Jane: The Exclusive Circle

I can remember the exact moment that I decided to “drop” my group of friends from high school. We were at lunch halfway through my senior year, chatting about normal things, when Lucy looked over at me with a snide grin. Minutes earlier, we were walking to lunch when I told her that Jess, a girl we had met through theater who didn’t go to our school, was dating Tom. Gretchen, another girl in our group of friends, had dated Rafe on and off for the past couple of years. “Oh my god, Gretchen is going to FREAK when she finds out,” Lucy said before laughing harshly. I asked her not to mention it, because that would hurt and she was going through a tough time in school and at home as it was. Lucy said she promised not to say a word.

Now, sitting at the lunch table our group shared every day, Lucy’s look confirmed that she would not be keeping her secret. She looked over at Gretchen, sitting two seats over, before calling over to me. “Hey Jane!” she yelled across the table, “I heard Tom is dating Jess now, is that true???” Hating myself for even telling Lucy in the first place, I confirmed the rumor. “Aww that’s so cute, they must be perfect for each other,” staring at Gretchen the whole time. Of the four other girls at the table, no one said anything or stood up for Gretchen.

It was this interaction that made me really revisit my friendship with this group of girlfriends. We had been a group of friends since seventh grade. Gretchen and I had known each other since day care, and Lucy and I went to the same elementary school, but the rest of the girls were new to me in seventh grade. We became a group early in the year, and although some girls came and left, we stayed a group nonetheless. I was never considered a main friend within the group, however, but rather staying on the outskirts, becoming close
with one girl or another before slowly shifting to a closer friendship with someone else in the group. I was not always invited to all the slumber parties and mall excursions, but I invited myself along when I could and was always invited to bigger events like post-school-dance sleepovers or birthday parties. Leaving this group of friends would lead to the beginning of my revelations about how I deal with friendships, something that I am still wrestling to understand today.

My familial relationships have stayed fairly constant and predictable throughout my life. I have loving and caring parents who annoyed me a lot in high school but were always a great support system and sounding board for my future. My little sister and I fought as younger children and struggled to find our own definitions while being interested in the same things throughout most of childhood and adolescence, fighting but also having each others’ backs. Now, we are great friends as well as sisters. We both go to Colby and see each other daily, checking in or just relaxing together. Since my family has been so supportive and present in my life, I have had my relational problems almost exclusively between friends.

In elementary school, I had very few close friends who went to my school. I was put into a different class as all of my friends moving from kindergarten to first grade, which made that year a tough transition. From that point on, I never had a tight knit group of friends. I had individual friends that I would grow closer or farther apart from depending on the week or the month, but they were all one-on-one friendships. Lucy and I had an interesting relationship in that we played (and later “hung out”) together often throughout elementary school, due to the proximity of our houses. However, she would often bully me in school. In high school, she told me that the only reason she spent time with me in
elementary school was to use that information to make fun of me at school. I had one other friend, Kayla, who stayed close to me from third grade all the way until graduation and beyond. My lack of meaningful and durable friendships (or at least the feeling that I lacked these friendships) has been following me to this day.

My only other close friendship in elementary school was from my day care days. Katie, a girl who I had met before either of us could speak, has been my best friend for my whole life. While my other friendships may have involved more contact and day-to-day encounters, my friendship with Katie has been the only one throughout my life that has survived the test of time. Throughout elementary, middle, and high school, Katie was the one person I could talk to about everything and anything, and remains that person to this day. Even if we only see each other a few times a year now that we are in college, we can pick it up as though we saw each other yesterday. The consistency of my friendship with Katie has been a key factor in how I have developed healthy relationships, where so many other friendships I have had ended up causing me more distress than development.

