Friendship, schooling and gender identity work

Julie McLeod,
Postdoctoral Research Fellow,
Deakin Centre for Education and Change, Faculty of Education,
Deakin University, Burwood 3125,
Victoria, Australia
jemcleod@deakin.edu.au


Abstract

This paper explores gendered subjectivity in secondary schooling through a study of young people's experiences of friendship. Drawing on findings from 'The 12 to 18 Project'-a qualitative, longitudinal study of secondary school students-I address two main questions: i) Do the conventional stories about feminine and masculine styles of personal and social interaction continue to hold true? and ii) What research methodologies and theoretical approaches are most helpful for analysing gendered patterns in friendship? From a broadly poststructuralist perspective, I re-consider some influential feminist accounts of gender identity and intimacy, focusing particularly on the tension between desires for connection and for autonomy, and outline a way of seeing the self as a 'magic writing pad' (Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen 1996) or a palimpsest, a metaphor which allows us to hold together traditional poststructuralist concerns with the subject as produced and a more psychological focus on understanding the processual development of gendered subjectivity over time.

"Julie McLeod

All characteristics are potentially gendered, but they are not always forever gendered, since gender difference is never a total success; it is beset by contradictions, particularly in the contemporary world where women's positions have changed so dramatically. Material conditions, institutions, discourses and the human capacity of relating provide spaces for similarities to transcend differences. (Hollway 1995, p.100)
Introduction

What is the significance of intimacy and the affective in contemporary social life? How do we interpret the domain of interpersonal relations? And what are the predominant features of this 'private' domain at the end of the twentieth century? A range of social movements, feminism most notably, has scrutinised the private realm of emotions and interpersonal relations, redefining the 'personal as political' and challenging once rigid (even if artificial) distinctions between public and private, social and personal. In his book, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Anthony Giddens argues that one of the major effects of feminism has been a change in the manner in which personal and intimate relations are conducted and these changes have had dramatic consequences for the possibilities of social and public life. For Giddens one of these consequences is the exploration by many women of the 'potentialities of the "pure relationship", a relationship of sexual and emotional equality which is explosive in its connotations for pre-existing forms of gender power' (1992, p.2 see too Giddens 1991). Giddens characterises this as the 'democratization of the private sphere' (1992, p.185) and this democratization is for him one of the key features of late modernity. He writes: 'the transformation of intimacy presses for psychic as well as social change and such change, going 'from the bottom up', could potentially ramify though other, more public institutions' (1992, p.182). In short, for Giddens, the 'possibility of intimacy means the promise of democracy' (1992, p.188).

Capacities for friendship and intimacy operate discursively as key markers of gender identity and difference. Feminism has sought to redefine the public/private split and interrogate the associated binaries of reason/emotion, serious/trivial and so on. For some feminists, however, inverting rather than deconstructing these oppositions has been the goal, so that women's distinctive ways of being—our capacity for care, concern and connection—are reclaimed as virtues, celebrated not denigrated. By inference, men are constructed as lacking these qualities, and as defined by detachment, autonomy, hard-headed rationality and emotional awkwardness.

In education, claims that women have a distinctive voice, morality, style of learning, and predisposition for 'care and connection' have been given a renewed focus since the mid-1980s onwards with the growth of gender-inclusive curriculum and girl-friendly schooling. These reforms drew on notions of distinctively and essential feminine ways of knowing, and of women's natural inclination for affective, co-operative and 'conversational' relationships—views whose lineage is both conventional stereotypes of femininity and forms of object-relations psychology (McLeod 1996). The growth of the men's movement and the question of 'what about the boys?' has also focussed attention on what is different or special about girls. One of the things boys appear to miss out on and men want to reclaim is the experience of being in touch with their feelings, of being expressive and able to forge close bonds with one another (e.g. Morton 1997; Hickey et al 1998). In other words, being able to conduct their personal and social relations with the kind of emotional openness that is said to characterise women's friendships and social interactions. Whereas women's affect was once commonly represented as deficiency or as a negative and debilitating excess of sentiment, it is now being represented through discourses of transformation and redemption. Women's and girls' capacity for friendship and ability to express emotions is being reformulated as (personally and socially) 'healthy' and desirable, as powerful qualities which men simultaneously lack and need. And, if we pursue Giddens' line of analysis, the capacity for new forms of intimacy and the search for 'pure relationships' hold possibilities for the radical transformation of personal and social life.

