Friend-like' Intimacy Qualities in Family: A Case Study of Malaysian Students' Close Friendship

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Abstract: *In the specific context of living abroad, Malaysian students in the UK seek for intimacy and its ideal practices. This study addresses the questions of what does it mean to be intimate and who are included as close friends in the situation of temporary mobilities abroad. The 'ideal quality of intimacy' in terms of affection, love and care which usually present in family practices influenced the way in which Malaysian students define their close friendship. Focusing on 18 Malaysian undergraduate and master taught students in the UK, as well as using in-depth interviews, diaries and friendship maps as research methods, this study unpacks what it means to them of 'close friendship', the inclusion of family members in close friendships and the overlapping terms of 'family' and 'friend' used in this context. This study highlights the issue of insufficient vocabulary of intimacy. Calling a family member as a best friend showed that 'friend-like qualities' have acquired in the relationships. Nevertheless, it does not mean that these qualities have changed the social roles that family members take on. This study argues that the word 'friend' is used to emphasize the strong feeling and bond in family relationship as there is a 'missing vocabulary' that might better describe the intimacy practices in close friendships. The social roles of family and friends are specialized and not suffused. Instead, family relationships became closer and 'like a friend' due to the choices, commitment as well as the high levels of intimacy gained within the relationships.*

Keywords: *intimacy; family practices; close friendships; mobilities*

1. Introduction

Intimacy is not just about sharing emotions through talking or touching: this study also considers the influence of cultural and religious ideas and practices as well as students travelling a long way from home in the context of intimacy. Significant aspect of theories of intimacy is that they show how intimacy might also be produced and practised through sharing similar spaces, situations, experiences and sensibilities in living abroad. This study reviews the way in which Malaysian students in the UK produce and practise intimacy with their close friends which are categorised into three types: 1) blood-related family members, 2) long-established friends back home and 3) new friends formed in the UK. The discussion draws on Spencer and Pahl's (2006) concept of suffusion as a foundation.

> "[…] we discover that family ties may have friend-like qualities and, conversely, that friends may feel like family. Not only can there be a blurring of boundaries, but this process of suffusion is sometimes acknowledged in the way people talk about these relationships, for example, calling a cousin a friend, or a friend a sister" (Spencer, & Pahl 2006 pp. 108)

Although Spencer and Pahl's concept of suffusion seems relevant to discuss close friendships, this study argue that suffusion is actually a 'missing' vocabulary which is drawn on to emphasize the strength of particular relationships. This study highlight that the ways in which Malaysian students defined and practised intimacy are different for different types of close friends. Not all close friendships reported to acquire the ideal intimacy

qualities as not all family members are seen as best friends and not all close friends are referred to as family members. Further, it is hard to explain some relationship; for example, some students described their co-national new close friendships that are established abroad as 'family', which is different from the word 'family' used in long-established close friends. This article focuses on the discussion of 'friend-like' qualities in family relationship and the debates of 'missing vocabulary' in the use of word 'friend' in this context. The key argument of this study is that Malaysian students used the word 'best friend' in family relationship to emphasize the strong bond acquired between them and some of their family members. The relationships of friends and family are not suffused, but there is insufficient vocabulary to describe this kind of 'special' relationships.

2. Methodology

This study used friendship maps, diaries and in-depth interviews as the instrument of data collection. Before the meeting, participants will be asked to prepare a list of 15 to 20 names of friends who are close and important in their life. In this research, the meaning of 'friends' is open to participants' considerations about friendship and may include family members and other personal network. Preparation of the list of friends before the meeting is to give time and space for participants to think and choose which friends will be included or excluded in their list. The participants will be asked to write their friends' name in stickers and arrange the names in order of importance on the map before the first interview. From the arrangement of the names, the nearer to the centre of the concentric circle is the closest friendship (Spencer, & Pahl 2006). While three-weeks diaries provide temporal information on friendship interaction by capturing the practices and experiences of everyday lives. The friendship maps and real-time data captured by using diaries provide an overview of current behaviour, highlight issues important to participants (Tracy 2013) and serves as a main function to talk on the interview.

3. Discussion

Malaysian students talked about the time of living abroad as a time in which their identities and social positioning, as well as their practices of intimacy and close friendships were changing. They included not only non-kin ties as close friends but also their family members and new friends formed abroad. Old and new close friendships are formed and sustained based on several significant life events experienced by the students. These events include parents' divorce, financial crisis and mental illness, as well as living abroad which is the main focus of this study. It is interesting to found that sharing similar social space and doing physical activities together has transformed the new friendships formed abroad into close friendships as well as change the way in which students describe the strength of close friendships in family and long-established close friendships. Some of the Malaysian students in this study acquired the quality of 'best friends' with particular family members and the quality of 'family' in their non-relative close friendships – for particular individual or groups of old and new friends. The 'ideal quality of intimacy' which usually present in family practices influenced the way in which Malaysian students define their 'close friendship'. As the concept of intimacy is usually represented by family relationships in terms of affection, love and care (Chambers 2013; Morgan 2011a), the students listed a set of close friendships based on these ideal qualities. Thus, it is not surprising that a majority of the students' family members occupied the first two inner circles of the friendship maps. Aina's quote below represents most of the Malaysian students' views of the family as the important and close friendships.

