

Book review

The Ways of Friendship: Anthropological Perspectives. Edited by Amit Desai & Evan Killick. Pp. 213. (Berghahn Books, 2010.) £35.00, ISBN 9-781845-457310, hardback. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2011.01725_35.x

In anthropology, friendship has traditionally been cast as the ‘poor relation’ of kinship (excuse the pun!). Early ethnographers were often preoccupied with mapping systems of kinship and alliance through which flowed bundles of economic, political and legal rights and obligation. Other relationships that fell outwith the resulting lineages were rendered all but invisible. A couple of important volumes over the last decade or so have sought to redress this imbalance (notably Allan & Allan, 1998; Bell & Coleman, 1999; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). However, the recent rise of the ‘new kinship studies’ has served to re-direct attention again towards kinship at the expense of friendship or, rather, friendship has been framed within broader constructions of ‘relatedness’, rather than being an object of study in its own right. Killick and Desai argue – rightly in my view – that retaining an analytical distinction between friendship and kinship (even though they are often closely interwoven both discursively and in practice) permits a subtler kind of understanding about the ways human relationships are formed and played out in diverse social contexts.

This excellent new edited collection is thus a timely contribution. Killick and Desai deliberately resist the temptation to ‘dissect or define the category of friendship’; as they put it, ‘For us, friendship is interesting precisely because it evades definition: the way in which friendship acts to express fixity and fluidity in diverse social worlds is exciting and problematic for the people that practise friendship and the social scientists that study it,’ (p. 1). This is also the starting point for the various chapter authors, all of whom begin with the meanings and practices of their participants, rather than working from a pre-defined set of analytical criteria of friendship. What results is a fascinating collection of papers, all based on careful ethnographic work in a wide range of settings, from rural China, Central India, Chile and Peruvian Amazonia to South Africa, Lebanon and London. The ethnographic diversity in these case-studies belies the commonly prevailing view that friendship is a modern, Western construct, premised on a particular notion of personhood rooted in individuality. Instead, ‘friendship’ in its broadest sense appears to be a remarkably universal phenomenon, not to be confined to a particular period of history or geographical area, although with very different manifestation in different settings.

Together, the chapters underline the flexibility and adaptability of friendships, as well as the range of meanings and qualities underlying them. Thus, for example, friendships described in Killick’s chapter on inter-ethnic relations in Amazonian Peru are based primarily not on ‘sentiment’ but on expectations of mutual reciprocity that extend beyond the normal kinship networks, a finding echoed in Course’s chapter on

the Mapuche of Chile. In some situations, friendship may transcend other social divisions like class or caste (for example, documented by Froerer in Central India); in others, friendships may reinforce and re-inscribe such divisions. Friendships may be embedded within and reproduce kin relations (as, for example, in the chapters by Obeid and Rogers, in relation to the Lebanon and to Mozambican refugees in South Africa respectively). By contrast, among the Ashéninka people described by Killick, individuality is fore-grounded as a key feature of both social organization and friendship formation. Several chapters explore in some depth the role of friendship in the construction and development of personhood. Evans' work among boys in south-east London, for example, highlights the importance of friendship in the process of 'becoming', tapping into some interesting recent debates around the anthropology of potentiality.

A potential shortcoming of the volume might be that, by taking such a broad perspective, the category of friendship loses its analytical power. If friendship is taken to mean *any* human relationship based on something other than kinship, then should we be surprised to learn that it is a universal phenomenon? To what extent can such a loose category take forward in a meaningful way the study of human sociality or inter-subjectivity? This is perhaps ironic, given Desai and Killick's criticism of the new kinship studies on similar grounds. I, however, would seek to defend their position. The study of friendship (unlike kinship) is still very much in its infancy. To close off possible areas of enquiry and understanding in order to adhere to a particular definition is thus ill-advised. Indeed, as the editors argue, it is the very fluidity of friendship that makes it so interesting. One aspect of this that I would like to have seen more developed here is the negative side of friendship: failure to establish friendships, the consequences of having the 'wrong sort' of friends (however defined), broken friendships, bullying and coercion within friendships, to name but a few.

That omission notwithstanding, this is an excellent and timely volume. In some respects it is a playful volume: rather than claiming to provide answers, Desai and Killick invite the reader to join them on a fascinating and wide-ranging journey through contemporary meanings of friendship – I recommend that you take up the invitation!

References

- Allan, R. & Allan, G. (eds) (1998) *Placing Friendship in Context*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Bell, S. & Coleman, S. (eds) (1999) *The Anthropology of Friendship*. Berg, Oxford.
- Spencer, L. & Pahl, R. (2006) *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today*. Princeton University Press, Oxford.

KATE HAMPSHIRE
*Department of Anthropology,
University of Durham, UK*