



Matilda W. Riley

1911–2004

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
David Mechanic*

©2018 National Academy of Sciences.
Any opinions expressed in this memoir are
those of the author and do not
necessarily reflect the views of the
National Academy of Sciences.



NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

MATILDA WHITE RILEY

April 19, 1911–November 14, 2004

Elected to the NAS, 1994

Matilda White Riley was a pioneer in the field of social gerontology. Directing and inspiring other close colleagues, she and they created age stratification as a scientific endeavor, showing the interaction of aging over the life course with historical time and the complex interdependencies of biological, psychological, and social processes. She was equally distinguished in her professional leadership, in the institutions she was part of, in sociology and social science, and more broadly in the nation and world.

Riley earned a bachelor's degree (magna cum laude) in 1931 and a master's degree in 1937, both from Radcliffe College. Her varied career began in 1933 when she became a research assistant at Harvard University. From 1939 till 1949 she was a researcher and executive at the Market Research Company of America, a firm she established with her father. During that period (1942-1944) she also worked for the U.S. War Production Board as a consulting economist. In 1950 she joined the faculty of Rutgers University, where she remained till 1973. She then became the first woman full professor at Bowdoin College, serving until 1981. In 1979, at the age of 68, she joined the NIH's National Institute on Aging, retiring in 1998.



Matilda White Riley

By David Mechanic

Photograph courtesy National Institutes of Health, Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

Matilda White was born in Boston on April 19, 1911. She attended Brunswick High School in Maine, where she met her future life's partner, John "Jack" Riley, Jr. Matilda's and Jack's work and careers were closely intertwined over the next 70 years.

Matilda's career was hardly linear. Like other talented women of her day she overcame many barriers in her research, teaching, and scientific administrative roles. She was best known for her contributions to developing the aging-and-life-course perspective in sociology and other disciplines as an active research enterprise. She was later distinguished by her 20-year career at the National Institute on Aging (NIA) of the National Institutes of Health. Beginning at age 68, following a full academic career, she developed

and directed the NIA's grant program on social and behavioral research and served as a tenacious and effective ambassador for these disciplines at the NIH.¹

Matilda and Jack married when he was a sociology graduate student at Harvard. Matilda began her career in 1932-33 as a research assistant in the newly formed sociology department at Harvard. While a mother of two children, John III and Lucy, she was vice-president and research director between 1939 and 1949 of the Market Research Company of America (a firm she established with her father.) She also was chief consulting economist for the U.S. War Production Board during World War II. Her academic career began in 1950 at Rutgers College and continued there until 1973; she was also a visiting professor in the graduate school at New York University from 1954 to 1961. From 1949 to 1960 she also served as the executive officer of the American Sociological Association (ASA) and later became its 77th president (1985-86). She joined Bowdoin College in 1973 as the first woman faculty member appointed to a full professorship.

Matilda brought to her teaching a strong background in sociological theory, influenced by Professor Talcott Parsons at Harvard, and a strong empirical research orientation from her earlier work in market research. She taught for many years a two-semester course at Rutgers on the integration of theory and methods, and in 1963 she published a highly successful two-volume research methods textbook.²

Her first efforts in the aging area came when she was invited by the Russell Sage Foundation to review what was known about aging in the social and behavioral sciences. Between 1968 and 1972 she and her close colleagues—Jack, Anne Foner, Marilyn Johnson, Mary E. Moore, Beth Hess, and Barbara K. Roth—along with other contributors, published an influential three-volume work titled *Aging and Society*.³ This effort became the basis of her scholarly work and organizational efforts throughout the remainder of her life.

Distinctive about Matilda's work was not only a broad and systematic theoretical sociological framework but one linked to an appreciation of empirical data and appropriate methodological approaches. At that time, theory and empirical research



Matilda White Riley in 1973.

(Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.)

were largely separate. She presented an orientation, as well as many new concepts and perspectives, that closely bound aging theory and empirical research involving sociology and many related disciplines and research endeavors. Like all scholars, she built on earlier work on the life course, and particularly Norman Ryder's brilliant paper on cohorts and social change.⁴ The work of Matilda and her colleagues made it abundantly clear that cross-sectional differences in age alone could not adequately capture developmental or biographical patterns of the life course and that cohort differences are not simply a product of historical periods but depend also on the size and composition of cohorts. As she and her co-authors noted in the introduction to this series:

...the structure of the society and the roles it affords are simultaneously changing as norms, mores, attitudes, or knowledge change, or as wars or economic depressions may occur. It is not the same society with which each new cohort of individuals interact, just as the nature of individuals is not constant. Thus, a full understanding of either requires a third approach that combines the other two: a study of the sequence of cohorts as they fit together within the changing society (Riley, et al., Vol. 1, pp. 1-2.)

