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Reclaiming kith: weaving belongingness into community

Liz Ellis

The intersections between space and relationships are numerous. Spatial terms are often used to describe and define emotional relationships (Matthews and Matlock 2011). We talk about being ‘close’ to our mothers and ‘growing apart’ or ‘distant’ from intimate partners; we have close friends and distant relatives. We can, as per Simmel's stranger (1964), be both physically close to someone but emotionally remote.

This chapter draws on the data and analysis from a small inclusive research project with a group of co-researchers living in a rural area in the United Kingdom.¹ All the co-researchers identify as having learning difficulties.² The research aimed to explore how living in rural spaces had an impact on the co-researchers’ lives, particularly how it related to feelings of belonging. As the research project progressed and the data produced by the co-researchers was analysed, themes around belonging, community and mutuality began to come to the fore. As the connections the co-researchers had with their diverse communities were analysed, what seemed like a missing category began to emerge.

It was the need to find some way of describing the intergenerational ‘knowingness’ that seemed to provide one co-researcher in particular with a deep sense of being embedded within his community, which led me to reclaim the notion of ‘kith’. By extracting kith from its usual conjunction with kin that has, over time, subsumed kith’s original meaning, I disinterred the archaic meanings of kith as they related to homelands, tribe and especially being known. This then helped to make sense of the analysis of the connections the co-researchers had with their geographical and social spaces as interdependent and rhizomatic, all the while rooted within local neighbourhoods and the people who lived there.

Divided into two main sections, this chapter firstly presents some of the theoretical discussion that emerged from the data. The second section expands on how these theoretical discussions intersect and relate to the data and contrasts the diverse experiences of two of the co-researchers, Mark and John.³.

Theoretical background: exploring ideas of connection

This first section discusses four interconnected areas, specifically: the development of kith as a relationship category; the troubled and contested meanings of friendship for people with learning difficulties; the impact of family presence on belonging; and finally, the way these relationships, along with other proximal relationships, interconnect with each other to create forms of interdependent geographic communities.

Why I needed to reclaim kith as a discrete category

My observations and analysis indicated that there seemed to be a missing category, or rather, a group of people who did not 'fit'. All the co-researchers had connections with identifiable categories of people such as family, friends, neighbours and other proximal relationships. These proximal relationships consisted of people such as shop workers, former pupils from school, support workers and so on. In other words, people with whom there was some kind of connection that emerged from either current or previous interactions. And then there were the 'others'. There appeared to be a distinct group of people in the life of one of the co-researchers, John, who encompassed categories of friend, neighbour, proximal connection and, pertinently, stranger. These were people John sometimes knew *about*, but did not always know in person, through their family history. Sometimes these people were indeed well known to him: they were the local shopkeepers, neighbours and friends. For John, who had longstanding family ties, there were a great number of these people. Earlier generations had done business together forming a trading bond or had maybe just grown up together. Sometimes they married and became kin. So it was not simply the *individual* John who was known and recognized, but rather his family connection within that community.

As I continued to analyse the data and write up the findings, I found difficulty in describing this category of non-family, non-friend, non-acquaintance and non-stranger. Although I was aware that kith, despite being used as synonymous to kin in much of the literature (Philo et al. 2003, Harden et al. 2004, Pahl and Spencer 2010) could mean friends and acquaintances, this failed to convey the kind of intergenerational *knowingness* I was trying to describe. Initial literature and online searches nearly always came up with kith conjoined with kin and the meaning that is widely understood today: one's family or family and friends. An exploration of anthropological literature about 'primitive' tribes found kith to mean members of a tribe or those from other tribes with whom ritual blood bonds were forged, via marriage or trade (Pitt-Rivers 1975). Dictionaries gave the etymology relating to 'known' via 'couth'. The idea that kith related to 'being known' in some way was intriguing enough to delve further. So it was that I turned to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED 2014), which gives the etymology of 'kith' as deriving from the Old English *cýðð*, which, in turn, when the online *Dictionary of Old English* is consulted, translates into 'knowledge and recognition' (Cameron et al. 2007).

