People with learning disabilities’ accounts of friendship

Thesis

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People With Learning Disabilities’ Accounts Of Friendship

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SALOMONS
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CHAPTER THREE - RESULTS

3.0 General Comments

Overall, what was striking was how easy it was during the interviews to feel ‘as if’ the participants had rich and enjoyable relationships with other people, and an active social life. Rarely during the course of the actual interview did it become apparent that actually the majority of them had fairly impoverished relationships with others, except for professionals or family. During the process of transcribing, and especially coding, it became apparent that the interviewer had been ‘caught up’ in some need to believe that they had rewarding relationships and deny the difference between their lives and my own. It was striking how skilful they were at interacting and constructing accounts with which the interviewer was keen to collude. By being able to relate much of what they said to a ‘healthy’ image of friendships it was possible to come away from the interview feeling positive about the participants’ lives and remain out of touch with the degree of sadness, dissatisfaction and frustration which on analysis seemed to underlie their accounts. This occurred in spite of being alerted to the fact it might occur from the literature on stigma management. The strength of this meant it took many readings, and the process of coding to begin to see below the surface level of their accounts and begin to develop an understanding of how they had used their speech and language to construct their narratives.

Generally the information given by the participants was in line with previous research studies. Most of the people they referred to as friends were either others with learning disabilities who they had met through services or from sharing homes with them, or they were staff and families. It was the latter who they termed themselves as being closer to, and who they turned to for advice or support. They did acknowledge the
importance of their friends with learning disabilities but they did not describe these relationships as providing much of a sense of intimacy. What also became clear was their passive role within their relationships, they did not appear to seek out friendships but accepted what friendly advances were made to them. Similarly due to their own dependency needs, the issue of reciprocity was typically uneven within their relationships. These issues are expanded in more detail below.

Due to the expanse of data within the transcripts, and the richness of what they had said it was felt that in order to focus analysis on attending to the aims of the project a structure needed to be imposed. Thus each aspect of friendship which was explored in the interview is presented in turn highlighting common themes in what they said, whilst simultaneously discussing any issues related to how they had constructed their responses to manage the variation between their experience, or knowledge of friendship and that which is viewed as typical. For ease of discussion when a rhetorical device is highlighted for the first time it is presented in bold. For some of the rhetorical devices discussed only one example is provided within this Chapter; however each one occurred more than once throughout the interviews. In line with the theoretical basis of the analysis, there is no intention to present the information below as if it represents the “truth” about what any participant was thinking or feeling.

3.1 The meaning of friendship

Overall the participants described the meaning of friendship in terms of either companionship or closeness.

Three participants drew upon discourses of social activity when describing what the word friendship meant to them.
Interviewer: What do you think I mean when I ask about friendships, what does, you know, what does it mean to you?

Penny: I suppose you get together I s'pose

And a bit later:

Interviewer: ... So a friend to you is someone you get together with and do things, is that what, when I say the word friend comes to mind?

Penny: Well we have a natter, have a cup of tea have a natter

Interviewer: What does the word friend mean to you?

Mark: Quite a lot

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about it, what do you think when you hear the word friend?

Mark: Sometimes I get on the phone to my friends and sometimes they get on the phone to me

Interviewer: Right so a friend is someone you talk to [yeah], do you do anything else with them?

Mark: I go round and see them sometimes

Both responses, whilst acceptable on one level are also somewhat unusual on another.

It was clear what they meant, and yet their answers do not reflect much of the emotional quality typically associated with friendship. However, by constructing an answer which related well on the surface to the question the participants created an impression of knowing about friendship in such a way that either their limited vocabulary and/or their limited experience of friendship were somewhat masked. In both instances the interviewer took on the role of reframing their responses to fit with more typical language use thereby assisting in a process of minimising rather than exposing the implicit vagueness of their responses. In addition within the reframing the interviewer adds additional information which results in the response fitting the researcher’s view of what friendship is about. For example when Penny says they get together, the interviewer’s reframing includes doing things together. Both the respondent and interviewer here are using rhetorical devices which were repeated throughout the interviews. These assisted in maintaining a smooth flow of interaction and both parties were involved in their occurrence. The respondent’s being:
to give as good a related response as they can,

and in return the interviewer's being:

- to repeat and reframe what was said in such a way that the language is
  more appropriate and typical, and

- adding additional more appropriate information.

Whilst Sue also defined friendship in terms of social activity, it highlighted her passive role in making and maintaining friendships. For Sue, friends were not just people who she went out with, but those who actually asked her out. Her response thereby revealed her experience of friendship as not being a mutual process, but one in which she has to wait to be asked.

Sue  
*Friendship means if you go out with people [right] and that's friendship err umm really I had someone who friendship who were schoolmates of mine*

Interviewer  
*...... people you go out with? What other things might there be?*

Sue  
*If you go out with boys or group of you really that's umm friendship*

Interviewer  
*How do you know if one person is a friend and another person isn't, what's different?*

Sue  
*If they ask you to go out*

The remaining participants drew upon discourses of intimacy and closeness when defining friendship. From the outset, Andy located kindness and helpfulness at the centre of friendship.

Andy  
*It's lovin', loving somebody*

Interviewer  
*Loving somebody?*

Andy  
*and being kind to them, kind, helpful to each other*

Interviewer  
*Ah, that's nice, and is that, has that been your sort of experience of friendship as well?*

Andy  
*Only just got used to it you know. I used to er help each other you know and er help each other out*

Interviewer  
*Right maybe it's helpful to just talk a bit about some of your friends then [yes] actually can you tell me a bit about.....*

Andy  
*One time I meet friends in the street I was being kind and helpful [right] and they help me out*
Again, it is apparent what Andy is trying to convey about the meaning of friendship, and yet the emotional language which he has used is not typical. He conveys a very positive image which is reflected by the interviewers acknowledgement of how “nice” what he has said is. However, when attempts are made to explore whether this is what he has actually experienced Andy’s speech becomes more muddled and confusing. His depiction of meeting friends in the street is untypical, although he again uses language which implies this was a positive experience for him. Here there is some evidence of two other rhetorical devices which were commonly used by participants during the interviews. The first being:

- **to be excessively positive about everything thereby masking any difficulties**

and the second being:

- **to use muddled speech or poorly structured phrases.**

In response the researcher uses another rhetorical device. Namely:

- **When fearful of exposing any difference or ‘incompetence’ the interviewer changes the subject to an easier less revealing topic.**

These devices appeared to serve as a means of masking any variation between Andy’s positive definition and his actual experiences and what may cause these. His confused speech is not questioned by the interviewer who simply moves on to more questions thereby also avoiding revealing any difficulties Andy may have been having. Andy may well have learnt the effectiveness of ‘being disabled’ as a means of avoiding difficult issues; it would seem here it was more tolerable for him to be perceived as disabled than as having impoverished relationships.
Tim’s account included a sense of emotion and feeling in his understanding of friendship, as well as reflecting something of a sense of the developmental nature of friendship formation.

