"I've learned so much": befrienders' experiences of befriending minority ethnic young people

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Abstract

Befriending is commonly regarded as a purposive form of relationship designed to benefit the befriendee. Little research has examined experiences of befrienders. We report findings from a study of the experiences of volunteer befrienders to children and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 volunteers. Participants described benefits of the relationships, acceptance by befriendees' families, and social links and cultural factors relevant to the relationships. Befriending relationships should be viewed as more reciprocal than is often assumed. The mutual construction of meanings, and reciprocal outcomes, suggests that such relationships can engender positive intergroup relations.

Keywords: befriending; cross-cultural; young people; relationships; friendship

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Introduction

In befriending relationships, volunteer befrienders 'act as a friend' to befriendees, usually to people who might be at risk of social isolation (Dean & Goodlad, 1998). Such relationships are purposive, in being primarily pre-determined rather than originating with the parties themselves (cf. Duck, 1994; Shotter, 1992). Befriending schemes often overcome potential obstacles to relating such as inter-group differences or lack of commonalities between the parties, thus initiating relationships that otherwise would not exist. Evidence from a diversity of contexts suggests that, for befriendees, befriending relationships bring wide-ranging benefits, including preventing isolation due to social disadvantage, and ameliorating mental or physical ill- health, as well as encouraging links with broader social networks. For example, befriending interventions can reduce the experienced isolation of mothers at risk of mental health problems (Cox, 1993; Taggart et al, 2000), and of women with chronic depression (Harris et al, 1999). Similarly, befriending can benefit the elderly at risk from loneliness and isolation (Andrews et al, 2003; Bullock & Osborne, 1999), and individuals suffering from long-term mental illness (Bradshaw & Haddock, 1998). Befriending initiatives for children can promote inclusion in educational and peer settings and so reduce instances of bullying and victimisation (Boulton et al, 1999; Menesini et al, 2003).

Outcomes of befriending schemes then are generally judged successful for befriendees. Less however is known about the impact of such schemes upon the befrienders involved. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the primary focus of befriending schemes is to facilitate the social inclusion and well-being of the befriendees. However the absence of research looking at befrienders is noteworthy in two respects. First, the practice and implementation of befriending schemes is dependent upon the willingness and contribution of those who volunteer. Understanding the motivations for befriender involvement in these initiatives accordingly must play a major role in recruitment and the ongoing success of such schemes. Dean and Goodlad (1998) note that 62% of befriending schemes report problems in recruiting volunteers. Second, as seen above, the prevailing view of the befriending relationship is one in which the befriender gives and the befriendee receives. While relationships may later move beyond this stage to continued and perhaps deeper involvement, enduring relationships come to be viewed as having transcended the befriending situation and having become friendships (Andrews et al., 2003). Although such enduring contact is surely testament to the success of the befriending arrangements, the result is an impoverished view of the befriending relationship itself. That relationship continues to be seen as inherently structured in terms of an imbalance between the parties and as unable to progress beyond its initial scope without the addition of further elements. To what extent, this view reasonably reflects befriending in practice remains however a moot point.

In this study, we aimed to address the lack of previous research into the outcomes of befriending from the perspective of befrienders. We did so in the context of a scheme that promoted befriending relationships between minority ethnic young people and members of a majority ethnic group. Previous work has pointed to the difficulties that minority ethnic adolescents commonly experience in relation to wider social networks and to the disengagement that frequently results from an absence of inclusion (Verkuyten & Brug, 2003; Verkuyten & Kinket, 2000). Whereas successful relationships with majority group members can enhance positive self-esteem and academic achievement, poor or exclusionary relations can lead to isolation and academic disidentification (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2004; Zirkel, 2004). Even however where positive inter-group relationships are established, these are likely to endure for shorter periods of time than intra-group relationships, regardless of quality of the relationship in terms of loyalty or emotional security of the individuals involved (Aboud et al, 2003). The formation and maintenance of good relationships between minority ethnic adolescents and members of the majority group is thus problematic.

