

The welcome or not so welcome back – An application of Goffman’s social rituals to skilled migrants’ visiting friends outside Australia

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Abstract

This paper builds on Goffman’s (1971) work on the rituals that cement social relationships. Specifically, three of Goffman’s (1971) social rituals: the ‘little pieties’; ‘periods of high access’; and, the ‘attenuation rule of the performance of pleasure’ will be extended and applied to skilled migrants visiting friends outside Australia. In detail, ‘little pieties’ are the giving of small gifts to support friendship. ‘Periods of high access’ refer to an availability to socialise with friends in response to projected geographic inaccessibility. Finally, the ‘attenuation rule of the performance of pleasure’ is a display of initial delight following the reunion with an acquaintance which quickly diminishes. Insufficient attention has been paid to the social networks of skilled migrants (Scott 2007). Data collected from a sample of qualitative interviews with skilled migrants to Australia will be analysed in relation to these three social rituals. The analyses will be used to demonstrate that in general Goffman’s rituals are played out when migrants visit old friends, and that commitment to migrate impacts on some migrants’ motivations to support old friendships via little pieties. Even though distance impacts on friendship, the performance of pleasure during visits continues to be a key social ritual.

Keywords: Friends, Goffman, Social ritual, Skilled migrant

Introduction

This paper explores an aspect of the friendship experiences of skilled migrants to Australia. It is the *break* in friendships, facilitated or necessitated by migration, that allows migrants the opportunity to compare ‘before’ (the “old” friends they knew before they migrated), and ‘after’ (the “new” friends that they did not know before they migrated to live in Australia) friends. It is the maintenance that they undertake and the meaning that they attribute to their ‘old’ friendships which is of interest to me. I will focus in particular on skilled migrants returning - usually to where ever home is - to visit ‘old’ friends after a period of time spent living in Australia.

Insufficient attention has been paid to the social networks of skilled migrants (Scott 2007: 656). I explore findings from interviews with skilled migrants to examine the extent to which Goffman's (1971) rituals of supportive interchanges that occur between people to cement a social relationship are present. Specifically I examine and extend Goffman's concepts of: 'little pieties' - the giving of small gifts to support friendship; 'periods of high access' - being available to socialise with friends in response to projected geographic inaccessibility; and the 'attenuation rule of the performance of pleasure' - a display of initial delight following the reunion with an acquaintance which quickly diminishes. I will draw on responses from sixteen semi-structured face-to-face interviews with skilled migrants about their visits made to old friends outside Australia to assess the performance of Goffman's social rituals. Following the criteria for skilled migration to Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009) I define skilled migrants as those with a degree gained outside Australia and professional work experience in a related field to their degree. Respondents were recruited from volunteers to advertisements sent to migrant organizations, media outlets and businesses and government offices in NSW and the ACT. Anyone of working age, professionally employed at the time of the interview, and from any ethnicity or country of origin could be involved. Respondents came from: Bahrain; Bulgaria; Quebec, Canada (x2); England (x5); Ireland; Hong Kong (x3); Norway; Slovakia; and Sri Lanka. Ages ranged from 27 to 60 years. Nine respondents were female, 7 were male.

Goffman, interaction and access ritual

Goffman has a micro theory approach to the self and social interaction (Roberts 2006: 62) that provides a lens through which to explore the experiences of skilled migrants

and their friends outside Australia. Goffman's work on the interaction order is concerned with what happens when two or more individuals are co-present and considers aspects such as ritual, drama or performance and game (Goffman 1966, 1969, 1971). Whilst Goffman (1971: 67, 75, 84, 200-7) makes limited reference to friends, (and certainly to my knowledge none to skilled migrants), his analysis of the focused aspect of interaction, when two or more people are actively involved in a conversation that holds their attention (Goffman 1966: 7), does provide a transferable framework through which face-to-face friendship enactment and maintenance in everyday life can be understood. This has been used by Butera (2008) to analyse gender performance in friendship.

