

# “Doing” Intergenerational Friendship: Challenging the Dominance of Age Homophily in Friendship

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article remet en question la prédominance de l’homophilie liée à l’âge dans les écrits sur l’amitié. Les résultats d’une récente étude sur l’amitié intergénérationnelle ont été consultés et ont permis d’élaborer une nouvelle conceptualisation de l’homophilie, basée sur le « faire » et « l’être », pour expliquer l’amitié entre adultes de générations différentes. La recherche a été menée selon une approche qualitative faisant appel à une méthodologie basée sur la théorie constructiviste. L’homophilie associée au faire et à l’être a trois composantes : être « amis dans l’action » (partager des intérêts et des activités de loisirs, ou simplement passer du temps ensemble), être « non seulement âgé » (partager des identités autres que l’âge) et partager des attitudes et des approches communes concernant l’amitié et la vie. De plus, les « différences » étaient une source d’intérêt importante entre les amis intergénérationnels. Notre découverte de la centralité du faire et de l’être, ainsi que du caractère relativement peu significatif de l’homophilie basée sur l’âge, constitue une nouvelle approche de l’amitié, elle permet une nouvelle conceptualisation du « comment » et du « pourquoi » de la formation d’amitiés chez les adultes (âgés).

## ABSTRACT

This article challenges the dominance of age homophily in the literature on friendship. Using findings from a recent study on intergenerational friendship, we put forward a new conceptualization of a *homophily of doing-and-being* in friendships between adults who are of different generations. This research took a qualitative approach using constructivist grounded theory methodology. Homophily of doing-and-being has three components: being “friends in action” (pursuing interests and leisure activities, or simply spending time together), being “not only old” (sharing identities beyond age), and sharing attitudes and approaches to friendship and life. Additionally, “differences” were an important element of interest between the intergenerational friends. Our discovery of the centrality of doing-and-being, and the relative insignificance of age homophily, constitute a novel way of looking at friendship, and a new way of conceptualizing how and why (older) adults make and maintain friendships.

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## Introduction

Homophily – the idea that “birds of a feather flock together” as originally purported by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) – underpins the idea of friendship. Homophily emphasizes the tendency for individuals to have friends who are similar to them in age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education, and other key dimensions (Louch, 2000; Marsden, 1988). In their research on multidimensional homophily in friend networks, Block and Grund (2014) identified the principle of homophily as ubiquitous in findings on social network analysis. This article questions and develops the concept of homophily by exploring “sameness” from the perspective of the older friend in intergenerational friendships.

### *Homophily in Friendship Literature*

The philosopher Nehamas (2016), while alluding to the challenges faced by researchers and others in attempting to define friendship, emphasized the beneficence of friendship throughout many people’s lives. Friendship is conceptualized in the literature as a chosen, equal, mutual, and reciprocal relationship (Allan, 2010; Pahl, 2000). Adults tend to share normative expectations in relation to friendship (Felmlee & Muraco, 2009); the values of trust, respect, and support are identified as central to friendship regardless of gender, sexual orientation, age, or ethnicity (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013). Spencer and Pahl (2006) asserted that the principle of homophily is a central recurring theme in friendship literature, accentuating the context in which friendships are formed and the nature of the social worlds of individuals involved. McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) proposed that similarity breeds connection, and hence durable friendships were likely to be same-generation, having been formed in childhood.

Many researchers have concluded that age homophily is ubiquitous, prevalent, and necessary in close friendship (Jerome & Wenger, 1999; Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Adams and Blieszner (1989) argued that age peers are likely to share similar experiences in tandem throughout the life course, such as status changes, problems, and losses. Adams, Hahmann, and Blieszner (2017) point out that age-related changes, such as retirement or moving to older age living accommodation, may shape how friendships are conducted. Homophily in friend choice has been purported to reinforce an individual’s personal identity through a shared “sameness” (Allan, 2010). According to Allan (1989), generational differences in the form of temporal perspectives and experiences make intergenerational friendship unlikely, referencing Blau (1973), who stated that there were few reasons for differing generations to interact outside of family relationships. Williams and Nussbaum (2000) identified the expectation of age homophily in

friendship as a strong social norm, with intergenerational friendship being implicitly and explicitly discouraged as older people are expected to “act their age” and to enjoy spending time with same-age friends. Choosing an intergenerational friend resulted in both parties to the friendship being perceived as “weird” by others (Williams & Nussbaum, 2000, p.221).

At a structural level, age homophily is not just about individual choice; it is imposed in contemporary societies as people are streamed and segregated into age-homogenous sites such as youth orchestras or active aging societies with limited opportunity for age integration (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2006; Uhlenberg & Gierveld, 2004). Age integration has many benefits at an individual and societal level, as it fosters the exchange of material and informational support; for example, regarding the use of technology (Uhlenberg & Gierveld, 2004). Riley and Riley (2000) speculated that increased age integration would improve “connectedness” among all age groups. Biggs (2018) introduced the concept of “intergenerational complementarity”; whereby people, while aware of their own generational position, put themselves in the shoes of the other generation (intergenerational intelligence) and therefore demonstrate “the relative ability to negotiate between generational positions” (p. 174). Biggs (2018) further asserted that “[f]ew want to grow old as it is currently conceived. If the task is of cultural adaptation, then lasting solutions can be based on intergenerational complementarity” (p. 174). Jarrott and Smith (2011), in their research on child/older adult organized intergenerational programs, perceived that those programs underpinned by the tenets of contact theory – support from stakeholders, equal group status, cooperation and shared goals – promoted positive interaction and minimized negative attitudes between the child and older adult participants. Age integration has also been linked to a reduction in ageist attitudes and discrimination (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005), the prevention of older people’s marginalization (Butler, 1969), promoting a positive attitude to aging and older people (Leedahl et al., 2019), and challenging negative, often stereotypical, attitudes towards older people, thereby increasing the likelihood that people will seek out intergenerational interaction with those of a different age (Yamashita, Hahn, Kinney, & Poon, 2018). Research on older adult friendship emphasizes the significance of homophily, particularly similarity in age, as the central feature of friendship. Applying the concept of age homophily – as researchers present it in extant literature – to friendship means that peer-age friendships are not only the preferred, but also the only socially acceptable friendship option. Being of the same age and generation is perceived as a prerequisite for shared interests and attitudes, and hence for friendship formation and maintenance.