The present study was conducted in the particular context of Scotland, United Kingdom. In Scotland, many minority ethnic adolescents describe their experiences of inter-group relationships as being unhappy or mixed, and relatively few relationships are reported as being positive (Closs et al, 2001). As a result, a stated aim of Scottish Executive policy on inclusion is to ensure the 'full involvement in cultural, social and sporting opportunities' of all children and young people, irrespective of background (Scottish Executive, 2003: 56). The befriending scheme studied here was one that looked to promote the social inclusion of children and young people from minority ethnic backgrounds by facilitating relationships between them and members of the majority ethnic group. The outcomes of the scheme thus were very much dependent upon the continuing involvement of participants willing to engage on those terms. Here we report on befrienders' views of the scheme and of their relationships with the young people.

Method

The study was conducted with the support and assistance of one of the largest befriending organisations within Scotland, operating from four local bases. This organisation provided a service specifically for children and young people, aged within 5 and 16 years, who were experiencing personal or social difficulties and who lived in areas of high social need or who were from minority ethnic communities. Main aims of the service were the development of young people's self-confidence and self-esteem, and the promotion of opportunities for personal and social development. Referrals were accepted from anyone having contact with a young person who might benefit from the service provided. Volunteer befrienders came from all sections of the community and were required, following training, to commit to a befriending relationship for a minimum period of one year. No maximum period was stipulated. At the time of the study, the organisation had in excess of 100 volunteer befrienders.

Participants were ten White British (majority ethnic) befrienders. Five were male, ages ranging from 25 to 36 years (median age 32 years), and five were female, ages ranging from 20 to 35 years (median age 29 years). The befriending relationships in which they were engaged had a median duration of approximately two years. Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 40 minutes, were conducted at one base of the befriending organisation. Participants were asked nine open-ended questions, focusing on issues previously identified as relevant to successful befriending relationships and on issues relevant to the inclusion and well-being of minority ethnic young people. A copy of the interview schedule used is attached as Appendix A. Interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed. Punctuation marks were added to improve readability. Participant numbers were substituted for names and all data were otherwise rendered anonymous to preserve confidentiality.

Coding and analysis were conducted using principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is an inductive approach to data analysis that emphasises the generation of theory from close inspection of qualitative data and is particularly appropriate for inquiry into topics where theoretical development is required. The form of grounded theory used here emphasised the engagement of the researcher with the data and the interpretation of data in order to derive analytic themes that meaningfully captured the participants' understandings of the topics of study (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis focused on identification of elements grounded in the data and on the development of these elements into higher order themes. Transcripts were initially explored on a case-by-case basis for indicators of the participants' understandings. Emerging indicators were constantly compared against further transcripts

and further indicators identified where present. Indicators were examined for their potential connections with each other and developed into emerging themes. Initial themes were developed to incorporate analysis of any further indicators identified and to take account of what initially appeared to be negative cases in the data. Themes were constantly checked for relevance and fit against the data set as a whole. Analysis proceeded iteratively until no further themes emerged and the analytic framework accounted for the participants' own understandings as displayed in the data.

Results

From the analysis, four themes emerged as being of prime importance to the participants. These themes, namely achieving reciprocal benefits, gaining acceptance by families, providing social links and negotiating cultural factors are considered in turn below.

achieving reciprocal benefits

When describing their views of the befriending relationships, all of the interviewees referred to benefits that that they perceived as occurring during the relationship. In many cases these understandings included changes that they noted in the befriendees. For example:

'when I first met him he was just this wee lad' (Participant 5: 1)

'she was a quiet sad little girl, I would have said, three years ago' (Participant 3: 2).

The speakers above refer to the ways in which they viewed the young people at the commencement of their befriending relationships. Both descriptions refer to size, suggesting vulnerability and lack of development. Participant 5 emphasises the importance of this lack of development through 'just', while Participant 3's references to 'quiet' and 'sad' suggest an absence of communication and of self-confidence. In each case the description offered implicitly is contrasted with how they viewed the befriendees later in the relationship, suggesting that positive changes had taken place over the intervening period. These changes in the befriendees come to be regarded as benefits that followed the commencement of the befriending arrangement.