This is not the only non-standard understanding of kith. For example, Griffiths (2013) in her paean to the 'lost' natural spaces of childhood, situates kith spatially, to mean 'country, home, one's land'. While acknowledging the etymology of kith as above, Griffiths utilizes a further meaning of the Old English *cýðð* of native land, most specifically: 'place, region with which one is most familiar or to which one properly belongs, native land, home' (Cameron et al. 2007). Griffith's use of kith to relate to the earthy landscapes of childhood, the 'home outside the house', ties in with the notion of a spatially situated community of people, bonded by almost tribal connections.

Although usually only used today in connection and synonymous with kin (Philo et al. 2003, Harden et al. 2004, Pahl and Spencer 2010), kith could, in our increasingly fragmented and global times, be seen as a useful addition to the social typology of family, friends and acquaintances in rural-based studies. One's kith therefore, following from the original Old English, are those people living in close physical proximity to you who may have not just a geographic/racial kinship (such as being Cornish for example) but who really *know* you. They know your family and history

and, in turn, their own families and histories are known by you. They might not necessarily be friends and they could even harbour ill-will towards you, but there is a connection of knowingness going back in time. They are much more than acquaintances but they might never deign to speak to you. While they may be your neighbours, they are different from the neighbours who moved in next door to you from 'up country'. Kith is almost but not quite as close as kin. Thus the understanding and meaning I ascribe to kith is that it must be both temporal and spatial/geographic in nature. It is more likely (but not exclusively) to be found in isolated rural areas which have little in or out migration.

Such notions of kith-ship might have little traction in most urban centres today, although there is some, albeit contestable, suggestion that some British Asian communities still maintain close-knit 'village' characteristics (Phillips et al. 2007). However, despite the levels of in-/out-migration in rural areas, many rural communities, including Cornwall, still have areas containing well-established local families going back generations. Ideas of kith as opposed to kinship allows the Cornishman (as was the case with my neighbour) travelling to Australia to feel a bond with communities, not because he finds his own blood ties there, but because he finds the kin of his own kith there.

Family and friends: troublesome categories?

Family or kinship is, within the social sciences and anthropology, a key area of study because its formalized relationships, particularly between parents, offspring and siblings, are seen as key to supporting social structures. The old saying that you can choose your friends but not your family reinforced the belief that friendship was an individual and private matter. It has thus been asserted that friendship as a focus of research and theorizing has been ignored (Holmes and Greco 2011, Bunnell et al. 2012), contributions from Aristotle notwithstanding, until comparatively recently.

Friends and friendship are therefore complex and contested concepts. We might measure our popularity and social relevance by the number of friends we have on Facebook, irrespective of whether we even know who they are or they us. 'Friends' supporting social causes (Friends of the Earth), can be made in an instant on

networking sites like Badoo and at any time we might have dozens of BFFs (best friends forever), as we consume film and TV programmes that package idealized and romanticized visions of friends that will ‘be there for you’ (Willis and Skloff 1995), taking us through good times and bad. Friends make us feel loved, secure and wanted and are consequently desirable and valued relationships.

The counterpoint to the popular and internet/media-driven notions of friendship and friends is a significant amount of scholarly writing in recent times which has explored and examined how friendships function and work in detail. Current western understandings of friendship are based around notions of choice, reciprocity and equality (Schuh et al. 2014). Because friendship is perceived to be a constituent to what is a ‘good’ and ‘normal’ life, it has become, over time, important within UK policy relating to people with learning difficulties (Department of Health 2009). This, as Hughes and colleagues (2011) have observed, can be seen as a policy solution to social exclusion and, as friendship occurs within the private sphere, it becomes problematic for many people with learning difficulties, especially those labelled as having profound and multiple learning disabilities who, they argue, live their lives within a public sphere. They state:

Our analysis has suggested that the idea of friendship with adults with profound disabilities becomes problematic when placed in the context of social scientific research and philosophical thinking on friendship. At best, it appears difficult to achieve, at worst, it is little short of a contradiction in terms. Furthermore, its value—the ‘good’ of friendship in the lives of adults with profound disabilities—is contestable. (Hughes et al. 2011, p. 201)

One of the ways that policy renegotiates friendship to overcome this difficulty is by suggesting ‘friend-like’ relationships or by joining ‘friend’ with another relationship such as advocacy, family, co-worker. This, Hughes et al. (2011) argue, allows the reader to accept one truth (family/advocacy/relationship) but ignore the other (friendship).

