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Friendship as Method

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In this article, the author discusses friendship as a method of qualitative inquiry. After defining friendship and positing it as a kind of fieldwork, the methodological foundations of friendship as method are established. Next, it is proposed that friendship as method involves researching with the practices, at the pace, in the natural contexts, and with an ethic of friendship. Finally, the author describes this method's strengths and considerations for both researcher and participants.

Keywords: *friendship; ethnography; qualitative methods*

PROJECT HISTORY

In 1994, Doug Healy, whom I would marry the following year, graduated from pharmacy school and moved to Tampa, Florida. His trainer at work, David Holland, would alter the course of our lives.

For a couple weeks, Doug and I had a recurring conversation about whether David might be gay, a question David all but answered by inviting us to meet him at Tracks, a gay nightclub in nearby Ybor City. Neither Doug nor I had ever had an openly gay friend before. In fact, both of us had grown up in the rural Midwest with rather conservative ideas about sexual orientation. Despite our limited exposure to gay people and cultures, we agreed to meet David at Tracks. As it turned out, this was only the beginning.

In November 1994, David mentioned to Doug that he played softball. When Doug asked if his team needed players, David told him that the team, sponsored by a bar called the Cove, and in fact the whole Suncoast Softball league were gay identified. If that didn't bother him, David said, Doug could

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join under a league provision that allowed each team to have two straight players. At the start of the next softball season, Doug became the Cove's right centerfielder, a position he played for 4 years, until I was hired by Rollins College and we moved to Orlando, Florida.

For more than a year, ours was an innocently personal journey: a straight couple venturing beyond the conventions of their small-town socializations. But in the fall of 1995, the journey took an unexpected turn.

That semester, I was enrolled in a graduate course on qualitative methods. After a month of class, my intended study fell through, and the softball field became my alternative fieldwork site. What started as a class project blossomed into a narrative ethnographic (see Tedlock, 1991) Ph.D. dissertation and eventually a book called *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a).

During the 5 years it required to research and write this book, friendship emerged not only as a subject of my research but also as its primary method. In *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a), I coined the term *friendship as method*. Expanding on ideas developed there, this article discusses my project and other interpretive studies that exemplify elements of friendship as method.

I begin by defining friendship, positing friendship as a kind of fieldwork, and establishing the methodological foundations of friendship as method. Next, I propose that this mode of qualitative inquiry involves researching with the practices, at the pace, in the natural contexts, and with an ethic of friendship. Finally, I describe this approach's strengths and considerations for both researcher and participants.

FRIENDSHIP DEFINED

In *Friendship Matters*, William K. Rawlins (1992) defined a close friend as "somebody to talk to, to depend on and rely on for help, support, and caring, and to have fun and enjoy doing things with" (p. 271). Similar to romantic and family relationships, friendship is an interpersonal bond characterized by the ongoing communicative management of dialectical tensions, such as those between idealization and realization, affection and instrumentality, and judgment and acceptance (see Rawlins, 1992).

Unlike romance and kinship, friendship in Western cultures lacks canonical status. In the United States, we tend to accord friendship second-class status. For example, we might say, "We're *just* friends," to mean, "We're neither family, nor are we lovers." On confronting the chasm between unsanctioned and sanctioned ties, Andrew Holleran (1996) reflected,

I was always discomfited whenever I accompanied friends to hospitals, or emergency rooms, at having to answer the question of the doctor, "Who are you?" with the words, "A friend." It sounded so flimsy—so infinitely weaker than,

"His brother," "His cousin," "His brother-in-law." It sounded like a euphemism; a word that did not, could not, convey what our bond really was. (pp. 34-35)

Holleran's experience supports Rawlins's (1992) claim that friendship occupies a marginal position within the matrix of interpersonal relations and has "no clear normative status" (p. 9). Kathy Werking (1997) affirmed this, calling friendship "the most fragile social bond" (p. 18).

The unstable footing of friendship in many Western societies is attributed in part to the absence of obligatory dimensions. We are not born into friendships as we are into families. Similar to marriage, friendship is a voluntary relationship (Weiss, 1998); but unlike marriage, friendship lacks religious and legal grounding, rendering the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of friendship an essentially private, negotiable endeavor (Rawlins, 1992).

Friends come and stay together primarily through common interests, a sense of alliance, and emotional affiliation (Weiss, 1998). Friendship, according to Rawlins (1992), "*implies affective ties*" (p. 12). In friends, we seek trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding, and acceptance (see Rubin, 1985).

In addition to emotional resources, friendships provide identity resources. Conceptions of self and other are formed, reinforced, and altered in the context of ongoing relationships. This explains why Gary Alan Fine (1981) called friendship "a crucible for the shaping of selves" (p. 265).