Many participants described specific changes in the befriendees' educational progress, as seen in the extracts below.

> 'He would bring along some games such as card games or roulette or something so that he was reading numbers' (Participant 4: 3)

> 'When he was very young when he went to school they thought that he was speaking his home dialect and when he came home his mum thought that he was speaking English but he was actually talking gibberish. He had made up his own language because he had got so confused between the different languages both of them speaking more than one language at home I would guess plus English outside. The poor wee kid age five had developed his own language that nobody understood. So there was a lot of working on that' (Participant 7: 4).

The participants emphasised the point that improvement of educational skills was a major element of interactions. They viewed joint activities, such as game-playing or similar, as providing suitable occasions for them to tutor the befriendees in the appropriate skills and thus as ways of addressing the particular difficulties that were encountered. In doing so, they regarded their input as being beneficial to the befriendees in both general and specific educational terms. The befriending relationships were thus viewed as providing both general benefits and specific opportunities for facilitating the development of the befriendees.

The befrienders perceived the relationships as having benefits for themselves as well as the befriendees. For example:

> 'I think that it's obviously increasingly more interesting and stimulating because you are appreciating another culture a bit more so that's obviously a major advantage and it's very interesting to be involved with someone from another culture (Participant 8: 4)

I think that there are enormous advantages. I've learned so much. I mean this young person is in a Scottish white culture that's his schooling, you know, he's got his boxing clubs most of his friends if not all of his friends just now are Scots boys from many generations. He is probably very familiar and at ease with Scottish white culture and I've learned a lot about the Pakistani Muslim culture. I would think that that is usually a real advantage' (Participant 9: 4).

Above, the speakers describe what they viewed as important advantages of the relationships for themselves, in the form of greater knowledge of different cultures. All participants emphasised their increased knowledge of different cultures and understandings of diversity. The befriending relationships thus were viewed as being reciprocally advantageous, providing benefits for befrienders and befriendees alike.

gaining acceptance by families

In describing their relationships with the young people, the interviewees described how these relationships had been accepted and welcomed by the families involved. For example:

'I think the mum was glad that he was out of the way and she knew he was safe away doing something and she could then use the time to catch up on other things like shopping or sorting out other business' (Participant 4: 3).

Such gradual acceptance commonly led to the befrienders establishing contacts and in some cases relationships with family members.

Commonly this increasing acceptance was reflected in hospitality to the befriender at different points during the relationship.

'They were having a party one night when I dropped him off and they said "would you like to come in for a bit of food" and it was the first time ever I had properly been invited into the home so I am very much seen as an outsider but that's fine I'm actually quite comfortable with that we have our own special relationship that is not tied into the family' (Participant 2: 4).

Above, the interviewee describes how these instances became welcome aspects of the involvement in the befriending relationship. Often such displays of family hospitality became routine occurrences, as seen in the following extract:

'The mother was in the regular habit of giving me little Chinese meals at night before I went home. It was simple food you know it was very minimum, Chinese tea and biscuits' (Participant 8: 2).

One consequence of regular contacts was that they strengthened links between not just the befriender and befriendee but between the befriender and other members of the befriendee's family. Forming such contacts, of course was not always straightforward, as seen below.

'The mother can speak English although it's quite broken but she can and another previous matching when the English was not so good in the house. I couldn't speak to the mum really. That was difficult yeh but not impossible' (Participant 3: 2).

'One of the difficulties was the fact that the he was living with his grandmother who spoke virtually zero English so all communication through his grandmother even simple things like whether you wanted a cup of tea tended to have to go through the young person. So that was a definite difficulty I mean it was quite a harmonious relationship with his grandmother but obviously it was quite difficult' (Participant 8: 1).

In the extracts above, the speakers describe difficulties experienced in relationships with members of the befriendees' families. Even in such situations however, they regarded such problems as arising from communication difficulties rather than reflecting any unwillingness on the part of the family. Family

acceptance of the relationship and of contacts with the befriendee was not in question for any of the participants. The extent to which these links had become established was experienced perhaps most acutely at the point where a befriending relationship was ending.

