonal communication within marital relationships is not mistaken as something that is universally stable, but subject to change within societies at specific moments in time.

Equally germane for the purpose of this article is Alan Silver's (1990) sociological analysis of the impact of social and economic structures within eighteenth century commercial society on friendship development. An eloquent rejoinder to the Marxist and conservative tradition of emphasizing the inimical effects of industrialized society and labor processes on the nature of personal relationships, Silver (1990) reasons that the rise of commercial society in the eighteenth century provided the conditions for a new and 'morally superior form of friendship' to emerge (1990, p.1481). Drawing on the work of Adam Smith and other commentators associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, friendship is not understood as a response to the instrumental bonds of a market-orientated way of organizing, but as a key moral dimension to a new liberal society that was seen to be emerging at the time. Put differently, in the context of social shifts towards impersonalized modes of administration and organizing, friendship relies more on intimacy for developing interpersonal trust. In Silver's (1990) analysis, an ideal notion of friendship is defined against an impersonal public sphere, but also dependent upon it for its emergence as a relationship to be enjoyed for its own sake.

Unlike much of the postpositivist research on friendship colored by a managerial bias, Silver (1990) examines how the economic and social circumstances of people's lives influence the forms that friendship takes. Silver's (1990) analysis is specific to eighteenth century commercial society, but the emphasis placed on the

historical context of friendship can help organization researchers to move beyond treating workplace friendships as an ahistorical relationship, disembodied from the social realm. Silver (1990) cautions against assuming that friendship lacks any form of instrumentality (e.g., a friend may be instrumental in seeking out the other for a shoulder to cry on) or that business relations (including workplace friendships) are entirely instrumental; equally, it is wise not to prejudge the character of either, or their impact on each other. For example, Marks (1994) analyses the historical processes in which institutional structures moved toward increasing functional specificity (e.g. economic production and home maintenance), a move which laid the foundations for dividing society into public and private domains. Challenging the tradition among sociologists to view the public realm as a death zone for intimacy, Marks (1994) argues, based on empirical evidence from the General Society Survey and the Northern Californian Community Study, that one instance of the public sphere of life – the workplace – can be an important site for experiencing intimacy. In conclusion, Marks (1994, p. 854) suggests that sociologists should abandon the intimacy dichotomy between a ‘cold world of organizations and a potentially warm private sector’.

Somewhat similarly, Pescosolido and Rubin (2000) note how individuals are less firmly embedded in institutional commitments and structures, but highlight how this enables rather constrains individuals to develop friendship networks that are more flexible, even if they are ephemeral. Instead of reading this as the death knell for fostering intimacy within friendships, Pescosolido and Rubin (2000) contend that individuals are finding new ways of maintaining intimacy under circumstances of residential and work mobility, such as taking advantage of the rich array of electronic forms of communication to sustain these friendships. Indeed, a blizzard of electronic

communication technology colors the contemporary landscape of work (e.g., internet, voice mail, e-mail, cell/mobile phones, Skype, social media), all of which may hasten the development of intimacy and informal workplace relationships such as friendship. Sias, Pedersen, Gallagher, & Kopaneva's (2012) study of the impact of information communication technologies on workplace friendships indicates that personality, shared tasks and perceived similarity are the most important factors to coworker friendship initiation, and the importance of physical proximity to workplace friendship is diminishing in the electronically connected workplace. More research needs to be conducted on how work friends understand workplace friendship within the electronically connected organization, which may generate new theoretical insights into how workplace friendships may be less readily identifiable as 'unique' relationships (Sias, 2009). Workplace friendships that might have once been conditioned by close proximity within organizational settings appear to be less bounded by specific geographical work contexts (Sias et al. 2012), but we have yet to explore fully the implications of this at a time when friendships more generally demonstrate greater suffusion with other personal relationships (Spencer & Pahl, 2006).

The benefit of understanding workplace friendships as a social relationship may be harnessed elsewhere. Returning to the influence of technologies of communication on relationships and noting the flurry of quantitative studies that have examined this influence (LeFebvre, Blackburn, & Brody, 2015; Rains, Brunner, & Oman, 2016; Ruppel, 2015), unanswered questions remain about how the lived experiences of relationships (e.g., friendships, familial, romantic and sexual relations, love and acquaintanceships) differ fundamentally in societies at different stages in the development of technologies of communication. Similarly, (social) psychology

scholars with an interest in social relationships may draw benefits from a sociological approach that locates the understanding and experience of human relationships historically and socially. For example, Hatfield, Bensman, & Rapson (2012) demonstrate how the concept of passionate love has occupied psychologists and other social scientists for decades, typically with a view to measuring it. In reviewing this field of activity, Hatfield et al. (2012) demonstrate how scholars' conceptions of the nature of love have changed over the years, and how historical and scientific changes about love are interconnected, reflected in the various scales designed to measure passionate love. Such research findings are in tune with a sociology of friendship that alerts us to how ongoing historical and social change impacts on relationships, but also how such changes shape bodies of knowledge on relationships generated within different academic disciplines using specific research techniques and theories.