In this paper, I address young people's recollected experiences of friendship and intimacy with two questions in my mind. The first is whether the conventional stories about female and male styles of social and personal relations continue to hold true. Are girls still being
caught up in webs of intimacy while boys seek out detachment and autonomy? How useful is it to keep speaking in these categories of difference- to keep reinscribing the authority of the affect/reason binary? (And, in relation to this, can we observe the kind of (incipient) changes and possibilities about which Giddens writes?) And the second question is, what approaches and ways of seeing might be helpful in interpreting the significance and effects of (gendered) patterns of intimacy and friendship?

In 1993 Lyn Yates and I began the 12 to 18 Project, a qualitative, longitudinal study which is following a number of young people at four different Victorian (Australian) schools through each year of their secondary schooling. Twice each year, we interview twenty-four students (six students at each school) either alone or with their friends, and video- and audiotape the interviews. We are interested in following qualitatively their thinking and their pathways as they go through schooling and then enter life beyond this. At each interview we ask them a range of questions about how they see themselves; how they are relating to school; and whether and how they are thinking about their futures (see Yates & McLeod 1996; McLeod & Yates 1997).

A particular focus of the study is the construction of gendered subjectivity over the period of secondary schooling-from 12 to 18 years. We are exploring two dimensions to the 'construction of gender': the first is cultural meanings and public discourses on gender and the ways in which girls and boys articulate and negotiate these. The second sense, and to date the more problematic, is the way in which individual gender identity takes shape and develops over time. Here we are concerned with understanding gender identity as a process, and how this process develops. We are examining stages and patterns, differences and commonalities in the ways in which different girls and boys negotiate/fashion/regulate their gender identities; we are looking at both developments in individual biographies as well as cross-sectional comparisons of different groups of students at the same age or stage of schooling.

In terms of understanding 'gender' in responses to interview questions, we have focussed on what the feminist researcher Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen calls 'unacknowledged gender'. We have not explicitly asked students to talk about how or what they think of themselves as a girl or a boy, or to reflect on their 'genderedness' in direct and immediate ways. Rather, we have tried to read off 'gendered subjectivity' from the ways in which students respond to the full range of questions-even when gender is not for them an obviously foregrounded issue. Bjerrum Nielsen suggests that:

The gendered subjectivity is the gendered 'being in the world' which consists of unacknowledged and to some extent unconscious gender (unconscious images/discourses and feelings attached to gender). Unacknowledged gender is the way gender is present as background when one reflects on something else, for example what kind of person one is, what kind of desires one has, what kind of feelings one experiences as having. Gender identity can then conversely be defined as the acknowledged gender. (1996, p.11)

Students' attitudes to and retold experiences of friendship are thus also being explored in terms of what insights they also offer into the process and construction of gendered subjectivity. How does the experience and perceived significance of friendship change or stay much the same for young people as they 'grow up' during the adolescent years? We are interested in how students talk about their present situation and in how they represent, to us and to themselves, earlier experiences of friendship-both happy and unhappy times-and how these accounts fit within their overall narratives of themselves.
Feelings matter

Giddens' sociological attention to 'feelings' and intimacy is itself one part of a large and diverse body of research (much of it feminist inspired) which attempts to make sense of the private, messy, and non-instrumental. In such work, intimacy and friendship are positioned as central objects of analysis, no longer trivial or incidental 'noise' in the serious business of explaining the rational and public dimensions of social life. For example, there has been a growth of interest in work broadly characterised as the 'sociology of emotions' (e.g. Stephenson et al 1996) and there are numerous ethnographic and other qualitative studies of young people and friendship which, often drawing on critical traditions within Cultural Studies, elaborate the political and sub-cultural significance of friendship practices (e.g. Nilan 1992; Taylor 1993; Hey, 1997). In major ethnographic study of girls and friendship, Valerie Hey argues for example that, 'The so-called private, marginal realm of schoolgirl friendships is a significant place where the "social" is indexed. It is between and amongst girls as friends that identities are variously practised, appropriated, resisted and negotiated' (Hey 1997, p.30).