The tenet that ‘friend’ is a valued relationship in policy for people with learning difficulties and the promotion of ‘friend-like’ relationships is mirrored by services for them. Thus Antaki and colleagues (2007) describe how support staff ‘coach’ service

users about who to call a friend and position themselves as being ‘like’ family or a friend to the service user. While they suggest that one reason for this is to imply equality and a harmonious (family-like?) environment, they also warn ‘If staff are constructed as acting on the basis of friendship, then their motivations, and loyalties, are not brought into question’ (Antaki et al. 2007, p. 13). This has resulted in the suggestion that friends of people with learning difficulties are, in fact, not like ‘regular’ or ‘real’ friends because such friendships between carers, support staff and family members lack the kind of reciprocal and equal relationship that is recognized as ‘true’ friendship (Redley 2009, Hughes et al. 2011). Opportunities for friendship for people with learning difficulties are and have in the past been limited in institutional settings, but this does not automatically mean that people will seize on any opportunity to call a person ‘friend’. As Antaki et al. demonstrated, staff interpreted ‘minimally positive assessments’ by service users of staff being ‘alright’ as equal to ‘being a friend’ (2007, p. 10). Additionally, while the friendships of people *with* learning difficulties are subject to intense scrutiny about the ‘reality’ of such friendships, it seems that the same criteria are seldom applied to people *without* learning difficulties, as suggested in the introduction to this section. So if friendships for non-disabled people can be derived from workplaces and frequent proximity (Bunnell et al. 2012) or can consist of ‘caring for’ and not just ‘caring about’ (Bowlby 2011), then the same should hold for people with learning difficulties. To this end, in the research, I made the decision to take the friendship claims of the co-researchers at face value.

In support of the rhizomatic relationship

As families and societies in the northern hemisphere have become ever more fragmented and individualized (Bauman 2003), there is an increasing interest in what Donovan and colleagues (2001, cited by Pahl and Pevalin 2005) refer to as ‘families of choice’. While Pahl and Pevalin (2005) suggest that the death of the family in sociology has been overstated, Pahl, in conjunction with Spencer (Pahl and Spencer 2003, 2010) has argued for the notion of ‘personal communities’. Consisting of individual social networks of friends, family, neighbours or work colleagues, these personal communities were seen as having distinct typologies ranging from communities almost exclusively made up of friends to those dependent upon

professionals. These networks of personal communities are made more complex by the way both family and friends can 'suffuse' into each other, thus our mother's best friend becomes 'auntie' and siblings and cousins can have relationships more akin to friendships (Pahl and Spencer 2003). Such personal communities have, in turn, close connections with the 'Circles of Support' developed by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (n.d.) in that they comprise an interdependent mixture of family, friends and formal supporters.

Interdependency has been theorized within disability studies in the past, for example recognition that caring and being cared for are fluid roles (see Walmsley 1993, for ways in which older disabled women's roles change from cared for to caring for); in relation to care and friendship (Bowlby 2011); Tronto's ethics of care (1999); and Kittay's (1999) notions of nested dependencies. Likewise, disability can be considered as contingent upon the presence or absence of interdependent factors (see Davis's 2002 discussion of dismodernity). There has also been an exploration of the way that Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of 'bodies without organs' and 'assemblages' can explain the relationships disabled people have with other humans (Shildrick and Price 2005), machines (Gibson 2006) and animals (Slater 2013). Goodley (2007) has also applied Deleuzian rhizomatic theories to the original concept of circles of support developed for people with learning difficulties. More recently, personal networks of support have been situated alongside material and social resources to form networks of resilience (Runswick-Cole et al. 2014). In the second section I explore how these ideas of rhizomes and interdependence informed my analysis of the rural communities where the fieldwork took place.

Rooted and idyllic: two cases of living in a rural community

The following section focuses on two of the co-researchers from the project who have had very different lives and experiences but have both reported feelings of belonging. Mark is an incomer to Cornwall and lives in a small, isolated village which is very popular with tourists in the summertime. It has a very high number of second and holiday homes and the resident population of 700 more than trebles in season. John conversely lives in a deprived, post-industrial, semi-urban town with a comparatively

high population density. John has extensive family and local connections going back generations in the town and surrounding area.