Building on Durkheim's work on religious rituals Goffman uses a rich array of metaphors to describe the ritual, social life and the moral self (Manning 1992: 60; Roberts 2006: 72; Trevino 2003: 2, 7). Yet despite his depiction of a moral order that structures the interactions between individuals Goffman (1971: 72) still constitutes the individual as strategic, knowing and therefore manipulative (Roberts 2006: 63). Individuals have various motives for maintaining their impressions of self when co-present, and in a way collude with others to 'save face' (Goffman 1969: 9). Whilst this collusion may be taken as a means by which rituals are mutually supportive or collaborative (Roberts 2006: 72), it could also be understood as strategic behaviour. Applied to friendship, Goffman's strategic self relates to functional modes of friendship identified in the literature where a quid pro quo system - a favour for a favour - is assumed to operate. For example, Aristotle's (2002: 232-260) 'utility' and 'pleasure' friends are motivated by what can be gained by friendship, as opposed to the benevolence of friendship, for friendship's sake.

In 'Relations in Public' Goffman (1971) writes about the micro-interactions of groups and individuals who are co-present in relation to the verbal and non-verbal 'rules', and 'rituals' that govern social behaviour. Here Goffman defines a ritual as:

“...a perfunctory, conventionalised act through which an individual portrays his respect and regard for some object of ultimate value to that object of ultimate value or to its stand in.” (Goffman 1971: 62)

I will now use the friendship literature to explain how Goffman's rituals of supportive interchange relate to the experience and practice of friendship for skilled migrants.

Friendship face-to-face

I start with the premise that active friendship occurs face-to-face. There is a substantial literature that demonstrates the importance of friends being in the same physical place and of having frequent contact in order to enact and maintain friendship (Aristotle 2002; Derrida 1997; Little 1993; Montaigne 1991; Pahl 2000).

For example, Aristotle thought that good friendship was impeded by separation as:

“...if they are asleep, or in different parts of the world, they cannot express their mutual affection in deeds, though retaining the disposition to do so. For separation in space does not kill friendship outright, it only makes its active exercise impossible.” (Aristotle 2002, Book 8, Chapter 5: 236).

Aristotle implies that friends must be together in 'space'. Millennia later Little (1993) agrees that true friends need a physical space in which to hang out and be friends *in*. Likewise Derrida (1997) asserts that friends need to be in the same place and see each other often:

“...the friend is the near one and friendship grows with presence, with allocation in the same place” (Derrida, 1997: 240).

More recently, Pahl (2000) highlights the importance of nurturing friendship networks, proposing that friendships are about shared values and times together and

iterates that geographic proximity offers a different style of intimacy than that of a friend 'separated by the Atlantic Ocean' (Pahl 2000: 121).

When migrants come to Australia, they are separated from their old friends by physical distance and can no longer spend time together in active face-to-face friendships. Based on the importance of face to face friendship in the literature, it could be assumed that maintaining the closeness of active friendship with people outside Australia will be a challenge to skilled migrants, as geographic separation means that they are unable to physically spend time together.

Nowadays the disposition to maintain friendship over distance highlighted by Aristotle is enabled by technological advances such as Internet applications; mobile phones; and, cheap phone calls (Clarke 2005; Panagakos and Horst 2006: 115; Vertovec 2004). Whilst these technologies do enable friends real time contact despite geographic separation, arguably they are a supplement to active friendship, as they offer a different mode of friendship to face-to-face contact in the same physical space and time. Hence, it is important to examine the face-to-face friendships of skilled migrants to Australia, and how these play out in the micro-social order of everyday life.

Friendship far away

Even without migration most friendships still have a natural attrition, and the end of a friendship is rarely formally articulated, meaning friends tend to 'fade' away (Little 1993: 41; Matthews 1986: 70; Pahl 2000: 14). Access is central to friendship maintenance (Spencer and Pahl 2006: 99). Geographic mobility does play a role in friendship maintenance by impinging, moulding or modifying personal relationships (Pahl and Pevalin 2005: 435). Like migrants to another country, an individual moving

to a new region within the same country also experiences a change in friendships. Relocation has also been identified by Matthews' (1986: 41) research as detrimental to maintaining friendships into old age. Matthews (1986: 66-69) shows that older people drew on 'dormant' friends in old age depending on their social situations. Pahl (2000) calls these old friends – who may have been important once, for instance at university - who are re-visited at a later stage in life as 'fossil friends', observing similarly that they can be reactivated as life circumstances change and the friendship would carry on 'just where it left off' (Pahl 2000: 72).