Tim  
I mean to like, I have some friendship, it means somebody inside of a person that grows

Interviewer  
Something inside of a person that grows?

Tim  
Yes inside of a person.. and it grows in you, it’s a person a person that grows into a person...... And friends are friends, when you say friendship it means more to me

Interviewer  
Why is that?

Tim  
Well, you could say you’re my friend

Interviewer  
Right, what I’m your friend?

Tim  
I’m your friend okay, and you’re my friend and we talk as friends but when it goes the other way, a bit further, you’ve got a friendship...

Whilst it was possible to understand what Tim was saying, his differing use of language requires the interviewer to utilise a rhetorical device of

• interpretation of what has been said.

Whilst this facilitates the interaction, it is possible that within the process aspects of their responses which are not understood by the interviewer are dropped as there is no shared language with which to discuss them. Thus highlighting a way in which the absence of shared language can result in their accounts and experiences being marginalized. In this instance it is possible that the interviewer uses a rhetorical device of interpretation as a means of masking limited understanding of the actual language used by the respondent.

Tim goes on to clarify how he uses the words friend and friendship differently. The interviewer was perceived as a friend because the interaction was ‘friendly’, yet friendship for him refers to a close relationship which develops over time.
3.2 Importance of friendship

All the responses indicated that the participants did think that friendship is important. Whilst this may be their view it is also a reflection of a wider societal discourse. Generally in western society the value of friendship is upheld by related discourses which place value on having a social life and friendships, as this in turn reflects popularity and a sense of leading a “good” life. Each participant incorporated some aspect of this, typically the social gains of friendship.

Interviewer  Okay why is it important to you to have friends, what's important about having friends?
Paul  Erm, happy
Interviewer  They make you happy?
Paul  Play games together, enjoyment, have a bit of fun
Interviewer  Have a bit of fun?
Paul  That's right
Interviewer  What do you think is important for you about having friendship? What does it make you feel like?
Andy  It makes me feel happy and that, happy and cheerful.
Interviewer  ... I suppose what I'm saying is what's important for people about having friends?
Andy  That's how you get on, when you've got friends, that's how you get on well with each other and they come and see each other don't they.
Interviewer  yeah, so there's a bit of, they see each other so there's a bit of company there [yeah, yeah] and help for each other and things [yeah yeah]...

Within both of these responses the interviewer uses the rhetorical device identified in Section 3.1 above: namely interpretation of what was said in the absence of a shared language. Again, in doing this their experiences are inadvertently ‘pulled’ to fit with dominant discourse.
Penny’s account reveals something of how she manages her social identity: by “doing the same” as those she perceives to be not only friends, but peers.

**Interviewer** Do you think that having friends is quite important?
**Penny** I think so

**Interviewer** What do you think you get out of having friends?
**Penny** Relations, they talk about their past you know, their umm family, their daughters and their sons and their grandchildren and I do the same...

**Interviewer** Right share information

By constructing a response such as this she is demonstrating a rhetorical device of using language to:

- highlight as foremost membership to a more accepted group in society.

The benefits of using such a device are that it detracts from membership of the alternative, less valued group of learning disabled people.

In Mark’s account it is possible to see how the interviewer was also involved in constructing an account which reflected mainstream discourse.

**Interviewer** Do you think friends are important?
**Mark** Yeah

**Interviewer** What do you think life would be like without any friends?
**Mark** Miserable

**Interviewer** What would you miss about having friends? Can you think of anything?
**Mark** (long pause) No be hard to...

**Interviewer** Hard to think of it is it? Life without friends is hard to imagine
**Mark** Hmm.

Mark’s long pause and hesitant answer were filled in by the interviewer in such a way that the value of friendship is constructed to match dominant discourse. Mark relies upon the rhetorical device mentioned in Section 3.1 above of using muddled speech. In response the interviewer uses a rhetorical device of:

- filling in the gaps in his response with the dominant discourse, thereby masking any difficulty.
3.3 Getting to know people

Overall, what was striking was the lack of experience the participants had in actually getting to know people. Whilst some of them did provide responses all were quite different to what would be considered typical. Hence a number of rhetorical devices were used by both the respondents and interviewer as a means of managing the discussion.

An example of this can be seen in the following extract from Paul's interview:

Interviewer  When you want to get to know someone better, what do you do, how do you get to know them?
Paul  err contact them, err holding hands, shaking hands, I I sometimes I do sex but that's different (laughs)
Interviewer  ...what sort of things might you want to know about them?
Paul  Go out together
Interviewer  You'd want to go out with them? Would you want to know anything about them as a person......
Paul  Any er er if they like opera and that kind of thing
Interviewer  You'd like them to like the music you like [yes] the operas and classical music
Paul  Yes
Interviewer  You'd like them to like music [yes] ..... 

Paul's response had the effect of revealing his limited knowledge of the 'typical' processes of getting to know someone. He manages this by using the rhetorical device discussed in Section 3.1 above; namely of giving as good a related response as possible. In response the interviewer repeats and reframes what he has said to fit with mainstream discourses about friendship selection. Thus here is evidence of another rhetorical device used by the interviewer:

- reframing a response so that experience can be viewed as being 'normal'.

This differs from an earlier device mentioned when reframing was to provide more appropriate language, here it is a way of relating their accounts to typical experience.
Sue’s account reflected something of the passivity of their roles in developing friendships.

*Interviewer*  How do you get to know them a bit better, what do you do?
*Sue*  Their names
*Interviewer*  You learn their names and then what might you do
*Sue*  If they don’t want to talk I just walk away
*Interviewer*  But you’d try and talk to them first........

Here is an example of when the interviewer uses a rhetorical device of

- **reframing what was said in a way that avoids opening up discussion of emotive issues.**

In this way both the participant and interviewer are able to avoid discussing the different, and rejecting experiences of the participant. Furthermore, it detracts from the passive role of the participant and emphasises her talking to someone, a typical activity when getting to know someone.

A further rhetorical device which became apparent in many of the participant’s responses was:

- **changing topic and diverting conversation to another more manageable subject.**

As a result of employing this strategy Andy was able to get the issue of how he got to know people dropped, thereby alleviating him from the discomfort of having to discuss it.

