

**IDENTITY AND ITS MAINTENANCE IN LATER LIFE:  
A SOCIAL NETWORK APPROACH**

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A SOCIAL NETWORK APPROACH**

By

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines what growing old means for the older women's sense of self-identity. Some gerontologists argue that old age constitutes a period of role loss with detrimental impact on identity. A sizable body of data do not support this assumption. The underlying assumption of this study is that identity emerges and is sustained through social interaction. Thus the research focuses on (1) the meaning of 'being old' as defined by older women and (2) the extent to which a positive identity can be retained through social network involvement with family, friends and community leisure activities. Instead of focusing on what is lost, the emphasis was on determining what role relationships are retained and established in old age, and the extent to which these serve to maintain a positive self image.

The research is based on interviews with 142 women over age 65 living in the town of Bridgewater, Nova Scotia. The principle component of this sample comprised 101 women living in their own homes or apartments (i.e. community-dwelling). Most of the analysis is based on this sample. However, where comparative analysis is useful, these data are supplemented with information from interviews with 31 residents of senior citizen apartment complexes and 10 residents of a nursing home.

The findings indicate that the elderly women studied here generally do not view themselves as 'elderly' or 'old'. Age identity is



found to be largely situational and more relevant to some interactions than others. The majority have managed to retain a positive identity which is deeply embedded within their informal role involvements and social network ties. As a result, the loss of more formal role relationships had only limited impact on identity. The findings also indicate that a relatively stable small community appears to offer advantages for identity management in old age.

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## INTRODUCTION

To apply the label 'old woman' in our society is to set a group of people apart from others; it is to identify them as objects of ambiguous meaning and questionable value. The old person may not feel 'old' - she may feel little different than she did years ago or, she may feel somewhat differently about herself but what she feels, what this experience means to her, may not be at all congruent with the meanings shared by those who have labeled her.

This study examines the older woman's experience of growing old. It is concerned with developing a subjective understanding of what growing old means for the older woman's sense of self-identity. The theoretical framework guiding the study is the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Maintaining a viable and meaningful sense of self can be a precarious effort at any period in life; however, in later life the likelihood of being classified in the social category of 'old' creates special problems for identity management. 'Oldness', Matthews (1979a:73) maintains, "spoils identity". "Even though the old woman does not think of herself as old, she must deal with situations in which other people think she is old". This study looks at how older women do, in fact, confront the aging experience and the ambiguity of an old-age identity.

One central objective of this study is to analyze and present the meaning of 'being old' as it is conveyed by the elderly respondents.

Self-conception affects our aspirations and orientation to life (Gergen, 1971); it exerts an important influence on our behavior (Rosenberg, 1981). Consequently, "much human behavior and social interaction is identity directed - motivated by a desire to maintain and enhance identity" (George, 1980:17). A second major objective of this study is to explore the issue of identity maintenance in later life. Based on the premise that identity is created and sustained in the process of social interaction, this research examines the older woman's involvement in a process whereby she negotiates, with others, a meaningful sense of self. Identity maintenance is explored primarily by examining social network participation in later life.

Symbolic interactionists view the relationship between humankind and society as a dialectical one (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Hewitt, 1976). Human beings act upon the social world helping to shape and modify it, while the social world also acts upon or influences them (Mead, 1934). In this research, it is assumed that older women are capable of influencing their social networks as well as being influenced by them. Hypothesizing that older women will use their personal networks as a medium through which identity may be maintained, this study examines possible strategies for identity maintenance.

This study, in focus and method, is both a social psychological and ethnographic interpretation of the aging experience. The methods employed are derived from the standard ethnographic methods of participant observation, and both formal and informal intensive interviewing. The researcher resided in the community under study and participated first hand in as many life events as was possible.

This research, while not a community study, is concerned with the role of community context in identity creation and maintenance. Developing a contextual understanding is important for other people and "settings" provide "the taken-for-granted background for the definition of self" (Matthews, 1979b:44). The data were collected in Atlantic Canada. The Town of Bridgewater (the setting is described in detail in Chapter Two) was chosen as the location for this study because it represents a 'progressive' small town. It is a town that has experienced considerable change in recent years, while also maintaining a degree of stability that is unlikely to be found in a large urban setting. Bridgewater thus provides an environmental context where one can explore the older woman's aging experience within a realm of both change and continuity.

This study is organized into three parts. Part one (chapters I and II) briefly outlines the theoretical framework and research orientation, and presents a review and analysis of relevant literature. It also outlines in detail the major research objectives guiding the study and the research methodology.

Part two (chapters III and IV) focuses on the nature and basis of identity in later life. Chapter three looks at 'old' as one dimension of identity and examines the meaning of 'being old' as conveyed by the elderly respondents. The phenomenon of age identification is examined, focusing on the circumstances in which older women apply the label 'old' to themselves. The relationship between age identification and such variables as - chronological age, socio-economic status, perceived health status, marital status and the views of

significant others - is examined. In chapter four, an attempt is made to interpret the subjective meaning of identity as opposed to the conventional objective conceptualization of the concept. George's (1980) conceptualization of identity as "the configuration of self-perceptions and self-evaluations that are important and meaningful to the individual" provides the focus for this analysis.

Part three (chapters V, VI, VII and VIII) examines the relationship between social network involvement and identity maintenance in old age. The nature of the older woman's networks and the meanings associated with these ties are described in detail and the way in which each network contributes to identity maintenance is analyzed. Chapter five begins this analysis describing and analyzing the elderly woman's relations with her family. In chapter six, relations with friends are examined, while chapter seven looks at relations with neighbours and the older woman's leisure activities and organizational involvements. Chapter eight elaborates further on the analysis of the way in which the elderly women studied here have managed to sustain meaningful identities in old age. It examines in detail their position in relation to four principal types of resources: (1) number of ties, (2) strength and meaning of ties, (3) context and, (4) personal resources. Finally, chapter nine presents a brief summary of the study and discusses some of the implications of this research.

## CHAPTER ONE

### SOCIAL NETWORKS AND IDENTITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS RESEARCH

This chapter presents the conceptual orientation of this research and a review of the research literature related to the topic of identity in later life. The relevant research material is analyzed and the major objectives and questions guiding the study are outlined. There is, to date, no body of research literature dealing explicitly with the topic of identity in later life and adopting, at the same time, a network perspective. Thus, this literature review will first examine the concept of identity as it has been applied to studies of later life, and will then look at research literature dealing with the concept of social network as it relates to studies of aging and the aged.

#### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND RESEARCH ORIENTATION

This study originated out of a concern with a paradox in the social gerontological literature. According to a significant proportion of the literature, the stresses and losses of old age have a detrimental and negative effect on the older persons' self-identity. Indeed, according to Rosow, one of the leading proponents of this view, the process of aging represented an "actual life crisis"; the elderly are deprived of "vital functions that underlie their sense of worth, their self-conceptions, and self-esteem" (Rosow, 1973:82). On the other hand, a second body of literature countered this view pointing out that available research evidence does not support this assumption.



Proponents note that, although investigators have expected the social and physical losses of old age would result in negative self-evaluations and identity losses, "available evidence suggests that self-concept and self-esteem remain remarkably stable over time" (George, 1980:21). Moreover, the evidence suggests that most elderly individuals do "maintain a positive sense of self" (George, 1980:43). Stimulated by this paradox, the present study addresses two issues: (1) What actually is the nature and basis of identity in later life? and (2) Given that identity is maintained, how, in fact, is it maintained?

The perspective and orientation on which this research is based stands in contrast to the orientation adopted by proponents of the "identity crisis" view of old age. The present study takes an interpretive approach (see Marshall, 1980a) whereas the identity crisis approach adopts a normative perspective on aging. From the normative view, society is seen as made up of role-behavior and the socialization process is emphasized. The emphasis on the internalization of roles "implies that social norms become constitutive, rather than merely regulative, of the self" (Marshall, 1980a:51). From this perspective, aging is seen as problematical in that there is no socialization for old age and emphasis is placed on role and status loss. The individual is viewed as passively enduring the assaults and losses of aging, while becoming increasingly cut off from society.

In contrast, the interpretive approach views the human being as creator of the social world, constructing a meaningful reality through negotiation with others. The individual as social actor is portrayed as

"an individual searching for meaning, constructing identity, and seeking to direct interactions with others in ways compatible with that sense of identity" (Marshall, 1980a:54 emphasis mine). Adopting an interpretive orientation to the social world and human interaction, and building upon previous research (e.g. Sokolovsky and Cohen, 1978; Matthews, 1979a; Tindale, 1980; Corin, 1982), this study aims at demonstrating that older people are actively involved in shaping their own aging experience and managing their self-identities. Instead of focusing on roles lost in old age, this research focuses on the roles (both formal and informal) and relationships in which elderly people are involved. The objective is to become better informed on the way in which older people do participate in society and to gain an understanding of the symbolic significance their relationships and interactions hold for them.

Anselm Strauss (1969) describes identity as an "elusive concept". Certainly, the concept has been variously defined and used. Some researchers focus on only one or more dimensions, while others employ a broader conceptualization. From the symbolic interactionist perspective identity is conceptualized as a social product developed and maintained in the process of social interaction. Identity is "connected with the fateful appraisals made of oneself - by oneself and by others" (Strauss, 1969:9). It is not a static entity but an ongoing process, "an enterprise continuing throughout the whole life course" (Breytspraak, 1984:18). Both change and continuity are considered to be essential components in the conceptualization of self. Identity, as Erikson (1959:118) reminds us, is a fragile entity; it "is never gained nor maintained once and for all", but is "continually lost and

regained". McCall and Simmons (1978:163) similarly argue that "identity, like freedom, must be won and rewon every day. Each identity must be continually legitimated..." Identities are legitimated through a negotiation process with others. This study is based upon the central premise that, in order to study identity, the researcher must focus on the interaction process where self-identity emerges and is sustained.

As Strauss explains:

The student of identity must necessarily be deeply interested in interaction for it is in, and because of, face-to-face interaction that so much appraisal - of self and others - occurs (1969:44).

The interaction process is examined here through the concept of social network.

The meaning of growing old is also a central focus throughout this study. With one or two notable exceptions, meaning has generally been ignored in studies on aging. Similarly, it is difficult to find studies dealing specifically with identity in old age, though there are studies which focus on such dimensions of identity as subjective age identification and identity maintenance. These and other work related to identity and aging will be analyzed throughout this chapter.

#### PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON IDENTITY IN LATER LIFE

##### The Meaning Of 'Being Old'

To understand the issue of identity in later life, we must understand more about the meaning of growing old. We must pay "attention to the nature and sources of the meanings attached to 'being old' by individuals" (Ward, 1984:231). In particular we must seek to

understand the meaning and salience of "being old" within the context of the older individual's everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

The social psychological approach to aging originally focused on the "problems of aging", and these problems were defined largely in objective terms. Sarah Matthews makes much the same point.

When I began examining the social science literature on old people, I found that most of the research is either aimed at discovering the correlates of a "good adjustment" to old age, or conducted principally to answer questions related to social policy. I came away from the literature feeling that I "knew about" old people in that I knew many objective facts, but that I did not "know" what being old is (1979a:23).

To gain some understanding of "what being old is", Matthews adopted a qualitative methodology and attempted to gain intimate familiarity (see Blumer, 1969) with the social worlds of a select population of old widows. She looked at the way in which these elderly women dealt with the social meanings attached to their chronological age, and focused upon how these women defined their own situations. Matthews maintained that old is stigmatizing, yet there is uncertainty in old age. Norms and expectations that might define old age are either lacking or ambiguous. There is no clear consensus as to when one becomes old. The ambiguity involved in applying the label old, Matthews contended, gives old people "some latitude in defining themselves as 'old' or 'not old'" (1979a:71).

Another recent exception to the general objectivist orientation in aging research is Fontana's (1977) qualitative analysis of "how old people find meaning in their lives". Fontana, however, seeks the

meaning of growing old by focusing primarily on only one dimension of later life - leisure pursuits.

Jennie Keith (1982), claiming that subjective data are necessary if we are to understand old people, examines "what it means to be old" from an anthropological perspective and looks at the old age experience cross-culturally. Kaufman's (1980) research, focusing directly on identity in old age, also adopts a subjectivist approach. She examines the older individual's own interpretation of the aging experience and maintains that older individuals interpret and organize their life experiences, constructing a sense of self. For Kaufman, culture "gives the individual the materials with which to construct a self concept and interpret the relationship of the self to the environment" (1980:4). Similarly, Myerhoff's (1978) research, also an anthropological study with an emphasis on cultural context, seeks to discover the way in which elderly Jewish respondents assign meaning to their lives and weave identity out of their memories and experiences.

Aside from Matthews, none of these studies examine meaning and identity in later life in a comprehensive way. Even Matthew's research, though treating identity in later life more comprehensively, focuses primarily on oldness as a stigma and little attention is given to the more positive, or at least neutral, aspects of identity in later life.

While the present research is concerned with developing a subjective understanding of the meaning of 'old' and of the way in which the experience of growing old affects the older woman's sense of self, old is only one dimension of the older person's identity. This study adopts the view that it is the subjects' own understanding of her 'self'

that is important and all self-meanings must be explored. Thus, it is necessary to determine the "configuration of self-perceptions and self-evaluations that are important and meaningful" to the older woman in her daily life (George, 1980), and to determine which self-meanings and self-descriptions are more meaningful to the individual than others. Employing George's conceptualization of identity, this study examines the salience that various self-meanings have for the older woman as well as what meanings are attached to various attributes, roles (both formal and informal) and interpersonal relationships? It focuses on "felt identity" (self-meanings as interpreted by the individual, see Goffman, 1963) and social identity (meanings attributed to self as defined by others).

This study also adopts the view that, to understand the issue of identity in later life, one must pay more attention to the meaning of relationships associated with roles, rather than to roles per se. One can, for example, possess a role-identity that is not very meaningful because it is not associated with a meaningful relationship. Conversely, one can be involved in a meaningful relationship that is not associated with any well defined set of behavioral expectations. This view has been influenced by Hagestad and Marshall who argue that individuals must be viewed as more than a "bundle of roles", more than a "role portfolio". They argue that "we cannot put an equal sign between role portfolio and self because self is established and maintained through relationships, in which meaning is created and shared" (1980:7). Hagestad and Marshall further warn that, "the personal significance of a

role may not be in direct correspondence to its social significance" (1980:7). Similarly, Breytspraak (1984:60) advises:

We must raise some questions over the contention that self-identity through the life cycle can be summed up as putting on and shedding roles.

In much of the aging literature there has been an overemphasis on role loss in old age. As well, there has been a great deal of emphasis placed on formal, institutionalized roles and statuses such as work roles. Much less attention has been given to informal roles and the meaning attached to them by older people. George draws our attention to the significance of informal and interpersonal roles for the elderly, arguing that personal well-being does not necessarily depend on active participation in what Rosow terms "institutional role patterns" (1980:46). Informal roles may become more significant than formal ones in later life and, George suggests, may even be preferred and welcomed by older people.

In a similar vein, Mutran and Burke report research evidence which suggests that, as people grow older, there appears to be a shift "from thinking of oneself in instrumental terms to a self-description that is more personal" (1979:190). This suggests that the elderly may be less affected by the loss of formal roles than we have been led to believe. McCall and Simmons offer some theoretical support for this position by pointing out that our role-identities are in constant need of legitimation, and that individuals seek "stable, dependably recurring means of such legitimation" (1978:163). This stable resource, they suggest, can be found in interpersonal relationships in which legitimation can be provided on a more or less routine basis.

David Unruh (1983) also criticizes previous studies in the sociology of aging and social gerontology for having focused primarily on conventional forms of social organization, overemphasizing social roles and group memberships as the means by which people are linked to society. Arguing that, in most previous work, "the range of involvements used to indicate acceptable social integration is unnecessarily narrow" (1983:24), he employs the concept of social world as a means of exploring one way in which older people may be connected to society. Unruh's research illustrates that there are less visible, "spatially transcendent" forms of social organization, where shared perspectives and interests can effectively and meaningfully bind older people to others.

The present research also examines older people's social lives by focusing on a broader range of involvements. In contrast to the prevailing conceptions of aging which assume that identity automatically suffers because old people lose roles, this study proposes that more can be learned about the meaning of 'old age' and the nature of an older person's identity by comparing the meaning attached to informal versus formal roles, and by comparing the contribution that each of these dimensions make to the older person's identity. It is proposed that, in later life, participation in informal roles and informal relationships will be more meaningful to the older woman (and therefore contribute more positively to her identity) than formal role participation. The study will explore the extent to which the older women studied viewed themselves primarily in terms of formal role-identities or in more personal terms. It will also explore whether, in fact, role



relationships are more important to identity maintenance than roles per se.

This study investigates the salience of 'being old'. Just how important is an old age identity as it is experienced within the context of a meaningful everyday world? In doing so, it must explore whether identity is even of concern to elderly women. Do they indeed ever ask themselves the question, who am I? There is some evidence to suggest that concern for identity may not be a real issue in the older person's life. Turner (1975) reported that, while younger people acknowledged a quest for identity, older respondents did not admit to any such concern.

### Dimensions Of Identity

Introducing the concept identity, George (1980:13) writes:

In order to understand the meaning of the term identity, it is necessary to understand a set of terms - identity, self-concept, and self-esteem - and the relationships among them. Individuals are able to think of themselves as objects - to describe their characteristics and evaluate themselves in terms of those characteristics. (For example, I could describe myself as a good scholar and a poor typist). The notions of self-concept, self-esteem, and identity all rest on this cognitive capacity to describe and evaluate ourselves as objects.

Self-concept refers to the cognitive process of self-perception and consists of individuals' perceptions of themselves as objects. Self-esteem refers to the affective and evaluative aspect of self-perception and consists of the individuals evaluation of the self as an object (Breytspraak and George, 1982). Identity "refers to those self-perceptions and self-assessments that are significant to the individual". It includes both cognitive and affective components-

there are identity-perceptions and identity-assessments (George, 1980:14).

Although, as indicated earlier, there are few studies dealing specifically with identity in later life, both self-concept and self-esteem have received considerable attention in gerontological research. These research findings are, however, not easily analyzed because of the "many ambiguities and inconsistencies in the usage of the constructs self-concept and self-esteem" (Breytspraak and George, 1982:241). Very often no clear distinction is made between the two concepts and self-concept is often used interchangeably with identity.<sup>2</sup> These studies also present inconsistent conclusions about the relationship between age and self-concept and self-esteem (see also Breytspraak, 1984). Some report that self-concept or self-esteem decrease with increasing age (Mason, 1954; Kogan and Wallach, 1961; Ziller and Grossman, 1967). Others report that they increase, or become more positive with age (Gurin et al., 1960; Thomae, 1970; Lowenthal et al., 1975), while still others show no significant relationship (Kaplan and Pokorny, 1970; Trimakas and Nicolay, 1974; Hunter, Linn and Harris, 1981-82).

The expectation underlying such studies appears to be that aging and self-esteem will be negatively related. Kalish writes:

Given the stresses and losses that come with increasing age, given the lack of respect shown the elderly, given their diminishing physical capacity and sometimes their diminishing cognitive capacities, it is only common sense to believe that peoples' self-esteem should drop, perhaps drastically, as they enter their later years. Except that this common-sense conclusion is not borne out by the research data (1975:57).

As indicated earlier on in this chapter, despite expectations to the contrary, the bulk of the research data present evidence which suggest that, in general, self-perceptions and evaluations remain stable over the years and most older people report a positive sense of self-esteem.

Addressing the contradictory nature of the study reports, Kaplan and Pokorny point to the necessity of specifying the conditions under which aging and self-perceptions are significantly related. They identify four conditions under which aging was observed to be associated with positive self-attitudes: where the subjects (1) "reported no recent life experiences requiring behavioral adaptation; (2) reported no disparity between their current and hoped for standard of living; (3) reported that as children they were not afraid of being left alone; and (4) were living with their spouses in independent households" (1970:248). Anderson examined the relationship between institutionalization and self-esteem and concluded that "instead of institutionalization, variation in the amount and quality of interaction was found to explain changes in self-esteem " (1967:316). Hunter, Linn and Harris (1981-82) also examined the conditions as well as personality characteristics of the elderly associated with low and high self-esteem. They found that elderly with low self-esteem had "poorer self-reported health, more pain, and higher disability". They also "had significantly higher scores on depression, anxiety, somatization, and a more external locus of control orientation..." (1981-82:117). These data suggest that the relationship between aging and self-esteem may be affected by various mediating conditions or variables.

Other studies have investigated changes in self-descriptions or self-perceptions across time. Pierce and Chiriboga (1979) explored changes in the dimensional structure of the self-concept and concluded that the meaning of self-concept dimensions may fluctuate with passing time. Lowenthal et al. (1975) examined differences in the self-concept among men and women in four successive stages of adult life. They found that the self-descriptions of younger and older adults tended to differ in relation to life stage, suggesting that there may be a reordering of self-concept dimensions with increasing age. Lowenthal et al. found, for example, that with increasing age, respondents were less likely to describe themselves in terms of undesirable traits (e.g. dependent, helpless, timid, restless, lazy, disorderly), and more likely to ascribe desirable or positive traits to themselves, perceiving themselves to be more self-reliant, efficient and to have more self-control. The self-conceptions of women in the preretirement stage were noticeably different from those of the younger women in the study. They saw themselves as less dependent and helpless and as more assertive and competent. Similarly, Back (1974), examining changes in self-concept related to transitions generally associated with aging, found that older women were less likely than younger women to describe themselves in terms of personal background characteristics (such as family relations) and more likely to emphasize their abilities and achieved traits.

This study examines both the identity-perceptions and identity-assessments of elderly women. However, primary attention is given to the cognitive descriptions that these older women give of themselves, and the personal significance that they ascribe to their various self-

concepts. The self-descriptions of 'older' and 'younger' elderly women will be compared. While some of the studies just reviewed have dealt with a rather limited age range of older people (e.g. Back's sample ranged in age from 40 to 70 years; Lowenthal et al's included only the preretirement stage), this study sample includes respondents whose ages vary from 65 years to 90 years and over. The broader age range of this sample should allow a more useful comparison of the self-perceptions and evaluations of younger and older elderly women.

#### How Others View The Old: Attitudes And Stereotypes

A central issue explored in this study is the older woman's view of herself and the relationship between this and her appraisal of the way in which others view her. How we see ourselves is related to our perception of how others see us. There is a sizeable body of literature dealing with attitudes others have toward older people (McTavish, 1971, 1982; Green, 1981; Palmore, 1982), though once again they contain inconclusive and somewhat contradictory findings (Brubaker and Powers, 1976). Although there are some exceptions (Golde and Kogan, 1959; Thorson, Whatley and Hancock, 1974) the majority of these studies indicate that there is a common negative image of the aged and of the aging process (Tuckman and Lorge, 1953; McTavish, 1971; Naus, 1973; Borges and Dutton, 1976).

On a related theme, there is a considerable body of research attempting to determine the extent of actual knowledge others possess about aging and the aged (Branco and Williamson, 1982). Most of these studies have documented that inaccurate and generally negative

stereotyping of the elderly is prevalent. However, there is contradiction in this literature as well. Brubaker and Powers, citing contrary evidence, contend that "research has not yet demonstrated that stereotypes of old age are all negative" (1976:242; see also Schonfield, 1982 for a similar argument).

A national survey in the United States (Louis Harris and Associates, 1975) to determine public attitudes toward aging and what it was like to be old, found that there is a great discrepancy between the serious problems attributed to old people and the problems actually experienced by them. Ironically, both younger (18 to 64 years) and older people (65+) produced substantially the same evaluation of what life is like for "most people over 65". It would seem that older people carry into later life negative and stereotypical images of old age (Harris and Associates, 1975). Similarly, Borges and Dutton (1976) found that there is a substantial discrepancy between what people think "getting old" will be like, and what it "really is like". Their younger subjects projected their future lives to be not as good as older subjects actually reported their lives to be.

#### How The Old See Themselves: Self-Conception And Age Identification

Several other studies have also revealed that older people do not see themselves in the same way that they view other old people (Brubaker and Powers, 1976; Ward, 1977). Keith (1982:27) writes: "old people also think more highly of themselves than they do of old people on the whole. The old, in other words, share many stereotypes of old age, and feel good as individuals because they don't fit them". If

indeed we come to see ourselves as others see us, and if most people (including the elderly themselves) appear to have adopted a stereotypical and negative image of old age, how do we account for this rather optimistic view that many elderly hold of themselves? Kalish (1982:16) agrees that we all tend to view ourselves, to some degree, as we believe others view us and subsequently, "it takes great personal strength to see yourself as competent, growing and whole when others view you as incompetent, static or constricting, and unwhole". However, Kalish explains, many elderly are able to escape this self-concept by adopting the "that-old-person-over-there position; they accept the general population view of the elderly but apply it to other people seeing themselves as exceptions" (1982:16-17).

Chiriboga and Thurnher (1975) report that several of their older respondents commented on the paradox that they themselves felt little changed whereas others appeared to view them as older. Just when and how an individual comes to define himself/herself as old is a complex phenomenon.

George's (1975) extensive study of the factors significant in a shift in age identification draws attention to an additional problem that must be considered here. She concludes that although the evaluative actions of others do appear to be a very important factor in the process of age identification, this finding must be interpreted cautiously,

because of the confusion concerning the temporal order of these two variables. It may be instead that self-perception of self as old leads the individual to perceive others reacting to him as if he were old. There is certainly a strong association between the individual's self-image and his perceptions of how others view him, but the causal ordering is not clear (1975:105).

Although it might be expected that subjective age and chronological age would be related, the relationship is far from clear with studies yielding inconsistent and ambiguous findings. While some studies have reported that age identification is not "significantly" related to chronological age (Blau, 1956; Zola, 1962; Baum and Boxley, 1983), quite a number of others have concluded that chronological and subjective age are related (Peters, 1971; George, 1975; Ward, 1977; Bultena and Powers, 1978; Markides and Boldt, 1983). Though these studies have found chronological age to be one of the better predictors of age-identity, the relationship between objective and subjective age is not always as strong as one might anticipate (Markides and Boldt, 1983). Bultena and Powers, for example, found chronological age to be a better predictor of age-identity in comparison to other variables tested. However, they report, "these data are consistent with previous studies that have revealed a substantial denial of aging among persons of advanced chronological age" (1978:750). Older respondents often do ignore chronological age and identify themselves as being younger than they actually are<sup>3</sup> (Riley and Foner, 1968; Peters, 1971; Bultena and Powers, 1978; Markides and Boldt, 1983; Baum and Boxley, 1983). Keith writes:



the most striking fact about identifying oneself as old in America is that many people do not do it at all, or wait as long as possible before using the label on themselves. When asked what age category they belong in, most Americans over sixty-five say middle-aged (1982:25).

The present study will examine age identification as one dimension of identity. It will determine whether the older women interviewed viewed themselves as old or "not old" (i.e., as young or middle-aged). This study also examines what these terms mean to these elderly women.

George found that while chronological age was a very important predictor of age identity, other variables such as widowhood and subjective and objective health were also significant predictors. She concluded that a large portion of the total impact of chronological age on age identification is indirect, "that it is not age per se but rather age-related processes which are crucial to the individual's age identity" (1975:101). Similarly, another study, investigating change in subjective age using longitudinal data, found that subjects who shifted their age identification from young or middle-aged to old tended not only to be older, but also less educated and to have poorer health (Markides and Boldt, 1983). This research will examine the relationship between age identification and such variables.

This study will also examine when and how the older woman comes to identify herself as old. Previous research suggests that, in addition to poor health, certain other experiences or events can contribute to self-definition as old (Peters, 1971; Brubaker and Powers, 1976; Ward, 1977). These include: low income, loss of independence,

institutionalization, retirement, and loss of a spouse or a close friend (Brubaker and Powers, 1976; Keith, 1982). Keith maintains that, although people may perceive these experiences as cues that they are indeed old, "people are probably not so much feeling old, as they are acknowledging the expectations that these are experiences of old people" (1982:25). It is not at all clear just what the relationship is between objective indicators of the aged status and the subjective definition of self as old.

The older person's reference group is an important factor in the process of interpreting the objective indicators and defining oneself as old<sup>4</sup> (Bultena and Powers, 1976). The reference group influences the meanings attached to the objective indicators of age status. However, other old people become a reference group only after the older person first adopts an image of self as old (Blau, 1956:199). Although this reference group is largely a negative one, most old people appear to use it positively, viewing themselves as much better off (Kalish, 1982). This study explores the concept of reference group, examining whether (and in what way) elderly women compare themselves to others in interpreting their own aging experience.

Previous studies indicate that age identification is also related to levels of formal and informal social involvement (Guptill, 1969; Mutran and Reitzes, 1981; Baum and Boxley, 1983). Baum and Boxley report that "personal involvement and meaningful activity are linked to feeling younger and better about oneself" (1983:536). But, as they point out, it is not clear whether involvement creates a younger age identity or those with younger age identities tend to seek out

activities and events. Peters maintains that it is critical that researchers examine social participation among the aged, "since the maintenance of ties with significant individuals and groups seems to be crucial to a stable and viable self-image,...(1971:71). A central focus of this research is the relationship between involvement in meaningful social ties and identity in later life.

The present study postulates that an old age identity is a situational identity and investigates the kinds of situations associated with a feeling that one is old or 'not old'. A situational interpretation of identity may help explain the contradictory findings reported in the age identification and perceptions of the aged literature. Marshall and Rosenthal (1983:141) suggest that what is required is a "more situational interpretation of the relationship between socially shared attitudes and self-identity" as people may view themselves as old in some situations and not in others. Russell Ward also calls for a situational interpretation in research seeking to understand age-identity. Ward writes:

Rather than assuming the importance of age, we need to clarify the conditions under which age is relevant. We should investigate the conditions under which "being old" is made salient to the aging individual and the consequences of this for self-image and overall well-being. Indeed, under some conditions being old may be both salient and positive.....(1984:230).

The present research investigates whether an old age-identity is more salient in some situations than others.

### Old Age As "Crisis" Or "Opportunity"

In sum, the present study of identity and aging assumes a view of the older woman as an active participant in her own aging experience. It stands in contrast to the crisis view which emphasizes the role losses that accompany old age (Burgess, 1960; Cavan, 1962; Blau, 1973; Rosow, 1967, 1973, 1976), and which sees the aged as helpless, dependents; passive observers of a process of accumulated role losses that threaten to undermine self-conception and sense of worth (Rosow, 1973). The available evidence simply does not support such assumptions.

This study is, however, allied with the work of several social gerontologists (Bengtson, 1973; Marshall and Tindale, 1978-79; Marshall, 1980a; George, 1980; Breytspraak, 1984) who view the older individual as a social actor capable of active participation in his/her own aging experience. Old age, these gerontologists suggest, might even be viewed as "a time of opportunity" (see especially Bengtson, 1973; Neugarten and Hagestad, 1976; Marshall, 1980b; Hagestad and Marshall, 1980). Breytspraak's illustrates this perspective contending that, "people negotiate their way through aging". She advocates that more attention be given to exploring the possibility that the older individual is not simply a reactor but an actor as well.

The dominant image in this literature is an aging individual who primarily is left to react to the changes and degradations in social roles that inevitably accompany aging. A frequent underlying assumption is that selfhood is threatened by this process. The person's response may be colored by such factors as sex, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and the presence or absence of an aging subculture, but the emphasis is still predominantly on reacting, responding, adjusting, and accommodating. Relatively little attention is given in this literature to exploring the possibility that the

individual is an actor as well as a reactor, that meanings surrounding aging are constructed and negotiated in conjunction with others, and that a number of cognitive strategies may be used to ensure that self-integrity is maintained in the face of the "losses" associated with aging. (Breytspraak, 1984:51-52).

In accordance with Breytspraak's call for a focus on the aging individual as actor, this research explores the issues of identity maintenance, postulating that the older woman is involved in a process of identity management. Several studies provide support for this approach. Matthews' study of the social world of old women found that elderly women did indeed fight back in an effort to resist the social meaning ascribed to their chronological age. A major focus of her research involved a presentation of defence strategies adopted by these elderly women. She delineates these defence strategies according to "encounters with others" and "encounters with self" (i.e. situations where the elderly woman must deal with signs "which indicate that she is a 'typical' old woman after all".) Some of these included: suppressing evidence (e.g. the old woman avoids telling her age), using one definition for other old people and a different one for herself, bringing in outside sources to confirm her 'not old' identity (e.g. relating to others that "very few think of me as old as I am"), avoiding threatening situations, explaining away her oldness by claiming that "what seems like oldness really isn't" and justifying her existence by attaching new meanings to old activities (e.g. cooking, cleaning or making crafts may now be regarded as 'work') (Matthews, 1979a:71-93).

Other researchers have also drawn our attention to the ways older people protect their self-images. Stephens (1976), in her study

of elderly hotel dwellers, describes how information control is used by her respondents to safeguard their self-esteem. They were slow to reveal any information on their past and what was revealed was generally reconstructed.

Tindale (1980) describes the identity maintenance processes invoked by old men on skid row. These elderly men also used information control as one form of identity management. They avoided revealing anything that would damage their self-images. Tindale also describes how his elderly informants had developed a form of "status hierarchy" (See also Hochschild, 1973:58-63). They would stigmatize as "mission stiff" those seen as selling out to the identity accorded them by the larger society.

These studies reveal that many older people do not acquiesce to the way in which others in society choose to define them. Identities are socially formed and sustained; they are also managed through the process of social interaction. This study looks at how older women maintain a viable sense of self while confronting the aging experience as it is socially defined.

#### THE CASE FOR NETWORK ANALYSIS: SOCIAL NETWORKS AND LATER LIFE

It is an underlying assumption of this research, that the older woman's social network involvement is of fundamental significance to her identity maintenance. This section introduces the concept of network, looks at how it has been applied in the study of aging, and outlines the way in which the network concept is employed in this study.

Network theorists maintain that "to understand the individual in society, we need to understand the fine mesh of social relations between the person and society; that is, we must understand social networks" (Fischer et al., 1977:vii). Every individual spends his/her lifetime embedded in a network of social ties with others. Each individual participates in some form of a personal social network. As Fischer (1977:vii) defines this personal network:

Individuals are linked to their society primarily through relations with other individuals: with kin, friends, co-workers, fellow club members, and so on. We are each the center of a web of social bonds that radiates outward to the people whom we know intimately, those whom we know well, those whom we know casually, and to the wider society beyond. These are our personal social networks.

A network approach is especially fruitful for analyzing the social world of the elderly. It takes one beyond the surface appearance of that world and is capable of revealing whether elderly people are socially isolated or connected to society in a meaningful way (see especially Sokolovsky and Cohen, 1978). In contrast to conventional approaches to research in aging which have tended to focus on institutionalized groups and such sociological categories as roles and statuses, network analysis focuses on the ties that link individuals across social categories and bounded groups (Wellman, 1981a). Such linkages are instrumental to the process of identity maintenance.

Early network analysts (e.g. Barnes, 1954; Bott, 1957) emphasized the structural constraints on individual's actions. In the present study, a quite different approach to network analysis is adopted. Using works by more recent network theorists (in particular,

Mitchell, 1969; Boissevain and Mitchell, 1973 and Fischer et al., 1977) the emphasis in this research is on how choices are made amid constraints. Mitchell (1969:43) informs us:

There is an element of individual choice, therefore, in the make-up of any person's network in the sense that the individual seeks to establish and maintain contact with a number of persons in terms of his interests in them....

This approach to network analysis is compatible with the symbolic interactionist view of the social world and humankind as acting and choosing beings. It seeks "to place again in the foreground of social analysis the notion of internal process and the inherent dynamics in relations between interdependent human beings" (Boissevain and Mitchell, 1973:viii). From this perspective networks are defined as "a system of relations which impinge on and influence individuals and their behavior" but also as "a series of relations which persons use to achieve their ends" (Boissevain and Mitchell, 1973:viii). Similarly, behavior is viewed as "choices made with limited alternatives and limited resources" (Fischer 1977:2-3). This "choice-constraint model" sees individuals as actively involved in creating their social networks. The focus is on the individual as an actor as opposed to mechanistic models which focus on the individual as "acted upon".

This perspective on network analysis also shares with the symbolic interactionist framework a similar methodology in which the researcher must adopt a subjective methodological approach and "take the role of the acting unit whose behavior he is studying" (Blumer, 1972:151). Emphasis is placed upon investigating social networks from the perspective of the individual (see Fischer et al., 1977). Unlike



approaches which emphasize the structural form of the social network, this approach as adopted in this research, focuses on network content. The content of the network involves "the meanings which the persons in the network attribute to their relationships" (Mitchell, 1969:20). That one must attend to meaning if one is to understand human behavior is also a key principle of the symbolic interactionist perspective.

Snow and Gordon, making a case for the applicability of network analysis to the study of aging, draw our attention to the

need to make sense of the interrelationships between old people and their societies. Social network analysis permits us to look again at the interaction between an old person, those of significance in the person's life, the agencies who serve the elderly and the ways in which these are integrated into larger social wholes in which such action is set (1980:464).

However, when the network concept has been applied to the study of aging, the tendency has been to focus on only one dimension or type of network - the social support network.

There is a considerable body of research describing the availability of support networks for the elderly (Lopata, 1975; Pilisuk and Minkler, 1980; Kahan and Antonucci, 1981; Chappell, 1983; Kohen, 1983). Lopata describes this primary support system provided by an informal network of kin, friends and neighbors as a

set of relations involving the giving and receiving of objects, services, and social and emotional supports defined by the receiver and giver as necessary or at least helpful in maintaining a style of life (1975:35).

Other studies describe how old people help other old people through a neighborhood network of mutual assistance and support (Rosel, 1983).

Networks and the supportive ties they provide are clearly a major source of help for the elderly, acting as a buffer in helping to counteract the stresses and losses that may accompany old age (see Pilisuk and Minkler, 1980).

The present study is not concerned with support networks in the traditional sense. It is concerned with social networks as a medium through which identity may be maintained. While the social network as a support system is investigated in this research, the focus is on support for identity.

While not focusing on identity in later life, two studies employ a network approach to old age and provide additional support for the notion that older people are capable of identity management. More importantly, they illustrate how older people use networks as a medium for identity maintenance. Sokolovsky and Cohen's (1978) study of the personal networks of the inner-city elderly deals with elderly hotel residents (SRO's, single room occupancy hotels), who from an objective viewpoint appear to be socially isolated. This population is not isolated however, but linked to their urban environment through meaningful personal networks. These residents use their networks to achieve desired ends. Some devised means to insure a reliable source of network support while avoiding intimate ties.

Corin's (1982) research also applies network analysis to the study of aging. She examines how elderly people use their social networks as "strategies for survival". This study, although not focusing explicitly on identity maintenance, offers evidence to suggest that the elderly use their networks as a means for maintaining a

positive self-image. Corin describes how her older male respondents strive to maintain an image of themselves as autonomous, independent agents, being more reluctant than older women to see themselves as "receiver" of services. "This masculine attitude", she suggests, "appeared to be a precious tool for the maintenance of a certain positive self-image" (1982:11). Older male respondents also tended to overestimate the size of their networks and, as Corin suggests, this too may have been a means of boosting their self-images.

The present study is based on the premise that older women are capable of influencing their social networks as well as being influenced by them. Specifically, it maintains that older women are capable of using their networks so as to maintain a viable and meaningful sense of self. Both freedom and constraint characterize human behavior. Thus, as network theorists stress, there is an element of choice in the make-up of an individual's personal network; individuals create their networks though building them within the limits of a set of socially structured alternatives (Fischer et al., 1977). As previous research (e.g. Hochschild, 1973; Sokolovsky and Cohen, 1978; Matthews, 1979a; Corin, 1982) has demonstrated, older people are capable of manipulating existing relationships as well as initiating new ones.

Because of the tendency in gerontology to emphasize role losses in old age, we know very little about new roles that may be improvised or the kinds of meaningful relationships and networks in which the elderly are involved. This study examines opportunities for developing new roles and relationships in later life and looks at how role transitions are negotiated. Previous research (Hochschild, 1973;

Matthews, 1979a) indicates that older women living in age-segregated communities do create new roles. Hochschild suggests that age-segregated communities may provide a more favorable context for developing new roles and statuses. Building on such work, the present study takes the view that many former roles are redefined rather than lost as people grow older. It argues that continuity in role involvements within family relationships, friendships and leisure activities helps to sustain self-identity (Atchley, 1980b). A meaningful role such as mother may never be lost but is redefined and renegotiated as both mother and child journey the life course. Successfully redefining and renegotiating former role relationships is a means of maintaining a viable self-image in old age.

In the analysis of the social networks of elderly women the following dimensions are focused upon: (1) meaning and content of networks, (2) strength of ties, (3) networks and change, and (4) networks and distance. In the remainder of this chapter, these aspects of network involvement are discussed and works related to each of the three areas of network involvement to be investigated in this study (1) the family network, (2) friends and neighbors, and (3) leisure networks are examined.

### Meaning And Content

This research adopts the view that, in order to understand social network involvement in old age, it is necessary to investigate the subjective assessment and quality of ties (see Lowenthal and Robinson, 1976; Ward, Sherman and Lagory, 1984; Wellman and Hall, 1986).

Thus, the major emphasis in this study is on the content or meaning of the network ties as defined from the elderly individual's own perspective. A social tie may be meaningful because it is an important source of support for the individual's identity. McCall and Simmons (1978) remind us that individuals are involved in an exchange of support for each other's role-identities. Individuals must seek out others as sources for the legitimation of their identities. This study investigates meaning in all areas of network involvement with an emphasis on determining the meaning which the elderly woman's ties hold for her sense of who she is.

In contrast to previous studies of network ties which tend to focus on the amount of involvement, this research postulates that, it is not the number of ties or amount of interaction that is important to the older individual and her self-conception, but the quality and meaning of such ties. Previous research has revealed that having at least one "intimate other", or confidant, can compensate for the losses, including the loss of significant others, that may accompany old age (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968). Strain and Chappell (1982:479) have concluded that "a confidant relationship may be more important to the quality of life than the quantity of interactions with family or friends". Lowenthal and Robinson (1976) suggest that the older individual may choose to concentrate on fewer ties but more intimate ones. Thus, elderly women who have few ties in total, yet one intimate tie, may have just as much identity support as those with many but less meaningful ties. The availability and significance of an intimate tie or confidant is investigated in this study.

One way to explore the content of the network and the meaning associated with any particular tie is to look at what is exchanged and the affective meaning of the transaction. We know, for example, that the elderly are actively involved in family networks and that the family is of critical importance in providing support. Yet, we are not well informed as to just what family ties mean to the elderly individual. This study will examine the elderly woman's transactions with her family, friends and neighbors looking at what is exchanged within these relationships.

This study will also investigate the existence of 'negative ties' in the older woman's personal network. Not all of the older individual's ties will be equally meaningful and it cannot be assumed that all ties will contribute positively to self-conception. Indeed, some ties may, in fact, contribute to an image of self as dependent and powerless. One may, for example, be at the bottom of the "poor dear" hierarchy<sup>5</sup> (Hochschild, 1973). In which case, participating in such interaction may well have a negative effect on self-image as the older person is reminded of her deficiencies.

Perhaps more surprising is the suggestion that the family network may not contribute positively to the older person's self-conception but may, in fact, have a negative effect. Given the much documented importance of the family in the lives of the elderly, one might expect that this relationship would be the most meaningful of the elderly's ties. There is evidence to suggest that even though the rate of interaction with family is higher, the relationship with friends may be more meaningful to the older person in maintaining morale and life

satisfaction (Lowenthal and Robinson, 1976; Arling, 1976; Wood and Robertson, 1978). However, "the relationship between the morale of older people and their involvement with family members is inconclusive,..." (Wood and Robertson, 1978:368).

Friendship and neighboring may be more satisfying to the elderly because these relationships are generally based upon common interests and life-styles (Arling, 1976). Perhaps most important, friendship and neighborhood ties are generally voluntary and based upon a reciprocal exchange. Reciprocity is of great personal significance in preserving the self-esteem of older people (Wentowski, 1981). Family ties, on the other hand, may place the elderly individual in a dependent relationship. Matthews (1979a) describes elderly widows who had access to family but were not guaranteed identity support; the quality of the relationship adversely affected the widow's self-conception.

Rosow (1967) and Hochschild (1973) maintain that family and friendships are to be considered as separate dimensions of social involvement. Hochschild found that relations with family and friends were usually managed separately. Relations with kin and friends were not competitive but complementary. Friendship networks may serve to complement the kinship network and "may help to strengthen (them) by relieving some of the burden from caretaking kin" (Lowenthal and Robinson, 1976:440). This research examines the varying meanings attached to family, neighbor and friendship ties.

### Strength Of Ties

While previous studies have tended to ignore the strength of ties and level of commitment to different areas of network involvement, the strength and weakness of the older woman's ties is investigated in the present study. Pilisuk and Minkler (1980:100) defining the strength of ties write:

Bonds between people vary in tenacity, the emotional intensity of the ties, the expectation of their durability and availability, and the degree of intimacy or confiding which occurs among the exchanges. These combine to determine the overall strength of ties.

All network ties are not likely to be equal in strength. Wellman points out that "ties vary not only in their content but also in the intensity with which they manifest that content;..." (Wellman, 1981b:185). Although one might assume that stronger ties are more likely to be supportive, weak ties must not be overlooked. Granovetter (1973) offers a convincing argument for the strength of weak ties, arguing that "weak ties often denounced as generative of alienation are here seen as indispensable to individual's opportunities and to their integration into communities;..." (1973:1378). More people can be reached through weak ties and these ties act as "bridges" or channels to community resources.

Though strong ties to spouse, family or close friends may be severed or lost, an abundance of weak ties may compensate for this. Many of the elderly, though objectively defined as old and alone (especially by survey analysis), may have several less obvious weak ties that are instrumental in connecting them to the outside world.<sup>6</sup> The



present study is concerned with investigating the role that weak ties play in the area of identity management.

