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Review of Friendships Between Women: A Critical Review

Sarah H. Matthews

Cleveland State University, s.matthews@csuohio.edu

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Friendships Between Women: A Critical Review.

Pat O'Connor. New York: The Guilford Press. 1992. 223 pp. Hardcover ISBN 0-89862-976-4. \$44.95 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Pat O'Connor has done a yeoperson's service in bringing together British, Canadian, and

American research literature on women's friendships in one book organized into chapters that make the book relevant to students of marriages and families. She accomplishes this by doing a standard literature search and then supplementing it with a careful examination of articles and books in which information about friendship would not be immediately apparent because they are ostensibly about something else. As she rightly notes, friendship is a neglected topic even though it is part and parcel of everyday life in modern societies. As such, there are many allusions to it in a variety of places within the social science literature. She draws work together that has been done under various guises including sociology, social psychology (particularly the emerging field of social and personal relationships), social network analysis, and feminist scholarship. She also cites her own empirical work on close relationships (which she refers to somewhat disconcertingly in the third person) throughout the book, using "vignettes" from it for illustration. Regrettably, she does not tell the reader much about her study, an oversight given its central place both in the book and presumably in her own thinking.

The first two chapters of the book, ("Women's Friendships: An Underexplored Topic?" and "Towards a Theory of Friendship: Identifying Its Elements") initially may make the reader wonder how O'Connor will accomplish the promised critical literature review given that women's friendships are an "underexplored" topic; and how she can organize the literature given that definitions of friendship used both in everyday life and by social scientists are amorphous and specific to various disciplines. It is also apparent that subjects of the many small studies she draws upon rarely constitute random samples of known populations. This, of course, is a problem for any literature review, but O'Connor manages to include enough about the characteristics of the respondents in the studies she cites to remind the reader of the suggestive rather than definitive nature of the findings. In part, she is successful in this because of her emphasis throughout the book on the importance of the social context, including social class, in which friendships are made and broken.

In the following three chapters she discusses married women's, single women's, and elderly women's friendships. This is where the significance of the study of friendship for students of

marriages and families is most apparent. These chapters put familial relationships—particularly husband-wife and sibling ties—in the context of other relationships. In Chapter 6 (“Is There Something Special About Friendship?”), O’Connor compares friendship with kinship and other social ties, arguing that comparing types of relationships clarifies each. She raises the question of the degree to which distinctions between friend and kin relationships are diminishing in modern societies. In the final chapter, O’Connor speculates about the future “face” of women’s friendships and identifies the key issues she feels are important to pursue in research.

Anyone interested in knowing about women’s friendships or looking for fruitful research topics that place marriages and families in the context of social relationships, will find this an excellent place to begin. My only concern is with the assumption that only the topic of *women’s* friendships is “underexplored” in the social science literature. Much of the research cited, because it includes information about friendships in general, is also about men’s. Many of the conclusions reached about women’s friendships probably also describe men’s. Although one of O’Connor’s critiques is that researchers have often been content simply to compare men’s and women’s friendships and report differences without exploring structural explanations for them, by focusing only on women’s friendships, the implicit assumption is that men’s and women’s friendships are “opposite.” In fact, there is likely to be much “overlap.” Without including men’s friendships, differences may be assumed where there are none and gender may be taken as the explanation when other locations within the social structure may be equally or more significant.

SARAH H. MATTHEWS
Cleveland State University