*Interviewer*  How often did you have to meet with them, before you thought of them as your friend?
*Andy*  About once a week or twice
*Interviewer*  Right so you maybe meet them once and ....
*Andy*  Oh I go to MENCAP conferences I do..... (changes subject and leads interview off track)
Andy’s initial answer revealed little awareness of the usual processes people go through when getting to know someone. When this was picked up by the interviewer with the aim of exploring further, Andy interrupts with an alternative subject that he did feel able to discuss. By using this rhetorical device both parties were able to avoid exposure of difference and any difficult feelings which either may have felt about this.

Andy also demonstrated the passive role he and other participants took in making friends with people. When talking about a neighbour he had “got to know” his response indicated that his experience of this was based upon the other person choosing to spend time with him, as opposed to him actively seeking out the friendship. This offer of company was sufficient for Andy to think of him as a friend, and there was no sign of any aspects of self disclosure involved in the process. When asked more directly about how he got to know him, Andy used the rhetorical device mentioned in Section 3.1 of using ‘disabled’ speech.

Interviewer It sounds like you’ve got to know him in quite a short period of time, how’s that happened?
Andy Well, he comes in here and I’ve got to know him, he comes in here, he comes in and he talks to me he does.
Interviewer ...are there things you like to know about someone before you feel they’re your friend?
Andy Like like I know, he tell, I ask him something, I mentioned, he mentioned about where he used to live, he told me it wasn’t, he used to be in a top flat and he didn’t used to see many people at all

When asked about getting to know people Penny appeared to draw upon what she knew about stereotypical behaviour in social situations.

Interviewer How do you think you’ve got to know them, what do you think...
Penny Well we have our little meetings, we sit down and have a cup of tea now and then and talk about the weather
Interviewer What kinds of things might you want to know about someone when you meet them for the first time?
Penny I don’t know
Interviewer Don’t know?
Penny Don’t know but umm, I’m, I mingle in, you gotta mingle haven’t you
Interviewer Do you think it’s quite difficult to get to know people for you personally? Do you find it quite difficult?
Penny You do when you first move in yes but umm they said oh come again....so er they wanted me here, they said oh yes we’ll have you... Oh we’re pleased we got you, you make us laugh so we want somebody to make us laugh, so they took they took to it like that, so er I’m you know.. like it was okay.

Within her response she used the rhetorical device mentioned in Section 3.2 of aligning herself to a more acceptable social group. Her account reflected a lack of a sense of intimacy or depth to her relationships. By openly stating that she didn’t know what information she might want to know about someone she demonstrated her lack of experience in taking an active part in developing relationships. Her desire to mingle in and not stand out possibly reflected her desire to detract from any difference there may have been between her and the others in the home, and suggests this is a method she has employed of gaining acceptance and shared identity.

3.4 Identity in Relationships

As outlined in the Introduction, social relationships are typically thought to be a means of obtaining identity validation. However, within these interviews only two participants responses indicated that this was the case for them. The remaining responses reflected little awareness of identity confirmation. Whilst some of them did give responses that were related and not wholly inappropriate, their responses provided further evidence of their passive role in developing relationships. Various rhetorical devices were used to manage the conversation in such a way as to not reveal these issues.
Ann and Karen were the only two participants whose responses did reflect issues of friendship selection on the basis of identity confirmation. Karen, was open about preferring the company of others with learning disabilities.

**Interviewer** What is the same about you and your friends, why do you think, how do you think you are alike?

**Karen** erm, because we’ve got problems... and they don’t have to be exactly the same problems but we can help each other with that.....

**Interviewer** Are you more comfortable around people who are more like yourself?

**Karen** Yes yes, I am yes yes I am yes, I'm I'm I'm happy with happy with my sort of people [yeah yeah] I can see the question yeah. No I am I’m more happy with my, I’m happy to be at a boarding school, I was I was happy to be at a disability college umm more so ‘cos I was with my sort of people.......

Karen speaks of how having a shared experience and understanding of problems associated with disabilities facilitates her feeling comfortable with people and therefore validates her own sense of identity. In contrast Ann openly acknowledged her preference for people who do not have learning disabilities.

**Speaking about her friendship with someone who has not got a learning disability:**

**Ann** That helps yeah definitely helps, I mean somebody that’s not got any difficulties at all

**Interviewer** Would you like to have more friends, maybe with people with similar problems to yourself?

**Ann** Umm I prefer ones without, I know it sounds a bit bad but I feel like now I’ve got older I’m gonna meet more people that’s got not problems that I used to have really...

Later....

So basically I feel like the normal ones don’t push me aside they actually include me in everything

From Ann’s account it would seem that via her friendships with people who do not have learning disabilities she is able to position herself apart from a ‘learning disabled’ identity and locate her problems in the past. What facilitates this process for her is the protective element of having friends who are able and therefore have the ability to
understand her and not reject her on the basis of her learning disability. In this way she is seeking out friendships with people to whom she would like to be perceived as similar who in turn, by accepting her, confirm this positive identity for her.

The remaining participants relied upon one of three rhetorical devices already discussed above to respond to questions of similarity to their friends.

The first, discussed in Section 3.1 was to provide a related response. For example in response to being asked what he thought was similar between him and his friends Mark replied:

Mark Well it depends on what sort of age they are, 'cos I'm forty now and so I'm forty two, I'm forty one now so I'll be forty two next year.
Interviewer Right, so it's about age, you think of someone's a similar age to you...
Mark yeah yeah

Mark may have been responding in this way here as opposed to saying more directly that he does not understand the question, or he may be attempting to 'pass' by providing the best answer he can in the absence of experience. In contrast this may be a demonstration of a concrete way of thinking resulting from his intellectual difficulties. In turn the interviewer responds by using the rhetorical device highlighted in Section 3.1 of reframing the response into more typical language.

The second rhetorical device was only used by Penny.

Interviewer What is the same about you and some of your friends?
Penny I don't know
Interviewer no, hmm. Is it or your age, or er, it sounds like your interests, you all share interests in families
Penny Yes we do, we do yes we do
Interviewer But you can't think of anything else?
Penny No No
She was explicit about not knowing. This led the interviewer to try and prompt her for an answer by suggesting information, which in turn Penny agrees with. Here the interviewer is again using the rhetorical device discussed in Section 3.1 of adding information. In turn, in order to facilitate this process Penny agrees with the interviewer. In such an interaction it is possible to see

- being acquiescent

as a rhetorical device for the person with a learning disability. In this instance these devices appear to be used as a means of masking Penny’s impoverished knowledge or experience of typical friendships, thereby avoiding issues of difference and what this relates to.