Friendships tend to confirm more than contest conceptions of self because we are prone to befriend those who are similar to ourselves, those more "self" than "other." As Rawlins (1992) pointed out, this begins in early childhood, when young persons typically have more access to playmates of the same age, sex, and physical characteristics. Similarly, adolescent friends tend to be of the same race, school grade, and social standing. Throughout life, friendships have a pronounced likelihood of developing within (rather than across) lines such as culture, education, marital and career status, and socioeconomic class. One consequence of this, posited Rawlins (1992), is that friendships are more likely "to reinforce and reproduce macrolevel and palpable social differences than to challenge or transcend them" (p. 274).

When friendships do develop across social groups, the bonds take on political dimensions. Opportunities exist for dual consciousness-raising and for members of dominant groups (e.g., men, Euro-Americans, Christians, and heterosexuals) to serve as advocates for friends in target groups. As a result, those who are "just friends" can become *just* friends, interpersonal and political allies who seek personal growth, meaningful relationships, and social justice.

FRIENDSHIP AS FIELDWORK

When I began proposing friendship as a method of inquiry, I received many quizzical looks. In some cases, even those who view friendship as an

important topic and who recognize that friendships sometimes arise in the context of research expressed skepticism about a methodological link between friendship and fieldwork.

In many ways, though, friendship and fieldwork are similar endeavors. Both involve being in the world with others. To friendship and fieldwork communities, we must gain *entrée*. We negotiate roles (e.g., student, confidant, and advocate), shifting from one to another as the relational context warrants. We may experience our ties as developmental, passing through stages such as those Rawlins (as cited in Wood, 2002) described: moving from role-limited interaction to integration to stabilization. Our communication might progress, in Buber's (1988) terms, from "seeming" to "being," from I-It (impersonal and instrumental), to I-You (more personal yet role bound), to moments of I-Thou, where we are truly present, meeting one another in our full humanity.

We navigate membership, participating, observing, and observing our participation (see Tedlock, 1991). We learn insider argot and new codes for behavior. As we deepen our ties, we face challenges, conflicts, and losses. We cope with relational dialectics (see Rawlins, 1992), negotiating how private and how candid we will be, how separate and how together, how stable and how in flux. One day, finite projects—and lives—come to an end, and we must "leave the field."

FOUNDATIONS

Friendship as method builds on several established approaches to qualitative research. It is based on the principles of interpretivism, which according to Thomas Schwandt (1994), stem from the German intellectual traditions of hermeneutics (interpretation) and *verstehen* (understanding), from phenomenology, and from the critiques of positivism.

Interpretivists take reality to be both pluralistic and constructed in language and interaction. Instead of facts, we search for intersubjective meanings, what Clifford Geertz (1973), following Max Weber, called the "webs of significance" (p. 5); instead of control, we seek understanding. For interpretivists, "objectivity becomes a synonym for estrangement and neutrality a euphemism for indifference" (Jackson, 1989, p. 4). According to Norman Denzin (1997), we research and write not to capture the totality of social life but to interpret reflectively slices and glimpses of localized interaction in order to understand more fully both others and ourselves.

Additional groundwork for friendship as method has been laid by feminist researchers. Much of feminist thought combines interpretivist assumptions with political commitments to consciousness-raising, empowerment, and social change (see e.g., Cook & Fonow, 1986; Lather, 1991; Reinhartz, 1992; Roberts, 1990). Feminists have been instrumental in debunking the myth of

value-free inquiry (Harding, 1991), in promoting communitarian ethics, and in both reflexively attending and actively resisting hierarchical separation between researcher and participants.

Standpoint theory, as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (1991, 1998), focuses on intersecting power relations. Standpoints emerge from dominant and target group locations. Interlocking systems of individual, institutional, and cultural oppression shape and constrain what we can know and do and how we can relate. According to Collins, we must move from colonization to an "epistemology of empowerment" (1998, p. 229). Pathways toward this way of knowing include dialogue, relationships, and an ethic of caring that invites expressiveness, emotion, and empathy (Collins, 1991).

Similar to feminist research, queer methodologies call researchers to defy cultural practices of marginalization and othering (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A project or text is queer if it challenges heterosexism and heteronormativity (the idea that heterosexual is normal and all other sexualities deviant) and if it problematizes the binary construction of hetero- and homosexualities (Butler, 1999; Sedgwick, 1990). A key to liberation, argued Joshua Gamson (1998), is "*muddying* the categories . . . pointing out their instability and fluidity along with their social roots" (p. 222).

Also influential to friendship as method is Michelle Fine's (1994) notion of "working the hyphens." Similar to other interpretivist approaches, hers rejects scientific neutrality, universal truths, and dispassionate inquiry and works toward social justice, relational truths, and passionate inquiry. Through authentic engagement, the lines between researcher and researched blur, permitting each to explore the complex humanity of both self and other. Instead of "speaking for" or even "giving voice," researchers *get to know* others in meaningful and sustained ways.