The power and pervasiveness of social networks in contemporary societies are recognized as individuals are linked and their health, actions, and belief systems are influenced by friends and friends-of-friends, in a hyper-connected society (Christakis & Fowler, 2010). There is consensus that friendship is a “good thing”, particularly in later life, with Blieszner and Ogletree (2017) noting that friendship may move center stage in later life as individuals gain more time to focus on friends and friendship processes following the likely diminution of parenting and work-related responsibilities. The importance and benefits of friendship to the well-being, health, and happiness of older adults have been explored extensively in epidemiological (see for example Li & Liang, 2007), and social science research (Allan, 2010; Blieszner, 2014; Blieszner & Ogletree, 2017; Blieszner, Ogletree, & Adams, 2019). Friendship is lauded in research and policy for promoting physical and mental well-being, and is often perceived as a panacea for social exclusion and loneliness (Demir, 2016; Victor, 2018). Chopik (2017) argued that friendships in later life are linked to increased happiness and health for the older individual, perhaps even more so than family relationships.

In general, friendship is considered less important than family for older people, with representations and research on older people typically situated within their roles in the family; that is, as parents or grandparents. Jarrott and Smith (2011) perceive that many intergenerational programs structured to bring older people and children together recognize the importance of intergenerational kin relationships and seek to mimic these familial relationships in organized settings to benefit their participants. Extant research argues that peer friendships are the preferred form of friendship, as the friends have a lot in common based on their age (see for example Adams & Blieszner, 1989). Older people are perceived as being reluctant to form new friendships in older age (Gabriel & Bowling, 2004). Intergenerational friendships therefore are perceived to be of limited interest to older people. Where they do exist, intergenerational friendships are often disguised (for example, “she’s like a daughter to me”), whereas those involved in intergenerational friendship “may hesitate” to attribute the status of friendship to close intergenerational non-kin relationships (Williams & Nussbaum, 2000, p.82).

However, more recently, research has challenged previous thinking in relation to intergenerational friendship. Quantitative evidence from Dykstra and Fleischmann (2016) demonstrates that intergenerational friendship is prevalent across European countries, indicating that a significant number of older people are socially embedded in intergenerational friend networks and that intergenerational friendship is not a marginal issue. The deficit of research on intergenerational friendships was,

therefore, perplexing and prompted our study on intergenerational friendships from the perspective of older people (Elliott O'Dare, Timonen, & Conlon, 2019b).

### *The Study*

Drawing from a study of intergenerational friendships, we explore and question the idea that homophily in general, and similarity in age in particular, are central underpinnings of friendship. Intergenerational friendship is a friendship between a chronologically old (i.e., conventionally, 65 years of age or older) and a significantly younger adult, operationalized in this research as an age difference of 15 years or more. We acknowledge that this age difference is somewhat arbitrary, for reasons that are linked to the “slippiness” of the concept of generation in a societal context (Elliott O'Dare, Timonen, & Conlon, 2019a).

The purpose of this study was to understand how older individuals portray being an older friend, and how they experience being older in their everyday lives through intergenerational friendship. Little was known about how older adults experience and portray intergenerational friendships and the meaning, significance, and role such friendships play in older people’s lives (Elliott O'Dare et al., 2019b). By focusing solely on the “older friend”, the research aimed to understand the role that intergenerational friendships play in how older persons feel and behave as older individuals and as older friends. In this article, we present findings that demonstrate how homophily takes on a different, broader meaning when intergenerational friendships are put center stage.

### *Study Context*

Time and place, structure, and culture, matter in how friendships are constructed (Adams & Allan, 1998; Adams & Blieszner, 1994; Blieszner et al., 2019). Unprecedented demographic change, caused by decreasing birth rates and increased longevity, has resulted in a growing proportion of older (and arguably healthier) people in the population, thus providing unprecedented opportunities for intergenerational interaction. Globally, the number of people 60 years of age and older is expected to reach two billion by 2050 (Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland, 2011). Ireland, the country where this study was conducted, is a relatively “young” country in comparison to most other developed countries, although population aging is accelerating and it is forecast that by 2041, nearly one third of the population will be 60 years of age and older (Central Statistics Office, 2016).

Dykstra and Fleischmann (2016) found that 40 per cent of Irish older people surveyed for their study of

intergenerational friendship reported that they had a cross-age friend. Gibney, Ward, Shannon, Moore, & Moran, (2018) purported that among older people in Ireland 55–69 years of age, 60 per cent reported having one or more friends under 30 years of age, falling to 38 per cent for those older than 70. Although these studies employed a larger age gap in their definition of “intergenerational” than we did, they nonetheless help to contextualize the relatively extensive prevalence of intergenerational friendships in Ireland.