The third rhetorical device was that mentioned in Section 3.1 of using more muddled speech.

Interviewer  ....What is similar between you and your friend?
Paul       umm, I know somebody, I know from err, from Tim, one of Tim's sisters and I, married, and I know her, she knows me you see
Interviewer  Right so you know people, you share other friends? [yeah yeah] ... 

The interviewer in turn uses the rhetorical device of interpretation highlighted in Section 3.1.

3.4:2 How friends would describe them

In an attempt to access something of their self-concept the participants were asked how they thought their friends would describe them. Three of the participants described how others would view them by constructing accounts of themselves as helpful, fun and sociable. For example Penny said:

Interviewer  Do you know what your friends like most about you?
Penny  Oh they like me and I do I do help out in the dining room wash up and er do little odd jobs...

Interviewer  Yeah, and you know they like you but you’re not sure what it is about you they like?

Penny  Well they like me, they like me, I get me leg pulled and they get their leg pulled, so er umm yes we do our little bit for the community I do a bit see and we er get a laugh out of it. Yes.

Those who responded in this way all constructed very positive accounts of their friends’ views of them. Yet in all instances they did not refer to any personal qualities they have. They used the rhetorical devices mentioned in Section 3.1 of describing everything positively and changing or expanding the topic being discussed.

In contrast the remaining participants gave more ambivalent or negative accounts of themselves. A clear example of this can be found in Paul’s response.

Paul  He think I’m a nice person and sometimes I’m a nasty person [yeah] he thinks he thinks I’m a nice pers ...... friend, very nasty person.

Interviewer  Why do you think he’d say you’re a nasty person?

Paul  Because, er inside me inside in inside in here I’ve got things that are problems myself and in here I I sometimes I’m like a girl see and I must diet, like er I get fits I get fits quite a lot, I get black outs.

Paul’s description of himself is constrained by his available emotional language and therefore requires some interpretation. However, he is able to construct an account which reflects his view of himself as being made up of a number of problems and gives a strong impression of low self-esteem.

3.5  Impact of learning disability on friendship

Three main themes emerged in the participants responses to questions about how having a learning disability had impacted on their experiences of developing friendships. These were pragmatic problems of communication, feeling vulnerable and no impact.
3.5:1 Communication problems

The two participants who spoke of communication problems described scenarios when they have been attempting to interact with someone else with a learning disability. One example being:

**Interviewer** ...do you think having a learning difficulty affects making friends for you?

**Paul** Little bit difficult, like I can’t talk to (friend) for example cos sometimes he doesn’t listen properly

Here Paul makes it clear that his experience of attempting to gain support from a friend is frustrated by the fact that they both have difficulties with speech and interaction. Thus the absence of a shared language amongst people with learning disabilities is potentially a further complication hindering their friendships with each other.

3.5:2 Feeling Vulnerable

Three participants gave descriptions of how having a learning disability affected their social experiences. For reasons of brevity only two examples are discussed.

**Andy** Yeah I been young and lonely, lonely and nobody to talk to.......

**Interviewer** .....Do you think having a learning difficulty has something to do with what makes it difficult?

**Andy** Yes, I think I I think people with learning difficulty haven’t got someone, they’re nervous aren’t they

**Interviewer** What do you think they feel nervous about?

**Andy** Well, what’s going to be said to them

**Interviewer** what’s going to be said hmm. What kind of things do get said?

**Andy** Err like umm, things like, they like erm, how they ever been out together or how they get persons been out ever been ever been have they have they seen anything anybodies, you know what I mean
His account clearly constructs an image of isolation and a fear of rejection or possibly verbal abuse from people who are not learning disabled. He reflects some of the anxiety that he believes people with learning disabilities feel about socialising. He does however, locate such experiences in the past for himself by stating he was young when he felt lonely. Interestingly, he also relied upon the rhetorical device discussed in Section 3.1 of using muddled and confused speech.

When asked whether having a learning difficulty had affected making and choosing friends Ann spoke of similar issues to Andy yet was able to openly reflect upon her experiences as she has managed to reframe her identity outside of ‘learning disabilities’ that she is a married woman with a child. This being a much more acceptable identity than that of a learning disabled woman.

**Ann** Yeah, it has yeah a lot, I feel like if I didn't have that I'd get more chance to make friends, get on with them, maybe trust them a bit more, I've actually tried to go to the colleges...... college in ..... and then I tried the one in , and even there they they the people they sort of look at you with a difficult problem and they just don't want to know, so basically I've just tried to leave, you know be a loner basically

**Interviewer** How did it make you feel though, when people don't seem able to understand?

**Ann** Oh it makes you feel really really low, so like, I mean sometimes I sit in doors in with my husband I mean he's brilliant, like I just think sort of back on my school times and that and I think to myself, well it wasn't really worth all the agro

3.5:3 **No impact**

Four of the participants when asked directly about the impact of having a learning disability said they had not experienced any. When asked “do you think having a learning difficulty affects or gets in the way of being able to make friends?” they responded:
Penny (very quietly almost indecipherable and shaking head) don't think so. What else? Are there any more questions?

Tim No nothing like that

Mark No, I make friends easy

Sue Umm, my mother taught me to stand on my own two feet...
Interviewer So you don't feel it does affect you, is that what you're saying?[No]

All of these responses involved the use of

- closed statements

which served as a rhetorical device in that they made further exploration of the topic difficult to pursue for the interviewer and served to facilitate the avoidance of painful topics and emotions. However, it is somewhat unclear what aspect of the interviewer's question Sue is responding to, which was not picked up by the interviewer during the interview.

3.6 Closeness and Reciprocity

As in previous research studies, all of the participants identified either staff or family as the people they are most close to and to whom they can talk easily. Their responses indicated that in part this was because of feeling that staff and family have a responsibility to help them. Furthermore when asked why they felt closer to these people it appeared to be related to the fact that the professional or relative had prior knowledge of them. The following quotes reflect these themes:

Interviewer Out of all the people you know who do you find it easiest to talk to?
Penny having named social worker as person she finds easiest to talk to, and responding to why states:
Oh yes, he sorts it out
I might get a bit embarrassed but he does understand he put me right
he does put me right but er oh yes oh yes. They're pretty good the Teams are both the Teams they come see me now again, yes
Interviewer: Who do you find it easiest to talk to out of all your friends?
Mark: I talk to Support worker ‘cos she can talk to me like, you know.

Interviewer: Why do you think it’s easier to talk to her than some of those friends?
Mark: Cos she can, she knows what I’m like cos you know if I get bad temper I would loose it but she knows I must I must keep calm myself down.

