

# The Potential of Friendship: A Case for Social Resilience and New Care Optics

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*In this article, we call for greater recognition of friendship as a basic social relation that should play a pivotal role in re-imagining social resilience if it is to be future-proof in the face of social upheaval, such as the current pandemic. Drawing on existing research and early scoping of emergent information about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, we suggest that friendship is an important component of heterogenic social realities. The specific focus of our discussion is twofold. Firstly, attention is paid to the narrow lens of social policy that privileges particular familial set-ups and living arrangements, and in doing so marginalises groups which are already disenfranchised; secondly, we consider the dangers of nationalism and Eurocentrism as they relate to these issues. We suggest that thinking in terms of friendship can open up new avenues of academic and political imagination, offering strategies with greater potential for building socially resilient communities.*

**Keywords:** Friendship, social policy, wellbeing, pandemic, resilience.

## Introduction

The ongoing socio-cultural, economic and political consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly mark a crisis of neoliberal ideologies of entrepreneurial individualism and growing precarity on national and global scales (Standing, 2011), as well as in the micro-social dimensions of personal and community networks, relation(ship)s, and modes of sociability. While countries' responses varied – from Italy's and Poland's tight restrictions, to more "relaxed" measures in the UK – there is at least one commonality across several national contexts and different "waves" of the pandemic. In Poland and the UK – the two countries which we observe for academic interests and personal links – emergent political and media discourses have been heavily skewed towards economic consequences on a macro level. When micro-level economic and general social issues are brought to attention, there is a dominant emphasis on the heteronormatively constructed nuclear family as a hub of resilience. On the one hand, "family" becomes an ersatz of society, and on the other, it is constructed as an individual *locus* of coping and support<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/dzialania-rzadu> and <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus> (this and subsequent links accessed on 12.07.2020).

It is our argument, and a call for further action and reflection from academic communities and policy makers, that such a focus is reactive, and that bold reconfigurations are needed. Our ongoing and future post-pandemic work on strengthening societal resilience will not be effective or pro-active enough without recognition of social relations beyond (heteronormatively understood) family and kinship. To recognise friendship as a fundamental social relation on a par with (and not overshadowed by) the family is a much-needed step towards more nuanced understandings of resilience and, consequently, more effective strategies for building socially resilient communities.

Writers harnessing a sociologically influenced take on the concept have impacted our thinking about resilience. These include Dagdeviren *et al.* (2016), Pavićević (2016), and Rampp *et al.* (2019). In this article we draw on the flexible and purposefully open definition of Estêvão *et al.* (2017: 21) who propose understanding resilience as a “complex and multilevel process through which societies, institutions and individuals respond to sudden and large-scale environmental, social and economic shocks.” Their goal with such open-ended conceptualisation is to move away from “heroic” to more “mundane” and “everyday” understandings, as signalled in the title of their article.

At the same time, Estêvão *et al.*'s definitional work pertains to the characteristics of resilience in relation to poverty, and the potential operationalization of resilience in this context. Their analysis includes a focus on the family as a key unit of consideration in relation to resilience, yet the concept of family is not explored or problematized. We view this as a critical oversight and posit that exploration of what family is taken to *mean* and *do* in this context holds potential for fruitful conversation. Such exploration and discussion may help us to think about the role played by institutions and policy making in relation to friendship and possibilities for resilience and the unsettling of inequitable social systems.

In this article we look at two clusters of pandemic-related issues – policy and global political economy – and suggest friendship as a possible entry point for re-imagining needs and outcomes that might benefit societies. We draw our initial, tentative and often hypothetical reflections (which undoubtedly require further, more systematic study) based on Polish and British contexts. In the following section we present the research context before moving to section three, where we deliberate the need for friendship to be recognised in social policy in general and especially in responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The last section of our discussion, prior to the conclusions, presents incipient thoughts on how accounting for friendship can counterbalance resurgent, nationalist biopolitics that looms behind global dimensions of the pandemic, only reinforcing the spectre of Eurocentrism.