Mark's rural idyll

Mark had neither personal connections nor family living in or around Porth Wreak⁴ when he moved there. Previously, Mark had lived in a number of different countries, as his father was in the armed forces, before he settled in a residential special school in the UK. That was followed by a number of years living in an intentional community for people with learning difficulties / mental health issues. Following the breakdown of the intentional community placement, Mark's social worker found him a place in a group home in Porth Wreak run by a national charity. In theory, this could have left Mark isolated and alone. However, this small, isolated community is home to many other people who are also incomers and who have, in many ways (including purchasing houses at many times the local, and indeed national, average house price), bought into the ideal of the rural idyll.

The power of the rural idyllic community is strong within Porth Wreak with residents eager to preserve the local character and resistant to extending second home ownership and limiting new affordable homes to local residents (Porth Wreak Neighbourhood Development Plan Steering Group 2014) as well as limiting commercial developments. There are community events organized throughout the year and the Porth Wreak Parish Councils are active and well organized, publishing agendas and meetings via two community websites and the village notice board. Public consultation exercises have high response rates (Cornwall Rural Community Council 2004, Porth Wreak Neighbourhood Development Plan Steering Group 2014), indicating that a large number of residents have a strong interest in what happens in their area.

This strong communal spirit in Porth Wreak makes it seem to be a far-from-mythical rural idyll. The warmth, openness and friendliness I observed the residents display is seductive. My field notes following one of the trips Mark and I made record a hint of unease, however:

I think Mark wanted me to validate that Porth Wreak is a good place (to live?). I felt truthful in saying I was enjoying myself. I even felt a little seduced by the seemingly friendly community. It seemed too good to be true. (FN 06/08/2013)

The three trips Mark and I made in Porth Wreak throughout the year were constantly punctuated by people either hailing or being hailed by Mark. Decorators up ladders would call down for a hello and chat and gardeners would stop work for a hug and a catch up (FN 06/08/2013). Mark seemed to know and be known by everyone and regarded the people we met as his friends:

I've made hundreds of friends since living here ... The best thing about it is that everybody looks out for each other every day ... Everybody knows who you are ... (Mark Trip 2)

My field notes from the second trip report that following an argument with his father, despite feeling he is an intrinsic part of his community and surrounded by friendly, supportive faces, Mark expressed feeling lonely and isolated, something he eventually touched upon in the analysis session:

Mark: No I wouldn't change my friends for anything else, I like my friends and I get on very well with my friends.

Liz: Yeah, although you were saying earlier that, you know, your friends don't ever come and visit you here.

Mark: No, but I still go down the village and see them and I get a lot of people asking me about my flat; do I like my flat, do I like being in my flat and everything. [...] Yep but I do belong to ... I've got lots of good friends around here but sometimes I feel ... I don't know what the word is ... um ... it's not isolated ... sometimes I think I might feel fed up because I've been on me own all the time ... (Mark Trip 2 analysis)

This loneliness is underscored by the way Mark has to put so much labour into relationship maintenance. The following extract is from the analysis session following our trip to play bingo. This was the first time Mark had been to bingo for three months as he had a bad leg:

Liz: They must have noticed that you had stopped coming to bingo, did any of them come and see you?

Mark: No, nobody comes to see me. Only my support workers. I live here on my own and ... other people come and visit their friends in their flats and ... I go

*and keep my mate R*** ... R*** and I keep each other company because we're good mates, R*** and I.*

*Liz: Did you see R*** in the three months you stopped bingo?*

*Mark: Yeah kept back going to visit my mate R*** and his boys, J*** and P*** [...] I'm still waiting for a member of my family and stuff to come and stay with me because it's a fold up bed under here so they could come and stay for the night ... (long silence) I'm happy here on my own. (Mark Trip 1 analysis)*

This experience of Mark's strongly echoes the findings by Milner and Kelly (2009) in relation to one of their participants, Trevor, who also reported that no one came to visit him at home:

Like most participants, having a relationship required an *act of migration* by Trevor, away from the people and places he knew best, to public or shared community spaces. No one, Trevor said, made an equivalent journey to the places he was most intimate with [emphasis added]. (Milner and Kelly 2009, p. 52)

So, although Mark has strong feelings of connection and belonging and despite his local community acting on the surface like a paragon of cohesion and inclusion, Mark is lacking the more intimate and deep ties that properly knit him into his community.