Another related body of research addresses popularity, friendship cliques, tension in friendships, bullying and processes of inclusion and exclusion (Eder 1985; Kinney 1993; Giordano 1995; Tulloch 1995; Leckie 1997). There is also a strong tradition of psychologically-based research which examines friendship patterns and the ability to initiate and maintain close personal ties in terms of psychological adjustment, self-esteem, and other measurable traits (ref). In such work, friendship becomes a symptom or a way of measuring the (successful) passage through normative stages of adolescent social-psychological development. Coming out of object-relations and developmental psychology, the influential work of Carol Gilligan and the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girl's Development identifies the force of gender differences in interactions. A central focus of the 'Harvard Project' is the exploration of patterns and developmental crises faced by young girls growing up in Western cultures in the late twentieth century-prominent themes are the loss of voice as girls enter adolescence, and the juggling of their desires for autonomy and connection (e.g. Gilligan et al 1990; Taylor et al 1997).

There are as well many survey-based studies documenting that although friendship is important for both young women and men, there remain significant gendered patterns (e.g, Wilks 1992; Hartley 1994). A recent Australian report concludes that 'Women's friendships are a sharing of themselves, men's are more a sharing of activities'. Women's friendships tend to be holistic and undifferentiated while men's tend to be more specialised and differentiated; women tend to focus on nurturing, sharing, personal communication, and general expressiveness while men emphasise instrumentality with a focus on shared activities; women's friendships tend to be of a longer duration than men's. (Hartley 1994, p.5)

These are unsurprising findings, striking only insofar as they repeat what is already popular and feminist common-sense. Indeed, disappointingly, much of the research on gender and friendship offers few new insights into either friendship or gender difference/identity. At the beginning of the 12 to 18 Project, we wanted to see if, at the end of the twentieth century and after over two decades of feminism and of gender equity work in schools, the familiar patterns persisted; and we wanted to reconsider some of the standard analyses of these apparent differences, particularly the work of the 'Harvard Project' and the themes and dilemmas it identifies.

Gender difference and friendship in the 12 to 18 Project
From our research, it is unequivocally clear that for both girls and boys (from very different schools and backgrounds) friendship is a central part of their experience of growing up and of being at school. In Years 7 and 8 students frequently described seeing your friends as one of the best things about school.

Angela: Yeah, it totally changes, Like if you don't have friends then you don't really have anything in school.

Caroline: I mean it's alright if you don't have, I mean it's not good, but it's better to have, to have friends. I mean it's better to have no friends than being teased and having no friends.

(DC.a.94.Yr.7)

Narelle: I like this school a lot better, but in all truth I think that we don't have, I mean I love the school and all my friends, I mean the only reason I come to school is because of my friends...

(HC.cl.95b.Yr.8)

Q: What about you... what would you say [is] the most important thing?


(BS.m..94b Yr.7)

Q: And how do you think your friends see you? What sort of person do they think you are?

Mark: Probably the same as I sort of see them I suppose, I hope anyway. As good friends and I'd do anything for 'em if they needed to and that. If it was in limits. I'd stick by them.

(BS.m.96b,Yr.9)

Q: What do you really like about school?

Laura: Well, probably because you see your friends every day and that's good.

Sally: The best thing would probably be your friends.