### Networks And Change

The composition and content of a person's network change across the life course. Stueve and Gerson (1977) draw attention to the influence of life cycle transitions, arguing that a major influence on individual's networks is their position in the life cycle. According to much of the aging literature the latest stage of the life cycle is characterized by role losses and social isolation (Burgess, 1960; Cumming and Henry, 1961; Rosow, 1967, 1976; Blau, 1973). Widowhood, retirement, residential mobility of children and friends, death of family members and peers, poor health, and limited income can all contribute to restricted involvement in social relationships (Arling, 1976; Kohen, 1983). However, more recent studies contradict this view and report that the elderly do maintain social contacts. (See Shanas, 1979). It is not altogether clear just how change does affect the older person's social networks and this study is concerned with exploring both change and continuity in network ties. In doing so it explores the influence of significant life events (e.g. death of important network members) on patterns of network involvement.

The possible influence of the environmental context on the elderly woman's network ties is also investigated. Little is known about the small town as a context for the aging experience. In the small town investigated here, there has been considerable change in recent years and this study is concerned with understanding the effect

such changes have on older people's social networks. The smallness of the community increases the likelihood of familiarity, creating "a place in which one knows and is known by others" (Rowles, 1983:117), and this study investigates whether this contributes to continuity of self.

### Networks And Distance

This research is interested in ascertaining the extent to which distance influences the older person's network involvement. Over the years, friends and family members may move away or the elderly woman may herself relocate. Mobility in later life may be restricted due to such factors as poor health, limited income, or lack of transportation. The effect of distance on the strength of ties is also examined.

We know relatively little about the effect of distance on areas of network involvement. We do know, however, that family relationships are maintained across distances, although the amount of contact tends to diminish as the distance increases (Marshall and Rosenthal, 1985; Moss, Moss and Moles, 1985). Marshall and Rosenthal also found that proximity had a differential effect, so that while some aspects of the parent-child relationship were affected by proximity, others were not. For example, interaction and some types of exchanges were related to geographical proximity but affectional solidarity or emotional closeness was not. Rowles (1983) describes how the elderly residents of Colton are able to maintain friendships and support networks by active involvement in a telephone network. In this study, the use of the telephone as a means for maintaining distant but meaningful ties is investigated.

While proximity may be advantageous for some relations it is not essential for others. As Fischer reminds us:

...personal networks are not inherently bound to a particular area. Some people are deeply involved with their neighbors, some with friends a continent away, and others with both near and distant associates, each in different ways (1982:8).

Fischer argues that proximity is not critical nor is daily interaction necessary for sustaining personal relations. He is critical of those who maintain that "the 'authentic' personal community is the local one—that neighbors, nearby kinfolk, and the local church form the only truly supportive community" (1982:158). Modern life, Fischer maintains, allows people to build personally rewarding relations that are not necessarily bounded by community. The present study is concerned with exploring the extent to which elderly women have such personally rewarding relations. The dispersion of ties within the community is also of interest.

#### SOCIAL NETWORK INVOLVEMENT

Later life is very often viewed as a period of diminished social contact (see especially Rosow, 1967; 1973; 1976, Cumming and Henry, 1961; Blau, 1973). While previous studies do not support this notion, little previous research on aging has taken the form of network analysis and we are not well informed as to the way in which older people actually do participate in society. The present study attempts to elucidate this by examining each older woman's personal network in terms of her involvement with family, with friends and neighbors, and in leisure networks.

### The Family Network

Contrary to the widely held myth that the old are abandoned and alienated from their families, research has revealed that the majority of the elderly are by no means isolated from a kinship network (Townsend, 1957; Shanas et al., 1968; Shanas, 1979; Sussman, 1976; Troll et al., 1979; Rosenthal, 1987). The majority of old people interact frequently with their children with most seeing an adult child weekly, if not more often (Shanas et al., 1968; Harris and Associates, 1975; Troll et al., 1979; Rosenthal, 1987). More than two decades ago Sussman and Burchinal (1962) proclaimed the existence of an active and functional kin family network providing mutual aid and social activities. In addition, the family may also serve as a "mediating link" between the older individual and societal institutions and organizations (Sussman, 1976).

The relationship between adult children and their aging parents is based primarily on the cultural norms of independence and autonomy. Older people do not want to be dependent upon their children and strive to be independent for as long as possible (Sussman, 1976; Shanas, 1979; Abu-Laban, 1980; Rosenthal, 1987). However, when they are no longer able to manage on their own, it is to their children that they turn for aid, and evidence indicates that children generally provide it (Troll, 1971; Neugarten, 1979; Shanas, 1979; Cantor, 1979; Marshall, Rosenthal and Synge, 1983).

Given the already large body of research on the topic, this study is not concerned with the family network as a support system in the usual sense. However, helping patterns and the content of exchanges

within the kin network are investigated in order to determine the extent to which such support helps, or hinders, the older woman in managing her identity. The way in which the older woman defines her relationship to her family is examined. The family network may contribute positively to the older woman's self-conception by providing material aid and emotional support, thus enabling her to present an independent self to neighbors and friends. Or, as Matthews (1979a) suggests, the family may, in fact, contribute negatively by encouraging and reinforcing a helpless or dependent view of self.

The nature of the older woman's relationships with a wide range of family members (e.g. her children, grandchildren, siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, and in-laws) will be explored here, examining the way in which such ties contribute to the older woman's self-feelings. The existence of 'fictive kin' will also be investigated and the nature of these relationships examined. Much of the literature on the family network of the aged focuses upon the immediate family of adult children and aged parents. Thus, much less is known about the older person's relations with his/her siblings, grandchildren, cousins, nieces and nephews, and non-family members such as 'fictive kin'.

### The Elderly Widowed

Martin Matthews writes that "widowhood for many women is far more than a loss of role. It undermines the basis of the widow's identity" (1980:149). Not only does the widow lose the role of wife, but "for many widows, their late husbands served as a link between themselves and society" (Martin Matthews, 1980:149). While some studies

suggest that the widowed are more socially isolated (Bock and Webber, 1972; Heyman and Gianturco, 1974), others do not (Petrowsky, 1976; Atchley, Pignatiello and Shaw, 1979). Powers and Bultena's (1976) study, for example, revealed that the widowed were more likely to develop more intimate relationships with their friends than those who were married.

Lopata (1979) suggests that women may be better prepared for widowhood than men. Women, having generally been responsible for developing their couple-based friendships, find it easier to maintain these relationships following the death of their spouse. In a recent study, Kohen (1983) examined the social relationships among elderly married and widowed men and women and her research supports the position that:

...the elderly widowed are not more isolated than the elderly married and that elderly women have some advantage over elderly men in their ability to develop or maintain their social relationships (1983:62).

The present study investigates whether relationships participated in prior to the husband's death are maintained and if new meaningful relationships are established.

### Friends And Neighbors

There are comparatively few studies focusing specifically on friendship and neighboring relations in later life (Peters, 1982). An additional problem is that neither 'friend' nor 'neighbor' are easily defined, with both terms being used by respondents to describe various types of relationships. Furthermore, the meaning attached to friendship relationships has seldom been addressed (Matthews, 1986b:11).

An exception, Matthews maintains that in order to understand friendship in old age, "it is necessary to know more about individuals' relationships throughout their lives - their 'populated biographies'- as well as their interpretations of them" (1986a:233). Her research focuses on the way in which past friendships affect present friendships of the old and the meanings attributed to them.

We do know that friendship is very important to the elderly (Blau, 1961; Hess, 1972; Rosow, 1967). Friendships help to integrate older people into society (Rosow, 1967) and contribute positively to their morale (Arling, 1976; Wood and Robertson, 1978). Lowenthal and Haven's research discovered that an intimate friendship can serve as a "buffer against such decrements as loss of role or reduction of social interaction" (1968:27). Blau (1961) and Lopata (1973) stress the importance of friendship in helping widows adjust to bereavement. However, as Lowenthal and Robinson (1976) note, there is ambiguity in the friendship literature. Some studies report that friendships tend to be maintained into old age, while others report that there is a decrease in interaction with friends, primarily because fewer friends are available due to poor health, death and difficulty in obtaining transportation (Riley and Foner, 1968).

According to Hess (1972) homophily affects friendship choice at all stages of the life course and in old age friendships most often occur among age peers. Cohen and Rajkowski (1982) however, question this assumption. They report that age was not a significant determinant in the friendships formed in their sample of SRO (single room hotel occupants) elderly. Cantor's (1979) research also suggests that

friendships in later life are not necessarily confined to age peers. According to her data, 56% of those designated as friends were younger than the elderly respondents.

This study investigates the relationship between participation in a friendship network and identity maintenance in old age. It examines whether or not participation in a stable friendship network lends a sense of continuity to self. It also investigates whether older women have at least one intimate tie or confidant and if they tend to have friends of similar age.

This research also examines the amount and nature of the older woman's contact with her neighbors, investigating the way in which such relations contribute to identity maintenance. It also explores whether older women, living most of their lives in a small town, tend to choose neighbors as friends, or if their friendships are more widely dispersed.

### Leisure Networks

Leisure is difficult to define since it may involve any of a vast number of possible activities and what is considered to be leisure by one individual may not be similarly defined by another. Typically, leisure has been viewed in terms of freedom from work, and most studies have focused on leisure activity as activity engaged in following retirement (Kaplan, 1979). Because work and activity are so highly valued in North American society, Miller (1968) maintains that, if leisure activity is to form the basis for a new social identity in retirement, the older individual must find leisure activity that is both meaningful and highly valued.<sup>7</sup>



This conception of leisure may not be appropriate for examining leisure among older women because of its focus on retirement from paid labor. For the majority of the generation of older women examined in this study, a woman's life time work was household labor, from which most never completely retire. We really do not know how older women define leisure and the activities typically associated with it. A main concern in the present study is the extent to which the leisure pursuits of older women involve interaction with others as opposed to solitary activities (e.g. gardening, knitting, reading, or watching television). In particular, this research explores the contribution that this involvement makes to identity maintenance in later life.

One area of leisure activity examined is voluntary organization participation. Voluntary organizations, in addition to providing meaningful leisure time activity, can serve to integrate individuals into a community (Bull, 1982). Such participation may be a vehicle for developing and maintaining friendships. Ward, for example, examining the meaning of voluntary association participation to older people, found that "contact with friends was by far the most frequently mentioned benefit of group participation" (1979b:441). Volunteerism can also provide the older person with an opportunity to serve others. Such service to others can contribute to feelings of self-worth and provide the basis for a new social identity (Miller, 1968; Ward, 1979b).

While it is often assumed that aging is accompanied by a decrease in both membership and involvement in voluntary associations, Cutler's (1977) data do not support this assumption. According to Cutler, age differences in membership and participation in voluntary

associations do not reflect age changes but are related to differences in socioeconomic status between younger and older age groups. Cutler reports:

When socioeconomic differences between age groups are controlled, the resulting pattern is generally one of relatively stable or increasing levels of membership and participation after age 45 through at least ages 75-80 (1977:471).

This study examines the older woman's involvement in voluntary organizations and whether or not this participation provides the older woman with an opportunity for developing new identities. While the opportunity for status within the community at large may be problematic for the elderly woman, involvement in a local senior center or organized woman's group can provide an opportunity for developing meaningful informal roles.

Another area of leisure activity examined in this study is church membership and involvement in religious associated activities. Religion and aging is an area in social gerontology that has been under researched (Payne, 1982). Yet, many older people belong to churches (Moberg, 1983) and it is assumed that religion plays an important role in the lives of the aged (Moberg, 1983; Heisel and Faulkner, 1982). Older people, for example, are more likely than younger people to belong to church affiliated groups (Ward, 1979a). However, the nature of religious involvement in old age is somewhat ambiguous. Ward informs us that, "while religious involvement may become more important with age, it may also decline" (1979a:256). Church attendance is generally quite high among those in their sixties but tends to decline in advanced old age (Riley and Foner, 1968).

Membership in church related associations is positively associated with psychological well-being (Heisel and Faulkner, 1982) and, there is apparently a direct relationship between good personal adjustment in old age and religious involvement (Moberg, 1983). Yet, we know little about the church and its possible place as a locus for meaningful activities and interpersonal contacts for the aged. The church offers an ideal basis for identity maintenance in that it "provides an opportunity both to give and receive" where "service for others and service from others is complementary" (Moberg, 1983:131). Also, according to Moberg, "a true believer finds self-identity in the context of his or her religious group..."(1983:121). The role of religion and the church in the lives of older women is examined in this research, investigating the extent to which the church and its affiliated organizations serve as a medium for identity maintenance in later life.

#### SUMMARY

This chapter has examined the research literature relevant to a study of identity and social networks in later life. It has also shown the way in which this previous work has shaped the orientation and research questions which direct the present study. This research, in contrast to existing studies, is an attempt to provide a more comprehensive examination of identity in old age. It adopts a subjectivist stance and seeks to develop an understanding of what it means to be old. It investigates the salience of 'oldness' as one dimension of identity concentrating on the meaning and salience of

'being old' as it is experienced within the context of the older woman's everyday life.

In contrast to much previous work, this study assumes a more positive perspective on the aged and the aging process. Like all periods in life, there is, in old age, an element of choice. Drawing on the insights derived from the symbolic interactionist framework and, in particular, the "reality constructionist" perspective, this research views older people as capable of active involvement in their own aging experience.

A network approach is employed as a means for examining the way in which older women participate (or do not participate) in their surrounding social world. Network formation and involvement among elderly women is investigated with an emphasis on exploring the meaning such interaction holds for the older woman and her sense of self. Adopting the view that networks can be used by individuals to pursue their interest in achieving certain ends, the way in which older women use their networks as a medium for identity maintenance is investigated. Located in a small progressive town, the research is also interested in examining the impact of change and community on social network involvement and identity maintenance in old age.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 The term "everyday life" is borrowed from Jack Douglas who maintains that "all of sociology necessarily begins with the understanding of everyday life,..." (1970:3).
- 2 A real problem with the literature in this area is that the conceptualization of identity with which the researcher is working is not always clear. It is often difficult to determine if identity is actually the concept being studied, as a variety of terms are employed in the relevant literature (e.g. self-image). Breytspraak and George (1982:241-301) provide an excellent review of conceptual and methodological issues related to the constructs self-concept and self-esteem.
- 3 Bultena and Powers (1978), in a longitudinal study measuring age identification both in 1960 and 1970, report that in 1960 nearly three-quarters of their chronologically elderly respondents (65%) saw themselves as middle-aged. Baum and Boxley (1983) report that 62% of their chronologically elderly sample identified themselves as younger than their actual age.
- 4 In addition to Bultena and Powers (1976) reference group perspective, there have been a number of other approaches taken in an attempt to explain the finding that a majority of older people, refusing to define themselves as old, see themselves as middle-aged. See for example, Ward's (1977) investigation of labeling theory as an explanation of aging denial. Baum offers another view, arguing that gerontologists must "construct a new model based upon the subjective expression of wellness in later years" (1983-84:25).
- 5 Hochschild describes the "poor dear" hierarchy used by the elderly widows at Merrill Court. "There was a shared system of ranking according to which she who had good health won honor. She who lost the fewest loved ones through death won honor and she who was close to her children won honor. Those who fell short on any of these criteria were often referred to as 'poor dears'" (1973:58)
- 6 See for example Sokolovsky and Cohen (1978). Though objectively defined as socially isolated, this population of SRO elderly were not devoid of personal networks and had many contacts outside the hotel.

- 7 More recently, Kaplan (1979) maintains that the work ethic has declined in contemporary society while leisure has ascended as a primary value. However, while this new attitude toward work and leisure should make the transition to a leisure role easier for future generations of elderly, the work ethic is still meaningful to the present generation of older people (Hochschild, 1973; Kaplan, 1979).

## CHAPTER TWO

### METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter will examine the research methodology used in this study. This will include a description of the research setting, the sample and sampling procedure, and the research instruments.

#### THE SETTING

The data for this study were collected in the small Town of Bridgewater, Nova Scotia. This research was intended as an examination and analysis of the aging experience of elderly individuals living in what was basically a non-urban environment. Much of the existing social gerontological research focuses upon studies of the urban elderly and little attention has been given to the rural and small town elderly. While the majority of elderly Canadians live in larger urban centers, the small town elderly are a significant population constituting a higher proportion of the population in small towns (Statistics Canada, 1984). In 1981, the proportion of Canadians aged 65 and over living in urban areas with populations of 500,000 and over was 9.4%. However, in small urban areas with populations of 1,000-5,000, the proportion of elderly Canadians comprised 13% of the total population as compared to the national average of approximately 10% (Statistics Canada, 1984).

An examination of the distribution of the population aged 65 and over in Nova Scotia reveals that older persons do, in fact, constitute a significantly high proportion of the total population of the small towns

in that province. In many Nova Scotia towns, with populations of 1,000-5,000, the proportion of elderly living in the area is well over the 13 percent found in the small urban areas of the country as a whole. To illustrate, the Town of Springhill, in Cumberland County, has a population of 4,900 and 16.9% of this population are 65 years and over. Middleton, in Annapolis county, has a population of 1,830 with 18.3% of this population being 65 years and over. Windsor, in Hants County, has a population of 3,645 and 20.7% are 65 years and over. Bridgewater, in Lunenburg County, has a population of 6,670 and with 12.7% of its residents 65 years and over, this town also has a proportion of elderly that, while substantially lower than the above towns, is also considerably higher than the national average.

There has been little gerontological research done in the Province of Nova Scotia, yet 10.9 percent of the population in the province are senior citizens. While it can be argued that small town Nova Scotia is unique and therefore not entirely representative of small town Canada as a whole, there is some basis for generalizability. This study focuses primarily on the issues of network involvement and identity in old age and these are social-psychological issues applicable to all elderly, regardless of their geographic location.

The original intent in the research design was to examine the social world of elderly women living within a natural setting. That is, the study was intended to focus on those elderly living a more or less 'normal' existence in their own homes, rather than in an institutionalized setting or in such unique settings as a retirement community. This is in contrast to much of the previous research related



to the issue of identity in later life. Matthews' (1979a) research focused on a select group of elderly widows gathered from a pool of public housing applicants and participants at a senior citizen's center. The population was also predominantly middle and upper class. Tindale's (1980) work involved a select sample of old men on skid row. Kaufman (1980) focused on "middle class Americans", living throughout a large metropolitan area, and did not study elderly individuals residing within the same geographic area. The principal focus for the data analysis in this study is, then, a sample of community-dwelling elderly women living within the boundaries of a small town.

It is not uncommon, in studies based on qualitative methodologies, for the researcher to implement changes in the initial formulation of the research design. Indeed, in conventional field studies, the researcher typically creates his/her focus and method as he/she works. Techniques are selected on the basis of the requirements of the research problem and according to which techniques will yield the most meaningful information (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). During the data gathering phase of the present study, the decision was made to include in the research, two secondary samples of elderly women living in specialized settings. These included a senior citizen's apartment complex and a nursing home.

These secondary samples were included as it became apparent that additional insights could be gained from examining the network involvement of older women who were living in contrasting settings. Being admitted to the nursing home, or meeting the criteria of eligibility for special senior housing, immediately placed these women in a

unique position vis-a-vis their community-dwelling counterparts. In each of these sample settings (the nursing home in particular), the older woman's definition of self as independent, and the availability of identity maintenance resources, could both be easily threatened. In both cases, individuals were removed from their surroundings of familiar neighbors and long time friends to a setting where the development of new network ties and the maintenance of old ones could become problematic. In the new environment, one's 'others' may, or may not become one's cordial neighbors and good friends. Most importantly, they may or may not become confirming others for one's self-identity.

It was hypothesized that the elderly women in these samples would be in a situation where resources for network maintenance and formation would be less accessible than would be the case for community-dwelling elderly. Interest, then, developed in examining the way in which older women achieved and maintained a viable sense of self in a situation where the possibilities for identity management were less than ideal. Knowledge of the aging experience in these settings would enhance the overall understanding of identity maintenance in later life.

An additional advantage of including these samples is the increased likelihood of obtaining information on social isolates. Those elderly women who are not part of a social network, or whose once active networks may have broken down or been eroded, through the loss of significant others, will be more likely to be located in these settings than in a sample of community-dwelling elderly (whose very presence in their own homes may be indicative of the existence of an active social network).

### The Town Of Bridgewater

The Town of Bridgewater is a progressive and developing community located on the south shore of Nova Scotia in Lunenburg County. It is approximately 90 kilometers southwest of the city of Halifax. The town is a service center for the county and surroundings areas. It is often described as "the hub" of Nova Scotia's South Shore. The town's population has been steadily growing with a population in 1981 of 6,670. approximately 12.7 percent of this population are 65 years and over.

While some of the older industries in the town have been dying out, new ones have been developing. The business community has been steadily growing and town officials now boast of a Bridgewater Industrial Park containing a Michelin tire plant, a major employer for the town people as well as workers from surrounding municipalities. Michelin is responsible for some of the more recent changes in the town, bringing with it a substantial number of "outsiders", and stimulating growth in business and commerce. The importance of Bridgewater as a service center has been increasing with 48.2 percent of the labor force employed in managerial/administrative, clerical, sales and service occupations and 27.2 percent in trade and commerce (Statistics Canada, 1983).

The Town of Bridgewater is most picturesque, lying on both sides of the scenic La Have River. There are many elegant old homes, and tall trees gracefully line the streets. Like many small towns, Bridgewater presents an interesting blend of the old and the new. Bordering on one side of the river is "Main Street" which comprises the core of downtown Bridgewater. Located here are various small shops and privately owned

businesses. These are, in general, housed in old buildings that were once part of a vital and vibrant downtown center. Directly across, on the opposite river bank, is a relatively large and modern shopping center containing various national chain stores. While Main Street is still the focus for a lot of town activity, the shopping mall (along with two other shopping plazas located in the town) has become an obvious rival as the hub of the town's commercial activity.

Residential areas spread out beyond these two commercial centers on both sides of the river. Although there is evidence of change all throughout the town, much of the 'new' has developed at some distance from the older town center. The two additional shopping malls are, for example, each located at the opposite extremities of the town. Modern landmarks such as 'McDonalds' and two large motel chains are also located away from the town center. Recent housing sub-divisions are developing in new areas located some distance from the older residential sites. Both an 'old' and a 'new' bridge connect the two sides of the town. The new bridge, completed very recently, bears evidence of the growth of the town, being constructed for the purpose of alleviating traffic congestion on the old bridge. Bridgewater is described as thriving and progressive by town businessmen and other local residents, with many of the research respondents proudly drawing attention to the progress in their town and the lack of it in surrounding municipalities.

It is precisely because Bridgewater is a progressive and developing community that it was selected as the setting for this study. As illustrated earlier, many small towns in Nova Scotia (e.g. Springhill and Windsor) have significantly large populations of elderly people.

However, these towns have not experienced population growth and industrial and economic development to the degree that Bridgewater has. An intention of this research was to examine the nature of the aging experience within a context of notable social and economic change. Presumably, in a community which has changed very little over the years, maintenance of identity in later life would be less precarious.

In a static community, for example, there would be less threat to the older individual's self-continuity as both setting and 'others' would remain relatively unchanged over time. In a town with little economic development, out migration of children is likely to occur, whereas, in a town with considerable economic development, it is likely that at least some children will remain as possible resources for identity support. However, while industrial development brings jobs for children, it also brings "outsiders" into the town and old neighbors, known for years, may be replaced by "strangers". As business and commerce grow some change is inevitable; the outside world creeps in and the identity maintenance resources available to older people may be adversely affected.

Older residents were very much aware that their town was changing. Although they acknowledged that there were some benefits to 'progress', they were also concerned about what was perceived as less positive implications of such change.

It's a thriving town. It's grown tremendously. We didn't have mail delivery then (before the growth). It would have been nice if they had left more stores on the main street. (No. 57-90 years).

It's extended so much. One time you knew everybody. Now there is no contact like there used to be. We were like a big happy family years ago. Now it's all changed, you don't know who's next door. (No. 45-83 years).

It's very commercial and lost its friendliness. It's not like Lunenburg. It (Lunenburg) hasn't gone ahead. (No. 9-76 years).

This study is concerned with the possible effect of rapid social and economic change on patterns of network involvement and concomitantly with identity maintenance in old age.

#### SAMPLING PROCEDURES

In this research, older women's social networks are a key dependent variable. Thus, unlike most forms of network analysis, this study does not follow the conventional network sampling procedure. It does not adopt a "snowball" sampling technique whereby the researcher asks the respondent to identify her social contacts and then proceeds to interview the individuals named by each respondent. While this technique is a very convenient way of obtaining a sample, it is not an appropriate method when a dominant concern is whether or not older women actually do have active social networks. The snowball sampling technique is by definition a biased one: it ensures that the sample selected is a group belonging to a social network. Those who are not part of a social network have no chance of being selected in the sample. To use such a sampling procedure in this study would yield an inaccurate analysis of identity and its maintenance in later life and seriously undermine the validity of the conclusions.

The population for this study was defined as women aged 65 years and over living within the boundaries of the Town of Bridgewater. The objective was to gather a random sample from this population. However, identification of this sample proved to be problematic. It proved impossible to gain access to any comprehensive listing of the town population which also provided information on the age of residents or their occupation. The town has, for example, nothing comparable to the city directories found in larger towns or cities. Since a list of the sampling units was not available, the equivalent of a systematic sampling method was employed as an effective alternative (Babbie, 1979).

Respondents were selected according to the following procedure. The researcher (covering the entire town) knocked on the door of every fifth house and inquired as to whether there was a woman aged 65 or over residing in the household. If an eligible woman lived in the residence she was asked to participate in the study.<sup>1</sup> A letter explaining the study and introducing the researcher was given to each potential respondent.<sup>2</sup> A copy of this letter is found in Appendix A. Although admittedly less efficient and certainly more time consuming than drawing a random sample from an objective listing, the method of locating potential respondents proved successful. The response rate was 84% and relatively few refusals (15 cases) were encountered.

Ultimately three sample sources were utilized. The first source (and core sample) was the group of 101 elderly women residing in their own homes (or private apartments) within the community. This sample was systematically selected according to the method described above and will be referred to hereafter as the 'community-dwelling elderly.' The

second source was a sample of 31 women drawn at random from a population of seniors residing in the two senior apartment complexes located in the town.<sup>3</sup> These respondents were selected by placing all apartment numbers in a box and randomly drawing each successive interview from it. The third sample source included 10 elderly women who were residents in the town nursing home. The home had 50 beds and was fully occupied. Initially, it was intended to select these respondents by randomly drawing names acquired from the home directory - a board located in the front lobby. However, this was not possible as the building was divided into wings with residents being situated on these wings according to their degree of wellness and the kind of care they required. The researcher had been informed by the administrator that the more "well elderly" were located on the S-wing. As it turned out, the majority of the residents on this wing were women, and through a process of eliminating those who proved impossible to interview, with few exceptions, almost all the eligible women on this wing were interviewed.<sup>4</sup>

Before entering the nursing home the researcher met with the administrator at which time the research was explained and permission to interview residents requested. Permission was granted and the administrator was most helpful. The manager of the Lunenburg County Regional Housing Authority (in charge of the seniors' apartment complexes) was also contacted. A meeting was again arranged where the nature of the research was explained and permission to enter the apartment buildings requested. Permission was granted and once again cooperation was excellent and no objections were encountered.



#### A NOTE ON ANALYSIS

In the analysis which follows, primary attention is focused on the core sample of 101 community-dwelling elderly respondents. However, there are various specified sections where it was considered advantageous to draw upon all the available data on a particular topic and, in these instances, analysis is based on the total sample of 142 respondents. Comparisons between the principal sample of community-dwelling elderly and the secondary samples are frequently made throughout the analysis. Where this occurs the data from each sample are specified independently.

#### THE INTERVIEW SITUATION

All interviews were conducted in the respondents' home.<sup>5</sup> In the majority of cases, the respondent and the interviewer were alone throughout the interview. However, in eight of the interview situations husbands were present. This did not present a problem as the husband generally adopted the role of "curious bystander" and did not interfere with the interview.<sup>6</sup> Interviews were, as anticipated, quite lengthy with the average interview taking two hours to complete. There was, however, considerable variation, from 1-1/2 hours to over 4 hours.<sup>7</sup> The informal style of the interview no doubt contributed to the interview length. However, this same style was conducive to obtaining a detailed profile of each respondent's network. Additional helpful information was often gathered during 'tea' following the interview. The researcher was struck by the frequent interruptions encountered in the course of

the interview. Remarkably, in many cases, the telephone call or visitor (who "just dropped by") was a significant member of the respondent's network and thus provided immediate confirmation of the degree of the respondent's network involvement. On the whole, the interview situation was a pleasant one; women were responsive and open with the researcher. In spite of the length of the interview many women reported that they enjoyed it.

### RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The nature of the research problem and the objectives of the study frequently determine the choice of methodological procedures. Since this study focuses on the meaning of "being old" and is concerned with developing an understanding of how elderly women define their own aging experience, methodological emphasis is on the subjective, and the research analysis is based primarily on qualitative data. Because of the advantages of using a combination of methods more than one technique was used. The in depth or intensive interview was employed as the principal method of gathering the data. However, participant observation was utilized as a secondary and supplementary data source.

#### Participant Observation

Symbolic interactionists generally believe that, in order to achieve an understanding of the social world of their research subjects, they must immerse themselves in the actors' world and obtain the research subjects' own definition of their situations. The researcher must, in short, attempt "to get inside their world of meanings" (Blumer,

1969). Participant observation is a data gathering technique that enables the researcher to establish this kind of closeness. The researcher, in an effort to gain intimate familiarity, participates in the lives and situations of research subjects as they interact in their natural life setting. At the same time, data are recorded and collected unobtrusively.

The merits of participant observation have been well documented (see for example, Becker and Geer, 1957; Becker, 1970; Deutscher, 1970; Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). This research tool allows the researcher to gain access to valuable information not possible using other techniques. Direct observation enables the researcher to cross-check the reliability and validity of information obtained from the interview. In this study, the researcher was often able to verify that ties specified by respondents actually did exist. Many of these network relationships were observed by the researcher and she was frequently able to take note of the nature of the exchange. Participant observation also provides the investigator with a rich source of descriptive, 'contextual' data invaluable in attempting to fully understand how others define their situations.

Utilizing participant observation as a second data gathering device, the researcher lived in the Town of Bridgewater, in the home of an elderly town widow, for the full 6 months during which the data were gathered. This proved to be most advantageous for this woman became a "key informant", able to provide information that led to a deeper understanding of many situations. She was most willing to share her knowledge and often provided valuable background and explanatory

information on various situations which the researcher found perplexing. Because of this woman, it was possible for the researcher to become aware of, and attend various senior's activities. She was also a welcomed source of information on many events that the investigator was unable to attend or that occurred when the researcher was not present. The investigator's association with this woman also proved advantageous in that through her the researcher was introduced to many elderly women (e.g. her elderly friends and acquaintances) that she might not have otherwise met. In addition, observing this elderly woman's own personal network in action yielded many enlightening and useful insights.

Although the investigator and her landlady conversed frequently, at no time was any of the research information discussed. Confidentiality was also maintained at all times by keeping the respondent's interviews carefully stored out of sight. An initial concern that some of the respondents might be reluctant to reveal information (or even be interviewed), knowing that the researcher was living with another elderly town woman, proved to be unwarranted. Many of the respondents did not know where the researcher was living. Those who asked, generally sought this information following the interview and showed no sign of concern or discomfort upon hearing of the investigator's living accommodation. It was advantageous that the researcher's landlady happened to be a woman who was a well-respected resident of the town.

An effort was made to get to know as many of the elderly women as possible and to become familiar with their activities and the settings where these activities took place. The researcher visited

often in the homes of many of the respondents, getting to know them better. Senior women were observed in many different situations and numerous events were attended. Some of these included: the annual spring fling (a major hospital fund raising event in which many older woman were involved), various church related activities (including special entertainment, church suppers and teas), a meeting of one of the women's church groups, an 80th birthday party, and events such as the seniors' art display and sale. Frequenting the town shopping malls provided the opportunity for chatting with older women and observing them in interaction with others. Numerous other isolated happenings provided the occasion for observing and listening to older people. These observations resulted in the collection of an abundance of detailed fieldnotes significantly supplementing information obtained in the interviews. A chief advantage of the direct observations here was that the researcher was able to view the dynamics of relationships. The contact between the older woman and her family, friends and neighbors was, in many instances, observed directly as they interacted in various settings. Observing social networks in action as it were, gave the investigator a 'feel' for what might have otherwise been merely a conceptual and analytical construct.

### The Interview Schedule

The interview format was standardized so that the same data were collected from all respondents. The interview schedule used was semi-structured, and consisted primarily of open-ended questions. This enabled the interviewer to guide the conversation, yet provided

necessary freedom which enabled respondents to expand on some responses or to digress if the interviewer felt the information pertinent to the study. It also allowed the researcher to probe for additional information where it was considered essential. Verbatim quotations drawn from responses to these open-ended questions (as well as those derived from field notes) form an important part of the data collected. These verbatim quotations are a significant source of information in the following analysis, for they enable the reader to judge the fit between the researcher's interpretations of the respondent's situations and the respondent's own definition of the same (c.f. Rosenthal et al., 1980:143).

The interview schedule (see Appendix B) was designed primarily to gather information on two general subject areas - self-identity and social networks. There were, in addition, a series of questions relating to socio-demographic and general background data, such as age, marital status, education, socio-economic status, health status, and length of residence in the town.

Self-identity. The self-identity section of the interview schedule included a somewhat modified version of Kuhn's TST (twenty-statement test) or the "who am I?" test. The intention in using the TST was not to quantitatively analyze responses but to qualitatively examine the content of the responses and use this information as a sort of springboard for further analysis of identity. For example, responses to the TST will be examined to determine whether or not the older woman describes herself in terms of formal statuses and roles or in terms of

informal roles, personal attributes and interpersonal relationships. Rosenberg's self-esteem scale was also used. A number of other questions were designed to gather information on the various dimensions of identity (e.g. age-identification) that were considered relevant. Also included in this section were questions designed to elicit information on the 'meaning of old' as it was defined by the respondents.

Social networks. Although some quantitative data on social networks were gathered (e.g. information on the number of ties and frequency of contacts), most of the questions were designed so as to elicit qualitative data on the quality and content of network ties. The intent was to develop a network profile of each elderly woman gathering data on all areas of her network involvement. Thus, questions were asked relating to family, friends, neighbors and leisure involvement. The interviewer also probed for any additional meaningful ties not included under any of these categories. One problem, inherent in this type of network analysis, is that it is time consuming to record data on so many dimensions. However, respondents were most cooperative and the researcher was very satisfied with the quality of the data obtained.

#### THE SAMPLE

The following profile of the study sample begins with a description of the age of the respondents. Looking first at the total sample (N=142), the respondents range in age from 65 years to 98 years. The mean age of the total sample is 76.8 years. Not surprising, the

mean age for the nursing home sample (N=10) is considerably higher at 87.9 years. The mean age of the community-dwelling elderly (N=101) and the elderly women residing in the apartment complexes (N=31) is 76.3 years and 75.1 years respectively. The age distribution of the respondents in each sample is illustrated in Table 2.1.

TABLE 2.1  
AGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS

Age Categories	<u>Samples</u>							
	Community- Dwelling (N = 101)		Nursing Home (N = 10)		Senior's Apts. (N = 31)		Total Sample (N = 142)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
65 - 74	47	(46.5)	0	0	15	(48.4)	62	(43.7)
75 - 84	41	(40.6)	3	(30)	14	(45.2)	58	(40.8)
85 and Over	13	(12.9)	7	(70)	2	( 6.4)	22	(15.5)

Educational attainment for the elderly women in this sample is relatively high considering that opportunity for education was limited for this generation of women. Nearly one-third (29.6%) had at least some high school education, while twenty-three (16.2%) completed high school. Only three women (2.1%) had university degrees. However, thirty-seven respondents (26%) had other forms of training beyond high school (e.g. nursing or teaching diplomas, training in accounting, business and clerical skills). Thirty-three respondents (23.2%) had



completed only elementary school while another seven respondents (4.9%) had less than grade V education.

It was not uncommon for many in this generation of women to have their education cut short either because their families could not afford to send them to school or because they were needed to help out at home. The following responses illustrate the kind of explanation that many of these women gave in discussing why they had been unable to go on in school.

I came from a big family and we couldn't do that.  
(No. 103-91 yrs.)

I had to look after my mother, she had twins.  
(No. 139-89 yrs.)

Typical of the majority of elderly Canadian women, the elderly females in our sample are not financially well-off. Over one-half (53.5%) of the respondents have an income of less than \$8,000 a year. Annual income for the majority of these women (74.6%) is well below \$15,000. The largest proportion of this annual income, in the majority of cases (72.5%), comes from the government old age security pension. Very few of the respondents (7%) declared that their largest source of income was derived from either their own or husband's private pension plan. While forty percent of the sample claimed to have some investments, investment earnings made up the largest contribution to annual income for only twenty-one (14.8%) of the respondents.

Acquiring information on income presented problems in a number of instances. Many of these women had difficulty selecting a category from the card of possible incomes, and the researcher was convinced that a number of the respondents truly did not know for certain their actual

income. One respondent, who looked at the card but said that she was unable to tell the interviewer the correct amount, replied, "my son takes care of that". In this case, the respondent's son took care of his mother's financial affairs including making arrangements so that the fee for his father's nursing home care was paid monthly through the bank. The son also did his mother's income tax. A number of these women reported that either husbands or some other family member looked after their financial affairs.

A number of other respondents were reluctant to discuss their incomes. Fourteen (9.8%) respondents either did not know, or would not reveal, their financial status. In many of the instances where women refused to disclose income, the researcher was led to conclude that a general suspicion of "government" was responsible for the reticence. One lady replied that she really did not know what her income was but she did not want the government to send her less. Another respondent, who replied to each of the income related questions with, "that's private", added, "but why are you asking that - the government already knows that?"

Several respondents claimed that they had been interviewed a year or two ago by "a woman from the government" who was apparently "doing some kind of census". One respondent's husband (who would not allow his wife to discuss income) claimed that this "woman from the government" asked a number of income related questions "each time going further". Whereas women were often unsure of their incomes, husbands (when present) were more apt to be reluctant to allow their wives to disclose financial matters. At least two of these men warned the

researcher prior to the interview that she was not to ask any "money questions".

Looking at husband's occupation, it can be concluded that, for the better part of their lives, most of these elderly women have not been living in a position of high socio-economic status. Only ten (7.6%, N=132) of the respondent's husbands had held professional or semi-professional jobs. Twenty-four (18.2%) husbands had been proprietors or managers, although only five of these positions could be classified as high level management. Thirteen husbands (9.8%) had worked in clerical, sales and service positions. By far the largest number of husbands (64.3%) had not been working at highly skilled occupations. Thirty-one husbands (23.5%) had been employed in jobs that would be classified as skilled. Twenty-seven men (20.4%) had worked at semi-skilled manual jobs, while another twenty-seven had worked at unskilled manual occupations. No husbands were still employed at the time of the interview. As might be anticipated, the ten never-married women in the sample also did not work at highly prestigious occupations. Seven of these women had been employed in clerical and sales positions, two respondents had worked at housework and one woman was a retired nurse.

Although one-half of the sample (71 respondents) had, at some point in their lives, been employed outside the home, only thirty-eight of these women (26.8%) had worked full-time and for the duration of fifteen years or more. The remaining 23.3% worked part-time and, in general, for very few years, working off and on during their married years. In most cases, the respondent went out to work after the

children had entered school or, in some cases, during the early years of marriage before children arrived. Others began working outside the home for the first time after their husband's died or some women began working to supplement family income after their husbands had become ill. Of those who had been employed outside the home, most women worked at low-paying, unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. These included: salesclerks and cashiers, secretaries and stenographers, bookkeepers and those who worked as housekeepers (17.6%) or doing some form of housework. Only five respondents taught school although twelve were trained as teachers. Three respondents had been nurses.

Looking at all of the ever-married women (132 respondents), only 21.2% worked outside the home at full-time jobs (and for at least 15 years or more). The majority of married women in the sample then, spent most, if not all, of their lives as mothers and homemakers. In reply to the question "Have you ever worked outside the home for pay?" many women gave responses similar to the woman who replied, "No, I had enough work to do inside the house". Some of the women, who had remained in the household, supplemented family income by taking in boarders or doing sewing in their homes, again, often following their husband's death or illness.

A substantial majority of the respondents (64.1%) are widows. Even in the community-dwelling sample, 61.4% are widowed women. In fact, there are proportionately more widows in this group of elderly women than there are among elderly Canadian women in general. Almost one-half (49%) of the Canadian female population 65 and over is widowed (Statistics Canada, 1984). In our sample ten women (7%) were never

married and four respondents (2.8%) were separated or divorced. Thus, only thirty-seven respondents (26%) were still married women at the time of the interview.

Again, typical of elderly women in general, the majority of the respondents were living alone (58.3%, N=132, respondents from the nursing home being deleted). As would be expected, many more of the community-dwelling respondents were still living with husbands (32.7% as compared to only one respondent in the senior's apartment complexes). However, twenty-one (20.8%) of the community-dwelling were living with persons other than a husband. These arrangements included: women living with adult children, grandchildren, a cousin, a sister, a brother, a sister-in-law and a friend.<sup>8</sup>

Also typical of the majority of Canada's elderly, the vast majority of these women (83.8%) had at least one living child. However, a not insignificant number (23 women, 16.2%) were childless. A comparison of the elderly women living in their own homes in the community with those residing either in the nursing home or apartment complexes reveals that slightly higher percentages of those living in the nursing home (20%) and the senior citizen's complex (22.3%) are childless, compared with 13.9% of those living at home.

Well over one-half of the sample population (63.4%) were either born in the Town of Bridgewater (21.2%) or in a nearby community (42.4%). Forty-four respondents (31%) were born in other Nova Scotia communities outside the immediate area, while eight women (5.6%) were born outside the province. Slightly over three-quarters (76.8%) of the sample have lived in the town for twenty years or more. Although some

of these women were unable to recall the exact number of years that they had lived in Bridgewater, at least forty-eight of them (33.8%) said they had lived in the town for forty years or more. Only nine women (6.3%) had lived in Bridgewater for less than five years.

This concludes the outline of the methodology and research design. At this point, the nature of the study has been introduced, relevant literature has been reviewed, and the research objectives and methodology have been presented. Parts II and III examine the way in which the aging process is actually experienced by a group of elderly women living within the context of a small Nova Scotia town. In Chapter Three, which begins this analysis, the meaning of 'being old' is examined in detail.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 If more than one eligible women (i.e. 65 years or over) lived in the house, the researcher interviewed the one who answered the door.
- 2 This letter was typed on stationery bearing the official McMaster University letterhead and compiled and signed by my supervisor. As some seniors were suspicious, in particular, that the researcher was someone "from the government", this letter proved to be most helpful.
- 3 These two apartment buildings contained 49 and 25 units respectively.
- 4 Two women were eliminated because their hearing was severely impaired. Two others were too confused to understand the questions. Another lady was not interviewed because she was suffering from a substantial memory loss. One woman, afflicted with M.S., was too young to be eligible for the study.
- 5 The nursing home residents were generally interviewed in their rooms. However, in a couple of cases (where the respondent had a roommate, for example) the interview was conducted elsewhere in other private areas where confidentiality and anonymity could be assured.
- 6 The only exceptions to this being two cases where husbands intervened when income questions were asked toward the end of the interview. In a number of instances, talking with sociable husbands after the interview actually yielded useful information, adding to the researcher's general understanding of the aging experience.
- 7 The length of the interview was usually dependent on the size of the woman's network. Women who had few children, siblings or close friends took much less time to interview.
- 8 Eight widowed respondents lived with sons (five of whom were unmarried) and four lived with daughters (of whom one was widowed, one divorced, and two married).

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE MEANING OF 'BEING OLD'

This chapter examines the meanings that elderly women attach to their own experience of the aging process and explores the source of these meanings. This attempt to understand the particular interpretation the older woman gives to her own actual experience of 'being old' lays the groundwork for subsequent chapters which examine her sense of self-identity and the way in which she attempts to maintain it.

After several months of continuous involvement in the day-to-day world of elderly women, it is relatively easy to enumerate the objective realities of aging for them. In objective terms 'being old', for some elderly women, can mean: stretching to make ends meet because of insufficient income; not being able to do what one once did because of changes in health and ability; worrying about how much longer one will be able to stay in one's own home; not being able to do things and go places because of lack of transportation and because taxi fares are too high; losing many dear friends and loved ones; and, above all, being old can mean being dependent on others in order to manage one's daily life. However, as previous research has shown, and the analysis in this chapter will demonstrate, these objective 'realities' of aging can be distorted and exaggerated so that what people think growing old is like does not mesh with the actual experience.



This chapter begins by examining the objective reality of chronological age and looks at the way in which these women subjectively identify themselves in terms of age. It will show that, although others in society may define the elderly woman as old, she is not likely to perceive herself this way. 'Being old' is simply not a preeminent part of her own life experience.

#### AGE IDENTIFICATION

"I don't think of myself as old, I don't feel old".

Though all 142 respondents in this study are 65 years or over and thus eligible for the label 'old' as it is socially employed, the vast majority of these women ignore the social definition of old and do not view themselves in terms of their chronological years. That most of these elderly respondents identify themselves as either young or middle-aged is not a surprising finding, as it is similar to the results of a number of previous studies (cited in Chapter One) which have reported that many older people tend to identify themselves as being considerably younger than their actual years.