Matilda argued that appropriate interpretation of age differences requires study of cohort trajectories within the context of changing social structures and contexts. It was this understanding of the shortcomings of much research up to that time that led Matilda throughout her career to encourage and develop long-term longitudinal research and to build data archives supporting the study and advancement of our understanding of the aging process in appropriate context. As she noted:

Yet a good deal of research, failing to distinguish between cross-sectional and longitudinal views, attempts to reduce one to the other. As a consequence, there is considerable danger of fallacious interpretation, of erroneously inferring that differences among age categories in the society are due to the aging of individuals. (Riley, et al., Vol. 1, pp. 7-8.)

She and one of her colleagues at the NIA, Richard Suzman, foresaw the need to build an appropriate research infrastructure. Such efforts helped construct an extraordinary knowledge that now serves social and behavioral scientists well.

From a theoretical perspective, Matilda and her colleagues made clear to the aging field the essential distinction between age as a property of social systems and age as a property

of the individual. How roles are structured by age in any society is distinct from individual aging. It was this important distinction that shaped her later theoretical work on such concepts as structural lag and age integration. A crucial issue for her was the fit between the aging of individuals and the organization of roles in the social structure, both changing over time. Whether because of social, economic, environmental, or technological change, Matilda saw, the needs of and opportunities for persons of varying ages may be more or less compatible with role opportunities, and that incompatibilities, should they occur, lead to significant social strain. She was particularly concerned with the failure of social structures to adapt to demographic change and to adjust to more older cohorts enjoying improved health and wider capacities. She increasingly focused on the interface between age and structural lag, where the social structure was making poor accommodations to such social changes as increased female work participation, economic shifts and unemployment, and new educational demands. Her notion of an age-integrated society was one without age barriers to opportunities in work, education, recreation, or anything else. This short description hardly begins to capture the richness and sophistication of her 16 books and numerous articles and chapters addressing the many aspects of these issues.

In 1979 Matilda was invited by the NIA's founding director, Robert Butler, and NIH Director Donald Fredrickson to develop an NIA grant program on social and behavioral research and to help guide disciplines relevant to aging and health throughout the institutes. In earlier decades, most social and behavioral research and training had been focused within the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which defined these disciplines as basic sciences related to its mission. By 1980, however, with the election of Ronald Reagan and the subsequent politically driven attack on social research, the NIMH refocused its program toward mental disorder and away from research on broader social issues. The program Matilda developed with NIH colleagues, as well as important outside advisors and the continuing input from Jack, provided crucial support for much of social and behavioral science research not only relevant to aging but more broadly to health and welfare. It also supported the data archives and infrastructure for longitudinal work that were used fruitfully then and increasingly since throughout the social and behavioral sciences. The initial program developed by Matilda and her colleagues focused on three areas: the issue of older people in a changing society and its implications for the population, as well as age-related economic, political, and societal structures; psychological and social components of aging with regard to biopsychological aging and cognitive aging; and older people and social institutions. The program was multidisci-

plinary and informed by emphases on the dynamic character of aging and the succession of cohorts; the social and cultural variability of aging; and the many facets of aging emphasizing a biopsychosocial approach.

As the program developed, new agendas emerged, such as behavioral geriatrics research, the oldest old, forecasting life expectancy, and active life expectancy. The program's ten-year report reiterated areas requiring new conceptual and methodological approaches: opportunities for older people in society, social institutions and a changing world; the diverse populations of older people and in particular those with Alzheimer's disease; older people's relationships with people of all ages; the full life course; intellectual competencies of middle and later life; older people of the future; and multiple facets of aging.⁵ Consistent with Matilda's entire-life agenda, the program emphasized the need for further developing the research tools for new interventions such as field trials, clinical trials, and new research designs.

To simply know the agenda is to miss Matilda's power and persuasiveness as she championed it within the NIA, the NIH, and among the relevant disciplines, professional organizations, and national and local groups. She was indefatigable. As the program developed, she became an advocate for promoting health and effective functioning in later life and led a new program in this area. She maintained a prodigious correspondence with scientists, administrators, and friends, seeking to persuade them of scientific opportunities in the area as well as the opportunity to anticipate and contribute to resolving emerging issues.

Matilda provided leadership on important committees on behavior and health. Among others, she co-chaired the joint Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration (ADAMHA) and NIH Steering Committee for the Institute of Medicine's health and behavior study, chaired the trans-NIH Work Group on Health and Behavior (1982-1991), and was the senior NIH spokesperson for the behavioral and social sciences.

As those of us who served on the Aging Institute Council or as advisors to the Institute knew, the challenges were difficult and highly demanding. Developing and maintaining the budget for this broad, forward-looking program was challenging in the context of the naïve belief and goal that every available dollar had to be targeted to solving the Alzheimer's crisis by the year 2000. Matilda fought like a lion for her agenda. Developing and supporting long-term research data and methods is rarely a politically attractive option in the battle for resources, but because of the advocacy and persistence of Matilda, Richard Suzman, and Ronald P. Abeles, the research community is far better positioned today to address fundamental issues of aging, health, and society.