Effectively, migrant's friends outside Australia are dormant because they were once important friends; there is a shared history and yet they may be drawn on should the need arise. The extent to which migrants maintain their friendships could include small rituals, Goffman (1971: 62) identifies as 'little pieties'. Indeed, Matthews (1986: 63) suggests that sending a Christmas card is a small and infrequent 'exchange' to support friendship. These rituals are admittedly tokens in friendship maintenance requiring little active effort. Little (1993: 41) suggests that people feel a sense of pride in resuming dormant friendships that they have made little effort to maintain for a long time.

Results

As suggested by the literature, in general the interview data demonstrates that the skilled migrants made minimal effort to maintain their 'old' friendships. For Norman (English, 34), contact was limited to occasional emails and phone calls: 'maybe birthdays or Christmas'. Similarly, Benjamin (English, 52), limited contact to: 'Christmas cards, that's it'. Eugene (French, 33), used email, but infrequently: 'I would say four messages a year, max'. Technologies do supplement friendship and

allow performance of little pieties at a distance, but here they do not replace face-to-face friendship.

Despite this limited contact, respondents did not consider this a problem, nor an indication of the value attributed to their friendship. For example, Benjamin admitted he was ‘not very good at keeping in touch’ but still imagined close ties to friends in England based on a shared history since childhood over a period of nearly 50 years - in comparison to 12 years shared history with his Australian friends. Likewise, Jennifer (English, 31) was unbothered by her limited friendship contact, expressing the projected ‘pride’ of resuming friendship as identified by Little (1993):

“I can’t explain it, but it it it’s fine ... if I moved back there tomorrow, like it [would] just pick up where it left off really” (Jennifer).

The previous examples fit the model of small ritual interchanges that support interaction, or little pieties, as identified by Goffman. Margaret (Québécoise, 33), was an exception to the other interviewees. She related that she had phoned friends outside Australia weekly for the first two years, exceeding the ‘little’ piety of other respondents. Subsequently her behaviour conformed to the little pieties at birthdays and Christmas as per Goffman, and as evidenced by the other respondents:

“I kind of cut a bit, the contacts ... because it was an extra effort that I didn’t want to make. Which sounds awful. But I wanted to concentrate on the friends I have here” (Margaret).

Margaret is focused on maximising friendship outcomes for her gain, as per Aristotle’s model of utilitarian friendship. Her initial high contact with friends outside Australia may be related to difficulties making friends here, and a desire to ‘test out’ migration. Her later reduction in contact with old friends outside Australia was both deliberate, rather than the natural attrition of friends fading away, and simultaneously reflected her greater successes in making new friends. Margaret’s approach offers some evidence of the utilitarian nature of friendship, and also relates

to the knowing self (Roberts 2006: 70). Unlike Goffman's (1971) work, however, which suggests individuals have motives, but offers little to suggest what these might be other than to broadly limit 'damage' to the reputation of the self (Manning 2000: 289; Roberts 2006: 66), here we gain some insights into Margaret's motives.

Social ritual when visiting old friends

When skilled migrants visit old friends a performance of friendship ensues that sees the enacting of a different ritual, what Goffman calls a time of 'high access.' This is marked by a change in access to someone, especially geographic access, manifesting in a period of increased availability with "social parties, dinners-out, or telephone calls" (Goffman 1971: 85). I am extending Goffman's notion of high access to include the scenario of migrants *returning* to old friends on a visit. Benjamin was an interviewee who conformed to Goffman's model of high access. On his most recent visit back to England he signaled his accessibility by phone to friends who it appears were reciprocally accessible to him. Both Benjamin and his old friends were collaborating in this ritual of supportive interchange of high access. However, Benjamin's access was not without the motivation of a knowing self:

"...I guess it is a bit of a false situation, when a migrant goes back home because you are only there for a short period of time, you are running around trying to see as many people as possible, err, ... your time is very limited, ... I want to cram as much in as possible, and I suppose, I almost force things to happen, and I will see a LOT of people in a short time. Whereas I suppose if I lived there permanently I wouldn't be seeing people on such a regular basis. ... I don't know how much of an effort I would make if I lived there." (Benjamin).