In response to the question, "when you think about yourself, do you think about yourself as: (1) young, (2) middle-aged, (3) elderly, (4) old?" Well over three-quarters of the community-dwelling respondents (77.2%) identified themselves as either young (8.9%) or middle-aged (68.3). Fourteen women (13.9%) identified themselves as elderly, one refused to classify herself according to any particular age category, and only eight respondents (7.9%) adopted the label old as

applicable to themselves. Even in the nursing home sample, where the average age of the respondents was 87.9 years (approximately twelve years higher than the average age of the sample as a whole), seventy percent of the elderly women identified themselves as middle-aged. Two others viewed themselves as elderly and only one respondent thought of herself as old. Although there were proportionately more respondents among the non community-dwelling elderly women, who identified themselves as either elderly or old (for the apartment sample, (N=31), these proportions were 25.8% and 6.4% respectively), the numbers are not as great as might have been anticipated.

Many of the respondents were quick to provide explanations for the way in which they thought about themselves in terms of age. Most were not accustomed to thinking about their age. On occasions when they were forced to confront their actual years, they were both surprised and perplexed to discover that, while they are indeed 'old' in chronological years, they cannot think of themselves this way for they simply do not feel old. Thus, a seventy-one year old woman stated, "I don't feel old, sure I'm old (i.e. in years) but I am not feeling old." Feelings were the most common explanation for the way in which these elderly women determined their subjective age-identities. The following are typical responses which echo this theme:

I really feel as young as I always did. It surprises me sometimes when I look in the mirror and see how old I look. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

I don't feel any older today than I did twenty-three years ago. (No. 127-94 yrs.)

I don't think much about that (i.e. age), I don't feel old. (No. 194-98 yrs.)

### When And How The Older Woman Comes To Identify Herself As Old

George (1975), in an extensive study of the process of age identification, examined three types of referents used in the assessment of age identification: (1) physical conditions and attributes, (2) social statuses and conditions and (3) chronological age. She concludes that, while chronological age is very important in the process of age identification (particularly for the 50-69 year old age group in her sample), there are a substantial number of older people (particularly those 70 years or older) who ignore chronological age as a referent. These people are more likely to use physical and social conditions in the assessment of age identification (George, 1975:130). The data presented here confirm the finding that chronological age and subjective age assessment are related. However, the majority of the elderly women in this study appear to ignore chronological age and tend to use other referents (in particular physical conditions and various experiences or events) in assessing their own age identities and in determining when and how others become old.

To determine how and when the older woman comes to identify herself as elderly or old, respondents who had identified themselves as old (or elderly) were asked the following two questions, "About how old were you when you began to think of yourself as old (or elderly)?", and "Did anything happen that made you feel elderly/old?" A number of different explanations were given for the change in self-perception (Table 3.1). However, of the thirty-five respondents who had identified themselves as either old or elderly (of these, 22 were community-dwelling, 3 nursing home and 10 senior's apartment respondents), only

TABLE 3.1

FACTORS AFFECTING THE PERCEPTION OF FEELING OLD  
(OR ELDERLY) AMONG RESPONDENTS WHO  
IDENTIFIED THEMSELVES AS OLD OR ELDERLY

Type of Reason Given	Frequency Response Given (N=39)	Percentage of Respondents Giving Response <sup>1</sup> (N=35)
Chronological Age	8	22.9
Deterioration in Health	6	17.1
Slowing down/unable to do what once did	8	22.9
Accident Related Disability	2	5.7
Living in a Nursing Home (or the suggestion of it)	3	8.6
Loss of friend or loved one	5	14.3
Receiving the Old Age Pension	1	2.9
Living alone	1	2.9
A gradual process, no particular age, event or circumstance	5	14.3

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N=35);  
because some respondents gave multiple reasons, the total exceeds 100%.

eight of these women (22.9%) were able to give a chronological age at which they began to see themselves this way. Three of these respondents made very brief replies, taking the form of - "in the eighties", "after seventy" or "when I was about eighty" - and were unable to give any further explanation as to why, at this particular time, they began to consider themselves as old or elderly. The five others referred to something which happened around this time in their lives and apparently contributed to their self-perceptions as old women.

Previous research has suggested that certain circumstances or events can contribute to self-definition as old or elderly. Of the thirty-five respondents who identified themselves as elderly or old, twenty-six respondents (74.3%), with little probing, referred to specific experiences or events that led them to think of themselves in this way. Sixteen of these women (61.5%) used physical referents in their explanations for how and when they began to feel elderly or old. A deterioration in health was a precipitating factor.

When I got high blood pressure. (No. 31-79 yrs.)

Up until this winter I felt young, but when you get something wrong with you and have to lie around....  
(No. 34-78 yrs.)

Because I'm not feeling so well, I can't go downtown to the post office or to the bank. (No. 66-88 yrs.)

Inability to "do what I once did" and a feeling that "I've slowed down" were related factors that led other women to conclude that they were old.

I couldn't do the same at eighty. (No. 62-86 yrs.)

Just this last year, since my knee got so bad I can't get around like I used to. (No. 119-77 yrs.)

I tire a lot easier, just a slower pace. (No. 133-65 yrs.)

Physical limitations, often the result of an accident, may affect the older woman's life style and eventually her perception of herself, so that she no longer thinks of herself as young or middle-aged.

After I fell, that's for sure. It was 3 years the 14th of May. I never got back the same. (No. 120-77 yrs.)

Moving out of one's own home and into an institution for the elderly can also be an influential factor in the shift to an age identity of old. Two respondents claimed that they began to feel old when they began living in a nursing home.

Oh I guess after living in nursing homes. You change I think. You have to do a lot of fighting your way through. (No. 109-88 yrs.)

I knew I was getting older when I went up to the \_\_\_\_\_ (a nursing home located in another town). (No. 102-95 yrs.)

A third respondent started to think of herself as old after her family unsuccessfully tried to convince her that she ought to move to a nursing home.

I think that when my sons started talking to me about the nursing home, I felt 10 years older. (No. 59-81 yrs.)

Older people frequently experience the loss of significant others and this event is sometimes a precipitating factor in the shift to a perception of self as old. Five respondents reported that they began to feel old when they lost good friends and loved ones. The loss of a parent or a husband can be particularly significant.

Two additional factors referred to as explanations for feeling old were, "when I started getting the old age pension" (No. 142-80 yrs.); and, "when you live alone you get old" (No. 3-85 yrs.). It is interesting that "getting the old age pension" is not a common explanation for feeling old yet this is a typical component of the social definition of old. Five other respondents maintained that growing old was for them, a gradual process precipitated by no particular event or circumstance. As one respondent said,

It just gradually happened. You don't notice it really, it just grows on you. (No. 101-77 yrs.)

As noted in Chapter One, a number of previous studies of age identification have focused on investigating the relationship between specific variables and the shift to an age identity of elderly or old. The present study examined the relationship between age identification and the following variables: chronological age, perceived health status, income and marital status. These variables are, of course, interrelated; it is with increasing age, for example, that health problems in elderly people become more prevalent, income tends to decline and widowhood is more likely. Thus, expecting that chronological age and perceived health status are related, the combined effect of these two variables on subjective age is examined. Likewise, anticipating that marital status and income are associated, the relation between these variables and age identification is similarly investigated. (Note that the analysis in this section is based on the 101 community-dwelling respondents only)

Chronological age. The relationship between chronological age and subjective age assessment is not clear cut. It has already been shown that a substantial number of older people pay little attention to their chronological age and, using other referents, assess their age identities as young or middle-aged. Yet, chronological age is generally found to be a stronger predictor of age identity than other variables (George, 1975). The data presented here confirm the findings of previous work that a positive relationship exists between chronological age and subjective age.

First, comparing the average age of those whose age identity was young or middle-aged with the average age of those whose age identity was elderly or old, we find that, though the difference is not as great as might be expected, respondents who view themselves as elderly or old are indeed older in chronological years than those who do not. The average age of those who view themselves as young or middle-aged is 75.9 years and 74.7 years respectively. The average age of those women who view themselves as elderly or old is somewhat higher at 80.6 and 83.4 years respectively.

The relationship between chronological age and feeling elderly or old is further illustrated in Table 3.2 where the subjective ages of respondents and the gerontological age categories to which they actually belong are compared. The number of respondents identifying themselves as young or middle-aged decreases as chronological age increases, so that while 93.5 percent of those in the 65-74 age group view themselves as young or middle-aged, only 38.5 percent of respondents 85 years and over do. Alternatively, while only 6 percent of respondents in the 65-



TABLE 3.2

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE AGE  
IDENTIFICATION AND OBJECTIVE AGE STATUS

SUBJECTIVE AGE IDENTITY	CHRONOLOGICAL AGE CATEGORIES					
	65-74		75-84		85 and Over	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Young/Middle Aged	43	93.5	30	73.2	5	38.5
Elderly/Old	3	6.5	11	26.8	8	61.5
TOTAL	46	100.0	41	100.0	13	100.0

\*N=100. One respondent could not assess her age identity and has been omitted.

74 age category identify themselves as either elderly or old, 61 percent of those 85 years and over view themselves this way. These data confirm that, although many older people continue to identify themselves as young or middle-aged, the older the respondents, the more likely they are to identify themselves as old.

Perceived health status. Table 3.3 illustrates the relationship between chronological age, perceived health status and subjective age. According to these data, the better the older woman perceives her health to be, the more likely she is to identify herself as younger than her actual age. Thus, 50 percent of those who identify themselves as young

TABLE 3.3

The Relationship Between Chronological Age,  
Perceived Health Status and Age Identification

Subjective Age Identity	65-74				75-84				85 And Over			
	<u>HEALTH STATUS</u>				<u>HEALTH STATUS</u>				<u>HEALTH STATUS</u>			
	<u>Excellent/Good</u>		<u>Fair/Poor</u>		<u>Excellent/Good</u>		<u>Fair/Poor</u>		<u>Excellent/Good</u>		<u>Fair/Poor</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Young/Middle-Aged	28	96.6	15	88.2	22	81.5	8	57.1	2	50.0	3	33.3
Elderly/Old	1	3.4	2	11.8	5	18.5	6	42.9	2	50.0	6	66.7
TOTAL	29	100.0	17	100.0	27	100.0	14	100.0	4	100.0	9	100.0

\*N=100. One respondent could not assess her age identity and has been omitted.

or middle-aged, even though their objective age status is 85 years or older, also report their health to be either good or excellent. However, the older the respondent is in years, the more likely she will be to identify herself as elderly or old, if she perceives her health to be only fair or poor. Thus, while almost 67 percent of those who are 85 years or over and report that their health is only fair feel elderly or old, only about 12 percent of those who are in the 65-74 age category and perceive their health to be fair feel this way.

Income. Having a lower income also appears to be associated with an age identity of elderly or old. As Table 3.4 illustrates, as income increases (within each category of marital status) proportionately fewer respondents identify themselves as elderly or old. Though the number of respondents having an income of \$20,000 or more is very small, not one respondent in this category identified herself as elderly or old.

Marital status. It was reported earlier that some respondents claimed that the death of their husbands made them feel that they were old. According to these data, marital status does indeed appear to be related to feeling elderly or old (while only 8.8% of the marrieds identify themselves as elderly or old, 30.6% of the widowed do. Again, the interrelation of a number of variables associated with age identification needs to be emphasized. There is little variation in the perceived health status of the widowed and married in this sample; however, widowed respondents are on the average 5.8 years older than the marrieds. Thus, chronological age is a likely influential variable which also has to be considered here). However, the likelihood of

TABLE 3.4

The Relationship Between Marital Status,  
Income and Age Identification

Subjective Age Identity	MARRIED						WIDOWED					
	INCOME						INCOME					
	<8,000		8,000-19,999		20,000+		<8,000		8,000-19,999		20,000+	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Young/Middle Aged	5	83.3	15	88.2	8	100.0	20	57.1	17	81.0	4	100.0
Elderly/Old	1	16.7	2	11.8	-	-	15	42.9	4	19.0	-	-
TOTAL	6	100.0	17	100.0	8	100.0	35	100.0	21	100.0	4	100.0

\*N=91. One respondent could not assess her age identity and has been omitted. Five respondents refused to disclose their incomes and four never-married respondents have also been omitted.

feeling old is greatest when the older woman is widowed and has a lower income. Thus, while 42.9 percent of widowed elderly women with incomes of less than \$8,000 identify themselves as elderly or old, only 16.7 percent of married elderly women with similar income do so (Table 3.4).

To briefly summarize, our data support the findings of a number of previous studies of the relationship between age identification and a number of specific variables. The woman most likely to think of herself as elderly or old is - old in chronological years, in poor health, has a relatively low income and is a widow.

#### Age Identification And The Views Of Significant Others

This study also examined the nature of the relationship between older women's age definitions of themselves and how they think they are viewed by their significant others. Berger and Luckmann (1967:150-151) maintain that "the significant others in the individual's life are the principal agents for the maintenance of his subjective reality." Based on this theoretical notion, the women in our sample were asked, "How about other people close to you, do you think that they think of you as an old woman?"

Eighty-five percent of the respondents (N=142) did not think that others close to them thought of them as old women. Given the fact that almost three-quarters of these same women perceive themselves to be young or middle-aged, these data seem to suggest that indeed the older individual's self-image is related to the way in which she perceives that her significant others view her. However, while thirty-five women (in the total interview sample) think of themselves as elderly (24

respondents) or old (11 respondents), only nine of these (25.7%) say that they think others close to them think of them as old. While one respondent with an old age identity claimed that she did not know how others viewed her, twenty-five women (71.4%) identified themselves as elderly (20 respondents) or old (5 respondents) yet, did not think that others viewed them the same way.

A possible explanation for this finding relates to the wording of the question asked. The question reads, "How about other people close to you, do you think that they think of you as an old woman?" The responses suggest (as noted by Cutler, 1982) that old and elderly mean distinctly different things to many of these women. This is confirmed by responses to another question in which sixteen of the women whose age identities are elderly say that old and elderly mean something different to them. Thirteen of these same sixteen respondents said that others did not think of them as old.

Another possible explanation for the discrepancy between the image these older women have of themselves and their perception of the views of significant others may be found in the explanations they give about why they feel elderly or old. In most cases, respondents who claimed that they thought of themselves as elderly or old were able to refer to specific circumstances or experiences that led them to feel this way (e.g., failing health or disability). George (1975) suggests that the standards used by older individuals in determining their subjective age may operate internally or externally. According to the external standards perspective, the elderly woman sees herself as old when she perceives others to be treating her as an old person. If the

source of the standards are internal, the elderly woman's perception of herself as old is based on her comparison of herself to a cultural standard or image of oldness which she has previously internalized.

Our twenty-five respondents with elderly or old age identities appear typically to use physical referents such as their health or a feeling of slowing down. Such physical changes may be either internal or external standards depending on whether or not they are apparent to the older woman's significant others. Though the elderly woman may have slowed down and may feel that she cannot do what she once did, children or close friends may not be aware that she has changed. Many of the women who said they had slowed down added that they still do most of what they always did, it just takes them longer. Thus, others, seeing the work done, may interpret this as evidence that she is as strong (and 'young') as ever.

As is clear from our data, the process of age identification is a complex one. No one factor can alone sufficiently explain it; multiple referents are involved. Even though she is old in years, her health has declined, and she is aware that significant others view her as an old woman, the elderly woman still may not adopt 'old' as a self view. Thus, a seventy-two year old woman (who identifies herself as middle-aged), when asked whether she thought others close to her thought of her as an old woman replied:

Yes, because \_\_\_\_\_ knows I'm seventy-two, she expects me to be old. My daughter says, "Mum, grow old gracefully" - but, I can't, I don't feel old.  
(No. 78-72 yrs.)

## 'BEING OLD'

"Oldness is in one's body and never a state of mind".

To know that these women think of themselves as young, middle-aged, elderly, or old does not tell us a great deal unless we also know what meaning they attribute to these terms. Thus, respondents were asked, "What do the terms young, middle-aged, elderly and old mean to you?", as well as a related question, "When do you think that most people become old?" Data from all 142 respondents are drawn upon here and a 'typical' or composite picture of what 'old' means to these women emerges from their responses to these questions.

Many of the respondents related these terms to a specific age but, at the same time, pointed out that there is also a great deal of variation. Others simply insisted that it was impossible to give any particular age because, "I don't think that has anything to do with it", "it's according to the person", "it's not the same for everyone". When confronted with the need to define 'old', many of these elderly respondents use definitions that are based upon the stereotyped social image of it but, hardly any of these women identify themselves with this picture. Their own experience does not mesh with the conventional description of old that they give. Most of these women are aware of the discrepancy between the social meaning of old and their own experience. They are also aware that many of the 'old' people they know do not fit the image, as one respondent concluded, "I don't think there are any old people anymore." In other words, 'being old' is an experience that means something other than the typical social notion of it.



Since aging is a lifelong process many respondents defined aging and old age in relation to youth. Thus, in order to understand the meaning of 'old' it is necessary to also look at the meaning of young.

### The Meaning Of Young

"Young is smart, well and able to do things". (No. 24-84 yrs.)

Young can mean as early as "the teen years" and "the twenties and thirties" or, as a substantial number defined it, young is "the twenties and forties" and even "anyone fifty, they are still young." A seventy-seven year old respondent claimed that a person is young "up until age sixty-five", while a seventy-three year old maintained that, anyone "less than seventy" is young.

The most common way of describing the meaning of young was in terms of activity or the ability to do things (see Table 3.5). Thus, a young person is "a person who is active and able to do everything they want to do" (No. 20-84 yrs.). Almost three-quarters of those whose age identity was 'young' either defined it in this way or as "feeling good." This emphasis on activity and the ability to do things is evident in the following typical responses.

A person who is active and able to do everything they want to do. (No. 20-84 yrs.)

Active, going all the time and enjoying life.  
(No. 142-80 yrs.)

Young makes you think of going out and walking, dancing, working; going out and having fun, sleeping well, eating well and enjoying life. (No. 102-95 yrs.)

TABLE 3.5

TYPES OF DEFINITIONS EMPLOYED  
IN DEFINING 'YOUNG'

Type of Definition	Frequency Response Given (N=150)	Percentage of Respondents Giving Response <sup>1</sup> (N=142)
Chronological age (includes 13 references to "teens" or "teenagers")	44	31.0
Active, able to do things, well and fit	80	56.3
Outlook on life (e.g., Enthusiastic, looking to the future)	9	6.3
Having fun, enjoying life	9	6.3
Family life stage	5	3.5
Other	3	2.1

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N=142); because some respondents gave multiple definitions, the total exceeds 100%.

The ability to do things and get around without wondering, "can I do it?" That irks me terribly.  
(No. 52-84 yrs.)

The Meaning Of Middle-Aged And Its Relation To Being Old

"It's not much different from young." (No. 2-69 yrs.)

The meaning these elderly women attribute to middle-aged is of particular interest since the majority of the respondents in this study think of themselves as belonging to this age category. Those who think of themselves as middle-aged share a similar perception of it. They ignore the typical social meaning and define it consistent with their perception of themselves and their own experience. Thus, a sixty-seven year old respondent says, "they say its fifty, but I don't believe that." (No. 18) Another eighty-three year old woman describes middle age as, "not before seventy, they shouldn't become middle-aged before seventy." (No. 45)<sup>1</sup>

Middle-aged is more often defined in terms of chronological age than any of the other age categories, though the range is a broad one. According to these women, one can begin middle age as early as age forty or as late as age eighty. The most popular period was, "about fifty", with fifty-four percent of those who used chronological age as a referent saying this was when middle age began.

As Table 3.6 illustrates almost 62 percent of the respondents, who identify themselves as 'middle-aged', refer to chronological age in their definition of this term. The majority of these women (76%, N=58)

TABLE 3.6

TYPES OF DEFINITIONS OF 'MIDDLE AGED' BY SUBJECTIVE  
AGE IDENTITY OF RESPONDENT

Subjective Age Identity<sup>1</sup>

Definitions	Young		Middle-Aged		Elderly		Old	
	Freq. Res. Given (N=14)	% of Respondents Giving Res. (N=11)	Freq. Res. Given (N=102)	% of Respondents Giving Res. (N=94)	Freq. Res. Given (N=24)	% of Respond Giving (N=24)	Freq. Res. Given (N=12)	% Of Respondents Giving Res. (N=11)
Chronological Age	7	63.6	58	61.7	12	50.0	7	63.6
There is Variation (e.g. "It Varies with the Person")	4	36.4	8	8.5	5	20.8	1	9.1
Ability to do Things (e.g. "Pretty Much the Same as Young")	-	-	12	12.8	1	4.2	1	9.1
Change in Ability (e.g. "Slowing-Down")	2	18.2	8	8.5	2	8.3	-	-
Wisdom and Maturity	-	-	6	6.4	-	-	1	9.1
Family Stage	-	-	4	4.2	1	4.2	1	9.1
Other	1	9.1	6	6.4	3	12.5	1	9.1

<sup>1</sup> Within each column, the percentages are based on the total number of respondents in each subjective age category. Because some respondents gave multiple definitions, in most cases, column totals exceed 100%. The total number of respondents = 140 since two respondents who could not assess their age identity have been omitted.

provided definitions which enables them to protect their image of themselves as being considerably younger than their actual years. Eighteen of these forty-four respondents (40.9%) managed consistency between their objective and subjective age by defining middle-aged so that it extended well beyond the years conventionally assigned to it. Thus, typically, if the respondent is seventy years old, and views herself as 'middle-aged', middle-aged is "from fifty on" and elderly becomes "from eighty on". (No. 16) Seventeen others (38.6%) avoid discrepancy by describing elderly so that they in no way resemble it and thus can safely maintain their middle-aged self-image. A typical example of this is a seventy-three year old respondent, with a middle-aged age identity, who defines middle age as "from sixty-five on", and elderly as "people who have to stay in bed all the time." (No. 36) The nine remaining respondents (20.4%) managed their subjective age identity as middle-aged by maintaining that there is "such a difference in people" as to when they become elderly or old.

Similar to young, some respondents defined middle-aged in terms of having or not having the ability to do things. Twelve of the fourteen respondents (85.7%) who describe middle age as a time in life when ability has not changed a great deal have middle-aged age identities. For these women middle-aged is "not much different from young" (No. 2-69 yrs.). It is a time in life when "you can still do what you want" (No. 1-70 yrs.), a time, when one is "getting a little older" but feels "lively still." (No. 79-73 yrs.) Twelve respondents said that middle age occurred when people begin to notice that they do not have the ability to do what they once did or, as most put it, it's

"a time when you begin to slow down." However, over half of those whose age identity was middle-aged qualified that though a person does slow down, "it's slowing down a little bit" (No. 97-70 yrs.) or, as this respondent described it, "you have slipped a bit probably, but you can still keep your end up if you try." (No. 67-73 yrs.)

Middle age can also be related to knowledge and judgement. Seven respondents, all but one with a middle-aged age identity, described middle age as a time in life when one is "wiser", "educated in life", and "more capable" than when one is young.

Family development stage can also be a distinguishing characteristic of aging for some people. For them, young is "people who have children" (No. 5-82 yrs.) or, "bringing up your family" (No. 57-90 yrs.) or, "when you get your grandchildren" (No. 101-77 yrs.). No reference was made to family stage in definitions of elderly or old.

A few respondents described middle-aged and young in terms of outlook on life. Whereas young was associated with "a happy outlook", to be middle-aged meant "they are very serious and thinking of life" (No. 44-76 yrs.). For another respondent "young is looking to the future." While middle age is a time when "most people are beginning to feel their responsibilities more, but are also looking ahead" (No. 59-81 yrs.). A third respondent expressed it this way, young is "full of hope, mentally and physically and I think emotionally too" while in middle age "you are busy in a quiet sort of way" (No. 110-89 yrs.). Interestingly, only one respondent referred to outlook on life in the later years and she said, "I think you are more apt to look inward when you are older." (No. 59-81 yrs.)

### The Meaning Of Elderly

"It brings to mind that you can't do many of the things you used to do." (No. 59-72 yrs.)

In some studies the age identities 'elderly' and 'old' are analyzed as interchangeable, and these categories are collapsed (see Cutler, 1982). Other studies retain both age identities, the assumption being that some older people do distinguish between elderly and old and prefer to identify themselves as the former rather than the latter. According to our data this distinction is indeed an important one. Eighty-one respondents (57%) claim that elderly and old mean something different to them, while sixty-one respondents (43%) feel that elderly and old mean pretty much the same thing. As some of the latter explained:

I think it's [elderly] another word they use for old. Some people will never say they are old, they'll say "I'm older" [or elderly]. (No. 59-81 yrs.)

When anyone gets along in years, if you are polite, you call them elderly. (No. 6-81 yrs.)

Approximately thirty-five percent of the respondents defined elderly in terms of chronological years. However, about fifteen percent insisted that elderly cannot be defined in terms of age because when people become elderly it varies from person to person. Again, there were contradictions in which fifteen respondents define elderly as pertaining to a range of years to which they themselves belong, yet ignore this fact and choose to think of themselves not as elderly, but 'middle-aged.' Thus, a seventy-eight year old who identifies herself as "middle-aged" says that elderly is "probably from seventy-five or eighty

on." Similarly, another eighty-four year old respondent maintains that elderly is "anywhere from seventy-five on", yet, she is "middle aged".

As indicated earlier in the discussion of the meaning of middle-aged, many of the respondents who identify themselves as belonging to this age category protect their middle-aged identities by defining elderly as a chronological age older than their own. Thus, in examining definitions of elderly we find that twenty-two of the thirty-nine respondents (approximately 56%) whose age identities are either young or middle-aged, and who define elderly in terms of chronological age, manage to maintain a consistency between their objective and subjective ages by defining elderly in this way. Thus, if elderly is, "in their nineties" and the respondent is eighty-four years old, she is able to retain her self-image as middle-aged. As one respondent explained:

Now that I'm this age myself, I always think of others older as being elderly. (No. 49-66 yrs.)

Four other respondents maintained their subjective age identities as middle-aged by defining elderly as a specific chronological age but at the same time insisting that "it all depends on the people". An eighty-two year old 'middle-ager', apparently recognizing the contradiction in her definition, defined elderly this way, "When you are around eighty, but not me!" (No. 77).

All eight of the respondents who defined elderly in terms of chronological age and identify themselves as 'elderly' were realistic in their definitions of the term. That is, elderly was either somewhere around their own present age or, it was defined as beginning at an age which they had already passed. Thus, a seventy-nine year old respondent



who identifies herself as elderly, describes elderly as being "around seventy-five". Another eighty-three year old, with a subjective age of elderly, defines elderly as "eighty". All eight of these women are over seventy-five years of age.

Consistent with previous research reporting that many older people, like younger people, have adopted a negative and stereotypical image of old age (e.g., Harris and Associates, 1975), a number of respondents (26%) presented negative and stereotypical depictions of elderly in their definitions of this term. Even a quarter of those who identified themselves as 'elderly' gave a stereotypical definition of it (Table 3.7). It was noted earlier in the discussion of the meaning of middle-aged that many of those who identified themselves as 'middle-aged' gave negative and exaggerated descriptions in their definitions of elderly. These individuals were then able to verify that they, in comparison, were not yet elderly or old. Approximately 30 percent of these women gave such definitions.

As some saw it, if one's health was still good, being elderly might not be all that different from being middle-aged.

If your health is good you can still carry on, health is very important. (No. 1-70 yrs.)

You can still get around and still do things. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

However, sixteen percent of the respondents (N=142) defined elderly in relation to changes in health status or mobility. Over a third of these definitions were given by respondents who identified themselves as either elderly or old. Six of these women were over the age of seventy-five and all described their own health as being either fair or poor.

TABLE 3.7

TYPES OF DEFINITIONS OF 'ELDERLY' BY SUBJECTIVE  
AGE IDENTITY OF RESPONDENT

Subjective Age Identity<sup>1</sup>

Definitions	Young		Middle-Aged		Elderly		Old	
	Freq. Res. Given (N=14)	% of Respondents Giving Res. (N=11)	Freq. Res. Given (N=102)	% of Respondents Giving Res. (N=94)	Freq. Res. Given (N=24)	% of Respond Giving (N=24)	Freq. Res. Given (N=12)	% Of Respondents Giving Res. (N=11)
Chronological Age	3	27.3	36	38.3	8	33.3	3	27.3
There is Variation (e.g. "It Varies with the Person")	3	27.3	12	12.8	5	20.8	1	9.1
Stereotypes	1	9.1	28	29.8	6	25.0	1	9.1
Change in Health or Mobility	-	-	15	16.0	4	16.7	4	36.4
Other	4	36.3	12	12.8	3	12.5	3	27.3

<sup>1</sup> Within each column, the percentages are based on the total number of respondents in each subjective age category. Because some respondents gave multiple definitions, in most cases, the column totals exceed 100%. The total number of respondents = 140 since two respondents who could not assess their age identity have been omitted.

Typically elderly meant "changes in your health" (No. 23-91 yrs.) or, that one just cannot keep up one's previous pace.

It's how you feel, as you go along you don't think about it until you start in not feeling so well. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

You can't keep up the pace that you've done, you have to slow down. (No. 79-73 yrs.)

It's hard to get around and do things. (No. 120-77 yrs.)

One who sits a lot, moves slowly, and can't do a lot. (No. 9-76 yrs.)

### The Meaning Of Old

"People who are old old are withering away, that's when you become obsolete altogether". (No. 53-81 yrs.)

It is very clear that old is definitively different from either young or middle-aged (what the majority of these women think of themselves as being). Also, if elderly and old mean something different, old is typically "older than elderly", "real old", "old old", or something "worse than elderly". If one defines age, as many of these women do, in terms of the ability or inability to do things, elderly means doing little but "knitting" or "sitting in a rocking chair" while old is having to give up completely. Thus, "real old is someone not capable of doing anything" (No. 22-69 yrs.). The responses of the following women also illustrate this perception of old as something more advanced than elderly.

(Elderly) I think of the little old lady sitting  
knitting.

(Old) The nursing home. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

(Elderly) Nursing homes.

(Old) Death (No. 89-74 yrs.)

About one-quarter (24.6%, N=142) of the respondents refer to a chronological age in their definition of old and as one might expect, the chronological age at which a person is considered old is considerably older than it is for elderly. Whereas fifty-six percent of the chronological age-related definitions designated elderly as eighty years or over, about ninety-seven percent of the references to old were in this range. Indeed, sixty-six percent of the definitions of old specified the nineties and/or one-hundred, in contrast to only ten percent of the definitions for elderly. All eight of the respondents, who defined old in terms of chronological age and who identify themselves as elderly, define old as a chronological age older than their own.

If the twenty respondents, who employed a stereotypic definition of elderly and then said that elderly and old mean the same thing, are combined with the twenty-six, who defined old in this way, a substantial proportion (32.4%) of the respondents gave definitions for old that involved the use of stereotypic and generally negative notions about this period of life, with old meaning - "decrepit", "failing", "cranky", "being incapacitated", "obsolete", "withering away", and "losing your faculties".<sup>2</sup>

I suppose that's the ultimate isn't it - next to being  
dead, helpless. (No. 101-77 yrs.)

Above all, old means dependency.

They need more help and a lot of care. (No. 40-67 yrs.)

Real old is when they can't look after themselves.  
(No. 10-87 yrs.)

Old is really dependent. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

While definitions of old presenting negative and stereotypical images of old age were quite often employed by respondents whose subjective age identity was young, middle-aged, and even elderly, not one respondent, whose subjective age identity was old, described old in this way (see Table 3.8). Such stereotypical notions also tend to be more common among respondents who are younger in chronological years.

While only about six percent of the respondents defined old in relation to changes in health or mobility, almost a third (27.3%) of the eleven respondents, who identify themselves as old, defined old in this way and each described their own health as only fair. A noticeable change in health status is a major factor influencing both the older individual's subjective age identity and others perceptions of her as 'old' or 'not old'. With a decline in health, or disability due to an accident, the older person's life may change suddenly and dramatically as this eighty-four year old respondent explains,

Oh I was doing great until I fell and broke my hip. It changed my whole life style. (No. 122).

A seventy-eight year old woman speaks for many of the others when she maintains that, in determining oldness, "health makes all the difference in the world" (No. 10). In response to the question, "when do you think most people become old?", one of the most frequent responses was a reference to deterioration in health:

TABLE 3.8

TYPES OF DEFINITIONS OF 'OLD' BY SUBJECTIVE  
AGE IDENTITY OF RESPONDENT

Definitions	Subjective Age Identity <sup>1</sup>							
	Young		Middle-Aged		Elderly		Old	
	Freq. Res. Given (N=13)	% of Respondents Giving Res. (N=11)	Freq. Res. Given (N=105)	% of Respondents Giving Res. (N=94)	Freq. Res. Given (N=25)	% of Respond Giving (N=24)	Freq. Res. Given (N=11)	% of Respondents Giving Res. (N=11)
Chronological Age	3	27.3	24	25.5	8	33.3	-	-
There is Variation	2	18.2	5	5.3	1	4.2	-	-
Stereotypes	3	27.3	19	20.2	4	16.7	-	-
Changes in Health or Mobility	1	4.2	3	3.2	1	4.2	3	27.3
Old and Elderly Mean Same	3	27.3	44	46.8	8	33.3	6	54.5
Other	1	4.2	10	10.6	3	3.2	2	18.2

<sup>1</sup>Within each column, the percentages are based on the total number of respondents in each subjective age category. Because some respondents give multiple definitions, in most cases, the column totals exceed 100%. A typical definition of old included in the 'other' category was "old is older than elderly".

When their bodies start to change, you slow up, you can't do things you did before, then you start to think it's age coming on. You get the feeling - well, I can't do what I used to do. If your really healthy you are much younger. Being well makes a big difference in life. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

Most people that I know, it all depends on what's wrong with them. If they are crippled with arthritis, that makes them old. (No. 76-80 yrs.)

While health is seen to be a crucial factor, attitude or "state of mind" is also an important related variable influencing when a person becomes old. As this eighty-four year old woman states, "health and attitude has a lot to do with it" (No. 20). Her response was reiterated by another respondent who declared:

You can be ninety and young in mind, if you don't lose your health. I think health is the major factor, and, state of mind. Some people are old at forty. (No. 78-72 yrs.)

Another seventy-two year old woman, who experienced her first heart attack at sixty-four years, explained:

I never thought about being old until I got sick. Health, it gives you a different attitude on life. (No. 54)

According to at least half of the respondents in this study oldness is an attitude.

It depends a lot on your outlook. Your attitude toward your daily life has a lot to do with aging. Enjoy each day, if it's sunny, enjoy it. If it's raining, make the most of it. (No. 47-76 yrs.)

I think it's a matter of their minds. I know of people that was old only in their twenties. (No. 132-81 yrs.)

Thus, for a good many of these women, 'being old' is indeed a matter over which one has some control. Responses to the question, "When do you think most people become old?", support this view.

When they make themselves old and I don't! (No. 62-86 yrs.)

I don't know, some people make themselves old because they are too lazy and don't try to help themselves. (No. 106-91 yrs.)

I think you can make yourself older than you are - just sitting around. I did that first, right after my husband died. There are a lot of people like that who won't help themselves. (No. 24-84 yrs.)

Thus, the actual experience of 'being old' for many of these elderly women involves - working at being 'not old'.

Some people let themselves go and don't try to keep younger, you have to work at it. (No. 42-71 yrs.)

This sense of personal control over the aging process is evidenced in the following recipes on how to stay young.

I think it's all in how you live, if you keep active you never become old. (No. 2-69 yrs.)

Some people give up early, I didn't. They give up too soon. I'm not giving up yet. (No. 23-91 yrs.)

I don't think people today get old as soon as they used to. Some people just give up. If you give up you can become old. I get lonely and then I say, "Get out or have someone in". (No. 55-80 yrs.)

I think when they give up altogether they've had it. You are just as old as you feel, I think. I keep active and I think that's what anyone should do. (No. 80-82 yrs.)

The idea that there is considerable variation in when one gets 'old' was most evident in replies to the question, "When do you think most people become old?" Almost sixty percent of the respondents stressed that this varies because "there's such a difference in people".

Well I think everybody becomes old at a different stage of life, you can't compare people. I know some people younger than me that act old. (No. 12-77 yrs.)



Some people are born old. I have a friend or two and I don't think that they were ever young. It varies with the person, it's not an age. (No. 52-84 yrs.)

#### THE ACTUAL EXPERIENCE OF 'BEING OLD'

Another concern of this research was to compare other's typical perceptions of the aged and the aging process with the older person's actual experience of growing old. Growing old is generally viewed in society as a negative experience. However, this study supports the findings of previous researchers, that a discrepancy exists between what many people think growing old is like and what it really is like.

It is often thought that people change a lot as they age, that an older person is somehow quite a different person from the individual he/she once was (see Branco and Williamson, 1982).<sup>3</sup> However, this image of the aged and the aging process is not borne out by our data. Respondents were asked, "Would you say that over the years you have changed (1) a great deal, (2) quite a bit, (3) a little, (4) not at all?" Those who felt they had changed were asked if, on the whole, they would say that these changes had been for the better or for the worse.

Eighty percent of the women (N=142) felt that either they had changed only a little (44%) or not at all (36%). Thirteen percent (19 respondents) felt that they had changed quite a bit and only six percent (9 respondents) said that they had changed a great deal. Some are surprised to think that others imagine them to be different now that they are older.

People always say, "you are just the same person". I always say, "why should I change?, I'm the same \_\_\_\_\_, I didn't have any reason to change". (No. 62-86 yrs.)

Of the respondents who felt that they had changed over the years, 81.3 percent (74 respondents) interpreted these changes as being for the better. Only 12.1 percent (11 respondents) felt that they had changed for the worse, and these changes - in almost all cases - were related to a decline in health status (thus it is not surprising that the comparable statistic for the community-dwelling is somewhat lower at 5.9%). Six respondents, who claimed to have changed, could not say if this change was for the better or for the worse. Most of the women who had changed for the better, referred to changes that might be called "growing experiences". These women spoke of having become "more tolerant", "more knowledgeable", "wiser" now than years before, more "confident" and "independent" overcoming the "shyness and insecurity" of younger years. Others spoke of being able to "understand life better now" and, as another woman expressed it, "I've learned more about myself". Thus, on the whole, the little change that was perceived to have taken place was perceived as positive, and not the type of changes that altered the basic person.

While younger people may look only at the disadvantages that accompany the aging process and cannot imagine any advantages to being old, this too is not an entirely accurate perception of the actual experience of being an old person. Respondents were asked three questions on this topic:

As you grow older, do you find there are any advantages to being older?

How about disadvantages in being older, do you find any of these?

On balance, then, would you say that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, or that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages?

Fifty percent of the respondents (N=142) said that there were some advantages to being an older person. Forty-nine percent said that there were no advantages, while one respondent couldn't say whether there were or were not advantages. The type of advantages described by respondents are illustrated in Table 3.9. Though some of these might at first appear to be rather trivial (e.g., discounts in stores, free medications, special privileges at the bank), to these elderly women, most of whom are living on limited incomes, these benefits were realistically perceived as important. A more substantial perceived advantage was the financial security of the old age pension (35.2% of the respondents). This guaranteed income was especially important as most of these women had lived much of their lives with precarious household incomes.

We have the advantage of getting our social insurance money. It's a secure feeling. (No. 124-76 yrs.)

The old age pension, I don't know where I'd be if it weren't for that. (No. 101-77 yrs.)

Thirty-two percent of the respondents stated advantages that referred to "fewer commitments" and not having to work as hard. These women spoke of their years with family responsibilities and a lot of hard work and felt that one advantage to being older was their sense of freedom. They now have time to devote to their own interests.

TABLE 3.9

## ADVANTAGES TO BEING AN OLDER PERSON

Type of Advantage	Frequency Response Given (N=90)	Percentage of Respondents Giving Response <sup>1</sup> (N=71)
Old Age Pension	25	35.2
Discounts, Free Medication, Bank Privileges	24	33.8
Freedom, people don't expect as much, time for self	23	32.4
More respect from others, people more courteous, helpful	12	16.9
Other (e.g., one is "more sensible", "tolerant", "capable")	6	8.4

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N=71); because some respondents stated multiple advantages, the total exceeds 100%.

Ironically, one advantage was that, as older women, people didn't expect as much of them.

You don't have to work as hard and have time to do what you want to. (No. 8-74 yrs.)

In that you feel freer, you have the time to do the things you really enjoy doing. Throughout your life there are so many commitments and responsibilities that you don't have when your older. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

There are a lot of things you should do but don't do and you don't feel badly about it. I don't make several dozen sandwiches anymore. (No. 52-84 yrs.)

Not so much is expected of you, by the time you are seventy you are pretty much your own boss. (No. 50-70 yrs.)

We have our freedom, we can pick up and go whenever we want. (No. 137-75 yrs.)

Ninety-three respondents (65.6%) felt that there were disadvantages to being an older person. Most cited disadvantages that, as might be expected, are health and activity related (76.3%, see Table 3.10). The most frequently reported disadvantage of being old was that, "you can't do the things that you used to do and you mind that" (No. 69-82 yrs.). Being able to do one's 'work' is very important to these women and in old age "you can't work as you did" (No. 3-85 yrs.). This "slowing down" is echoed in the following responses:

I tire more easily, I can't do the work I could. (No. 28-80 yrs.)

There are things I would like to do and I haven't got what it takes anymore. (No. 52-84 yrs.)

You get tired more easily, where you could work from morning until night, you have to rest more. It's a gradual slowing down of all your processes. (No. 110-89 yrs.)

Seven widowed respondents (7.5%) referred to loneliness as a disadvantage of being an older person. Five other women (5.5%) felt that the attitudes and behavior of others toward older people was a disadvantage for them. While some women stated that one of the advantages of being an older person was that people are "more courteous" and "more considerate of older people" (No. 21-79 yrs.), that "people make more fuss over you" (No. 105-80 yrs.) and "everyone wants to help

TABLE 3.10

## DISADVANTAGES TO BEING AN OLDER PERSON

Type of Disadvantage	Frequency Response Given (N=94)	Percentage of Respondents Giving Response <sup>1</sup> (N=93)
Changes in health and activity	71	76.3
Being alone, loneliness	7	7.5
Other's attitudes and behavior toward old people	5	5.5
Other (e.g., being in a nursing home, can't travel, "the end is coming")	11	11.8

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N=93); because some respondents stated multiple disadvantages, the total exceeds 100%.

you" (No. 58-74 yrs.), other respondents interpreted "all the attention" given to seniors as a disadvantage.

Attitudes, people thinking "oh well she's too old, she can't do that", your restricted in a lot of ways. (No. 130-73 yrs.)

All the attention given over turning sixty-five. (No. 19-65 yrs.)

To have to have someone baby you. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

In sum, while fifty percent of these women said that there were advantages to being old, and approximately sixty-five percent said that

there were disadvantages, a slight majority (55.6%) claim that the advantages and disadvantages are, on the whole, balanced.

Another common image of older people is that, being relieved of participation in most formal roles, they feel useless. To investigate feelings of uselessness respondents were asked, "How often in the past few weeks have you felt that you are of some use to the people around you, would you say (1) often, (2) sometimes, (3) never?" Eighty-seven percent (N=142) of these women felt that they were of use to others often (47%) or at least sometimes (40%). Only eighteen respondents (12.7%) said that they are never of use to others.<sup>4</sup> Almost all of this latter group said that they could not be of use to others because their health was poor.

One of the most popular stereotypes of older people is that they are oriented to the past. Respondents were asked, "Do you find yourself thinking more about the past or the future?" and, "What do you usually think about?" Although some of these older women (31%) do think more about the past, sixty-eight respondents (47.9%) reported that they do not think more about either the past or the future but think primarily in the present. Typical of these responses are, "you live from day-to-day" (No. 47-76 yrs.) or, "that's the way I take it - just from day-to-day" (No. 82-82 yrs.). Also common was the attitude, "what's the good to think about the past?" (No. 104-98 yrs.) and, "the future will take care of itself" (No. 47-76 yrs.)

Twenty-five respondents (17.6%) said that they think more about the future. Most of these are community-dwelling and they think about positive things like planning their housework ("having the house nice"

No. 14-84 yrs.), gardening, visiting and so forth. However, some thoughts of the future were negative or unpleasant. These included such worries as, "what's going to become of me if I can't walk?" (No. 28-80 yrs.), "I think of what's ahead of me, where I'm going to land, where I'm going to be, where I'm going to have to go" (No. 118-77 yrs.)

While some of these elderly women do think "it's no more than natural for an older person to think about the past" (No. 10-87 yrs.), thoughts about the past can also be positive or negative. The majority were pleasant thoughts of "good times", "some of the places you have been", the fun they had growing up, and the joys of raising their families. However, six women reported thinking of unpleasant things in their past; as one respondent explained, "When you have heartaches they crop up", and thoughts of lost loved ones focus in one's mind.

Later life is generally viewed as a time of accumulated losses. In an effort to investigate whether older women agreed with this depiction of old age, they were asked, "Some people see growing old as a time when they must give up a lot of what is important to them, would you agree or disagree with this description of growing old?" Once again, contrary to what others may believe about later life, ninety-six respondents (67.6%, N=142) disagree with this statement.<sup>5</sup>

Respondents who did agree with the statement (32.4%) were asked, "What have you had to give up?" The majority of these women reported having to give up activities because of health problems.

I used to love to read, crochet, quilt, and hook mats and I can't now because of my eyes. (No. 10-87 yrs.)

My work, getting around, doing what I used to. (No. 106-91 yrs.)



The majority of those women who disagreed with the statement about later life maintained that they hadn't actually given up anything yet. Many were adamant in their belief that "you don't have to unless you want to" (No. 1-70 yrs.), at least, "not as long as your health is good" (No. 4-82 yrs.).

No, no I think it's stupid. Don't give up things that are important to you. Health does come in quite a bit. (No. 9-76 yrs.)

Once again, there is the implication that 'being old' is something one has some control over. Thus, "just the fact of growing old should not dictate what you are or aren't to do" (No. 77-82 yrs.) In fact, it is believed that if one begins to give up things, "that's the time when you really become old" (No. 11-71 yrs.).

People get old because they give up too quick. If you keep going you don't feel old. (No. 14-84 yrs.)