When asked the majority of the participants stated that people did not talk to them about problems. Furthermore Penny’s response reflected a reluctance to take on the role of helping other people:

Interviewer: ... have you got people who talk to you, tell you their problems?
Penny: no no no
Interviewer: Would you like that to happen?
Penny: no no (laughs) Well I listen I listen and tell ‘em nicely but no no
Interviewer: That’s not for you?
Penny: Not for me no

When responding about whether they helped friends out in any way, instead of referring to the person they had just identified as whom they felt closest to, they drew upon experiences within other relationships or attributed that it didn’t occur to other factors. An example of this latter strategy can be seen in the following extract of the interview with Mark.

Interviewer: Do you ever help your friends out...?
Mark: Not really ‘cos they live too far way
Interviewer: So do you not get to see much of your friends?
Mark: Not at the moment ‘cos I you know I’m work and I finish work and it’s too busy
Interviewer: How do you feel about not getting to see your friends very often?
Mark: It doesn’t bother me
Interviewer: It doesn’t bother you?
Mark: No no it’s you know I’ve got a lot of friends, if they want to get in touch with me then...
Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. Do you have friends who help you out and do things for you?
Mark: I don’t, well I ain’t seen any friends
Here Mark explained the difference in his experience to what is thought typical by providing reasons other than his difference. Thus he is using a rhetorical device of:

- **providing reasons for difference in relationships which do not relate to having a learning disability**

However, in doing this he inadvertently reveals something of the impoverished nature of his social contacts.

Penny’s responses highlighted the lack of reciprocal support between friends, staff and the participant.

**Interviewer**  
Do you help any of your friends out?

**Penny**  
No, I go to lunch

**Interviewer**  
Right you go, and do you, you were saying earlier you help in the dining room a little bit?

**Penny**  
Yes wash up, tidy up

**Interviewer**  
That sort of thing, is that the sort of thing you might do for your friends?

**Penny**  
Well yes, when we have do’s, Christmas we’re all put chairs, all help out, put chairs away, tidy up the floors, wash up, all we all wash up, all all all mix together...

**Interviewer**  
And do you, do your friends help you out....?

**Penny**  
No No but I phone Social worker you know

Within this extract it is possible to view the interviewer as taking an active role in leading Penny to a point when she is able provide answers which ‘fit’ more with what the interviewer was expecting. In this way the interviewer doesn’t highlight to Penny that maybe she misunderstood or say directly anything about her answer not making any sense. This interactional style facilitated the flow of the conversation, enabling both parties to remain feeling comfortable and ‘as if’ this aspect of Penny’s friendship matched with an ideal of what relationships should be about, and avoid the issue of difference in experience of relationships. However, an alternative view could be that Penny’s answer reflected her responding to bits of the question which she does
understand. In the absence of following the whole question due to her intellectual disabilities, she answers a more concrete version. Thus it is possible that both interviewer and participant are talking at cross purposes. If this were the case the interviewer could be seen as using the rhetorical device of interpretation discussed in Section 3.1.

3.7 Missing

Generally it was difficult for the participants to suggest what was missing from their relationships. In part this was thought to represent how an acknowledgement of things missing might indicate a sense of failure within their relationships. Although additionally, it may have been hard for some of the participants to identify what was missing if they have not experienced fulfilling relationships.

**Interviewer**  What do you think is missing from your relationships, what would you like to be different?

**Penny** Don't know really can't tell you, but I'm getting on with support and they're very pleased what I do

**Interviewer** ....what's missing, what could be better about your friendships?

**Karen** ...we need, Oh God I can't think of anything

It may have been a novel experience for them to have been asked their views of what they need.

Three of the participants referred to needing more friends, however two of these were speaking about a relationship with a person of the opposite sex.

**Mark** Yeah but I need somebody...

**Interviewer** You want a girlfriend as well [yeah] Is that, is that the bit that feels like its missing?
Mark  
*I think so, cos I don't have many girls coming round to see you know I like to see some girls come round and see me I'd like to have a nice I think what's is missing is a girlfriend*

In a similar vein, although speaking more generally about needing another friend, Paul spoke of wanting someone else like his best friend. In this way these participants constructed responses which revealed a desire for more intimacy within their relationships.

### 3.8 Support Needed

The main theme emerging from questions about support centred around support with social activities and meeting people although there was some divide between those wanting specialist services and those wanting to be able to mix with people who are not learning disabled.

Karen  
*Well I probably, what making more friends? Umm well maybe I do with trying to find clubs and things like that yes, we need to make more friends like that ...*

Andy mirrored this by suggesting that what was need for people with learning difficulties is some form of social meeting, and that for those who would find it difficult to come support should be provided by the staff team or other more able people with learning disabilities:

Andy  
*It might it might it might help them to meet new friends, come over and see visit people friends what haven't seen before and might interest them.. something might happen to some 'venturous move and live on their own like me (yeah, yeah) independent*

In contrast Paul stated that he wanted assistance in learning how to mix with people in the community:
Paul: Yeah with how to mix with people out there

What their responses did convey was the importance of the Community Support Team, and the desire of the participants to have more support of this type not only to help them meet people, but also to develop skills for mixing in the wider community.

3.9 Respondent Validity

Due to time constraints only two of the participants, Andy and Karen, were re-visited to discuss the initial analysis findings. The discussion focused more upon the general themes of what had been said about the experiences the participants had had of friendship. A discussion of rhetorical devices was felt to be inappropriate as it would have involved discussing some of the issues which had been difficult for them to talk about during the interviews. Both agreed generally with what was said, though it seemed to be extremely difficult for them to comment critically on the issues raised as they seemed very eager to give a positive impression of their relationships. In order to expand the information a little they were asked the following questions:

- Which friendships do you value most, those with staff or those with others with similar difficulties to yourself?

- What is different for you about the friendships you have with professionals and those with others who have learning disabilities?

- What do you think might be different between your friendships and those of people who haven’t got learning disabilities?

Both Andy and Karen reflected similar issues when responding. In general they felt that relationships with staff were more important because they were able to provide more support and information for them in managing their own lives. The role of staff in
supporting their independence was a strong theme. The difference between the two types of relationships was again framed in terms of receiving help and support, Andy stated that staff “were friendlier” than others with learning disabilities. Finally the difference between their friendships and those of people who do not have a learning disability was described in terms of the anxieties and nervousness which people with learning disabilities experience. Both Karen and Andy expressed a view that they should be given more support in developing friendships, and Andy added “they should be helped to be more like other people”.

3.10 Summary of identified rhetorical devices

Throughout the analysis a number of rhetorical devices used by either the respondent or the interviewer became apparent. These are summarised in Tables one and two below.

