Abstract

Drawing on a review of recent international literature, this article argues for the first time that an understanding of, and engagement with, the theory and practice of friendship is essential to working alongside those who have care experience. Drawing on theory from philosophy, psychology and sociology, the care system is explored as a unique and challenging context for making and keeping the reciprocal, caring friendships which research suggests are important for a 'happy, healthy life'. Our analysis shows how theories of friendship have failed to consider the friendship experiences of those in the care system. We suggest that including these experiences offers new opportunities to develop theory and practice in the field of friendship. We argue friendship is an essential human need and, as such, should be placed centrally in assessment and intervention work, encouraging social workers to support positive and enduring friendships for the people they work with.

Introduction

Friendship is a concept that is commonly understood and prized by most people. Indeed, many children and young people place friendship at the top of the list of what they value most in life (Rees, 2017). This 'felt' experience of friendship is complemented by a vast and growing body of research which has identified that friendship is related to health and wellbeing, with the number and quality of friendships impacting on mental and physical health and feelings of happiness (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Demir and Demir, 2015). In turn, the absence of friendship and social connections is of increasing concern, with research linking loneliness and social isolation to a range of physical and mental health problems including depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, poorer immune functioning, and serious illness (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006).

Despite this, friendship has received very little attention from social work academics (Furman et al., 2009). Indeed, in relation to looked after children, 'friendship work' has been an underdeveloped area of practice (Children's Society, 2015). National practice frameworks such as *Getting if Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC) in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2010) and the *Framework for Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* in England and Wales (Department of Health, 2000) make passing reference to friendship as an important area of

the child's world. Review processes also require that professionals take a holistic view of all aspects of the child or young person's wellbeing at regular intervals, which should include important relationships such as friendships (Emond et al., 2016).   However, the extent to which friendships regularly feature in social work assessment or review processes is not known, as research examining this has rarely been undertaken (Thomas, 2010).

The aim of this article is to draw together a range of international research on care experience and friendship, evidencing why friendship work should be central to social work practice with those who have care experience and suggesting new directions for future research. The paper will begin by explicating the methods we used in our review of the literature, before moving on to a critical exploration of the complexities of defining friendship, arguing that language matters for the doing of 'friendship work' in social work. The available evidence about friendship and care experience is then considered. Until now, the few studies that have examined friendship and care experience have not engaged in wider theoretical debates within friendship studies. Our analysis will show how the limited empirical literature on care experience and friendship suggests we need to develop new models for thinking about friendship that are better suited to the social work and social care task and better reflect the lives of people with care experience.

Methods

A purposive search of the literature on friendship and care experience, published between 2000 and the end of September 2019, was undertaken in order to answer three key questions: what is friendship; why is it important in people's lives; what is known about the friendship experiences and practices of people with care experience? While we sought to be rigorous and transparent in our approach to gathering literature, the very limited amount of work undertaken on this topic meant we were inclusive of very small studies and grey literature in a way that would not be typical of a systematic review (Popay et al., 2006). Databases consulted included ProQuest, Ovid, Scopus, Social Care Online, Web of Science, DiscoverEd and Google Scholar. Further citations were found by searching the bibliographies of previously published work. Search terms included: friend, friendship, peer relationships AND care experience OR looked after OR in care OR care leaver OR foster care OR residential care OR care system OR out-of-home care. We did not include adoptees as a looked after

group as their placements are not monitored or supported in the same way as other care placements.

Only eleven empirical studies with some explicit focus on friendship or reciprocal, caring peer relationships for those in the looked after or care system or those leaving care were identified (Ridge and Miller, 2000; Emond 2003, 2014; Purves, 2005; Leve et al., 2007; Sala-Roca et al., 2012; Mahon and Curtis, 2013; Adley and Jupp Kina, 2014; Sen, 2016; Rogers, 2017; Mann-Feder, 2018). We also made use of a helpful meta-analysis of studies exploring the peer relationships of those with an experience of adoption or foster care (DeLuca et al., 2018). Whilst research relating to the experiences of children who had been adopted were not within the parameters of our review, we included this meta-analysis because of its focus on foster care.

