

Mothers Doing Friendship in a Hostile Environment: Navigating Dialectical Tensions and Sharing Support

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journals.sagepub.com/home/soc**Rachel Benckroun** 

UCL Social Research Institute, UK

Abstract

Increasingly hostile immigration policies in the UK produce insecure immigration statuses and exclusion from public services and mainstream welfare benefits. Little is known about how this precaritization affects racially minoritized mothers with insecure immigration statuses and ‘no recourse to public funds’. The ethnographic study on which this article is based explored the impact of hostile policies on mothering, and found that precaritization increases the significance of mothers’ informal support networks, including friendships. I show how hostile policies constrain mothers’ friendship practices, shaping access to support. I argue that while mothers share diverse forms of support through their everyday friendship practices, they have to navigate dialectical tensions (contradictions) that play out in ways specific to their precarious legal and financial positioning. Applying theories of friendship and relational dialectics, I highlight the importance of safe, sociable spaces and sustained ‘friendship work’ to navigate tensions and nurture friendships as sites of support.

Keywords

dialectical tensions, financial precarity, friendship, hostile environment, legal precarity, migration, mothering, No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), social spaces, support

Introduction

Shaped by its colonial history, the UK’s immigration policies have long been hostile and racist in their effects (El-Enany, 2020). Following the Conservative-led Coalition government’s announcement of its ‘Hostile Environment’ strategy in 2012, immigration policies and discourses have become more explicitly hostile in their targeting of

Corresponding author:

Rachel Benckroun, Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Social Research Institute, 27–28 Woburn Square, London, WC1H 0AA, UK.

Email: Rachel.Benckroun@ucl.ac.uk

non-wealthy, racially minoritized groups from the Global South moving to Britain, deemed ‘undeserving’ of residency rights and citizenship status (El-Enany, 2020; Jones et al., 2017; Yeo, 2020). New policies and laws have increased barriers to acquiring (and retaining) ‘leave to remain’ (residency rights) and citizenship status, and to claiming associated rights (Mort et al., 2023; Woolley, 2019). Hostile policies and discourses affect people with diverse statuses, including racially minoritized citizens (Gentleman, 2019), but have specific effects on racially minoritized groups without permanent residency rights (Erel, 2018). The expansion of the ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) condition and the ‘10-year route to settlement’ policy subject people to legal and financial precarity (Mort et al., 2023); racially minoritized mothers are most affected (Dickson and Rosen, 2020; Pinter et al., 2020; Woolley, 2019). NRPF denies access to mainstream welfare benefits and creates barriers to housing, healthcare, childcare and other services, with often detrimental impacts on children and families (Children’s Society and Coram Legal Centre, 2018; Dennler, 2018; Dickson, 2019; Erel, 2018; Meissner, 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). Those who have lost their ‘leave to remain’ are excluded from doing paid work.

Prevented from accessing social housing, mothers and children positioned by legal and financial precarity may resort to ‘sofa-surfing’ among households in their informal networks, or may live in cramped, poor-quality accommodation (Mort et al., 2023), in certain cases provided by the Home Office or the local authority (Woolley, 2019) (depending on their immigration ‘category’ and/or local assessment of need). The intersection of legal and financial precarity can thus produce involuntary hyper-mobility within and between cities. Conversely, it also produces forms of immobility, compounding the effects of the geographical distance and international borders separating mothers from their early support networks (Björnberg, 2011; Killias, 2018). This precaritization puts pressure on couple relationships, which may constrain the dynamics of shared parenting (Griffiths, 2019). It may also increase the risks of couple breakdown, exploitation or abuse (Dudley, 2017; Menjivar and Salcido, 2002). These conditions thus (re)produce intersecting, multi-level forms of marginalization and racism (Erel, 2018; Erel and Reynolds, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2018; Ellermann, 2020; Erel, 2011; Luibhéid et al., 2018; Woolley, 2019).

Within this context, mothers are likely to need different types of support – practical, material, financial, emotional – from their informal support networks, in order to provide for, nurture and protect their children, and to foster a sense of self and belonging. In recent years, sociologists have increasingly drawn attention to the significance of friendships as a site for sharing support and cultivating a sense of self (Adams and Allan, 1998; Jamieson et al., 2006; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Examining friendship practices can help elucidate the role of non-kin support networks at particular stages in the life course (Cronin, 2015; Jamieson et al., 2006), and in contexts of mobility (Hruschka, 2010; Ryan, 2007) and precarity (Erel, 2018; Smart et al., 2012).