Matilda's contributions were broadly recognized and honored as she continued her many efforts into her 90s, including her contributions to the literature. She was dedicated to her role at the NIH and would have stayed till her last days, but her husband Jack's waning health and desire to return to his childhood home in Maine led Matilda to accept appointment as the only Social Scientist Emeritus ever at NIH and return to her beloved Bowdoin College in 1998.

Possibly overshadowed by Matilda's many public accomplishments is her service as a teacher and mentor at Rutgers and New York University, and the dedication and accomplishments of some of her students and mentees to the study of aging and the life course, especially Anne Foner, Marilyn Johnson, and Kathleen Bond. She built a modern sociology-anthropology department at Bowdoin College and was named the Daniel B. Fayerweather Professor of Political Economy and Sociology in 1975; in 1996 the building housing the department was named in her honor, and she received honorary doctoral degrees from Bowdoin(1972), Rutgers (1983), Radcliffe (1994), and the State University of New York at Albany (1997).

Matilda was elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences in 1994, the Institute of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine) in 1979, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1987. In addition to the presidency of the American Sociological Association, she was elected president of the Eastern Sociological Society in 1976, and she and Jack served as co-presidents of the District of Columbia Sociological Society in 1984-85. She held leadership positions in many other professional organizations, including the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Gerontological Society of America. She received awards from these and many other organizations, among them the United States Presidential Meritorious Rank Award. In 2001 the NIH organized a lectureship in her honor, and in 2006 the institute's Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research established the Matilda White Riley Lecture and Award in the Behavioral and Social Sciences, given each year.⁶



Matilda White Riley at Bowdoin College for the dedication of a building named in her honor.

(Courtesy of the George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College Library, Brunswick, Maine.)

As Ronald Abeles has noted, the title for the first lecture series in her honor at the NIH entitled, “Soaring: An Exploration of Science and the Life Course,” was adapted from her first publication in 1931 at age 20 with her father, entitled “Gliding and Soaring: An Introduction to Motorless Flight.” She took the name “Mat White” to appear more masculine, since the publishers believed no one would buy a book on this topic written by a 20-year-old girl.

Matilda is survived by her daughter, Lucy Ellen Sallick of Westport, Connecticut, her son, John W. Riley III of Everett, Washington, eight grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. For hundreds of colleagues and students who benefitted from her generosity and public advocacy, she has been, and will continue to be, sorely missed.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to many others who knew Matilda and her work over many years, and who worked with her, for many details of her biography. For a detailed intellectual evaluation of her legacy, see D. Dannefer, P. Uhlenberg, A. Foner, and R. P. Abeles. On the shoulders of a giant: the legacy of Matilda White Riley for Gerontology. *J. Gerontol. Soc. Sci.* 60B(2005):S296-S304. Available at <https://academic.oup.com/psychsocgerontology/article/60/6/S296/813176>. Accessed January 25, 2018. Also, R. P. Abeles. Soaring: celebrating Matilda White Riley (1911-2004), Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, NIH. Available at <https://obssr.od.nih.gov/about-us/matilda-white-riley-award/>. Accessed January 25, 2018. Other useful biographical items that I drew on include: *Bowdoin Magazine*, Matilda White Riley Honorary, 1972. Accessed at <https://obituaries.bowdoin.edu/matilda-white-riley-honorary-1972/>. *Bowdoin Campus News*. Remarks by Karyn A. Loscocco '78, Professor, SUNY-Albany, delivered at the Matilda White Riley House Dedication, May 8, 1996. Available at <https://www.bowdoin.edu/news/archives/1bowdoincampus/000391.shtml>.

Matilda White Riley. Wikipedia. accessed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matilda_White_Riley.

NIH Record Obituaries. Sociology Trailblazer Matilda Riley Mourned. Accessed at https://nihrecord.nih.gov/newsletters/2004/12_07_2004/obits.htm.

American Sociological Association. Matilda White Riley. April 19, 1911 - November 14, 2004. Accessed at <http://www.asanet.org/matilda-white-riley>.

2. Riley, M. W. 1963. *Sociological Research* (with J. W. Riley, Jr., R. M. Cohn, M. E. Moore, M. E. Johnson, S. S. Boocock, and A. Foner.) 2 Vols. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World. Inc.