Table One: Rhetorical devices used by the participants:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>To give as good a related response as they can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>To be excessively positive about everything, thereby masking any difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>To use muddled or ‘disabled’ speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Highlighting an alternative, more acceptable aspect of their identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Changing the topic of conversation, diverting away from difficult issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Being acquiescent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Using closed statements, thereby closing down topics to discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Providing reasons for difference in experience which do not relate to having a learning disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table Two: Rhetorical devices used by the interviewer

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>To repeat and reframe what they have said in such a way that the language used is more typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Interpretation of what has been said when shared language is absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Adding additional more appropriate information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>When fearful of exposing difference or 'incompetence’, changing to a less revealing topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Filling in the gaps in their responses to mask any difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Reframing their response so their experience can be perceived as typical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Reframing what has been said to avoid opening up discussion on difficult or emotive topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It also became apparent during the course of the analysis that there were certain situations when these devices were more likely to be used. All of these situations were broadly similar in that in some way they enabled both participant and interviewer to move away from discussing or acknowledging painful issues related to their difference. Closer study of each situation revealed there were four common themes identified as to when a rhetorical device was used. These were as follows:

- to avoid discussing issues which might evoke painful emotions,
- to minimise or avoid exposing difference in terms of identity and related experience,
- to mask misunderstanding what was said or asked, and
- to present a more ‘acceptable’, less stigmatised self or aspect of self than that of a learning disabled person.

When discussing less emotive aspects such as the support they felt they needed there did not seem to be the same reliance upon speech strategies when constructing responses, which may be related to the fact that such topics did not have the association to stigma and painful emotions for either interviewer or participant.
CHAPTER FOUR - DISCUSSION

4.0 General comments: links with previous research

What became apparent from the analysis and results was that there are two levels at which their accounts can be interpreted. Generally a surface level interpretation provided a picture of their relationships similar to that found in previous research studies (Richardson and Ritchie, 1989). That is, whilst the participants did state they had a number of friendships these were characterised as being limited in terms of intimacy, and those they felt closest to were staff or relatives. They had met the majority of their friends either by sharing living accommodation or through services, and not through integration into their communities.

However, the aim of this study was to consider the means by which they constructed their accounts using rhetorical devices, to reflect upon the function of these, establish whether they related to issues of managing a ‘spoiled identity’ and how this impacted upon typical processes of friendship formation. By deconstructing the interview transcripts it had been possible to identify a number of rhetorical devices that the participant and interviewer used to facilitate the construction of a narrative of friendship. Whilst it was important to recognise how they manifest in actual linguistic style, it is the deeper issues of when and why they used them that require consideration to gain insight into why people with learning disabilities find friendship difficult. It is worth noting however that the participants’ cognitive deficits may also have played some role in the construction of the phenomena described. By this it is meant that for instance when a rhetorical device was identified referring to muddled speech, this at times may also have occurred in part because of their cognitive difficulties.
4.1 Functions of Rhetorical Devices, Stigma Management and How Friendships Develop: Linking Results with Theory

It became apparent throughout the analysis that there were particular situations in which either the participant or interviewer relied upon a rhetorical device. These were categorised into four common themes, all of which related in some way to issues of managing difference. When this is related to typical processes of developing friendships it is possible to gain some idea of what the difficulties are for people with learning disabilities.

Within the Introduction various theories were described which reflected how typically when developing relationships people seek out others who they perceive to be similar to themselves, or whom they aspire to be like (Kelly, 1969; Duck, 1973). This is thought to provide a means of identity validation. The theoretical frameworks and research studies indicated that the process of developing relationships and getting to know someone involves gradual reciprocal self disclosure which is assessed in terms of risk (Altman and Taylor, 1973). This self disclosure is thought to lead towards more meaningful relationships. Additionally people assess the benefits and costs of any potential relationship, often by drawing comparisons with previous experience of relationships. They are then thought to select friendships from which there will be an equitable outcome, or at least to their advantage (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959).

From the interviews it did seem that there were several interlinked factors influencing these processes for the participants. Looking at just the content of what they said it is possible to glean a picture of them taking on passive roles, with an almost complete absence of actively seeking out relationships, or weighing up the benefits and costs.
Instead it seemed they openly accepted whatever was offered to them in terms of friendly advances. There did not appear to be any aspect of mutual self-disclosure involved in their relationships. If they did want to know something about people it tended to be factors such as their name or where they lived. Furthermore, there was an absence of reciprocal support or help between them and their friends. When responding to questions about these issues both interviewer and participant used some form of rhetorical device. Typically the rhetorical devices used by the interviewer pulled their response in some way to 'fit' with mainstream discourse, and those used by participants either reflected an attempt to give an appropriate answer, became more 'disabled' or changed the subject. The use of these rhetorical devices can be understood by drawing upon Goffman (1963) and Taylor’s (1991) suggestions of how during interactions with 'normals' stigmatised people strive to be accepted as 'normal' by using communication skills that either mask or distract attention away from their stigmatised identity. They added that the 'normals' respond accordingly as this enables them too to deny any difficulty they experience at being with someone different from themselves. It is arguable that the rhetorical devices can be viewed as concrete manifestations of these processes. The use of rhetorical devices in this situation facilitated an impression that, what Taylor (1991) referred to as the 'code of normal conduct implicit within interactions', was occurring. This in turn enabled the stigmatised person, in this case the participant, to feel as if they have 'passed' as 'normal'.

Hence, the absence or difference in their experiences which were related to being a stigmatised person were managed within the context of the interview by using rhetorical devices. But this leaves the question of why these occur unanswered. If there
is a need in an interview to manage their identity and difference in this way then it is probable that similar difficulties will arise for them in building relationships. The parallels drawn here between these two situations is related to the sense that the boundaries of their relationships with staff are so blurred with their sense of friendship, there is the possibility they could view anyone new whom they meet as a potential friend. Theory suggests that much of friendship formation is reliant on mutual self-disclosure (Altman and Taylor, 1973) and identity confirmation (Kelley, 1969); yet similarly stigma management theory suggests that a great deal of this process involves monitoring the degree of self-disclosure in order not to reveal a stigmatised identity and cause embarrassment for both parties (Goffman, 1963). Thus here there is an explicit tension between key aspects of friendship formation and managing a 'spoiled identity'. This tension is likely to manifest at every stage of typical friendship formation and is compounded by the constraining factors identified in previous research studies.