## Methods

Singh and Estefan (2018) outlined that grounded theory, although broad, has three main perspectives championed by different researchers, which share some similarities but also differ, and are underpinned by conflicting philosophical understandings. Our research took a qualitative approach using a constructivist grounded theory variant (CGT) to generate theoretically informative data (Charmaz, 2014), a necessary consideration given the dearth of research on the topic. The CGT methodology departs from the positivist or objectivist underpinnings outlined in previous versions of CGT by rejecting the understanding of data and data analysis as neutral (Singh & Estefan, 2018). In CGT, researchers construct the categories and theories and their interpretations or renderings of the data, thus recognizing the symbolic interactionist element as both the participant and the researcher co-create meaning (Singh & Estefan, 2018). Bryant and Charmaz (2007) provided a succinct summary, stating that CGT “emphasizes how data, analysis, and *methodological strategies* [italicized in original] become constructed, and also takes into account the ‘research contexts and researchers’ positions, perspectives, priorities, and interactions” (p. 10). The constructivist element of CGT acknowledges the researcher as an influential component of knowledge generation. Theories are not in existence waiting to be discovered by a researcher, but are instead co-constructed – the researcher and the respondents are involved in the mutual construction of meaning during the interview process (Charmaz, 2014). A theory generated using this paradigm is understood to be interpretive, and as Charmaz explains, “[i]nterpretive theories aim to understand meanings and actions and how people construct them” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 231). Thus, a portrayal of the studied phenomenon is explicitly presented with no claims to exact representations; reality and subjectivity are recognized as being multiple. Constructivists therefore ask how and why participants construct meaning and action in particular circumstances (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012; Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keanne, 2017).

## Initial Inclusion Criteria

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin in September 2015. Suitable participants were identified as community-dwelling men and women 65 years of age or older. There is no consensus on when an individual is “old”. Sociologically, age is accepted as being socially constructed; that is, what and who is understood to be “old” is a social creation as individuals interact and create meaning (Katz, 2018). The additional inclusion criteria for this research was that participants would, at the time of the interview (or recently), have (had) at least one good non-kin friend, for a duration of 3 years or more, who is at least 15 years their junior. An intergenerational friendship for the purposes of this study was understood to be a friendship between an older individual of 65 years or more and a younger (by 15 years or more) non-kin individual. All ideas of old(er) and young(er), and the idea of societal generations, are to a large extent socially constructed and, therefore, the decision to opt for a minimum 15 year age gap is not predicated on any “objective” ground pertaining to definite distinctions in the human life course, or between generations. The pragmatic choice was to opt for an age/putative generational difference that would resonate as potentially significant with people in general.

Sampling was purposive and theoretical, which is a key component of grounded theory (GT)/CGT. Sampling commenced through access to the database of a study that explored intergenerational solidarity in Ireland entitled “Changing Generations” (see Scharf, Timonen, Carney, & Conlon, 2013). Recruitment through “snowball sampling” – Changing Generations participants enlist another participant who is known to them – was also used as a form of recruitment. As coding (line-by-line and focused), analysis and memoing (observational and analytical) progressed, participants with particular characteristics or who were in particular circumstances were recruited as being suited to “flesh out” emerging concepts and constructs (theoretical sampling). Various routes were taken to recruit participants; for example, placing notices in public areas such as community notice boards and libraries, distributing materials to groups such as active retirement association, and at adult education centers and leisure and hobby clubs, along with a notice in a blog posted on the Web site of an age-friendly university. All participants who came forward were given clear, detailed, written information about the study and what taking part entailed.

In keeping with the CGT method, an interview guide was prepared for the initial interviews and thereafter

used as a general frame for subsequent interviews. The initial guide contained open-ended questions and prioritized learning about the participants' views, experiences, and actions; for example, "could you describe how your friendship started and how it grew?" Theoretical sampling, driven by the emerging concepts identified by the ongoing, iterative analysis, directed the interview questions as the study progressed.

Twenty-three people 65 years of age and older (ranging in chronological age from 66 to 95 years old) were interviewed by the lead author to generate thick co-constructed talk data. The sample incorporates 16 women and 7 men from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, and encompasses individuals across the socio-economic spectrum. Field notes, in the form of memos, were written to capture observations related to participants' homes and environs (for example, equipment related to a hobby that the participant shared with intergenerational friends). Interview duration was 65 minutes on average; all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and pseudonyms are used in the findings. Throughout the interviews, participants spoke of seeking to form intergenerational friendships; they sketched portraits of their intergenerational friendships, and of being a friend; that is, the processes involved in the formation and flourishing, along with the characteristics, of intergenerational friendship. The participants often reflected on the changes and challenges that their aging, and aging in general, wrought. The people who took part in the study alluded to the features that being an intergenerational friend brought to their lives.

Transcripts and observational memos were coded manually by the lead author following the conventions of CGT (Charmaz, 2014), and data gathering, analysis, and memoing progressed in tandem until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical sampling was employed and saturation was achieved. Procedures for validity in CGT particularly center around the process of theoretical sampling and saturation.

Triangulation is frequently alluded to by social scientists as an additional tool to support reliability and dependability. Triangulation is best understood to be "a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). Guba and Lincoln (1989) conceptualize triangulation as "overlapping methods" (p. 317). This is consonant with the use of observational memoing as an additional data-gathering tool, and is best aligned with the constructivist paradigm central to this study, as the researcher's observations, and the participants' interviews took place at the same time and in the same setting, and as such, they overlapped. Triangulation here is

recognized as allowing deeper insight into how the participants constructed their reality and meaning through interaction and performance with materials (props) in their own setting; that is, their homes.