Even once Katie and I were in the same high school, however, I was not part of the “main crowd” in her group of friends. I have a huge tendency to be a floater or on the outskirts of a group of friends. As I have already explained, within my main group of middle/high school friends, I never felt like I was incredibly important to the group’s structure, as opposed to other girls who seemed like vital parts of our friend group. When I tried to become part of other friend groups fleetingly throughout middle school and high school, I found the same thing happening. Within friend groups in my dance company, I found the same thing happening. I spent all of high school longing to be part of the “in”
I strove to feel like I was integral to a group of people. I never felt this inclusion until my senior year of high school.

After deciding that I did not enjoy the company of girls who were really pretty horrible to each other, I found myself on the inside of a group of great friends. Our group had formed out of our involvement (however slight) in a community theater in my town. The Crew, as we called ourselves, consisted of people in and just out of high school, from a couple different schools, and we mostly just laughed and had a good time. We had plans almost every weekend, and for the rest of my senior year, I had the wonderful experience of being on the inside. I was invited to every group activity, organized activities, and was even invited when some people weren't invited. The Crew, however, eventually became a thing of the past as three of us went to college. While we are still in contact and we express the ability to be a support system if someone needs it, we have not been all together since the summer before my first year of college.

In college, I have noticed an interesting pattern that helps me understand why I may have had so many problems with friends in the past, even though it is through experiencing the same problems here at Colby. I've noticed that I have conflicting feelings about being part of the “in” group. When I am not part of this group, I long for the closeness that I see others have. I hope to be invited to everything, on the group text message chain, told every night when dinner will be happening. When I see this happen between friends, I get extremely jealous and sad that I am not part of the group. I wonder what I am doing wrong and wish to be invited into the exclusive circle. However, when I am in fact part of this group, I find myself panicking, uncomfortable and under too much pressure. In my two years at Colby, there have been three different instances of finally being included in the
way I wish I could be that I have tried to change. I will go to meals alone or eat in my room to avoid the group that is finally telling me every time they eat, when I had been so jealous before. Right now, I feel as though I have struck a good balance, where I don’t feel too committed to one group but I also feel as though I am included in a social group where I feel comfortable to be myself. However, I’ve become anxious about the spring semester and how my friendships may change. I realized, when talking with a friend about this paper, that there has been one type of relationship that has changed the way I feel about friendships since middle school that has a good deal of influence on how I deal with friendships.

I began dating boys in seventh grade. I had two boyfriends who I held hands with on the bus or in the hallway. My first “serious” boyfriend and I started dating in eighth grade. We were together for two and a half years. My next boyfriend and I began our relationship two months after my previous relationship, and we dated for almost a year. I had one other boyfriend in high school. We dated throughout the first half of my senior year. It was not until thinking about my friendships critically that I realized that my major uncomfortable periods with friendships have all taken place while I was not dating someone. I took the beginning of my time at Colby to be single and make sure I knew who I was and who I wanted to be at school before I started to begin anything romantic. It was during this long single period that I had the most inner conflict about how involved I should be with various friend groups. For almost a year now, however, I have been in a relationship with Spike. Spike and I spent all of our freshman year as best friends before starting a romantic relationship. He is the first boyfriend I’ve had that was a great friend first and foremost, before the romance began. I haven’t had as much anxiety about friendships while being
with Spike because I feel as though I have a stable foundation that I don’t need to be filled through friendships.

While I’ve always thought that I had a clear sense of who I am, those are all based on my activities. I understand myself as a XXX, XXX, XXX, student, daughter, sister, and over all busy-body. But I have never really felt like there are people that I can be “myself” with. I don’t know who that is, because I feel that I have different traits with each friend group that I encounter. Sometimes I am laid back and down to earth, other times I am hyper and bubbly. I know that I want to be kind to people and generally helpful and happy, but I don’t have a clear understanding of who I am, not just what I do.