## Context

The COVID-19 pandemic is a geo-political issue and insightful research responding to the crisis needs to be attuned to the epistemic geo-politics of knowledge-production and spatial-temporal dimensions of scholarship to avoid an Anglophone or broader Occidental skew (Koobak, Tlostanova, and

Thapar-Björkert, 2021; Kulpa and Silva, 2016; Whitehand, 2005). We draw inspiration for this response article from the ongoing, larger research agenda on friendship in Poland and the UK involving discourse analysis, examination of practices and responses (social justice activism, ground-up commons mobilisations) which has drawn on participatory observations and biographical interviewing.

Both countries' changing social practices, institutional failures, and emerging consequences from the crisis in terms of inequality, offer a useful springboard for thinking about European societies at large. The UK and Poland epitomise different religious (respectively: protestant, catholic) and social attitudes and traditions (individualism vs. communitarianism, more liberal vs. more conservative), and political economies (established vs. "young" capitalism and neoliberal democracy). On the other hand, as recent years have shown, both are susceptible to populist nationalisms (e.g. "Brexit"), rising "heteroactivism" (Browne and Nash, 2020) and "anti-genderism" (Graff and Korolczuk, 2017). Indeed, our early analysis of political discourse indicates that both national contexts share a commonality in the way that family is understood and placed at the core of their responses to the pandemic: notably the heteronormative "family" unit (i.e. the life-long married, monogamous, reproductive, "nuclear" and overwhelmingly heterosexual unit) (Ludwin, 2011) at the centre-stage of socio-economic and political imagination. Within these similarities and differences, there is a potential for developing greater understandings and practices of "friendship as social resilience," which may be applicable to other European contexts. "Rapid response" knowledge-building about the effects of the pandemic shows a similar tendency. Whilst UK Research Councils have sought to address social inequalities through funding calls for projects addressing and mitigating the health, social, economic, cultural and environmental impacts of COVID-19<sup>2</sup>, research awarded thus far does not attend to the importance of social relations outside of the traditionally understood family. In Poland, there are particularly tight constraints in terms of what is researched, since humanities and social science projects are significantly underrepresented among those awarded by the Foundation for Polish Science<sup>3</sup> and National Science Centre<sup>4</sup>.

For a moment we were excited about a promise of one project that focuses on the 'household' as a social unit of coping with pandemics<sup>5</sup>. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a short-lived excitement: also here "household" is unreflexively synonymised with nuclear heterosexual family and childrearing. This is unfortunate, as we find "household" – while not without its disciplinary and conceptual burdens and need for further conceptualising work – to be a promising concept-category for social

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/funding/funding-opportunities/ukri-open-call-for-research-and-innovation-ideas-to-address-covid-19>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fnp.org.pl/en/nowe-srodki-na-badania-zwiazane-z-covid-19-przyznane>

<sup>4</sup> [https://projekty.ncn.gov.pl/index.php?jednostka=&jednostka\\_miasto=&jednostka\\_województwo=&kierownik=&kierownik\\_plec=&kierownik\\_tytul=&status=&projekt=&kwotaprzyznanaod=&kwotaprzyznano=&typkonkursu=&konkurs=&grupa=&panel=&slowokluczowe=covid&aparatura=](https://projekty.ncn.gov.pl/index.php?jednostka=&jednostka_miasto=&jednostka_województwo=&kierownik=&kierownik_plec=&kierownik_tytul=&status=&projekt=&kwotaprzyznanaod=&kwotaprzyznano=&typkonkursu=&konkurs=&grupa=&panel=&slowokluczowe=covid&aparatura=)

<sup>5</sup> [https://projekty.ncn.gov.pl/index.php?projekt\\_id=501446](https://projekty.ncn.gov.pl/index.php?projekt_id=501446)

imagination and social policy; one that may be helpful in escaping family-centrism towards other co-living arrangements, such as friendship, which are not predefined upon heteronormative expectations.