In addition to factors identified in previous research this study has highlighted that in managing the stigma associated with being a learning disabled person processes of seeking out people and getting to know them are complicated by the anxieties involved in revealing something of themselves. As Goffman (1963) suggested stigma is associated with shame for the stigmatised individual. This in turn arguably has an impact on feelings of self-worth and self esteem. If people with learning disabilities have negative feelings about themselves this inevitably impacts on having sufficient self-confidence to approach people for friendship. Thus, it would seem that deep rooted feelings associated with having a learning disability also directly impact upon the ability they have to develop friendships. Not only do they have to manage their own feelings related to this but, as stigma theory suggests the onus is upon them to
cope with the other persons reaction as well (Taylor, 1991). Plus there is the risk that a reaction will be one of rejection as described by Andy when he speaks of people with learning disabilities feeling nervous about what other people might say. Therefore, it is possible that whilst they experience sadness and frustration at not being able to establish relationships, it is less anxiety provoking to avoid developing intimate relationships. The fact that the participants felt closest to staff or family may be a reflection of this, as within these relationships there was no need for self-disclosure. Furthermore these felt like safe relationships where the other person has a familial or professional duty to them which enables them to feel okay about being dependent upon them. This in turn revealed another difference in their relationships from what is typically upheld by mainstream values. Namely the role of mutual reciprocity. The participants appeared to have identified as friends people they felt okay being more dependent on – that is people who had a duty to care for them. However their responses revealed their reluctance to take on the role of being reciprocally close to someone and their vagueness in terms of what they did for their friends may well be a reflection of their sense of having nothing to offer. Such a view would arguably be upheld by historical discourses associated with the label of learning disability (Oliver, 1993) and reinforces the sense that they are receivers and not givers and ‘that’s just the way things are’.

4.2 The Implications of Using Rhetorical Devices

It has been suggested that the function of the rhetorical devices was to manage moments of interaction when aspects of the participants’ disability either in terms of their ability to construct a response, or the difference within their experience of relationships could have been exposed. The two-way process involving both
participant and interviewer revealed something of the dynamic nature of this process. As was mentioned in the Results, the powerful effect of such devices enabled the interviewer to leave the meeting with each participant feeling 'as if' they did have satisfying relationships and the participants to believe they have 'passed' (Goffman, 1963).

One possible way of viewing these devices is as a manifestation of the participants defensive mechanisms against some of their painful emotions about being identified as belonging to a stigmatised group within society. Without such strategies interaction with someone without similar disabilities would inevitably always result in the issue difference being foremost in the interaction resulting in unmanageable emotions. Whilst the nature of these interactions did result in the interviewer responding in a way that worked in conjunction with them to minimise exposure of their 'disability', the transparency and crudeness of the devices paradoxically actually served to highlight this very issue. This in turn evoked feelings such as guilt at having 'put them on the spot' compounding the likelihood that the interviewer too would use a device to move the discussion on and feel relieved at not having had to cope with anything too painful.

Valerie Sinason (1992) discusses how the impact of interacting with someone with a learning disability evokes such a strong emotional reaction that there is a need to find means of minimising their difference in order to manage one's own reaction. In terms of the interviews this can be understood within the context of a transferential relationship, in which the speech strategies used by the participants had such a strong defensive effect that the counter-transferential reaction was to use other such strategies which reflected an image of accepting them non-judgmentally as opposed to
challenging them. By doing this neither participant or interviewer had to deal with the
difficult emotions which lay below the defence mechanisms and associated with the
differences between their experiences. This may well have been the most appropriate
reaction within the context of a research interview when there is limited opportunity or
consent to facilitate a participant unravelling such emotions in a manageable way.

However what these findings do reveal is the extent to which the reality of their
experiences is masked within the language used by and about people with learning
disabilities. As Szivos (1992) highlighted one of the limits of normalisation was to
detract from any value which could be attributed to difference. It would seem that the
strength of mainstream discourses about intelligence and independence are so
influential that even when difference is explicit there is a need to try and make this ‘fit’
with what is believed to be ‘normal’. Inevitably this has a pervasive effect on the lives
of people with learning disabilities, and is apparent in how they construct accounts of
their relationships. It would have been too difficult and painful to openly speak of the
difference in their experiences and what underlies this. The result of this however is
that as Sinason (1992) suggests people with learning disabilities have to act as if
everything is okay for them in order to obtain any level of acceptance from the people
without disabilities with whom they interact. This therefore closes down the possibility
of being able to openly discuss the fears and anxieties they have of rejection which are
inherent difficulties in terms of their abilities to develop friendships. Thus mainstream
discourses, to which the participants are also exposed, about the nature and value of
friendship is so influential that their own discourses associated with this topic are
marginalized and remain unheard. Social constructionist theory advocates that it is
within language that identity and experience is constructed, and it would seem from the
results of this study that it is only by analysing the language of people with learning disabilities in this way that the extent of this process and how both they and able people are immersed in it can become apparent.

4.3 Service Implications

The extent to which the sense of social exclusion which people with learning disabilities is masked by defensive strategies which manifest in their language is of concern in terms of the possibility that psychological distress is going unrecognised within this population. The rhetorical devices identified within this study which serve to defend both people with learning disabilities and the people they interact with from having to acknowledge the deep rooted anxieties about their difference may well manifest in all social interactions. The strength of the desire to believe that things are better for them than they really are is very influential, and the use of rhetorical devices is not suggested to be a conscious process for either person involved in any interaction. There is therefore, the need for greater awareness as to whether such strategies are being used by clinicians, other professionals and clients when working with people with learning disabilities. It is possible that if these are not picked up issues related to people with learning disabilities emotional and psychological health may be inadvertently overlooked as a result.

4.3.1 Therapeutic work

Having identified the nature and function of some rhetorical devices which people with learning disabilities may use, it may be possible to have greater insight and ability in assisting them to talk about the difficult issues associated with having a stigmatised identity in relation to developing friendships. It is probable such rhetorical devices
occur in all interactions including therapeutic work with a person with a learning disability. Within the therapeutic relationship it may be possible to listen for and reflect upon the processes of using such linguistic devices and thereby facilitate discussion of the deeper issues which underlie them. Inevitably, as with all defence mechanisms, challenging them in any way needs to be done at an appropriate stage of the therapeutic work. Yet it would seem important to recognise the role they are playing in the communication of people with learning disabilities, and to be alert to the possibility that when one occurs it is due to the fact that the interaction is evoking some deep rooted anxieties.

