

Friendships Through the Life Course: Oral Biographies in Old Age, by Sarah H. Matthews.

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Abstract:

S. H. Matthews, *Friendships Through the Life Course: Oral Biographies in Old Age*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1986. 176 pp. \$24.50 hardcover, \$12.50 softcover.

This book is an important contribution to a growing area of inquiry—the sociology of friendship. Like many other authors in this area, Sara Matthews is a gerontologist as well as a sociologist. She is currently Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Gerontological Studies Program at Case Western Reserve University. Researchers from both fields will find this book interesting. Teachers will find it sufficiently theoretically challenging to use in graduate-level seminars and simply enough written to assign to undergraduates.

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Article:

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The major purpose of this volume is to report on research that places friendship in the broader context of persons' individual biographies. Matthews points out five problems with previous literature that her research was intended to redress: (a) the meaning of friendship has rarely been studied; (b) friendship has usually been a secondary focus of research; (c) most researchers have not distinguished between friendly relations and friendship; (d) most of the literature has focused

on attraction rather than on later stages of friendship; and (e) most researchers have focused on friendship at one point in time.

The data were derived from the transcripts of tape-recorded, guided conversations with 63 informants who related their biographies using friendship as a constant referent. All informants were 60 years old or older. Matthews did not approach the data with a priori categories in mind, but immersed herself in the data after they were collected and sorted them into categories that emerged as important. The author was sensitive to the problems of recall and comparability posed by the methods she chose to use.

In addition to a review of the literature on friendship, the first chapter includes an introduction to the three perspectives-cultural, life course, and social psychological-used to analyze the data. Although these perspectives are not explicitly discussed as the data are presented, they clearly informed the analyses. The final chapter provides theoretical coherence to the volume by using the three perspectives to evaluate the data presented.

The four middle chapters are primarily descriptive and include numerous, lengthy quotations of the informants. Chapter 2 describes three ways of “doing” friendship. The dimension along which these friendship styles vary basically is receptivity to friendship. The independents do not consider anyone as a true friend, the discerning use strict rules in applying the label, and the acquisitive are receptive to friendship with a wide variety of persons. Although the author is much more sensitive to the complexity of friendship than most have been, she did oversimplify things here. Friendship is multidimensional; there are many more than three ways of “doing” friendship. In fairness to her, however, she acknowledges that the categories are not internally consistent in all respects.

Chapters 3 and 4 present data and interpretations consistent with the findings of research conducted by this reviewer. Since both Matthews’s and my studies were based on small, nonprobability samples, the consistency of the findings is important testimony to their accuracy. Chapter 3 discusses the maintenance and termination of friendships. Included is an interesting discussion of two ways in which friendships are maintained-through commitment and effort or by having lives organized so that minimal effort is necessary. Chapter 4 discusses the importance of age and gender to friendship through the life course. It includes interesting discussions of the factors that foster age-discrepant relationships and those that desexualize cross-gender friendships.

Chapter 5 considers old age as a unique context for friendship. Of particular interest is a discussion of the implications of using each of the three friendship styles during old age. Matthews concludes that independents continue to be affected primarily by the circumstances that surround them, the discerning are least affected by the circumstances in which they live but most vulnerable to their friends no longer being available, and the acquisitive are affected both by biography and circumstance. The problem with this analysis is that it assumes that people do

not change their friendship styles. My research suggests that people tend to change their styles as the normative constraints associated with middle age are removed. For example, someone who was discerning might become acquisitive. The discussion, however, correctly identifies the consequences of using each style in old age. Although they are not specified, the analyses presented here have obvious implications for practitioners concerned with the social lives of their clients.

The theoretical importance of this volume should not be underestimated. As Matthews (p. 159) observes, “the study of friendship ... confronts the sociologist with a critical test to theoretical formulations, not only about friendships but about the social organization of societies more generally.” For example, drawing on Graham Allan’s discussion, Matthews observes that the concept of role is inadequate in studying friendship. I agree with her that theory may be advanced by studies of friendship. If this book is not overlooked by mainstream sociologists, such advancement will have occurred.

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