'When I was ending the matching that was very difficult but I suppose it is with any matching. I was told I had become part of the furniture. It was very difficult to detach myself from the family because I knew all the older siblings' (Participant 7: 4).

When a befriending relationship ended this resulted in the termination both of contact with the befriendee and of established contacts with other family members. In the extract above, the idiomatic 'part of the furniture' points to just how accepted and established links with the family had become. Of course, this degree of involvement reflected the most extreme case of befriender involvement with the befriendee's family. Nonetheless, many participants referred to the difficulties that they experienced at the end of a befriending relationships in severing contacts that had become increasingly established over time.

providing social links

As seen above, the befriending relationship itself in many cases provided contact and involvement of the befriender with other members of the befriendee's family. One common outcome of this involvement was an increased role for the befriender, often by way of providing links to the wider majority community. All interviewees were happy to be involved in this way and to provide links to the community. For example:

> 'I just sometimes feel that the mother particularly in the Muslim families because the females aren't really allowed to go out un-chaperoned but they are quite isolated as well, their link with the community is through the children (Participant 7: 8).
>
> I think that I am maybe the only white person who goes in his house. So I always go in the house when I go to collect him and I go back into the house when I take him back. Either mum is there or grandma and the siblings are there as well. I think that I enjoy seeing them but I think that it's quite good for them' (Participant 1: 4).

Above, the interviewees describe clearly what they see as the difficulties for the befriendees' families, particularly for female members, in forming links with the majority ethnic culture. The limited extent of such links, in the view of the befrienders, is evident in the second extract where the befriender describes herself as the only point of contact available within the household. Given this role, the befrienders acted as willing intermediaries for the family when community-based difficulties arose. For example:

> 'She has missed quite a lot of time off primary school when her gran was ill her mum was going down to Manchester and she had to go she would miss two months and the school didn't know. So in this case they asked me to write a letter to the school and sort of intervene so that has been quite an important bit in the last year to get her into school or she would have lost her place' (Participant 3: 4).
>
> 'I prompted him once if he had any difficulties at school and that time he did confide in me with a problem ant I referred that back to the people here and this was referred back to his teachers and so on' (Participant 7: 3).

The perceived educational benefits of the befriending relationship have already been noted above. Here the speakers describe further involvement in the education of their befriendees, in becoming involved to alert schools to any existing problems or to ward off potential problems that might otherwise arise. In this, the befriendees again took up a role that might be viewed as going beyond the immediate parameters of the initial relationship. Their involvement with the outside community was however not restricted to the young people concerned, as seen in the extract below.

> 'I've tried to be a link into institutions I don't think her mum can read and write very well so she has asked me to write letters and to read letters to her before if official things have come in to read them and advise her about what she should do' (Participant 3: 4).

Here, the role of the befriender extended beyond a focus on the young person to one of assisting the family to communicate effectively with organisations within the wider community. In large part, the interviewees were willing helpers in this respect, especially where closer links with the family had evolved over time. There were however limits to the extent of assistance provided.

> 'She wanted me to come mid week in addition to Saturday morning which I was doing to kind of look after the young person while she went to the hospital in particular. She was at the hospital practically every day and having to take him with her and he was getting upset seeing his mum so ill. I had to say that it wasn't appropriate but I think that mum was disappointed with that' (Participant 4: 6).

In most cases, the befrienders viewed ad hoc assistance as an ancillary element of the main relationship. Where however requests involved recurrent responsibilities, the befrienders usually declined such requests. Additional ongoing commitments to family members other than the befriendee were, in this way, viewed as far exceeding the scope of the befriending relationship.

negotiating cultural factors

In the three preceding sections we have seen how the befriending relationships evolved over time to encompass a range of contacts and meanings for the befrienders, the befriendees and their families. Rather than simply being single relationships, they might more usefully be regarded as sets of relationships that were continually open to development. However even though the interviewees viewed the relationships as fluid, they did not regard them as being without constraints as seen below:

> 'Sometimes it's hard that she will go swimming quite a lot but she isn't interested in learning to swim because she is extremely aware of the fact that she won't be swimming later in life or freely. . . . She knows certain limitations for her that are there. Well there are lots of other things that she does do but sometimes she is quite aware of what she can and can't do. What she will do today in the future the culture won't allow' (Participant 3: 2).