(DC.l.94b,Yr.8)

And, as the Australian survey noted above found, there are many responses indicating that boys conduct friendship through activities such as sport, that for girls being friends involves a lot of talking and 'mucking around' and the swapping of confidences; and that both girls and boys describe their friendships along these lines of difference.

John: Me and Geoff are into cars. We talk about that.

Geoff: And maybe shootin' or somethin' like that.
Greg: Whatever comes up.

John: Sport

(BC.g, 94b Yr.7)

Q: ...What type of thing do you talk to your friends about?

Mark: Talk about fishing and that. See, 'cause I go out fishing a lot.

...

Aaron: Also talk about good yabbie spots and things like that. Or go the Wombat forest and fire dams.

...

Mark: And we talk about cars and what sort of cars you've got and what you're going to do new for them.

Paul: Yea.

Aaron: What favourite brand of car we have.

....

Q: So you talk about fishing and cars, anything else?

Mark: Oh, not really.

Paul: Soccer, sports.

....

Paul: And we talk about guns sometimes.

(BC.m,.94b Yr.7)

Tim: Girls often gossip and keep secrets. A lot and the boys are always the ones trying to find out I suppose. Well that's not always the case but... girls have girls' talk...

Laurie: The group I hang around with the girls are more secretive but the guys are a lot more open. You know.

Q: What do you think is the difference between girl talk and boy talk?

Laurie: Boys talk about cricket and footy and girls talk about, I don't know relationships and who they're going out with and who they're going to ring tonight....I don't know. It's the sort of impression I get.
Laurie: That's being a bit sexist though.

Tim: Yea, I know

(M.A. 95a.Yr.8)

Marion: If the guys want to say something to us and we retaliate, they don't really care but it might hurt us, kind of thing.

Tara: They've always got to be the best.

Marion: And between guy's friendships groups, they don't talk as much as we do so they don't have

Tara: Things like, emotional, like especially at movies and if we go as a class to a movie and it's a sad one then she gets all upset, I mean it's all cause we're emotional and free speaking and.....

(M.A. 95bYr.9)

We have also found many examples of boys in junior and middle school longing for friends and feeling isolated, struggling to find a vocabulary to express their despair. Contrary to a common view that affective relations are of little importance to adolescent boys, our findings suggest that the issue is rather one of emotional awkwardness and uncertainty. There are some strong indications that when friends fall out or there is friendship trouble girls and boys react differently. For girls it tends to be an all-consuming trauma, and it is difficult for them to focus on school work or on any other issue. For many girls, especially in junior and middle school, there is an intense pre-occupation with being a good friend and displaying the right qualities of friendship: trust, honesty, loyalty. And there is an equally intense pre-occupation among them with what counts as betrayal, and with processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Valerie: It moves around. Like sort of, I mean if you get left out you may be swap friends, like become better friends with other people, and all the friendships change.

Annabel: Yea, like they're constantly changing.

Q: Do you think most girls handle it ok when it happens, or do people get really upset?

Annabel: No girls get really upset.

Valerie: Girls get really upset

Sally: They get really upset.

[.]

Annabel: It really bothers you.

Sally: Yea

Valerie: And you just feel like not really welcome in your own group.
Jillian: Our sort of friends, like our group of friends, we don't have fights at all, but there's really popular people who have, like one minute they'll hate someone and the next minute they'll like them again and then they'll be best friends with someone and then they'll be best friends with someone else and it's really confusing...

For boys, in contrast, the reaction to friendship trouble is more often to look beyond the immediate upset and focus more single-mindedly on school work and looking to a future and a world of work away from school (see McLeod & Yates 1998).

Rodney: Oh people tease me, always pickin' on me and that, but you just ignore them....

Rodney: Just think "you're an idiot" and walk off....

Rodney: I just ignore them, and think about the kind of job they're going to have, if they have any job when they get older. Because if they don't do the work, well they're gonna fail aren't they and drop out of school.