Fine's (1994) philosophy shares much common ground with participatory action research (PAR). According to Reason (1994), this type of inquiry emerged from liberationist movements. Action researchers view truth as a product and instrument of power. PAR honors lived experience and aims to produce knowledge and action directly useful to those being studied. Research under this model can be judged by what Patti Lather (1991) and Peter Reason (1994) termed *catalytic validity*, the degree to which it empowers those researched. Central to this approach is dialogue, where the subject-object relationship of positivism becomes a subject-subject one, in which academic knowledge combines with everyday experience to reach new and profound understandings (Reason, 1994).

Closest methodologically to friendship as method is interactive interviewing (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Tillmann-Healy & Kiesinger, 2001). This demands more sharing of personal and social experiences on the part of the researcher than does PAR. But, similar to participatory action research, interactive interviewing is an interpretive practice, requires intense collaboration, and privileges lived, emotional experience.

FRIENDSHIP AS METHOD

Calling for inquiry that is open, multivoiced, and emotionally rich, friendship as method involves the practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship. Researching with the practices of friendship means that although we employ traditional forms of data gathering (e.g., participant observation, systematic note taking, and informal and formal interviewing), our primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability.

Practices of friendship are evident in Keith Cherry's (1996) ethnographic account of a community of people living with AIDS. To chronicle their experiences and relationships, Cherry conducted fieldwork, shot photographs, and recorded interaction, but he also played ping-pong and watched soap operas with residents, drove them to doctor appointments, visited them in the hospital, and helped arrange birthday parties and, eventually, funerals. These activities added emotional and relational layers to Cherry's intellectual pursuits. Responding to the changing needs of community members, his friend and researcher roles shifted from center to periphery and back again. Sometimes Cherry had the emotional space to reflect on the meanings residents assigned to everyday practices, such as gossiping and watching television; other times, he was consumed by fear and grief. The depth of his connections to this community rendered him a vulnerable observer (Behar, 1996), a compassionate witness, and a true companion.

Second, friendship as method demands that we research at the natural pace of friendship. The tempo here is that of anthropologists, who typically stay a year or more in fieldwork communities. Over the course of 18 months, Cherry (1996) spent 25 to 40 hours per week at the Tahitian Islander, an apartment complex for people living with AIDS. For 2 years, Leigh Berger (2000, 2001) volunteered, attended services, and conducted interviews at Dalet Shalom, a Messianic Jewish congregation. Christine Kiesinger (1995, 1998a, 1998b), who wrote life histories of four women with eating disorders, devoted 3 years of academic and personal involvement to the lives of her participants. Between formal interviews, Kiesinger shared meals, transcripts, and confidences with respondents. Barbara Myerhoff's (1978) *Number Our Days* is based on 4 years of participant observation and life history interviewing within an elderly Jewish community. For 4 years, Ouyporn Khuankaew and Kathryn Norsworthy (2000) have facilitated "training of social action trainers" along the border of Thailand and Burma (also see Norsworthy, 2002). *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a) required 3 years of participant observation and interviewing and 3 additional years of writing, sharing drafts with community members, and rewriting. Michael Angrosino (1998) volunteered at a group home for 3 years before even beginning his study of persons with mental retardation (which lasted another 9 years). These are

serious time commitments, but in each case, both profound relationships and provocative accounts resulted.

With friendship as method, a project's issues emerge organically, in the ebb and flow of everyday life: leisurely walks, household projects, activist campaigns, separations, reconciliations, losses, recoveries. The unfolding path of the relationships becomes the path of the project.

The length of time needed may vary depending on whether the researcher and participants begin the study as strangers, acquaintances, friends, or close friends. This approach requires multiple angles of vision. Strangers tend to have keener observational eyes yet need to cultivate more intersubjective views, which develop gradually over time. Close friends already may share deeper, more intricate perspectives of self, other, and context but must continually step back from experiences and relationships and examine them analytically and critically.

Third, friendship as method situates our research in the natural contexts of friendship. Again the approach is anthropological: going where participants are. *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a) takes readers into the multiple sites of my fieldwork: gay bars and clubs, softball fields, homes, restaurants, and coffee houses. In their accounts, we follow Kiesinger (1995, 1998a, 1998b), Cherry (1996), and Myerhoff (1978) to the private and public spaces where their respondents struggle to make meaning from illness and loss.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this methodology is that we research with an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love. Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project.

We sacrifice a day of writing to help someone move. We set aside our reading pile when someone drops by or calls "just to talk." When asked, we keep secrets, even if they would add compelling twists to our research report or narrative. We consider our participants an audience (see Ellis, 1995) and struggle to write both honestly and empathically for them. We lay ourselves on the line, going virtually anywhere, doing almost anything, pushing to the furthest reaches of our being. We never ask more of participants than we are willing to give. Friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying "them" to studying *us*.