This article offers new insights into how mothers precariously positioned by legal and financial precarity negotiate friendships. Drawing on my London-based ethnographic study, I show that friendships are constrained by Hostile Environment policies, and at the same time are an important site for mothers to contest such policies and share diverse forms of support. Building on theories of relational dialectics (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Baxter and Scharp, 2015; Rawlins, 2008), I argue that dialectical tensions – or

contradictions – within friendships play out in ways specific to mothers’ structural positioning. This article contributes to the sociology of friendship by highlighting the role of social structure and context in everyday friendship work, in showing how mothers navigate tensions between self-disclosure and the need for privacy, between the need to access resources and their apparent scarcity within support networks, and between the principle of social exchange and barriers to reciprocating.

Doing Friendship: The Role of Social Structure and Context

Friendships can be crucial in the context of migration and geographical distance from kin and other support networks (Amrith, 2018; Bunnell et al., 2012; Killias, 2018; Ryan, 2015). Although widely perceived as voluntary and based on personal choice (Pahl, 2000), studies show that friendships and the support they provide are shaped by social structural factors, such as class, ethnicity, gender and age, potentially (re)producing social stratification (Allan, 1998; Bunnell et al., 2012; Smart et al., 2012). Homophily – seeking out those whom we perceive to be similar to ourselves – often plays a key role in how friendships are formed and sustained (Allan and Adams, 2006; Davies, 2019). Similarity based on shared culture and ethnicity (Ryan, 2015), gender (O’Connor, 1998; Policarpo, 2017) and the intersection of ‘race’ and gender (Niles Goins, 2011; Stack, 1974) has been shown to influence friendship practices and access to emotional and material support. The intersection of gender and life stage – for example, becoming a mother – is significant too. Motherhood opens up new networks offering possibilities for new friendships (Ryan, 2007). Friendships may emerge among mothers in parallel with those of their children (Cronin, 2015), and may also be shaped by perceived similarity in class and ethnicity (Vincent et al., 2017). Socio-economic factors affect access to support through friendship practices: poverty for instance limits access to material resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Fernandez Kelly, 1998), but also, paradoxically, may increase the significance of material exchanges as a core friendship practice (Allan, 1998; Hruschka, 2010; Stack, 1974).

Spaces and places interact with social structural factors in shaping friendship formation, everyday friendship practices and access to support (Bunnell et al., 2012; Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018; Werbner, 2018). Inadequate or overcrowded housing (Allan, 1998) and a lack of access to sociable spaces (Klinenberg, 2018) may impede the formation and development of friendships. The spatial dimension of friendship practices is shaped by class as well as gender: scholars have suggested that middle-class friends tend to broaden the contexts in which they enact their friendships (emphasizing the importance of the relationship over place), whereas working-class friends may confine interactions to particular places, spaces and activities, separate from domestic spaces (Allan, 1998; Willmott, 1987). In the context of material poverty and limited space at home, this way of managing friendships may serve as a ‘mechanism for protecting privacy and maintaining respectability’ (Allan, 1998: 78). What remains under-explored is the role of gender, space and place in friendship practices and negotiating access to support from the perspective of mothers constrained by poverty and poor housing. Excluded from many forms of consumerist social infrastructure, and lacking home space conducive to

sociabilities, mothers with limited financial resources may be able to mobilize their motherhood status, ethnicity and/or religious beliefs to gain access to other kinds of convivial social spaces. Such spaces can facilitate the formation and sustaining of friendships and sharing of support (Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018; Klinenberg, 2018; Ryan, 2007; Small, 2009; Vincent et al., 2017; Werbner, 2018). This may be particularly significant for mothers further marginalized by migration, racial minoritization and insecure immigration status (Erel, 2018).

Reciprocity, Trust and Relational Belonging

The principle of reciprocity underpins both scholarly and commonplace understandings of friendship (Rawlins, 2008). Central to managing friendships is the ability to ‘reciprocate and sustain a balance of material and symbolic exchange’ (Allan, 1998: 77). Unequal access to resources between or among friends can unsettle this norm. In some cases, uncertain or precarious contexts may drive greater investment in friendships ‘to acquire necessities, to protect oneself and one’s possessions, or to achieve other important life goals’ (Hruschka, 2010: 181). But while friendships may, in this way, become an ‘effective insurance system’, support-seeking creates ‘obligations and high expectations’ (Hruschka, 2010: 182) and may generate ‘asymmetric dependency’ (Björnberg, 2011) and risks of exploitation (Erel, 2018). Additionally, multi-layered precarity may create feelings of shame, temporariness or outsider status (Björnberg, 2011). For these reasons, new friendships may be avoided or curtailed (Amrith, 2018; Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018), and control over social exchange practices within existing friendships (and consequent expectations of reciprocity) carefully managed (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). It may be easier to delimit ‘simple’ friendships (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Smart et al., 2012) confined to one setting (Allan, 1998). Conversely, this may be difficult in the context of more ‘complex’ friendships (Spencer and Pahl, 2006), high-level needs (Amrith, 2018) and/or social norms in relation to celebration of cultural events (Luotonen, 2023). Help-seeking is also shaped by the perceived availability of particular friends and associated resources (Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

