Effect of age on friendships and family patterns | proposal

1) The Title of the Project

Family and Friendship: an investigation of the relationship between age and patterns of friendship within and outside the family: a discourse analysis.

2) Rationale, Aims and Objectives

Friends and family are clearly important components of everyone's lives. They can increase self-esteem, well-being and provide opportunities for socialising. Evidence from the psychological literature suggests that friendships are beneficial, if they are of the right type (Hartup & Stevens, 1997).

This study will examine the attitudes that two different age-groups have towards friendships and their families. There has been increasing discussion in the sociological literature by some authors (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001) that friendships are taking over the traditional place of the family in people's social networks. This study aims to examine this idea in two age-groups, one 18-28 years old and the second, 50-60 years old. It will also aim to look at an aspect of the detraditionalization hypothesis and judge whether the evidence supports it.

The objectives in order to reach this aim are to carry out a series of interviews with people in those two age-groups and then carry out a discourse analysis of that data. This will pinpoint the different ways in which people think about their families and friends in two different age-groups.

3) Research Questions

The research question will be to examine whether there is a clear difference between the types of friendships formed at different ages. Do younger people rely more on their friends for support in times of crisis than older people? Do older people include more of their kin as their closest friends? How do both groups view their families generally in terms of who they rely on? Alternatively, is there little evidence for a difference in the way people separate and view their friends and their families?

4) Literature Review

Individualization is a sweeping social change that has been seen to affect many societies around the world. Beck & Beck Gernsheim (2001) point to two different meanings of individualization. The first refers to the weakening of traditional social forms used in the analysis of societies; these include class, gender and the family. Beck & Beck Gernsheim (2001) identify this change as occurring as a result of the weakening of tradition, religion and state. The second aspect of individualization is the way in which modern societies are placing new demands on their citizens. This can be seen in the huge numbers of regulations that attempt to control every aspect of our lives. Levels of mobility, argue Beck & Beck Gernsheim (2001), are higher than ever in many societies and, as a result, people move freely for economic reasons as there is greater emphasis on individual fulfilment.

A natural corollary of this movement is that family ties are frequently left behind in the search for economic opportunity. And so, in the struggle for individual human relatedness, if the family is left behind, to where does the modern member of society turn? Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan (2001) point to

so-called ' families of choice', which are essentially groups of friends. Weeks et al. (2001) see society as being at a transition point, from more traditional ideas of family to this notion of the family that has been chosen from a group of friends. People are specifically choosing their family of friends to fit in with their own personal beliefs and attitudes and sometimes choosing to get away from their biological families who do not represent their attitudes and beliefs. This process of choosing friends is seen by Weeks at al. (2001) as a process by which people are shaping their own identities.

While Weeks et al.'s (2001) research concentrates on non-heterosexuals, they argue that these ' families of choice' are in fact taking over from ' families of fate' throughout society in the UK and elsewhere. This has been similarly understood by Giddens (1992) in terms of transformations in the interpersonal domain. In particular, Giddens (1991) sees these kinds of changes arising from what he terms the emergence of ' pure relationships' (Giddens 1991: 58). A pure relationship occurs where the more traditional connections through obligation that are present in family relationships are replaced with relationships based on what each can get out of the other. These changes have been referred to by Giddens (1992) as democratising in nature such that these changes are also affecting the family.

Pahl & Spencer (2004) explain that this detraditionalization thesis normally draws upon a range of social statistics that appear to demonstrate widespread societal changes. These include higher levels of education, higher rates of divorce, greater mobility – both socially and geographically – and a larger participation by women in the workforce.

These conclusions are, however, disputed by Pahl & Spencer (2004) who argue that the use of other research sources can lead in a different direction. They quote research carried out by Park & Roberts (2002) which found that the family appeared to be in good health. Their respondents tended to suggest the family represented the first port of call in an emergency for people. Indeed, Pahl & Spencer (2004) carried out their own research into friendships which avoids a standard quantitative analysis, asking about length of time known and other such variables, and concentrating more on content. Pahl & Spencer (2004), then, look at people's ' personal communities'.