Hood (2007) asserts that "theoretical sampling, constant comparison of data to theoretical categories and theoretical saturation" speak to the strength and the validity of GT methodology (p. 164). Context, action, and interpretation of the studied life are the elements that concern the CGT researcher in the endeavor to produce a theory that fits; that is, the power to explain and to provide a conceptual, interpretative understanding of the topic under analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Adapting the use of observational memoing for the research not only added "thicker" data – Denzin (1989) details that "thick descriptions are deep, dense, detailed accounts" (p.83) – but additionally overcame a possible limitation, in expanding the data set and therefore providing additional insight into the meanings and actions of the participants. For example, the meaning of shared activities became clearer through memoing about the activity-related props that participants had in their homes, such as a projector and a screen (for a photography club).

In the following sections, in keeping with the CGT method, we outline the talk-data captured; that is, the participants' own words, and the conceptual rendering that emerged through rigorous iterative analysis.

## Findings

### *Seeking and Forming Intergenerational Friendship*

An analysis of how the intergenerational friends met and what facilitated their friendship formation can be categorized into four main settings: leisure pursuits and interests, work and professions, peer-age friends and family members, and social interaction in their community. The process of forging and deepening friendships is multidimensional and varied. The friends met as they joined, for example, football clubs, golf clubs, camera clubs, or, as in Simon's (age 69) case, an amateur dramatic society:

When you're putting on a musical or there's a drama, or something being rehearsed, then there's a wide range of ages involved, and they all have a common purpose to achieve, something, the product. And we all just behave as adults of whatever age it is, it [age] doesn't really matter...

Similarly, professional societies for those interested in business allowed Hugo (92) to initially meet his friends. In the group, retired people across a broad age spectrum spanning possibly two generations meet to discuss finance and business topics. As Hugo explained:

[The club] is for retired members over 65 and we meet once a week in the [venue] and we have the usual discussion chats among ourselves. There's about 34 members and they're all retired managers like or senior positions in various companies: policemen, doctors, lawyers and the rest and we all have to make research doing the presentation.

For Lucia (89), the first encounter with her younger friend Lydia was through her profession as a dancing instructor. Janis (78) met two of her intergenerational friends as younger adults when she mentored them as artists; she explained how she had encountered one of her intergenerational friends, Amy, and illustrated how mentoring her as her teacher was a conduit to friendship:

So, Amy would be a little bit more than 20 years younger than me. I met Amy because I used to run art classes .... So, Amy was one of my students...and [later] her mother came and asked would I be kind enough to help Amy to get into Art College .... So, I took Amy under my wing, and Amy went on to college...and then she turned up on my door again, shortly after she qualified.

Work was an important conduit for intergenerational friendship formation for Anne (66) and Darina (88); they had met their younger friends in the workplace prior to their retirement. Darina charts the multiple and diverse processes that maintain her friendship with Eoin:

... it turned out that this individual who is now about 53, came into my office and worked in my section, and we became closer friends then and I got to know him, Eoin, very well. Eventually he got married...they are very happily married with two children now, and I was with them through the mother's illness, the father's illness. I have been at their wedding, their christenings, First Holy Communions. Eoin calls me; he sends me postcards from his holidays. [He] just checks how I am.

Work and active involvement in societies were not the only conduits to intergenerational friendship. Iris (91) explained how her initial meeting with her younger friend Molly had been through family: her grandchildren had formed friendships with Molly's children, which paved the way for friendship formation. Iris and Molly subsequently realized that they both enjoyed knitting and crocheting and as a result their friendship flourished after their initial meeting and the discovery of their shared interest:

... we keep in close touch. We share a lot in common in the ordinary things in life such as knitting and creative things and things like that so she, Molly, keeps me jogged along and I find her great you know. I see her intensely for two months every year probably every day [when holidaying in the same

location] and then I might see her at Christmas and I might see her at Easter.

For Iris, being interested in and spending time with very young family members was the tie that led to her intergenerational friendship formation, and other interests "in ordinary things in life" strengthened the friendship. Being "jogged along" by Molly seemed to be an important process in this friendship. Molly is active in craft making and brings new ideas and encouragement to Iris to continue to engage in these pursuits.

Friends and family were links that facilitated intergenerational friendship formation and maintenance for many of the people who took part in this study. Lydia (67) and Eileen (79) met their intergenerational friends through a peer-age friend: in both instances their prospective younger friend was their older friend's daughter. Lorna (84) and Jennifer both narrated how they met their intergenerational friends as children or young adults who were friends of their daughters. Similarly, Kathryn (94) met one of her intergenerational friends through her son, as they had been teenage friends. The relationships grew into friendships as the intergenerational friends discovered shared interests and characteristics.

Although the friends met in myriad ways, the gateways to intergenerational friendship shared two elements. First, an age-integrated, shared space or place provided the opportunity for the friends to meet. Leisure pursuits, interest groups or societies, former workplaces, families (their own and their friends' families) or ad-hoc social interaction in a community were all shared spaces for adults of all ages and stages of the life course. In contemporary society, many opportunities are made available to older people to socialize with those of their own age. The people in this study sought out or took advantage of encounters with like-minded people of other ages. Many had maintained their intergenerational friendships, which were formed in mid-life, and endured to older or oldest age.

The second element that the gateways to friendship shared was that the friends encountered each other through going about their "normal" lives and pursuing their own agendas with the people in the places and the spaces where they lived their everyday lives. (None of the older friends initially met their younger friends through a virtual medium; for example, through online interest groups or societies). Proximity played a part in the initial meeting, and subsequently as the friendship grew, as the friends met those who were close by or in reasonable proximity to where they lived or worked. Later, as the friendship became stronger and a close affinity was developed, proximity became less

important for some of the friendships. The friends overcame being physically distant by *making* opportunities to meet (as opposed to *taking* serendipitous opportunities to meet), often sustaining and deepening the friendship through frequent telephone conversations between meetings. Whatever the medium used, what emerges as important in deepening the friendship are the essential elusive “ingredients” that underpin the process of friendship formation and flourishing.