Unlike certain other kinds of relationships, the absence of an institutional or legal framework means friendships are by necessity based on trust. In practice, this ideal of ‘individual freedom and expression’ (Pahl, 2000: 62) means taking risks and making oneself vulnerable (Granovetter, 1985; Pahl, 2000). Trust tends to be built through self-disclosure (Jamieson, 2011; Pahl, 2000) or ‘intimate confiding’, involving ‘admitting dependency, sharing problems, and being emotionally vulnerable’ (O’Connor, 1998: 122). This is widely seen as a gendered practice, associated with female friendships (Allan and Adams, 2006; Flemke, 2001; O’Connor, 1998). Friendships among mothers may provide a unique kind of intimacy, built around webs of practical support and emotional care (Cronin, 2015). Yet, even within such intimacies, disclosing adverse experiences or precarious situations can be difficult to do, requiring discretion from friends and an ability to recognize what kind of support is expected of them (Rebughini, 2011). For migrants, especially if subjected to insecure immigration status, the need for trust through self-disclosure must be carefully weighed up against the risks of exploitation, betrayal or ostracization; at times, self-reliance may be preferable to confiding in friends (Amrith, 2018; Björnberg, 2011; Killias, 2018; Ryan et al., 2008; Sigona, 2012).

Friendships provide a ‘mirror’ on the self and contribute to the construction of self-identity – through the social structural factors that shape them and through everyday interactions (Allan and Adams, 2006; Smart et al., 2012; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). This may play out in positive or negative ways, producing ontological (in)security (Smart et al., 2012). This is salient at different points in the life course (Allan and Adams, 2006) and during transitions, such as becoming a mother (Cronin, 2015), and when new friendships are formed (Hruschka, 2010). The relational belonging and trust generated through friendships are particularly significant in situations of uncertainty, financial precarity and social exclusion resulting from insecure immigration status (Amrith, 2018; Björnberg, 2011). Friendships can provide social recognition, boosting self-esteem (Björnberg, 2011). In this context, friendship practices can be understood as a form of active citizenship, whereby citizenship is produced through social interactions, participation and acts of solidarity, rather than simply being a legal status (Erel and Reynolds, 2018; Isin, 2008). Friendships can be seen as sites for claiming space and rights, where those with precarious statuses can ‘define themselves, form a community’ and find spaces where they can ‘feel at home’ (Flores, 2003: 297; see also Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz, 2014), and where they can build communities of support and facilitate access to resources (Erel and Reynolds, 2018; Erel et al., 2018).

Dialectical Tensions in Friendships

As has been shown, friendships can be sites of ambivalence and tensions. The concept of relational dialectics provides a useful lens for understanding how tensions emerge and are navigated within friendships. Baxter and Montgomery (1996: 10) have shown that contradictory or oppositional forces in ‘dynamic interplay or tension’ drive ‘ongoing change’ within interpersonal relationships. Rather than straightforward binary oppositions, these are better conceptualized as complex and multivocal dialogues (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996): first, navigating such tensions is not generally a matter of simply choosing between two options, and second, more than one type of tension is likely to be at play in any given situation. Nevertheless, sets of contradictions have emerged that can help elucidate relational dynamics. Rawlins (2008: 9–10) has theorized several sets of contradictions within friendships: these include ‘the dialectic of the freedom to be independent and the freedom to be dependent’ (or autonomy and connectedness (Baxter and Scharp, 2015)); ‘the dialectic of affection versus instrumentality’ (caring as an end in itself versus as a means to an end); and ‘the dialectic of expressiveness and protectiveness’ (or openness/self-disclosure and closedness/privacy (Baxter and Scharp, 2015) – making decisions about what to reveal and what to conceal; or indeed the balance between intimacy and distance, as conceptualized by Morgan (2009) in his work on acquaintances).