The lack of research on the topic prompted us to look more widely at studies of care experience and care leavers more generally, where studying friendship was not the primary focus of the study but the importance of friendship was reported as part of the findings. A further thirty studies were identified, however, the findings on friendship within them was limited (e.g. Hyde et al., 2017; Schofield et al., 2017; Blakeslee and Best, 2019; Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Refaeli et al., 2019). The research reviewed was international in scope, demonstrating that friendship is important in the lives of those with care experience across the globe. The key insights these further studies provided in relation to friendship were that: those with care experience highly value friendship, friends offer important practical and emotional support in the care system and when transitioning out of the care system, and that having friends or supportive social networks improves the chances of a successful post care transition.

Roche's (2019) scoping review of children's experiences in residential care in the global South also identifies eight studies which explore some of the important roles peers in residential care play for each other including sharing material resources, meeting physical and emotional needs, and helping each other with practical tasks like homework and chores. Several of these studies also associate having friends with greater overall wellbeing and happiness for children in residential care (Yendork and Somhlaba, 2105; Fournier et al., 2014). Studies of the social support of care leavers were not reviewed unless they explicitly discussed friendship as a feature of social support. There were also studies on peer relationships more generally, which were discounted unless they described caring, reciprocal peer relationships.

Our review showed that the friendship experiences of those with care experience appeared to have been neglected by researchers across a range of disciplines. We were interested in why this might be given the strength of evidence that exists about the importance of friendship in all domains of human development as well as wellbeing and happiness across the life course (Haworth and Hart, 2007; Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011; Demir and Demir, 2015; Alwin et al., 2018). We also found limited engagement with the wider interdisciplinary field of friendship studies or with key theories of friendship, such as those presented by Adam and Allen (1999) or Spencer and Phal (2006). For this reason, we begin our discussion by engaging with key literature from philosophy, psychology, and sociology in order to highlight the complexity of defining friendship and some important theoretical debates currently absent from discussions within social work.

Defining friendship

Frequently throughout much of the existing literatures on both young people generally and care experienced people in particular, the terms 'peer' and 'friend' are used interchangeably. This lack of distinction is problematic for several reasons and requires some discussion before an examination of the specific literature on friendship is undertaken. First, the term 'peer' is frequently employed in the psychological literature to encompass all those of a similar age (Naylor, 2011). It is asserted that '… from the peer group the child will find, friends, companions, rivals, co-workers, future spouses' (Healy, 2018: 241). Peer relationships seem to encompass a range of 'horizontal' relationships with very different qualities and meanings attached to them, with age the central, homogenous, binding factor. More nuanced psychological literature has shown that the precise qualities of peer relationships influence the impact they have on behaviour and adjustment; emphasising different dynamics at play in reciprocated friendships as compared to other peer relationships (Molloy et al., 2011).

Second, we would argue that 'peer relationships' is not a term that most children or young people use to describe their relationships; instead it is a term that has clinical or research applications. While it might be useful for a social worker to thinking broadly about how a young person gets along with those of his/her own age and why he/she might be facing difficulties with this, it is important for social workers to look deeper into the specific qualities

of these relationships as understood and defined by young people themselves. Indeed, it may be suggested that the use of the term 'peer' extracts the close bond, shared experiences/views from the relationship, making it easier for adults to dismiss their significance.

Despite our preference for the term friendship, we recognise that it does not have 'a shared or stable meaning' and has been widely debated in sociology, anthropology, philosophy and psychology (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 41). Theories of friendship from across a range of disciplines are, however, a helpful starting point for thinking about how we might, as social workers, develop conversations about friendship with other professionals and the care experienced people we support.