Making and maintaining friends

The contention that the friendships of people with learning difficulties are predominantly with staff, family and other service users is supported by early research into the lives of people with learning difficulties living in institutions and later work around the process of deinstitutionalization (Edgerton 1967, Atkinson 1980, 1986, Bogdan and Taylor 1982, Chappell 1997). These studies explored some of the difficulties that people had in establishing and maintaining friendships. In my research there also appears to be evidence of this from Mark, who has experienced long periods of institutionalization in his life:

Liz: Do you see your support staff as friends?

Mark: I ... I see my support workers as good friends, yeah ... I get on very well towards all of them ... if I wanted to cancel my support worker if I wanted to

cancel my support and just have a day on my own I can do that. (Mark Trip 2 analysis)

I reflected on this exchange later:

I asked Mark if he saw his support workers as his friends and he said yes. Do they see themselves as Mark's friend? Because it's (on the surface at least) a professional relationship, I don't think most people would say it's a 'real' friendship, but who the hell am I to say how Mark defines his relationships? If he says his support worker is a friend to him then shouldn't I just respect that? No one questions me when I say who is or isn't my friend. In fact when I think of it, I often call people my mates or friends just because I know them and sometimes socialise with them. (FN 10/18/2013)

This issue of *how* friendships are defined and especially *who* defines them, is problematic. If we are to accept that people with learning difficulties, especially those who are active participants in the research process, are experts by experience (Walmsley 2009) then when a co-researcher or respondent describes a person as a friend, we, and specifically I, must also accept that. This follows with other authors such as Lafferty et al. (2013), Schuh et al. (2014), Tilly (2008) and Bigby (2008), who also accept claims of friendship at face value. This is not to say that accepting such claims is not always problematic. For example, while Mark is clearly held in affection by his community, as evidenced by the many instances on our trips, he still, as shown earlier, has to unilaterally do the 'friendship work' by going out to them. This is shown by the continuation of the earlier extract about feeling isolated:

Mark: ... sometimes I think I might feel fed up because I've been on me own all the time ...

Liz: Yeah. So being on your own ... I mean to get company you have to go out –

Mark: Yeah.

Liz: – and get it?

Mark: Yeah, yeah. (Mark Trip 2 analysis)

One explanation for this lack of bilateral relationship work could be the aforementioned difficulties faced by people in forming and maintaining friendships following deinstitutionalization (Bigby 2008). Bigby (2008) suggests that most of the residents' friends in her study were staff members and that contact with them as well as family was lost over time because of geographical distance. The importance of 'being local' in supporting people with learning difficulties has been highlighted by

Ledger (2012) and it is argued that ‘not being local’ is a reason for what could be termed Mark’s ‘thin’ relationships, in that he lacks the family network to support deeper friendships. Another form of institutionalization, again with a geographical dimension, could also have had an impact on Mark’s friendship networks, however. Mark comes from a military background and, as such, his family has lived all over the world. So while it is tempting to explain Mark’s friendships solely in terms of his disabled and non-local status, there is also the confounding factor that living a rootless and nomadic early life has possibly also affected how he negotiates and maintains friendships in the long term (Hunter and Nice 1977, Finkel et al. 2003; Chandra et al. 2010).

Making glue: Mark as flâneur

Mark says, *I’ve made hundreds of friends since living here [...] I’ve made friends wherever I’ve been* (Mark Trip 2); however, those friendships, while numerous, need a lot of work from Mark in order to maintain them in the absence of other supporting factors such as family or peers from childhood. One of the ways that Mark works at maintaining his bonds in the local community is by physically and visibly positioning himself within his community:

Mark: Well I’m a friend in the community, I go out, I see my friends every day.

Liz: Yeah.