Some of those who reported that they had given up activities also maintained that these weren't "really important" (No. 20-84 yrs.). A seventy-one year old respondent explains:

It doesn't seem that I care to go to these things. I seem to have grown out of these things, I don't miss them. (No. 64)

Instead of dwelling on what must be given up, most focus on what they can do.

Because there are a lot of things that you really don't have to give up. If you are willing to do what you can do, you can have a pretty full life. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

You only give up if you are disabled and today there are a lot of things you can still do if you put your mind to it. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

I don't give up anything I can do, as long as I can do some little things I do it. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

To summarize, according to the majority of the older women in this study, the actual experience of 'being old' is not what many in our society expect it to be. Most of these women do not perceive that they have changed greatly over the years and any change was generally considered to be "for the better". There are disadvantages to being an old person, but for many there are also advantages. For a substantial number of these women the advantages and disadvantages balance out. Most do not feel useless, nor do they spend most of their time thinking about the past. Later life is not necessarily a time for giving up things for there are still things one can do to have "a pretty full life".

#### THE SOURCE OF THE MEANING OF 'BEING OLD'

In their interpretation of the meaning of the aging experience (both their own and that of others), respondents appeared to be drawing on knowledge derived from a number of sources. Thus, while they (typical of many other older people) have been influenced by the social meaning of 'old', most also question this view of later life and many often ignore or reject it. One of the best illustrations of this is the finding that despite their advanced chronological age, almost three-quarters do not identify themselves as either elderly or old.

One reason why the majority of these women do not view themselves as old is because, as their own comments indicate, the meaning of 'being old' is changing. Conventional definitions of middle-age, elderly and old were often not accepted because many believed that these terms do not mean what they once did. Throughout the interviews

respondents frequently contrasted what they saw as old age in the past and old age today. Many were in agreement with the observation that "today people are not as old as they used to be" (No. 36-73 yrs.).

In this day and age I don't know if they do [get old]. There's one woman \_\_\_\_\_ whose going on ninety-four and she's out every night to a card party. I used to think people were old at sixty-five, today, I don't think they are at seventy. (No. 113-66 yrs.)

People years ago at thirty-five was draped in black and they were old. Now, people wear nice colored clothes, it makes a difference. (No. 107-82 yrs.)

Nobody becomes old today because everybody is so active. They don't seem to be like the old people used to be unless they are miserable, if their health is poor. (No. 108-86 yrs.)

Elderly women are participating in, and helping to construct, an old age reality different from the experience their mothers knew. As some social gerontologists have already pointed out (e.g., Matthews, 1979a; Marshall, 1980a), the ambiguity and normlessness often associated with old age may actually be an advantage since it allows older people the possibility of creating their own approach to later life. The majority of the women studied here are involved in a great deal of interaction with others of their own age. Many have known each other for years and thus, grown old together. Sharing a common situation, they have had the opportunity to develop a shared "perspective" or set of loosely defined 'age norms'.<sup>6</sup>

These women do not apply the label 'old' to those who adhere to the shared attitudinal and behavioral guidelines that qualify one as a 'not old' person. For an older woman to remain 'not old', she must attempt to stay independent, and must never "just sit still and not do

something" but "keep active and busy". It is very important that she keep doing what she has always done for as long as she can. She must adopt the right attitude or way of thinking about age since "one's state of mind is so important". She must not "just sit down and worry" but "take life as it comes". If she feels lonely, she must "get up and dig around and find something to do". She must not "lose interest" in life around her but "keep going out" and participating. If these collective 'norms' are followed, the older woman can then see herself, and be seen by her peers, as someone who is 'not old'.

Most of the respondents in this study do not think of themselves as old because their 'not old' status is legitimated by their significant others. The majority of these women perceive that neither "people close to them" nor "other people" regard them as old. As reported earlier, eighty-five percent of the respondents did not think that others close to them thought of them as old. When asked, "most of the time, would you say that other people regard you as, (1) younger than people your age, (2) older than people your age, (3) about the same as people your age?" eighty-three percent claim that others regard them as younger than other people their age. This perception of other's evaluations is consistent with their own age identities (i.e., younger than their actual ages). No one claimed that others saw them as older than other people their age. Respondents appeared to be quite confident in their judgement of other's appraisals, and were quick to offer justifications for these evaluations. This included comments like, "I've been told that a good many times", "I get a lot of compliments", and "they often say to me, how do you do it?"

While many of the elderly women in this study do appear to have adopted stereotypical notions of old age, most of them point out that there is considerable variation among older people and not all older people are 'old'. They question the stereotypes because they know of specific others who do not fit the stereotypic depiction. Respondents were more apt to use stereotypes in their attempts to define the meaning of the term old and more likely to question them in their response to other questions about old age. In the latter case, they were more likely to draw upon their actual knowledge of their own and others' aging experience. Thus, many respondents, who initially began to describe old as a specific chronological age or in terms of stereotypic notions, stopped themselves, thinking of exceptions, specific people they knew who were that age or older and 'not old', and made comments like these.

...But there's a woman up here close to eighty and she's smarter than I am. (No. 40-67 yrs.)

Up there's my mother, she's eighty-six and she can cut circles around me. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

I've met people who are old in their forties. I have a friend in Dartmouth who is ninety-two and he's the brightest person around, so you have these extremes. (No. 59-81 yrs.)

I don't know whether you can go by age or not, my sister is five years older than me and ten times as smart. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

Perhaps in a small town where there is frequent interaction among older women and the actual experience of the aging process is more easily shared, there is less need to rely on stereotypic notions about old age.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has examined what it actually means to be old. According to their own subjective evaluation, almost three-quarters of the elderly women, in this study, do not view themselves as old. The way these women identify themselves in terms of age has implications for our subsequent analysis of self-identity in later life. The majority of these elderly respondents do not identify themselves as old because their self-interpretations do not fit their definitions of old, and, they simply do not feel old.

The meanings attributed to the terms young, middle-aged, elderly and old were examined in detail. The majority of these women view themselves as middle-aged, defined in a way that was compatible with their interpretations of their own situations. Old, on the other hand, was defined largely in negative and stereotypical terms or as a chronological age older than their own. Most, important, age was defined as more a mental state (i.e., a way of thinking) than a physical condition. There was general agreement that both health and attitude were crucial intervening variables in determining oldness.

In examining the actual experience of 'being old', it was found that 'being old' really is different from what most people think 'being old' is like. While it was true that objectively there are constraints and limitations in later life, these were subjectively interpreted by most of these women as something that one can do something about. Many recipes or prescriptions (e.g., "keep active", "don't give up", "you

mustn't think old") are subsequently offered for how to remain 'not old'.

The last section in the chapter examined the source of the meanings attributed to 'being old'. While many of these elderly women do rely on stereotypic notions in their definitions of the term old, their interpretations of their own and other's actual experience of 'being old' is more realistic. It was suggested that older women in a small town may have more awareness of the reality of later life because they have more opportunity to interact with other old people, most of whom they have known for years.

This analysis of the meaning of 'being old' reaffirms how important it is that researchers examine situations from the perspective of those who are experiencing them. These data, like a number of previous studies of the aged and the aging process, illustrate that the subjective experience of being an old person does not entirely correspond with typical objective interpretations. Chapter Four looks at the nature of identity in later life. Recognizing that old is but one dimension of identity, it examines the salience of various components of the older woman's identity in an effort to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which the older woman views herself.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Two additional definitions of middle age, which further illustrate the non-traditional way in which many of these women interpret this age category, are - "retirement" (No. 89-74 yrs.) and, "when you start to get your pension" (No. 29-78 yrs.).
- 2 Of the sixty-one respondents, who said that elderly and old mean the same thing, about 33% defined elderly in terms of stereotypes, about 22% in relation to changes in health or ability, and 28% as a chronological age. About 12% said there was variation and the remainder fall into the 'other' category of definitions.
- 3 Some of these misconceptions about the elderly include the notion that: their temperament changes (e.g., they become grouchy), their activities and interests change (e.g., they like to play checkers or bingo), they become more conservative and insecure.
- 4 As might be expected, fewer nursing home respondents feel useful (50%) as compared to community-dwelling respondents (91.1%) and apartment-dwelling respondents (87.1%). The nursing home is, of course, a setting where both the opportunity and ability to do for others is limited.
- 5 While only 25.7 percent of the community-dwelling sample agreed with the statement that growing old is a time when people must give up a lot of what is important to them, more of the apartment dwelling and nursing home respondents agreed with this statement. Fifty percent of the nursing home sample and 45.2 percent of the apartment dwelling respondents agreed. These results are consistent with expectations in that one would assume that the move to a nursing home or even the seniors apartment complex would result in a feeling that something important has been given up (e.g., one's home, neighborhood, independence).
- 6 Becker et al. (1961) employ the perspective concept in their study of the professionalization of medical students. Perspectives they define as, "coordinated views and plans of action people follow in problematic situations" (1961:33). Group perspectives arise "when people see themselves as being in the same boat and when they have the opportunity to interact..." (1961:36). As noted in the literature review, old age has often been defined as a problematic situation (see for example, Rosow, 1967; 1973, Blau, 1973) and the lives of the elderly are viewed as "socially unstructured". Most of the elderly women in this study have the opportunity to interact with their peers, and there does appear to be some evidence here to suggest that, in sharing a set of loose guidelines, they are attempting to construct a meaningful interpretation of their own and other's aging experience.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### BUILDING SELF THROUGH OTHERS

William James (1890:294) declared that "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind". Identity is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. Not only do we present different identities within various social relationships, we also carry with us, within our minds, a number of different self-meanings that together we come to recognize as "me". This chapter examines the multiple self-meanings that comprise the older woman's self-identity, highlighting those self-identifications that are most meaningful to her in her everyday interaction with others. The previous chapter examined, in detail, 'old' as a dimension of identity in later life. This chapter emphasizes that 'old' is but one dimension of the older individual's identity.

While 'oldness' may be a pivotal or central social identity (Matthews, 1979a) the data to be presented here, indicate that, from the older woman's point of view - she is more than old. The sense of who she is, is comprised of a combination of a number of self-interpretations and her age is but one of these. Focusing on the "configuration of self-perceptions and self-evaluations that are important and meaningful" to the older woman (George, 1980:14), this chapter looks at the nature and basis of the older woman's identity.

In this analysis a distinction is made between the affective and cognitive components of identity. Self-esteem, as the affective

component, refers to the individual's sense of worth, or evaluations of self as an object. It can be approached in global terms (i.e. as generalized evaluations about the self as a whole) or in terms of specific dimensions. Most self-esteem measures (including the one employed in this study) are global in orientation (Breytspraak and George, 1982) and thus might be more appropriately referred to as measures of 'identity esteem' since they are actually a measure of an individual's evaluation of his/her numerous self-concepts. Self-concept refers to the cognitive process of self-perception and consists of individual's perceptions of themselves as objects. Self-concepts are the building blocks of identity. The cognitive component of identity is interpreted broadly in this analysis so as to encompass "self-perceptions of characteristics and abilities as well as relationships with others and the environment, life experiences, and personal goals" (Hunter, Linn and Harris, 1981-82:118). The bulk of the analysis that forms this chapter focuses on the older woman's self-perceptions; self-esteem is discussed briefly below.

#### SELF-ESTEEM

Global self-esteem was measured in this study by using Rosenberg's self-esteem scale. Scoring procedures followed Rosenberg's recommendations.<sup>1</sup> Consistent with many other studies of self-esteem in the elderly, the vast majority of the elderly women in this sample present positive self-evaluations. One hundred and twenty-five of the respondents (88%, N=142) had high self-esteem scores, with sixty-six

respondents (46.5%) having very high scores and making no negative self-evaluations whatsoever. Fifteen women (10.6%) had scores in the medium range while only two women (1.4%) had low scores. Of the two women who had low self-esteem, one was a resident in the nursing home, the other a community-dwelling respondent. With the exception of the nursing home sample, the fifteen medium self-esteem scores were pretty much evenly distributed among the three sample settings (8.9% of the community-dwelling, 9.7% of the senior's apartment dwelling and 30% of nursing home respondents). Because the number of respondents with medium and low self-esteem scores are so small, it is not possible to make generalizations about them, nor comparisons between high, medium and low scorers.

Some of the comments which respondents made immediately following their responses to some of the scale items suggest that self-evaluations, like general self-perceptions, may be situational. One woman with a medium self-esteem score and who disagreed with the scale item "on the whole, I'm satisfied with myself", quickly added, "you're catching me in the wrong year" (No. 70-66 yrs.). This respondent's husband had died recently and it had been a difficult year for her. Another woman, who agreed with the item, "at times I think I am no good at all", immediately added, "lately, like I say, if you would have come to me two years ago, the answers would be different" (No. 71-75 yrs.). This respondent was still recovering from an illness which had caused her intense and continuous pain over a period of approximately two years.

Some of the respondents who had agreed with the statement "I certainly feel useless at times" emphasized the "at times" part of this statement thus emphasizing that this feeling of uselessness was situational.

Well, I think we all do at times. (No. 92-70 yrs.)

The last few weeks I have been useless. (No. 66-88 yrs.)

The last respondent had not been feeling well during the two weeks prior to the interview.

Rosenberg's scale, like most other measures of self-esteem, is not able to tap this situational dimension of self-evaluation. Also, because, like most other instruments, it is a global measure of self-esteem, measuring the individual's overall or general sense of worth, we know little about the way in which specific self-dimensions are evaluated, nor how relevant some of these dimensions are to many of the older person's everyday situations. Though "presumably, global self-assessment and dimension-specific self-assessments are closely related", it cannot be assumed that one is the equivalent of the other (George, 1980:14). Also, it is unlikely that people value all aspects or dimensions of their identities equally and therefore, as Breytspraak warns:

We cannot adequately appreciate the significance of a description one makes of oneself for global self-esteem without knowing something about how important or central that characterization is to the individual. (1984:88)

Taking into consideration the overall characteristics of the study sample, it is not so surprising that the majority of these women

evaluate themselves positively. We are, first of all, dealing with a group of women who describe themselves as reasonably healthy, and poor health is one factor generally associated with lower self-esteem (Hunter, Linn and Harris, 1981-82). Many of these elderly women view growing older as an inevitable experience in life and one that must be appropriately confronted. Even inadequate incomes and health deterioration are subjectively interpreted in a somewhat positive way.

I'm glad to have enough to get along on. I went to work for three dollars a week. (No. 47-76 yrs.).

You can't flourish on it, you can't waste anything, but I can make out. I guess there are things a person could have better but I don't see the sense of it. (No. 82-82 yrs.).

I don't consider my arthritis sickness. (No. 6-81 yrs.).

You can't call an accident poor health, can you? (No. 52-84 yrs.).

I won't put it down as poor, as long as I'm able to be around the house. (No. 53-81 yrs.).

This last respondent suffers continuous pain from degenerative disc disease and takes daily medication for arthritis and high blood pressure. She also had a heart attack several years ago but she refuses to describe her health as poor.

#### MEANINGFUL CONTENTS OF THE OLDER WOMAN'S IDENTITY

The following analysis of the cognitive component of the older woman's identity has been influenced by the conceptual insights of Linda George.<sup>2</sup> George informs us:

Identity has both content (the specific dimensions of life experience that are important to the individual) and organization (the relationships among valued dimensions of life experience). Two important components of the organization of identity are a hierarchy of importance and a hierarchy of pervasiveness (1980:15).

The hierarchy of importance refers to the fact that some dimensions of life experience are more important to the individual's identity than others. The hierarchy of pervasiveness refers to the scope of identity dimensions with some dimensions being very broad and relevant to almost all interaction experiences while others are much narrower in scope (George, 1980).

In the remainder of this chapter, the content of the older woman's self-perceptions is examined in detail and the fact that some self dimensions are more important to the older woman than others is illustrated.

#### The Saliency of an Old Age Identity And 'Old' As A Situational Identity

For most of the older women in this study, age is but one self-meaning and does not appear to be an identity that is foremost in the thoughts of many.

You're not old until you're asleep forever. I think it's only young people that think of old. As you get older you don't think about old. (No. 141-67 yrs.)

Age is something I never think about, that's why I often don't remember my own. It's never important to me. (No. 9-76 yrs.)

I don't think of myself as being any age - I don't think of it. (No. 100-71 yrs.)

I don't think we [elderly people] think much about age.  
(No. 78-72 yrs.)

I never bothered to think about getting old before  
someone came along asking questions. (No. 91-79 yrs.)

Matthews (1979a:65) however, maintains that old age "is not so easily relegated to the status of background variable".<sup>3</sup> According to the older women interviewed in this study, whether or not an old age identity can be relegated to the background is dependent, at least in part, on the situational context where interaction takes place. When asked whether they thought of themselves as young, middle-aged, elderly or old, a number of respondents were quick to qualify that thinking of self as young or old can be situational.

Put it like this, some days I'm nineteen and some days  
I'm ninety. (No. 47-76 yrs.)

Some days I feel ninety-nine and some days not at all.  
When I'm bored I'm old, when I'm not, I'm not. (No. 91-  
79 yrs.)

Sometimes you feel older than other times. (No. 80-82  
yrs.)

Because it was expected that an old age identity would be situational, two interview questions were designed to investigate the type of situations that would lead the older women to view herself as old or 'not old'. One asked, "have there been any situations recently where you felt old?" and, "what kind of situation was that?" Although only eleven respondents (7.7%) actually think of themselves as being old people, slightly over half the women in the total interview sample (52.1%) report that there are indeed specific situations which can make them feel old (for the samples individually the corresponding

percentages are, 54.5% of the community-dwelling, 50% of the nursing home, and 45.2% of the senior apartments respondents).

One of the most typical kinds of situations where the older woman may begin to think of herself as old (63.5% of respondents, N=142) is during a period of illness, disability, or general weariness. Thus, though the majority of these women think of themselves as young or middle-aged, and interpret oldness as more of a bodily state than a state of mind, there are times when their bodily aches and pains overtake them.

When the arthritis was so bad in the spring that I had to use a walker. (No. 15-78 yrs.)

When I go outdoors and try to bend over to weed my flower garden and I can't get down. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

When I get real tired. (No. 50-70 yrs.)

When I walk along the street and can't go as fast. (No. 96-76 yrs.)

In addition, there may be days when loneliness or inaction precipitate feeling old (10.8%).

A rainy day - you get lonely. (No. 55-80 yrs.)

When I don't go out enough, it's just laziness I guess. (No. 57-90 yrs.)

When you get days that you get depressed. When I get that way, I get myself dressed and get out. (No. 127-94 yrs.)

Times when you feel lonely. (No. 43-88 yrs.)

Six respondents (8.1%) indicated that being in a situation where they were around young people made them feel old.

If you get out in a crowd with a whole lot of young people. (No. 26-86 yrs.)



I found I had nothing to say, I felt ignored. I realized that these four young people were caught up in their world. (No. 59-81 yrs.)

Such occasions are reminders of the number of years that have actually passed.

When I look at my twenty-nine year old granddaughter, I think I have to be old. (No. 78-72 yrs.)

However, such situations appeared to be exceptions. Most of these women were involved in very few interactional settings where they found themselves noticeably outnumbered by much younger persons. As Matthews (1979a) observed, elderly women may avoid such "threatening situations".

Some situations clearly are more apt than others to undermine the older woman's view of herself as 'not old'. Some respondents referred to situations where, stepping outside of familiar bounds or even contemplating the unfamiliar, they found themselves in settings where they began to feel old. One respondent, partially paralyzed as the result of a stroke, described a recent wedding party where, when her physical limitations are drawn to her own and others attention, she begins to feel old.

When my brother wanted me to get up and dance and I couldn't. (No. 19-65 yrs.)

Another respondent finds herself feeling old when she thinks about attempting something out of the usual.

When I think about going on a trip or anything I get cold feet. (No. 122-84 yrs.)

The death of a friend or neighbor is another event or situation which intrudes on the elderly woman's feeling of comfort and confidence

and is apt to make her feel old. Six respondents (8.1%) referred to this type of situation. The loss of a loved one was especially influential, "when I saw my son die" (No. 133-65 yrs.), "when my husband died" (No. 70-66 yrs.).

'Old' is not the only identity that can be situationally experienced. Respondents were asked a second question, "have there been any situations recently where you felt young?" Forty-five women (31.7%, N=142) reported that there were situations where they felt young (for the samples individually the corresponding percentages are, 33.7% of the community-dwelling, 40% of the nursing home, and 22.6% of the senior apartments respondents). According to approximately thirty-eight percent of these respondents "feeling well", "working hard", or "being on the go" are such situations.<sup>4</sup>

Some days in the summer, things go so well I could jump over the moon. (No. 9-76 yrs.)

When I get tearing all the cupboards apart. (No. 18-67 yrs.)

Running around selling tickets for the spring fling. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

When I'm feeling good and when I get dressed up to go out. (No. 20-84 yrs.)

When I'm working hard, I forget myself sometimes. (No. 32-87 yrs.)

When I get out with friends. (No. 86-71 yrs.)

Others feel young when they have the opportunity to do unusual and exciting things. Not surprisingly, health is again an influential factor here. Respondents, who had reported feeling old in unusual or unfamiliar types of situation, had also described their health as poor

or had a disability. In contrast, each of the respondents below had reported their health to be good.

Oh yes, when I'm on the dance floor. (No. 11-71 yrs.)

When I went to Acapulco. (No. 63-71 yrs.)

Our fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration. (No. 95-76 yrs.)

Out in the city, doing different things in your life. (No. 16-73 yrs.)

When I go to a party and dance. I can get up and dance like the rest of them. (No. 127-94 yrs.)

More common than comments indicating that being around younger people made them feel old (8.1%) were reports that being around young people made elderly women actually feel younger than their age (17.8%).

Working at the \_\_\_\_\_, I work with younger people and they treat me as one of themselves. (No. 66-88 yrs.)

My grandchildren always make me feel younger when they are around. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

When I was serving at that wedding, I kept up with those younger woman. (No. 142-80 yrs.).

Whether interaction with young people makes the older woman feel young or old is dependent, at least in part, on the nature of the situation. If the older person is included in the activity and made to feel that she is part of the situation (e.g., like "one of themselves") she can find herself feeling younger than her years. If, on the other hand, she feels left out or that she is being treated differently from the rest, she is made to feel like an old person.

Comparison with others can also work another way. Being in the company of people older than oneself can also make an older individual feel young.

When I get with older people I feel young. (No. 94-81 yrs.)

Another respondent described feeling young at a family reunion where the oldest attending family member was eighty-two and she (at seventy-eight) felt herself young in comparison.

Another occasion for feeling young is a situation in which the older woman's view of herself as 'not old' is confirmed by others. This type of situation is particularly influential if these others are people who haven't seen her in a number of years. This respondent describes feeling young:

When I go to Digby and we meet people I haven't seen in years and they say, "look you haven't changed a bit". (No. 92-70 yrs.)

Similarly, this woman describes feeling young when she attended her niece's wedding:

When we walked in they said "\_\_\_\_\_ you look like a bride". (No. 65-75 yrs.)

In sum, 'old' can be a situational identity and as such need not necessarily be relevant to all interaction experiences. The salience of old as a self-reference depends very much on those with whom the older woman is interacting (e.g., her age peers, her family, or much younger people), and where the interaction takes place (e.g., in familiar settings or in settings where identity management is difficult). As we shall shortly see, the elderly woman can also relegate her oldness to

the background because other dimensions of her life experience seem to be more important to her than her age.

Other Components Of The Older Woman's Self-Conception:  
Felt Identity Vs Social Identity

Most of the theoretical and empirical work on identity in later life has tended to focus on social identity. As noted in Chapter One, this emphasis on social identity has focused on status and role losses in old age. Irving Rosow's work illustrates this emphasis on social identity and a crisis view of identity in later life:

If the social self consists of roles, then role loss erodes self-conceptions and sacrifices social identity. These then are the social inputs of the crisis of aging (1976:467).

Though Rosow says "if" the social self consists of roles, he assumes that the social self is but "the totality of a person's social roles". His work is also premised on the assumption that these roles are, for the older individual, "central to his very self-conceptions" (1976:467).

Manford Kuhn, one of the first researchers to attempt to empirically study self conceptualization, like Rosow emphasized social identity based "on the self theory view that the self is an interiorization of one's positions in social systems" (1954-72). In interpreting the responses to his twenty-statements test, Kuhn was concerned primarily with "social anchorage" or "self-identification in a social system" (1954:70). Kuhn, Rosow, and others who adopt this approach to the study of identity make the assumption that social significance and personal significance of the various dimensions of identity correspond.

The present analysis deals less with objective identity than with self-meaning from the individual's own point of view. The main focus is on the individual's felt identity or "the subjective sense of his own situation and his own continuity and character that an individual comes to obtain as a result of his various social experiences" (Goffman, 1963:105). Felt identity is identity as the person feels or experiences it. In the context of this study, it is the identity that the older woman works with in her daily life. If our goal is to understand the aging experience and the meaning of self in old age, then we must enter into the older individual's world of meaning and set aside our own assumptions (Blumer, 1969). In doing so we are interested in "the individual's subjective experience of the reality of the self which is actively engaged with the world that surrounds it" (Ainlay and Redfoot, 1982-83:9). This analysis also demonstrates that individuals can be meaningfully identified by others in ways other than and in addition to the social positions they occupy. It provides support for David Unruh's (1983) contention (and empirical demonstration) that the prevailing social science focus on institutional and formal organizational life (and roles as the key linkage between individual and society) has overlooked the fact that older people can be meaningfully connected to others in a number of different ways.

It should also be pointed out that the processual nature of self and identity must not be ignored (Mead, 1934). Self-conception is a complex process which involves "continuing interpretive activity" (Gordon, 1968) across many situations and across time. Identity as

process has already been demonstrated in our analysis of 'old' as a situational identity. Because self-meanings are continually being interpreted and modified as the individual enters new situations and relationships, there are methodological problems inherent in any study of self-identity. It is difficult to operationalize self-conception and self-evaluation so as to capture their processual nature. This is, for example, a weakness of the twenty statement test (TST) since it yields information on identity as it exists only at one point in time. In this study, while the TST is utilized, the analysis of the older woman's identity is based on data derived from a number of sources (e.g., informal conversations, participant observation, and other interview questions designed specifically to gather information on the elderly woman's self-references). However, the fact remains that this study, like most others, is a cross-sectional interpretation of identity which, for analytical purposes, tends to over-emphasize the structural aspect of identity.

The TST was employed in this study strictly as a qualitative measure of self-perception. No assumptions were made about the importance or order of respondent's statements. Kuhn, for example, is primarily concerned with what he terms consensual statements, or responses which make reference to membership in social groups and classes.<sup>5</sup> Consensual statements are looked upon favorably as an indication of social anchorage. Kuhn also assumes that, since consensual statements generally appear earliest among the respondent's responses, they are the more important social identities. In the

present analysis, all TST response statements were inspected and their content analyzed. However, particular attention was focused on the older woman's perception of, and reference to, her relationships with others. This category of self-identifications proved to be, as hypothesized, very significant in understanding the basis upon which the older woman builds her self-identity.<sup>6</sup>

The women interviewed in this study are not, in Kuhn's terms, a highly socially anchored group. Nor, in contrast to Rosow's assumption, are their social selves comprised primarily of institutionalized roles. The primary basis of self-identity for the majority of these women is focused around their interpersonal relationships to others. This study population is comprised of a group of women who had little opportunity at any point in their lives to participate in many formal roles or to occupy the type of social positions to which Rosow and others generally refer. These are women whose life experience has revolved around women's traditional roles. As we saw in Chapter Two, although over half of the women in this sample, at some point in their lives, were employed outside the home, that was rarely full-time employment, was usually intermittent, and did not resemble anything like a permanent working career.

Possibly because the self-identity of these women was built around relationships rather than statuses and formal roles, the TST proved to be problematic as an instrument for yielding information on the meaningful components of their identity. Many of the respondents, including those who did eventually give useful information, had



difficulty with the instrument. Most found it difficult to describe "who am I?" because they were just not accustomed to thinking about themselves.

That's something I never never thought about. (No. 130-73 yrs.)

Oh dear me, I don't know what to say. I'm not much given to introspection. (No. 52-84 yrs.)

I really don't bother to think about those things. (No. 91-79 yrs.)

I don't know how to answer that. (No. 80-82 yrs.)

Not only were most respondents unaccustomed to thinking about themselves, they were not used to talking about themselves either.

I am not much for talking about myself. (No. 57-90 yrs.)

Some women were not sure that talking about themselves, their statuses or attributes, was the proper thing to do. One respondent, for example, prefaced her list of attributes with the comment "I shouldn't say this...". Another said, "you'll think I'm bragging". To these women, it was considered more acceptable to state that others recognized one's accomplishments or attributes. Thus, information about self was frequently couched in the words of 'others'.<sup>7</sup>

I am a person, citizen of the town and community, I would say in good standing. They say I'm too good hearted and too good natured, but I'd rather someone else say that. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

I'm good natured, at least everyone tells me I am. (No. 64-71 yrs.)

According to other people, they think I'm a pretty good person, responsible, reliable and helpful. (No. 1334-65 yrs.)

Another problem with the TST is that respondents may orient their answers to what they perceive to be the expectations of the researcher (Spitzer, Couch and Stratton, 1971). It was obvious that a number of respondents, in this study, unable to comprehend the TST, tried to provide the type of response that they assumed the researcher wanted. When one woman, whose TST response focused on her personal attributes only, was asked later why she had omitted a number of statuses which appeared to be important to her, she replied, "I thought you wanted to know what kind of person I am". Other respondents sought cues or hints as to the kind of response that was expected of them.

That's something I never gave any thought to really. I could list all the things I did, but that's not what you want? (No. 60-74 yrs.)

That would be a hard one - what am I or who am I? Give me a little hint. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

Another respondent, as she made statements in response to the TST, kept repeating, "Is that what you want me to say?" (No. 106-91 yrs.).

Thus, although the TST was a source of data in this study of self-identity, it cannot be relied upon as the sole source of information on self-meanings. More useful information was obtained from more explicit questions and direct probes. This analysis of the older woman's sense of who she is, is focused primarily around three categories of meanings as they were derived from the data - (1) those pertaining to statuses and roles, (2) those pertaining to personal attributes and, (3) those pertaining to the older woman's interpretation of her relationship to others.

## STATUSES AND ROLES

Organizational Membership and Informal Roles

"I take offices in different areas, politics, church and the Eastern Star".

Few formal statuses and roles are, or ever were, occupied by the women in this study and even most of those who were involved in such formal statuses as employment outside the home do not mention this in their response to the TST. Thirty-eight women had been involved in full-time employment for a relatively extensive period of time but only two of these women made reference to formal work roles. Three women still working part-time failed to mention this in their TST responses. Clearly, the traditional roles of wife, mother and homemaker are the ones that are the most salient.

Apart from self-identification according to their traditional roles, one of the largest categories of positions respondents refer to is their organizational membership. In the case of TST responses, fifteen women made statements which referred to these involvements.<sup>8</sup>

I am in the lodge, I am president of [a woman's organization], I am president of the [another woman's organization]. I am going to be the [high office] of the lodge. (No. 25-67 yrs.)

I am a worker in the church. I am an organizer. I've been convener at the [a local club]. I'm convener at the [a voluntary organization]. I am president of the [a woman's organization]. (No. 63-71 yrs.)

I'm secretary of the [a woman's organization]. I served my term as president. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

I belong to Rebekahs [a lodge, a branch of the Odd Fellows], and I belong to the Eastern Star [order of the Masons]. I do volunteer work at \_\_\_\_\_. Once a week I visit at Hillside Pines [the local nursing home]. (No. 132-81 yrs.)

Yet, there were many others among the women interviewed who also hold memberships in these very same organizations but do not mention this at all in their TST responses. However, when respondents were later asked about their organizational involvements and encouraged to talk about them, it became clear that activities in these groups are very important to these older women and become meaningful self-references to them.

Some examples help to illustrate the degree to which some women are involved. One seventy-three year old respondent made a very general reference to her organizational participation in her TST response, but later in the interview it is learned that this woman is currently vice-president of the local women's Liberal Association, a bridge club member, a member of the church choir, a member of her Church's womens group and a former director of vacation bible school. She is also a former Girl Guide Captain and now, as an honorary member, is sometimes invited as a guest speaker at special guide events.

Another seventy year old respondent also replied to the TST in very general descriptive terms but her later responses indicate extensive organizational involvements that form meaningful components of her biography as well as her present sense of self. She is an active member of her church's womens group, has been convener of the sewing committee for the past seventeen years, is a member of the church choir

and attends choir practice regularly every week, serves on the altar guild, is a thirty-five year member of the Legionettes (ladies auxiliary of the Canadian legion), and states "I was president of that for nine years, I just retired this year". She "used to belong to the Brotherhood of Railroad trainmen and was president and treasurer for twenty-seven years". In addition, she has been involved in Red Cross since she was a very young woman and recalls, as a young housewife, knitting sweaters for baby layettes, as she awaited the arrival of her own baby daughter. She has kept up her involvement over the years and is currently "very interested in blood donor clinics" and "on the sick and loan for Red Cross".<sup>9</sup>

As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, other respondents also have impressive histories of organizational participation. Eighty-five of these women (59.8%, N=142) belong to at least one type of group, with the average number of memberships being 2.1. Apart from the actual benefit of membership, these formal and informal organizations also provide older women with the possibility of developing meaningful informal roles. For many of them, these informal role involvements contribute a very meaningful dimension to the total makeup of their self-identities. The women, in this study, were participating in a wide variety of informal roles including: choir member, church organist, chairperson of the sick and visiting committee, senior citizen of the year, eldest member of the women's institute, eldest member of the Lutheran church, worker in the church, volunteer at Hillside Pines and "the first resident, the very first" resident at Hillside Pines. While

these informal statuses and roles were of personal significance they were also highly valued within the older woman's peer group, if not in the community as a whole.

### Housewife And Homemaker

"My home and [husband's name], that was my life"

Clearly, being a housewife and/or homemaker is (and was), for many of these elderly women, a very meaningful and focal component of their self-identities. Again, however, the salient position these roles occupy within the arrangement of self-meanings is not apparent from the TST responses. Only seventeen respondents identified themselves as housewives and homemakers in their TST response. The inference that these roles are important, meaningful and focal dimensions of the older woman's self-identity is based upon data from a variety of references to these traditional roles in which respondents consistently describe them as meaningful and salient dimensions of their life experience.

Elderly women who still have husbands living continue to take their role as wife seriously and are still very much involved in what they perceive to be their wifely duties. Indeed, if the husband is not well, the older woman may find that this period of her life is almost totally devoted to caring for her husband. Caregiver to an ailing husband is seen as a natural and necessary part of being a wife. One respondent states:

I can't do the things on the outside that I would like to. But, we just have to accept the fact that my duty to my husband comes first. (No. 95-76 yrs.)

Another describes who she is almost entirely in terms of her roles as mother, grandmother and wife.

I am just a person trying very hard to do what I can to keep my husband alive. I spend all my time with \_\_\_\_\_. I have two adorable grandchildren that I love very much and I spend a great deal of time doing things for them and my daughter-in-law whom I love very much. I was involved in a great deal of outside work - hospital auxiliary and church work - but I have given them up to be with him. (No. 75-74 yrs.)

While some respondents began their TST response with statements like "I am a housewife" or "I am a housewife and a homemaker", others added adjectives indicating that their pride in their role performance was also a meaningful component of their self-perceptions.

I think I've been a good mother and wife. (No. 72-67 yrs.)

I was always a good housewife. (No. 34-78 yrs.)

In the latter case, the husband, who was present during part of the interview, quickly supported this.

However, the role of wife is not an available self-reference for the majority of the women in this study since ninety-one (64.1%) are widows, ten (7%) are never-marrieds and four respondents (2.8%) are separated or divorced. The homemaker role, however, is still available as a meaningful component of the husbandless woman's self-identity. Thus, some respondents began their TST response with statements like "I am a widow, I am a housekeeper". The latter, having lost the role of wife with the death of her husband twenty-two years ago, describes the salience of her homemaker role:

I'm a homemaker, not a housewife, that's what I do the most of and the best. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

For this generation of women, husbands were viewed almost entirely in terms of their role as family provider while a woman's identity was primarily "inside located" (Lopata, 1966:8) and she was viewed by self and others in terms of her work performance within the home. To be viewed by self and others as a good homemaker was highly valued and most of these women took great pride in how well they performed and continue to perform this role.

I always was a good housekeeper and a good cook. (No. 35-74 yrs.)

I'm very clean and tidy. I like company and I like to cook and bake. (No. 69-82 yrs.)

I was always considered a most wonderful cook, an efficient person and a wonderful housekeeper. (No. 76-80 yrs.)

I could sew, cook, bake, wash and iron, I loved work. I was a good cook if I do say so myself. (No. 102-95 yrs.)

I was a spotless person in my home. (No. 128-78 yrs.)

The homemaker role is a source of continuity in self-identity since so many of these elderly women are still very much involved in it. The majority of these respondents are still living in their own homes and homemaking and housekeeping duties are still given priority in their lives. Getting one's 'work' done is still very important and thus most homes are kept spotless and cooking and baking are still part of the weekly chores for many.<sup>10</sup> While some social activity is welcomed, too much can interfere with the older woman's daily 'work'. The researcher was surprised to find on a number of occasions that her elderly landlady was scolding herself for doing too much socializing and not enough



'work'. When she eventually found a day to herself she announced, "Well, maybe today I'll get some of my work done". Much of the socializing these women are involved in takes place within their own or someone else's home, and having someone for a meal or hostessing the monthly women's institute or church group meeting is not taken lightly for it's an opportunity for the older woman to display her housekeeping and homemaking skills.

While 'women's work' may not be highly appraised by society as a whole, it is highly valued by this group of women. Those who are now denied access to this meaningful role sadly miss it. The salience of the homemaker role and the feelings of satisfaction and self pride derived from it become apparent as these nursing home residents talk about what they miss most about not being in their own homes.

Glory sakes, I'd like to go back and keep house. (No. 107-82 yrs.)

You still have the feeling that you would like to be able to cook and bake. I'd love to get in the pantry and put a nice roast of beef in the oven. That's one thing you can't do here. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

I miss everything. I like to do my own work - cook, clean and bake, having my family come on weekends. The vacuum cleaner was out everyday. (No. 109-88 yrs.)

Work, cooking, baking, washing. (No. 106-91 yrs.)

While it is obvious that these women mourn their inability to perform a role that is central to their self-identities, the homemaker, housekeeper role is not deleted from their repertoire of meaningful self-references. They derive a sense of satisfaction and pride from knowing, and knowing that others know, that "I always was a good cook

and an excellent housekeeper", or, that "I could bake the best apple pie they tell me in Smith's Corner". Atchley has pointed out that while old age is accompanied by changes in positions and roles, these changes may not affect the older person's self-concept to the extent we might expect because:

Older persons tend to retain roles they formerly played as part of their self-concepts. For example, the retired railroader may still see himself as a railroader, and the older widow may still see herself as the wife of so-and-so. Thus, our concepts of who we are often remain reasonably stable in later life because roles we no longer play can still be drawn on as sources for identity,... (1980a:82).

Thus, while 'wife' is a role that the majority of these women have had to give up when their husbands passed on, the knowledge that they have performed the role well, and their reputation as good housewives is consoling and continues to form a meaningful component of their current configuration of self-perceptions. Unless and until the older woman's health fails and she becomes incapacitated, homemaker is a role-identity that appears to be available to the elderly woman for a lifetime.<sup>11</sup>

### Mother

Seven respondents began their TST response with the statement "I am a mother".

First of all, I'd say I am a mother. I guess it's a toss up, but I'd say mother comes first. No matter how old your children are, you are still a mother. (No. 100-71 yrs.)

However, the majority of respondents made no reference to the mother role in their descriptions of who they are. Yet, once again from their

other responses and comments, it becomes evident that mother is still a meaningful role for many of these women (excluding the twenty-three women who are childless) and forms another meaningful dimension in the content of the older woman's self-identity.

Having hypothesized that the mother role would still be meaningful in the lives of older woman, and discovering early on that mother was more often deleted than included in TST responses, the researcher began asking respondents (after the TST was completed), "do you still feel like a mother?" This question was asked of almost three quarters of elderly mothers and not one woman reported that she no longer thought of herself as a mother. On the contrary, this question yielded unequivocal responses of, "definitely", "absolutely", "oh yes" and "of course".

I am very definitely a housewife and a mother. (No. 46-68 yrs.)

I am a mother, I guess so! I'm a grandmother and a great grandmother. (No. 48-86 yrs.)

Yes I am, that I truly am, and a grandmother. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

One criticism of the TST is that this technique "rests upon the assumption that subjects are conscious of their self-concepts and articulate its important aspects in response to the twenty statements stimulus" (Spitzer, Couch and Stratton, 1971:113). There is evidence in this study that respondents can hold important self-identities which they have difficulty articulating and thus omit from their TST response. Yet, the salience and significance of these same self-references are made known in other ways. Spitzer, Couch and Stratton point out that

"some aspects of the self are apparently so firmly internalized that the subject no longer intellectualizes them" (1971:113). Thus, if a self-meaning becomes so deeply internalized that the individual begins to view it as a taken-for-granted dimension of her self-identity, the true significance of this self-reference may become obscured from others.

When respondents were asked why they did not mention that they were mothers in response to the "who am I?" question, some women claimed that they did not think that this was the kind of response the researcher was looking for. Others maintained that being a mother was something they just took for granted.

I guess you don't think of that, you just take that for granted. (No. 57-90 yrs.)

Definitely I'm a mother and a grandmother, we just take it for granted. I've been a grandmother for twenty-three years. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

The mother role is subjectively interpreted by many of these women as a role that is never lost. Mothering, like homemaking, lends continuity to the older woman's identity and it can be an available source of self-meaning for almost a lifetime.

Oh yeah, once a mother, always a mother. That's just something that stays with you. They want your opinions. If they want to know how to do something, they want to know how I'd handle it. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

Yes, I am a mother of three grown children even if they are grown up. (No. 85-69 yrs.)

Oh absolutely, I always got that feeling till I die. (No. 120-77 yrs.)

I'll always be a mother to \_\_\_\_\_ my son. When he's in trouble he phones - "what would you do mum?" They sort of need me. I call her [daughter-in-law] every Sunday and if I miss, she misses it. (No. 75-74 yrs.)

A seventy-nine year old respondent, who had two adult sons living with her told the researcher that, though her sons are grown men, she continues to worry about them. In particular, she worries about what will become of them should she die. Other women, who still think of themselves as mothers, also talked about "worry" and "concern" as a part of the mother role in which they are still very much involved.

Oh yes definitely, I am a mother and I still have that concern and close feeling about them. (No. 59-80 yrs.)

Oh yes, you still have your worries over them. (No. 74-73 yrs.)

While mothering, in some cases, has been redefined to deal primarily with functions such as concern and worry, or mother as advisor, some women are more directly involved in the role. This is especially true in cases where adult children are living in their elderly mother's home. If daughters are present, they are usually working outside the home and the older woman finds herself performing many of her mothering activities not only for her daughter but for her daughter's children as well. For mothers who have unmarried adult sons living with them, role redefinition may be minimal, so that the elderly woman continues to perform almost a full range of mothering duties. Respondents who had adult unmarried sons living with them ranged in age from sixty-eight to eight-six years. With a son living at home, there were "socks to be darned and lunches to prepare" and these elderly

mothers did almost all the cooking, cleaning and washing they had always done.

I worked since 6:30 this morning, I made bread and rolls, got my boy up, and packed his lunch. (No. 37-72 yrs.)

Even when the nest is empty, elderly mothers can continue to feel that their adult children still very much need them.

Oh yes, I'm very much a mother and a grandmother. I have one son who knows I'm a mother. I feel that I am needed to both my boys. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

Oh yes, I think every woman does [i.e., still feel like a mother]. You are always interested in your family. My children still turn to me. They depend on you no matter how old they are. (No. 86-71 yrs.)

Definitely, I'm still as close, and they are still as close to me as they were when they were born. It's still Mum this and Mum that, they still ask me to do things for them. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

Whether adult children share their mother's view that she is still needed is unimportant here. It is the elderly woman's definition of the situation with which we are concerned. If the elderly mother believes she is still needed by her children, then, motherhood can continue to exist for her as a meaningful role-identity in old age.

I got two sons and they seem to need me in ways that they don't realize it, but I can see it. (No. 141-67 yrs.)

As illustrated in some of the previous quotations, many of the respondents voluntarily reported that they were not only mothers, but, grandmothers and great-grandmothers as well. According to Neugarten and Weinstein (1968), the degree to which grandparents become involved in the grandparent role varies and there are different styles of

grandparenting. While some grandmothers become "surrogate parents", others remain as "distant figures" in the lives of the grandchildren. Among the group of women interviewed in this study, variation in grandmothering style was also evident. However, because so many grandmothers had at least one grandchild living fairly close by, direct involvement in the grandmother role was quite common. Indeed, in a number of cases, the older woman was (or had been) involved in 'mothering' her grandchildren.<sup>12</sup> Grandmother was, then, for a number of these women, also a meaningful component of their self-identities.

Oh yes, oh yes, and I feel that my grandchildren are my children. (No. 63-71 yrs.)

Oh yes, gosh yes, when my grandchildren come, I try to take over as their mother, I give advice. (No. 88-78 yrs.)

Even if the mother role has been redefined so that she is less directly involved in her children's lives, the elderly mother finds indirect yet meaningful ways of mothering. The older woman can also experience a sense of satisfaction and pride in a job well done and this too becomes meaningfully incorporated into her configuration of self-perceptions.<sup>13</sup>

Oh yes, I feel that I'm a pretty good mother. My son said that he wouldn't be anywhere today without me. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

Yes, I've been a good mother. I brought up my children on my own. (No. 123-69 yrs.)

I have a marvelous family. I worked to put him [her son] through school. (No. 125-65 yrs.)