Since ancient Greece, philosophers have taken a keen interest in defining friendship often categorising it as one of the essential 'goods' of life. As Aristotle argues in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, '… without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods' (1998: 192). This early emphasis in moral philosophy on friendship as a 'good' is perhaps part of the reason that it tends to be defined in wholly positive terms. In a helpful overview of a range of philosophical perspectives on friendship Lynch (2015, p. 9) explores the etymology of the word friend, showing how this '… connects its meaning with love, freedom and choice . . . a voluntary relationship that includes a mutual and equal emotional bond, mutual and equal care and goodwill, as well as pleasure.' The words voluntary, equal and mutual or reciprocal are regularly repeated in the literature, as in Blieszner and Roberto's (2003: 159) definition: '… a voluntary relationship that encompasses intimacy, equality, shared interests, and pleasurable or need-satisfying interactions.'

Hartup and Stevens (1997), working within the discipline of developmental psychology, argue that there are two essential structures to friendship: deep and surface. The deep structure of friendship is 'reciprocity', while the surface structure relates the exchanges and interactions between friends. The deep structure abides, while the surface structures alter as we develop and our environment changes across the life course. So, a young child might engage in play with their friend and a teenager might stay up texting, both are surface structures. The deeper structure or essence of friendship is reciprocity.

Sociologists and anthropologists are less comfortable with naming the essential qualities of friendship. However, Spencer and Pahl (2006) argue that it is useful to consider the extent to which friendships are chosen or given (as in the case of kinship relationships)

and the level of commitment within these relationships. They describe a process of suffusion in which friends may become 'family like' because of the levels of love, responsibility and continuity in these relationships; while some family relationships may be described as 'friend like' because of the confidences, interests and free time shared with each other. For these reasons sociologists often argue that it is helpful to adopt an open-ended approach to the definition of friendship and take account of '… the diversity and multidimensionality of friendships as they are lived' (Heaphy and Davies, 2012: 312).

Sociologists have also been interested in understanding the way that history and social contexts shape definitions, experiences and opportunities for friendship (Adams and Allan, 1999). Contexts change over time and can include 'structural, cultural, spatial, and temporal' dimensions (Adams and Allan, 1999:5). Other relationships are increasingly recognised as part of this 'context' too (Cronin, 2015). This interest in how networks of relationships impact on and shape other relationships also includes a growing interest in how intersecting categories such as race, disability, gender, sexuality and class impact on friendship choice and practices among children and young people (e.g. Punch and Vanderbeck, 2018).

Research exploring the role of social media and the digital environment on friendship practices is further altering definitions of friendship. Raghunandan (2018; 423) points out that the term friend, which once '… implied one had at some point face-to-face interaction with the person deemed a "friend", today it includes a person we may have never met in person.' Technology has opened up new ways to practice friendship and young people are drawing on well-established face-to face methods alongside contemporary digital technologies in order to do so (Raghunandan 2018).

'Looked After Care': A challenging context for making and keeping friends?

The terminology used to describe children 'in care' or children who are 'looked after' by the state varies throughout the UK and internationally, as do the legislative arrangements and requirements related to this care. In this paper, we have generally tried to use the term 'care experienced'. A growing number of care experienced advocacy groups have argued that this term is helpful as it focuses on care as one element of experience for an individual, rather than being the defining feature of a person's life, which is suggested by terms such as a 'child in care', a 'looked after child', 'children without parental care', children in 'out-of-home care'

or a 'care leaver'. In addition, it recognises the lifelong impact of having been 'looked after' (The Independent Care Review, 2020).

Evidence from across the world suggests that risk of significant abuse and/or neglect is the main reason why children become looked after (Gilligan, 2015). This can make it challenging to isolate the outcomes of the care system, with some evidence suggesting outcomes for children are clearly improved by being looked after within it (Forrester et al., 2009). The diversity of care pathways and settings also make it difficult to generalise. Depending on need and available resources children can be placed in a range of settings including foster care, a residential unit/home or residential school, a kinship placement or a secure unit. In recent years, governments throughout the world have identified the need to improve outcomes for children in the care system with efforts focusing primarily on two key areas: improving planning for looked after children to ensure they achieve stability and continuity in a placement that meets their needs (often described as improved permanency planning) and improving throughcare and aftercare support, particularly by extending opportunities for looked after children to remain in care for longer and to take up educational opportunities (Munro et al., 2011; Blakey et al. 2012; Gilligan, 2015). Work has also been going on to take stock of and make amends for the historical abuse of children within care systems throughout the world (Sköld and Swain, 2015).