Mark: And they see me, I see them out and about, I say hello to them ... they see me out and about, they say hello to me. (Mark Trip 2 analysis)

One of the most distinctive features of Mark’s strolls around his village is the constant interactive reportage between him and the other residents. Almost every interaction, no matter how brief, features what appears to be idle chatter along the lines of ‘how are you? What are you up to?’ However, these seemingly inconsequential conversations work like a form of social glue between the participants. Mark is able to keep up to date with the progress of the other person’s children, partners, work and health situation and in return the other person learns that Mark has changed jobs, has had some health issues and is working with a researcher. The ‘chat’ allowed both Mark and the other participants to share their values and demonstrate community solidarity. Thus, what is superficially the basis of future gossip and time passing

becomes an important form of social capital building, as Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) observe:

the ‘little chat,’ in a few short turns of conversation, has acted as a device for demonstrating how social capital may be simultaneously used and built as the talk constructs and sustains the community. (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000, p. 98)

Therefore while Mark might not be ‘known *well*’ (Bigby 2008, emphasis added) by those whom he calls friends, at least in terms of having a close and intimate connection with him, he is well *known* by everyone in his own community. All of Mark’s comments about his community suggest a sense of belonging and trust despite expressing moments of loneliness and isolation. I would argue that lacking the solid background that being ‘a local’ and having nearby kin and kith provide in terms of supporting deep, rich friendships and relationships seems to be partially ameliorated by the numerous positive, albeit possibly thin, friendships he has with his community.

John, rooted in his community by his family’s past

Trips out with John were characterized by shouts of ‘wosson!’ and frequent apparently good-natured accusations from both parties of the other’s laziness for not being in or at work. These connections are with people known to John because of his longstanding personal and familial connections in the neighbourhood. On the various trips we made together, we met friends of his family members, ‘mates’ from the local pub where John plays pool, an ex-girlfriend and her mother and various others, all of whom knew John, asked after him and his family and shared their own personal updates. In this respect walking John’s neighbourhood was similar to walking with Mark. The difference lay in the fact that many of the people we met knew John as one part of a larger kin network and John also knew their families.

Some contacts were clearly more important to John’s life than others. Many friends of John’s were related to being sociable, but others had a more supportive role. One friend John identified as important in his life was the café owner. As well as running what, according to my field notes, seemed to be John’s home from home, the café owner also provided practical and social support. In this way the café owner is like the non-kin auntie (Pahl and Spencer 2010). Thus, when John found himself in

escalating difficulties with payday loan companies, the café owner helped him out of his ‘mess’ by organizing and acting as one of the guarantors for his loan with the credit union:

*John: C**** is one of my, aren't you C****? One of my people that help me when I'm in a mess.*

CO: When you are in that position, I can only give a bit of advice really, I certainly haven't got money to lend you but –

John: You were the one that signed on it (as credit union guarantor) as well.

CO: Well I told you about the credit union, didn't I? (John Trip 1)

This act is in addition to other instances where the café owner provided help, guidance and support from teaching John how to count money to cautioning against potential exploitation. The café owner was aware that John was vulnerable because of his learning difficulties, especially in relation to his desire for a romantic relationship:

CO: He lets people take the proverbial out of him, especially women ... (John Trip 1)

While John sees the café owner as someone who provides informal support, he also refers to her and her family as friends. This segueing from friend to family or, as Pahl and Spencer (2010) refer to it, ‘fusioning’, demonstrates how interconnected John’s family and the café owner’s family are. This interconnectedness of different family networks could be described as John’s kith.

One of the positive aspects of kith-ship is that it can create a form of friendship that is altruistic and supportive and not necessarily based on reciprocity. As alluded to earlier, most scholars, supported by evidence from participants, agree that friendship is mutually chosen and reciprocal. The co-researchers in this study largely agreed that friendship is about ‘give and take’. Thus, relationships which are based on forms of organized support, ‘benevolence or a one-way relationship of “helping the handicapped”’ (Schuh et al. 2014) are not seen as meaningful. This perspective would cast the owner of John’s local café as simply kind and altruistic, with all the attendant connections to charity and the side-lining of human rights that the charitable, altruistic discourse entails (Priestley 2006, Goodley 2010). However, her actions in supporting John, when seen in the context of kith-based friendship, lack the patronizing gloss of

the altruistic ‘do-gooder’ acting egotistically or otherwise (Allyn et al. 1990) and instead are seen as the actions of someone acting halfway between friend and family. There is no expectation of reciprocity as per the standard concept of friendship and yet the café owner is not family nor is she paid to provide support. The ‘payback’ for providing support to John is that by providing a scaffold to an individual, the café owner has strengthened or knitted her community tighter as a whole.