The concept of dialectical tensions in interpersonal relationships offers useful ways of understanding how trust is built and sustained within friendships, and how support is accessed. The sections below employ this lens to explore how dialectical tensions play out in specific ways within friendships of mothers with insecure immigration statuses and NRPF; how mothers navigate these tensions in their everyday interactions through ‘emotional work’ (Bunnell et al., 2012; Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018; Killias, 2018; Smart et al., 2012); and the impact on access to support and relational belonging.

Methodology

The aim of the ethnographic study on which this article is based was to explore the impact of intersecting legal and financial precarity on mothers' interpersonal relationships and access to support. Ethical approval was given by my institution's Research Ethics Committee. During my fieldwork in a London neighbourhood, I volunteered in several support and advice organizations, enabling me to develop an understanding of mothers' diverse trajectories since arriving in the UK, bureaucratic barriers and routes to support. I recruited 22 mothers as individual participants in the study by drawing on my volunteer roles and 'snowballing'. All participants provided their informed consent at the outset, and consent was revisited on subsequent meetings. Trust was built through my volunteer roles in respected community organizations. My identity as a mother also helped to build rapport. Over 20 months in 2018–2019, I met with most participants at least twice, and in many cases multiple times. I joined mothers in their everyday activities: doing the school run, attending drop-ins and healthcare appointments, and 'hanging out' at home. Spending time and moving around together within participants' everyday spaces enabled me to listen deeply, develop my understanding of participants' everyday practices within personal support networks and witness how mothers navigated bureaucratic barriers and claimed rights (Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018; O'Neill and Reynolds, 2021; Sinha and Back, 2014).

Our conversations were open-ended but focused on everyday mothering practices, friendships and other types of interpersonal relationships, and how these shaped access to support. I asked participants to create a 'freestyle' sociogram, which helped generate shared understandings and informed our subsequent conversations (Benchekroun, 2020; Ryan, 2020; Ryan et al., 2014; Tubaro et al., 2016). With participants' consent and where appropriate, I audio-recorded our in-depth conversations; where this was not possible, I took notes during conversations. I also kept detailed fieldnotes following research encounters; these varied in their levels of description, analysis and reflexivity. Research conversations usually lasted between 40 and 60 minutes; I transcribed recordings and wrote up notes as soon as possible after each interaction. I analysed transcripts of all recorded conversations and fieldnotes, using open coding to identify particular practices within different kinds of relationships (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). I periodically reviewed codes and grouped them into categories and themes.

The majority of mothers who took part in the study had migrated from West African countries. Others were from other parts of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and South-East Asia. Most of the mothers were in their 20s when they had arrived in the UK. The majority had been living in the UK for at least 10 years at the time of my fieldwork. Most participants had entered the UK with a visa; others had sought asylum on arrival. Most had subsequently lost their residency rights or had been refused asylum. Of these, some had later been granted temporary residency rights (usually for 30 months). Four (all of whom had arrived in the UK before 2012) had been granted permanent residency rights. When I first met with participants, 10 had no residency rights and a further eight had only temporary residency rights (although some of the former group were granted temporary residency during the course of the fieldwork). Twenty people identified as Christian (from different denominations); one identified as Muslim. Four participants were university graduates and a further two had attended university. All had given birth

in the UK. Mothers' children were aged from infancy up to 18+ years; most were under 12. At least three participants were living with their spouse/partner, while others were in a relationship but living apart; some participants were not in a relationship at the time. All but one spoke English fluently. (A mutually trusted frontline practitioner acted as interpreter in the conversations with the one mother who spoke little English.) This article focuses on the experiences of eight of the mothers who took part in the study, chosen because friendship practices and the related dialectical tensions were central to their accounts and my observations. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

The ensuing sections examine how mothers navigated dialectical tensions as they engaged in three types of friendship practices, which my analysis suggested were of central importance: *reaching out and holding back*; *sharing resources*; and *confiding and providing emotional support*.