Adam and Allan's (1999) framework for contextualising friendship highlights the importance of understanding the '… conditions external to the development, maintenance, and dissolution of specific friendships', suggesting the need to explicitly and systematically explore looked after care as a unique context shaping opportunities for friendship (Adam and Allan, 1999:4). None of the studies we reviewed engaged explicitly with this theory but their findings begin to paint a picture of how complex and challenging the 'care' context might be for friendship. As most of these contextual factors have been explored in detail elsewhere, although not in reference to friendship, we will only explore these aspects briefly. Our aim in so doing is to draw out the implications for friendship work and suggest future directions for research and practice.

A lack of security, continuity and trust

Although there are efforts underway to improve permanency planning and continuity for children in the care system (e.g. Mitchell and Porter, 2016), the lack of stability and continuity in placements is a well-recognised feature of the care system for many (Ward, 2006; Boddy, 2013). Too many children in the care system are without '… a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity' or '… a secure stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond' (HM Government, 2010: 11). The physical and psychological consequences of this lack of security and continuity have been well documented (Natalier and Johnson, 2015). However, in our review we were particularly interested to draw out how these issues explicitly impact on friendship. As the previous section has identified, friendship is not the same as other close or intimate relationships like family and partners.

The available studies of those with care experience offer limited insight into what helps and hinders children and young people in making and keeping friends. However, they do show that trust is a key issue. Arguably, it can be hard for some children and young people to trust people and take risks to make new friends when they may feel as if they have been repeatedly let down by professionals, family members and by the care system itself (Ridge and Millar, 2000; Holland and Crowley, 2013; Rogers, 2017). The wider friendship literature also points to trust as a key pillar for friendship and shows that friendships in childhood offer important opportunities for rehearsing relationship skills and learning about what trust is, who might be trustworthy and how to build trust and safety in relationships (Blieszner and Roberto, 2003). Taking risks and reaching out to new people or accepting offers of interest from others has often been discussed in relationship to carers or social workers but how care experienced children learn to do this with friends and how professionals can help them has received little attention (Children's Society, 2015).

All human beings experience multiple transitions during their life course (Danely and Lynch, 2015). Definitions are contested, but Storø's (2017: 776) review of a range of studies proposes that many definitions coalesce around the idea that transition is '… a complex process involving moving from one status to another over time.' Many looked after children experience changes in where they live and who looks after them. In addition, these transitions into new 'placements' are not always well planned or managed but rather many occur at times of crisis (either individually, familially or as a result of pressure of resources). Transitions involve identity adjustments and are influenced by temporal and spatial factors (Dima and Skehill, 2011). The physical move into a new geographic area and a new school,

which often accompanies placement moves, disrupts existing friendships and can make finding new friends more difficult (Happer et al., 2006; Bown, 2010; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). Accelerated transitions, due to issues of resources and poor planning, also reduce opportunities to say goodbye or enjoy transition rituals, compounding feelings of grief and loss (Unrau et al., 2008).

Interestingly, the wider literature on transitions suggests that friends can help us to adjust to all sorts of new things, providing an emotional anchor and practical support to deal with new challenges (Alwin et al., 2018). Some have even suggested that keeping friends or making new friends could be one of the most important factors in ensuring positive transition experiences across the life course (Hartup and Stevens, 1997). For those with care experience there is some evidence that friends can provide crucial emotional and practical support and help young people to feel a sense of belonging and positive identity beyond their care status (Dixon and Stein, 2002; Törrönen, 2006; Hiles et al., 2014). Those leaving care also have a much easier time if they have friends of any kind (Dixon, 2008; Refaeli et al., 2019). How these friendships are understood and defined by those with care experience, what enables the development of these friendships or how they endure over time, is much less clear and requires further investigation.

