

A Question of Friendship:  
Community care and the relations  
of people with learning difficulties

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Assumptions demonstrated by, first, the way that the topics of loneliness and isolation have been defined in the community care literature and, secondly,, the strategies which are proposed to tackle these related problems. I will argue that the question of the relationships of people with learning difficulties is important to a social theory of disability, and therefore, must take account of the significance of material and ideological constraints on people with learning difficulties.

First,, greater value must be accorded to relationships *between* people with learning difficulties.

Secondly, a connection must be acknowledged between the collective action of disabled people and their ability to form individual relationships with on another.

*Finally, by drawing on research data, I will argue that any examination of the lack of social relationships of many people with learning difficulties must include an analysis of the constraints they face.*

Kin relationships are based on the “acknowledged and well – known principles” of ties of blood and marriage. The term friendship is problematic.

Allan

Friends are people who are not usually relatives, but who enjoy a continuing relationship based on social contacts and shared leisure time, mutual help and emotional attachment.

Willmott

Allan begins his definition by discussing the meaning of friendship as a personal relationship.

First, it is a relationship between individuals which develops regardless of their formal role positions.

Secondly, it is a private relationship and the behaviour towards each other of those within the friendship is their business only.

Thirdly, friends accept each other as the “really” are

That people tend to select as friends those who are like themselves has important implications for people with learning difficulties.

Friendship has typically been seen as the most idiosyncratic form of personal relationships. Hence, little attention has been paid to...the social factors which are associated with its emergence, maintenance or demise...there has been a tendency to idealize it and to ignore the fact that it requires resources – such as time, money, etc (O'Connor, 1992)



*Reciprocity* has been identified as an important feature of friendship (Abrams, Allan 1979)

Relationships, especially friendships, can provide company. They can bring a variety of important new opportunities to learn...They also bring intimacy, a sense of closeness and trust...Relationships can bring practical help in little day to day ways, as well as in times of major disruption or celebration...they can provide a way of confirming and validating our experiences . People who value us with positive feedback (Firth & Rapley 1990)

Friends are people who listen, who understand, who provide the opportunity to share experiences and emotions...The engagement that friendship brings confirms and strengthens people's sense of feeling valued and valuable...At its deepest level it provides *intimacy...A second, important function...is company* Friendships also have a function of providing *practical help...Friendship is not only about taking, it is equally about giving.*

It would not be accurate with to suggest that all people with learning difficulties are lonely or dissatisfied with their social networks, but there is evidence which suggests strongly that a significant proportion do not participate in a range of satisfying social relationships.

In terms of their day to day relationships, far too many lead impoverished lives.  
(Richardson & Ritchie)

The use of means which are valued in our society in order to develop and support personal behaviour experiences and characteristics which are likewise valued.

(CMH 1981)

People with handicaps often spend most of their days and most of their lives in the company of other people who are also handicapped and who have also been socially rejected.

(Williams, 1986)

Discussion of the apparent loneliness of many people with learning difficulties is motivated by 2 anxieties.

1. Friendships are important to an individual's life satisfaction.
2. By developing friendships, people with learning difficulties can become integrated into their communities, being in the community in a physical sense is not the same as been part of the community in the sense of social belonging.



Encouraging the social integration of people with mental handicaps involves a further dimension...The aim is that their relationships and social activities should not be confined to interactions with other people with handicaps *but should also include people who are not labeled “handicapped” – people valued by the local community*

Friendships between disabled and non – disabled people.

It is these friendships which lead to integration. Friendships between people with learning difficulties maintain their segregated positions in the “handicapped world”

Although Szivos comments that “people with disabilities have much to gain from each others’ company, there is a sense in her argument that disabled people opt for a relationships with each other as protection from feelings of inferiority, rather than as a positive choice.

Rather, I am arguing that relationships with non – disabled people should not be assumed to be more valuable than those between disabled people. If people select as their friends others like themselves with whom they have things in common – as was noted earlier in this paper – then it should be recognized that disabled people will appear to each other as potential sources of friendship (just as many women look to other women for friendship) this should be seen as a positive part of disabled people's lives.

There is an important connection that must be made between the question of disabled people being together as friends, on an individual basis, and their being together on a wider basis of political solidarity. Ignoring or undervaluing the significance of friendships between disabled people has implications, therefore, for the development of a collective response to discrimination.

The argument made to disabled people, whether implicitly or explicitly, that it is better to be associated with non – disabled people is very damaging. It implies that the problem for disabled people is *other people who are disabled*, particularly those who have severe impairments.

In effect, then, attempts to “integrate” disabled people may represent dispersal into a hostile world. This can isolate disabled people, physically and emotionally, in the non – disabled community.

In this light, being with other disabled people may be an experience more accurately described as “liberating” – a far cry from such terms as remaining confined in “the handicapped world”



An important distinction needs to be made between disabled people being together on terms *of their own choosing* (whether for friendship or political activity) and disabled people being together *not* of their own choosing (e.g, because of the way that services are organised)

The research comprised an ethnographic investigation into the lives and experiences of people with learning difficulties who live in residential care. The research was conducted in three private residential homes in Middlehurst, a town in the south of England. Felix House opened in the early 1980s and has 13 residents, Anstey House opening in the mid 1980s and has 12 residents and Warwick House also opened in the mid 1980s and has 8 residents.

In common with other studies, my data indicated that people did not appear to enjoy a wide range of personal relationships. they had little influence on their daily lives and little scope to make decisions. This lack of autonomy reinforced their social isolation.

1. The first factor which must be noted is that people with learning difficulties are generally very poor.
2. Another factor here concerns the access to one's money.
3. The organization of staffing is another factor which has important implications for residents social lives.

1. I have indicated that the influence of normalisation has created a clear assumption that relationships with non – disabled people are preferable to those between disabled people.
2. It demonstrates also an important misunderstanding of the nature of friendship as a voluntary relationship of mutual affection which founded on shared interests and experience.
3. The emphasis placed on social skill training as the solution to loneliness diverts attention from constraints faced by people with learning difficulties when attempting to establish social relationships, such as low income, restricted access to income, lack of autonomy and little control over personal information.
4. Discouraging disabled people from associating together also undermines the sense of commonality which is crucial to political action.