Weaving interdependent, rhizomatic communities: the connection mats

To illustrate the different composition of the co-researcher’s communities, I developed a series of connection ‘mats’ (see figures 1 and 2). These mats provide a much-simplified snapshot of the kinds of relationships each of the co-researchers have and the kind of relationships that those around them have with each other. They represent those spatially close and, where appropriate, those who are emotionally close but spatially distant. These spatially distant but close emotional relationships are represented by thicker connecting ties (as is the case with Mark and his family). The presence of kith connections is, like the mats themselves, fluid. The longer a family is part of a community and the more generations exist in that community, the greater the number of kith. Similarly, friend relationships are fluid and the lines between some proximal relations and friends is blurred as are the lines between support worker and friend.

These mats evolved from the theorizing around Deleuzian rhizomes (Beckman 2011), particularly in relation to disability (Shildrick and Price 2005, Goodley 2007, Simmons et al. 2008). At a practical level they can be seen as a form of ‘circles of support’ for disabled people, but their interdependent and knitted natures provide a powerful visual metaphor for community and belonging. As Goodley writes:

Rhizomes are oppositional to trees which symbolise hierarchies, linearity and extreme stratification. Ignore trees. Think, instead, of weeds, grass, swarms and packs ... The rhizome is not singularly rooted but multiply interlinked and ever growing ... points on a rhizome always connect to something else; rhizomes are heterogeneous not dichotomous; they are made up a multiplicity of lines that extend in all directions; they break off, but then they begin again (either where they were before or on a new line). They are not models but maps with multiple entryways ... [We] can note a key phenomena in relation to rhizomes; *weaving*.

Any point of a rhizome can and has to be connected to anything other [emphasis in original]. (Goodley 2007, p. 12–13)

For an analysis of small rural communities with interconnected families and historical and intergenerational ties, a rhizomatic ‘mat’ acts as an appropriate analogy for the support and sense of belonging (or lack of) a disabled person experiences within their community. As Simmons et al. argue, rhizomes create ‘perpetual transformation and movement’ (2008, p. 737) and the individual becomes ‘decentred’:

he shifts and moves with the world, he connects and interconnects, flourishes in different ways depending on rhizomatic configurations, and withers when the rhizomes are severed. (Simmons et al. 2008, p. 737)

Thus, John’s local community has multiple strong interconnections with his family, his kith and his friends. The knowingness of and by his community is rooted in their shared history about each other. Mark’s mat demonstrates the opposite of John’s connections. The absence of kith and kin relationships locally means that Mark has a greater reliance on his family (who live at a distance) for emotional support. Despite this, the density of proximal relationships, many of which seem to have strong kith and kin relationships of their own, combined with Mark’s friendship work, provides a loose form of support for Mark and reduces his sense of isolation. So while Mark experiences instances of loneliness, he is not overtly, actively and systematically excluded. The mats show that a loose community, where there are fewer interconnections with an individual, as in Mark’s case for example, can potentially leave people vulnerable and less able to resist exploitation. John, by contrast, is tightly woven into the fabric of his community. This does not make him invulnerable to exploitation or abuse, but it makes him better able to withstand the effects and it means he is more likely to gain assistance.