4.3:2 The role of the paid carer

In the absence of wider significant social change with regard to the attitudes and discourses surrounding people with learning disabilities, there is a need to consider how they can best be supported to decrease the extent of their social isolation and low self-esteem. The process of getting to make friends is clearly not as simple as putting them in touch with people or identifying that they have mixed feelings about who they do and do not want to be friends with. The difficulties need to be understood and means of assisting them in compensating for these need to put in place. One such way is via the benefits they feel they obtain from contact with support workers, with whom they can spend time carrying out social and leisure activities. Here, the argument is being made that it is possible paid employees can take on roles typically fulfilled by friends. Suggesting people should be paid to be friends with people with learning disabilities is inevitably controversial however. For the staff the idea that a relationship with a client is perceived as a friendship by the person with learning disabilities may cause discomfort as it may challenge the professionals’ typical beliefs about such
relationships. However, with training and supervision it may be possible to provide them with insight into the reasons why their clients feel this way about them, and to enable them to manage these feelings and thus facilitate the further development of these relationships in a supportive way for clients. Both this project and previous research has indicated the significance of these relationships for people with learning disabilities, and bearing in mind the protective factor that having an intimate and supportive relationship is against mental health problems it seems only reasonable that resources should be allocated as far as possible to meet this need.

4.4 Future Research Implications

It may be useful to conduct further studies of a similar nature to highlight how rhetorical devices are used within therapeutic interactions. The difficulties of carrying out individual therapy with this client group, people who do often have communication difficulties may be facilitated if therapists are aware of the range of rhetorical devices people with learning disabilities may use, and what they represent. Using discourse analysis to study in detail the micro interactions which occur in therapy between client and therapist may highlight means of establishing better therapeutic relationships and rapport with clients with learning disabilities.

In exploring further the issue of friendship, it may be beneficial to investigate how issues related to a stigmatised identity are managed within successful relationships. Interviewing both parties of a successful friendship may reveal differing rhetorical devices or a lack of them, if things can be spoken about openly. By identifying the differences between a successful relationship and accounts such as those given within
this study it may be possible to identify further issues to address in facilitating people with learning disabilities to develop more successful relationships.

4.5 Links with Self-Advocacy

By having greater insight into issues of negative self-concept and low self-esteem, and how they are skilfully masked by people with learning disabilities due to the anxieties associated with discussing them, it may be possible to further develop therapeutic strategies to facilitate them in gaining greater self-acceptance. For it follows that a greater degree of self-acceptance may enable a reduction in the sense of risk they feel in self-disclosure. This in turn could possibly assist them in gaining confidence in making new friendships. Furthermore, if they felt less negative about their identity they may attach more value to the friendships they do have with others with learning disabilities, whilst still valuing those with staff and family. As Chappell (1994) and Finlay and Lyons (1998) have highlighted it will only be by assisting individuals with learning disabilities to value themselves that they can come to value a group identity. This is essential for collective action, and the further development of self-advocacy groups (Chappell, 1994; Finlay and Lyons, 1998). With professionals supporting them to find a collective voice a shift in wider societal attitudes may escalate.

4.6 Methodological Issues

A number of issues relating to the methodology emerged. Firstly it may have been beneficial to use some form of pictorial material to facilitate the discussion. This may have made the interview setting more manageable for the participants, and enabled them to talk in more depth about their friendships. However, the aim was to investigate not just their experience but how they managed their identity within their language.
Attempts at respondent validity did to some extent feel contrary to the research paradigm used, in that a main premise of social constructionism is that people may draw from various discourse at different times. Furthermore, it has been discussed above in Section 3.9 how one main finding, namely the identification of rhetorical devices did not appear to be appropriate to feed back in this context.

It would have been beneficial to have carried out a second level of analysis by going through all the transcripts and identifying the number of occasions each rhetorical device occurred. This would have provided further detailed information and been another means of validating the findings. However, within the parameters of this project and time available this was not possible.

4.6:1 Validity

Although a number of processes were employed within this study to maximise the validity and transparency of the analysis, a number of issues need consideration.

4.6:1.1 Researcher Biases

Whilst within the research diary (appendix one) the researcher detailed the thinking processes that occurred during analysis these were inevitably subjective and influenced by the researchers own biases and assumptions about people with learning disabilities and the value of friendship. Hinde (1996) has suggested whatever the underlying cause, friendships appear to be more important to woman than men. So, as a female researcher, interpretations of the data may have involved placing greater emphasis on certain aspects of friendship than a male researcher may have done.
4.6:1.2 Issues of learning disabilities and research

It is becoming more widely recognised that people with learning disabilities have a central role to play in research and are the best authorities on their own lives, experiences and views (Ward, 1998). However they still have a vulnerable role within the research process (Stalker, 1998).

Within this study careful consideration was given as to whether participants were able to decline to take part in the study and whether they would feel able to stop the interview at any given time. The researchers impression was that the participants were able to do so, and as two participants did decline to take part after having met with them, felt reassured that appropriate processes were in place to facilitate this for participants.

Previous researchers (Stalker, 1998; Jahoda, cattermole and Markova, 1990) have taken time to get to know their participants prior to interviewing them. This facilitates familiarity with communication styles and enables pitching interview questions to facilitate their responding. Within the present study although time was taken prior to each interview to establish rapport, this was inevitably limited due to time constraints. However, in spite of this the interviews were characterised by fluent and expansive responses.

CHAPTER FIVE - CONCLUSION

This research study aimed to investigate how people with learning disabilities construct accounts of friendship, and how they manage aspects of a ‘spoiled identity’ within this. Furthermore it aimed to investigate how the typical processes of friendship formation
are affected by having to manage such an identity. At a surface level the experience of the participants mirrored that found in previous research. In addition a number of rhetorical devices were identified within their accounts. Further consideration of these revealed that they were used at times in the interview when either participant or interviewer was attempting to manage an issue related to difference or stigma.

It is suggested therefore that the issue of managing a stigmatised identity directly impacts upon typical processes of friendship formation, which involve reciprocal self-disclosure and seeking out people to provide identity validation. It is important to note however, that there are limitations to the generalisability of these results, in that the nature of the study focused upon the interpretation by one researcher of particular data given in a one-off interview situation. Further research with a larger and more broadly representative sample of people with learning disabilities, to clarify the existence, nature and function of the rhetorical devices identified here would be beneficial to enable wider generalisation of these findings.

In spite of these limitations, having awareness of how these rhetorical devices manifest and the function they serve could facilitate professionals in helping people with learning disabilities to discuss their difficulties and associated emotions in a more meaningful way. The implications of this in assisting people obtain greater self-esteem may have a 'knock-on' effect in their ability to seek out friendship, and is also relevant more generally in encouraging people with learning disabilities to place more value on their group identity. This could lead to greater value being placed on their friendships with other people with learning disabilities and also be useful in terms of self-advocacy and collective action.