> 'So we decided to go to the local shop and get some lunch as it was nearly two o'clock by then. It turned out the following week that it was during Ramadan and he wasn't supposed to eat anything' (Participant 4: 2).

In the extracts above, the speakers describe the impact on the relationships of the cultural differences between themselves and the young befriendees. One point that should be noted here is that these differences were not perceived to impact negatively on the formation or maintenance of the relationships; on the contrary, the views described in the earlier sections suggest positive outcomes arising from the cross-cultural matchings. Where however cultural differences became relevant was in the activities conducted within the relationships. As seen in the two extracts above, culturally specific expectations did not necessarily rule out joint activities such as swimming or eating lunch. Such expectations however did impact upon the perceived appropriateness of these activities within minority ethnic culture and the consequent participation by the befriendee. Thus, the activity of swimming although then permissible offered limited interest for the befriendee. Cultural factors were also relevant to interactions between the participants and the befriendees' families. For example:

> 'Well, especially if you ask a Chinese person, for example, if everything is going alright and having a nice time you're not likely to get the same sort of direct response that you might get from a western person who is so meticulously polite and absolutely more concerned that they do not offend. They are more likely to give a polite answer than to reveal some problem. That's one and to appreciate how that works in practice you need a little bit of experience I think but the crucial thing is that you shouldn't be sure because the person said there is no problem' (Participant 8: 4)

> 'If I could document now things like if you're a women expect them to say you go home, you cook, you don't work, you don't drive because it is a shock if you have never encountered such strong beliefs and just being told it and it's quite difficult not to respond. Especially with some of the women that work for [organisation name] are quite independent women whose beliefs are quite different' (Participant 2: 5).

Again, cultural differences were not seen as precluding the formation of effective relationships. However, minority ethnic cultural expectations were perceived as shaping communications between the parties involved. Cultural differences accordingly came to be viewed as elements that (potentially) impacted upon the scope of these relationships rather than negating their value. Indeed, notwithstanding such perceived obstacles, the interviewees regarded their contacts with the befriendees and with their families as being very positive. They therefore remained very much in favour of the existing arrangements for promoting cross-cultural matchings between befrienders and befriendees, as seen below:

> 'I think that it's important that one is aware of cultural differences. But hmm I don't think that it should be reasoning for either accepting or rejecting someone for entering in to a [organisation name] relationship either from the point of view of the people providing the support or the people being supported' (Participant 8: 3).

> 'I think that [organisation name] is a multi cultural organisation and it just is . . . that's just how it should be and it's a great model with how it currently is in my mind' (Participant 5: 10).

These two extracts sum up the range of views expressed by the participants in the course of the interviews. As is evident, both participants explicitly refer to cultural factors and differences as being relevant to the context of the befriending relationships. While acknowledging such considerations, the participants describe the arrangements in positive terms, particularly in the final extract where the process is viewed as 'a great model'. Taken together, these reflect many of the views that the participants expressed of these relationships: that, although there may be specific elements that mark them out as different from other relationships, the experiences are favourable and should be encouraged in future befriending arrangements.

Discussion

The reports of positive befriending experiences in this study are consistent with much previous evidence, albeit coming primarily from befriendees rather than befrienders, that points to the successes of befriending schemes. For example, in a study of an intergenerational programme in a rural community, Bullock and Osborne (1999) found that volunteers, programme users and their families shared positive views of the programme. In a similar vein, Taggart et al (2000) found that a home-visiting befriending scheme for mothers was positively regarded by all involved, namely the volunteers, mothers and the service co-ordinator. Further, also consistent with previous studies (e.g. Cox, 1993; Harris et al, 1999; Shih, 1998; Taggart et al, 2000), the social roles taken up by the present befrienders appear potentially to go beyond the initial scope of the relationships (see Andrews et al, 2003) and so to increase links with the wider community.