Reaching Out/Holding Back

I don't like bringing people to my house because I just live in one room. They probably live in a better house than me. If people are in the same situation as me – ah-hah! This morning at the food bank, I met a lady there [for the first time]. She talked to me, she invited me to her house. She lives [nearby]. She heard me talking in [my first language] to [my daughter]. I just like her – there is a connection. She said, 'You look familiar.' I think maybe we saw each other at [a local advice organization]. She took me to her house, I stayed just for five, 10 minutes. She has a one-bedroom flat! I told her I just have one room. She told me she came from [neighbouring borough], they placed her here. I said maybe sometimes if I get bored I can come round. I took her number. She has two children. I said our kids can play together. (Adama)

Adama, a mother of two young children, had been living in London for a number of years, having moved from West Africa. When we met, she did not have 'leave to remain'. Her account highlighted how both perceived social similarity and safe spaces presented opportunities for reaching out and initiating connections that could develop into friendships (Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018; Klinenberg, 2018; Ryan, 2015; Small, 2009), especially as a mother in the wider context of hostile environment policies and discourses. The interaction Adama described had taken place at a local food bank, and a possible earlier encounter had occurred at a local advice organization. I had seen for myself how both places were constructed and experienced by staff, volunteers and clients as safe spaces for families with insecure immigration statuses and NRPF. The spatial dimension of the encounter(s) no doubt signalled to both mothers that they were similarly subjected to legal and financial precarity. Moreover, the realization that they not only shared a first language (and so were likely to have grown up in the same country or region) but also were mothers to similarly aged children had generated a sense of familiarity and warmth. The food bank was a safe space that produced mutual recognition of shared experiences of hostile immigration policies: this was important in facilitating the initial contact and generating trust and positive feelings about the potential friendship (Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018).

Domestic spaces, conversely, were not conducive to doing friendship. Talking with me in the small room she shared with her two young children in an HMO (house in multiple occupancy), Adama explained that she avoided inviting friends round. This appeared to be

not only because of a lack of space (Björnberg, 2011) but because doing so could reveal information about her situation (Killias, 2018). Confining friendships to particular local places while maintaining the home as a family space was one way of navigating the dialectical tension in friendships between self-disclosure and privacy (Baxter and Scharp, 2015), or intimacy and distance (Morgan, 2009). This was a common strategy among mothers in my study. It was therefore not necessarily a class-based practice, as argued by Allan (1998), but rather was produced by the intersection of legal and financial precarity.

The importance of safe, convivial spaces and of perceived social similarity in facilitating connection and friendship formation was reflected in other mothers' narratives and in my own observations. Such spaces – including voluntary-sector groups, advice centres, faith institutions, children's centres, nurseries and schools (Klinenberg, 2018; Small, 2009) – helped mothers navigate the dialectic of connectedness and autonomy, and that of self-disclosure and privacy, in the early stages of forming friendships. For example, at a weekly drop-in – attended predominantly by mothers and their young children with insecure status and NRPF – Eshe found respite from the relentless status-related anxiety she experienced when at home. Having moved from West Africa to the UK some years previously, she had settled and given birth to two children, but had lost her 'leave to remain'. Attending the drop-in had become part of Eshe's weekly routine: 'We are there to . . . just to free our minds. When you see other people, you think it's not only you. When you are at home, you feel alone.'

Spending long periods of time alone in her tiny room in an HMO caused Eshe to dwell on the impossibility of her legal situation, leading to feelings of hopelessness. She saw the drop-in as a protective factor, offering opportunities to connect with other mothers in similar situations without expectations of uncomfortable intimacy. Likewise, Mawusi, also a mother of two from West Africa, regularly attended the drop-in because 'you meet a lot of parents like you, [. . .] people that are down like you [. . .] who don't have their status'. Mothers did not directly discuss immigration statuses with each other; instead, they would bolster each other with positive talk ('let's keep hoping because things will turn around'). Tacit understandings of shared experiences and precarious positioning reduced the risks of indiscreet conversations or intrusive questions; tact and discretion were the norm in these spaces (Rebughini, 2011). There was simultaneous recognition of a need for autonomy and privacy balanced with a need for a degree of connection with others (Baxter and Scharp, 2015; Morgan, 2009). The drop-in thus served as a safe space, which facilitated interactions among mothers facing similar immigration status-related struggles (Erel and Reynolds, 2018; Flores, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ruiz, 2014). It enabled connection while respecting mothers' autonomy and without expectations of self-disclosure.

Even in apparently safe and supportive spaces, mothers had to exercise caution in how they responded to gestures of friendship. A core strategy was to regulate potential friendships by 'holding back': limiting the degree and the nature of interactions. For example, Leandra, a Latina mother of two, who had recently moved to the neighbourhood, carefully avoided revealing significant personal information to people within her informal co-ethnic-linguistic networks, who she felt 'ask too many questions' about sensitive topics, such as parental relationships and immigration status. If people asked her directly whether she had been granted leave to remain, 'sometimes I won't say anything, sometimes I will just say yes'. At church, she was guarded and stuck to small talk: 'I can get very abrupt. We greet each other but I don't want to get too involved.' Several

mothers, such as Femi, distinguished between friends they felt close to and those who were ‘not classic friends, but people you can just say hello to’ – this latter conceptualization of ‘friends’ aligns with Morgan’s (2009) notion of acquaintanceship.