I think I've been a good mother and wife. I am very happy with my children. I have two nurses and a son who is twenty-seven years old and not married and manager of a \_\_\_\_\_ store in [another town]. (No. 72-67 yrs.)

#### PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

Responses to the TST generally take a number of forms. In addition to statements which identify the respondent according to his/her statuses, statements referring to personal attributes are common.<sup>14</sup> In this study, self-identification in terms of personal attributes was the most frequently occurring category of TST responses with at least sixty percent of the respondents making such self-references. In particular, respondents often described themselves in terms of their character and interpersonal style. However, it was not only in the TST responses that such self-descriptions occurred. References to personal attributes were frequently made at various points throughout the interview. Because references to both self and others in terms of attributes appeared to be both frequent and salient, the researcher wrote in her field notes:

It seems to me that what is most important to these elderly women in Bridgewater is not "who you are" but "what you are" (i.e., what kind of a person you are). Being a good living person is important, getting along well with others throughout your life is very important. Being kind and helping others is important. When an older woman says "I always tried to do my best", more often than not, she means, "I did my best to help others, get along well with my friends and neighbors and be a good living person".

Being a respectable, "good living person" is a self-identity that is highly valued among this group of women.



I am a person, citizen of the town and the community, I would say in good standing. I try to be a good citizen and do welfare work. I'm interested in the good of the town. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

I am a christian absolutely. I go to church twice a week. I am a great believer, I am a strong believer. I consider myself a good citizen. I help other people. I took two women to church this morning. I gave [sum of money] to the hospital to furnish a room in memory of [a family member]. (No. 73-79 yrs.)

I am a respected person. I am an active person in a number of things that are going on. I participate in a number of clubs. (No. 97-70 yrs.)

The only thing I could say was, I was always a good living person. I haven't had too much trouble with my family. They have all done pretty well. I'm a person that I don't make trouble for anybody unless I have to. I'm friends with everybody, I always was like that. (No. 122-84 yrs.)

The older woman's interpersonal style or manner in which she relates to others is another source of personal pride and a meaningful self-reference. Reference to interpersonal skills was common, and adjectives typically found among the self-descriptions of these elderly women include the following - "friendly", "helpful", "considerate", "good-natured", "generous", "pleasant", "thoughtful", "kind", "sincere", "reasonable" and "agreeable". Being a person who can "get along well with others" is an especially highly valued attribute.

I am very easy to get along with. (No. 29-78 yrs.)

I am good natured, at least everyone tells me I am. I don't like to get into an argument with anyone. (No. 64-71 yrs.)

I'm pretty good and people like me, I am always pleasant I have lots of friends. (No. 41-73 yrs.)

I'm a good natured sort of person. I never get cross. (No. 66-88 yrs.)

Price in one's ability to get along well with others is illustrated in this respondent's description of her relationship with another older woman with whom she shared her home for eight years.

We lived eight years together; we ate together, worked together and shopped together, and there were no cross words between us - I'm proud of that. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

The nursing home and the senior's apartments were environments where the individual's interpersonal skills were really put to the test. In both of these contexts the older woman found herself living in very close proximity to others and it was almost impossible to avoid interaction with them. Being a friendly person, or one who is able to get along well with others, is a prized identity in these environments and descriptions referring to these attributes occurred more often among these groups than in the community sample (in the case of TST statements, 41.5% of the respondents in the subsamples as compared to 18.8% of the community-dwelling). The following self-references were made by nursing home respondents:

I'm very thoughtful of other people's feelings. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

I am not a person to fight with anyone or kick up a fuss. (No. 107-82 yrs.)

I am very gentle, very sociable. I am kind to people. (No. 108-86 yrs.)

Apartment dwelling senior women offered very similar self-descriptions:

I am a very easy person to get along with. I'm a good natured person. I thing I try to get along with people. I don't think I have a bad friend. I can sit beside a stranger and start a good conversation. (No. 113-66 yrs.)

I think I can get along with anybody. (No. 119-77 yrs.)

I'm good natured, I'd give the last thing I had. I've got a lot of friends, more than I can handle now. I got no trouble with nobody. (No. 136-81 yrs.)

Among other esteemed qualities, having a good sense of humor was considered important, if not essential, if the constraints and realities of old age were to be appropriately confronted. Being able to adjust to a less than ideal situation was also a prized characteristic. The older woman who never gave up but made the most of a difficult situation praised herself and was praised by others. A nursing home respondent describes herself as one who can adjust:

...Not like some of them do. Some people have trouble adjusting. I came in here to make it my home and that's just what I did. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

To be known by self and others as an independent person was another significant and almost essential dimension of self in later life. "Independent" was a self-reference many were proud of:

I am a very determined person, extremely independent. (No. 59-81 yrs.)

I'm a tough old rooster, I'm as independent as a pig on ice. (No. 52-84 yrs.)

I'm terribly independent. (No. 115-74 yrs.)

Some of the personal strengths or achievements that formed part of the older woman's self-image were directly related to being an old person. Thus, for some older women, characteristics that proved they were 'not old' were prized and became an important component of their self-identities as well as their social identities.

I think that I am very smart and clever for my age. (No. 69-82 yrs.)

I think I'm great at seventy-four years, no eye troubles. (No. 115-74 yrs.)

You'll never find a woman as old as I am with straight limbs like I have. (No. 127-94 yrs.)

The notion that certain attributes are recognized by the older woman and her peers as meaningful dimensions of identity is supported in responses made to the question, "Is there any one person you admire a lot?" and "Can you tell me why you admire him/her?" Respondents invariably admired the same qualities in others that they viewed as important components of their own identities. Thus, a specific person was admired for, "her disposition", because, "she's so loving and kind", "kind and considerate", "good natured", "a real true friend", "a good living person". . . Other older people like themselves, who don't give up and retain their independence, are greatly admired.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, that he can take anything that comes along and take it in stride. He had a stroke and never gave up. (No. 13-79 yrs.)

Her age, plus her ambition; with her strength and her push she bowls. (No. 63-71 yrs.)

The way she kept going for her age. (No. 130-73 yrs.)

In addition, then, to organizational memberships and informal roles, personal attributes can form a meaningful and salient component of the older woman's identity. Being a respectable, good living woman, an agreeable person who gets along well with others, an honest, fair-minded woman, or a determined and independent person, can be meaningful components of one's felt identity. Because these qualities are also highly valued by the older woman's peers, possession of these attributes can earn her a valued social identity as well.

## RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHERS

"Doing for others, that's what my whole life has been".

Kurt Back (1974:215), in his study of changes in self-image related to aging, reports that:

During the aging process, women tend to shift their self-image from their relationship to others, the social characteristics, to their own abilities and feelings: the separation from children can be viewed in this way.

Yet, in the present study, we have found that many older women never stop viewing themselves in terms of their family relations and though the nest is empty, never entirely separate themselves from their children. We have also found that, although elderly women in this sample do describe themselves in terms of their abilities, the most common abilities referred to are those which focus on the way in which they relate to others. The data analysis in this section will present further evidence which contradicts Back's finding that older women tend to shift their self-image away from their relationship to others. For many, in this sample of elderly women, interpersonal relationships form the basis of what appears to be one of their most meaningful self-identities - someone who is, and always has been, willing to "do" for others.<sup>15</sup>

In this chapter it has been illustrated that the traditional roles of mother and homemaker continue to be important and meaningful dimensions of the older woman's sense of who she is. It has also been pointed out that the elderly women, in this study, are unaccustomed to thinking, or talking, about themselves. This is not surprising since

this generation of women were socialized to adopt an "expressive role" (Parsons and Bales, 1955) in life and to build their selves primarily around expressive behavior toward others. Because they have been so effectively socialized into a nurturing role, it is little wonder that they are so "other oriented" in their self-descriptions. It is also not surprising that these women find it awkward to communicate their self-meanings verbally since they are used to demonstrating who they are non-verbally in their actions toward others. The propensity for many of the respondents in this study to describe themselves in terms of 'doing for others' becomes apparent on numerous occasions; it is especially noticeable when TST response content is examined. Self-identification as one who does for others occurs with surprising frequency.<sup>16</sup> At least thirty-four women made statements similar to the following:

I must say that I've lived a lot of my life for others—my family, my sisters and brothers. I was always willing to help someone if I could that's why I find it rather hard now to be in the receiving line. I still have this feeling that I want to do for them. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

I like making things and taking them out to the sick, I like helping other people out. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

I love to do things for people, to help them and to make things a little easier for others. (No. 89-74 yrs.)

I try to think of other people, I try to do what's within my strength to help them. (No. 116-70 yrs.)

As respondents talked about themselves and their lives, 'doing for others' was such a pervasive reference (at least fifty-three respondents, 37.3%, identified themselves in this way at some point throughout the interview) that it appeared to be a fundamental element

in an ideology that was shared by many, if not most, of these women. One way in which human beings can discover meaning in life is by "doing a deed" (Frankl, 1963) or by fulfilling what they interpret as their task or purpose in life. For many of the elderly women, in this study, 'doing for others' appeared to be an important dimension of their interpretation of the meaning of life and the part they are to play in it:

I help people out. I like helping people out. That's what we're here for, to help people out. (No. 135-69 yrs.)

That's what keeps you living, makes you feel useful. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

Turner's (1975) findings provide support for the idea that self can be found in 'doing for others'. Turner reports that both the adult and student subjects in his study on identity endorsed altruism, or helping others in need, as a realistic route to self-discovery. Sixty-eight percent of the adult population, "agreed that one finds who he really is by helping someone who needs assistance" (1975:154).

Doing for others as a meaningful purpose in life and its implications for self-meaning is also illustrated in this next quotation. This respondent proudly showed the researcher a newspaper clipping where she was photographed while being congratulated for a significant achievement as a senior citizen. In the biographical sketch accompanying the photo, this woman relayed the following interpretation of a meaningful and happy life. As one can see, it is a "recipe" that many of her peers appear to subscribe to as well:

The most important thing in my life was helping others. I believe in being kind to other people and doing unto them like you would like them to do unto you. This has been my recipe for a happy life. (No. 127-94 yrs.)

When the researcher asked this ninety-four year old respondent how she came to develop an interest in helping others, she replied immediately, "I guess I was born that way". However, thinking again for a moment she explained that she had been influenced by her mother, a mid-wife, who was always helping others. She also appears to have passed her recipe for life on to her own daughter. Her daughter has been formally involved in helping others as a registered nurse. Now retired, she continues to 'do for others' through her volunteer work. This respondent says of her daughter, "She helps everybody, she's just like me". Other respondents also indicated that parents had been role models and that their own nurturing behavior had, at least in part, been influenced by them.<sup>17</sup>

I like to help other people. I like to do things for others. I like to give things to others. I like to share everything I have. I often feel like my mother used to be, she was awfully good to others and I do pretty much like she did. (No. 85-69 yrs.)

I was always, when I was home, doing for people and still do. My mother was that way and so was my father. (No. 140-76 yrs.)

I always was [i.e., involved in helping others]. My parents were brought up that way, I followed them. (No. 129-73 yrs.)

Thus, some of these elderly women began their nurturing role early in life and learned to value doing for others as an important element in their life experience. Reference to self as one who does for others occurs frequently throughout the data. For example, when



respondents were asked "what in your life has given you the greatest feeling of satisfaction?" 'doing for others' is introduced again.

I think it gives you satisfaction to do things for other people. (No. 7-69 yrs.)

When I can do something for others - when I can feel that I am of use to others. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

Helping other people, I've helped other people in a good many ways. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

Helping people out that are not situated as you are. (No. 116-70 yrs.)

Similar statements were common in responses to the question, "how often in the past few weeks have you felt that you are of some use to the people around you,..."

Often, I try to think ahead to help people out, do things for people. (No. 1-70 yrs.)

I like to do something good for someone every day that I can. (No. 13-79 yrs.)

One thing I love to do is to help people. (No. 4-82 yrs.)

As indicated in these quotations, many of these women continue to be involved in what has been a meaningful life time role - 'doing for others'. Most, in this sample are (or were) involved either formally or informally (or both) in helping others. While some have constructed a meaningful role and a sense of personal worth through their voluntary organizational involvements, others continue a lifetime activity of helping neighbors 'down the road' or anyone else whom they consider to be less fortunate than themselves.

Building self around relationships to others and informal roles seems to be a wise identity investment for later life. In helping

others, the elderly woman is assured a stable source of self-meaning and she is also assured meaningful appraisal from others. The nurturing role is another source of self-continuity for the older woman since a "woman's lifetime expressive specialization continues to be viable in later years" (Myerhoff, 1978:262). On the other hand, to have built a self-identity around formal roles and statuses or instrumental activities can be problematic in later life. Unless appropriate and meaningful substitutes can be found, such older individual's self-conceptions and self-evaluations can be threatened when and if such roles and statuses are relinquished.

Myerhoff (1978) makes this observation in her study of a group of elderly Jewish men and woman. Old Jewish women, Myerhoff maintains, were "better at being old" than elderly Jewish men because they had an advantage. Their lives continued to revolve around the same expressive behavior that had given meaning to their earlier life. Unlike the elderly women, who were "experts in human relationships", the men were "less engaged in even superficial interpersonal relations". The old men were at a disadvantage, for their "life-long involvement with instrumental activities" was not, according to Myerhoff, "viable after retirement" (1978:262). 'Doing for others' is, then, not only a meaningful source of self-identity but a lasting one for:

Roles based on nurturant functions are durable and expandable. They can last as long as life and enlarge as needed, for there is always someone around who needs taking care of (Myerhoff, 1978:262).

### QUEST FOR IDENTITY

The data analysis presented in this chapter contradicts the identity crisis view of old age in a number of ways. Indeed, identity crisis does not appear to be a concern for the majority of this sample of elderly women. Respondents were asked, "We sometimes hear people say: 'I don't know who I really am', do you often, sometimes, or never ask yourself, 'who am I really?'" An overwhelming majority, one-hundred and forty respondents (98.6%) claim that they never wonder about who they are. Two respondents (1.4%) said they sometimes ask themselves this question but "not often". Replies to this question were, in almost all cases, unequivocal and immediate. However, many appeared to have difficulty relating to this question, some were perplexed and others amused. Others appeared to be unable to comprehend the relevance of the question and even to be affronted by it.

I think that's a ridiculous question for anybody to ask themselves. (No. 91-79 yrs.)

I never think about stuff like that because to me that's silly. (No. 125-65 yrs.)

I think that this is very much over-rated, if you go about your business, you don't have time. (No. 6-81 yrs.)

That's all nonsense to me, I know darn well who I am. (No. 100-71 yrs.)

The most typical response involved matter of fact comments indicating a firm self-assurance that "I know who I am!"

Never, because you know who you are, I know who I am. (No. 18-67 yrs.)

I really feel I know who I am. (No. 21-79 yrs.)

Well, I know who I am and that's it. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

No, I know who I am thank you, I never had any doubts.  
(No. 77-82 yrs.)

Other respondents felt that "who am I?" was perhaps a more appropriate question for young people.<sup>18</sup>

I think that question applies more to young people, not knowing where they are going. (No. 86-71 yrs.)

No, I don't do any soul searching, I belong to another generation. (No. 83-70 yrs.)

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, analysis has focused on examining the nature and basis of the older woman's self-identity. Adopting the premise that an individual's identity is comprised of a variety of self-meanings and that it cannot be assumed that any one dimension of self is more meaningful to the individual than another, the objective was to examine all contents of the configuration of self-perceptions and self-evaluations that appeared to be important and meaningful to the older woman. Maintaining that one cannot equate the social significance and personal significance of the various self-meanings, priority was placed on exploring felt-identity, or identity as a personal experience rather than social identity. Self-esteem was evaluated using Rosenberg's scale and consistent with many previous study results, the vast majority of the elderly women in this sample were found to have high self-esteem scores.

Viewed from this perspective, we discovered that 'old', though perhaps a salient social identity, is not a central or focal self-

meaning for the majority of the women in this study. Moreover, an old age identity was found to be a situational identity and thus more relevant to some interaction experiences than others. Self-dimensions other than age are given priority in the everyday lives of these respondents. When these women talk about themselves and their lives, it becomes obvious that the older woman, in her own mind, is much more than an old person.

The primary basis of self-identity among this group of elderly women rests upon the older woman's relationships with others within the realm of her interpersonal world. Voluntary organizational membership forms a significant component in the content of the self-identifications of many of these woman and provides an avenue for informal role involvement. We have also found that there is continuity in the identities of these elderly respondents because their involvement in such central roles as mother and homemaker continues to be a salient and meaningful dimension of their self-descriptions throughout old age. Personal attributes, especially those which define the older woman in relation to others (e.g. "good mother", "good wife", "true friend", "good neighbor", or "the first one to help out") also form an important and meaningful component of the elderly woman's sense of self.

Of all the meaningful self-descriptions identified by these elderly respondents, one of the most interesting (especially with regard to its prevalence) was the reference to self as 'one who does for others'. Building an identity around helping others was viewed as advantageous since it is a source of self-continuity in later life,

doing for others (barring great illness or disability) is a source of identity that can last a lifetime.

It would seem that gerontologists have generally erred in ignoring the significance of the interpersonal world. They have overlooked the fact that such behavior as helping others can be a meaningful route to self-discovery and, as such, a significant source of continuity of identity in old age. Most theorizing on later life (which has of course influenced empirical investigation) conveys the impression that, in North American society, at least, meaningful self-identities can only be built around formal roles and statuses, most notably a working career.<sup>19</sup> Since identity tends to be viewed primarily in terms of one dimension only, and since most formal roles and statuses must eventually be relinquished in old age, the jeopardy perspective on identity in later life follows.

However, the analysis presented in this chapter suggests that this perspective on identity in later life needs to be expanded. It is a view that ignores the fact that the majority of older women today never were involved in many formal roles or statuses. It ignores, as well, the fact that both men and women, young and old, can find numerous sources of meaning in life and ways of demonstrating who they are. For the sample of older women interviewed in this study, the meaning of life and self revolves around their informal roles and interpersonal world. Thus, most of these women have retained, in old age, a firm sense of who they are because their self-meaning is deeply embedded within their relationships to others. How these elderly women go about using their

networks of social involvements to maintain their self-meanings is the subject of the next two chapters. Chapter five begins this analysis by examining in detail the nature of the older woman's network tie to her family.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Rosenberg's scoring procedure is explained in detail in the report of his study of the self-attitudes of high school students, see Rosenberg, M., Society and The Adolescent self-image. Princeton, N.J.:Princeton University Press, 1965. The Rosenberg scale as a measure of self-esteem is described and reviewed, and scoring procedures clearly outlined, by Breytspraak and George in Mangen, D.J. and Peterson, W.A. (eds.) Research Instruments in Social Gerontology, Vol. 1, Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 241-302. The scale is administered as a ten item scale, however, some items are combined for scoring purposes so as to form a six item scale. The six item scale is then treated as a Guttman scale. High, medium, and low scores are arbitrarily determined from the data.
- 2 This notion is somewhat akin to McCall and Simmon's hierarchial organization of role identities. Individuals have a number of role-identities and McCall and Simmons suggest that these role-identities are organized into a hierarchy of salience and a hierarchy of prominence (see McCall and Simmons, 1978:61-100). The present study is concerned with a broader scope of self-meanings and role-identities are considered as only one dimension of self-identity.
- 3 Background variables are those which "affect interaction but are generally unnoticed unless they are glaringly out of the ordinary" (Matthews, 1979a:65). A person's gender and age, for example, are generally treated as background variables.
- 4 The researcher observed that seasons also influenced the older woman's interaction patterns and her feelings about herself. Winter could be a gloomy and lonely time for those who had difficulty going out. It was also a time that drew attention to the elderly woman's physical limitations if she were at all disabled. On the other hand, summer was a peak period of social interaction. Friends and family dropped by more often and relatives (especially children) living outside the province made their annual summer visits. Neighbors could be seen and chatted with simply by going outdoors. Town activities of interest to older women such as the spring fling (an annual all day fund raising event for the local hospital) and church suppers also took place in the summer. Others, like respondent number nine, feel young in the summer as they get caught up in the pleasures they derive from their outdoor activities such as gardening.



- 5 Kuhn quantitatively analyzes TST response and an individual receives a "locus score" which is "simply the number of consensual references he makes on the 'twenty-statements' test" (Kuhn and McPartland, 1954:70).
- 6 The idea that the older woman's relationships with others was a key variable in understanding her sense of identity was derived from a number of data sources in addition to TST responses.
- 7 These quotations are good illustrations of the symbolic interactionist tenet that the meaning of self arises in social experience.
- 8 In the analysis of TST responses, N=100 respondents. The other 42 respondents either were unable to make any statements at all or made statements which could not be categorized.
- 9 Permission was obtained from both these respondents so that this type of detailed information could be revealed.
- 10 Some of these women continue to cook daily hot dinners for their noon time meal. Even though they are now alone they feel it important to do as they always have done over the years. Even older women who have adult children living in the home continued to do much of the household cooking. One seventy year old woman, who had her divorced daughter and three granddaughters living in her home, prepared three daily meals for the entire family. Other women prepared daily noon-day meals for grandchildren whose mothers were employed.
- 11 The homemaker role is also a role that can be disengaged from gradually. Even in cases where there was illness and disability women continued to do what little they still could. In the nursing home, even though staff provided daily cleaning services, residents tidied up their rooms, cleaned out their closets and reorganized their belongings, behavior that simulated their previous housekeeping chores.
- 12 Grandparenting will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five. While some of the respondents had previously raised a grandchild, two women are currently parenting a grandchild. Others act as surrogate parents on occasions such as when they babysit or provide meals for grandchildren whose parents are at work.

- 13 This sense of pride and satisfaction in role performance is evident in many of the comments respondents made in reaction to Rosenberg's scale item #5, "I feel I do not have much to be proud of". A number of women were quick to add comments like these, "No, I'm proud of my family, I've lots of things to be proud of" (No. 98-86 yrs.), "I'm proud of my children, grandchildren and proud of a lot of things" (No. 131-81 yrs.), "Any woman left a widow at forty-seven with what I had to do with..." (No. 64-71 yrs.).
- 14 In statements referring to personal attributes, the respondent describes herself as an object without necessarily making any evaluation of the quality or characteristic referred to (e.g., "I am ambitious", "I am honest"). This differs from self-esteem where self-evaluations are being made.
- 15 Even in the case where an elderly woman is no longer capable of doing very much for others, the fact that she would be willing to, if she could, is important; "I am friendly and active, active with my hands, not my feet, I always was thoughtful of other people" (No. 45-83 yrs.), "I like to help people. If I knew someone who was sick and I had the health, I would like to help them" (No. 62-86 yrs.).
- 16 Respondent number 53 had to leave school, while only a very young girl, to help her ill mother care for a baby sister. She is now very crippled and endures a lot of pain. While it is true that this woman must accept help from others, she still continues to do what she can for people. Thus, she knits and crochets for her family and donates her handiwork to craft sales that are raising money for charity. Respondent number 116 lives in the senior's apartment complex, and though not terribly well herself, she does many things for those whom she considers to be worse off (e.g., she does errands for the lady downstairs like mailing letters and buying stamps, she makes another woman's bed for her).
- 17 The researcher, on a number of occasions, actually observed respondent number 85 doing for and giving things to others. This woman was a regular volunteer at the local nursing home, doing many things for the residents and always bringing small gifts and treats, most often given to those who had few visitors.
- 18 Actually, Turner (1975) found that even his youngest subjects showed no preoccupation with the "Who am I?" question. However, most of the university students in his sample did acknowledge a "personal quest for identity".
- 19 Built into this notion is the assumption that work holds a particular meaning for the worker. That is, there is an assumption that work is a central life meaning and thus when the worker retires, life and self-identity are devoid of meaning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### "BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER: THE OLDER WOMAN'S FAMILY TIES"

The strongest ties that the self establishes are still to relatives, not to abstract principles, institutions, or groups" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981:120).

One problem inherent in the study of family relations is the difficulty in describing what is meant by the term family. There is a lack of consensus (even among sociologists and other professionals) as to what constitutes an adequate definition (Sussman, 1976), and we must always ask the question - from whose point of view? There are a variety of family forms in contemporary society; "these variant family forms, however, have been more popular with the young than with the old" (Shanas, 1979:4). Thus, in this study, a traditional notion of family is adopted and as Shanas describes it:

For most older people, the family is that group of individuals to whom they are related by blood or marriage.... This definition of family implies that the family includes more than the individuals immediate family, that is, spouse, children, and perhaps siblings. The family may include those persons somewhat distantly related by blood or marriage, such as cousins of various degree or in-laws, all of whom may be perceived as family members (1979:4).

Based on this approach to family, respondents were questioned directly and in detail on the amount and nature of their contact with such designated family members as, children, grandchildren, siblings, and nieces and nephews. However, more indirect questioning and probing provided the occasion for inclusion of more distant yet meaningful kin

such as cousins, in-laws and quasi-family members who serve as "fictive kin".

It has been well documented in previous research that the popular notion of older people as alienated from their families is a misconception (Shanas et al, 1968; Shanas, 1979; Sussman, 1976; Troll et al, 1979; Rosenthal, 1987). The data to be presented here provide yet another confirmation that the notion that old people have been abandoned by their families is more a myth than reality. The majority of the elderly respondents in this study are actively involved within their family networks.

#### MEANINGFUL FAMILY TIES

##### Children: Amount of Contact

Eighty-seven (86.1%) of the respondents in the community-dwelling sample have at least one living child. Proportionately more childless women are found in the nursing home (20%) and apartment complex (22.6%) samples than in the community-dwelling sample (13.9%).<sup>1</sup> There is, however, no notable difference among these samples in the average number of living children; there are approximately 2.5 children per mother in each.

Not only do the majority of the respondents have at least one living child, most of those who have children (86.2% of the community-dwelling) have at least one child living within one-hundred miles (Table 5.1). Forty-three women (49.4%) have a child living in the same town. Children living outside the community were not, in most cases, living all that far away. Thirty-two women had a "nearest child" who lived

TABLE 5.1

DISTANCE FROM NEAREST CHILD

Location of Child	Samples			
	Community-Dwelling (N=87) %	Apartment-Dwelling (N=24) %	Nursing Home (N=8) %	Total Sample (N=119) %
In this House	23.0	-	12.5	17.6
In this Neighborhood	9.2	4.2	12.5	8.4
In this Community	17.2	20.8	25.0	18.5
Within 100 Miles	36.8	62.5	50.0	42.8
Elsewhere in the Province	2.3	-	-	1.7
Elsewhere in the Maritimes	1.1	4.2	-	1.7
Elsewhere in Canada	10.3	8.3	-	9.2
Outside Canada	-	-	-	-

Note: One nursing home respondent shares a room with her daughter and was classified in the category, In this House.

within one-hundred miles, and, fifteen of them (46.9%) had a child living within fifteen miles.

Table 5.1 illustrates that almost half (49.4%) of the community-dwelling respondents who have children have a child living in the same community, with twenty-three percent having a child living in the same house. While fifty percent of the nursing home sample also have a child

living this close, only half of this proportion (25%) of the apartment-dwelling respondents have a child living in the same town. This may be due, in part, to the fact that fewer of the apartment-dwelling seniors were long-time residents of the town than was the case in the other two samples. While 85.1 percent of the community sample and 80 percent of the nursing home respondents had lived in Bridgewater for twenty years or more, only 48.4 percent of the apartment sample had lived in the town for that long. However, this difference in distance from the nearest child, as Table 5.2 illustrates, has little effect on the frequency with which children are seen, (possibly because the majority of the apartment respondents (87.5) had children living within one hundred miles.

Two-thirds (66.4%) of all respondents who have children, see a child at least once a week, and there is little difference among the samples in the frequency with which a child is seen. Data reporting when a child was last seen (Table 5.3) further confirm that contact between these elderly mothers and their children is frequent. The majority (83.8%, N=87) had seen at least one of their children as recently as within the preceding week. Approximately thirty-seven percent had last seen a child as recently as that day. While approximately sixty-seven percent had seen one as recently as a couple of days ago.

Not surprising, the frequency with which children are seen varies with the residential distance between parent and child so that, in general, the further the distance the less frequent the contact. For example, eighty-six percent of those who see a child no more than once a month, live more than fifteen miles from their nearest child. Seventy-

TABLE 5.2

CHILD MOST FREQUENTLY SEEN

Frequency Seen	Samples			
	Community- Dwelling (N=87) %	Apartment- Dwelling (N=24) %	Nursing Home (N=8) %	Total Sample (N=119) %
Everyday	35.6	-	50.0	29.4
At least 1/Week	31.0	66.7	12.5	37.0
At least 1/Month	16.1	25.0	25.0	18.5
At least 1/Year	16.1	-	-	11.8
Less than 1/Year	1.1	8.3	12.5	3.4

TABLE 5.3

CHILD LAST SEEN

When Seen	Samples			
	Community- Dwelling (N=87) %	Apartment- Dwelling (N=24) %	Nursing Home (N=8) %	Total Sample (N=119) %
Today	36.8	12.5	25.0	31.1
Yesterday	12.6	29.2	25.0	16.8
A Couple of Days Ago	17.2	8.3	12.5	15.1
A Week Ago	17.2	41.7	25.0	22.7
A Month Ago	8.1	-	-	5.9
A Year Ago	6.9	4.2	-	5.9
More Than A Year Ago	1.1	4.2	12.5	2.5

three percent of those who see a child only once a year or less, live more than one-hundred miles from their nearest child. Though distance did effect the frequency of visiting, this was offset to some extent by the duration of long distance visits. Several respondents reported having made recent extended long distance visits to children. These visits are generally ritualized, occurring "every summer", "in the fall", or on occasions such as Christmas or Easter. These long-distance extended visits are made by both parent and child.



I just came home a week and a half ago. I'll go again the fall. She [daughter] comes for a week at a time. (No. 129-73 yrs)

Oh yes, I get up often, I spent Christmas. I always spend three weeks at their cottage. (No. 62-86 yrs.)

Respondents and their children also make frequent use of the telephone to keep in touch. Where a daughter lived close by, it was typical to hear respondents say, "she calls me everyday", or, "she calls me every morning". Male children also maintained telephone contact with their mothers, though often it was the son's wife who did the calling, "his wife calls me nearly everyday". There is a remarkable similarity in the phoning patterns of elderly mothers and their children (Table 5.4). Within a couple of days prior to the interview, 60.9 percent of the community-dwelling mothers had telephoned a child, while 57.4 percent of these respondents had also received a phone call from a child. Well over three-quarters of both mothers (79.3%) and children (81.5%) had called each other within the previous week.

While the telephone definitely serves to bridge the distance between parent and child, distance does result in a decrease in the frequency of phoning. At least 80 percent of the calls to children that had occurred no more recently than a month ago or less, involved a long distance phone call. Several respondents with children living at considerable distance, said that they would like to call their child more often but were unable to do so because of the cost involved.<sup>2</sup>

In a previous Canadian study (Synge, Rosenthal and Marshall, 1981) it was reported that, while telephone contact between the generations was extensive, letter writing was not an important form of

TABLE 5.4

TELEPHONE CONTACT BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD

When Last Phoned	Mother Last Phoned A Child (N=87) %	A Child Last Phoned Mother (N=87) %
Today	20.7	21.8
Yesterday	19.5	23.0
A Couple of Days Ago	20.7	12.6
A Week Ago	18.4	24.1
A Month Ago	12.6	14.9
Occasionally or Less Than a Year Ago	8.0	3.4

Note: Percentages do not total 100 because of rounding. One respondent was unable to use the telephone because of hearing impairment, another's only child lived in the same house.

communication between elderly parents and their children. In this study, as well, writing is not nearly as popular a means of keeping in touch as telephoning (See Table 5.5). While 92 percent of the community-dwelling mothers reported that they had telephoned a child within the last month, only 50 percent reported writing a child in that period. Very similar proportions of both children (50.6%) and mothers (48.3%) do not write at all, or only occasionally (e.g. on birthdays, christmas and so forth). Of course, as Synge et al (1981) have illustrated, whether parents and their children exchange letters, and

TABLE 5.5

WRITTEN CONTACT BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD

When Last Wrote	Mother Last Wrote A Child (N=87) %	A Child Last Wrote Mother (N=87) %
A Couple of Days Ago	18.4	10.3
About a Week Ago	13.8	16.1
A Couple of Weeks Ago	8.0	6.9
About One Month Ago	10.3	16.1
About Six Months Ago	1.1	-
Occasionally or Less Than a Year Ago	48.3	50.6

Note: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

writing frequency, is related to proximity. Letter writing is more likely to occur if parents and children live a considerable distance apart.

Younger (less than 80 years) and older mothers (80 years and over) were compared with regard to amount of contact with their children, and little difference was found between them. Thus, there was no notable difference in frequency with which a child was seen nor when a child was last seen. There were slight differences in phoning and writing patterns in that younger mothers were somewhat more likely (14%)

to have phoned a child within the past month and older mothers to have written one (difference of 6.8%).

The amount of contact that widowed and married mothers had with their children was also compared. While it might be expected that widows would attempt to compensate for their lost spouse by increased interaction with their children (the child might also feel obliged to increase interaction with his/her mother), there was little evidence to indicate that this was the case. There was no major difference between widowed and still-married mothers in either the amount of face-to-face or telephone contact with their children. Married mothers had actually written a child more recently than the widowed (16% more had written within the previous month).

#### Nature and Quality of Contact with Children

Hess and Waring (1978:303), describing the nature of parent-child relations in later life, maintain that we have moved from "the family of obligatory ties to one of voluntary bonds". According to this voluntaristic model, parent-child interaction is more likely to be mutually rewarding and to more closely resemble friendship relations than the intergenerational relations of previous periods. On the basis of the quality of the interaction and the content of the exchange observed (particularly convincing were the numerous participant observations of interactions between elderly mothers and their children), it would seem that the relationship between respondents and their children was a relationship characterized by genuine mutual caring, concern and affection.

The affective nature of this tie is evident even in the amount of contact observed. Many of the children give more time and attention to their mothers than would presumably be warranted by need alone. Children apparently initiate this contact as often as mothers do. Some of the contact is relatively routinized:

We have a routine established, it's taken for granted that birthdays, easter, etc. are spent at one house or the other. (No. 100-71 yrs.)

There is also a lot of spontaneity with children "just dropping in".<sup>3</sup>

They are here all the time. (No. 39-71 yrs.)

He [son] runs a store in town, he drops in often. (No. 85-69 yrs.)

He [son] teaches school here and quite often comes in and has lunch with me. (No. 15-78 yrs.)

Caring concern is frequently displayed in the form of affectionate "checking up" on parents.

We get a call every night before we go to bed to see if everything is okay. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

When she's [daughter] at the cottage, she's on the phone every night checking in. (No. 78-72 yrs.)

It has been well documented that most older people strongly subscribe to the norm of independence and autonomy as the ideal in parent-child relations (Troll, 1971; Troll *et al*, 1979; Hochschild, 1973; Shanas, 1979; Rosenthal, 1987). Most of the respondents in this study, though not questioned directly on their preferred living arrangement, typically let it be known that "intimacy at a distance" (Rosenmayr, 1977) was the model parent-child relation. Respondents were asked, "Would you say that it is - very important, somewhat important,

not very important, or not at all important - to be living close to your family and see a lot of them"?<sup>4</sup> While eighty-four respondents (83.2%, N=101) felt that it was very important (37.6%) or somewhat important (45.6%) to be living close, many of these same respondents qualified this by noting that it was not a good idea to live too close or in the same house as one's children.

I don't think you should be living with them or too close. I think we're close enough. [Son] wanted me to live with him but I said no. (No. 141-67 yrs.)

I could live with any of my children if I wanted to, but they have a right to a life of their own. (No. 138-65 yrs.)

Sometimes it's just as good not to be too close, there is such a thing as being too close, I don't think it pays. (No. 64-71 yrs.)

A number of studies of elderly parent-adult child relations indicate that gratifying relationships with parents seem to depend largely on the relative independence of parents. An elderly parent's dependency tends to lead to a strained and deteriorated relationship<sup>5</sup> (Robinson and Thurnher, 1979; Johnson and Bursk, 1977; Rathbone-McCuan, 1976). To the majority of the mothers in this study, their relationship with their children was an agreeable one. A question directed specifically at parent-child relations asked, "how often do you have major disagreements with your children?" Eighty-three of the community-dwelling mothers (95.4%) said that major disagreements occurred "not very often" (19.5%) or "not at all" (75.9%). No one reported having disagreements often. Minor disagreements typical of family life were described as "nothing that causes unhappiness, we just don't see eye-to-eye on things". (No. 14-84 yrs)

Many respondents were able to avoid major disagreements with their children because they lived in their own households. The researcher, on one occasion, listened to older women discussing the problems inherent in living in the same house as one's children.<sup>6</sup> A nursing home respondent, who had lived temporarily with a child prior to her move to the home also warned that such arrangements can be problematic - "Don't ever try it, will you"? (No. 103-91 yrs.)

Elderly mothers and adult children living under the same roof create the potential for conflict. By living apart and seeing each other often, but "not too often", such interference and conflict can be avoided. These respondents indicate that a respect for autonomy is important in preserving good parent-child relations.

They live their lives and I mine, that's the best way.  
(No. 8-74 yrs.)

If you're living close you would be interfering in their lives. I think it works out better if you're not too close. (No. 86-71 yrs.)

You can see too much of your family, I would be inclined to butt in.... (No. 70-66 yrs.)

In attempting to elicit information from respondents on the nature of their relationship with their family, there is the problem of social desirability in response. Few like to admit that their family relations are different from what is assumed to be the cultural ideal. It may be especially likely that older people will endorse this family mythology since they were socialized within a social and familial context much different from our own and are aware of the stereotypic notions about the family life of the aged. Moreover, an unsatisfactory family relationship may be perceived by the older woman as "damaging to

her self-identity: stereotypical old women are forgotten by their families" (Matthews, 1979a:83). "The family is a sacred institution and failure to be a member of a loving, stable family is seen and often accepted as personal failure" (Matthews, 1979a:136). Thus, convincing self and others that one's family is loving and supportive may be one defensive strategy employed by some older women in an attempt to maintain their identities and to see themselves as loved and cared for human beings. Matthews found evidence of this when most of her informants did not outrightly admit that they were dissatisfied with their family relations but some hinted that all was not well.

While some of the respondents in this study also gave justifications why children were not more attentive (e.g. "she is a nurse and has three kids, she is very busy", "he is a clergyman and is busy with his many commitments", "we don't see her as often, as her husband's work keeps them busy"), these were infrequent. Respondents were given the opportunity to reveal whatever discontent they may have had when asked the question - "Would you say that you are, in general, very satisfied, quite satisfied, not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with your relationship to your family"? A vast majority (93.1%) of the community-dwelling sample stated that they were either "very satisfied" (79.2%) or "quite satisfied" (13.9%) with their family relations.

It could be argued that the high degree of satisfaction with family relations reported by the respondents in this study is a case of selective perception, that these elderly mothers are interpreting their relations with their children to be more positive than they actually



are. Previous data on intergenerational relations suggest that this is a realistic possibility. Bengtson and Cutler (1976:148) have presented data which reveal that there is "a slightly higher perception of subjective solidarity on the part of the elderly parent" than the adult child. Similarly, Gesser et al., (1985) have also found that elderly parents tend to report greater affectional solidarity than do their adult children. If so, this is less of a concern in this study since our focus is on the older woman's point of view rather than on intersubjective reality. Conversely, it is possible that elderly mothers do enjoy rewarding and congenial relations with their children.

#### Grandchildren: Amount of Contact

In investigating contact with grandchildren, we asked only about grandchildren that the respondent felt she had "a lot of contact with". Eighty-four respondents (83.2%) in the principal sample have at least one grandchild and the majority (82 or 81.2%) have considerable contact with their grandchildren. Only two women (2.4%) said that contact was infrequent. Most of those who have grandchildren have one who lives not all that far away (Table 5.6). A sizeable majority (85.5%) of the community-dwelling have a grandchild living no further than one-hundred miles away (forty-seven, 57.3% have grandchildren who live within fifteen miles of them). Approximately 38 percent have a grandchild living in the same community while 20.8 percent have a grandchild living either in the same house (9.8%) or neighborhood (11%). While few respondents in the secondary samples have a grandchild living as close

TABLE 5.6

DISTANCE FROM NEAREST GRANDCHILD

Location of Grandchild	Samples			
	Community-Dwelling (N=82) %	Apartment-Dwelling (N=23) %	Nursing Home (N=7) %	Total Sample (N=112) %
In this House	9.8	-	-	7.1
In this Neighborhood	11.0	4.3	-	8.9
In this Community	17.1	17.4	14.3	17.0
Within 100 Miles	47.6	73.9	85.7	55.3
Elsewhere in the Province	3.7	-	-	2.7
Elsewhere in the Maritimes	2.4	4.3	-	2.7
Elsewhere in Canada	8.5	-	-	6.2
Outside Canada	-	-	-	-

Note: In the sample as a whole twenty-three women (16.2%) are childless and four respondents (2.8%) have children but no grandchildren.

as the same neighborhood, the majority have a grandchild no further than one-hundred miles away.

Grandchildren are also seen quite frequently (Table 5.7). In our community-dwelling sample, well over half of the grandmothers (53.6%) see a grandchild at least once a week (31.7%) or more (21.9%). Seventy-eight percent see a grandchild once a month or more. Though not

TABLE 5.7

GRANDCHILD MOST FREQUENTLY SEEN

Frequency Seen	Samples			
	Community- Dwelling (N=82) %	Apartment- Dwelling (N=23) %	Nursing Home (N=7) %	Total Sample (N=112) %
Everyday	21.9	4.3	-	17.0
At least 1/Week	31.7	34.8	14.3	31.2
At least 1/Month	24.4	34.8	28.6	26.8
At least 1/Year	22.0	26.1	57.1	25.0
Less than 1/Year	-	-	-	-

Note: In the community sample at least eight (44.4%) of the eighteen respondents who see a grandchild at least 1/year, see one as often as four times a year.

as many apartment-dwelling and nursing home respondents see a grandchild as often as once a week or more, it is only in the nursing home sample that overall face-to-face contact with grandchildren is considerably less frequent. This is the only group where at least three-quarters of the grandmothers do not see a grandchild once a month or more.<sup>7</sup>

Nature and Quality of Contact with Grandchildren

In Chapter Four it was claimed that "grandmother" was a meaningful identity for many of the older women in this study. Indeed, the grandparenting role is evaluated highly by the majority of the

respondents. When asked, "how important is being a grandparent to you?", approximately ninety-eight percent of the community-dwelling grandmothers (96% of the apartment-dwelling, 75% of the nursing home residents) reported that it was either very (75%) or somewhat important (22.6%) to them. Grandparenting is also a role in which many of these women are very involved. Robertson, maintaining that grandparenting types vary with the lifestyle of the grandparent, says that "grandmothers view grandparenting in relation to their degree of involvement with their families". She suggests that life styles are of two types - extrafamilially oriented or intrafamilially oriented (1980:293). Extrafamilially oriented women (often younger) "are more involved in their own lives and place less emphasis on grandparenting". On the other hand, intrafamilially oriented grandmothers (usually older) place more emphasis on grandparenting and view it as a very important part of their lives.

As noted in Chapter Four, many of the respondents in this study appear to be "intrafamilially oriented". Though many are also involved in extrafamilial activities, most of these women have always been and continue to be very involved in their family roles and family interaction. The extent to which many of these women have been directly involved in their grandchildren's lives is notable. At least six women stated that they had raised a grandchild while three others were currently involved in 'parenting' one. In such cases, the relationship is a very close one and the grandchild is seen as being "just like one of my own".

She's just like my dearest dearest daughter, she calls me 'mum'. Her children love me and I'm not bragging. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

My oldest granddaughter lived with me for eleven years. She calls me often. Every time I go up [to Halifax] I stay with her. She says - "Nannie you was always more of a mother to me". (No. 138-65 yrs.)

Other women also described varying degrees of involvement in a grandchild's care. Typically, those who helped care for a grandchild developed a close bond with this child which was maintained as the child grew older.

I've looked after her since she came home from the hospital, she's a comfort to me. (No. 50-70 yrs.)

I brought up the whole three of them while their mother worked. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

He was born in our home and I've rocked him and rocked him. I just adore him. He drops in pretty often. (No. 98-86 yrs.)

He was like our baby, every summer he would stay with us. (No. 109-88 yrs.)

Several other grandmothers (generally those with a grandchild either living in the same house or neighborhood) provided child care. For example, one woman picked up both her grandchildren daily taking them to her house after school. Others provided meals for grandchildren whose mothers were employed.

Other typical forms of interaction between grandmothers and their grandchildren included: frequent staying overnight, coming for weekends or summer vacations, and coming for meals.

She stays overnight, she's here often. (No. 40-67 yrs.)

They stay a lot in summer. (No. 39-71 yrs.)

They call me, "what have you got to eat Nan"? (No. 137-75 yrs.)

Grandchildren also frequently just drop in so that in some cases, as one grandmother put it, grandmother's house "is like their second home".

They are here all the time, they may walk in anytime. (No. 141-67 yrs.)

She works here in town, if she doesn't drop in she calls me. (No. 15-78 yrs.)

\_\_\_\_\_ is here often, when she's home from college, she's here all the time. (No. 65-75 yrs.)

As would be expected, the type of contact between grandmothers and grandchildren varies with the ages of both. Typically it is younger grandmothers, who have younger grandchildren, and are thus more likely to be performing child care services such as baby sitting, after school care or noon time lunches. Though some older grandchildren do continue to spend a weekend, stay overnight, or come for meals, it is more often younger grandchildren who make overnight visits, spend summer vacations and call to ask, "what have you got to eat Nan"? Though relationships with older grandchildren are still close, there is often less face-to-face contact as grandchildren move further away.<sup>8</sup> The tie is maintained, however, by visiting and phoning, writing letters, and sending cards.

I'm right close to them, they write and phone. (No. 56-75 yrs.)