### *Being Friends “In Action”: Fostering, Growing, and Sustaining Intergenerational Friendship*

The processes that assisted in bringing the generations together to form an intergenerational friendship were significant in building the relationship from acquaintance to friendship. Although circumstances bring people together across generations, for friendship to develop, more is needed in developing shared interests and in growing affective bonds. Janis spoke of recognizing this process and labels it accordingly: “it was obvious we were friends, because we were friends in action.” This insightful concept – “friends in action” – indicates that the formation of an initial intergenerational relationship took time and “action” in the form of “doing” friendship, to progress into being recognized and experienced as (an intergenerational) friendship. The “actions” formed a basis of commonality and sharing. The term “commonality” is understood to refer to the shared interests, experiences, ways of being or doing, attitudes, and approaches – the ties that bind the friends in friendship – that enriched the relationship and facilitated intergenerational friendship growth.

Having discussed in the previous paragraphs how older and younger individuals are brought together through a variety of gateways, these commonalities acted as stepping stones to other “doings” that in turn deepened the friendship further. Shared leisure pursuits, hobbies, and interests were the most prevalent. In time, the friends discovered further shared interests and commonalities. Relating his friendship experiences, Tommy (76) spoke of a lifelong passion for football, which he shares with his intergenerational friends:

... I would meet these lads on a regular basis, and it's mostly football you are talking about. Then in the [football] club you would meet them for a drink after, and you would often go on weekends away and things like that. You know, I would be the old man of the party (laugh). I would be speaking to Martin (intergenerational friend) every day, you know, every day. (Laugh). Yeh, (laugh) mostly about football (laugh).

Eileen originally met Joanne, her intergenerational friend, when Joanne was a child, as she was Eileen's peer-age friend's daughter. Eileen described how

sharing a passion for clothes and shopping led to her spending more time with Joanne who was looking to make a more serious investment by purchasing a house. Eileen and Joanne spent every Saturday together for a year, viewing houses. The friends also grasped the opportunity provided by the serious business of house-viewing for enjoying “the day out” and sharing more light-hearted pursuits:

It was a full year it took, looking and looking and looking [viewing houses together]. Well, of course, out, coffee, lunches, a meal out now and then.... There was no coming back once we left in the morning; there was no return (laugh) till night-time.

House-hunting signaled a shift towards deeper friendship by demonstrating the trust that Joanne placed in her friend to guide her in making this major purchase. Eileen expressed pride in herself that her informally acquired “professional” skills were useful in assisting her friend. For some of the older friends in this study, professional roles were the sustenance of their friendships; however for others, professional roles were simply the launching pad for growing the friendship, as the next section illustrates.

### *Continuity and Expansion of Professional Roles: Retaining the Professional Self*

Many friends met initially through their place of employment. For some, the workplace or professions were simply the “meeting site” for friendship formation. For example, Anne spoke of how she met her intergenerational friend through her work. However, it was their shared interest in sea-swimming that facilitated the friendship moving on to their sharing other activities: having dinner parties and nights out, chatting, confiding, and having fun. For Anne and for others, taking her intergenerational friendship out of the professional setting allowed it to develop differently after the older person's retirement. The constraints of a professional relationship loosened after the retirement of the older friend and allowed the friends to enter into a more colorful and relaxed friendship stage.

For others, however, their role as a professional continued and was inextricably tied to their identity and to being an intergenerational friend. Maria, 85 years old, was retired from paid work as an educator for pre-school children. Yet, her intergenerational friendships were formed and maintained by continued involvement in a group of similarly interested parents, international interest groups, and professionals involved in promoting a particular approach to pre-school education.

Some of the participants continued to perform in professional roles in retirement from formal work, often in an informal capacity, for their own pleasure and

possibly to retain the status that these professions endow. The groups described (in an earlier paragraph) by Hugo played an essential part in maintaining his intergenerational friendships. The shared identity of being a professional was at the core of Hugo's friendships: retirement from "formal" work more than 25 years earlier did not seem to alter this identity as a professional. The friendship group is part of the process of emulating professional roles and identities beyond retirement. Brendan (72) a retired teacher, in a similar way, explained how he continued to provide career guidance to his intergenerational friends' children as he had once guided those friends when they were his students:

I taught a few of them [intergenerational friends]. It's lovely to rekindle the relationship at a different level. ... it is great to have that relationship you know and friendship over such a long time. You would have the game of golf and they [former students now intergenerational friends] would sort of bring you up to date on their own lives. One of them, Bobby, has come back to me and his daughter was doing the Central Applications Office [for third level education applicants] and the whole decisions have been made around that, and I had a lot of contact with Bobby and with his daughter you know, and that has been very interesting.

Additionally, friendships were formed through an initial introduction through the older friends' children. Although their children were the connections that enabled the friends to meet, the initial relationships transitioned to a friendship between like-minded adults. The friendships developed and deepened through further "actions"; for example, Lorna and her daughter's friend, Megan, shared a passion for golf and arranged to play together. Lunches, visits to each other's homes, days out together, and frequent holidays were shared by Lorna and Megan, as the friendship grew and flourished.

For another participant, Jennifer, her intergenerational friend Eve called in each evening "to check the windows". Jennifer had mobility constraints and Jennifer's daughter had performed this daily check on her mother before she had moved a considerable distance from Jennifer. The daughter's friend, Eve, offered to perform the task by popping in for a few minutes most days to Jennifer's home, and so the relationship grew into friendship, having endured now for more than 10 years. They enjoyed "a great chat" about their families and the happenings in their local community and often watched TV together. For these participants, although their children were the conduits to enduring intergenerational friendships, the friendships evolved and flourished through everyday shared interests, spending more time together, and simply enjoying each other's company.