We draw on a substantive body of existing research to support our proposal that friendship should be at the heart of future research and political debate in response to pandemics, and beyond. These works point decisively to the importance of adequately reflecting a range of social relations in social policies, welfare provisions, and the legislature (Roseneil, 2004; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Others highlight the unsustainable nature of social policies presuming marriage and monogamous coupledness as the default social and political unit, discriminating against single people (Lahad, 2017; Wilkinson and Bell, 2012), as well as against those people living together in “alternative” caring and supportive households and arrangements that are not based on a presumption of “typical” sexual, romantic, or kinship ties (Slany, 2008; Sanger and Taylor, 2013; Stoilova *et al.*, 2017). A growing number of scholars approach thinking about intimacies in a more holistic manner, spanning desire, love, friendship, and caring alongside each other (Jamieson, 2005; Budgeon, 2006; Pahl and Spencer, 2010; Nelson, 2011; Musiał, 2015), and there is also an increased interest in the study of friendship itself (among others: Adams and Allan, 1998; Blatterer, 2014; Caine, 2009; Descharmes *et al.*, 2011; Szarota, 2018).

With this context in mind, our suggestion to focus more systematically on friendship has strong potential to push policy-making boundaries, with attention given to overlooked social bonds and how they strengthen social resilience across European societies.

### **Friendship and Policy: Beyond the Heteronormative Fantasy?**

Over the last several decades the nuclear form of family – a product of post-industrialisation – has been exposed as inherently unstable. This is highlighted through: increases in cohabitation, divorce rates, single-parent families, single-person households (Szlendak, 2015; Stasińska, 2018), liberalisation around gay rights in some – mostly Western – countries, and a social recognition and proliferation of research on “queer kinship” and other intimacies, including friendship (Blatterer, 2014; Dahl and Gabb, 2019).

Despite this evidence, the nuclear family remains the much romanticised “ideal type” of aspiration. The power of the “heteronormative” arguably lies here, in the fantasy rather than the actuality, in the persistent normalization of a specific, narrow version of heterosexuality and family arrangement as “organic” (Ludwin, 2011). Based on the privileging of the (largely heterosexual), married, monogamous, reproductive “nuclear” family unit over other, “deviant” sexualities and living arrangements, it manifests itself in a multitude of nuanced ways, and is perpetually reproduced in the fabric of Western cultures, including in social policy, welfare provision and legislation (Roseneil *et al.*, 2020). Oláh *et al.* (2017: 43) published research findings on the changing nature of families and societies in predominantly European Union countries. They found that further scrutiny of diverse, intimate social

relation(ship)s that go beyond kinship ties is, among others, much needed to inform the development of relevant social policy related to individual lived realities. If we (individually, nationally, globally) are to endure this moment in history, we need a social framework, built and sustained through a variety of relationships, including friendship, that holds potential to facilitate and enhance individual and communal resilience at a structural level.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging reports show that ethnic, gender, sexual minorities, migrants, refugees, and other marginalized groups are significantly disadvantaged by national responses (ECDC, 2020; Gayer *et al.*, 2020); social inequalities and their intersections are at once magnified and hidden by these responses. Given our word limitation here, we focus specifically on “queer” individuals and communities, whilst recognising the need for a discussion about the amplification of social inequality to be broadened and developed in future work. We understand “queer” as living practices and experiences (rather than an identity) of people who remain at the thresholds of the normative familial ideals of their given contexts/times/cultures. As such, they destabilise and agitate the central ideologies of heteronormative societies, in particular reproductive heterosexuality as *the* institutionalised face of sexual citizenship as “normal” (Warner, 1999), rather than heterosexuality *per se* as the acceptable face of intimacy. Why? Because it is not heterosexuality itself that is invested with social privilege, but a very specific, narrow version of heterosexual life – married, monogamous, reproductive – to which one should *at least* aspire. Many practices of heterosexuality, self-consciously or otherwise, fall outside this constraining frame of heteronormativity, and thereby are in line with our understanding of queer practices.

Queer individuals are disproportionately ostracised from families of origin in both Poland (Mizielńska, Król, and Struzik, 2017) and the UK (Donovan, Heaphy, and Weeks, 2001). Consequently, friendship serves the intertwined practical and emotional functions required for resilience of the kind necessary to survive in the face of violence, stigma and socio-economic marginalisation. This is only exacerbated by the pandemic’s worsening effects on wellbeing and mental health. For instance, McMullan *et al.* (2020) report that in the UK 59% of the general population experienced negative impacts of the lockdown, while in Poland 56% indicated worsened living conditions (Malinowska, Marchlewska, and Górska, 2020: 13). In their study of the pandemic, Gayer *et al.* (2020: 3–4) directly link this deterioration to withdrawal from e.g. friendship structures, and they further suggest that the negative impact is potentially amplified for various marginalised groups. Multiple exclusions, which are significantly exacerbated by the pandemic, are also a concern for the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC, 2020: 1).