### **Workplace friendships as personal relationships**

The sociology of friendship has been attentive to the role friendships play at a time when individuals appear to exercise greater agency over how they understand and define themselves (Cronin, 2015; Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). This is not to say individuals exercise unencumbered freedom in how these relationships are put to that use. Rather, it is to acknowledge, as Allan intones, that as individual choice and freedom of self-expression has increased, 'people's social identities are no longer shaped so clearly by the institutional or structural conditions of their lives' (2001, p.333). From this sociological perspective, researchers can craft more nuanced and qualitative understandings of the personal significance of workplace friendships, as relationships that are pivotal in conditioning the

possibilities for human flourishing (Fritz, 2014). For example, workplace friendships can function as crucibles for individuals to construct and sustain identities and a meaningful sense of their place in the social world (Andrew and Montague, 1998; Rumens, 2011). In this frame, the social and personal aspects of friendship are not divorced from one another but intertwine (Morgan, 2009).

To illustrate, eschewing the term ‘network’, Spencer and Pahl (2006) adopt the concept of ‘personal communities’ to capture the richness of the content and meaning of people’s friendships at a dyadic and community level. When individuals embed their social identities within their social networks, they become ‘personal communities’. The idea that individuals may set much store by their personal communities, which in turn may shift in time and across different contexts, opens up opportunities for researchers to study how the social aspects of workplace friendships shape the personal value they are accorded, not least in terms of helping individuals at work to explore who they are as persons. As Spencer and Pahl’s (2006) study reveals, when asked to depict and describe their personal communities, interviewees provided exceptionally rich qualitative accounts about how work friends can perform varied and multiple roles, taking on particular salience when friendship opportunities are strongly influenced by obstacles, opportunities and changes in work and home life. Some organization research hints at the possibilities here.

Rumens (2011) taps into the sociology of gay men’s friendships (Nardi, 1999) and explores how gay men in the UK can use workplace friendships as sources of emotional and material support to enable them to confront the heteronormativity of the workplace. In some situations, these friendships form the basis for organizing politically in the workplace such as when gay men, along with their work friends, advance equality agendas that address sexual orientation. Workplace friendships may

also play a generative role, helping gay men to develop and endorse new identities when, for example, they come out as 'gay' to work colleagues, become fathers and civil partners in ways that conform to and contest social and organizational norms about what it is to be 'gay'. Additionally, some of the gay men interviewed by Rumens (2011) fostered workplace friendships with heterosexual men and women that contained sexual and romantic components, disrupting normative understandings of same- and cross-sex workplace friendships as platonic relationships, always distinguishable from romantic and sexual relations (cf. Berman et al. 2002).

Exciting here is that we might glimpse insights into 'new' organizational forms of friendship that transcend normative regimes about how relationships ought to be structured, categorized and ascribed meaning. Indeed, empirical insights into localized accounts of workplace friendships may connect to wider social debates about the role of friendship in an age of economic arrangements structured by neoliberalism. While neoliberalism is a polysemic and contested term, it is deployed typically as a mode of political and economic rationality that has been characterized by deregulation of labor markets and privatization. As Harvey (2005) argues, it is a 'theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (2005, p. 2). While neoliberalism is not an end-state such that it is more accurate to say that processes of neoliberalization are taking place, the current political consensus is that the interests of a society, conceptualized as a set of atomized individuals, are best served through the operation of market forces. As May (2012) reasons, the sovereignty currently given to economic factors and the privileging of a neoliberal agenda exerts tremendous influence on how we understand

ourselves and relate to others. Neoliberalism, as May writes, is said to encourage us to consider our work and lives in economic terms, as consumers and entrepreneurs, and that this economic hue is imbued into our 'political, social, and personal relationships' (2012, p. 30). Relationships are thus considered a site of struggle as individuals negotiate who they are asked to be within the confines of neoliberalism (e.g. the consumer, the entrepreneur) and who they want to be.