On the one hand, therefore, perceived similarities and safe, sociable spaces facilitated friendly interactions, allowing mothers to navigate opposing needs for autonomy and connectedness. Yet, on the other hand, the need to manage privacy and avoid disclosure of personal information required ongoing work to avoid being too open: mothers often made conscious efforts to *hold back* and ‘just say hello’.

Sharing Resources

My friend, if I need anything, I go to her house, she will give me whatever I want. If I am thin like this she will cook, I will eat. I will go to the kitchen. [. . .] I will just eat something. We are just like a family. At times I will say, maybe we will sleep there. [. . .] But I can’t move in, because I don’t want to feel like it’s too much, you understand? She’s the one who at times will give me food, everything. But I think it’s too much for her. (Eshe)

Sharing resources was a central friendship practice for mothers positioned by legal and financial precarity. Friendships facilitated access to food, clothes, shelter, money, support with childcare and useful information, such as how to find free legal advice. However, mothers were mindful that friends in similarly precarious positions often lacked material resources. This knowledge shaped the ‘subtle calculations’ involved in help-seeking (Spencer and Pahl, 2006: 66): what to prioritize, whom to approach, when and how. These careful negotiations were ongoing and were a form of strategic mothering work (Benchekroun, 2023), as was apparent in Eshe’s narrative. When she and her baby daughter had become homeless several years previously, a friend had agreed to provide shelter. In the excerpt above, Eshe reflected on how, in that time of crisis, she had had to weigh up her friend’s acts of care and hospitality against the risk of asking for more than her friend could comfortably provide. Feeling that moving in would be ‘too much’, Eshe navigated the tension between her need for support and her friend’s limited resources by prioritizing her young child. Her daughter would stay there each night, while Eshe would make decisions on a daily basis as to whether to sleep there too or instead stay on the night buses or in a church, returning in the morning to collect her daughter. By continually making these careful calculations, and by minimizing her take-up of the resources offered by her friend, Eshe worked to protect and sustain the friendship.

The ability to reciprocate also shaped these careful help-seeking calculations. Reciprocating could take different forms according to differential access to resources. For example, when Eshe’s living conditions had stabilized somewhat, she was keen to ‘give back’ to a friend who helped her out, within her limited means:

At times when I can’t do things, maybe financially I am not okay [. . .], and it’s really weighing me down, I will call her, I will tell her, ‘I don’t know if you can help me – if you can help me, I will give it back to you.’ And she will give me when I need help. At times when they ask the children to wear costumes to school, I don’t have – she will say, ‘Don’t worry, I have one.’ I will take it. So we are there for one another. She is there for me and I for her. Everything she asks me to do, if I can do it – why not?

Flexibility in reciprocating (in relation to what and when) was important and built trust within the friendship (Björnberg, 2011; Hruschka, 2010). Being able to reciprocate – being ‘there for one another’ – was fundamental to Eshe’s construction of the relationship as being based on equality, an important characteristic of friendship (Adams and Allan, 1998; Hruschka, 2010). This was similarly emphasized by Rowan, a mother of two young children. As she drew a sociogram depicting her support network, Rowan described how on occasion she turned to certain friends for financial support, but would always ensure she gave something back:

He has been a great friend. Sometimes I get broke, and I will be like, brother, I’ve got no money. He will just help me out. He won’t take it back. [. . .] In return, I will make sure when I cook, I just give him a plate, and that is it.

The two-way nature of such social exchange practices provided ‘social recognition’ (Björnberg, 2011), strengthening mothers’ sense of self and belonging. This was particularly important given the multiple forms of exclusion mothers experienced in their everyday lives (Ellermann, 2020; Erel, 2018; Erel and Reynolds, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2018).