Personal communities, for Pahl & Spencer (2004), relate specifically to two main aspects of the relationship: communication and belonging. Pahl & Spencer (2004) carried out 60 interviews in different parts of the UK and, in order to access these concepts, they used a map of concentric circles on which people indicated where their friends lay. These friendships were then examined through interviews. As a result, Pahl & Spencer (2004) found that it was actually very difficult to separate the notions of friendship from that of family and that one easily flowed into the other. From their detailed findings, Pahl & Spencer (2004) assert that there is little evidence for the idea that people are moving away from their family group and towards their chosen friendship groups. There is also little evidence, in Pahl & Spencer's (2004) view, for the idea that people place more importance on their friendships than their family.

Taking a more wide-angle quantitative viewpoint, Pahl & Pevalin (2005) use data gathered from the British Household Panel Survey over ten years to

analyse potential changes in family and friends. Here, instead of finding a shift to friends away from family, they find that the family still provides a large number of people's friends. There is a change seen across age-groups, however, with older respondents more likely to nominate family as close friends than those in younger age-groups. The question is, does this represent a change that people go through as they age, or is this a social change that can be seen emerging? Pahl & Pevalin (2005) suggest the longitudinal data shows that it is actually a change happening with age, therefore suggesting that this does not support a social change of increasing friendship choices outside kin-groupings. Gross (2005) argues, like Pahl & Pevalin (2005) that the extent to which the detraditionalization hypothesis is true has been exaggerated.

It's important to note that throughout the literature on families and friendships it is clear that there are certain overlaps in meanings. One clear example is that of partners. For those over the age of 30, Pahl & Pevalin (2005) argue that a partner provides the most important relationship. Does this person count as their friend or a family member? Pahl & Pevalin (2005) argue that partners form a kind of hybrid category. Partners sit on the cusp of the debate because if they ' count' as members of the family then they add weight to the importance of the family. But, if they count as friends, then they add weight to the idea that people are moving towards greater reliance on friends. There is probably a good argument for each view but certainly excluding partners from the analysis is a mistaken approach.

Pahl & Pevalin (2005) also criticise Weeks et al.'s (2001) findings because they focus on non-heterosexual respondents. It is hypothesised that non-

heterosexual respondents will tend to have a greater degree of reliance on friends rather than family as, perhaps, the family will not have been accepting of their sexual orientation thus necessitating an appeal to a group outside their confines. This study should, therefore, take this into account in balancing up the sexual orientations of the respondents.

5) Methodology

Carry out a series of semi-structured interviews with participants to ask them about their family and their friendships. This would be carried out with a small group of younger people who are 18-28, as well as with a small group of older people who are 50-60 years old.

Interviews will be semi-structured and so will start with questions asking specifically about participant's close social ties, who they tend to confide in, who they share attitudes and beliefs with. This will be achieved through the use of maps of personal networks on which people indicate where their friends and family lie. Also, questions will be asked about attitudes and feelings towards the family and how family members fit into this picture. Latter questions will be more open-ended, so that participants are able to speak more freely about their friendships and families.

Participant's interviews will be transcribed and then analysed using discourse analysis to extract meanings and relationships.

6) Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for carrying out this study will be obtained from the relevant authority. All respondents in the study will be told that taking part is optional

and that they may withdraw at any time. Further, they will be assured that they will remain anonymous in the reporting of the results. Personal information relating to individual friendships will, of course, remain completely confidential. Respondents will be reminded that they are entitled to see any of the data that is held by the researcher which specifically relates to them.

7) Costings

The project will require a voice recorder and the researcher's time involved in carrying out the interviews, transcribing, analysing and writing up. It may also require the cost of travelling to respondents in order to carry out the interviews. Some stationery costs will also be incurred.

8) Communication plans

Respondents for the research will be solicited through standard university notice boards. For the older age-group, if suitable respondents cannot be identified in the university, it may be necessary to call on the researcher's personal networks of friends and family members.

9) Users and Beneficiaries

The ways in which friendships and families operate is of perennial interest to the government. Examining the ways in which personal communities coalesce provides insight into important notions of social support and social capital.

For those who work in professions with direct contact with younger age-groups, it would be useful for them to know who young people rely on in times of stress. Is it members of their family, or is there a shift towards relying on friends in hard times?

For those who work in professions who care for the elderly it would be extremely useful to know how patterns of friendships change with advancing age (Pahl & Pevalin, 2005). For example, do older people rely more on siblings as a result of their partners passing away or do they develop other networks of friends outside their kin relations?

References

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