He writes such long letters, he writes about his trips. (No. 44-76 yrs.)

She visits often and writes often, she comes back to the cabin. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

They write such nice letters. (No. 87-82 yrs.)

Older grandchildren who live nearby are also a source of assistance running errands, doing "chores" (e.g. cutting grass, shovelling snow, helping with spring cleaning or "heavy laundry", installing a shower door) or providing transportation.

[Granddaughter] is the one who gets here to do anything and everything for me. (No. 132-81 yrs.)

### Significance and Meaning of the Grandmother Role

In order to investigate the significance and subjective meaning associated with the grandmother role, respondents were asked, "what actually does being a grandparent mean to you"? Replies to this question illustrate how it is that 'grandmother' can be a meaningful and significant role in later life. The symbolic themes which emerge indicate that the kind of active involvement in the grandparental role, which many of these women enjoy, yields support for the older woman's view of herself as a useful, needed and loved human being.

Though most respondents readily indicated that grandmothing was important to them, many found it difficult to precisely define the meaning associated with the experience. Thus, the largest category of responses (36.2%, see Table 5.8) was typically comprised of very general meanings such as: "it just makes me feel good", "it gives me pleasure", "enjoyment", "it's a nice feeling". The pleasure and enjoyment associated with grandparenting was derived from "watching them grow", "looking forward to their visits" and so forth.

Though the remaining categories of responses are varied they are also similar in that most can be seen to illustrate the way in which

TABLE 5.8

MEANINGS ASSOCIATED WITH BEING A GRANDMOTHER

Meanings	Frequency Response Given (N=128)	Percentage of Respondents Giving Response <sup>1</sup> (N=116)
"It gives me pleasure", "Enjoyment"	42	36.2
Someone to Give to and Do Things For	25	21.5
Source of Love and Affection, Someone to be Close to	16	13.8
Source of Pride	11	9.5
Joys of Parenting without Responsibility	11	9.5
Biological Renewal, Keeps One Young	10	8.6
Biological/Self Continuity	8	6.9
Other (e.g. "It Makes Life More Interesting")	5	4.3

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N=116); because some respondents gave multiple meanings, the total exceeds 100%.



grandmothering contributes positively to the elderly grandmother's self-feelings. Twenty-one percent of these grandmothers, for example, defined the meaning of grandparenting in terms of the satisfaction and pleasure they derived from doing things for a grandchild: giving to them, assisting in their care, advising them or teaching them about life, instructing or showing them how to do things (e.g. knitting, crocheting, cooking). Doing things for a grandchild can contribute to the older woman's feeling that she is still needed and confirm her view of herself as a useful human being. It is of interest to note that giving to a grandchild can take a less tangible form. As one respondent noted, grandparents are able to give grandchildren "the extra love and caring" (i.e. in addition to parents) (No. 16-73 yrs.). It would seem that almost all grandmothers, regardless of their health or financial status, have the opportunity to participate in, and derive pleasure from, this type of giving. The following responses illustrate the theme of satisfaction in doing things for grandchildren.

It means helping with the grandchildren which I have always done. I enjoy it. They come to me for advice. (No. 22-69 yrs.)

I enjoy teaching her how to live. (No. 13-79 yrs.)

I find it a great satisfaction to help my grandchildren. I've had to do a lot for them, I've had to be a mother, a grandmother and a great-grandmother. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

Whether she is currently involved in doing things for her grandchildren or not, from the elderly grandmother's point of view, she can feel useful because she knows that she is there if she is needed.

I'm always here if they need something. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

They know that if anything happens to their mother, I could go down and take over. (No. 99-69 yrs.)

I hate to think of the children without me. I feel that I'm needed. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

Approximately 14 percent of the respondents said that, for them, being a grandparent meant "love and affection", having someone they could feel close to. Grandchildren can make the older woman feel loved. They can provide the physical touching which confirms her perception of herself as a wanted and loved human being (nourishing her felt identity). This may be especially important to elderly widows who are otherwise denied access to this type of warmth and human caring.

I love their love. The children are so free with their love. (No. 75-74 yrs.)

It's nice to have grandchildren that you can hug and hold onto and feel needed. (No. 97-70 yrs.)

I am very pleased with all my grandchildren, they hug and squeeze me. (No. 41-73 yrs.)

When I visit they kiss me and put their arms around me. (No. 56-75 yrs.)

Language plays an important role in reality - maintenance making "more real" our subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:152-163). Conversation with significant others is particularly important in this process. Conversational exchange within one's primary group is important in self-formation and maintenance "if for no other reason than that the self can best be confirmed or negated by language" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981:91). Several grandmothers, in describing the meaning of the role, made reference to the symbolic significance of the title. Hearing the label "gram" or "Nan" appeared to be meaningful perhaps because it validated, or made "more real", one

of the older woman's unique and personal identities - "my grandchild's grandmother".

I'm Gram to them all and I like that. If they called me \_\_\_\_\_ I just wouldn't like that. (No. 15-78 yrs.)

You like for the children to call you Grammie. (No. 43-88 yrs.)

Perhaps the ultimate validation of self, for a grandmother, is to hear a grandchild say, "I love you" (Csikszentmihayli and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

I hear, "I love you Grammie", a lot. (No. 16-73 yrs.)

I get such nice letters from them. They always say, "I love you Nan and hope to see you soon". We are a very loving family. They think the world of me. (No. 69-82 yrs.)

Approximately nine percent of the grandmothers described the 'meaning of grandparenting' in terms of grandchildren as a source of pride. Typically respondents described their grandchildren's accomplishments and the researcher was frequently shown a grandchild's high school or university graduation photo.

It's the most important thing in the world to be able to love em, give to them, and rejoice in everything they do. I'm interested in everything she does. (No. 65-75 yrs.)

How can you describe loving a granddaughter, being proud of them and their achievement, being able to make things and give them to them? (No. 126-72 yrs.)

Another 9.5 percent referred to grandparenting as an opportunity to experience the joys of parenting without the responsibility. Some grandmothers, for example, spoke of the pleasure of being able to do for their grandchildren what they were unable to do for their children.

I get more pleasure out of keeping [grandson]. The pleasure of having them around, playing with them, taking cookies to their play house. You didn't have time with your own children. (No. 26-86 yrs.)

I feel just the same about them as my own. You have a lot of fun with them but you're not responsible for them. (No. 38-76 yrs.)

I used to say, "you can spoil them and enjoy them and then send them home to mum and dad". You have more time to enjoy them than you did to enjoy your own, without them, I don't know what we'd do. Everything I do is for the grandchildren. (No. 78-72 yrs.)

Neugarten and Weinstein (1968), in a study on grandparenting, found that for some respondents, grandparenthood was "a source of biological renewal" and "biological continuity". Similarly, for some of the grandmothers in this study (8.6%), being a grandmother helped to keep them feeling young.

It helps to keep a person young, you sort of try to keep young with them. (No. 21-79 yrs.)

I think it helps to keep you young. You can keep up with the times and know what this generation is doing. (No. 50-70 yrs.)

Another 6.9 percent described grandchildren as an extension of the self or what Neugarten and Weinstein called "biological continuity". One respondent was saving precious family heirlooms for her young granddaughter and spoke of being able to see something of herself in this grandchild - "I can see little things \_\_\_\_\_ does that are like myself".

You have someone to carry on after you, someone younger to be interested in. (No. 6-81 yrs.)

I suppose it's a family tie. It's nice to know that something of you, good or bad, will be passed on. It's just a nice feeling. (No. 59-81 yrs.)

For many of these grandmothers, then, the bond with grandchildren is a close one. Indeed, two respondents describe their relationship with a grandchild as their closest tie. An eighty-one year old respondent has an unusually close relationship with her favorite grandson, who lives in another province. Though she sees him only once a year, they exchange letters and phone calls. She describes this grandson as "my best friend", and interprets the relation as a mutual one, "he tells me I'm his best friend" (No. 59). Another eighty-six year old grandmother also enjoys a very special relationship with her grandson; she says, "the closest one to me now is my grandson" (No. 98). A third respondent explains how a close bond with a grandchild can develop.

I had my two oldest grandchildren with me so much that I really feel closer to them than the rest of the family.  
(No. 138-65 yrs.)

#### Nieces and Nephews: Amount of Contact

For many of the respondents in this study, nieces and nephews constitute a meaningful tie in their familial network. Again, respondents were asked only about nieces and nephews with whom they were in contact. Seventy-five of the community-dwelling respondents (74.2%) have such a niece or nephew (77.4% in the apartment-dwelling sample, 70% in the nursing home). Seventeen (16.8%) have no nieces or nephews, while nine (8.9%) have them, but have little or no contact with them. Six (6.6%) of this latter category said their nieces and/or nephews were "too far away".

Approximately eighty-three percent of the community-dwelling respondents who have at least one niece or nephew, have one who lives no further than one-hundred miles away (Table 5.9). There is little overall difference between the samples as to the distance from a nearest niece or nephew. However, twenty-four percent of the community-dwelling sample have one living in the same neighborhood or community, while proportionately, only about half (12.5%) of the apartment-dwelling sample have a niece or nephew living this close. No one in the nursing home sample has a niece or nephew living this close.

As would be expected, nieces and nephews are not seen nearly as frequently as children or grandchildren. However, as Table 5.10 indicates, 26.7 percent of those in the community-dwelling sample who have a niece or nephew see one at least once a week, while slightly over half (52%) see one at least once a month or more. Considerably smaller proportions of the respondents in the secondary samples see a niece or nephew as frequently.

#### Nature and Quality of Contact with Nieces and Nephews

Typically, contact between these elderly aunts and their nieces and nephews takes the form of visiting, telephoning and, for those who live some distance apart, correspondence.

We visit each other and keep in touch on the phone.  
(No. 20-84 yrs.)

We write quite often, he visits when he's home. (No.  
15-78 yrs.)

She calls me almost everyday. (No. 43-88 yrs.)

TABLE 5.9

DISTANCE FROM NEAREST NIECE OR NEPHEW

Location of Niece or Nephew	Samples			
	Community- Dwelling (N=75) %	Apartment- Dwelling (N=24) %	Nursing Home (N=7) %	Total Sample (N=106) %
In this House	-	-	-	-
In this Neighborhood	4.0	-	-	2.8
In this Community	20.0	12.5	-	17.0
Within 100 Miles	58.7	75.0	100.0	65.1
Elsewhere in the Province	6.7	-	-	4.7
Elsewhere in the Maritimes	2.7	-	-	1.9
Elsewhere in Canada	4.0	8.3	-	4.7
Outside Canada	4.0	4.2	-	3.8

TABLE 5.10

NIECE OR NEPHEW MOST FREQUENTLY SEEN

Frequency Seen	Samples			
	Community- Dwelling (N=75) %	Apartment- Dwelling (N=24) %	Nursing Home (N=7) %	Total Sample (N=106) %
Everyday	-	-	-	-
At least 1/Week	26.7	-	28.6	20.7
At least 1/Month	25.3	25.0	-	23.6
At least 1/Year	44.0	70.8	71.4	51.9
Less than 1/Year	4.0	4.2	-	3.8

It was reported earlier that a number of respondents and their children exchanged long distance visits. At least twenty-one percent of these elderly aunts (N=106) also reported exchanging overnight and more extended visits with a niece or nephew.

She stays every summer for two weeks. (No. 39-71 yrs.)

They come and stay for a week in the fall. (No. 56-75 yrs.)

She was down last week for two days, we had a lovely time. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

I visit her [niece in Quebec] every year, they visit. (No. 44-76 yrs.)



The relationship between a niece or nephew and her/his elderly aunt can, in some cases, be a very close one. Respondents were asked if they had a particular niece or nephew to whom they felt closest. Thirty-three (31.3%, N=106) said they had such a niece or nephew.<sup>9</sup> Typically, this type of a relationship has a unique history where a close bond had been developed early in life. The elderly aunt may, for example, feel especially close to a niece or nephew that she helped care for when he/she was a child. At least twelve respondents (11.3%) referred to this type of situation.

My sister died early in life and I took them over. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

She lived with us until she was fourteen, we almost adopted her. (No. 36-73 yrs.)

She spent so many years with me after her mother died. (No. 12-77 yrs.)

According to our data, it seems more likely that an elderly aunt will have a close relationship with a niece rather than a nephew. Of the thirty-three respondents who claimed to feel closest to a particular niece or nephew, twenty-eight named a niece while only five named a nephew. There is also some indication that women without daughters may develop a close tie with a niece; 33.3 percent of mothers, who had sons but not daughters (N=33), reported feeling closest to a niece while only 12.8 percent of mothers with daughters (N=86) reported the same. None of the following respondents have daughters.

She's just like a daughter to me. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

Her mother died young and she kept a lot of contact, she's like a daughter really. (No. 44-76 yrs.)

Although twenty-eight respondents had daughters only, only one of these described a very close relationship with a nephew. This respondent has daughters but no sons and is very close to both her nephews.

They are almost like my own sons. He is coming to take me down this weekend. (No. 130-73 yrs.)

Some studies have suggested that, where closer ties such as spouse or children are unavailable, more distant kin may act as substitutes (Wentowski, 1981; Johnson and Catalano, 1981). Although there is no evidence in our data to suggest that the amount of face-to-face contact between nieces and nephews and childless aunts is any greater than that between nieces and nephews and aunts who have children, data on the quality of the contact do suggest that these kin may indeed serve as child substitutes. Of the childless who have a niece and/or nephew, all (100%) have contact with at least one as compared to 87.7 percent of those who have children. Of the twenty childless women, who have contact with a niece or nephew 45 percent have a very close relationship with a particular niece or nephew, compared to 24.5 percent of those with children. Two other childless respondents (10%) are equally close to both their nieces, while three women have only one niece or nephew (one of these is also a close relationship). These relations between childless aunts and their nieces and/or nephews tend to resemble parent-child relations in a number of ways. For example, an unmarried childless respondent feels so close to both her niece and nephew, and spends so much time with them, that she says-"they may as well be mine" (No. 47-76 yrs.). She does things with her

niece that mothers typically do with daughters, "she comes often, we go a day shopping; she phones often". Another unmarried childless respondent also treats her niece's and nephew like children of her own.

They are my family. I am just as close a lots of people are to their children. They were with me more than their mother. (No. 140-76 yrs.)

The following quotations illustrate further the way in which relations between aunts and their nieces and nephews can simulate parent-child relations.

She comes and stays several times, I go there at Christmas. She does things for me, takes me shopping when I'm up [to Halifax]. She's very thoughtful. She's coming to stay next week for one week. (No. 116-70 yrs.)

If I needed help, all I'd have to do is to go to that phone and \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ would be here. They would do anything for me in the world. \_\_\_\_\_ is always calling, "when are you coming out Aunt \_\_\_\_\_? I'll come and get you". (No. 140-76 yrs.)

He helps us out a lot. (No. 89-74 yrs.)

These two respondents have daughters living in distant provinces and, in each case, a niece performs what could be considered a daughters role.

She calls nearly everyday. When I need help she comes and stays with me. (No. 69-82 yrs.)

She's done everything for me. When we moved here, she looked after everything. (No. 76-80 yrs.)

Another respondent, whose son lives at a distance, is very close to a nephew whom she raised; he helps her out a great deal and she says,

He's always telephoning to see if I'm alright. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

Thus, for almost three quarters of the respondents in this study nieces and nephews are another available source of meaningful primary ties. Our qualitative data suggest that these kin also constitute a viable link in the support network of some older women, providing emotional support and other types of assistance where respondents are childless or their children geographically distant. Nieces and nephews, even if they do not live near by and are seen infrequently, can still constitute a meaningful tie for the elderly woman, contributing support to her self-image as a connected and cared for human being. This may be especially important to an elderly women whose ties have been diminishing over the years. An eighty-four year old widowed respondent is a case in point. She has no children or grandchildren, nor living siblings. Though actively involved with friends and neighbors, she has no nearby family ties. However, this woman maintains her relationship with two nieces ("by marriage"), each living in another province. As she describes it, "both are close". They come to see her only once a year, however, they "correspond regularly, especially since I broke my hip". Maintaining these ties allows this woman to feel that she is still part of a family, that she is connected in some way to someone who cares about her.

The significant place that nieces and nephews can hold in the lives of elderly individuals is perhaps best recognized by those who do not have access to such kin but sadly wish they did. When asked if she had any nieces or nephews, this eighty-one year old never-married, childless, siblingless, respondent mourns the fact that she has no such living family ties.

I'm so sorry I haven't, that would be one of my biggest wishes. That's one thing I'm really really sorry about. (No. 114-81 yrs.)

#### Siblings: Amount of Contact

Many of the women in this study have grown up in large families. On average their parents had 6.5 children. Eighty (79.2%) of the community-dwelling respondents have at least one sibling still living (80.6% of the apartment-dwelling, 80% in the nursing home). Once again, most, who have at least one sibling, have one living not all that far away (Table 5.11). Eighty percent of the community-dwelling have a sibling living either in the same community or no further than one-hundred miles away. Indeed, well over half (58.7%) of the respondents who have a living sibling, have one living no further than fifteen miles away.

Siblings are not seen as frequently as children. However, the amount of face-to-face contact between respondents and their siblings is relatively high, particularly in the community-dwelling sample (Table 5.12). Approximately fifty-nine percent of those in the community sample who have siblings see one once a month or more, with 42.5 percent seeing a sibling once a week or more. These figures are somewhat lower for the apartment-dwelling and nursing home samples.

While, in some cases, it may be difficult for elderly siblings to maintain face-to-face contact, ties can be sustained via regular telephone calls or correspondence. In this study, many siblings also use the telephone to keep in touch (Table 5.13) with fifty-five percent

TABLE 5.11

DISTANCE FROM NEAREST SIBLING

Location of Sibling	Samples			
	Community-Dwelling (N=80) %	Apartment-Dwelling (N=25) %	Nursing Home (N=8) %	Total Sample (N=113) %
In this House	3.7	-	-	2.6
In this Neighborhood	3.7	-	-	2.6
In this Community	25.0	28.0	12.5	24.8
Within 100 Miles	47.5	60.0	62.5	51.3
Elsewhere in the Province	6.2	-	12.5	5.3
Elsewhere in the Maritimes	1.2	-	-	0.9
Elsewhere in Canada	5.0	4.0	-	4.4
Outside Canada	7.5	8.0	12.5	8.0

TABLE 5.12

SIBLING MOST FREQUENTLY SEEN

Frequency Seen	Samples			
	Community- Dwelling (N=80) %	Apartment- Dwelling (N=25) %	Nursing Home (N=8) %	Total Sample (N=113) %
Everyday	8.7	4.0	25.0	8.8
At least 1/Week	33.8	12.0	-	26.5
At least 1/Month	16.2	36.0	12.5	20.3
At least 1/Year	33.8	40.0	12.5	33.6
Less than 1/Year	7.5	8.0	50.0	10.6

TABLE 5.13

TELEPHONE CONTACT BETWEEN RESPONDENTS AND THEIR SIBLINGS

When Last Phoned	Respondent Last Phoned A Sibling (N=80) %	A Sibling Last Phoned Respondent (N=80) %
Today	7.5	5.0
Yesterday	21.3	8.8
A Couple of Days Ago	10.0	18.8
A Week Ago	16.3	20.0
A Month Ago	31.2	28.7
Occasionally or Less Than a Year Ago	13.7	18.7

Note: Included in the last category are two respondents who are unable to phone a sibling either because the respondent or the sibling does not have a telephone or has a hearing impairment. Also included is one respondent who lives in the same house as her only living sibling.

of those in the principal sample who have siblings having phoned a brother or sister within the past week. Thirty-nine percent have called a sibling within the past couple of days. In spite of the relatively frequent use of the telephone to keep in touch and the geographical proximity of most siblings and respondents, a surprisingly large amount of letter writing took place as well. Approximately forty-two percent of the community-dwelling respondents who have siblings have written one as recently as one month ago, and equally as many siblings (42%) have



written a respondent within the past month. As Table 5.14 illustrates, overall, letter writing patterns of siblings and respondents are quite similar.

In a study of old people in three different industrial societies, Shanas et al (1968) have reported that, while around eighty-five percent of sixty-five to sixty-nine year olds had a sibling alive, this was true for only seventy percent of those seventy-five and over. When the younger (65 to 75) and older (75 and over) respondents in this study are compared as to the availability of siblings, the findings are similar to Shanas'. Thus, while 85.5 percent of all younger respondents have a living sibling, only seventy-five percent of the older women have one. Of thirty-one respondents (21.8%, N=142) reporting that a relative had died in the past year, seventeen (54.8%) had lost a sibling. Of those who had lost a sister (five) or a brother (twelve) in the past year, thirteen (76.5%) of these were older women and only four (23.5%) were younger. Thus, it is more unlikely that the very old will have access to a sibling as the source of a meaningful identity - confirming self-other bond. Older respondents also do not see their siblings as frequently as younger respondents do.<sup>10</sup> However, of those who phone and write a sibling regularly, slightly larger proportions of those eighty years and over have done so more recently than their younger counterparts (i.e. women under 80 years).

TABLE 5.14

WRITTEN CONTACT BETWEEN RESPONDENTS AND THEIR SIBLINGS

When Last Phoned	Respondent Last Wrote A Sibling (N=80) %	A Sibling Last Wrote Respondent (N=80) %
A Couple of Days Ago	10.0	3.8
About a Week Ago	12.5	13.7
A Couple of Weeks Ago	2.5	8.7
About One Month Ago	17.5	16.3
About Six Months Ago	6.3	5.0
Occasionally or Less Than a Year Ago	51.2	52.5

Nature and Quality of Contact with Siblings

Contact with siblings, as with nieces and nephews, generally takes the form of telephoning, writing, visiting, shopping together, playing cards and assisting one another. Although there was no substantial evidence to suggest that, possibly compensating for the loss of a spouse, widowed respondents were interacting more frequently with their siblings, the qualitative data do indicate that at least a number of these women had what seemed to be very intense involvement with a sibling.<sup>11</sup> Also, never-married and widowed respondents tended to give more detailed descriptions when asked about the type of contact they had with these kin. Of thirteen especially close sister-sister bonds

observed, each involved widowed respondents. The following three quotations illustrate the significant role that a sibling can come to play in the lives of women who lack a husband. The first widow explained that keeping in frequent contact with her sister helps to overcome the loneliness that can accompany widowhood. The second believes that it is because she is widowed and childless that her sister, who lives in another province, goes out of her way to maintain frequent contact with her. The third widow describes how she relied on her sister to help her cope with the death of her husband.

We phone each other almost everyday. I do most of the phoning. It's good company. (No. 2-69 yrs.)

They [sister and brother-in-law] keep in touch with me because they know I'm alone. (No. 73-79 yrs.)

I lived with my sister for three and a half years, I went to pieces when my husband died. She calls me every night. (No. 119-77 yrs.)

Another never-married respondent indicates that she is compensating for her brother's loss of his spouse when she says - "I write to him more often now that his wife is gone". (No. 116-70 yrs.)

In the course of interviewing and participant observation, the researcher was able to obtain first-hand knowledge on the kind of close relationship that can exist between an elderly individual and a sibling. In two of these cases, both sisters in a sibling pair were interviewed. It was evident that, for these four widows, the feeling of closeness that each had for her sister was indeed mutual. What becomes apparent from the qualitative data is that a close tie exists between two people, each of whom contributes something to the other. This contribution can be in the form of assistance, companionship, or simply the source of a

meaningful family tie. Thus, elderly people may not be in excellent health, yet, feel useful in the companionship they offer a widowed sibling or in the little things they do, like checking on each other, or cooking dinner for a widowed brother.

Our qualitative data also indicate that, to focus on the amount of contact between siblings, particularly face-to-face contact, can be misleading if one is concerned with examining the sibling relation as a meaningful tie which can be a source of support for the older woman's identity. When respondents were asked, "do you feel any less close to those family members who live further away?", one-hundred and twenty respondents (84.5%, N=142) did not feel less close because, as one respondent put it, "you still have them in mind" but most typically, "because we write and phone". The telephone is especially important in bridging the distance between elderly siblings.<sup>12</sup>

She calls every night, we look forward to that. (No. 109-88 yrs.)

I talk to her a lot but I don't see her so often. (No. 88-78 yrs.)

Although many pointed out that "it's expensive" to make long distance phone calls, various means were devised to manage this problem.

We try to phone each other every week. (No. 81-84 yrs.)

I generally call her once a month if she doesn't call me. (No. 119-77 yrs.)

We always talk once a month. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

Writing, though less popular than telephoning, also helps to keep geographically distant siblings in touch. In general, the further the respondent is located from her nearest sibling the more likely she

is to write regularly. Thus, in the community-dwelling sample, while only 28% of those, whose nearest sibling lives within one-hundred miles, write to one regularly, 81% of those whose nearest brother or sister lives more than one-hundred miles away correspond with a sibling regularly. Writing is especially important if telephoning is not possible. To illustrate, a seventy-six year old respondent has not seen her only living brother in several years. He is eighty-four years old, in poor health, and living in an institution in the United States. They once talked regularly on the telephone but "not anymore, because he's hard of hearing". However, this woman and her brother keep in touch by exchanging letters frequently.<sup>13</sup>

Looking beyond dyadic relationships to a higher lever of network analysis, it is instructive to note that the family network, as a number of respondents described it, is utilized in interesting and efficient ways in order to bridge the distance and keep elderly brothers and sisters in touch. Information relayed through the telephone and letters does not always pass directly from sibling to sibling but is transmitted indirectly through one family link to another. For example, a seventy-nine year old respondent, who refers to her family often as "close knit", writes a sister in her old home town in another part of the province, and this sister passes on the news to the other sisters and brothers who also live in this area. Another eighty-four year old respondent keeps in touch with her only two living siblings in the same way. The sisters, eighty years and seventy-nine, live closer to each other than they do to the respondent so - "A phones B and then B phones and gives the news to me".

Another eighty-six year old respondent has a sister living only three miles away, but her older brother and another sister have lived for years in the United States. She has not seen this brother and sister in fifteen years, however, these four elderly siblings manage to keep in touch despite the distance - "[sister] and [brother in U.S.A.] keep in touch by phone and [the sister] writes the news to the sisters".

A fourth seventy-four year old respondent has a daughter and two sisters (they live together) who live near one another in the United States. She visits twice a year and keeps in touch the rest of the year by writing and phoning. However, it is to her daughter that she writes and phones the most, the daughter passing on the news to her aunts and keeping her mother informed on her sisters. In a fifth case it is a cousin who acts as the intermediary, keeping an eighty-two year old respondent and her sister in touch. The sister lives in a nursing home in the same town as the respondent's cousin.

I write to her about every ten days. She is in the position to be visit my sister often and she keeps me posted. (No. 77)

In some cases, one particular sibling seems to be acting as the family kinkeeper (see Rosenthal *et al*, 1981; Rosenthal, 1985) seeing that the other family members are kept informed.<sup>14</sup> For example, one respondent, who has five living siblings with one sister living in the same town, says she is not "one for writing letters" or casual telephone conversations, "we don't just phone unless we have news". However, her nearby sister does use the telephone often and with it keeps the entire family in touch.

\_\_\_\_\_ does the phoning. She calls and tells me how they are. (No. 117-68 yrs.)

More Distant but Meaningful Ties: Cousins, Sisters-in-Law and 'Fictive Kin'

In gathering data on the family network, respondents were encouraged to talk about all significant family relationships regardless of how distantly related these ties might be. This thorough search for meaningful family ties proved worthwhile. Most previous studies investigating the family life of older people have tended to ignore more distant family ties (assuming no doubt that close ties are the stronger ones). Our data, however, indicate that some of these 'distant ties' can be strong ties, representing a very meaningful close relationship in the life of an older woman. Respondents were asked if there was anyone else who was an important person in their lives but had not yet been discussed. Replies to this question reveal that cousins and sisters-in-law are very significant ties in the lives of a number of our respondents. In fact, cousins and sisters-in-law kept turning up as meaningful kin in responses to a number of other family related questions. That these kin could be perceived as close kin was further confirmed when at least eight respondents listed them among their closest friends.

At least twenty respondents (14.1%, N=142) described a close relationship with a cousin. The strength of these more distant family ties is illustrated in the following quotations where the respondent's cousin is perceived to be almost as close (if not as close) as a sister. The first respondent said that her cousin had been "brought up" by her

parents. She was treated by them as a daughter and upon their death shared in their estate. This woman and her cousin visit and phone each other frequently. The last respondent never had a sister and she and her cousin became very fond of each other.

She's the same as a sister. (No. 13-79 yrs.)

I was closer to her than I was to my sisters. (No. 130-73 yrs.)

She's almost like a sister. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

Respondents and their cousins also keep in touch by visiting, phoning, and writing. Again, where cousins live at a distance, annual extended visits are common.

I write to my cousin in Ontario, they visit in the summer. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

I write to her about every ten days. She comes to stay with me for a week in the summertime. (No. 77-82 yrs.)

Twenty-three respondents (16.2%, N=142) described their relationship with a sister-in-law as a significantly meaningful tie.<sup>15</sup> A sister-in-law can be a particularly important tie in the life of an elderly widowed woman. In many of these cases, both the respondent and her sister-in-law are widowed and often both are advanced in years. These women and their sisters-in-law exchange visits and talk on the telephone frequently.

We sometimes talk for three hours on the phone. (No. 18-67 yrs.) (This woman describes her sister-in-law as her only close friend)

My sister-in-law calls me most everyday and visits often. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

My sister-in-law, we've always been close. I see her every week. (No. 76-80 yrs.)



When the respondent and sister-in-law live at some distance from one another, the link can again be maintained through letters and telephone conversations, as well as annual visits. When the respondents and their sisters-in-law live close to one another they tend to do things together. In the words of the respondents:

She likes to come to Bridgewater and we go out to lunch together. (No. 52-84 yrs.)

We go out quite often and talk often. She lived with me for three or four years after my husband died. (No. 64-71 yrs.)

I see her about three times a week. I go to church with her and to group with her. (No. 81-84 yrs.)

Again this relationship can be a particularly meaningful one where few, if any, other family ties remain. For example, an eighty-seven year old widowed childless respondent, whose only living blood relative is a nephew living in the United States, when asked about siblings, replied that she has "no real family to speak of". However, she quickly pointed to an exception - her close relationship with her sister-in-law. This sister-in-law lives in a nearby community, is seen "once a week", and they talk on the telephone "twice a week". Perhaps it is not so surprising to find that these elderly women and their sisters-in-law have become close kin. Because women have generally been the family kinkeepers (Rosenthal, 1985) and sisters-in-laws are often the connecting link between sisters and their married brothers, there is the potential for this type of closeness to develop.

In our investigation of meaningful interpersonal ties in the lives of elderly women, we also probed for the existence of quasi-familial ties or "fictive kin". Sussman describes fictive kin as "non

kin", usually friends, who are treated as family. "They are adopted members who take on obligations, instrumental and affectional ties similar to those of conventional kin" (1976:225). Fifty-seven women (40.1%, N=142) reported that they had this type of a relation, while three others once had such a tie but the fictive family member has since died. The origins and history of these familial like ties are varied and interesting.<sup>16</sup> A number of these relationships go back as far as early childhood and their durability illustrates the strength of ties that in most studies of elderly people are overlooked.

The majority of these relations fall into either of two categories - a sibling like relationship (i.e. "like a sister") or a parent-child like relationship (i.e. "like a daughter"). Sibling like relationships, as might be expected, generally go back a good number of years and thus the respondent and the fictive sister (or brother) are usually close in chronological years.

Aunt \_\_\_\_\_, she's just like a sister. I met her years ago in church, we got baptized together. (No. 14-84 yrs.) (These two talk on the phone daily and spend every Sunday together)

She was my girlfriend when I lived in Lunenburg, we grew up together. They use to come very Saturday night to play cards. She's my best friend. (No. 56-75 yrs.)

I drop by, she comes down, we talk on the phone. Every year we go cranberrying. I never forget her on her birthday and she never forgets my birthday. She came to Bridgewater when she was nine, we went to school together. She is like one of the family. Her parents died when she was young. (No. 85-69 yrs.)

The relationship resembles a family tie not only in its duration but in the intimacy and emotional intensity involved. Typically, the fictive relative is referred to as being "just like a sister".

We go everywhere together, we've been on trips together. She classes me as one of the family. (No. 140-76 yrs.)

I call her my cousin but she's not by blood related, only through the people who brought me up. She would do anything for me. She calls me often, came Sunday. (No. 36-73 yrs.)

She's been like a sister to me. (No. 138-65 yrs.)

She's just like a sister, we do things together. When I had my operation last year I stayed there. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

It is of interest to note that, while 27 percent of married respondents identified a fictive family member, 45 percent of the widowed, 40 percent of the never-married, and 56.5 percent of the childless said they had a fictive familial tie. When the nature of the relationship is examined, it appears that the fictive familial member may serve as a substitute for an equivalent missing family tie. Thus, nine of those who describe a sister like relationship have either no living siblings (three), or have a brother only (six). In two other cases, while the respondent has a living blood sibling the fictive sister has no such sibling.

\_\_\_\_\_ was like the sister I never had. (No. 47-76 yrs.)

She feels like a sister to me. I didn't have any sisters and not many cousins. I usually visit up there every year. We don't write often but we keep in contact. (No. 131-81 yrs.)

Of the eight respondents who describe their fictive family member as being like their own child, four are childless women. Another respondent, whose only child is a daughter, describes the fictive child as "like a son". This 'son's' biological parents were killed when he was sixteen years old and the respondent took him into her home. He now

lives in another province but they correspond regularly and he faithfully comes to see her once a year. A sixth respondent, whose only children are sons, says of her fictive child, "she's just like the daughter I never had". This young woman lived with the respondent for fifteen years and they have remained close, exchanging frequent weekend visits with each other.

The nature of the tie between these childless respondents and their fictive children very much resembles that of natural parents and their off-spring. For example, a younger couple, whom a childless respondent describes as "in many ways closer than family", provide her and her husband with the kind of assistance that children often give their parents. The fictive son took time off from work in the fall to help put on storm windows, and both he and his wife assist the elderly couple with their craft shows. A second widowed respondent, and a younger woman whom she says is "just like the daughter I never had", shop together and visit frequently, seeing each other two and three times a week. A third widowed childless respondent says of her fictive child, "I think of her as a daughter". This tie is a very important one, for this respondent has no other kin living nearby. The fictive daughter lives right across the street and they are in frequent contact. The younger woman provides a great deal of assistance and does such personal errands as banking and cashing cheques, functions generally performed only by immediate family. She is also a confidant for as the respondent says, "I tell [her] things I never tell anyone else" (No. 52-84 yrs.). A fourth childless respondent describes her close tie with

her godson and his wife which is very similar to a typical son and daughter-in-law relationship.<sup>17</sup>

They visit, remember us at christmas, easter, and our anniversary. They bring birthday cakes. She often calls on the phone. (No. 35-74 yrs.)

In concluding this discussion, it is evident that most of these women are embedded in dense family networks where contact is frequent and the relationships are high in quality. The qualitative data support the notion that more distant, yet affectively close kin, can serve as substitutes in cases where a closer familial tie does not exist. Consequently, almost every respondent in this sample has at least one close familial or quasi-familial relationship which helps to support her view of herself as a meaningfully connected human being. The remainder of this chapter examines respondent's descriptions of what their families mean to them, and analyzes the ways in which family ties can either enhance or hinder the older woman's attempt to maintain her identity.

#### THE MEANING OF FAMILY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF FAMILY NETWORKS TO IDENTITY MAINTENANCE IN OLD AGE

In examining the interaction patterns of elderly women, a central objective of this study was to investigate the symbolic significance of respondent's relationships to significant others. However, asking people to define the meaning they associate with their relationships can be problematic. Although many of the respondents in this study were certain that their families were of paramount importance

in their lives, some had difficulty finding the words with which to express their strong feelings.

They mean a lot to me, I don't know just how to put it.  
(No. 4-82 yrs.)

That's a hard one to put into words. They mean an awful lot, I wouldn't want to be without it; it's hard to express. (No. 6-81 yrs.)

As the next two chapters will reveal, most of these respondents are actively participating in other networks as well. Thus, they are not solely dependent on family as their only source of meaningful primary relationships. Friends are particularly important in the lives of many of these women and very few are without at least one close friend. However, when pressed to make a choice as to which is most important in their lives, for most (60%, N=142), "family definitely comes first" - "family comes ahead", "family, of course". For some it's "only natural" that family be a person's most important tie.

Naturally you feel closer to your family. (No. 76-80 yrs.)

We all know that family is closer - you know what I mean? (No. 136-81 yrs.)

Only three respondents (2.1%) felt that friends were more important.

Some people perceive relationships with family to be qualitatively different from those with friends (see also Hochschild, 1973). Thirty-four percent of our respondents maintain that "you can't compare them".

They are important in different ways. (No. 20-84 yrs.)

There's a difference altogether. There's a different feeling between my child, my grandchild, and my friends. It's a different kind of love. (No. 55-80 yrs.)

From those who were able to explain in more detail just what their families mean to them, we are able to glean some sense of why it is that family is such a unique and all important tie in the lives of these elderly women, and how this social network can help an individual to maintain a viable self-image in later life. One of the most important meanings of family is that it is a unique source of identity bestowal. It is within our families that our biographies begin and that we are each invested with a unique and particular identity (Weigert and Hastings, 1977). Weigert and Hastings (1977:1172) describe the family as, "a 'world', albeit a little one, in which selves emerge, act, and acquire a stable sense of identity and reality".

As Chapter Four has illustrated, the identities of most of the women in this study are, and always have been, anchored within the family. Within this context, their images of themselves as mothers, grandmothers, housewives, and homemakers evolved. It is also within this context that other dimensions of self such as sister, aunt, cousin, and sister-in-law have developed, each of these relations having the potential of becoming a meaningful identity-confirming self-other bond. Since, in later life, many of these women continue to be involved in their familial roles, family becomes a life-long source of identity and self-continuity. In describing what family meant to them, at least fourteen respondents (12.1%, Table 5.15) explained that family bestows meaning to self and gives purpose to life.

My family means practically everything to me, that's what I've lived for. (No. 13-79 yrs.)

TABLE 5.15

MEANINGS ASSOCIATED WITH FAMILY

<u>Meanings</u>	<u>Frequency Response Given (N=148)</u>	<u>Percentage of Respondents Giving Response<sup>1</sup> (N=116)</u>
Gives Purpose and Meaning to Life and Self	14	12.1
Part of Oneself or Extension of Self	4	3.4
Source of Pride and Satisfaction	3	2.6
Gives a Sense of Belonging, Being a Part of Something	25	21.5
Source of Closeness, Love, and Affection	21	18.1
Security or Someone to Turn to for Assistance	67	57.7
Other (e.g. "Someone to Confide In", "Someone You Can Do Things For")	14	12.1

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N=116 since twenty-six respondents were unable to define the meaning of family); because some respondents gave multiple meanings, the total exceeds 100%.



It gives you something to live for. Ever since I had my family my whole life has been wrapped up in them, to look forward to seeing them. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

It means everything to you it's your life. (No. 141-67 yrs.)

Without a family, what would life be worth? (No. 87-82 yrs.)

William James, describing the empirical self or "me" writes:

...it is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves. Our fame, our children, the work of our hands, may be as dear to us as our bodies are,... In its widest possible sense, however, a man's self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and his children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his land and horses, and yacht and bank account. All these things give him the same emotions (1890:291).

According to James, then, it is possible to conceive of such significant others as one's family members as a self-component or an extension of one's self. Significantly, family was described by some of the respondents as "part of me", or, "part of yourself" or, "flesh and blood of mine".

They seem part of me. (No. 73-79 yrs.)

My family mean a lot to me, you think that they are part of you. I think when I go there, they are my people. (No. 44-76 yrs.)

Your family are part of yourself and your friends are a different category. (No. 77-82 yrs.)

My family has always meant everything to me. They mean more to you, they are part of you. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

There's a closeness that you don't get if they are not blood. If you took that out of your life it would leave an awful void. I really think that family is the real thing, nothing can take the place of somebody who has your own flesh and blood no matter how much difficulty you may have had. (no. 75-74 yrs.)

This perception of one's family as "part of oneself", and thus part of one's biography, illustrates the way in which family contributes to self-continuity. Thus, even if an elderly woman is not actively involved in the mother role, the memory of these close ties can reactivate and reconfirm her sense of self as mother and homemaker.

The boys mean a tremendous amount to me. Well, they are my children and I have always been close to them. The love for them for all those years - It's something from the past that I hold onto for the present. (No. 77-82 yrs.)

In this regard, respondents tended to have various self-defining objects on display in their homes and most of these were either family related objects (e.g. children's or grandchildren's school pictures and graduation photos, baby pictures, wedding photos, trophies and various items that were gifts from family members) or the products of their handiwork (e.g. quilts, mats, needlepointed pictures). Typically respondents insisted on showing these items to the researcher while filling her in on the stories associated with each (e.g. "my grandson gave me that when he was a little boy", "my son brought me that from Germany", "that was my daughters"). Observing these objects and listening to the stories, the elderly woman's family life and related biography was made "more real" to the researcher.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton have found that older people tend to value "objects of contemplation" or objects whose meaning

usually derives from memories of past events and relationships. They maintain that as one grows older, "objects that stand for memories, relationships, family, and values become more prominent. In later life, possessions that represent belonging occupy center stage" (1981:119). Similarly, Disman (1983) has also found that older people cherish domestic possessions that serve as links to significant others and provide a source of self-continuity. Weigert and Hastings (1977) draw attention to the special "archival function" of the family. It is seen as a unique primary group in that it is a "repository of identity symbols" (e.g. snapshots, children's toys and other similar artifacts, family stories, diplomas, medals, ribbons and so forth) which help to define who we are as individuals. These identity symbols, and the meaning they call forth, help the older individual to "hold onto" the past and thus contribute significantly to the preservation of the individual's personal and social identities.

By preserving and displaying relics of past identities in revered locations in the home (graduation or baby pictures atop the T.V. or mantel, an epochal family portrait adorning the dominant livingroom wall), the family constitutes an archive for particular and meaningful identities. In this way, the archival function provides proof and documentation of continuity of self by retaining identities which are relevant to one's biography seen from the perspective of the family (1977:1174).

Related to the perception of family as "part of me" is identification with, and pride in, their achievements. The elderly mother can derive a sense of personal satisfaction and accomplishment from the feeling that she has "done a good job" in raising her children. Since family work (including child-rearing) was primarily 'women's

work', she can legitimately take some responsibility for their success. Furthermore, the collective familial identity was very much a significant aspect of the personal identity of most of these elderly small town women. Thus, the achievements and acquired status of one family member inevitably rubbed off on another. For these women, not only felt identity but social identity as well, were affected by how well their children "turned out". Indeed, to have family in itself was a source of social status. To be without family draws pity.<sup>18</sup>

I think you would be quite lonely not to have anybody, I pity those who have no family. (No. 81-84 yrs.)

Oh I wouldn't want to be without any family, different one's in here don't have any family and they say "wouldn't I like to be you". (No. 128-78 yrs.)

It has already been noted in Chapter Four that satisfaction in familial roles and pride in one's family can become a meaningfully incorporated component of the older woman's identity. Respondents described family as a source of pride and satisfaction in their attempt to define the meaning of it. "I'm proud of them" was a typical preface to comments related to family. However, it was in replies to the question - "what in your life has given you the greatest feeling of satisfaction"? that this meaning of family became most apparent. Sixty-three (52.9%) of the one-hundred and nineteen mothers in the sample referred to "raising my children" or, "having my family". Twenty-two other women (15.5% of the total sample) found their greatest feeling of satisfaction in "married life" or in their roles as wives ("being a good wife") and homemakers ("making a home"). That approximately sixty-four percent of these respondents (excluding the two never-marrieds) found

their greatest satisfaction in life to be within these traditional familially related roles points once again to the centrality of family life in the lives of these women.

Raising my children, seeing them do so well on their own, succeeding in their ambitions. (No. 79-73 yrs.)

Raising my children, knowing that they turned out to be responsible. (No. 33-71 yrs.)

To see my family doing what they have done, we haven't had a lot for ourselves, but the kids all have something. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

Perceived success in raising one's children was especially satisfying to several women who had been widowed early in life and endured the hardship of raising a family on their own. The following respondent, whose husband died when her children were still very young, took pride in the fact that, when others urged her "to put the children out to homes", she refused and managed to raise them on her own. Now she says,

I've something to be proud of in my olden days, they think the world of their mother. (No. 88-78 yrs.)

When asked, "Can you please describe just what your family means to you", at least twenty-five respondents (21.5%, Table 5.15) explained that family meant, "a feeling of belonging" or, of being "a part of something".

I feel that when you are with your family it's the only time you really feel a part of something, you go back so far. You can have friends who are real close to you, but it's not the same. (No. 59-81 yrs.)

Everything, it means people to be in close contact with. It gives you a feeling of belonging, belonging to a group. It's that sense of belonging, we always were a close family. (No. 110-89 yrs.)

I think my family is togetherness for us, the closeness, being together. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

Knowing that one is part of a larger family unit meaningfully locates the individual in a very personal sense. People who have families can feel intimately connected to others with whom they share a family history and collective identity (Weigert and Hastings, 1977). The reverse of this feeling of belonging is loneliness, a feeling of being "alone in this world". A person who is involved with her family can avoid an overemphasis on self.

I don't feel alone. (No. 9-76 yrs.)

In many ways it's a fulfillment of your life, especially since I've been alone, to know that I have family... Anyone would have a very lonely life not to have any family. (No. 53-81 yrs.)

Oh my family, they mean a lot to me and I realized it most when my husband died. You do not feel so left alone in the world. (No. 85-69 yrs.)

You never get a chance to be lonesome... A person without a family would be very lonely. You have children and grandchildren to think about. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

Related to the previous meaning of family is the interpretation of family as a source of closeness, love and affection (approximately 18%). This type of intimate self-other bond contributes to the older individual's sense of self as a wanted and loved human being.