A further benefit was experienced by Kathryn who met her intergenerational friend, Joyce, through her son. A shared appreciation of music and theatre led to excursions, with Joyce often driving Kathryn to the theatre and other events. Enjoying each other's company on the journey and at the events, the friends began to speak on the telephone regularly and meet for Sunday lunch and a drive afterwards. Kathryn explained how mobility problems meant she was constrained in walking any distance from her home, and since Kathryn was now in her mid-80s she no longer drove beyond her locality. These outings in her friend's company held particular value for her as they allowed her to visit places and events that she could no longer access by herself. An independent individual, it seemed that Kathryn could receive this "bounty" only through friendship and shared interests, as Joyce enjoyed the outings as much as she did.

### *Sharing Attitudes and Approaches*

The older friends spoke of the relevance of a chronological age difference in their friendships in different ways. The irrelevance of age was frequently alluded to. Tommy expressed how counting the years lived is a narrow representation of who a person is: "I think age is only a number." Age was dismissed by Iris as irrelevant:

People are people, you know, we don't wear a birthday card around our neck. No, we're quite relaxed with each other you know and people's values are different but that necessarily hasn't got to do with difference in age. Friendship is friendship no matter what the age.

A difference in values is a more significant influence on friendship formation than age difference for Iris. Reflecting a similar attitude, Sheila (79) indicated that laughter and enjoyment along with mutual respect were important considerations:

Age doesn't matter to me, to be honest. I get on with a girl of sixteen as much as I get on with a person my own age. I love the young people. I have a lot of time for them. I find the best way in life is to treat people good and to have a laugh with them and enjoy their company, and that's the way you will get on in life... What makes a good friend I think would be you treat the person nice and if you think they have a problem you do your best to help them with that problem... I get a lot of happiness from my friendships.

Recognizing a person as an individual and demonstrating an interest in that person as an individual makes age irrelevant in a friendship. Demonstrating mutual respect for the age-other is professed to hold more



importance than chronological age, as Brendan elucidated:

I think it [intergenerational friendship] is a positive thing. I mean, to me sort of working with younger people, age was never a factor. I was never conscious of my age, even at the moment now and the young lads [players in the football club] would be in first year in college, and they would be 18, 19, 20 age. I don't think they are saying 'your man's an auld fella'. I would say they are more interested in how you treat them if you treat them as people.

Brendan demonstrated an awareness of potential generational conflict, as he wished to clarify that intergenerational interaction is a "good thing". He pointed to his experience of a life spent in the company of younger people, not as friends but in a work context. He emphasized that the outcome of this experience was the realization of the importance of mutual respect for the age-other. In his current intergenerational friendships with significantly younger friends, age difference is both acknowledged (respected) and ignored (irrelevant once age difference is respected). Brendan's friendships are friendships between people, and respect for young people in general is a transferable element deployed in intergenerational friendship formation.

The attributes of the friend and the components of the friendship are important. As Simon explained, he had initial "age awareness" when he encountered age-others; however, sharing an interest overcame any age gap in his friendships and eliminated this "age awareness":

... You can relate directly to a thirty-year-old or a seventy-year-old equally, and I think...that... my involvement with musicals particularly has really got rid of any sort of age awareness that I would have, or that other people would have for me.

The disappearance of "age awareness" for Simon is promoted by a shared interest (music). The people in this study appeared to be satisfied that fondness of each other, mutual respect, enjoying each other's company, and shared interests displaced and erased age-awareness. Thus, for them, chronological age and the age gap were immaterial in friendship. Feeling the same age inside was posited by the older friends as they signaled sharing a same-age identity with their younger friends. May (75) felt that there was no "age difference" (despite a chronological age difference):

We have a very good friendship, and in their [her two intergenerational friends] company there isn't any great age difference, not in your heart.

The older friends perceived age as immaterial, as they and their friends were essentially the same *undefined* age

inside. Further elaborations, however, illustrated that the shared age identity in some instances was not undefined or ageless but youthful. Maria expressed solidarity beyond chronological age, yet here the shared age is one of youth:

No, I don't feel any age difference, because we [Maria and her intergenerational friends] are united in spirit, and the spirit is ageless. I mean, my mother used to say when she got old, "I don't feel old, I feel young because your spirit is young." You know, your spirit is young.

Maria describes an inner intangible "spirit" that she conceptualizes as being young. This "spirit" is independent of the aging body. For Maria and others, being with younger friends promotes and maintains a younger age-identity: the older friends feel young and intergenerational friendship facilitates this feeling. Maintaining a youthful age identity was spoken of by Anne, who pointed out that spending time with, listening to, and interacting with her intergenerational friends "keeps her young". Intergenerational friendship ties provide insight for the older friend into how age-others think and experience their everyday lives in contemporary society. There is a unique benefit of having younger friends with an acknowledged and sought-after outcome; that is, maintaining a youthful self and feeling young, while being chronologically old (Elliott O'Dare et al., 2019a).

A friendship characteristic that promoted this shared youthful identity is fun and laughter. Being lighthearted and being herself within the friendship promoted a shared identity for Valerie (67), as she felt the same age as her younger friend:

We have a great bit of a laugh, you know. Chatting and laughing, telling jokes. And, you know... I don't feel any older than her, you know...it's not like I'd say... 'I couldn't say that to Denise', I could say anything to her.

### *Being "Not Only Old"*

Taking the concept of feeling young further, being childlike, or adopting childlike behavior, were spoken about by people who took part in this study. Iris pondered:

...so, like, we're all children at heart so that childish at heart even at this age (91), so maybe they give you a kind of false stature that you don't really earn.