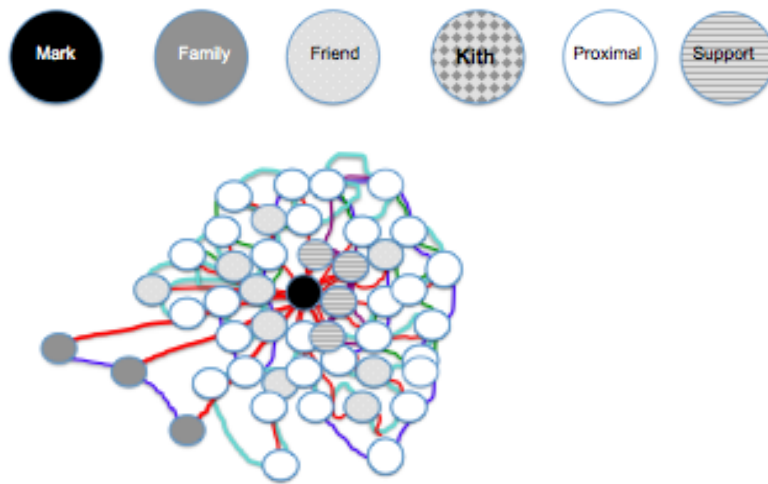


Figure 1: Mark's Connection Mat

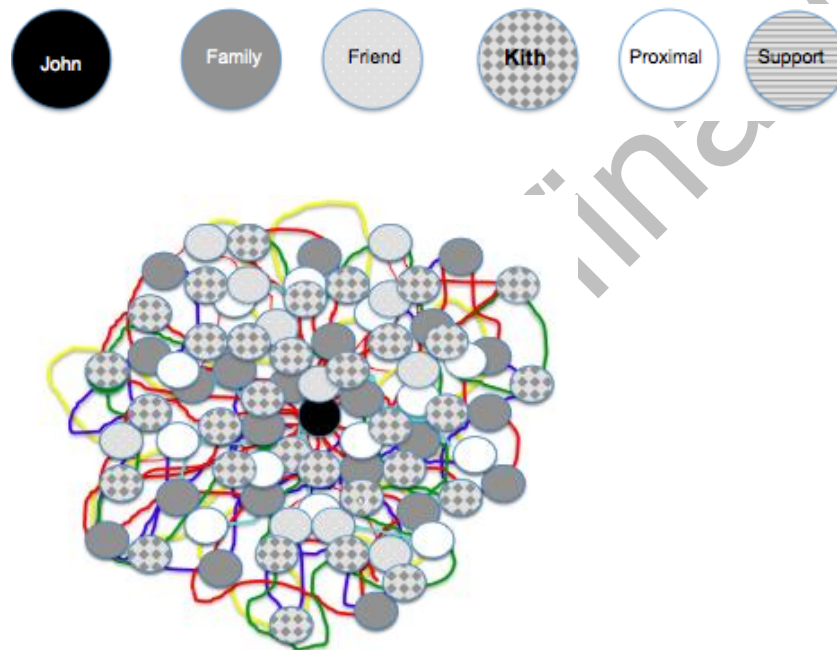


Figure 2: John's Connection Mat

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to tease out some of the issues around the way people, particularly people with learning difficulties, in rural areas connect with those around them. I have attempted to exhume kith as a specific and discrete relationship category in order to explain relationships that have both temporal and spatial characteristics. I have also argued that for people with learning difficulties, having the opportunity to

live among one's kith, in the sense of being around people who know one and one's family and history well, as well as the geographical sense of physical childhood location proposed by Griffiths (2013), can help support feelings of connection and belongingness with their wider communities, thus increasing overall wellbeing. It is important to clarify that kith is not a panacea, able to magically transform lives. Mark's life, which is devoid of kith and indeed family in close proximity, while sometimes lonely, is one that he is generally content with. He, along with his neighbours and friends, all believe in the benefits of the rural idyll and work hard to maintain the ideals and values of rural communities despite being comparatively 'new' as a community.

John's experiences demonstrate that kith is not the preserve of small and insular communities, but can flourish in denser populations. While John's experiences have not been completely without instances of hurt and exploitation, he is generally well supported by a strongly interconnected network dominated by family, friends and kith. As austerity measures in the UK become increasingly punitive, the worry is that people like Mark and John will have formal support structures such as personal assistance and/or financial benefits stripped back. In order for people with learning difficulties not to end up isolated and alone, as this progresses it is imperative that potentially vulnerable members of society are as well supported informally as possible. For many, this will mean living in proximity to family or other extended support networks, which reinforces the importance of helping people to remain living in their local communities.

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¹ This chapter is drawn from PhD research carried out between 2012 and 2014. The research took an inclusive approach (Walmsley and Johnson 2003) and involved four co-researchers. Although the research questions, design and data production were done in collaboration with the co-researchers, the analysis is largely mine. This was in part due to limitations of geography and time constraints. The analysis in this chapter is therefore in my voice; however, it was informed by the post-trip co-analysis with the co-researchers.

² I use the term 'learning difficulties' throughout as this is the co-researchers' preferred term. Internationally it is equivalent to learning disabilities, or intellectual or cognitive impairment.

³ Mark and John are their real names as they chose to make their identities public. Other names and places have been anonymized.

⁴ Porth Wreak is a pseudonym.

Author's final draft