For researchers, this means that we use our speaking and writing skills and our positions as scholars and critics in ways that transform and uplift our research, local, and global communities (see Christians, 2000). Since the publication of *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a), I have written three newspaper editorials, one marking the 3-year anniversary of Matthew Shepard's murder (Tillmann-Healy, 2001b), the second and third urging Orlando's city council to add sexual orientation to the classes protected by our nondiscrimination ordinance (Tillmann-Healy, 2002a, 2002b). In addi-

tion, my colleague Kathryn Norsworthy and I have given testimony on the ordinance to the Orlando Human Relations Board, spoken at a public rally, collected over a hundred faculty signatures at Rollins College, and met with three city commissioners.

After her dissertation work, Kiesinger was interviewed on National Public Radio during Eating Disorders Awareness Month. Myerhoff contributed to a film that won an Academy Award for best short documentary, bringing renewed visibility and resources to the Aliyah Center. Angrosino developed such close relationships with staff and clients at Opportunity House that he was appointed to its board of trustees, and Cherry was so transformed by his fieldwork that instead of an academic job, he accepted a position with an AIDS network. In these and many other ways, researchers can become allies with and for their research communities. Making this move, we do not deny or efface privilege associated with education or any other dominant group identity; instead, we try to use that privilege for libratory ends.

This ethic of friendship also extends to our relationships with readers. We research pressing social problems that undermine peace, equality, freedom, and democracy. We strive to ensure that our representations expose and contest oppression associated with race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, age, and ability. With compelling, transgressive accounts, we seek to engage readers and on multiple levels: intellectually, aesthetically, emotionally, ethically, and politically (see Bochner, 1994). Together, researchers, participants, and readers learn to practice a more active and responsible citizenship.

STRENGTHS OF FRIENDSHIP AS METHOD

For everyone involved, friendship as method can provide a unique perspective on social life. In the ethnographic dialogue (see Tedlock, 1991), we bring together personal and academic discourses, comparing, contrasting, and critiquing them.

For the Researcher

This move has much to offer qualitative researchers. Perhaps the most salient benefit is the relationships themselves. Total immersion of both our academic and personal selves can foster multifaceted bonds. Of his relationships with the men of Opportunity House, Angrosino (1998) wrote, "I didn't want to be thought of as just the guy who showed up every so often with the tape recorder. I wanted to remain someone who had connections to their lives in general" (p. 38).

Such relationships can provide what Kenneth Burke (1973) called "equipment for living." By befriending Jewish elders at the Aliyah Center, Myerhoff

rediscovered her roots. Through interactive, reciprocal bonds with Abbie, Liz, Eileen, and Anna, Kiesinger added layers of meaning to her own account of bulimia; and Berger's connections with Rabbi Levinson and congregants at Dalet Shalom expanded the dimensions of her faith.

Friendship as method can bring us to a level of understanding and depth of experience we may be unable to reach using only traditional methods. In my project, by studying gay, lesbian, and queer literatures, I learn about my participants historically and politically; by observing their interactions, I get to know them interpersonally and culturally; by giving them my compassion and devotion, I experience them emotionally and spiritually.

Between Gay and Straight (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a) involved multiple cycles of conversing, sharing activities, reading about sexual orientation, exchanging what was read, writing about the group, distributing the writing, and talking about it. Throughout these cycles, my researcher and friendship roles wove together, each expanding and deepening the other. My participants became (and remain) my best friends, my family—and I theirs. Our relationships ripple through every dimension of my life.

One area profoundly affected has been my connections with women (both lesbian and heterosexual). Observing my participants' same-sex bonds, I have been prompted to seek new levels of affiliation in my own. I am better able to tap into the loving—even erotic—possibilities of female friendship, and I believe this renders me a more feminist ally to other women.

The vulnerability the Cove men and I share also has transformed my marriage. Doug and I have learned to cultivate a level of openness and risk neither of us experienced in our families of origin. Becoming immersed in a gay male community has rendered our sexual and gender identities more queer. Doug and I have developed strategies to resist binary constructions of sexuality and gender, freeing us to enact more fluid identities.

Finally, these layered connections allow me to see the many faces of oppression (Young, 2000). As a result, I work continually to infuse every aspect of my research, my pedagogy, and my institutional and community service with the values of antioppressive education (Freire, 1999). In all of these ways, this academic project has become my life project.

For Participants

Respondents can benefit from participation in such projects as well. One way is through the experience of empathic connection with the friend/researcher, which can help participants feel heard, known, and understood (see Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994). Those with whom we work have unique opportunities to (co)construct meaningful accounts of troubling and painful experiences and to offer their accounts to others as gifts. Previously hospitalized for anorexia, a participant named Liz said to Kiesinger (1995), "I

have been to hell and back and if I can prevent anyone from going where I've been, I will tell my story" (p. 54). Respondents also can take pride in the contributions they make to the researcher's life. About her relationship with a participant who has struggled with bulimia and obesity, Kiesinger wrote:

Abbie took a liking to me almost instantly. She seemed very interested in my life, my story, and my bulimia. In our interactions, she played a "motherly" role and seemed eager to take me under her wing. She expressed this most strongly in the intense maternal embrace she gave me after each meeting. She would hold me close to her for a long time, patting the back of my head. I knew that she felt valued, useful, and strong when consoling me. Given that she felt unworthy, useless, and weak for most of her life, I was thrilled to let her shower me with all the advice, nurturance, and counsel she could. (p. 52)

By engaging the friend/researcher in a long-term, multifaceted relationship, participants can learn as many new ways of thinking, feeling, and relating as the researcher can. Rob Ryan, a participant in *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a), reported on some specific lessons learned:

I remember talking to you about what it meant to be gay and some of my hang-ups about it. You were the first person—whether you knew it or not—who clarified for me that being gay related to my sexual orientation and not necessarily to being masculine or feminine. I didn't see myself as feminine, but my upbringing was that if you were gay, you were feminine, and that was a bad thing.

A year later, I asked if you saw me as "the woman" in my relationship with Tim. Your answer was: "If you're asking whether I see you as the one who tends to be more sensitive and nurturing, then yes, I see you as the woman." You turned being "the woman" from a weakness—as I unknowingly had made it out to be—to a strength. Suddenly, it dawned on me: I should value *all* my good qualities, masculine and feminine. (p. 217)

At the oral defense for my Ph.D. dissertation, Gordon Bernstein, another participant, said this:

I grew up playing baseball, played it in college for a couple years. Was very much socialized with middle-class, beer-drinking, heterosexual ideals. Socialized that way all my life. Our group has thought and talked about things since meeting Lisa that we didn't before. Our conversations were very unemotional. I don't know how often we expressed ourselves—what we thought, how we felt, how we came to terms with things. Lisa facilitated those kinds of conversations, and I don't think anyone else here could have facilitated them. I know that I couldn't have been as open, pushed the envelope that often, and really shared my views, because I was socialized not to feel pain. "Deal with it, suck it up, and move on." But Lisa made it comfortable for us, and that made it possible for her to establish the kind of friendships we have with her. (pp. 217-218)

Although it brings unusual dimensions to our relationships, my dual role of friend/researcher provides additional reasons and ways to connect. Because I study them/us, these men always can assume that I want information about their emotional and relational lives. Rob indicated that had I been "just a

friend," he may not have perceived a standing invitation to share personal experiences. At the same time, because I care about them so much and embody that ethic of caring, they can trust that I will honor their disclosures and try to use them in ways that promote liberation and justice.

When we approach research as an endeavor of friendship, the emergent texts can have additional benefits for participants, including self-understanding and acceptance. Asked what he learned from the dissertation, Rob told me, "I wish I had read this before I came out. This has helped me become more comfortable with myself." On a similar note, another participant, Pat Martinez, said:

I think that I have benefited more from Lisa writing her dissertation than *she* has, or will, even by getting a Ph.D. Becoming involved with Lisa and the work she was doing . . . enabled me to deal with my coming out. It helped me combine my old athletic, fraternity-brother self and my emerging gay self. I saw that I could be a *gay* athlete, a *gay* man with *gay and straight* friends. . . .

The only "drawback" for me is that I wish the project would have started earlier. We met just as I was coming out at thirty-five. I wonder how different my twenties would have been had I crossed paths with someone like [Lisa], had I been asked to look within myself and discuss my inner struggles—as I have in my late thirties. (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a, p. 218)

What we write even can strengthen connections among members of one's research community. Rob said of the dissertation, "I wasn't involved with [my partner] Tim when many of the early events were occurring. So I felt like I got to know the group and the group's history better." David made a similar observation:

I never imagined that the dissertation would have such an impact on all of us as friends. My friendships with these guys were pretty solid before, but the project has brought us even closer. Reading the dissertation, we all learned about each other. Since then, we've talked about the events Lisa wrote about, and those discussions have reformed the bonds between us. This was a very, very unique experience that we all shared. (see Tillmann-Healy, 2001a, p. 218)

These works then can be taken outside the fieldwork community and used as sources of education. Tim Mahn said,

There are so many people I meet, or I'm friends with, or acquaintances, or family members, or people from my past that I'd like to send a copy. I think they could be enlightened. It's going to be a great tool.

Finally, our writings from friendship as method can promote social change. In Tim's words, "As a reader, I kept thinking, 'I want to do something; I *have* to do something.' It gave me energy. I feel like I'm now a bit of an activist." On a similar note, Rob told me, "You've shown us that we have a lot of responsibility, and that being out is courageous. If we can be that, I know we can help others."

CONSIDERATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP AS METHOD

Neither every researcher nor every participant will be comfortable practicing friendship as method. The demands are high, and the implications can be daunting.

For the Researcher

First, practical issues must be considered. Our work lives are structured around and constrained by deadlines for projects, grants, tenure, and promotion. Not all researchers can afford to spend at least a year in the field and another year or more writing, revisiting, and rewriting.