Against this neoliberal landscape, May (2012) debates the question of how friendship can provide not only an alternative to the neoliberal structuring of relationships, but also how friendship can provide a relational context for challenging neoliberal practices. In the end, May (2012, p.128) avers that 'close friendships' provide 'safe' spaces for self-invention. The *non-economic* quality of 'close friendships' (characterized by one friend seeking the betterment of the other friend for the sake of the other; passion and intimacy; a shared past history; and the meaning that friendship brings to the lives of friends), rather than the economic characteristic of workplace friendships, is said to condition the possibility for a politics of solidarity against the incursions of neoliberalism in everyday life. As indicated earlier, friendships can cultivate spaces for friends to reflect on their social, political and economic positions (Andrew & Montague, 1998), but it is in relations of equality and trust that exist between close friends that May (2012) argues can translate into movements of solidarity against neoliberalism. May's (2012) thesis is short on the empirical realities to support such a claim; nonetheless, this represents an exciting opportunity for researchers to generate in-depth qualitative data on how the personal aspects of workplace friendships can/not incite transformations within and across wider social and economic milieus marked by neoliberalism.



### **Research questions for developing a sociology of workplace friendships**

This article has sought to encourage friendship scholars to problematize and escape the current dominant predisposition within organization research that examines the significance of workplace friendships in terms of achieving economic goals. One way forward proposed in this article is to draw insights from a sociology of friendship (Adams & Allan, 1998; Allan, 1989; Pahl, 2000; Silver, 1990), opening up the field to more explorations of workplace friendships as social and personal processes of organizing that have wider constitutive effects on individuals and organization beyond those concerned with managerial notions of performance, productivity and efficiency (Grey & Sturdy, 2007; Sias, 2009). Oriented as such, researchers might embrace different sets of research questions to supplement a well-established but largely postpositivistic organization literature on workplace friendships (Sias, 2009). To aid that endeavor, research questions are provided that relate to the three sociological frames outlined above. Since there is potential overlap with the three frames, some of the following research questions intersect along more than one frame.

For example, re-framing workplace friendship as a set of practices that constitute a social process of organizing, researchers might ask: What are the different practices of workplace friendship, and how do they differ according to the work contexts in which they take place? What are the practices of friendship that shape the experiences of 'workplace friendship', and are these practices 'unique'? How do the practices of workplace friendship intersect with practices associated with other organizational relationships such as romance, sex, relations between peers and with managers? Why and how are overlapping relationship practices significant for

individuals in the workplace? How do workplace friendship practices shape processes of organizing, organizational cultures and structures?

Further, the future study of workplace friendships as social and personal relationships could supplement positivistic research by exploring how workplace friendships might be less rigidly constrained by social and organizational norms, perhaps revealing alternative modes of organizing in and outside the workplace. A sociology of workplace friendship would be structured by concerns about understanding action, doing and the everyday (Morgan, 2011). Pursuing some of these themes, organization researchers might consider the following research questions: How do multiple personal, social, economic and organizational contexts influence the formation and maintenance of workplace friendship? How are workplace friendships negotiated within and across specific contexts, and what are the consequences for individuals involved in doing them? What are the different capacities and motives individuals have for using workplace friendships to build identities and selves? How do the material circumstances of individuals affect the capacity of individuals to establish workplace friendships and the roles these relationships play in their work lives? How can workplace friendships contribute to wider processes of social organizing within societies? This last question gives rise to another pressing line of inquiry concerning how workplace friendship might provide opportunities to resist neoliberal practices and economic arrangements as they are currently understood and experienced.

## **Conclusion**

This article does not deny that organizations have an important role to play in managing workplace friendships, just as it does not wish to downplay the salience and

high priority accorded to work rather than friendship in the lives of employees who choose not to engage in workplace friendships. Rather, with the types of research questions outlined above in mind, future research on workplace friendships can invite empirical studies on what Fritz (2014, p. 464) describes as ‘human thriving in workplace contexts’. On that front this article speaks to human development scholars about the benefit of studying friendships as social and personal relationships, some of whom have cited friendship as an important but often neglected dimension of human flourishing, especially if we are to take seriously the concept of human development in its fullest sense (Alkire, 2002).

On that basis, this article has implications for organizational practice that is focused on ‘human thriving’ or flourishing (Fritz, 2014). For instance, employers might develop more inclusive workplace relationship policies that are qualitatively informed by empirical accounts of what employees feel about work policies designed to manage the lived experiences of friendship at work. As research shows, organization policies play an important role in endorsing the formation of certain workplace relations over others, according ‘value’ to some but not others (Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris & Shepherd, 2006). In terms of friendship then, consider what might (not) happen when an employee’s ‘best friend’ dies. Workplace bereavement policies seldom recognize friends as being of an equivalent loss to a blood family member to warrant compassionate leave, yet they might be more significant as caregivers and intimates than blood family members (see Weeks et al. 2001). In that regard, this article urges organizations to pay closer attention to the diverse meanings individuals attribute to workplace friendships, a consequence of which might be reformulating or devising new workplace policies on bereavement and workplace relationships. As envisioned above, a sociology of workplace

friendship can pave the way for organization policy and practice that is more sensitive to the sheer diversity in the lived relational experiences of workplace friendships, and its role in facilitating human flourishing in and outside the domain of work.

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