Iris feels childlike inside, and yet her years evidently lead others to confer on her a maturity or gravitas, which she stated she had not earned. Iris is alluding here to the positive stereotyping of the oldest-old as wise, an attribute that she considered to be unwarranted as she still *sometimes* feels childish at heart. Simon

outlined how he, along with his intergenerational friends, indulged in childish behavior and “play”:

There was a children’s playground, but a bunch of us friends went in, and we started using the swings and the roundabouts because there’s no other opportunity to do it. This was 11 o’clock at night (laugh). I hadn’t ever been on any of those devices in my entire life.

Awareness is illustrated in the narrative, that “being silly” and “play” and carefree enjoyment are not considered normative behavior for older people. Simon considered that it was appropriate to only use the playground under the cloak of darkness so that they would not be observed by others. Bolstered by the presence and encouragement of his younger friends, Simon fulfilled a long-held desire to use playground equipment. Simon remarked that this was one of the elements of his intergenerational friendships that he valued. Being friends with younger people allowed Simon to “be silly”; he grasped the opportunity to act in a carefree and fun way. Peer-age friendships were not seen as supporting these more carefree explorations for older adults. The maturity and gravitas that Iris spoke of as being normatively or stereotypically associated with older people are understood by Simon to be deterrents to a more light-hearted way of being and thinking. Simon shared these light-hearted ways of thinking and being, attitudes, and approaches, with his younger friends; and in this way he is being “not only old”.

Older adults are not *only* older adults. They carry forward the interests, roles, and statuses that they have formed throughout the life course, along with new interests and pursuits. The older friends further illuminated the experiences of feeling younger and doing things that spanned childlike and youthful adult behavior. This process, a mishmash of selves, can be visualized by using the analogy of a Babushka, or Russian doll. “Babushka” in Russian means “old woman”, and this is the outer, visible surface of the doll. However, contained within are additional dolls, which each in turn contain another figure, until the final doll at the core is a small, solid figure that here signifies childhood and childishness as retained by the participants, although it plays a smaller part as they age. The friends in this study spoke about feeling the same inside as their younger friends; they held an all-age identity (a layered yet simultaneously existing mishmash of selves).

#### *Being Challenged and Being Curious through Differences*

“Differences” were perceived as being an interesting element of intergenerational friendships. None of the participants indicated that these differences led to friendship cessation. Instead, the older friends managed or valued the differences. Anne provided insight into

differences in opinions between herself and her younger friends and described them as “intergenerational” in nature. She proclaimed:

We would rarely disagree, but when we do, it would be intergenerational. I would have a view on that wouldn’t necessarily coincide with her, Beth’s, view. .... One of her [Beth’s] daughters was having a teenage birthday party and we [Anne, and her two intergenerational friends, Beth and Lena] were joking and laughing about it, and she [Beth] was saying, “I don’t know how I am going to keep control, you know (laugh)”, ... and I said, “you know, as long as nobody ends up pregnant or whatever, nine months later that they don’t come to you with what happened at your party?” ... and they both [Beth and Lena] said “well sure that could happen anywhere.” Whereas I would be saying it definitely won’t happen on my watch (laugh). That [opposing points of view] was definitely intergenerational, I would be taking steps to make sure that nobody got pregnant. I have often seemed much more old-fashioned in my views.

Anne went on to clarify how these intergenerational differences add an element of interest to friendship for her. Engaging in friendship with younger women exposed Anne to alternative family practices and attitudes:

Well I reckon that it keeps me young...being involved with them. I am interested in their views on their relationships with their husbands. [This] would be very different to the relationship that I had with my husband. You know, their husbands are very hands on and they are all, everybody is very involved with the children. Whereas my husband would have been very old fashioned...it is different, and I find that interesting.

### **Discussion: Challenging Age Homophily**

Social interaction matters for friendship formation. Smart (2007) stressed the importance of a personal life approach in social research; as a personal life is “lived in many different places and spaces...and it forms a range of connections” (p. 29). Social interactions – through interests, hobbies and leisure pursuits, and employment, along with numerous ad-hoc opportunities – are sought out to form intergenerational friendships. The participants demonstrated a willingness to form intergenerational friendships and to seek a “common ground” with the age-other. A homophily of doing-and-being provided support for the nascent intergenerational encounters to flourish and evolve into friendships. The participants alluded to the joy and pleasure experienced through being an intergenerational friend. This occurred alongside the transitions, changes, challenges, and physical limitations that aging and an aging body may bring.

Kaufman (1986) posited that despite physical and social changes, some older people continue to feel ageless inside. However, in this research, participants are not speaking of feeling ageless, instead they signaled that they were concomitantly feeling *all* ages. An all-age identity is portrayed by the participants; they can at times “feel the same inside” as their younger friends, and yet they can also feel older and act on this. The people who took part in this study are not denying their chronological age; they do not deny that they are old. Kaufman (1986, 1993) argued that “old people do not perceive meaning in aging itself so much as they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age” (p. 16). The participants in this research are rejecting the ubiquity of behaviors and characteristics ascribed to older people through social norms, age norms, and expectations. The participants choose to “do” and to “be” as they deem appropriate as they age, irrespective of societal expectations concerning the appropriateness of intergenerational friendships.