> AINA: I share a lot of things with my sister, Anis. She also shares a lot of stuff with me. That is why we can become best friends. She is not judgemental because she knows me and she knows my story. We do not contact each other every day. But if there is anything big happened to me, for instance, I failed my exam or anything bad happened to me, I told my sister first before I told my mother. But if I have happy news to share, my sister will know about that after I have told my mum. We are the only sisters in my family, so she has already faced the similar phase that I am facing right now. She is my teacher. Not totally a teacher because not all her advice is relevant to me. [Laugh] But I know that she can understand me better than anyone else.

Aina took on friend-like qualities in terms of practical help, emotional support, confiding and companionship, together with the sense of duty or obligation in her sibling relationships with Anis, in which turned their sibling relationships into close friendships. Siblings can be the closest possible soulmates (Spencer, & Pahl 2006), as in Aina's case, but, this is a very idealistic view of sibling relationships: not all the participants experienced this. Sibling can also be indifferent to each other, or even estranged, as in Kai' case which will be discuss later. As Aina lives away from home, she preferred to share news related to difficulties of studying abroad as well as relationships issues to her sister Anis, especially news that will bother her mother. Aina talked that she perceives Anis as a younger version of her mother because Anis is older than her and already experienced the similar situations that she is facing at the moment. Hence, Aina felt that her sister, Anis, was able to understand her more than her parents and brothers.

Although more than a half of the Malaysian students listed their family members as close friends, based on the findings, this study would not be able to make a claim that all family members who were listed as close friends by the students have acquired friend-like qualities in their relationships. In agreement with Policarpo (2016), the reasons why some people are 'special' depend on the time spent together, the trust that has gained as well as the sharing of routines, special life events, experiences, difficult moments in life and significant life transitions in the life course. In Aina's case, only her sister and mother are referred to as best friends. Aina acquired a friend-like quality along with a close family bond with her sister and mother, but she gained a lower level of intimacy with her father, brothers, and sisters-in-law, although all of them were listed as important and close friends. Hence, it seems to be that for some people, including family members, under some circumstances they are not all that special.

One of the explanations of why this study claimed that the use of concepts friends and family in close friendships is just a missing vocabulary is that the students did not use the term 'family' and 'friends' interchangeably every time they talked about specific relationships. For example, Aina still called Anis as her 'sister' not as a friend throughout the interviews although Anis is seen as someone special; more than a sister and a best friend. In this context, the reason of why Aina, as well as other students, referred to their family members as best friends is because they did not find a suitable word to describe the 'friend-like quality' gained in their relationships. In this context, the roles as a family member and a friend are not wholly or partially suffused as claimed by Spencer and Pahl (2006). Indeed, the attachment, expectations, as well as the way in which students practise the intimate act towards other people, matters in this case. As the eldest sister, Anis cares and concerns on Aina's wellbeing since Aina lives alone and away from their family. The role as the eldest sister has not been changed in this context. Instead, the acts of intimacy such as sharing personal problems and spending time together portrayed the close bonds that have been established between Aina and Anis.

Only particular relationships had taken on certain attributes, becoming more like a best friend or more like a member of the family. Certainly, it depends on the level of intimacy as well as the degree of choice and commitment. Based on these findings, the families that already achieved high intimacy levels and close bonds before the students live abroad has grown closer than before, and vice versa. There are two different cases of intimacy levels in this study, which are Kai' and Jenny's cases. Kai and Jenny whom both have experienced their parents' divorce have listed their families as close friends. However, the way in which they perceive and practice intimacy in the family are different. Jenny only listed her younger sisters as close friends and indeed perceived her sisters as best friends, while Kai listed all his family members but claimed that the only reason is a 'normative pressure' that family should be perceived as important and intimate.

> JENNY: I consider my sisters as my best friends because I tell them stuff and everything. Every day when I come back home, I just feel like telling them my day, teasing each other, sharing some funny things. To a certain extent, I will tell them my problems. If it will make them worry, then no. I do not want them to worry too much and I do not want them to know that I have a lot of things to handle. I still want them to be open to me and stuff like that. It is more like the eldest sister kind of thing. When my parents were divorcing, I had to be a big person because I did not want to show that I am weak in front of them.

KAI: I feel like blood ties mean nothing. It is simply the fact that we are related by blood. If blood ties are significant, I might have a close bond with my sister, but actually, I do not meet her every year, and I do not feel anything towards her. […] I think when I was little I was told that parents are very important. You learn in moral education (one of the syllabus in Malaysian education system) that parents are important. They work hard to give you a better life, anything that you want. I agree with that, but I don't really know, why I do not really miss them. […] I love my parents, but I do not call them a lot. I call them once every 4 months.