Spike is going abroad in the spring, and I have found this anxiety reforming. I have never felt like my romantic relationships define me, or anything like that. I am confident in my aspirations, talents, and sense of self, and don’t feel as though a relationship is what makes me feel whole. But the idea of not having Spike has left me feeling like I will be right back to where I hate to be: on the outside of a group of friends, wishing to be on the inside but knowing that if I were, I would be jumping ship immediately. I don’t know how I will cope with this (because having a boyfriend who is abroad is different that being single, possibly) but I hope that my insights about how I deal with friendships may let me have a deeper connection without feeling the obligation that suffocates me so often. I am searching to find a group of friends that I feel comfortable being part of, without feeling jealous of those who might be more integrated in the group than I am.

Case Analysis

Jane’s case study provides many different ways to look at adolescence and childhood. She focused on her friendships throughout most of her life, dealing with the fact
that she feels jealous when she is not part of the “exclusive circle” of a group of friends, but feels trapped and pressured when she is part of the circle. She notices that she has never felt as though she knew who she was, because her idea of herself was based on how she acted with others, which would change depending on her friend group at the time. In this analysis, I will use three different theories to help better explain how Jane has become who she is today. First, I will use James Marcia’s identity theory, which uses four stages of identity development to explain how one can clearly define their identity and have clear personal values, to show where Jane is in her identity development. Second, I will use Catherine Steiner-Adairs writing on girls with eating disorders to explain how girls, like Jane, develop their sense of self and identity in relationship to others, and how that could have brought problems to her case. Last, I will use Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan’s article on girls’ psychological development to describe how Jane struggled to keep genuine relationships while at the same time keeping her own voice. By looking at Jane’s case through these different lenses, I will show that Jane’s problems with friendships have different meanings about her identity and sense of self but in the end, her case study shows that she is on her way to having a strong understanding of her personal identity.

James Marcia developed a theory on identity development that could be useful to understanding Jane’s case. Marcia’s theory revolves around four different stages of identity development. The stages hinge upon the amount of identity exploration seen in a person and the amount of commitment to an identity. The stages are made from if there is exploration or not and if there is commitment or not. Those who are reported to have no exploration and no commitment are said to be in identity diffusion. Those with identity diffusion don’t have a clear understanding of their identity, and are not trying to find it.
(Marcia 558). People who are committed to an identity without exploration are in foreclosure, according to Marcia. They accept identity blindly, without exploring on their own. They take values and ideas from those around them but don’t really decide form themselves if they agree with those values. Those who are exploring their identity but have not committed to a set of values and beliefs are said to be in moratorium. They may have vague or inconsistent ideas about their identity but are still developing their beliefs. The final stage of Marcia’s theory is identity achievement. In this stage, people will have well-defined personal values and have a strong sense of self and identity (557). These stages are not rigid by any means, and a person can go back and forth between the first three stages before reaching identity achievement.

Jane’s issues with friendships can be seen through the lens of Marcia’s identity status stages. In elementary school, she did not have many friends and described herself as only having one-on-one friendships, rather than ever being part of a group. She did not describe ever trying to specify what she looked for in a friend or the types of people she wanted to be friends with. At this point in time, she could be described as being in identity diffusion, never trying to find an identity for herself but rather just looking for friendships regardless of her own self. In middle school and high school, Jane seemed to be going through foreclosure. She was friends with the same group for most of this time, and adopted their values and ideas. She committed to those ideologies without any exploration. Her time was spent looking for connections and similarities rather than differences or realness. Jane met her identity crisis when she realized that she didn’t agree with the values and treatment from her high school friends. She made a choice to begin exploring her identity. In that transition, she made a shift between foreclosure and moratorium. After
that, Jane has been in moratorium, exploring friendships and thereby her identity. She has not gotten to a point where she has committed to an identity, however, which means that she has not yet reached identity achievement.