It's just being close and feeling wanted, you need to be close to someone. (No. 97-70 yrs.)

It's nice to know you have someone who loves you, you don't feel alone. (No. 101-77 yrs.)

Love, if you have no love, you have nothing. Family love is special. (No. 107-82 yrs.)

If you should get married, you should have children. When you get older, that's the most pleasure in the world that you have. You go to visit them and they go to visit you. It's a closeness that you have. It's especially important to have a family when you get older. (No. 56-75 yrs.)

They are love. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

By far the most common description of the meaning of family given (57.7%) was related to family as "a sense of security", "someone of your own to depend on". "Knowing that there is someone there" to turn to for assistance, should it be needed, is very important to many of these women.

It means a great deal to me. There is a sense of security, if I need anything I could call on any one of my sons and they would do anything they can for me. (No. 15-78 yrs.)

Family means everything to me, I know if I need them, they are there. (No. 1-70 yrs.)

You feel more secure, it's protection sort of. If I called on them, they would help me, even if they are far away. [Daughter] calls me twice a month as a rule. (No. 57-90 yrs.)

Love and support, they'll come to your rescue when you need them. (No. 47-76 yrs.)

Someone to turn to for assistance when it is needed, constitutes one of the most important of the elderly woman's resources. While many respondents feel that other network members (e.g. friends and neighbors) would be willing to provide assistance if they were asked for it (and some have actually provided it), it is family that the majority of these women depend on the most and receive the most help from. When asked if they had received various kinds of help from family during the past year, only twenty respondents (14.1%, N=142) reported that they received

no such help. The assistance that family provides aids the elderly woman in maintaining her image of herself as an independent 'not old' person. In particular, such family aid allows her to successfully project this image to others outside her immediate family.

Goffman (1959) has drawn attention to the fact that a great deal of social life involves creating and managing impressions. In order to effectively portray a favorable impression individuals generally need the support and cooperation of others.<sup>19</sup> The older woman's family members can, in this light, be interpreted as an important part of her "expressive equipment" or "front", since they generally provide the backup which supports the definition of the situation that she tries to present to others.<sup>20</sup> One important item of expressive equipment is "personal front" which includes such things as the individual's age, sex, clothing, size and looks, and the like (Goffman, 1959:24). Control of appearance is one means by which an elderly woman can influence another's perception of her as an old or 'not old' person. A number of the respondents maintained that, "the way people dress keeps them young", and then revealed that they were employing this strategy as a means of maintaining a more youthful identity.

When I fix up to go out, I fix up. I make myself look young, like I feel. (No. 88-78 yrs.)

When I get out, I like to be dressed well. If you're dressed well, I think you look younger and feel better. (No. 114-81 yrs.)

Family (especially daughters and granddaughters) often contribute to the older woman's appearance or personal front. Daughters, for example, can influence their mother's style of dressing



by either buying clothing for her or giving fashion advice. A case in point was a nursing home respondent much admired by others for the way in which she was regularly well turned out. Her hair was always permed and she wore beautiful fashionable dresses bought for her by her daughters. Other women, when complimented on their stylish clothing, jewellery (e.g. gold chains), or eyeglass frames very often reported that they were gifts from children or that a daughter or daughter-in-law helped in selecting the item. Granddaughters can also be influential; a very fashionable seventy-four year old grandmother remarked, "[GRANDDAUGHTER] makes me feel younger, she's got me in pink jeans". Not all such advice is appreciated nor taken. A ninety-four year old respondent, when complimented on the very attractive and youthfully designed coat she was wearing, retorted, "my daughter made me buy it". This same woman, on another occasion, showed the researcher her favorite dress, the one she was to be "laid out in", as opposed to the one her daughter favored.

In helping elderly women care for their homes and property (e.g. mowing grass, shovelling snow, doing repairs or giving advice on repairs) family, again, contribute to the image they project to others in the community. The condition of her surroundings can jeopardize the older woman's 'not old' identity since an unkept lawn or a house in disrepair can create the stereotypic impression that a "little old lady" must be living there.<sup>21</sup>

More important, it is to a large degree because of the help that family provide that some elderly women are able to continue to live in their own homes in the same neighborhood in which they have lived for

years. This not only contributes to their self-images as independent persons but to their self-continuity as well. Her location in her own home and lifelong neighborhood also contributes to continuity by helping to keep the older woman's other network ties in tact. Relocation, on the other hand, can threaten the older person's identity by disrupting or severing lifelong supportive ties to neighbors and friends. "Giving up" one's home can negatively effect the elderly woman's ability to project to others her identity as an independent person. Thus, to "give up" one's own home was interpreted as a sign of demise, an acknowledgement by the individual in question that she was indeed now an old woman. Even if she was to sell her home and move to a senior's apartment, her move was still likely to be defined as "giving up" and a sign that she could no longer manage on her own.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, someone who was "ninety plus and still living in her own home" (even if she was able to do so only because she had help from others), was greatly admired and a role model of sorts to other older people in the town.

Being in one's own home is important to identity maintenance in other ways as well. The family home is generally the center of family interaction (e.g. family get togethers and celebrations). Respondents with geographically distant kin typically spoke of children, sisters and brothers, and even nieces and nephews and cousins who came to visit annually and, "they always stay with me". Those in apartments, in contrast, complained of the lack of space for entertaining and overnight guests. Loss of her home, then, can threaten the older woman's perception of herself as a mother and kinkeeper ("someone who works at

keeping family members in touch with one another", see Rosenthal et al, 1981). She is denied access to the reward drawn from the years of satisfaction she derived from "making a home" for her family.

At least two respondents hinted that they were holding onto their homes because they felt that the family home was important in preserving the nature of their relations with their children. One of these is a ninety-one year old widow who lives alone in a huge old house. She has two children, each living in distant provinces and both making annual summer visits. She is very close to her daughter and looks forward to her visit which always lasts a full month. When asked if she had any children, she replied, "oh yes, that's one of the reasons I kept the house" - so that her children would have a home to come home to. The other respondent, a seventy-four year old widow, who does not like living alone, has considered selling the house. However, she says she will not do so "as long as the children remain in the area". She also fears that, if she moved to an apartment, she might not have the "good neighbors" that she has now. This woman, very much a lonely widow, wants to preserve the ties that she has, and fears that leaving her home will weaken them.

#### The Family Tie as a Negative Tie

Family assistance, though it is very much appreciated and relied on by most of these elderly women, can be a mixed blessing. While family can contribute positively, enhancing the older woman's ability to maintain her identity in old age, they can, at the same time, threaten her image of herself as an independent, 'not old' person. Matthews

(1979a), drawing on exchange theory, argues that, although an elderly mother's relations with her children are very important to her, they can have an adverse effect on her identity because the relationship tends to be an unbalanced one. The old woman occupies a powerless, subordinate position in her family because she needs the services of her children but is able to give very little in return. Unless she is somehow able to balance the relationship she has no choice but to exchange compliance for the valued rewards she derives from her relations with them. Compliance, however, is damaging to the older woman's self-identity.

One way of dealing with such a situation is to deny the significance of the help one does receive. Perhaps the greatest resource we have as human beings is our symbolic ability. Specifically, humans possess the ability to creatively interpret their objective situations in such a way that they can achieve favorable outcomes; outcomes that are supportive of the way in which they prefer to view themselves and like to imagine they are viewed by others. Thus, while never in total control of our interactions with others, we do possess a degree of freedom.

In addition to the freedom to choose the situations that stimulate us, noted by Mead, we thus have considerable measures of freedom in interpreting the meanings of situations and encounters for our identities. We are only partly bound by physical events and only tenuously bound to the present. (McCall and Simmons, 1978:250)

Thus, while elderly mothers may, in objective terms, appear to be quite dependent on their families in various ways, they have the symbolic capacity to interpret their situations much differently and thereby preserve their identities. Even though they were receiving some

assistance from family and others, most of the respondents in this study continued to perceive themselves as quite independent persons. When asked if they had received help of any kind from family members, while pleased and proud of the fact that "the children are all so good to me", typically the researcher was also reminded that, "I am an independent person".<sup>23</sup>

I like to be independent. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

I've never been that I can't do it. I'm very independent. (No. 141-67 yrs.)

I can stand on my own two feet. I'm very independent, you have to be. (No. 97-70 yrs.)

Even if she was receiving considerable assistance from her family, from the older woman's point of view, this assistance need not be threatening to her identity if, according to her interpretation, this help is neither requested nor entirely necessary. Though children may insist on doing things for her, she can maintain that she really doesn't need it - "they offer to do more, I always say, 'there's no need of it'". An eighty-two year old respondent, adamant in her insistence that she and her husband were very independent people, appeared to be slighted by the researcher's questioning on family assistance. She finally conceded that some help was received by, if the children give assistance, "it's not due to necessity but to free will". Thus, the elderly mother's independent self-image can remain intact if she rationalizes that she did not ask her children for help, they volunteered.<sup>24</sup>

It may also be the case that family do things for the elderly woman which she does not define as help. Probably one of the more

important types of assistance that family provided respondents was transportation. However, they did not usually report this in their replies unless probed by the researcher. The provision of transportation did not appear to be perceived as help. If a child paid a bill or cashed a cheque, she was credited with providing assistance. However, if she drove her mother downtown so that she could pay the bill herself she was not.

It may well be that many of these women were reluctant to acknowledge that they had received assistance from family members because of their desire to protect their images of themselves as independent 'not old' persons. Gesser et al (1985:12) reporting that "parents tend to perceive less help received than their children report giving", suggest,

It is probable that the desire to maintain a belief in independence conditions how parents and offspring assess the amount of help received by parents. Parents are likely to downplay the amount of help received, as that would constitute evidence of their dependence.

Table 5.16 illustrates the various types of assistance that was received from family. Concentrating on our principal sample of community-dwelling respondents, the most common types of help were: some form of personal services, for example, errands (59.4%), emotional or moral support (54.5%), advice (52.5%) and, help with household chores (47.5%). It is important to note that the vast majority of these women had not accepted housing from their family, nor were they financially dependent on their children.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in avoiding these two types of assistance they were spared what would otherwise have been a likely threat to their identities. To be financially independent in North

TABLE 5.16

ASSISTANCE RESPONDENTS RECEIVED FROM FAMILY

Types of Help Received	Community- Dwelling (N=101) %	Apartment- Dwelling (N=31) %	Nursing Home (N=10) %
Provide a Home	1.0	-	-
Financial Help or Loan	2.0	6.4	10.0
Advice	52.5	45.2	30.0
Personal Services (e.g. Errands)	59.4	71.0	70.0
Help with Household Chores	47.5	25.8	-
Home Repairs	33.7	-	-
Personal Care in Illness	25.7	22.6	-
Emotional or Moral Support	54.4	80.6	70.0
Other Kinds of Help Not Mentioned	44.5	80.6	50.0

NOTE: Twenty respondents (15 of the community-dwelling, 3 in the apartment sample and 2 in the nursing home) said that no help was received. The 'other' category is high mainly because it includes transportation.

American society is highly prized, while to depend on others for economic sustenance leads to feelings of dependency and personal failure. To be old and accept a home from one's children is to risk being viewed as a burden and to abdicate one's identity as a self-reliant human being.

Only one quarter of the respondents received personal care in illness and this was generally short term assistance (e.g. "she came when I had my operation"), a finding that accentuates the relatively good health of this sample of women. Although family (mostly children) did provide help with household chores, most respondents did the bulk of their own housework. Help generally took the form of spring cleaning or heavy chores (e.g. cleaning a carpet). Help with home repairs typically took the form of minor repairs, with most women reporting that they hired outside help for major repairs. It thus appears that, although family were providing help, most of these women were relying to a considerable degree on their own resources.

As Matthews also found in her study, another means of redressing an unbalanced relationship is to insist on somehow reciprocating for assistance given. While more than willing to do for others with little, if any, expectation of something in return, respondents in this study were almost unanimous in their belief that their own reciprocation was essential. Almost ninety-four percent (N=142) believe that when others close to them do something for them, it is very important (81.7%) or, at least somewhat important (12%) that they do something in return. Thus, while respondents, on the whole, do receive more assistance from their families than they give, often, as one respondent put it, "it's a mutual



arrangement" with help going in both directions. Only thirty-two respondents (22.5%, N=142, 19.8% of the community-dwelling) had not given some form of help to a family member in the previous year.

Table 5.17 illustrates the various types of help that older women have given their families. It is interesting to note that, while only two percent of the community-dwelling had received financial assistance from family, almost forty percent claim to have given it.<sup>26</sup> This is a somewhat surprising finding since, while other studies have shown that financial aid between the generations does tend to flow downward from parents to children (Shanas et al, 1968) this is a pattern more often typical of the middle class (Shanas, 1967) and this sample is not, on the whole, a high income group.

Over a third of the community-dwelling sample (35.6%) reported giving advice and emotional or moral support to their families. In addition to children, grandchildren and siblings were often the recipients. Elderly women can give such help regardless of their age or health status thus, many made use of the telephone to dispense advice and give emotional support while others wrote consoling letters.

As might be expected, more respondents received personal care in illness (25.7%) than gave it (14.8%). Children of course, are not as likely to require this type of assistance, however, older women can be a welcomed source of help for other ailing kin such as siblings or even in-laws - "I cared for my sister-in-law when she broke her leg" (No. 7-69 yrs.).

TABLE 5.17

ASSISTANCE RESPONDENTS GAVE TO FAMILY

Types of Help Given	Community-Dwelling (N=101) %	Apartment-Dwelling (N=31) %	Nursing Home (N=10) %
Provide a Home	12.9	-	-
Help with Child Care	25.7	12.9	-
Financial Help or Loan	39.6	22.6	20.0
Advice	35.6	19.3	20.0
Personal Services (e.g. Errands)	12.9	-	-
Help with Household Chores	7.9	-	-
Help with Home Repairs	-	-	-
Personal Care in Illness	14.8	16.1	-
Emotional or Moral Support	35.6	67.7	30.0
Other Kinds of Help Not Mentioned	11.9	3.2	-

NOTE: Thirty-two respondents (20 in the community-dwelling sample, 7 in the apartments and 5 in the nursing home) said they did not give help of any kind.

It is impossible to say whether the assistance older women give is as valuable as, or equivalent to, the help they receive. However, "token repayments preserve the price of older people" (Wentowski, 1981:606). Also, to focus on "help" is misleading since, as already mentioned, it is not always clear what respondents define as "help". If we instead focus on the concept of reciprocation, and define reciprocate as, "to give and receive mutually" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary), we get a clearer picture of the "little things" (e.g. loaning a car, altering a dress, knitting socks for grandchildren, "pet sitting") elderly women do which can make them feel that they are givers as well as receivers.<sup>27</sup> Thus, a respondent, who is very crippled with arthritis, still manages to find ways of giving.

I can do little things for them. I keep the grandsons in socks and the granddaughters in sweaters. If an emergency comes up I can help them out. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

Other respondents described giving to family members in various ways.

I have a daughter who works, so I do a lot of family work. I phone her at about half-past seven everyday and make sure she's up. (No. 84-67 yrs.)

I wish you could see the backing I do when I'm out there. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

I have two grandchildren who come here everyday for dinner. My daughter isn't very well. I've been doing baking for her. (No. 74-73 yrs.)

Two respondents, who actually live in the homes of their married children, still describe themselves as making a contribution.

I do a lot of housework. I don't plan on sitting around doing nothing. (No. 61-80 yrs.)

I get their meals everyday. I answer the phone and do many things. (No. 50-70 yrs.)

Even if the elderly woman has not been called upon to give assistance to her family, she can continue to feel needed and useful because she knows she is there should they need her. Thus, two respondents, when they explained the meaning of family, did not describe family as dependency but as interdependency.

Your family mean a lot to you because you know that they are there if you need them, and they know you are there if they need you. (No. 12-77 yrs.)

I depend on them and they depend on me. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

Also, in drawing upon family for assistance, the elderly woman can preserve her self-image because the help her children give can be interpreted as "deferred reward" or "delayed repayment" (Wentowski, 1981). Thus, while independence is definitely the preferred state, when it is no longer possible to maintain it, "dependency on children carries the least stigma" (Hess and Waring, 1978:310) and concomitantly, the least threat to the older individual's self-identity. It was typical for respondents to say that they "feel more comfortable" calling on family for assistance and that "there are a lot of things that you ask your family to do that you wouldn't ask your friends to do". It could be suggested that these mothers have unconsciously or consciously adopted the notion of "distributive justice" (Homans, 1961), the idea that individuals should be rewarded proportional to their costs and receive profits proportional to their investments. In this vein, one respondent, describing what her family means to her, said, "you have the feeling that you can depend on them" and she explains why it is that she feels justified in her expectation.

I know that they will look after me because I have looked after them all my life. I spent a good many years looking after my family. (No. 50-70 yrs.)

For quite a number of these women, the best insurance that their identities would be protected in later life (even if they had to accept assistance from others) was to be found in their fundamental belief in the principle that one should always be willing to help others. The knowledge that one has, in one's past, willingly done things for others, no doubt tempers the negative effect that seeking help from others, in old age, can have on one's self-identity. Passing on this golden rule to one's children can also pay off, as this respondent illustrates.

I always told them to be good and help anyone they could, and now they do the same for me. (No. 134-70 yrs.)

Associated with the belief that one should help others was the notion that one should not expect a reward in return. However, people who help others, in general, are eventually reimbursed for their good deeds for, "somewhere along the line it comes back to you". According to Wentowski, "generalized reciprocity" is usually "considered the norm among close kin, and develops frequently among non-kin as well" (1981:604). In close relations, where individuals share trust, repayment for favors given is often deferred and both parties in the exchange are satisfied with this. Wentowski (1981:604-605) explains that,

"Generalized reciprocity" occurs when the assistance given is not necessarily expected to be returned in exact proportion, if at all.... The assumption is that relationships will balance themselves over the very long term. At some points in time, individuals may put more into the system than they are receiving, and at other points may withdraw, not necessarily from the same

people, more than they are contributing. "I'll do anything I can for them because, God knows, I may need help myself someday", is one woman's way of expressing her confidence that the system of exchange to which she has contributed, can be counted on to aid her.

Thus, regardless of how others may define her situation, the elderly woman, adopting the norm of generalized reciprocity, can interpret her relationship with her adult children as a balanced one, a return from investments made at an earlier period in her life.

However, the impact of family ties on an 'old age' identity goes far beyond the mutual exchange of goods and services. In some cases family members help preserve the 'not old' identity of some of these women. In the following quotations, several respondents draw upon family 'support' to confirm their contention that they are not yet 'old' people.

My family don't think of me as being old. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

I know the boys don't [think I'm old], I'm just "Mum" as I always was. (No. 77-82 yrs.)

I know the grandchildren doesn't [think of her as old]. (No. 99-69 yrs.)

My children always tell me that I'm not old. (No. 138-65 yrs.)

One respondent even indicated an intuitive awareness that family members do indeed play a central role in identity maintenance and that it is thus crucial to retain their support.

I think stay to the post till God wants you, then he'll take you. A person shouldn't give up, stand firm. If you give up then I think your family will give up too. (No. 88-78 yrs.)

However, there was evidence that other women failed to receive such support. While family members may not directly state to such women that they are old, these women conclude that their families no longer see them as young, "by the things they do and say", or when they "seem more protective" and begin to insist that they do things for her.

My daughter is always saying don't do this and don't do that, she tries to take care of me. (No. 43-88 yrs.)

Yes [they think I'm old], because they act that way, they think they have to help me. (No. 104-98 yrs.)

They are always here to help me, "you can't do this!" (No. 138-65 yrs.)

The older person's image of herself as an independent person is also threatened when children pressure their parents to leave their homes and move to a form of housing which they consider to be more appropriate for "a person your age" (i.e. an "old person"). Several of the respondents in this study revealed that they had experienced children trying to convince them to give up their homes. While some complied, others refused, and had devised strategies for dealing with the problem. One of these was a ninety-four year old widowed respondent who irately told the researcher that she moved to her senior's apartment only because her daughter "made" her sell her home. She also claimed that for the same reason, she sold her car and gave up driving. To suggest that an older person give up driving is to suggest that she is no longer a capable and responsible person since driving a car is a privilege granted only to those deemed capable and responsible.

In contrast, an eighty-one year old women, whose two sons insisted that, because of her disability, she should move to a nursing

home, relocated to an apartment of her own in another province where, at a safe distance from what she perceived to be interfering sons, "who were far too analytical", she was able to preserve her independence and autonomy. Another respondent, also pressured by her children to give up her home because of her poor health, manages to convince them that she is quite capable of managing in her own home by employing a strategy of information control. She told the researcher, "they don't know about the attacks I have when I'm alone". By withholding such information she feels her children are less likely to try to prevent her from staying in her *own home*, or *spending summers* at her cottage, both of which give her great pleasure.

As noted in Chapter Three, it is very important to the older woman that she feel useful and capable, that she continue to do what she has always done for as long as she possibly can, and, that she not "give in" to age. Family, apparently unaware of or insensitive to the older person's need to contribute, often do not allow her this opportunity and so weaken her self-perception as a competent, 'not old' woman. Thus, one seventy-four year old respondent complained of a daughter-in-law who made her feel uncomfortable because she would not allow her to help with even minor housework. Another eighty-one year old respondent chose not to go and live with her granddaughter (even though the two have a very close relationship), but to move to a senior's apartment because, she wants to continue to run her own household.

My granddaughter wanted me to go up with her. She doesn't want me to be alone. I don't want to go up there and do nothing. She won't let me do anything up there. She wouldn't even let me do dishes. (No. 136-81 yrs.)



The elderly person is especially likely to experience the loss of beloved family members and this can be yet another threat to an already precarious identity. When a close family member dies, the older woman loses one of her most meaningful sources of self-reference and identity confirmation. Her sense of self-continuity is endangered as she comes to feel that "a part of me" is gone.

A self experiences not only the loss of the deceased family member but also of that part of self embodied in the concrete identity constituted by the relationship with the deceased. The death of a father forever destroys the interactional self which is "Dad's son". The premature death of a daughter means not only the loss of the present identity as "Mary's Mom" but also the destruction of a biographical future involving self as parent and potential grandparent. (Weigert and Hastings, 1977:1176)

For some, the death of a family member contributes to the feeling that they are old. In the words of one respondent, "I began to feel old after my husband died" (No. 48-86 yrs.).

However, contact with family members can be lost in other ways as well. For example, a divorce in the family can have unpleasant repercussions for all network members. A son or daughter's divorce can be especially painful if the elderly grandmother is cut off from contact with her grandchildren (and thus denied support for her identity as grandmother). An eighty year old widowed respondent told the researcher of the frustration and hurt she was experiencing because of her only child's divorce. She was especially unhappy about the fact that, since her son's divorce, she has had no contact with her granddaughter who lives with her mother less than a block away from her grandmother's home.

Similarly, a seventy-nine year old widowed respondent, now childless, has only one grandchild and is most upset because she has no contact whatsoever with her granddaughter. This woman's son (now deceased) and his wife separated several years ago. She blames her daughter-in-law for her loss of contact with her granddaughter saying, "she has turned her against me". This woman not only bemoans her lost tie with her grandchild but is also saddened by the fact that she is denied a relationship with her great-grandchild. Thus, the respondent is not only deprived of her role as a grandmother, an identity that was once a source of pride, she is also deprived of her identity as a great grandmother, an identity that is also apparently valued by at least some of these women.

Family, as "a part of me", when they prosper, are a source of pride and their achievements or good fortune can enhance their mother's identity. However, when they do not live up to her expectations, they can also be a source of hurt and even shame. This is a phenomenon that William James also makes us aware of when he describes all the possible components of a "man's me".

...his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works,... If they wane and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down,... (1890:291)

Meaningful family ties can also be lost as a result of major familial disagreements where a rift in the family develops. One respondent, for example, has a brother living very near to her yet she says, "I never go over there, we don't see eye-to-eye" and "we avoid each other". Two sisters, who were both interviewed, have severed their

tie with a third sister with whom they had a major disagreement. They have neither seen nor talked with their sister for thirteen years. Thus, to have family is not a guarantee that one will always have access to a source of positive meaningful primary relations.

#### CONCLUSION

In concluding this chapter it is important to emphasize that, for the majority of the respondents in this study, family constitute a positive influence that is of paramount importance in their lives. Indeed most of these elderly women perceive their family network to be the source of their most important ties. We have also seen that family members can, and usually do, provide a positive contribution to the elderly woman's effort to maintain her identity. The ideal situation is, of course, one where the older woman does not put all her eggs in one basket, and most of the respondents in this study do not. Most manage to maintain a viable sense of self by invoking support from a variety of different network ties and not becoming overly dependent on anyone. In the next two chapters the older woman's non-familial ties are examined. Chapter Six looks at relations with friends.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Of the fourteen women (13.9%) in the primary sample, who are childless, four are never-marrieds. One married childless woman had children who have died. Among the eighty-seven respondents who have children, in three cases reported living children were step-children. In three additional cases, a "foster son", a "foster daughter" and a step son were included along with the respondent's natural children.
- 2 Some respondents also expressed concern over the cost incurred by the child. One respondent, discussing the expense of long distance phone calls, said that she and her daughter had agreed not to call each other too often - "we have a pact, I don't want her to call me...." Another, who had a comfortable income said, "I talk to them every week, the situation is, I phone to save their phone bill".
- 3 The researcher witnessed a lot of 'dropping in' when frequently during or after the interview, a son or daughter unexpectedly came by. Interviews were also frequently interrupted by telephone calls from children and other family members.
- 4 This question refers only to 'family' (i.e. children were not specified) however, many respondents, especially those with children, tended to interpret family as one's children and thus the question stimulated discussion of the respondent's views on parents and adult children living together.
- 5 Johnson and Bursk (1977), investigating relationships between elderly parents and their adult children, found that there was a positive association between a positive elderly parent - adult child relationship and good health status of the elderly parent. Poor health generally increases a parent's dependency on a child. To reiterate, most of our respondents (excluding the ten nursing home residents) have reasonably good health.
- 6 Sixteen of the community-dwelling respondents had an adult child living in their home. Only one respondent was living in the home of a child.
- 7 Younger (less than 80 years) and older respondents (80 years and over) were compared as to the frequency with which a grandchild was seen. Younger grandmothers tend to see a grandchild more frequently than older grandmothers. For example, while 61.1% of the younger grandmothers see a grandchild as often as once a week or more, only 39.3% of the older grandmothers see one this frequently. There is little overall difference between them as to distance from nearest grandchild. Younger respondents probably see

their grandchildren more often since they are most likely to have younger grandchildren who tend to accompany parents when they visit. Also, it is young grandchildren who go to grandmother's on the way home from school, have lunch at her house or stay overnight. Older grandchildren are more likely to be busily involved in their own lives.

- 8 Infrequent face-to-face contact, or geographic distance between grandmother and grandchild, does not necessarily lead to a less close relationship. Respondents were asked if there was a grandchild to whom they felt closest and forty-four (38%) had such a grandchild. Of these, ten (22.7%) felt closest to a grandchild who lived the farthest distance away. Nine other (20.4%) were closest to a grandchild they saw least often.
- 9 Nine women (8.5%) had only one niece or nephew with whom they were in contact. Nine of the respondents (27.3%), who said they had a closest niece or nephew, were closest to one who lived the farthest away. Seven (21.2%) felt closest to one who was seen least often.
- 10 Sixty-four percent of respondents less than 80 years of age see a sibling as often as once a month or more, while only 42% of those 80 years and over do. At the other extreme, approximately 23% more of the older women see a sibling only once a year or less. Although the majority of both younger and older respondents have a sibling living within one-hundred miles, approximately 17% more of the younger women have one living in the same community. Even relatively short distances can of course be problematic for the very old. While about 18% more of those 80 years and over do not call a sibling at all or only occasionally, 54.2% have called a sibling within the past week compared to 51.7% of the younger respondents. Almost equal proportions of both age groups write a sibling, with the older respondents slightly more likely to have written recently (e.g. 29.1% of those 80 years and over had written within the previous two weeks as compared to 23.2% of the younger women).
- 11 While about 4% more widowed respondents than married saw a sibling as frequently as once a week or more, about 8% more of the marrieds saw one as often as once a month or more. Also, while approximately 35% of the marrieds saw a sibling only once a year or less, 46% of the widowed saw one only this often. Telephoning patterns were similar with married respondents more likely (11.5% difference) to have phoned a sibling during the past week. Marrieds were also slightly more likely to have written recently. These differences may be associated with two factors. First, although the majority of both married and widowed respondents have a sibling living within one-hundred miles, a considerably larger proportion of the marrieds (15.4% difference) have one living in the community. Secondly, widowed respondents are, on the average, older in years than the marrieds.

- 12 The distance need not be all that great to prohibit frequent visiting since the health status of the respondent and/or her sibling is a crucial intervening factor. The importance of the telephone in keeping kin in touch, where visiting is not possible, is illustrated in the following example. A seventy-seven year old widowed respondent, whose health is poor and mobility limited, has two siblings living not all that far from her (the nearest is seven miles away). However, neither of her sisters (both older at 83 and 78 years) are very well and neither drive. The respondent's eyesight is so poor that she is unable to write letters. However, she and her sisters keep in touch for, as the respondent explains, "oh I phone everyday".
- 13 There were several other examples of situations such as these where written contact was the only form possible. Another way to bridge distance and maintain a tie is to send cards or flowers. One nursing home respondent used to be visited regularly by her brother but has not seen him for a long time because he is ill. However, as she proudly revealed, he uses other means of letting her know he is thinking of her - "he sent a plant for Mother's day". Flowers and cards can be especially valued in the nursing home where they become symbolic items on display, allowing the elderly resident to announce to others that she is someone who counts with her kin.
- 14 Family kinkeeper is an informal role that could also be a meaningful component of the identities of some older women. Rosenthal et al, found that, in many families, such a role did exist. They report that more than half their respondents "indicated that there was someone in their extended family who could be considered to be a 'kinkeeper'" (1981:1). They also found that "kinkeeping is primarily a female activity". At least two respondents in our study described themselves as kinkeepers.
- 15 The researcher first began to take note of the importance of sister-in-law relationships as she observed the nature of the relationship between her landlady and her sister-in-law. These two women, living in the same town, keep in close contact. They see each other frequently (both belong to the same church and related organizations) and rarely miss a day without phoning to check on each other and chat about recent news. The elderly sister-in-law returned to the town after spending most of her life in the U.S.A., leaving her children behind her. However, she is made very much a part of her sister-in-law's family and including in almost all family gatherings and events.

- 16 One case, described to the researcher in detail, illustrates just how close more distant ties can become. A sixty-nine year old respondent described the unique relationship which developed between herself and her lifelong neighbor, an unmarried schoolteacher, who had lived all her life with her two never-married sisters. In her later years, both sisters having died, this neighbor woman found herself alone, in very poor health and in need of care. The respondent initially began taking meals to her and sitting with her each night until bedtime. Finally, as her neighbors health grew worse, the respondent converted her diningroom into a bedroom and brought the elderly woman into her home where she cared for her and made her a part of the family. (The researcher was shown albums of family photos, where on every special occasion, the 'adopted' family member appeared in the pictures. There was one album devoted entirely to photos of this woman as she celebrated various birthdays and events). This respondent provided care for her elderly friend until the woman's health declined to the state where care in the home was no longer possible and she was admitted to the local nursing home. Until this elderly woman's death, the respondent went to the home everyday to visit and feed her.
- 17 Two other respondents described fictive-kin relations that were based, at least in part, on god-parenting. One of these, a seventy-year old woman, is godmother to her fictive sister's daughter. Her own daughter is close in age and she and her mother's godchild have also developed a close relationship - "she was my neighbor when I moved here fifty-one years ago. Her daughter is my godchild. We call about three or four times a week. My daughter and my godchild grew up together and they are the best of friends" (No. 68). At a time when more people are choosing to remain childless and couples are having few children, it would be interesting to investigate the current prevalence of godparenting and the nature and strength of these ties. It is possible that this could be another source for a close tie in later life.
- 18 Hochschild also noted the association between having children and having status. Discussing her elderly respondents, she writes, "among themselves the old often discussed their kin, and, as suggested earlier, the more children, the higher their status in the old age community. Residents showed off and shared their visiting relatives" (1973:93).
- 19 It is especially important that 'old people' manage the impressions they portray since they must constantly be on guard so as not to allow information to slip out which could be interpreted as a sign of oldness. Others may well be looking for such signs in order that they may confirm their interpretation of the person in question as "old and failing".

- 20 Goffman defines "front" as "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (1959:22). Goffman's analysis of social interaction here focuses upon performance situations but can be expanded to an analysis of a series of situations and social relationships (see Introduction, pp. 1-16, Goffman, 1959).
- 21 This applies to the interior as well as the exterior of the home. In the course of interviewing, the researcher was intrigued with the observation that in the homes of several of the childless respondents, decor had not been altered in years. It was as though time had stood still for thirty years or more (e.g. dated wallpaper, antique furnishings, old appliances, etc. One widowed woman kept her deceased husband's pipe sitting in an ashtray on the sidetable, it was just as though he had placed it there years before). While other respondent's homes were not always entirely modernly furnished, there were almost always some objects present that were symbolic of the present era and very often these were gifts from children (e.g. toaster ovens, stereos, and various electrical gadgets and appliances). It was the researcher's conclusion that children and grandchildren play a part in keeping the older person aware of and up with recent trends and styles (and, in this way, do help to keep the older woman 'young').
- 22 In making such a move, the individual also risked being defined as one who really didn't qualify and was relying "on the government" when they could "pay their own way". According to the Senior Citizens Housing Authority, residents were aware of the stigma attached to this type of housing. They knew that many saw them as "a burden on the town and the taxpayer". Some women, possibly for this very reason, chose to rent private apartments and preserve their independent self image in the town. Actually, once there, the move to a senior's apartment could enhance the older woman's ability to project an independent self. These apartments, designed specifically for elderly people, were easily maintained (also maintenance staff looked after repairs and little problems) so that less assistance was required from family or others. In this context, the elderly woman was also less likely to encounter situations that would remind her of her limitations and concomitantly - her age.
- 23 Also, while an elderly woman may have depended on others for some services, she was in many other ways self-reliant. Her self-perception as independent was probably focused more on what she could do than what she could not. Also, help from children or friends did not appear to be as threatening as needing the assistance of a homemaker. Several respondents were proud of the fact that they did not need a homemaker - "everybody in here has a



homemaker, I don't ask anybody to do anything for me. I do my own washing, cleaning, electroluxing, baking and cooking" (No. 127-94 yrs.). This respondent, did, however, receive other forms of assistance from family and friends.

- 24 Some respondents also appeared to interpret the question, "what kind of help did you give"? to mean that there was an implication that their children were less than independent people. Hence, there were many assurances that children were self-sufficient; "there's nothing they need", "they haven't needed it", and "they are quite capable" are typical examples. These protests could also be functioning to preserve the older woman's identity. That is, one need not feel incapable of giving, if family do not require one's assistance (e.g. "I could be of assistance, but they don't really need it").
- 25 Only five respondents reported receiving financial aid of any sort from family. The amount of assistance in each case was not large and generally took the form of gifts of money given at Christmas or on birthdays. One nursing home respondent received a monthly contribution from her daughter, a small sum which she used to pay her phone bill and purchase little extras.
- 26 This financial assistance was, with the exception of six cases, given to children. In one case, an unmarried childless respondent was financially assisting her niece. Two other respondents were contributing to a grandchild's education.
- 27 Some respondents possessed expertise that enabled them to assist children in less conventional ways. An eighty-one year old respondent can no longer bowl but she knows a lot about bowling, and trained as a stenographer, she types. She proudly announced that she provides assistance to her daughter's bowling team- "[daughter] bowls and I do the statistics for bowling" (No. 6). Another sixty-nine year old woman, physically frail, has worked with her husband in their grocery store for many years. His parents now retired, a son operates the store and she contributes her experienced assistance in helping him "with the books" (No. 22).

## CHAPTER SIX

### "STRONG AND ENDURING TIES: THE OLDER WOMAN'S FRIENDSHIP NETWORK"

Chapter Five has illustrated that, through meaningful interaction with family members, important dimensions of the older woman's identity are realized and confirmed. However, these are not the only ties which give meaning to older women's lives and support to their identities. In the next two chapters, respondent's relations with friends and neighbors and their involvement in various groups and organizations are examined. Again, as in Chapter Five, data on the structural and associational features (e.g. number of friends or neighbors, sex, geographical proximity and concerns such as frequency of contact) of each of these networks are presented. This is done first in order to examine the actual availability of these relations and involvements as possible resources for women in their later years of life. As each network is examined, the way in which it contributes to the older woman's self-identity is then analyzed.

#### THE FRIENDSHIP NETWORK

"A friend is someone to whom you are important and who makes you feel important". (Lopata, 1979:204)

Blau (1973:63), commenting on friendship in old age, writes: "just when friendship becomes most important, friendship opportunities are fewer than ever before". Old age is indeed, a "unique context for

friendship" (Matthews, 1986a:245) in part, because the maintenance of friendships at this period in life becomes increasingly precarious. To begin with, "the age cohorts to which the old belong are shrinking" (Matthews, 1986a:246), thus decreased interaction with friends may occur simply because fewer friends are available. In addition to the increased likelihood that many of their good friends will have passed on, life changes such as a decline in health, disability, or difficulty in obtaining transportation combine to limit the opportunity for maintaining old friendships or developing new ones. However, despite the unique contingencies that can threaten the friendship network in later life, the findings of this study confirm those of a number of previous others (e.g. Harris et al, 1975; Powers and Bultena, 1976; Cantor, 1979; Chappell, 1983) that for many, meaningful friendships do exist in later life. The vast majority of the respondents were well integrated into a friendship network and enjoyed meaningful involvement with at least one close friend or "intimate other". Most importantly, the data confirm that, in old age, the friendship network can continue to be a viable source of meaningful identity confirming self-other bonds.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS' FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS

##### Availability of Friends and Amount of Contact

Looking first at friendships in general, respondents were asked, "About how many friends would you say you have?" Perhaps their response is unique to the small town context in which these women are located. Certainly, the majority claim to have a substantially large number of

friends. Slightly more than three-quarters (76%) of the community-dwelling sample said that they had "loads of friends" or "many more" than nine or ten. Seventeen respondents (17%) said they had from seven to ten, six (6%) that they had at least three and not one respondent reported having no friends whatsoever.

Of more concern was whether or not respondents had at least one 'close' or 'intimate' friend. Thus, they were asked, "of these friends, who do you feel to be 'close friends'?" According to these data, more intimate friendships are also plentiful. Ninety-seven of the community-dwelling respondents (96%) reported having at least one close friend and only four women (4%) claimed to have none at all.<sup>1</sup> While eleven respondents (10.9%) had only one close friend, more than one half (52.5%) had from two to four and about one third (32.7%) listed as many as five.<sup>2</sup> The average number of close friends was 3.4. Tables 6.1 and 6.2 illustrate the incidence of 'friends' and 'close friends' according to chronological age.

There is, as might be expected, evidence here that the availability of friends (especially those of the same age cohort) does decrease for individuals who are well advanced in years. Comments like, "but of course you know they are dying off" (84 yrs.), "they are all gone" (98 yrs.), "most of the people our age are thinning out" (86 yrs.), were most typical of respondents who were over eighty years of age. Nevertheless, many who are well into their eighties and beyond, still think of themselves as having a number of friends and, more importantly, most report having at least one close friend.<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 6.1

## NUMBER OF FRIENDS BY AGE GROUP

Number of Friends	Age Categories					
	65-74		75-84 <sup>1</sup>		85 And Over	
	(N=47)		(N=40)		(N=13)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
None	-	-	-	-	-	-
One or Two	1	2.1	-	-	-	-
Three to Six	3	6.4	1	2.5	2	15.4
Seven to Ten	8	17.0	6	15.0	3	23.1
More than Ten	35	74.5	33	82.5	8	61.5
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100.0</b>

<sup>1</sup>Because of one no answer in the 75-84 age category, N=40.

TABLE 6.2

## NUMBER OF CLOSE FRIENDS BY AGE CATEGORY

Number of Friends	Age Categories					
	65-74		75-84		85 And Over	
	(N=47)		(N=40)		(N=13)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
None	2	4.2	1	2.4	1	7.7
Only One	3	6.4	7	17.1	1	7.7
Two to Four	24	51.1	20	48.8	9	69.2
Five or More	18	38.3	13	31.7	2	15.4
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100.0</b>

A decrease in the availability of close friends is more notable within our two contrasting sample settings. Though a majority of respondents in both of the non-community-dwelling samples (60% in the nursing home, 77.4% in the apartment complexes) have at least one close friend the proportion of respondents in these settings, who report that they do not have a close friend is considerably higher. Forty percent of the nursing home sample (three of these four are over eighty) compared to 4 percent of the community-dwelling (only one of whom is over eighty) said they did not have a close friend. More interesting is that close friendships are also less frequently found in the senior's

apartment sample where approximately 23 percent (seven respondents, four of whom are over eighty) said that they did not have a close friend. This finding runs contrary to Rosow's (1967) thesis that old people who live among other old people make more friends than old people who live in age-integrated settings. Despite the increased opportunity for friendship formation among age peers within the senior's apartment setting, only 12 (38.7%) have a close friend who is a fellow resident. Of all sixty-four close friendships that these respondents reported, slightly more than 70 percent involved friends who lived outside these buildings. It is, of course, impossible to say whether the fewer close friendships found in the nursing home and apartment samples is a function of the setting (and relocation) or if these women consistently had fewer close friendships before entering this setting.<sup>4</sup>

Geographically distant friendships are in the minority, and of those who have close friends, most live quite near them (Table 6.3). Indeed, close friends are often neighbors; fifty-six respondents (57.7%) reported that at least one of their close friends lived in the same neighborhood (thirty-three of these (59%) living as close as "next door" or "across the street"). Most (92%) have at least one close friend who lives in the same town, and a majority (67%) have all of their close friends living no further than 15 miles from them. Looking at more geographically distant friendships, while 27 percent of those who have at least one close friend (26 respondents) have one who lives more than twenty miles away, less than half of these (12.4%) have one living more than one hundred miles from them. Less than 10 percent of these respondents have a close friend living outside the province.

TABLE 6.3

## DISTANCE FROM GEOGRAPHICALLY NEAREST CLOSE FRIEND

Location	Community- Dwelling (N=97) %	Apartment Dwelling (N=24) %	Nursing Home (N=6) %	Total Sample (N=127) %
In this House	1.0	-	-	0.8
In this Neighborhood	57.7	50.0	33.3	55.1
In this Community	33.3	25.0	50.0	32.3
Within 100 Miles	7.2	20.8	16.7	10.2
Elsewhere in the Province	1.0	-	-	0.8
Elsewhere in the Maritimes	-	-	-	-
Elsewhere in Canada	-	-	-	-
Outside Canada	-	4.2	-	0.8

Due to rounding not all totals equal 100%. For apartment-dwelling respondents, close friends who lived in the same building were categorized as "In this Neighborhood". Nursing home respondents whose nearest close friend lived in the building were also categorized this way as opposed to "In the Same House".



As Fischer (1982) suggests, because of the cost involved in maintaining them, distant ties can be problematic for elderly people. Thus, in the later years of life when personal resources are limited, many older people are constrained to seek associates from within their community or even their own neighborhood. In this study, length of residence is also a factor associated with the likelihood of evolving friendships with neighbors and fellow residents (Hess, 1972). Many of these women have lived their entire lives in this town and more than three-quarters have lived in the community for twenty years or more. Most do not appear to have travelled extensively so that, throughout their lives, the opportunity for developing more distantly located relationships has been limited.

Looking briefly at the two non-community-dwelling samples, though the proportions are smaller, the majority of those who have close friends have one living as near as the same community. For example, of the six nursing home respondents who have a close friend, five (83.3%) have one who lives in the town. Most of the apartment-dwelling also have at least one close friend who lives in the town, however, the proportion (75%) is somewhat smaller than it is for the community-dwelling (92%). This may be due to the fact that fewer of these respondents are lifelong residents. Slightly over half (51.6%) have lived in the community for less than twenty years. However, close friends, if not living in the same town, are not all that far away. Of the 25 percent of the apartment-dwelling respondents whose nearest close friend lives outside the community, 21 percent live within 100 miles, or not much more than an hours drive away.

Most (82%) of those who have close friends see at least one of their friends as frequently as once a week or more (Table 6.4). Not surprising, nursing home residents do not see their friends nearly this often. Indeed, half of the nursing home sample, who said they had a close friend, see that friend not much more than once or twice a year. With the exception of ten women (41.7%) whose nearest close friend lives in the same building and is seen daily, apartment-dwelling respondents, on the whole, do not see their friends as often as the community-dwelling. Only about 62 percent see a friend as frequently as once a week.<sup>5</sup>

Consistent with the data presented in Table 6.4, most respondents also report that they have seen a close friend recently (Table 6.5). Approximately 92 percent of the community-dwelling have seen a close friend as recently as a week ago or more, and 73.1 percent as recently as a couple of days ago or more. Once again, although respondents in the two smaller samples have also seen a friend relatively recently, they have not done so as recently as the community-dwelling.

Respondents also make ample use of the telephone as a means of keeping in touch with their friends (Table 6.6). About 92 percent of the community-dwelling have called a close friend as recently as a week ago, 74.2 percent as recently as a couple of days ago. Telephone contact with friends does not appear to be a viable alternative for nursing home residents. Although two respondents had called a friend as recently as a couple of days ago, and another, a week ago, half of the

TABLE 6.4

## MOST FREQUENTLY SEEN CLOSE FRIEND

<u>Frequency Seen</u>	<u>Community- Dwelling (N=97) %</u>	<u>Apartment Dwelling (N=24) %</u>	<u>Nursing Home (N=6) %</u>	<u>Total Sample (N=127) %</u>
Everyday	24.7	41.7	16.7	27.5
At Least 1/Week	57.7	20.8	-	48.0
At Least 1/Month	13.4	16.7	33.3	15.0
At Least 1/Year	3.1	20.8	50.0	8.7
Less Than 1/Year	1.0	-	-	0.8

Due to rounding not all totals equal 100%.