In research, the common theme in relation to friendship is that it is a relationship predicated on “sameness”; that is, homophily. Age homophily is argued to be a central factor in friendship formation. This approach reflects a social construction of older adults as unsuited to forming naturally occurring, equal, mutually enjoyable friendships with younger non-kin adults (Elliott O'Dare et al., 2019b). However, in intergenerational friendship, the “sameness” that maintains the intergenerational friendship is a “homophily of doing-and-being”. First, engaging in intergenerational friendships emphasizes the commonalities shared by the friends, regardless of chronological age. Second, the friends, through attitudes and approaches, concur that “differences” are perceived as useful, interesting, and informative. A homophily of “doing-and-being” therefore draws the younger and older adults together, facilitating the growth and maintenance of the friendship. We acknowledge that there were other significant elements of homophily in our sample, such as that most friendships in the sample were between people of the same gender, nationality, and ethnicity. However, this does not detract from the central discovery of the insignificance of age difference, and how doing and being are at the heart of the commonalities and connectedness that older adults value in their intergenerational friendships.

It would be incorrect to surmise that older adults do not have different priorities or experience differences in their approach to maintaining and conducting their friendships. Being at a different stage in the life course, along with managing the aging body, did present difficulties in the form of challenges or a “downside” of intergenerational friendships; for example, a disparity in stamina was frequently mentioned. The portrayals in this study challenge previous research (see Rook, 1989)

which outlined a myriad of strains in friendship in general. Only one participant, Lydia, spoke of intergenerational friendship termination caused by age-related strains. Few conflicts were discussed by the participants in relation to their intergenerational friendships. Differences and disagreements were mentioned, but they were generally not considered as “strains” or “conflict” but instead were considered a *positive* aspect of the friendship.

The certainty echoed by many researchers that “successful” friendships are dependent on homophily is challenged in this study, as “difference” emerged as an important and positive characteristic of intergenerational friendship. Being born at a particular time with the prevailing technological, cultural, and social norms associated with that time provided an intriguing difference between the intergenerational friends. May (2011) emphasized that “identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others” (p. 88). Different ways of “doing and being” proved to be interesting, informative, and useful to the friends as they exchanged insights. These differences had positive aspects as the older friends spoke about guiding and advising their intergenerational friends. The age difference supports the friendship as the older friends’ understanding of the processes of aging has provided them with experience and insight in certain domains, such as becoming and being older and managing the transitions involved. The younger friends in turn sought to inform and guide their older friends in relation to “new” contemporary issues; for example, technology and awareness of new social norms. Older friends carry within them an all-age identity, carrying forward interests, roles, and statuses that they have formed throughout the life course, and they draw on these as resources in their intergenerational friendships. They encounter new perspectives on how their life could have been lived through the intergenerational relationship, which offers older friends new vantage points on life stages that they have already lived.

## Conclusions

This article has challenged the dominance of age homophily in friendship research with a new conceptualization of *homophily of doing-and-being*. The intergenerational friendships explored in this study, many of which had endured through adulthood and into old age, were formed and sustained through the homophily of doing-and-being that has three components. First, being “friends in action”; second, being “not only old”, and lastly sharing “attitudes and approaches” to friendship and to life.

The novelty and significance of the homophily of doing-and-being are apparent because most extant research on

older adults emphasizes how different older adults are when compared with younger adults, being a separate group with distinct characteristics and insurmountable differences. The social construction of aging and older people emerged from the accounts of the participants as a significant influence on how these participants perceived themselves and others, and they conducted their friendships and pursuits accordingly. The way in which this research revealed a homophily of doing-and-being working within intergenerational friendship contravenes current theorizing in friendship literature that older people have little in common with “the age-other” and furthermore challenges the norm of age homophily in friendship and age-normative assumptions in general.

Although Biggs (2018) situated the possibility for intergenerational complementarity within the family, workplace interaction, society, and policy, we contend that intergenerational friendship may present an exemplar of intergenerational complementarity at the level of the everyday in older people’s lives. We argue that homophily and difference elide in the process of “doing” intergenerational friendship. The older friends were aware of the characteristics, attitudes, and interests that they shared with their younger friends, but such commonalities often co-existed with differences, regarding, for example, their experience of gendered division of labor and social norms. Instead of pushing them apart, such differences were a source of interest for the friends. Our discovery of the centrality of doing-and-being, and the relative insignificance of age homophily, constitute a new way of looking at friendship, and a new way of conceptualizing how (older) adults make and maintain friendships.

Given the dearth of research and literature on the topic of intergenerational friendship, and our nascent conceptualization of a homophily of doing-and-being, we call on social scientists to initiate new investigations of adult intergenerational friendships. Further research focusing on intergenerational friendships from the perspective of the “younger” friend (a recognized limitation of this study as outlined earlier) may add valuable understanding on how homophily of doing-and-being works from the age-other perspective. Additionally, exploring how intergenerational friendship is perceived and practiced by those from across the gender spectrum would make an interesting addition to the literature on intergenerational friendship and homophily. The use of Adams and Blieszner’s (1994) integrative – incorporating sociological (structural and cultural) and psychological (personal characteristics) – conceptual framework previously used to theorize “general” friendship, if applied to intergenerational friendship, would make an interesting and innovative contribution to scholarship. Blieszner et al. (2019) call for further research on the “darker” elements of friendship, and

we propose that a study focusing on exploring “broken” intergenerational friendships and the process of intergenerational friendship cessation would build on our research and expand out to conceptualize alternative ways of “differences” manifesting in intergenerational friendship.

Much of the policy enacted in contemporary societies is concerned with the well-being of people as they negotiate aging and older age. The research findings set out here have implications for policy and practice, in contributing to the understanding of how “ordinary” older people negotiate their search for enjoyment and belonging in older age. Organizations and individuals with interests within the broader context of the third sector (befriending, community and social inclusion, loneliness interventions) and state interventions (in relation to ageism; aging in place; successful, healthy or active aging) should find the insights developed through this research insightful for their ongoing work.

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