Rules, power and risk averse cultures

While residential or secure care may include additional institutional rhythms and collective requirements, being in any care context means that your life is more regulated and that there is more surveillance (through a range of mechanisms including case notes, assessment reports, review meetings, etc.) (Emond et al., 2016). The operation of power and surveillance within the care system is under researched (McIntosh et al., 2010), and has not been explored as an important contextual factor within friendship studies. Interestingly, our review identified a range of studies which showed how the rules and cultures of the care system and the use of professional power placed constraints on the making and keeping of friends. In them, respondents describe requirements to complete police checks on friends and their families, overly rigid interpretations of health and safety guidelines, and risk averse cultures (Happer et al., 2006; Milligan and Stevens, 2006; Bown, 2010; Gallagher and Green, 2012).

Young people also highlighted the ways in which the physical environment in care homes was institutional and therefore 'embarrassing', making them reluctant to take their friends into these spaces (Blower et al., 2004). Emond's (2003) work has highlighted the ways in which the everyday practices in some residential units, such as isolating young people in crisis from the wider residential group, are difficult for the other young people in the residential unit to cope with. Rather, fellow young people wanted to continue to care for their friend in trouble and regarded the tactics of staff, often intended to provide privacy and maintain the confidentiality of the young person in crisis, as '… a rejection of their skills or a dismissal of their experiences' (Emond, 2003: 333).

A further theme emerging from our critical literature review was how friendship was seen and valued by adults caring for children. Foster carers, residential workers and social workers do not always recognise the importance of friendships nor do they work to support friendships, in line with what might be expected of a 'good parent' (Lipscombe et al., 2003; Bown, 2010; McMurray et al., 2011;). This can be motivated by an impulse to protect children or minimise risk, especially when children are perceived to lack good judgement about who a good friend might be or carers have fears about children being exploited in some way (Fisher et al., 2009; Sen, 2016). The huge amount of research evidence on the risks of negative peer influence may have contributed to these anxieties in practice and this focus on risk in practice and research may explain why the friendships of those with care experience have so rarely been studied (Sanders et al., 2014). A lack of engagement in friendship work might also relate to a lack of knowledge or understanding about how to 'do' this work (Hammond et al., 2018). This is important given that children and young people who are looked after will often need more support and guidance than others their age to develop the skills and the positive view of themselves which are so fundamental to developing positive, reciprocal friendships (DeLuca et al., 2018).

There is limited research concerning the use of digital environments among those with care experience. What is available suggests social workers and carers tend to be risk averse in their approach to technology and lack the knowledge and skills to help young people navigate the use of these environments (May-Chahal et al. 2014; Sen 2106; Macdonald et al. 2017; Hammond et al. 2018). However these environments may create alternative places for friendship and support and '… becoming digitally autonomous is a progressively important

part of safeguarding and transitions to independence' for those with care experience (Hammond et al 2018: 2072).

Other care experienced young people

The available studies of those with care experience appear to lack an in-depth understanding of people's personal communities. As a result, we know very little about the network of relationships for those with care experience and how these impact on opportunities for, and definitions of, friendship (Brady and Gilligan, 2019). However, studies have suggested that some young people particularly value friendships with others in the care system (Rogers, 2017; Gallagher and Green, 2012; McMurray et al., 2011; Adley and Jupp Kina, 2014). Rogers (2017) and McMurray et al. (2011) both argue this shared experience can help young people deal with the stigma of being in care.

Emond (2003, 2014) suggests that children and young people in residential care demonstrate care for each other in a range of ways, including providing support and advice, sharing material possessions, giving encouragement, and sticking up for each other. Bown also found a clear relationship between 'friends, safety and wellbeing' with friends playing 'important roles in listening and looking out for participants' safety and quality of care' (2010; 229). When young people leave care they often miss the contact with those they lived with in care and find it difficult to maintain contact (Morgan, 2012).

However, other children in care may not always be viewed as potential friends. Research indicates high levels of violence and bullying in some care settings (Mazzone et al., 2018).   Having friends outside of the care system may mitigate against some of these risks and help young people feel more 'normal' (Gallagher and Green, 2012).