Furthermore, for some individuals inhabiting the nuclear family space, friendship may offer an important role in maintaining that very family form – a kind of pressure valve necessary to sustain daily relations – or provide escape routes and emotional support when the “family” becomes a site of abuse (e.g. encouraging escape from situations of domestic violence, providing a place to say,

helping with resources to leave) (see, for example, Parker, 2015). The United Nations (Fang, 2020) identify the global increase in domestic violence as a “shadow pandemic” exacerbated by the withdrawal of support outlets and networks (including friendship ties), and similar reports are made in the UK (Townsend, 2020) and Poland (RPO, 2020). The Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH) in Poland warns that measures like “stay at home” expose queer communities to “domestic homophobia” at higher rates (KPH, 2020). While Maciocha (quoted in Haynes, 2020, para. 5) says they are “more scared of their current home/work situation than the virus itself,” Mohan (2020) reports that transgender people, already disproportionately represented in suicide statistics (McNeil, Ellis, and Eccles, 2017) are especially vulnerable. This is a global issue: as Wangare, (quoted in Mohan, 2020, para. 4) puts it: “Coronavirus will only expose more of these vulnerabilities. [...] We are hearing from people who say they fear they are detransitioning due to lack of access to medical care. This puts them in an extremely fragile emotional state.” Neglecting friendship and its existing pivotal role in supporting and maintaining personal and social relations in times of crisis would be a serious oversight that we cannot afford.

### **Friendship, Political Economy of Neoliberalism and Eurocentrism**

Our second focus is centred on nationalism, Occidentalism, and the political economy of neoliberalism, with the hypothetical premise being that dangers of nationalist self-enclosures and xenophobic politics are likely to increase as discourses and measures of “protectionism” and ill-fitted social Darwinism (“survival of the fittest”) espouse socio-economic and political imaginations. This in turn will contribute to the global geopolitics of inequality post-COVID. We suggest that greater attention to friendship in academic research and political imagination about societal resilience and resistance can inspire new pathways for thinking, from a social justice perspective, about the detrimental effects of the pandemic on global, European, and national levels.

Given the ways in which global capitalism organises society, particularly the close relationship between governments and large multi-national organisations, and their (lack of) accountability (Harvey, 2011), a grounded example comes from a case which also ties into politics around marginalised communities. For the current moment, lessons come from development of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, with its underpinning histories of political ideologies and state (non)actions, geopolitical implications of past and recent global circulation, and varied consequences for different social groups (e.g. homosexual men in the “West” in the early years, or currently heterosexual women in the “Global South”)<sup>6</sup>. The existing research on the (global) political economy of HIV/AIDS (Owen, 2014; Nuki and Townsley, 2018) shows clear, negative effects of the neoliberal logic of profit accumulation in “big pharma” industries, severely affecting societal cohesion and globalised inequalities between “Global North” and “Global South.” With further insights from Harvey (2011) and Standing (2011) into the neoliberalization of socio-economic relations (i.e. profit accumulation, individualist

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.avert.org/global-hiv-and-aids-statistics>

approach, individualization of responsibility, “equality of opportunity” rather than redistributive justice), and from Dussel (2000) on Eurocentrism, we would like to suggest (again, hypothetically and tentatively, as a conversation starter rather than conclusive argument) that the Occidental and Eurocentric logic of the above case might have impact and implication for the current one.

Eurocentrism and nationalism are two sides of the self-referencing, conjugated local-global dynamics, and Bieber (2020) shows that (negative) consequences of the pandemic already implicate a growth of authoritarian attack on liberties, xenophobic biases, bordering-up, deglobalization, and fear politics. To counterbalance these violent practices, more trans-national, collaborative, communitarian dialogues and initiatives are needed, as Golding (2020) calls for in a recent interview. Friendship thereby seems very relevant here, with foundations for encouraging new potentials with and through friendship already in place; others before us, in international relations and political sciences, have already noticed (not uncritically) the potential of friendship as political concept-practice (Chowdhury and Philipose, 2016; Digeser, 2016; Oelsner and Vion, 2011; Smith, 2019). Importantly enough, friendship and care can also serve as steppingstones between political theories and more praxis-oriented policy decision-making.