The 'false' nature of his visit suggests the strategic self, who maximizes performance for gain. This is particularly pertinent for Benjamin as he would eventually like to return to the town in England where his friends still live. In addition to the bond of a shared history, Benjamin's motive to maintain old friendships by creating periods of

high accessibility could hinge on the future utility benefits of these friendships. It is possible that Benjamin is deceiving himself about the nature of his old friendships (Manning 2000: 290). Having been away for 12 years his ‘old’ friends may not be the close friends they once were, in spite of the shared history. Indeed, the motives and feelings of his friends in meeting up with him, and the extent to which they manage without Benjamin being in the same physical space with them is unknown. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s friends were presented by him as being accessible to his visits, and interested in reuniting with him, both aspects of ritual. This may be genuine interest or what Goffman describes as an obligatory performance of pleasure enacted by “acquainted persons” following a period of separation:

“This display marks the delight an individual takes in finding himself in the presence of a loved one and worthy object and provides assurance that the separation just now terminated, not having been malicious, is not an expression of the relationship” (Goffman, 1971, p74).

Further Goffman proposes an attenuation rule whereby long separated friends will be initially expansive in their pleasure at seeing each other, but that this performance will quickly diminish in intensity, to a little “cheek flick” (Goffman 1971: 84). To varying degrees, the interview data demonstrates the attenuation rule in practice during visits by skilled migrants to old friends. Norman relates his experience of returning home once, after two and a half years away:

“Yeah, it was good. I only went back for five nights ... and it was brilliant on like the Friday the Saturday and the Sunday, but ... Monday and the Tuesday ... everyone went back to work ... when you first arrive you kind of... the novelty - and its good to see everyone, after about three days it’s like *ptht* [fizzing out noise] - back to normal.” (Norman)

Norman’s visit appears as a ‘text book’ example of the attenuation rule in operation, both in respect of the initial pleasure, the ‘brilliant’ ‘novelty’ of going out to the pub with his friends, dissipating after only three days to normality, or Goffman’s ‘cheek flick’. Norman’s visit raises questions about the circumstances of his friendships. As

this research does not interview both parties in the friendship, it is unclear if Norman's friends would have gone to the pub regardless of his return, or if this was a display of high access by them. Arguably Norman's access period was limited - five days only - it is therefore interesting that friends did not take time off work to increase their accessibility to him, their access was only at the weekend. This may possibly reflect Norman's attitude to them, his short visit as a weak commitment to the friendships, and his desire never to return to live in England. Strategically, Norman's main motivation for supportive ritual in friendship could simply be the nostalgia of a shared history or a chance that old friends might move out to Australia (as others had).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that skilled migrant's friendships outside Australia are not active in a face-to-face context, this paper demonstrates that in the absence of physical contact these friendships are sustained, sometimes for many years, by the supportive rituals of 'little pieties', such as sending Christmas cards or occasional emails, that are in part facilitated by technologies such as email. Yet, these technologies in this instance do not replace face-to-face friendship enactment. When the migrants return home to visit old friends a different performance of friendship is enacted, and one that draws on a different set of rituals. In general when the skilled migrants visit old friends, there is a performance of an initial display of pleasure on reunion. As Goffman suggests in his attenuation rule, this quickly diminishes. However, the time-frame and extent to which this tapering off of interest occurs varies depending on the length of the migrants visit, and their commitment to migration. Although, there are unanswered questions in relation to the motives of both skilled migrants and their old friends in

regard to these ritual displays, the interviews hint at the presence of a strategic self, which seeks to maximize friendship outcomes in a utilitarian fashion (Aristotle 2002). It seems that even though distance impacts on friendship enactment during periods of absence face-to-face; the performance of pleasure during visits continues to be a key social ritual. In most cases, skilled migrants do seek to maintain some contact with old friends outside Australia.

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