In some respects, the experience of being bullied or having trouble with friends serves to sharpen boys' sense of their own identity, setting them apart from others, and forcing them to focus more on a life and a future away from school. In Year 7, one of the boys, who was from an ethnic-minority background, was finding it hard to make friends and to work out the patterns of social relations at his school. But, he determined not to let his loneliness and uncertainty distract him from his school work. Instead, he reported spending his lunchtimes sitting by himself under a tree memorising the distance between the planets as he believed that this would help him to fulfil his long-term aim to study science at university.

We have found, then, the persistence of certain conventional gender differences but evidence also that friendship, and especially working out how to foster close relationships is an important issue for boys, even if they speak about it in awkward ways, and in ways quite different from the girls.

Autonomy and Connection

Alongside girls' immersion in the intricacies and demands of emotional life we have also found quite striking narratives and fantasies of escape and adventure. There is, we have argued (McLeod & Yates 1998) an apparent tension for girls between a desire for personal freedom and a compelling sense of emotional responsibility. This observation resonates with some key findings of the Harvard Project on Women and Girls. Carol Gilligan writes:

Adolescence poses problems of connection for girls coming of age in Western culture, and girls are tempted or encouraged to solve these problems by excluding
themselves or excluding others—that is, by being a good woman or by being selfish. [...] for girls to remain responsible to themselves they must resist the conventions of feminine goodness; to remain responsible to others, they must resist the values placed on self-sufficiency and independence in North American culture. (Gilligan et al 1990. pp.9-10)

The Harvard Projects have been criticised for their normative, universalising and essentialising tendencies and for the ways in which the work itself silences and excludes the voices of different groups of women (e.g. Feminism & Psychology 1994, especially Davis 1994). Feminist poststructuralists—and, for different reasons, feminist psychoanalytic critics (e.g Rose 1986)—have been particularly critical of this and related forms of feminist object-relations psychology. In her ethnography of girls' friendship, Valerie Hey writes that although she had some initial attraction to the arguments about girls loss of voice—'of the confident voice of childhood replaced by the diminished and un/voiced self of adolescence' (1997, p.11), these findings were not confirmed by her own research: 'my own data were more ambiguous, representing fragmented and contradictory feminine subjects with contextually variant assertive as well as diminished voices-findings which were impossible to reconcile with the conceptualisation of the 'Harvard' authentic self-validating girl subject' (Hey 1997, p.11).

Hey's comments encapsulate some significant themes in both the (poststructural) study of girls' friendship patterns and the construction of gendered identities, and the current reception of Gilligan's work. I support many of the standard poststructural critiques of the Harvard Project and, like Hey, in the 12 to 18 Project we too can find examples which contradict and complicate the patterns and stages it proposes. But, in the haste to interrogate psychological work (as variously humanist, essentialist and normative) and to assert the truth of poststructuralist propositions, there has been a tendency to overlook some of the substantive themes and insights raised by the work of the Harvard Project. For example, the Harvard Project underlines questions about processes of identity and gendered development: and, like the 12 to 18 Project, it is concerned with understanding gender over time, not simply the discursive construction of gender at one particular time. It focuses on patterns and recurring tensions, and while this can produce a normative analysis of development, this is not to say that some of the identified themes and tensions are irrelevant or meaningless. For example, the Harvard Project's elaboration of the autonomy/connection dilemma resonates with some of our findings in the 12 to 18 Project. While this tension is a well-established theme in psychology, especially in the object-relations tradition (e.g. Hollway 1995), the culturally and historically specific form this drama takes (or even transformed) needs to be explored.

In the 12 to 18 Project, the conflict between autonomy and connection is very strong for girls in junior and middle school, not just in terms of how they think about their friends and intimacy but also in how they think about themselves now and in the future. For example, a girl in year 9 told us that she was really worried about her maths teacher, feared that she wasn't going so well at maths, and was falling behind. She had had the same teacher for three years (this was at a elite private school) and felt she was not learning much from him—he did not explain things in a way she could understand. But when we asked her if she or her parents had considered seeing whether she could be in another class, she said of the teacher 'he's the sort of person that would be upset if he thought you didn't understand'. In other words she was taking responsibility for not hurting his feelings, even if it undermined her own chances of doing well.