Reflecting on friends who were mothers, Rowan mentioned that one would pass on clothes that her children had grown out of, and emphasized that this friendship practice was multi-directional: ‘She don’t tend to give only me. Sometimes her friends take stuff. And then I give out stuff as well.’ Foregrounding the principle of equality within this friendship group helped Rowan to navigate the relational dialectic of affection and instrumentality: she underlined that she valued her friendships in and of themselves, rather than as a means to an end (Rawlins, 2008). She represented them as networks of interdependence, rather than as ‘asymmetric dependencies’ (Björnberg, 2011). Such practices also helped to navigate the tension between the principle of social exchange and the difficulty of reciprocating. As illustrated by both Rowan’s and Eshe’s accounts, being able to ‘reciprocate and sustain a balance of material and symbolic exchange’ (Allan, 1998: 77) was important as a key foundation of friendships. Mothers constructed their friendships as reciprocal, mutually supportive and affirming, despite the scarcity of their resources (Fernandez Kelly, 1998). In the context of hostile policies and precarious legal statuses, such practices (and their representations) were a source of ontological security (Björnberg, 2011; Smart et al., 2012; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Through these friendship practices, mothers created spaces for care and belonging. By identifying and responding to each other’s needs, they produced a sense of community. In this way, ‘doing friendship’ was a form of active citizenship (Erel et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2018).

In an economy of scarcity, sharing information about how to access resources was an important friendship practice (Fernandez Kelly, 1998; Hruschka, 2010). It could also be fraught with unintended consequences. Femi, who had moved to the UK from West Africa over a decade previously, recounted how she was keen to let new friends know where they could access sought-after resources (‘I’m not greedy, I share. I just want people around me to be happy like I am happy’) but on occasion other friends already accessing these places expressed to her their frustration that she was sharing this information too widely. Although apparently disappointed by their boundary maintenance

work, Femi briefly observed that ‘sometimes I say to myself, that’s why I find it difficult to get good stuff’. Conversely, withholding information could undermine friendships, prevent friendship formation or damage mothers’ views of their self-identity.

A complementary strategy – particularly when resources within friendships were low – was to turn to acquaintances for support (Morgan, 2009) (even though the term ‘friend’ was often still used). In such cases, the dynamic was more evidently instrumental; this made the instrumental/affective dialectic easier to manage than in relationships constructed by mothers as friendships.

Confiding and Providing Emotional Support

You know some people, when you start telling them your problems, they will be upset with you. Because they don’t want to hear. They have their own problems. They will tell you they can’t help you, so why are you telling them? (Zola)

The intersection of legal and financial precarity and motherhood posed barriers to confiding as a friendship practice, and produced multiple intertwining dialectical tensions that mothers had to navigate. As Zola’s reflection shows (above), there was often a tension between the need for, and perceived scarcity of, emotional support (mirroring that between the need for and lack of material and financial resources). The decision to confide required a careful assessment of the likelihood of a friend being able and willing to respond with the discretion and the support needed (Rebughini, 2011). Zola, who had migrated from West Africa some years previously, had young children and was parenting alone. She told me that she did not turn to friends for emotional support. She explained that if friends appeared to be burdened by ‘their own problems’, it would be both futile and insensitive to bother them with her own, since they would not have the capacity, or willingness, to provide the required emotional or practical support. Zola observed wryly, ‘If I start telling [friend], what is she going to do? She cannot give me any advice or help me in any way.’ Zola argued that confiding would be counter-productive, since it could destabilize the friendship. A second dialectical tension was therefore between autonomy and connectedness. Given the perceived unavailability of emotional support within her informal networks, Zola preferred to ‘deal with my situation’ without burdening friends, thus tending towards autonomy much of the time (Amrith, 2018; Björnberg, 2011; Rebughini, 2011; Sigona, 2012). This approach was shared by many of the mothers I met.

Linked to this, the tension between openness and privacy played a central role in shaping confiding practices and access to emotional support. While gradual mutual self-disclosure over time could be a means of building trust, it required mothers to make themselves vulnerable, which meant taking risks (Björnberg, 2011; Sigona, 2012). Mothers approached this by confiding certain things in carefully selected friends. It was apparent that details of immigration statuses were withheld not only from new or ‘potential’ friends, as discussed earlier, but very often from close and long-standing friends too. However, if mothers did feel able to directly discuss the topic with a chosen friend, this could facilitate sharing of emotional support. This was the case for Gemma and her friend ‘A’, a mother in a similarly precarious position who had previously lived nearby and attended the same weekly community group. When ‘A’ and her child were relocated

to another neighbourhood, they continued to support each other through regular phone calls. On occasions when ‘A’ was feeling particularly frustrated about her exclusion from the labour market, powerless about her status and anxious about the future for herself and her child, Gemma would make efforts to buoy her, as she described to me:

I said when you get your papers you can still get a job. Let’s get our papers first, and let’s pray to get it when we are healthy. [. . .] We should just be thankful for the day. As long as we are alive there is hope. [. . .] Let’s think about today. God will take care of tomorrow for us.