Questions graduate students have asked include, "How do I get a project like this through my thesis/dissertation committee?" and "Will anyone hire this kind of researcher?" Students interested in such work must find programs that support it. Several of the projects I have discussed (my own, Cherry's, Kiesinger's, and Berger's) came out of the University of South Florida's Ph.D. program in communication. The University of Illinois at Urbana and the University of Utah also encourage critical, ethnographic, and action research. With respect to the job-seeking process, it probably is safer professionally to conduct more traditional studies. But one's passion for unconventional research—and for close relationships in the field—need not preclude academic employment. In my first year on the job market, I was invited to four campus interviews and received two offers.

On the other hand, practicing friendship as method does make it challenging to specify in advance research questions and objectives for external evaluators such as dissertation committees and institutional review boards. Our work also may be difficult to contextualize for more traditional colleagues and funding agencies. To help provide such a context, I included a detailed statement of my methodological philosophy, articulating many ideas contained in this article, in a professional assessment report for my midtenure evaluation. The statement sparked a lively discussion with the multidisciplinary evaluation committee, but I was not asked to defend my approach. Each researcher has to gauge the political and methodological climate of his or her department and institution to frame what he or she does in terms that are understandable and acceptable to peers and evaluators.

Careful consideration must be given to emotional demands as well. With friendship as method, researchers must examine, scrutinize, and critique ourselves in ways not required by traditional qualitative inquiry. During fieldwork at Dalet Shalom, Berger questioned whether her ambivalent Judaism could withstand her evangelical participants' efforts to convert her. Kiesinger's relationship with Abbie, whose account of bulimia and obesity centers on a long history of sexual exploitation, sparked a vague yet haunting sense that

Kiesinger also had been sexually abused as a child. Close relationships with gay male participants/friends make it impossible to shirk my heterosexism and heterosexual privilege. Although such radical reflexivity can take us to the darkest corners of our psyche and experience, it also can enlighten our thinking, our accounts, and our humanity.

Relationally, doing fieldwork this way carries all the risks that friendship does. Because we must reveal and invest so much of ourselves, researchers are exposed and vulnerable, which means we can be profoundly disappointed, frustrated, or hurt. For 3 years, Kiesinger witnessed four women battle anorexia, bulimia, and/or obesity. Three of them followed no clear path toward recovery, and their struggles at times exacerbated Kiesinger's own struggles with body and food. By exploring the borderlands between Jewish and Christian identities, Berger learned to live with uncertainty and began to work through the conflicted feelings she had for her estranged, mentally ill father. Just as she felt ready to reconnect with him, he suddenly died. During my fieldwork, members of my research community tested positive for HIV, rendering me a fellow traveler down the emotional, medical, and political pathways of AIDS. Myerhoff and Cherry had to grieve the deaths of virtually every participant in their studies.

Another consideration involves our sometimes conflicting obligations. On one hand, we must respect and honor our relationships with participants; on the other, we owe readers an account that is as comprehensive and complex as possible. After collecting narratives of conversion to Messianic Judaism, Berger (2000) wanted to interview participants' significant others about their reactions to the person who had changed faiths. In the end, she rejected the idea, concluding that this "would be too disruptive to the delicate truce many family members share when one member has converted" (p. 180). Although such interviews would have added a new and provocative dimension to her project, Berger privileged her ethic of friendship over her ethnographic interest.

As mentioned, due to our deep and sustained involvement, we may be told secrets that would add significant layers to our accounts. Even with nonprivileged information, the dual role of friend/researcher makes it difficult to decide what to divulge, especially regarding information that potentially discredits our participants.

Berger often was troubled by the conservative attitudes toward abortion and homosexuality her participants expressed. I frequently was disturbed by the sexism enacted by my gay male participants. In face-to-face encounters in the field, both Berger and I tended to suppress much of our disapproval. Had our participants been strangers or simply "subjects," we may have maintained a more critical distance and felt more empowered to challenge their views directly. Later, we decided to include these issues in our written accounts, hoping our portrayals would spark reflection and action both in and outside our fieldwork communities. At some level, though, even this felt

like a betrayal to our friends/participants, who already are members of stigmatized and marginalized groups.

Under friendship as method, researchers must pay constant close attention to ethical issues, including informed consent, confidentiality, and beneficence. At times, we navigate their pathways in unconventional ways. Angrosino's research, for example, centered on mentally retarded adults, many of whom also have mental illness and/or a criminal history. Because his participants may have difficulty assessing the consequences of consent, Angrosino chose to write ethnographic fiction and to use composite characters.

My approach to confidentiality changed as the relationships changed. In my first class paper on the Cove, I followed social science conventions by using pseudonyms and altering other identifying details. Later, as the project became more collaborative, I asked participants to choose between having a pseudonym, using their real first names only, or using their real first and last names.¹ I explained that pseudonyms were the standard and safest approach. For the dissertation, one primary participant, Al Steel, who was not out at work or to his family, requested a pseudonym and asked that I write only generally about his occupation and hometown. The others (David, Gordon, Tim, Rob, and Pat) had me use their real first and last names. For the book, the most public document to date, two requests were made: Al wanted his real first name used, and Tim, who was embarking on a new career, asked that I alter his last name. All men consented to having photographs of them in the book, and Tim and Rob agreed to appear on the cover with Doug and me.