We also came across a number of examples of girls trying very hard to please their fathers and being hurt in the process. In one case, a girl gave as her unhappiest memory a time when her father (who was a doctor) had tried to explain a maths problem to her. She had not
understood, but pretended she had, and went away desperately unhappy. Again she was trying to protect him and not to hurt his feelings (that he had not really explained it very well). Another girl was obsessive about horseriding and had had quite a lot of success in it. She had also made the effort to get up early and go running with her father and do other things that he liked, but he was not making any similar effort to attend her horse riding events or any of the other things in which she was involved.

What we are finding here, then, are examples of adolescent girls working out some apparently persistent dilemmas in being a young woman-negotiating tensions between desires for personal success and a sense of obligation to and responsibility for others. It would be a mistake, however, to surmise from this that feminism and gender equity reforms in schools have somehow failed girls, have not given them enough self-confidence or encouraged them enough to pursue their own ambitions. Indeed, in some respects, it is precisely the possibilities for personal success and public achievement opened up and emphasised by feminist reform that has heightened these tensions between 'connection' and 'autonomy' for young girls today.

On the one hand, the Harvard Projects and related work address themes which continue to speak to the ways in which young girls construct their identities and experience intimacy and growing up in Australia today. On the other hand, however, the critiques made of this work and of object-relations more generally cannot be ignored: the tendency is to be normative and to privilege psychological processes over social/cultural context and individual life history. While poststructuralism has generated some valuable insights for the study of gender difference, it has also foreclosed others; it works against (for good reasons) universalising and generalising analyses, and it has inspired a persuasive body of literature that repudiates the normative and dangerous frameworks of developmental psychology (Hollway 1989, Henriques et al 1984, Walkerdine 1990). But in relinquishing the psychologised, humanist subject, it has also produced some fairly reductive theorisations of subjectivity. 'Discourses produce subjectivity': such discourse determinism can lead to a poststructuralism that is often no more insightful than socialisation theory (Hollway 1994; McLeod 1993; McLeod forthcoming). In the 12 to 18 Project, the challenge is thus to develop an approach to 'gender' which holds together developmental concerns with patterns and processes (we are studying gender subjectivity over time), poststructuralist arguments about discourses as constitutive, and subjectivity as produced and regulated, and the idea of a developing, in time and space (psychological) subject who is not coterminous with discourse.

The magic writing pad

One suggestive approach has been developed by Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen in her interview-based study of women across three generations. Like us, Bjerrum Nielsen find much that it is helpful in poststructuralism, but she too is critical of its thin and deterministic account of subjectivity (see McLeod forthcoming). She is also critical of the universalising and inexorable stages and laws of developmental psychology and of object-relations and Lacanian psycho-analysis. In order to develop a way of understanding gender identity, Bjerrum Nielsen extends Freud's metaphor of 'psychic apparatuses' as a 'magic writing pad' in which the subject is understood as a kind of palimpsest. 'The magic writing pad consists of two layers: a soft wax slate and over it a thin, transparent leaf of paper'. This magic writing-pad 'all the time receives new inscriptions upon it without having the old ones erased', even though the older ones may not always be immediately apparent and may need to be read and deciphered under special lighting (1996, p.7).