In such cases, confiding practices built trust, generating mutual access to care, emotional support and hope for the future. Mothers’ shared experiences of the effects of legal and financial precarity and marginalization created empathy and reciprocal understanding (Amrith, 2018; Björnberg, 2011).

Yet, within many friendships, the stakes were too high to warrant taking the risk of divulging immigration status and associated vulnerabilities to other people, even those considered close friends. Following a previous experience of her trust being broken, Rowan had decided not to share her precarious status with any friend. She explained her rationale by describing a scenario with a hypothetical friend:

I will let you know what you need to know, but not let you in so much – so then I will become so vulnerable, my weakness will be hit against me. [. . .] I am scared of what I went through [where I used to live] to repeat back again, so I am very careful and cautious about what I say to people. Even though me and you are close [. . .] I still hold back.

Rowan was particularly concerned that sharing information about her status with friends from her co-ethnic group could lead to gossip (Amrith, 2018; Björnberg, 2011; Kathiravelu and Bunnell, 2018; Sigona, 2012), which could impact on her children.

It was only after several years of friendship with her closest friend that Rowan began to ‘let her into my story’: ‘Up till now, we go out together, she never knows anything about it. [. . .] I tell her what I want to tell her.’ Rowan felt safe beginning to confide in her because ‘she never digged into anything that I don’t want her to dig into. There’s a borderline you won’t be able to cross.’ Rowan reciprocated by recognizing when her friend was experiencing difficulties and giving her space to choose when she was ready to talk. Being sensitive to the emergence of safe topics for discussion and not probing beyond those boundaries was crucial in sustaining trust and protecting the friendship as a site for sharing emotional support and care (Rebughini, 2011). However, this required constant work, and delimited the degree of support and care available within friendships, potentially increasing the emotional burden for mothers to carry alone.

Conclusion

By identifying and considering in turn three core friendship practices – reaching out/holding back, sharing resources and confiding – this article has demonstrated the significance of social structural factors and context in developing and sustaining friendships, and the central role of friendships as sites for sharing diverse forms of support. Drawing

on my ethnographic study of the effects on mothers of hostile immigration policies, insecure status, the ‘no recourse to public funds’ condition and racial minoritization, the article has highlighted the importance of safe and sociable spaces in facilitating friendship formation and the sustaining of regular friendship practices, and the role of perceived social similarity, including being similarly positioned by legal and financial precarity. I have shown that reaching out, sharing material resources and confiding can build trust and enable sharing of emotional support, empathy and care. ‘Doing friendship’ can therefore be significant in developing and protecting one’s sense of self and building ontological security. In the context of financial and legal precarity and racism produced by hostile immigration policies and discourses, mothers may experience friendships as a site for cultivating relational belonging and enacting citizenship (Erel and Reynolds, 2018).

However, I have also highlighted how dialectical tensions within friendships play out in specific ways. In their everyday interactions, precariously positioned mothers must navigate tensions between self-disclosure and privacy, between connectedness and autonomy, between the need to access resources and their apparent scarcity, and between the principle of social exchange and barriers to reciprocating. I have suggested that mothers do so by regulating everyday interactions by ‘holding back’, confining friendship practices to specific spaces, carefully considering whom to turn to for support and minimizing the help they ask for. These strategies are crucial to avoid divulging too much information about their precarious status, reducing risks of betrayal and exploitation (Björnberg, 2011; Erel, 2018; Sigona, 2012). They are also vital in managing practices of social exchange in order to avoid putting unreasonable demands on friends and to protect themselves from unrealistic expectations of reciprocating. Yet these types of strategies may also prevent the development of interactions into more in-depth friendships, and therefore limit access to different kinds of support.

As the article has shown, in the context of exclusion from many public services and mainstream welfare benefits, mothers’ friendships and informal networks play a crucial role in accessing support, with implications for their physical, emotional and economic well-being, their mothering practices, sense of self and relational belonging, and the well-being of their children. As UK immigration policies become ever more hostile and exclusionary, further consideration must be given to the development and accessibility of sociable, safe, supportive spaces to facilitate mothers’ formation and sustaining of friendships as sites of support and active citizenship.

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ORCID iD

Rachel Benchekroun  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6911-9910>

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Rachel Benchekroun is an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Social Research Institute. Her research focuses on migration, the impact of immigration policies, motherhood, family and friendship practices, and support networks.

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