When Tim and Rob decided to use their real name(s), each said to me, "I want to do this for you." Although this reflects their level of investment in our relationships and the project, I had to assert my researcher role. I urged them not to base consent on their feelings for me or what they imagined I wanted. We talked at length about the personal and professional risks they would be taking. From the conversations that followed, I came to believe that although their connections with me could not be completely disentangled from their decisions, each perceived himself to be acting in his own best interest as well as the interests of other—especially younger—gay men who need role models for coming out. Had I not believed that, I would have tried to convince them to change their names.

In terms of beneficence, I clearly have profited the most professionally. This project and its publications were central to my earning a Ph.D. and getting an academic job and will be key factors in my tenure review. However, in the interest of distributing the benefits of this project, I have donated royalties from *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a) to activist groups (e.g., the Human Rights Campaign, GLSEN, and PFLAG) and continually offer myself as a resource to community groups, the media, educators, and students.

When researchers become advocates for groups the dominant culture constructs as deviant (e.g., gay men, Messianic Jews, bulimics, and people with AIDS) and assign the resultant texts in their classes, not all students respond

positively. Confronting this kind of work may challenge deeply held values and assumptions. I have had to answer complaints made on course evaluations and directly to my department chair, dean, provost, and president (e.g., my project as “gay propaganda”). One student had to be removed from my class before the semester even began. Seeing my book on the reading list, this student called my department chair and provost, demanded alternatives to my class (a requirement for our major), and made veiled threats, including, “This woman needs to be stopped.” I am fortunate to be at an institution whose administration supports and defends my work. It would be much more difficult to continue at this time if I believed that my tenure were hanging in the balance. Nonetheless, these student complaints are both time and energy sapping.

When our projects center on oppression, our emotional and physical safety can be jeopardized as well. My participants and I have been verbally accosted by homophobic slurs. I have received packages of virulent antigay literature in response to newspaper profiles of *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a). Enduring still another level of risk, Khuankaew and Norsworthy conduct workshops on violence, trauma, and HIV awareness on the Thai-Burma border, where it is illegal for them to organize. With each training session, Norsworthy, a psychologist from the United States, risks deportation and blacklist status, and her Thai collaborator, Khuankaew, faces incarceration.

Friendship as method, although potentially rewarding, comes with a new set of obligations that do not pave a smooth, comfortable road. When we engage others’ humanity, struggles, and oppression, we cannot simply shut off the recorder, turn our backs, and exit the field. Anyone who takes on this sort of project must be emotionally strong and willing to face pressure, resistance, backlash, and perhaps even violence.

For Participants

When we approach research as an endeavor of friendship, and we approach participants as friends, some considerations for respondents also are heightened. As indicated, if researchers become full and trusted members of research communities, we open ourselves to disappointment and pain. Likewise, if participants take in researchers not just as visitors but also as friends, their level of risk is increased. Because I was both friend and researcher, when Tim disclosed he had tested positive for HIV (see Tillmann-Healy, 2001a, pp. 88-90), he was doubly vulnerable. When he told Lisa-the-friend, he opened himself to rejection and pain. But later, Lisa-the-researcher wrote fieldnotes on our interaction and eventually sought his permission to include the episode in the dissertation. Although he consented, Tim remained anxious about how that evening would be portrayed. He told me that before his partner Rob

brought home their copy, they had agreed to read it to each other front to back. But as soon as Tim saw it, he immediately turned to "I Have Something to Tell You." Of his reading experience, he said, "It put me right back there. It seemed so real." Later, Tim told me, "That was hard to read. I don't like revisiting that time." Having to confront such painful experiences might give some pause when thinking of contributing to such a project.

Because of the power imbalance between researcher and participants, field relationships always have potential for colonization and exploitation. Friendship as method seeks to undermine and disrupt this. However, if researchers do not maintain an ethic of friendship in their fieldwork practices and/or accounts, participants can sustain emotional damage. In "Emotional and Ethical Quagmires in Returning to the Field," Carolyn Ellis (1995) wrote poignantly about the anger and pain members of her fieldwork community suffered when a third party told them that she had published *Fisher Folk*, a book containing unflattering portrayals of their rural lifestyle. An extended family had taken in Carolyn as a friend, giving her years of virtually unfettered access, but as a (then) realist ethnographer, she rarely allowed herself to be similarly open. Ellis also admitted to taping conversations surreptitiously, to securing consent so early in the 12-year project that many forgot about her researcher role or assumed it had ended, and to sharing none of her published work. The honesty of "Emotional and Ethical Quagmires" helps readers become, as Ellis herself becomes, a more emotional, dialogical, and ethical researcher.