With this picture Freud shows us that permanence and change do not rule out the other: the mental apparatus is of such a kind that it is receptive in
unlimited way(s) to other new perceptions and yet creates permanent- even if
not unalterable-traces of recollection of them. (ibid)

For Bjerrum Nielsen (and for us) the usefulness of this metaphor is that it 'makes it possible
to maintain a certain developmental perspective on subjectivity, without ending up in either
determinism or universalism' (ibid). It enables us to conceptualise the construction of gender
identity as a recursive process which is neither characterised as a 'linear advancing and
logic' nor as 'randomly constituted' (ibid). It offers a way of thinking about the uneven
intersections and overlay between stories and narratives about the self, recollections,
imaginings and fantasies, and so on, as well as the relative impact of these 'inscriptions' at
different ages and stages. While still analysing subjectivity as produced and discourses as
constitutive, it suggests a way of thinking about how discourses, in conjunction with psychic
processes, actually work to produce subjectivity over time. In this formulation, we can see
how at different times and stages some discursive traces are more pronounced than at other
times, that their influence is not neatly predictable but that their markings are never
completely erased. The self remains a psychological category but it is not irrevocably fixed
or only shaped by psychological processes or dramas.

The metaphor of the self as a magic writing pad is a highly useful one for investigating the
process/development of gender identity in a longitudinal study. It registers the self as both
having a history, and as being ongoing, in-process. Significantly, returning to Giddens, it also
helps us to see the making of the self as a self-reflexive project (Giddens 1991). That is, it
makes it possible to think of the self as shaped by reflective and self-reflexive moves
between older and newer 'inscriptions' (which include the stories we tell ourselves). For
example, while we are interested in how girls and boys negotiate friendship and intimacy in
the present, we are also examining how they recollect earlier experiences, and the
narratives they tell themselves, and us, about these incidents. In reflecting back on their
schooling, students in years 9 and 10 frequently mark out friendship troubles as defining
moments. For girls especially (but not exclusively) friendship troubles form part of their
narrative of growing up, represented as a loss of innocent happiness and pleasure, an
incident which keenly and painfully signifies that 'everything changes'. (Interestingly, the girls
were more likely to talk about troubles and falling out sometime after the event, to construct
it as a memory, as something from which they have recovered or left behind, rather than as
an unhappiness they are still experiencing.)

Annabel: Um, alright, I've had a few friend sort of friend problems, you know,
everyone says that happens, like year 9. You know everyone says that you
know, that's when everything starts to sort of change and..

Q: Well it somehow quite a lot different from Year 7, for instance doesn't it" In
terms of where you are?

Annabel: Yes, for sure. In year 7 you seem so set, sort of in a way. You think,
of yea, you know this is my group of friends, and we're gonna be together
forever and all gonna be sort of lovely. And then somehow like without even
knowing it everything changes, you know. (DC.a96b.yr9).

Such narratives, when pieced together with other recurring themes in their talk about
themselves, their futures and their everyday school experiences, begin to tell us something
about both friendship, intimacy and loss and processes of gender identity development.

Conclusion
Feminists inside and outside of education have often praised girls and women's intrinsic capacity for friendship and affective relations. Significant educational reforms have been based on such presumptions. Care, conversation and connection have been thought of as unassailable virtues, as self-evidently good for girls, and for boys, if only they weren't so bound up in detachment and autonomy. But, as I have suggested, the desire for friendship and intimacy is not always easily satisfied or achieved without tension. Indeed the desire for intimacy can engulf girls, and dominate their experience of schooling, especially in the junior and middle school years. Here we have a dilemma for feminism. On the one hand, feminism expects and rewards girls for being affective and sensitive, and on the other, it demands that they succeed at school and in the world beyond. These twin imperatives thus exacerbate, rather than resolve, the autonomy/connection conflict for girls.

Finally, Giddens speaks optimistically of the possibilities afforded by the transformation of intimacy, and of the impact of feminism in enabling such change. Again, the shifts he writes about do not necessarily make it easier for young women to negotiate affective and intimate relations. Indeed, they too could work to increase rather than dissolve tensions between affect and autonomy. He writes: 'In a post-traditional order, the narrative of the self has in fact continually to be reworked, and life-style practices brought continually into line with it, if the individual is to combine personal autonomy with a sense of ontological security' (Giddens 1992, p.75). It is in the context of these kind of large-scale sociological changes that we also need to interpret girls' and boys' friendship patterns and the social-psychological and gendered resolutions to the dilemmas of autonomy and connection.
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