Based on both cases above, this study is in agreement with Smart et al. (2001) that family breakdown, although is a quite painful process, offers greater opportunities for the democratisation of relationships between children and parents; which is usually lacking in collectivist culture, as well as encourages a re-evaluation of roles and practices within households. The data in this study shows that parents' divorce became a turning point as well as causing a shift in caring and power relations in sibling relationships between Jenny and her younger sisters. Jenny did not only take a role as a sister but also as a best friend and a mother especially in making decisions in the family. Jenny gained 'friend-like' qualities with her younger sisters as they comfortable to talk and to gossip with each other as well as to travel and have fun together. Besides claiming her sisters as best friends, Jenny carried out her role and responsibility as the eldest sister and became more responsible towards her younger sisters as she wanted to make sure that they are not affected by their parents' divorce. In this case, Jenny's situation has resonance with Mauthner's (2005) findings that women's experiences of sistering evolve and changes under the influences of life events outside of the sister relationships, which is parents' divorce in this case. However, Jenny gives more instrumental and emotional supports to her sisters, but the relationships are not reciprocal enough.

On the other hand, Kai who also experienced his parents' divorce argued that the only reasons that he listed his family members as close friends was a sense of obligation as well as the normative pressure that 'family should be important'. Kai had not had a close relationship with his family since he had been studying abroad – since high school – and that recently his parents had divorced. He is also detached from his family due to his sister's problem of drug abuse as well as his own mental illness. During the interview, Kai stated that he had more frequent contacts with his childhood friends compared to his family members to the extent that he did not remember when was the last time he contacted his family members. Nevertheless, Kai listed all his family members including his cousins as close friends, even though their relationships were not as intimate as his relationships with childhood friends.

Although Kai feels some unease about his family relationships, intimacy become an impossible 'ideal', not only to Kai but also to other students. The ideal qualities of intimacy in family practices and the sense of obligations might be influenced by the Malaysian collectivist culture in which immersed into the students' consideration to include their family members as part of close friends. Although Kai did not feel close or acquired friend-like qualities with his parents and younger sister, he listed them as close friends in order to conform to the social norms. Throughout the interview, the researcher noticed that Kai never talk about intimate practices and intimate experiences with his family members, which is contrary to his statement earlier. Kai talked about instrumental support, particularly financial, that he gained from his parents but he did not receive adequate emotional support from his family members. Kai repeatedly argued that he includes parents and sister as close friends in this study just because he learned that 'family should be close and important'. However, the way he talked about his relationship with Halim and family seem to show that Kai seeks for intimacy and the ideals of family which I will discuss further in the next part of this section.

Based on both cases, this study support Pahl and Spencer's (2010) argument that lack of quality time that family members spend together as well as less of affectionate communications became the key factors of unaccomplished friend-like quality, like in Kai' and Jenny's family relationships. These findings proved the arguments in this study that the roles as family members have not been changed or suffused, but the relationships became closer and special due to the choices, commitment as well as the high levels of intimacy gained within the relationships. Although intimacy is often seen in common sense terms as a natural process, the

data in this study show that intimacy is also learned and practiced. The evidence presented in this study suggests that only specific family members are seen as 'special' and becoming more like a best friend to the students as they practiced the ideal qualities of intimacy in their relationships.

It is interesting to highlight that the students have different expectations and obligations in friendship and family relationships. In this context, cultural and religious background are substantial elements that affect the way in which Malaysian students experience and define intimacy. The roles of family and friends are specialised; thus, the students interact with them and practise the intimacy in several different ways. There were no findings in this study that showed that the Malaysian students were having fun and doing 'friendship activities' especially with parents. Most of the intimate acts that are perceived by the students as 'friend-like qualities' – loving, caring and sharing, with their selected family members, are actually happened within family practices or the idea of 'doing' family as described by Morgan (2011b). Nevertheless, this raises a question whether intimacy in non-kin close friendships are similar to 'family practices' or beyond than that?

4. Conclusion

This study came out with an argument that the relationship between family and friends are not suffused. Instead, it is just a missing vocabulary to describe the intensity and quality of closeness, or 'intimacy', in those relationships. Although the students perceived some of their childhood friends as family members or their family members as best friends, they did not alternately use the term 'family' for non-kin ties or 'friend' for their parents or siblings, when they talk about their relationships. This study supports Allan's (2008) critical argument on the suffusion concept that the language of friendship is drawn on to emphasize the special quality of a given kin tie, while the language of kinship is drawn to highlight the strength of particular non-kin ties and differentiate them from other relationships. Indeed, Malaysian students in this study using the word 'family' and 'friend' to highlight the strong feeling and bond as there is insufficient vocabulary.

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