Friendship as method all but demands that writings be taken back to the community for examination, critique, and further dialogue. My central participants were given drafts of class papers, the dissertation, proposed changes for the book, and this article. All attended my dissertation defense having read the document, and many participated in the discussion. I also conducted follow-up interviews to attain additional reactions and reflections. At each stage, I incorporated their feedback and suggestions and renegotiated informed consent.

Although this process contributed to a collaborative project, it also rendered my participants vulnerable to each other and to other readers they know. Tim told me that even after giving me permission to include "I Have Something to Tell You," he worried about reactions of others in the group. Tim reported thinking, "Wow, all these people are going to read that. I wonder what they're going to say." With the publication of *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a), my participants were exposed to family members, associates, and coworkers, some of whom did not know they were gay.

In some cases, our participants risk physical harm. To attend Khuankaew and Norsworthy's workshops with the women of Burma, for example, participants defy laws against organizing and risk arrest, abuse, and imprisonment. For me, few thoughts are more sobering than the possibility that one of

my friends could become the victim of a hate crime as a result of his visibility in *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a).

Friendship as method requires that ethics remain at the forefront of our research and our research relationships. Confidentiality and informed consent become ongoing negotiations. Researchers and participants reflexively consider and discuss power dynamics at every turn and constantly strive to balance the need to advance the social justice agenda of their projects and the need to protect one another from harm.

CONCLUSION

Most any study involving human “subjects” can incorporate some aspect of friendship as method. Even in the most empirical, double-blind research, we can treat participants with an ethic of friendship. We can solicit fears and concerns, listen closely and respond compassionately, and use such exchanges to refine the study and direct its implications.

The study of close relationships, including friendship, is well suited for friendship as method. In contrast to one-time, retrospective surveys, a primary means of studying relationships, friendship as method involves sustained immersion in participants’ lives, offering a processual and longitudinal perspective. But most any topic could be investigated with the practices, at the pace, in the contexts, and/or with an ethic of friendship. Emotional topics, such as divorce, serious illness, or the birth of a child, probably lend themselves best to friendship as method because the more emotional and multifaceted the topic, the more appropriate it becomes for researchers and participants to share emotional and multifaceted ties.

For a mutual, close, and/or lasting friendship to develop between every researcher and all participants is unrealistic. Regardless, we can approach respondents from a stance of friendship, meaning we treat them with respect, honor their stories, and try to use their stories for humane and just purposes.

In a strange aligning of the universe, the oral defense for my Ph.D. dissertation took place the same day and time as Matthew Shepard’s memorial service. Jim King, a member of my dissertation committee, posed this question: “But what if *they* are not humane and just? Would you study Matthew Shepard’s killers this way?”

This was my response:

I exhale slowly. “That would be extremely difficult. When something like this murder happens, ‘we’—the non-perpetrators—often are so shocked and disheartened that we distance ourselves from ‘them’—the perpetrators. We tell ourselves that they must be crazy or evil. Such explanations come quickly and easily. The hardest question to ask is this: what kinds of personal, familial, and cultural conditions have to exist for this act to make sense somehow, to seem

almost *rational*? We don't ask this because it implicates us in the problem; it forces us to identify with the killers, to bring them close and see them as part of us. Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney were unable to experience their interconnection with Matthew Shepard; that's exactly what made him so disposable. But if we dispose of them in the same way, we come no closer to creating the kind of world where such actions become less possible. It would be profoundly uncomfortable and disturbing to study Henderson and McKinney with the practices and/or with an ethic of friendship, but that may be what's most needed." (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a, pp. 212-213)

Certainly, the full scope of friendship as method is not for every qualitative project. Time, career, and interest constraints limit our ability to study social life at the natural pace of friendship. Likewise, our purposes may not best be served in the natural contexts of friendship. When doing oral history, for example, it is important to contrive an interview setting where high-quality recording can occur. Practices of friendship, moreover, such as compassion, might feel inappropriate when doing research on groups we consider dangerous or unethical.

Between Gay and Straight (Tillmann-Healy, 2001a) is unique because some of my participants already were friends or acquaintances when I began the project, and friendship was also the subject of my research. But qualitative researchers need not adopt the whole vision to benefit from friendship as method. Moving toward friendship as method may be as simple as turning off the tape recorder and cooking dinner with participants; investing more of ourselves in their emotional, relational, and political welfare; inviting respondents further into our lives than we ever dared before; hanging around longer; writing texts that are as enlightening and useful to our research, local, and global communities as to our academic careers; and/or approaching participants as we would potential or actual friends: with a desire for mutual respect, understanding, examination, and growth.

NOTE

1. This approach to informed consent and confidentiality may mitigate the hierarchical separation between researcher and participants. However, so long as the researcher determines the options, the differential is not eliminated. Perhaps only coauthorship has that potential.

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