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Friendship as Solidarity

The question of whether friendship is based on similarity or dissimilarity among friends is posed in the introduction to Durkheim’s seminal work *The Division of Labor in Society*, which is considered “one of the peak contributions of modern sociology” (Merton 1934: 328). After his extensive review of different perspectives, Durkheim’s conclusion is that “we seek in our friends the qualities we lack, since in joining with them, we participate in some measure in their nature and feel less incomplete” (Durkheim 1893: 55f.). It is “this division of labor, which determines the relation of friendship”. Indeed, the “true function” of this division is “to create in two or more persons a feeling of solidarity” (ibid.: 56). For Durkheim, solidarity is about the fundamental structures in society; through the distribution of work, interpersonal ties are strengthened, especially when people realise that they are mutually dependent. As pointed out by Breiger and Roberts (1998), there are three actors in friendship, conceptualised by Durkheim as “the two individuals and the collective unit that they form with their interpersonal ties of exchange or sharing across several domains of activity” (Breiger and Roberts 1998: 241). Thus, solidarity among group members emerges through engaging in certain activities. In other words, “solidarity is regarded as the glue that keeps people together, whether by mutually identifying and sharing certain norms and values, or by contributing to some common good, or both” (Komter 2005a: 2).

According to Durkheim, there are two types of solidarity: mechanical and organic. In societies guided by mechanical solidarity, cohesion derives from the homogeneity of individuals in terms of such factors
as education, employment, identity and religion. Common beliefs and practices are thought to be the main driving forces by which societies are held together with mechanical solidarity. Organic solidarity, which is an outgrowth of mechanical solidarity, refers to the interdependence of individuals based on their different functions, which acts as a solidifying medium. Even though individuals become specialised and labour is divided in a way that separates most of the individuals, they tend to grow closer to one another rather than falling apart because solidarity "creates among men an entire system of rights and duties which link them together in a durable way" (Durkheim 1964: 406). Thus, according to Durkheim, individualism has evolved throughout time and is a dominant condition for binding societies together.

Through engaging in social activities with their fellow international students, the doctoral students in this study saw themselves as academics, as belonging to a scientific community. Social activities fostered their friendly relations through which the ‘rules of the game’ in academia could be shared and practised. In the Durkheimian sense, international student groups exhibit features of organic solidarity. The ‘we feeling’ of international students or those belonging to a scientific community results not only from their companionship with the international student friends like themselves, but also from the consciousness of belonging to a certain scientific field or academic milieu gained through their doctoral training.

The previous chapters illustrated the variety of support practices exchanged between friends. In addition to such supportive exchanges, social activities play a crucial role in the formation of new solidarities across borders. By solidarity I mean being interconnected with those who share common interests, objectives and knowledge, as well as feelings of belonging, commonality and togetherness. Solidarity also involves empathy and a sense of relatedness to the group of international students. This “fellow feeling” (Faist 2000: 109) is mainly created through engaging in graduate school activities or companionship with other international students, but it is also practised and imagined across borders. I argue that social activities do not signify solidarity per se but instead constitute the processes through which friends share moments of companionship for mutual amplification, thus leading to the establishment of organic solidarity among them. This represents one of the main conditions under which these friendships were framed. Previous studies highlighted