The processes by which befriending relationships might promote social inclusion here merit further consideration. In his seminal text on prejudice, Allport (1954/1979) noted that mutually conducive relations between members of different groups do not arise naturally but instead have to be promoted. Allport hypothesised that positive intergroup relations would arise not through contact per se but rather where those who are in contact (1) are of equal status; (2) share superordinate goals; (3) are not in competition, and (4) receive official or institutional support for the contact. While there is much debate as to whether these four conditions should be viewed as necessary or as facilitatory, there is wide agreement that effective relations are more likely to occur in circumstances where the conditions are satisfied (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000; 2006). It is reasonable to expect that, within a befriending context, Allport's second condition will usually be met, through a superordinate goal of maintaining a particular form of relationship. Similarly, institutional support as required by the fourth condition is likely to be found where befriending is promoted and initiated by an organisation designed for this purpose. The first and third of Allport's conditions are however potentially more troublesome; it is therefore to the issues of status and competition of those involved in the befriending relationships that we now turn.

As noted above, a common view of befriending is one of the befriender having higher status than the befriendee, at least in terms of what is brought to the relationship (Dean & Goodlad, 1998). The understandings of the participants in this study cast doubt on the usefulness of this view. Here, the participants saw themselves as receiving through their participation a range of benefits, including acquiring knowledge of different cultures, acceptance by those cultures, and engagement in a wide range

of social activities. Many participants reported a deep sense of loss on the termination of a relationship. Taken together, such elements suggest that the befriending scheme brings a diversity of benefits for befrienders and that the relationships might usefully be regarded as reciprocal, offering advantages for both parties. In this respect, befriending in practice appears a more equal and balanced experience than simply the giving and receipt of friendship: the relative status of those involved in the relationship is more equal than is commonly assumed.

Our argument is not that befriending relationships necessarily even out differences in status between those involved. Far from it, these relationships, as are others, are located within broader contexts of inequality of intergroup relations. The present findings point to differences in cultural understandings, and potential competition between the expectations of different ethnic groups that can impinge upon the possibilities for individual relationships. In the present study, participants viewed themselves and the relationships that they formed as being largely able to transcend such competition of expectations. Here, competition presented challenges rather than precluding meaningful relationships; elsewhere, cultural differences as experienced on an individual level might prove too difficult for those involved to overcome to similar effect.

To the extent that the relationships examined here transcended potential difficulties of unequal status and potential competition, the outcomes can be understood as accomplishments of the individuals involved (see Duck, 1994; Shotter, 1992). In reviewing the operation of intercultural relations programmes involving young people, Stephan and Stephan (2004; 2005; see also Stephan et al, 2004) noted that the most important element of the effectiveness of such programmes was 'the manner in which the programs are conducted' (2005: 439). The positive operation of befriending initiatives therefore may have less to do with specific aspects of design than with how they operate in practice and with how befrienders and befriendees make relationships work for them.

Viewing befriending in this light gives a more useful picture of the ways in which befriending schemes operate in practice rather than theory. As well as taking the scope of the relationship beyond the confines of an initial structure, such a view appears to reflect to a greater extent the motivations and rewards of those who participate. There are of course also matters of recruitment and continued participation of volunteers, on which the operation and outcomes of such schemes depend. Reframing befriending in terms that allow for and emphasise gains of befrienders are likely not only better to reflect such relationships in action; but also to encourage the participation of others and contribute towards the future success of community programmes. It is noteworthy that to the extent that befrienders derive advantages from the relationships, so the relationships can provide greater benefits also for the befriendees by acknowledging their contributions; the outcomes of successful befriending can benefit all involved.

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Appendix A

1. Are you in a befriending relationship at the moment?

2. What is your young person's cultural background?

3. How did you find the first meeting with the young person?

4. Can you describe some of your most memorable experiences so far with working with your young person?

5. What type of things do you and your young person do together?

6. Describe the key elements of your relationship with the young person.

7. How important do you think culture is within the befriending relationship?

8. How do you find the parents of the young person?

9. Do you have any ideas for [organisation name] to consider in the future related to cross cultural matchings?

About the Authors

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