Discussion

This review has shown that there is very limited evidence about how those with care experience understand and experience friendship, learn how to be a friend and accept friendship. This matters because friendship is good for health and wellbeing across the life course. Friendship is also a good in itself, often bringing fulfilment and happiness. Supporting

children and young people with care experience to make and keep caring reciprocal friendships is one clear way to improve life satisfaction and secure a fulfilling and happy life.

Defining friendship is of crucial importance to how we engage with service users and 'do' friendship work as social workers. As our critical review of the literature has shown, friendship is not easy to define and practitioners will have different experiences and ideas that have shaped what it means to them. The evidence about the importance of friendship discussed in this article should encourage a reframing of friendship as a crucial part of the wider circles of relationship in the lives of children, young people and their parents or carers. Central to this is an exploration of what this word means to them, what they want from these relationships and what practitioners can do to support them with these relationships.

Talking to young people about friendship is a crucial first step but we also need to be more observant, examining how friendship is practiced in different places and spaces, including virtual or online spaces, at different times (Hammond et al.,2108; Raghunandan, 2018). This has the potential to offers us a deeper insight into how context is limiting or opening up opportunities for friendship for individuals and groups of young people, and the skills that young people might need to negotiate friendships in different places.

However, friendship can sometimes be negative, painful and even dangerous (Heaphy and Davies, 2012; Smart et al., 2012). As C.S. Lewis (2002) famously said, friendship can be a school for virtue or for vice. Friendships may not always be positive but this gives us all the more reason to engage young people, seeking to understand the qualities they see in these relationships and exploring the levels of choice and commitment they feel within these relationships. Misusing professional power or hiding behind institutional procedures to limit risk is not a helpful way of managing the potential 'dark side' of friendship, young people need to learn through trial and error how to navigate friendships and care for themselves and others in relationship. They often have greater insight into what constitutes good relationships or friendships than we might give them credit for and it is our job to support their learning and development (Holland, 2010; Hyde et al., 2017).

Children and young people need support with understanding their own story; how and why they came into care, where they have lived and why, and to reflect on who the important people have been in that story (Emond et al., 2016). Understanding this for themselves is the starting point. They then need support to know how to explain and present their care experience to friends and others (should they so wish); they also need a safe space to work

through any worries they might have about how disclosures may influence the behaviour of others (McMurray et al., 2011). They need strategies and tips for how to deal with rejection and cruelty and they need to know we will be there to comfort them and advocate for them (Dansey et al., 2019).

At the present time in the UK all young people face challenges in a situation of ongoing economic uncertainty, recession and austerity (Blackman and Rogers, 2017). Children and young people in care and care leavers are at the sharp end of this this situation. They are more likely to come from situations of economic and social deprivation and poverty and to be reliant on a range of social services which have faced continued cuts under conditions of austerity (Davidson and Whittaker 2017). Without a stable place to live, support to access employment, training or further education, access to services to address ongoing physical or mental health needs they may have, care leavers face huge barriers to making friends and building the positive social networks which will support and sustain them into the future (Power and Raphael, 2018).

Conclusion

This review has highlighted to us the need for practitioners to keep a focus on the child and young person rather than the 'looked after' label. Whilst the reasons leading to being accommodated and the experience of being looked after can bring huge challenges and adversities, so much of the support we offer must keep in mind the very 'normal' features of growing up. Learning to be and have a friend is a vital part of this for all children. Adults are key to creating the conditions for this to happen.

Whilst friendship has rarely been the focus of any research for children or adults with care experience, this paper has highlighted how important friendship is for this group. Looked after children's friendships are often constructed by the adults and systems around them as 'peer relationships' arguably minimising the power and value that they hold for children. Philosophical and sociological literature has shown that friendships requires trust, familiarity, reciprocity and availability. All too often the wider care literature highlights the ways in which the 'care system' can interrupt rather than support these conditions for growth. This is concerning given what we know about the importance of friendship for health, happiness and

wellbeing. This review has suggested that policy and practice with care experienced people needs to recognise friendship as a basic need and as a condition for a good life.

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