Catherine Steiner-Adair’s *The Body Politic* talks about the way girls development is affected by those around them. While boys develop their identities to make themselves different from the rest of the group, girls develop their identities in relation to others (Steiner-Adair 164). While going through normal adolescent development, “girls are socialized to rely heavily on external acceptance and feedback to inform their identity” thereby making relationships extremely important to their development (165). Girls must learn how to define themselves in terms of other people, through relationships between family members, peers, and adults such as teachers or coaches. Girls form their identity and accept their identity when they get confirmation of their values from other people. Steiner-Adair writes that a major problem for adolescent girls is “to confirm the worth of her interest in relationships and in doing so to develop a sense of her own self-worth as an individual” (166).

In Jane’s case, we can see this challenge arise. While her relationships with her family are stable and she does not mention having issues with other adults in her life, Jane found herself looking to define herself without strong friendships to use to understand her identity. Steiner-Adair would say that Jane’s lack of meaningful friendships in a group context may have lead her to lack an understanding of her own values and identity. She explained that she did not feel as though she agreed with the girls that she spent time with during middle school and high school, which would have lead to confusion about how she defined herself. As she met friends that she related more to, however, she may have found
that her identity felt more secure and she had a greater understanding of her personal values. As she continued to shift friend groups in college, her sense of self-understanding and self-worth may have shifted as well. Steiner-Adair describes that “girls have been clearly educated...that compliance and dependency and interpersonal sensitivity are expected of them” (166). However, if faced with friendships that are not real or lasting, a girl could become stuck in finding her identity with no good relationships with her peers to find the self-worth that comes from girls’ adolescent friendships.

Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan research girls’ development and how their connections between people impact their understanding of the world and themselves. They describe how adolescence for girls is “a time when a relational impasse forced... ‘a compromise formation’ – some compromise between voice and relationships” (Brown 31). Girls must “take themselves out of relationship with themselves and with women as they reach adolescence” (31). Girls struggle to maintain genuine relationships with themselves and their true identity. They desire “genuine and authentic connection” but experience disconnections and have troubles “[conveying] or even [believing] in one's own experience” (14). Brown and Gilligan describe girls’ experiences as a crisis of connection, where girls struggle to keep real relationships while at the same time trying to keep their own voice and take seriously their experiences, thoughts, and opinions. As girls grow older, they have increasing confusion, defensiveness, and replace real relationships with inauthentic or idealized relationships (13). Brown and Gilligan also describe areas of resistance, where girls can be seen with “an insistence on knowing what they know and a willingness to be outspoken” (17). This resistance can increase during adolescence or fade
and go underground, depending on how the girl reacts to the pressures of society where relationships are not always genuine.

Jane’s experience with friendships during adolescence shows how girls go through a relational impasse. She begins with a great desire for genuine connection and closeness, although she describes not finding this closeness except with one friend. She makes a compromise between her voice and relationships (although it was not conscious) when she became friends with a group of girls that didn’t share her values. She explains how she felt as though she lacked an identity, possibly through trying to experience authentic connections with her friends. As adolescence continued, however, Jane experienced more disconnections that genuine connections between her friends. While her story did not seem to show a great deal of resistance, her choice to distance herself from her group of high school friends shows a moment where she voiced her resistance and was able to make a choice and begin searching, once more, for meaningful connections in the form of friendships. Although she may feel that she has not found the most meaningful connections she can, Jane has begun to be more political in her search for connections and has taken ownership of her identity.

Jane’s case can be better understood by using Marcia, Steiner-Adair, and Brown and Gilligan, although each might describe her story of coming closer to accepting her identity in a different way. Analyzing with Steiner-Adair does not take into account how moving away from relationships may cause resilience in girls that can increase their identity. Using Brown and Gilligan describes resistance well but does not reflect on how the process has stages, where there may be regressions. Understanding the case through Marcia was the best option, but none of the analyses were able to describe how romantic relationships had
an effect on Jane’s sense of identity and comfort with friendships. Through these analyses, however, we were able to clearly see that Jane will continue to grow and develop her identity and friendships in a way that will most likely help her become a successful and comfortable adult.

Works Cited

