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Researching Friendship: Politics, Process and Practice

The philosophical literature on friendship which is available to English-speaking, Anglo-American, Western academic readership is wide-ranging. The foundation for the tradition is usually traced back to the philosophers of Ancient Greece and Rome, including Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Seneca, who wrote comprehensive treatises on politics and friendship. The trajectory then passes through the medieval Christian writings on spiritual friendship by figures such as Aelred and Aquinas, via pre-modernists, modernists, and post-modernists, where there was limited coverage on friendship by writers like Montaigne, Emerson, Kant, Hume, Nietzsche and Derrida, to be part of a growing cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural literature in the 21st century.

This paper is an attempt to add to this body of literature by describing the politics, process and practice of a research project which attempted to incorporate various aspects of friendship. The research methodology was collaborative, the researchers, from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and a variety of cultures, languages and ethnicities were recruited via friendship networks, and the content of the research was the practice and language of friendship. However, the politics of the research was, in the main, related to the difficulties of pursuing an alternative methodology within a traditional framework of funding, reporting, publishing, and working.

While most cross-cultural research on friendship involves a researcher examining and comparing the language, customs and practices of ‘the other’, this project involved researchers studying their own culture and reporting for themselves to a group of ‘friendly’ co-researchers. The findings are that there are common understandings about what friendship is. However, the differences in language and practices relating to friendship have political implications and can help to explain some political differences.