3. The three volumes are the product of a project funded by the Russell Sage Foundation from 1968 to 1972. There were a number of colleagues involved in the project and there appear to be several versions of these publications with some differences in the listed authorship. M. W. Riley, with A. Foner, M. E. Moore, B. Hess and B. K. Roth. 1968. *Aging and Society. Vol. I: An Inventory of Research Findings*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; M. W. Riley, with J. W. Riley, Jr., and M. Johnson, 1969. *Vol. II: Aging and the Professions*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; M. W. Riley, with M. Johnson and A. Foner, 1972. *Vol. III: A Sociology of Age Stratification*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. A reference incorporating all three volumes is listed in the New York Public Library: M. W. Riley, A. Foner, and M. Johnson 1968-1972. *Aging and Society*, suggesting that Foner and Johnson were the major co-authors and collaborators for the project. These volumes are electronically available through Project Muse (muse.jhu.edu) and through jstor (www.jstor.org).

4. Ryder, N. B. 1965. The cohort as a concept in the study of social change. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 30:843-861.
5. Working document. The Behavioral and Social Research Program at the National Institute on Aging, Behavioral and Social Research Program, November 1990.
6. Matilda White Riley Lecture for Excellence in Behavioral and Social Sciences. National Institutes of Health. <https://obssr.od.nih.gov/events/matilda-white-riley-lecture/>.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1951 With J. W. Riley, Jr. A sociological approach to communications research. *Public Opinion Quar.* 15:445-460.
- 1954 With J. W. Riley, Jr., and J. Toby. *Sociological Studies in Scale Analysis*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- 1959 With J. W. Riley, Jr. Mass communication and the social system. In *Sociology Today: Problems and Prospects*. Edited by R. K. Merton, L. Broom, and L. S. Cottrell, Jr., pp. 537-578. New York: Basic Books.
- 1963 With J. W. Riley, Jr., R. M. Cohn, M. E. Moore, M. E. Johnson, S. S. Boocock, and A. Foner. *Sociological Research*, 2 vols. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.
- 1968 With A. Foner, in association with M. E. Moore, B. Hess, B. K. Roth, M. E. Johnson, and V. E. Schein. *Aging and Society, Vol. 1: An Inventory of Research Findings*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- 1969 With A. Foner, B. Hess, and M. L. Toby. Socialization for the middle and later years. In *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*. Edited by D. A. Goslin, pp. 951-982. Chicago: Rand McNally and Co.
- With J. W. Riley, Jr., and M. E. Johnson, eds. *Aging and Society, Vol. 2: Aging and the Professions*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- 1971 Social gerontology and the age stratification of society. *The Gerontologist* 11:79-87.
- 1972 With M. Johnson and A. Foner. *Aging and Society, Vol. 3: A Sociology of Age Stratification*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- 1973 Aging and cohort succession: Interpretations and misinterpretations. *Public Opinion Quar.* 37:35-49.
- 1978 With J. Waring. Age, cohorts, and drug use. In *Longitudinal Research on Drug Use: Empirical Findings and Methodological Issues*. Edited by D. B. Kandel, pp. 225-233. Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.
- 1983 The family in an aging society: a matrix of latent relationships. *J. Family Issues* 4:439-454.

- 1985 With R. Suzman. Introducing the “oldest old.” *Milbank Memorial Fund Quar.* 63:175-186.
- Age strata in social systems. In *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences*. Edited by R. H. Binstock and E. Shanas, pp. 369-411. New York: Van Nostrand and Reinhold.
- 1986 With J. W. Riley, Jr. Longevity and social structure: the added years. *Daedalus* 115:51-75.
- 1987 On the significance of age in sociology. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 52:1-14.
- With R. P. Abeles. Longevity: social structure and cognitive aging. In *Cognitive Functioning and Social Structures Over the Life Course*. Edited by C. Schooler and K. W. Schaie, pp.161-175. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- 1988 With A. Foner and J. Waring. Sociology of age. In *Handbook of Sociology*. Edited by N. Smelser, pp. 243-290. Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage Publications.
- 1989 With J. W. Riley, Jr. The lives of older people and changing social roles. *Ann. Amer. Acad. Pol. Soc. Sci.* 503:14-28.
- 1994 Changing lives and changing social structures: Common concerns of social science and public health. *Amer. J. Public Health* 84:1214-1217.
- With J. W. Riley, Jr. Structural lag: past and future. In *Age and Structural Lag*. Edited by M. W. Riley, R. L. Kahn, and A. Foner, pp. 15-36. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Aging and society: Past, present, and future (1993 Kent Lecture). *The Gerontologist* 34:436-446.
- With R. L. Kahn and A. Foner, editors. *Age and Structural Lag: Society's Failure to Provide Meaningful Opportunities in Work, Family, and Leisure*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- 2000 With J. W. Riley, Jr. Age integration: conceptual and historical background. *The Gerontologist* 40:266-270.

Published since 1877, *Biographical Memoirs* are brief biographies of deceased National Academy of Sciences members, written by those who knew them or their work. These biographies provide personal and scholarly views of America's most distinguished researchers and a biographical history of U.S. science. *Biographical Memoirs* are freely available online at www.nasonline.org/memoirs.