The rupture of the COVID-19 pandemic opened up a space for rethinking, practicing anew, and importantly – experimenting – with the *status quo*. What would a more flexible social policy that recognises friendship and support and that seeks to counteract the obscurity of nationalisms and political economies of Eurocentrism and neoliberalism look like? Perhaps an excellent starting point might be engaging with the feminist ethics of care theories (The Care Collective, 2020; Held, 2006; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1993). These take relationality, solidarity, responsibility and cooperative mutuality as their central tenets of envisaging social and political worlds, and facilitate deliberations on political economies of nation-states and practicalities of social policy-making. Approaches inspired by the feminist ethic of care range from the foundational works of Tronto (1993; 2013) and Held (1995; 2006), who propose feminist philosophical models of “living together” beyond traditional, masculinist frameworks characterising much of the “canonical” political philosophy, to the works of Sevenhuijsen (1998; 2003), who takes these philosophies further in the direction of policymaking, laying foundations for pragmatic solutions.

At the same time we must stay vigilant against the narratives of “friendship of nations” or the “caring (white) saviour,” which have often been historically abused for the rationalisation of colonialism, legitimisation of warmongering, or “pan-sovietism” (Koschut and Oelsner, 2014; Narayan, 1995). While these issues may seem (too) broad – for the consequences of pandemics do pose a set of new theoretical and practical challenges for which applicable strategies must be developed. Friendship reminds us of inter-connectedness and various social forms of commons (Brunkhorst, 2005) and commoning (Di Feliciantonio and Aru, 2018), and in considering friendship we may find alternative language to re-imagine current and future solutions to pandemics. By deflating the blood-related

optics of kinship, and thus the popular biopolitical governmentality of nation-states, thinking in terms of friendship is a step towards devaluing the chauvinistic and xenophobic ethnocentrism of “blood and soil” nationalisms, and a move to common living based on a premise of shared dependence and relationality. Or in the powerful words of Rahul Rao (2021: 81):

We confront the ‘same’ challenges with very different resource endowments and insurance schemes. Unsurprisingly, much of our contemporary politics takes the form of struggles to redistribute vulnerability. In this regard, the sharing of vulnerability is a worthy aspiration, one that might portend a more egalitarian world in which, as Butler suggests, vulnerability would not be eliminated through its transformation into invulnerability but would furnish the ground on which reciprocal relations of interdependence might be forged.

## Conclusions

In this short piece we have speculated an argument about shifting forms of intimacy, and the importance of friendship in understanding contemporary life, particularly in the context of national responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland, the UK, and globally. We contend that in order to build resilient communities and respond adequately to moments of social crises, social policy and government responses must be more attuned to the significance of friendship and the shifting realities of individual lives.

The examples presented here demonstrate that norms, intimacies, living arrangements and forms of care and support in modern Europe are changing significantly and becoming more heterogenous, yet European social policies persistently hold on to the heteronormative “ideal” type of kinship and household. Countries and supra-national institutions like the EU must respond to the lived realities of their citizens, rather than reflect a heteronormative ideology which holds little hope for weathering global crises like those posed by the current pandemic. To do so, there must be a bold and creative re-imagining of the role of various personal, group, national, and trans-national relations beyond the “family.” Specifically, we argue for friendship to be more fully acknowledged and engaged with at a policy level.

Robust, fair and just social policy must, in part, focus on addressing social inequalities. Thinking in terms of friendship holds particular potential for combatting social inequalities; it is socially marginalised groups who most often rely on, and resourcefully develop, networks of friendship as a necessity for practical, emotional and psychic survival. We need to learn from this. Given the above, developing policy in the area of friendship will help to strengthen these important and often vital connections and relationships. Understanding “social resilience,” in part, through the lens of friendship relations holds fruitful possibility for creating flexible, strong, and enduring post-pandemic communities.

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