TABLE 6.5

## CLOSE FRIEND LAST SEEN

Last Seen	Community- Dwelling (N=97) %	Apartment Dwelling (N=24) %	Nursing Home (N=6) %	Total Sample (N=127) %
Today	11.3	29.2	16.7	15.0
Yesterday	34.0	25.0	33.3	32.3
A Couple of Days Ago	27.8	4.2	16.7	22.8
A Week Ago	18.6	16.7	-	17.3
A Month Ago	7.2	20.8	16.7	10.2
A Year Ago	1.0	4.2	16.7	2.4
More Than A Year Ago	-	-	-	-

Due to rounding not all totals equal 100%.

TABLE 6.6

## RESPONDENT LAST PHONED A CLOSE FRIEND

<u>Last Phoned</u>	<u>Community- Dwelling (N=97)</u>	<u>Apartment Dwelling (N=24)</u>	<u>Nursing Home (N=6)</u>	<u>Total Sample (N=127)</u>
Today	18.5	8.3	-	15.7
Yesterday	22.7	20.8	-	21.2
A Couple of Days Ago	33.0	16.7	33.3	29.9
A Week Ago	17.5	29.2	16.7	19.7
A Month Ago	5.1	12.5	-	6.3
More Than A Year Ago or Occasionally	3.1	12.5	50.0	7.1

Due to rounding not all totals equal 100%.

women in this setting who have close friends either do not phone them at all or do so only occasionally. Health problems are a factor here. At least one respondent has a severe hearing impairment and cannot use the telephone, another cannot talk on the telephone with her friend because her friend has a hearing impairment. Respondents in the apartment sample also do not appear to have as much telephone contact with their friends as the community-dwelling. Twelve women who have at least one close friend in the building, have little need to phone them. However, even when these respondents are excluded, only 66.7 percent compared to

92% of the community-dwelling have called a friend as recently as a week ago.

Respondents have also received telephone calls from their close friends recently. While 92 percent of the community-dwelling sample have called a friend as recently as a week ago, 90 percent have received a call from a friend this recently.<sup>6</sup> If telephone contact can be taken as an indication of the significant role that friendships play in the lives of older people, it is interesting to note that these elderly women appear to have slightly more telephone contact with their friends than their children. While about 79 percent had phoned a child as recently as a week ago or more, 92 percent had phoned a close friend this recently. Similarly, while 82 percent had received a call from a child as recently as a week ago or more, 90 percent had received a call from a close friend in this period.

As most respondents talk with their friends on the telephone often and live at no great distance from most of them, letter writing is not typically used as a means of keeping in touch. Only ten of the community-dwelling respondents (10.3%) reported writing a close friend as recently as a month ago or more. Similarly only ten respondents reported that a close friend had written them as recently as a month ago or more and 87.6 percent said that their friends either did not write at all or only occasionally.<sup>7</sup>

#### Duration of Friendships

While some respondents have developed relatively recent friendships, illustrating that while old friends may be lost in later

life new relationships can be established, most have close friendships that have endured over many years. Eighty-seven (89.7%) of the respondents who have at least one close friend have one whom they have known for twenty years or more. Fifty-six (57.5%) have at least one whom they have known for forty years or more, and at least thirty-five (36.1%) have a close friend whom they have known for an entire lifetime. Looking at recent relationships, twenty-two women (22.7%) listed at least one close friend whom they had known for less than five years and forty-three women (44.3%) one whom they had known for less than ten.

A number of respondents in this study made a distinction between their 'old friends' and those they had acquired more recently. This finding lends support to Matthews' (1986a; 1986b) thesis that, in order to understand friendship in later life, it is important to investigate not only current but past friendships. Past friendships can affect "present friendships of the old with respect to both who their current friends are and the meaning assigned to them" (Matthews, 1986a:1).

#### Connectedness or Density

People who live many years in one community are likely to have high density networks. Fischer (1982) describes network density as, the extent to which network members are interconnected. Thus, density is a measure of the number of a person's associates who are also associates of one another. The connectedness of respondents' friendship networks was examined by asking, "For each of the close friends that you have listed, does he/she know any of the others?" and "Can you please tell me who knows who else?" Forty-one women in the community-dwelling sample

(47.4%, N=86) reported that all of their close friends knew each other.<sup>8</sup> Seventeen respondents (19.8%) said that three or more knew each other and another nine (10.5%) that at least two knew each other. In all, over three-quarters (77%) had at least two friends in their network who also knew each other.

#### Overlapping or Multi-Strandedness

In a small town context it is also likely that relations overlap and reinforce one another (Fischer, 1982). That is, network ties tend to be multi-stranded such that one individual is involved with another in several different ways. Though we did not formally measure the extent to which respondent's friendship ties were multi-stranded there is some evidence to suggest that there is considerable overlapping. For many respondents, their neighbors are also their friends. Since the social activity of most is confined primarily to the local community, it was also not uncommon for respondents to point out that they belonged to the same church group, senior's club, or voluntary association as one or more of their close friends.

#### Age Homophily

Consonant with a number of previous studies (Hess, 1972; Powers and Bultena, 1976; Chappell, 1983) respondents tend to have close friends who are similar to them in age. Of all close friends listed, 65 percent are age peers and about 92 percent of the community-dwelling respondents have at least one friend who is close to them in age.<sup>9</sup> However, and again consistent with the findings of other studies (Powers and Bultena, 1976; Cantor, 1979; Cohen and Rajkowski, 1982; Usui, 1984),



our data also reveal that older people's friends are not exclusively age peers. Of all close friends, 34 percent were younger than the respondents and two had friends who were considerably older. Sixty respondents (61.8%) have at least one close friend who is ten years or more younger than they are, fifty-two (53.6%) have at least one who is fifteen years or more younger, while twenty-three women (23.7%) have at least one who is thirty years or more younger than themselves. The older the individual, the more likely it is that she has younger friends in her friendship network. Thus, while 53.2 percent of those 65-74 years had at least one younger friend, 58.5 percent of those 75-84 years did, and 84.6 percent of the respondents who were 85 years or over had at least one friend who was ten years or more younger than themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Though respondents referred to them as friendships, a number of these relationships are familial in nature and resemble the 'fictive kin' described in Chapter Five. For example, a seventy-four year old childless respondent, who listed a fifteen year old girl as one of her close friends, has what could be described as a quasi-grandparental relationship with her. The close relationship developed when the respondent cared for the girl when she was an infant and throughout her childhood while her mother worked. Though the respondent now lives some distance from her young friend, this girl telephones frequently and often comes to town on the school bus to visit with her.

She phones once a week for sure, we got very close through taking care of her. (No. 89)

A second example involves a seventy-one year old respondent who had developed a very close relationship with her twenty-five year old next door neighbor.

She sort of adopted us as grandparents. (No. 33)

Other close friendships with non age-peers are based on a sharing of similar interests which no doubt strengthens the bond and obliterates the age difference. For example, one respondent and her friend share a lifelong interest (and careers) in music, they treat one another as family and have spent christmases together for a number of years.

### Sex Homophily

Our data confirm the findings of previous studies (e.g. Powers and Bultena, 1976; Usui, 1984; Matthews, 1986b) that older people's close friends tend to be of the same sex. Of all close friendships, over 90 percent were same sex and although fourteen respondents (14.4%) included males among their close friends most of these cross-sex friendships were the husbands of their female friends. In only five cases (5.1%) did cross-sex friendships involve an unmarried male.

### THE MEANING AND NATURE OF CLOSE FRIENDSHIP RELATIONS

More important than the quantitative features of respondents' friendship networks, are the meanings which they attribute to their friendships. As noted in Chapter One, there is ambiguity surrounding the term friendship and much existing research has been based on "crude

definitions" (Peters, 1982) and "a priori categorizations" (Cohen and Rajkowski, 1982). As Matthews points out,

in most cases, social science research has not heeded intention of the speaker, making the nature of the relationships to which respondents refer difficult to know (1986a:238).

It was decided, in this study, to avoid providing respondents with an objective, a priori definition of the term friend.<sup>11</sup> It was thus left up to them to decide who should or should not be included in this category. Seeking a subjective interpretation of the term, respondents were asked to explain what 'close friend' meant to them. Most had no difficulty defining this term and, in fact, were quite precise in their explanation of its meaning. A patterning emerged that there is a commonly shared set of criterion that separate 'close friends' from 'friends', or casual acquaintances.

First and foremost, a close friend is a confidant. The most typical discriminating characteristic of a close friend, specified by one hundred and fifteen respondents (81%, N=142) is someone in whom one can confide, that "you can tell your little troubles to" and "believe that they won't repeat it" (See Table 6.7). Some of these respondents also made it clear that, in a truly close friendship, it is expected that exchange of confidences and lending a sympathetic ear is mutual.

A friend who comes with her problems and if I had any, I could tell them. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

A person you can tell your troubles to and she tells me hers. (No. 96-76 yrs.)

Included, implicitly if not explicitly, in most of the definitions as an apparently crucial criterion of close friendship, is

TABLE 6.7

## TYPES OF DEFINITIONS OF 'CLOSE FRIEND'

Definitions	Frequency Response Given (N=211)	Percentage of Respondents Giving Response <sup>1</sup> (N=142)
Someone in Whom One Can Confide (Also 'Trust')	115	81.0
Someone on Whom One Can Depend, Go to for Help	63	44.4
Someone with Whom One Shares	9	6.3
Other (e.g. "Long time friends", "Someone who knows all about you", one who is "understand- ing", "loving and kind")	24	16.9

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N=142); because some respondents gave multiple meanings, the total exceeds 100%.

the concept of "trust". Thus, not all friends become confidants or are turned to for advice, only those who one feels certain one can trust.

Someone you can trust, you can depend that if you tell them anything, it won't go further. (No. 88-78 yrs.)

One you can trust, you can talk things over with them and they won't let it out. I trust them and they trust me. (No. 42-82 yrs.)

I claim that I have two kinds of friends, one's you can trust and....[those with whom one is just friendly]. (No. 82-82 yrs.)

Sixty-three respondents (44.4%) defined a close friend as "one that you can depend on", a friend who is "there when you need her", one

that "you could go to for help". According to these women, close friends are always willing to do things for one another.

Someone you can tell a secret to and someone, if you need assistance or help of any kind, they'll give it gladly. Someone to ride the river with, you want someone who will throw you a line. (No. 137-75 yrs.)

Someone who would do anything for me and I would be willing to do most anything for her. (No. 91-79 yrs.)

Someone that will do things for you - someone in hour of need. (No. 98-86 yrs.)

Truly close friends, as these respondents describe them, are loyal; they can be depended upon to stick with one another through the good times and the bad.

A close friend is a person who takes you as you are, good things and.... (No. 59-81 yrs.)

Someone who is with you when you are down and when you are up. (No. 78-72 yrs.)

A close friend is a good friend, a close friend is one who knows the best and worst of you and loves you just the same. (No. 115-74 yrs.)

While it is believed that friends should assist one another, it is also expected that, if a friend is a 'close' friend she will be available, willing to "go places and do things with you", "call you on the phone", and "get together with you". These respondents specified some of the kinds of things that a close friend can be depended upon to do.

If you feel you want to talk, you just call and they never say no. (No. 19-65 yrs.)

You can go for advice. I can depend on them and they can depend on me. (No 40-67 yrs.)

One whose ready to go when you're ready to go. (No. 141-67 yrs.)

Someone who will do things for you without your asking them. Someone who will invite me to Halifax just to see me and talk to me. (No. 121-73 yrs.)

Several respondents emphasized that sharing is a characteristic feature of a close friendship. A nursing home respondent fondly recalled a special friend whose company she so often enjoyed and with whom she frequently shared. This quotation illustrates that, out of small things shared grow meaningful and lasting memories, memories of true friendship given and received.

I used to go shopping all the time with \_\_\_\_\_.  
Many's a time we bought a sandwich and we shared it.  
(No. 103-91 yrs.)

To summarize, a close friend is "someone you can really understand", "someone who understands", someone who is "loving and kind", "consoling", "sincere", "true". A close friend is "someone you can trust", "depend on", "confide in", and "one who will be sympathetic". Close friends are "friends who are really concerned about each other".

When the nature of respondents' relations with their friends is examined, one finds that these women actually do go places and do things with their friends, visit with them and talk often on the telephone. They confide in and assist one another. Thus, most of these women can, in honesty, say that they have - and identify themselves as - a close friend.

When asked, "What kinds of things do you and your friends do together?", 91 percent of the community-dwelling respondents said that they visited. (See Table 6.8 for data on all samples)

TABLE 6.8

## THE KINDS OF THINGS FRIENDS DO TOGETHER

Activities	Samples		
	Community Dwelling (N=101) %	Apartment-Dwelling (N=31) %	Nursing Home (N=10) %
Visit	91.1	83.8	70.0
Talk a Lot	87.1	74.2	50.0
Go Shopping	43.6	58.1	-
Play Cards	43.6	58.1	16.7
Go to Restaurants	38.6	29.0	-
Other	28.7	25.8	-

Note: Since this question referred to 'friends' and not just 'close friends', the percentages are based on the total number of respondents in each sample. Since most respondents and their friends engaged in multiple activities, percentage totals exceed 100%.

I visit there in the evening, we play cards. (No. 44-66 yrs.)

She comes every Thursday after she finishes her shopping, she comes in for coffee. She calls me if she can't get in on Thursday morning. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

There isn't hardly a day that I don't go over there. She calls, "I'm having a coffee, come on over". I go over so often I got no need to call her. (No. 98-86 yrs.)

Whether face-to-face contact is involved or not, talking a lot with one's friends is a frequent and apparently enjoyable pastime for many. About 87 percent of the community-dwelling respondents said that they talked often with their friends. The advantages of the telephone were frequently acknowledged, with widows being especially grateful for the "company" such calls provided.

We get talking on the phone sometimes for two hours.  
(No. 99-69 yrs.)

We talk on the phone several times a day. (No. 2-69 yrs.)

I'm not much for phoning, but I have a friend down the river who calls every night. (No. 57-90 yrs.)

Close friends, particularly fellow widows, call "to check on each other", to combat loneliness, to reassure, or just to "gab".

We just check on each other. (No. 52-84 yrs.)

I call her in the morning and she calls me in the evening. She calls to see what's the matter with me, she does every evening, she never misses. (No. 82-82 yrs.)

I call her in the morning and the evening because she gets so lonely. (No. 84-67 yrs.)

Especially when it storms, she always calls. Sometimes I call her twice a day or she calls me. We are always on the phone, we gab a lot. (No. 36-73 yrs.)

The telephone is particularly useful to friends who, because of poor health or lack of transportation, cannot visit each other. By keeping in touch on the telephone a meaningful relationship is retained.

We don't see each other a lot but she calls almost every day. (No. 51-74 yrs.)



Friends also go shopping together. About 44 percent of the community-dwelling respondents said that this was something they did with their friends.

We go every week to shop, we go out every Saturday.  
(No. 85-69 yrs.)

We go to church together and grocery shopping together.  
(No. 101-77 yrs.)

Another popular activity is playing cards (about 44% of the community-dwelling). While some of the card playing is an organized group activity, it is also common for friends to get together and play cards.

We play bridge every week, sometimes twice. (No. 55-80 yrs.)

We go to card parties every night, we went last night back to \_\_\_\_\_ with a couple, tonight we go to \_\_\_\_\_. (No. 56-75 yrs.)

Eating out was another activity shared with close friends (39% of the community-dwelling). This was often not a full course meal (as a number of respondents were quick to point out) but a mid-day lunch or snack that was often included in a shared shopping expedition.

We travel around together....Tomorrow she and I go out and spend the day, we eat out tomorrow. (No. 113-66 yrs.)

Other activities typically engaged in with close friends included: going for walks (especially in summer), exchanging books, playing games, going for drives, attending church, community concerts, and other such social events, and sharing "a cup of tea". A number of respondents said they went on "little trips" with their friends. Day

trips were popular and generally involved trips to Halifax, "the Valley", and other nearby towns.

As respondents discussed the nature of their relations with their friends, various examples of friends as a source of assistance were given. These comments indicate that these particular intimate friends had demonstrated that they could indeed be relied upon to help out in time of need, and that certain experiences shared with a truly close friend are never forgotten.

She stayed with me when [respondent's husband] died.  
(No. 44-76 yrs.)

Nine hundred times I borrowed ten dollars and took it back. (No. 13-79 yrs.)

I'll tell you they were angels when (respondent's son) was sick. (No. 73-79 yrs.)

#### Old Friends Are Golden: Ties That Are Distant But Strong

In an effort to explore the possible effect of distance on friendship ties, respondents were asked, "Would you say that you feel closer to those friends that you see most often?" While 37 percent said yes, 47 percent said no (N=132 as nursing home respondents were not asked this question).

Those who claimed to feel closer to the friends they saw most, usually could not explain why. Comments like "it's just natural" were typical. Most of those who did attempt an explanation paralleled Homan's (1950:133) thesis that, "the more frequently persons interact with one another, the stronger their sentiments of friendship for one another are apt to be".

The more contact you have with people the closer you feel. (No. 47-76 yrs.)

I guess it's just because you see them more often. (No. 92-70 yrs.)

You get more friendly. (No. 123-69 yrs.)

Some felt that the relationship grows stronger primarily because friends, who see each other often, get to know each other better.

You grow to know their ways. (No. 55-80 yrs.)

The comments of several respondents (consonant with their definitions of close friend) suggested that, for a friend to be considered close, she must be available. The implication was that distance prohibits the types of exchanges that constitute close friendship.

Because they are always there if you need them. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

You are more apt to talk more personal things to them. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

However, as previously indicated, many of these respondents do not have intimate friends who live any great distance from them. Thus, their ability to maintain closeness in a long distance friendship has never really been put to the test. Among the few who did have more distantly located friendships, there is evidence that close ties can be maintained despite the distance. The numbers are small, but, of the eleven respondents who had out-of-province friends, nine (81.8%) maintained that they did not feel any less close to them. Fischer maintains that distant ties are almost always very close ones and found that distant associates were notably more likely to be called 'close' than were the nearer ones (1982:173). He argues that:

Since local associates "cost" less and distant ones cost more, people find their distant associates more rewarding, on the average, than their nearer ones. The distant ones must be especially rewarding, according to this logic, or else they would be dropped (1982:172).

In this study, of all close friendships located more than twenty miles away, 86.2 percent had been known for twenty years or more. Many of those who actually experience a geographically distant relationship apparently find that their feelings for this friend endure.

Those respondents who said that they felt as close to some geographically distant friends as to those friends they saw most frequently, often keep in touch with one another by telephoning and/or writing.

Today, you can keep in touch with the phone. (No. 30-85 yrs.)

If you don't see them you usually talk to them. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

Well, we write letters back and forth and keep close that way. (No. 86-71 yrs.)

The most common explanation given for the strength of such friendships was that it is the quality of the relation that matters.

The feeling is there whether you see them or not. (No. 44-76 yrs.)

I don't think the number of times you see them matters when you have a real friendship. (No. 77-82 yrs.)

I think you still have the same warm feeling for a friend whether you see him every day or not. (No. 89-74 yrs.)

In determining the quality of one's friendships, it was indicated here that long-time friendships are particularly rewarding and special; indeed, "old friends" are described as "the best" friends.

I like the older friends the best. (No. 125-65 yrs.)

I think the old ones are the ones you remember the most.  
(No. 100-71 yrs.)

Because the friends I call my friends, I've known them  
over the years. (No. 121-73 yrs.)

The significance of old friends was made apparent on a number of occasions throughout the discussion of friendship and a nursing home respondent echoed the feeling of many when she pointed out that, although new friends are welcomed, old ones are especially treasured.

You make new friends but hold onto the old. One is  
silver and the other is gold. (No. 109-88 yrs.)

As indicated earlier many women in this sample were involved in long-time close friendships. Of particular interest, however, are the close friendships that had been maintained over many years in spite of the fact that the two individuals involved lived a considerable distance apart. In this case, the strength of these ties is marked not only by their duration but by virtue of the fact that they have endured across time and distance.

In some of these long-distance relationships the respondents have not seen their friends in years, yet they continue to feel close to them, a finding which supports the contention that close bonds can endure under conditions of infrequent contact (Hess, 1972). These women keep in touch with their friends by exchanging letters and telephone calls. While very few of the respondents in this study (only about 12% of those who have one) write to their close friends, about 43 percent of those who have a close friend located more than twenty miles away, and 57 percent of those with a friend living further than one hundred miles

from them, exchange letters with a close friend. Others manage to exchange long-distance visits with friends they "grew up with", "worked with", or "lived next to" for a number of years.

Long-distance friendships are very important to a seventy-five year old respondent who retired in her home town after a number of years of working and living elsewhere. She has no close friends living in the town but does have two very close friends who live at a considerable distance from her. One of these lives in a distant part of the province, the other in England, and she maintains regular contact with both.

Every three days she [her friend in N.S.] writes, just as regular as a dice. She sends me four books every week.

Every three weeks she [friend in England] writes. She always spends two days with me when she comes to Canada.  
(No. 65.)

The following case of distant yet strong ties illustrates that not only can old friendships endure despite distance, but if the bond is strong enough, they can be depended upon for assistance when they are needed. An eighty-four year old widowed respondent maintains a close friendship with two women she has known for more than fifty years. One lives in another part of the province, the other elsewhere in the maritimes. She has known both since they were young working women living in the city of Halifax. She corresponds regularly with both and they exchange telephone calls.

I keep in touch with two old timers, girls I knew who worked in Halifax. I shared a kitchenette with one.  
(No. 52)

This respondent described how her elderly out-of-province friend came to her assistance a few years earlier, when she had eye surgery to have a cataract removed. Though the respondent tried to discourage her friend from doing so, this woman "insisted" on coming despite the distance.

She came down and stayed with me for two weeks when I had my first eye done. (No. 52)

From the previous discussion, it can be concluded that 'close' friendships have depth, they involve feelings of confidence and dependability and most important, they involve a feeling of trust. Though these older women did make new friends in later life, they treasured their old ties. Known for years, old friends are known well. As one respondent put it, "there isn't much we both don't know about each other". Over the years they have proven their worth, that they can hold and share secrets, be depended upon to be there in time of need, and that they can be trusted. Thus, for most of these women, 'friend' is not a trivial dimension of self-meaning, but an identity of substance and, being a good friend and a person who has one, are both a source of pride.

As trust typically evolves from years of 'knowing', the development of new and intimate relations in later life can, at least for some older people, be problematical. This seems particularly true of those in more institutionalized settings. Thus, contrary to Rosow's (1967:39) thesis that age dense residential settings "maximize the prospect of friendship formation", close friendships among those in our nursing home and senior's apartment samples are not as abundant as might be expected. Some of the nursing home respondents explained that they

did not develop close ties with fellow residents because they felt that they could not be sure of finding trust in such potential relationships. Typically, nursing home respondents maintained that they were "friendly" with fellow residents, but did not consider any of these people to be 'close' friends. There was only one exception where one respondent listed two fellow residents among her close friends. This feeling of closeness was not, however, reciprocated, in that the other two did not list her among their close friends. The following comments suggest that close ties among fellow residents did not develop in such settings primarily because respondents felt that years of 'knowing' are necessary before one can be assured of the crucial element of trust.

I have to be sure before I have a close friend. I don't call them all close friends. You soon know who you can trust and who you can't. I'm good with them all but what I mean about friends is someone you can tell your little troubles to and they don't go out and broadcast it. A friend is a friend to me. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

No, not really. I got friends here you know but they all seem the same. A close friend, you want to be able to tell some things to that you wouldn't want to tell everyone else. (No. 104-98 yrs.)

I don't get mixed up with any of them, you hear so much. I'd sooner keep to myself. You never know who you can trust. I'm sociable with everybody but I don't let it go any further. I don't tell anyone my business. (No. 111-79 yrs.)

One nursing home respondent said that there was one person in the home that she would have listed as her close friend, if she were well enough to reciprocate, but having dementia this woman could not. According to the respondent, this woman would qualify as a close friend because they had known each other for a good many years.



I've visited her place, eaten at her house, watched her boys grow up. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

Though more close friendships were found within the apartment sample, not everyone found it possible to develop feelings of closeness to someone they had not known for a long time. One woman, who had been living in the building for at least three and a half years, said she hadn't made any close friendships with fellow residents because, "I haven't known them long enough". Again, it apparently takes years of 'knowing' another to develop the confidence and trust essential to a truly close friendship.

I'm friends with people in here but that's just friendly. I wouldn't trust anyone, they'd tell it all over the place. I don't believe in getting too close. (No. 123-69 yrs.)

You have to be careful what you say or what you tell up here. There is a lot of gossip. I think when you get older you have too much time. (No. 114-81 yrs.)

It's best to keep away from them. I speak to em when I see them. No, I didn't make a habit of going [to visit in others' apartments], I don't know, you can't trust everybody. (No. 139-89 yrs.)

#### Satisfaction with Friendships: Changes in Style

The quality and availability of these friendship ties illustrates further that this network is, for most of these elderly women, a source of meaningful and identity-supportive self-other bonds. On the whole, most respondents were very satisfied with their friendships and happy with the number of friends they had. When asked, "In general, how satisfied are you with your friendships?" of the total number of interview respondents, one hundred and twenty-seven (89.4%) replied that they were very satisfied, while another twelve (8.4%) said

that they were somewhat satisfied with their friendships. Satisfaction was very high in both the community-dwelling sample, where 92 percent reported being very satisfied, and in the apartment-dwelling sample, where 93 percent said they were very satisfied with their friendships. In the nursing home sample satisfaction was lower, with only half of the respondents saying they were very satisfied, while 40 percent said they were only somewhat satisfied with their friendships.

When asked, "do you sometimes wish you had more close friends or are you happy with the number of close friends you have now?" only twenty respondents (14.1%) in the entire sample wished they had more. Once again the notion that it is the quality of one's relations that is important, and not the quantity, was stressed. Some believe that one can actually have too many friends, in which case, the quality of these friendships may suffer.

It's not the quantity but the quality. (No. 7-69 yrs.)

No, I think if you have too many you can't devote the time to them you want to. (No. 65-75 yrs.)

When the individual samples are examined, it is interesting to note that it is within the community-dwelling sample, where the greatest proportion of respondents (96%) already have at least one close friend, that the most respondents (15.8%, 16 respondents) say that they sometimes wish they had more. Only one respondent in the nursing home sample wished she had more, in spite of the fact that there are four women in this setting who have no close friends at all. In the apartment sample, where there are seven respondents who have no close friends, only three (9.7%) say they wish they had more.

It is not necessarily the number of friendships that determines whether or not one will want more. There are individual differences in friendship styles. Some older people do not have any intimate friends and yet appear to be satisfied. Thus, while there are fifteen respondents in the total interview sample who do not have any close friends at all, only three of these women (20%) said they wished to have more. Some of these respondents did not desire close friends because they never had been interested in cultivating them. These individuals appear to have adopted a style of friendship akin to what Matthews (1986a, 1986b) refers to as "the independents". They may have had friendships in their lifetime but not especially close ones. Each of the following appears to have been a "lifelong isolate" (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968) or "loner" (Cohen and Rajkowski, 1982).

You see I have quite a few people who are friendly, I don't need anything more than that. (No. 83-70 yrs.)

I don't think I ever had a really close friend. I am Scotch, I pretty well keep my confidences to myself-actually, I'm a bit of a loner. (No. 91-79 yrs.)

I've never been one to have a really close friend. (No. 131-81 yrs.)

For others, one close friend appears to be sufficient. Of the seventeen respondents having only one close friend, eleven (64.7%) did not wish to have more. Others would like more, despite the fact that they already have quite a number of intimate friendships. Thus, an eighty-five year old respondent, with three close friends, says she wishes she had more because, "the more the better" (No. 30). Similarly, a seventy-four year old, who already has four, says she would like more because, "there's always room for another" (No. 89). Two other

respondents wished for more, apparently because their long-distance friendships are problematic for them. The first respondent does, on occasion, exchange long-distance phone calls with her friends but, the kind of frequent contact she requires is prohibited because of the cost involved. When asked if she wished for more close friends, this woman replied, "I'd love to have someone I could call and talk to " (No. 59). The second respondent, an eighty-four year old widow, has three close friends, however, none are located in the town, two, in fact, live outside the country. This woman replied, "here, I wish I had a close friend" (No. 81).

While most said they were satisfied with their friendships, and few wished for more, several respondents were unhappy with a new style of friendship which they feared was replacing the old.

It might be nice to have the kind of friend who just drops in, but that won't happen again. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

I use to see them [her old friends] everyday, the new way you need to phone first. I miss that, you could just run in. (No. 9-76 yrs.)

### Widowhood and Friendship

A concern of this study was to determine whether or not widowhood negatively affected the older woman's level of network involvement. In general, the widowed seem to be just as embedded in network ties as the other respondents. There is no evidence to indicate that widowed women are any less involved with friends than those who are married. As Table 6.9 illustrates, both groups, within the community-dwelling sample of respondents, have a proportionately similar number of close friends. Also the average number of intimate friends is similar

TABLE 6.9

## NUMBER OF CLOSE FRIENDS, THE WIDOWED AND MARRIED COMPARED

Number of Close Friends	Community-Dwelling Sample			
	Married		Widowed	
	N	%	N	%
None	1	2.9	2	3.2
Only One	4	11.4	7	11.3
Two-Four	19	54.3	33	53.2
Five	11	31.4	20	32.3
Totals	35	100.0	62	100.0

with the widowed having 3.1 and the married 3.4. There is also very little difference between these two groups as to the frequency with which their friends are seen (Table 6.10). In fact, slightly more of the widowed than married respondents see a close friend as often as once a week or more.

In order to determine whether or not relationships participated in prior to the husbands' death were maintained, all widowed respondents were asked, "When your husband died, would you say that your friendships changed?" Almost three-quarters (74.2% claimed that their friendships did not change very much (17.7%) or at all (56.5%). Some even felt that

TABLE 6.10

FREQUENCY WITH WHICH A CLOSE FRIEND IS SEEN,  
THE WIDOWED AND MARRIED COMPARED

Frequency Seen	Community-Dwelling Sample			
	Married		Widowed	
	N	%	N	%
Everyday	9	26.5	14	23.3
At Least 1/Week	18	52.9	36	60.0
At Least 1/Month	6	17.6	7	11.7
At Least 1/Year	1	2.9	2	3.3
Less Than 1/Year	-	-	1	1.7
Totals	34	99.9	60	100.0

Percentages in first column do not total 100 due to rounding.

they actually grew closer to some of their friends following their husbands' death.

The same people came here that did before. (No. 91-79 yrs.)

The friends I had when I first came to Bridgewater, I still have. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

If anything, different ones got closer. (No. 120-77 yrs.)

Lopata (1973b, 1973c) has found social class and education to be central determining factors in the effect of widowhood on a woman's ability to reformulate her identity following her husband's death.

Lower class and generally less well-educated women are less likely to be affected by marriage and hence widowhood as they are less likely to shape their identity around their husbands (1973b:90). Much of their social life revolves around a sex-segregated leisure world (Lopata, 1973c). Thus, the lower class widow is less affected by the absence of her husband, and widowhood is less disorganizing to her identity. Lopata has found, however, that middle class widows are better equipped with the social, educational, and economic resources to restructure their lives and identities.

Most of the widowed respondents in this study fall into the category of lower class widows, and though 71 percent of the community-dwelling widows claimed that they and their husbands shared interests and did most things together, and almost three-quarters claimed that they and their spouse shared the same friends, it was also evident that most had their own long-time friends. Community context is, no doubt, an influential factor. In small, relatively stable communities, widows may retain their former involvements within their lifelong networks of neighbors and friends, with little need for modification (Lopata, 1973a). In which case, these women, like the middle class widow, have the necessary resources available with which to maintain their identities.

Most of those who claimed that their lives and friendships changed upon the death of their husband, experienced changes similar to those reported in previous studies of widowhood. Some women spoke of losing touch with couple-based friends who stopped visiting after their husband died. Others said that they avoided get togethers where they

felt like a "third party" or "the fifth wheel", while some felt that their friends invited them less often.

It was a little different, I just felt that they didn't want to bother with me anymore. It was a little shock to you. I haven't changed, I don't know what made them change. (No. 81-84 yrs.)

Atchley has noted that "the impact of widowhood on friendship largely depends on the proportion of the widow's friends who are also widows (1980a:208). If widowhood occurs too early in life, friendships with still-married women may be strained. If, however, it occurs in later life, women will likely find other widowed women among their friends and associates. Blau found that while widowhood had no detrimental effect on the friendship participation of people seventy and over, it did have detrimental effects on the friendships of those still in their sixties. In this study, some respondents who said that widowhood adversely affected their friendships, described the experience as a temporary one. While some friends were lost in the early years of widowhood, as the years passed new friendships were developed among fellow widows, and old friendships rekindled with women now also widowed.

For awhile it changed, the close friends I had, had husbands living. They didn't come to see me as often. Now their husbands are gone and they see me more often. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

Indeed, some had more friends in widowhood than they ever had before.

I gained more really because there were so many widows. They got me into their group. There are a lot of widows in Bridgewater. (No. 71-75 yrs.)



I have a lot more friends now that I'm alone. (No. 4-82 yrs.)

Because there were "a lot of widows in Bridgewater", most widowed women had available to them a ready-made "society of widows" (Cumming and Henry, 1961) with whom they could associate. Relations with other widowed women took two forms. Some women preferred dyadic relations, enjoying a quiet friendship with a fellow widow, visiting together, talking on the phone, going places and doing things together, each helping the other to overcome the loneliness of widowhood.

She's alone too and has a car. (No. 2-69 yrs.)

Others associated regularly with a group of several widowed women. Informal bridge clubs formed the basis for at least three of these groups.

There are seven or eight of us, we play cards. We play bridge every week, sometimes twice. (No. 55-80 yrs.)

Our bridge club, we are just like a family. Everyone in it is a widow. There are twelve of us who chum together. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

In the latter case, this "society of widows" associated with one another on other occasions as well. The respondent saw two of the members as frequently as two and three times a week, talked on the phone often with some of the others, and volunteered at the same organization as several other women in the group. A number of these women also went on "little trips" together, sharing expenses and taking turns with cars. Not only were these elderly women companions for one another, they were comrades as well. Recognizing that they were "all in the same boat", they "looked out" for each other. Thus, relations with other widowed women

enabled most of the widowed respondents to counteract the ill effect that widowhood might have had on their level of social participation.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE FRIENDSHIP NETWORK  
TO IDENTITY MAINTENANCE IN LATER LIFE

"The individual's very sense of identity is made up, in part, of acquired social ties" and within each meaningful tie that has been acquired there is a certain investment of self (Hess, 1972:379). Thus, a significant part of the individual's sense of self is sustained, in later life, within the meaningful linkage that has occurred between self and 'friend'. This section looks at some of the ways in which the friendship networks of older women contribute to their maintenance of self-identity.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of the friendship network to identity maintenance is that friendships generally provide older people with an opportunity for involvement in a more or less equal or reciprocal relationship. Friends share, by and large, a similar status (e.g. age, sex, social class, and often, marital status). Hochschild (1973) has labeled this type of relation "the sibling bond". According to Hochschild, all bonds in some way resemble one of two basic types of relations - the parent-child and the sibling bond.

The sibling bond involves 1) reciprocity, and 2) similarity between two people. Reciprocity implies equality; what you do for me I return to you in equal measure. We can depend on each other a lot or a little but we depend on and give to each other equally. If the exchange is not always even, the feeling is that it should be. The sibling bond also involves similarity between people: I have the same things to offer and the same needs to fill that you have (1973:64).

In contrast, the parent-child bond

is not based on reciprocity or similarity. What you do for me I cannot return in equal measure. I depend on you more than you depend on me. And what is exchanged is different, not similar (1973:64-65).

Friendships formed between persons of similar status and interests and engaged in voluntarily, are associated with higher morale in later life (Blau, 1973; Arling, 1976; Wood and Robertson, 1978). Whereas the exchange between older persons and their family is often unequal and dissimilar, friends are more likely to be equal in their ability to exchange goods and services. Thus, reaching out to peer-based friendships as a source of aid is less threatening to the older woman's self-image because it is less likely to conjure feelings of dependency. Blau argues that peer friendships, and not family relationships, elevate morale because these relations contribute positively to the older person's identity.

Indeed, because friendship rests on a mutual choice and mutual need and involves a voluntary exchange of sociability between equals, it sustains a person's sense of usefulness and self-esteem more effectively than filial relationships (1973:67).

Respondents were questioned about exchange of assistance with their friends (See Tables 6.11 and 6.12). Approximately 81 percent (82 respondents) of the community-dwelling reported receiving some type of help from a friend while approximately 78 percent (79 respondents) reported giving some type of assistance. By and large, respondents have given and received similar kinds of assistance and in close to equal measure. Whereas family tended to be the providers of assistance in

TABLE 6.11

## ASSISTANCE RESPONDENTS RECEIVED FROM FRIENDS

Types of Help Received	<u>Community-Dwelling</u>	<u>Apartment-Dwelling</u>
	Percent of Respondents Receiving Help <sup>1</sup> (N=101)	Percent of Respondents Receiving Help <sup>2</sup> (N=30)
Provide a Home	-	-
Financial Help or Loan	-	-
Advice	15.8	33.3
Personal Services (e.g. Errands)	28.7	60.0
Help with Household Chores	7.9	10.0
Home Repairs	4.0	-
Personal Care in Illness	1.0	13.3
Emotional or Moral Support	58.4	80.0
Other Kinds of Help Not Mentioned	36.6	46.6

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample (N=101), 19 respondents (18.8%) said they did not receive any help.

<sup>2</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample, however one respondent, from whom information was not obtained, has been omitted, thus (N=30). Only one respondent in this sample said no help was received.

TABLE 6.12

## ASSISTANCE RESPONDENTS HAVE GIVEN FRIENDS

Types of Help Given	<u>Community-Dwelling</u>	<u>Apartment-Dwelling</u>
	Percent of Respondents Giving Help <sup>1</sup> (N=101)	Percent of Respondents Giving Help <sup>2</sup> (N=30)
Provide a Home	-	-
Financial Help or Loan	-	-
Advice	14.8	33.3
Personal Services (e.g. Errands)	21.8	26.7
Help with Household Chores	2.0	10.0
Home Repairs	-	-
Personal Care in Illness	4.0	6.7
Emotional or Moral Support	60.4	70.0
Other Kinds of Help Not Mentioned	42.6	20.0

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample (N=101), 22 respondents (21.8%) said they had not given help.

<sup>2</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample, however one respondent, from whom information was not obtained, has been omitted, thus (N=30). Four respondents (13.3%) said they gave no help.

such areas as - advice, personal services, help with household chores, home repairs, and emotional and moral support (See Table 5.16)- friends, while also providing some of these types of help, tend to give mostly emotional and moral support. Emotional and moral support is also the type of help that these older women most often give to friends. This type of assistance elderly friends can give each other regardless of their financial situation or state of physical health, and it can almost always be reciprocated.

Based on the types and amount of assistance observed and recorded in field notes, as well as data obtained from other comments that respondents made about their friendship relations, it seems quite likely that the amount of assistance both given and received may have been underestimated and underreported. A respondent might maintain that help was neither given nor received, but would later reveal that she did do "little things" for her friends or that they did "little things" for her. "Little things" included: sewing (e.g. shortening a hem or altering a dress), providing transportation, giving food or baked goods, keeping an eye on another's house or apartment while one or the other was away, accompanying a friend to the doctor's office, or making a daily telephone call just to check on a friend.<sup>12</sup>

New recipes, baked goods, and food in one form or another were exchanged among friends on many and any occasions. Friends recuperating from illness or in bereavement were especially likely to be given this type of assistance.

Whenever I know of a person in trouble, I'm there....[When her friend's husband died] right away I made a meat loaf and took it over so they would have it for the first day. (No. 73-79 yrs.)

Respondents were asked only about help they gave, or received, "in the past year". However, friendships generally have a history, and in order to truly understand exchange patterns between friends and the implications that such transactions may have for identity, it is necessary to know something about the giving and receiving that has transpired over many years, if not a lifetime, of friendship. While some of the deeds referred to did occur in the past year, most of them, though fresh in the minds of the respondents, took place many years earlier. The exchanges described below illustrate not only the depth and meaning associated with a close friendship, but also that what is given at any one time may not be repaid for many years.

Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, I knew her for sixty years. When my husband died, she came and stayed with us for many nights. I went over when her daughter was killed in a car accident. (No. 109-88 yrs.)

\_\_\_\_\_ just lost her husband, I stayed with her for a few nights. (This friend had done the same for her years earlier). (No. 36-73 yrs.)

When her husband died, I was the first one who was called. When her sister died in the States, I was called and I go. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

Thus, with cross-sectional data alone, it becomes very difficult to determine whether giving and receiving among friends is reciprocal. While it may appear that an elderly woman is receiving much more help than she is giving, and the assumption may be made that her identity is being jeopardized, this may not be her interpretation of her situation. While she may no longer be able to give as she once did, her self-image

may remain intact as she finds security in the knowledge that she has a history of giving, a reputation as a giver that is built into her current identity.

I've done things for people that people remember me.  
(No. 127-94 yrs.)

Anybody can tell you, I do my share. You ask [a good friend], she'll tell you about me...[she has told me] "when you die, you are one person who will be missed in Bridgewater". (No. 73-79 yrs.)

When two people have been close associates for years, reciprocity tends to become 'generalized'. Friends know that "somewhere along the line it will come back" to them. One respondent, who does a great deal for her friends but is modest in reporting it, talked about a lifelong friend from whom she received a great deal of support many years earlier when her child was terminally ill. Now, she provides transportation for her elderly friend.

She was so good to help me with my little girl, now I take them to church every time they go. (No. 84-67 yrs.)

To understand the meaning of friendships in later life for the individuals involved, one must become informed on their history. As individuals journey the life course, most participate in numerous interpersonal exchanges and social relationships that come to constitute what Matthews (1986a; 1986b) refers to as their "populated biographies". The findings of the present study indicate that an investigation of the "populated biographies" of older individuals and the interpretations they attach to them, can contribute significantly to an understanding of the meanings that older persons associate with their current relationships.



As other researchers (e.g. Rosow, 1967; Hochschild, 1973) have pointed out, friends and family are separate dimensions of social involvement. Older people's relations with their friends are, for the most part, different from and complementary to their relations with their family. Though both friends and family sometimes provide similar types of assistance, the two networks also function to meet different needs. Friendships generally were found to be the source of confidants, an emotional support that only a friend can supply. Since most friends are age peers and thus share similar experiences and problems, the older woman may find it easier and more useful to turn to them, rather than family, with many of her concerns or "little troubles". Though the older woman may feel that her family are most important to her, there are situations where friends are more helpful, and there are some problems in which one just doesn't want to involve family.

...But sometimes you can call on your friends where you couldn't your family, you can call on them if you want company. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

Sometimes you can get more satisfaction from friends than family. (No. 116-70 yrs.)

I think your friends have more sympathy for you. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

I can talk more with this woman [a close friend] than I can with my family. (No. 4-82 yrs.)

In particular, when respondents felt lonely, they often turned to their friends for this kind of support.

If I get lonely, I go over to [her friend], or I talk with people on the phone. (No. 99-69 yrs.)

I'll tell you something, you let yourself get that way. The only thing I can do then is get going. I have a friend on the other side of the river, \_\_\_\_\_, I call her up and talk for half an hour. (No. 73-79 yrs.)

The availability of a close friend as a confidant, one to go to for assistance, or one that can be depended upon, also protects the older woman's view of herself as an 'independent self'. By drawing on her friends to meet certain needs (e.g. combating loneliness, seeking advice) she need draw on her family less, thereby preserving a degree of independence from them. She can retain her image of herself as, not one to burden family with her troubles. The knowledge that she can depend on her friends to be there when they are needed provides her with a sense of security, a feeling that she is not alone with her troubles. Knowing that, "I have a good many that I feel I could go to for anything" (No. 71-75 yrs.), supports the older woman's 'secure self'.

It is, of course, not always possible that friends be 'equal' in their ability to give and receive. Some elderly women do not have "the same things to offer and the same needs to fill" (Hochschild, 1973) as their friends do. This appeared to be most often true in cases where respondents had friendships with considerably younger people. From an objective view, at least, many of these exchanges appeared to be asymmetrical and the relationship resembled the parent-child type. However, even in cases such as these, reciprocation is considered essential and the elderly woman will "try to think of something to do" for the giver, "maybe take them something", to repay the favor. If the elderly woman's resources are few and her health poor, preserving her

identity as a giver and not just a receiver can be difficult, but the will to do so is still strong.

A case in point involves a ninety year old widowed respondent who enjoys the close friendship of two considerably younger friends. These two women take her shopping, mail letters, visit, phone, plant her vegetable garden and are largely responsible for enabling her to remain in her own home. Upon visiting her one day, the researcher found her fatigued and weary, lying on the livingroom sofa, "resting her feet". She said she was tired, having been busy all morning baking biscuits and cookies to give to her friends.

I must do it, they do so much for me and they won't take anything. (No. 57-90 yrs.)

Others find less demanding ways of reciprocating. For example, a disabled respondent, whose friend regularly sends her books, says,

The only way I can repay her is to send \$20 and say-  
"This is for a good chinese dinner". (No. 65-75 yrs.)

Transportation is a form of assistance much in demand among these elderly women, and friends often provide it. Respondents described various ways in which they returned this favor. For the friend down the road, who drives her to church, one elderly woman crochets doilies and tries to think of other "little things" she can do. Paying for gas is a typical form of reciprocation.

I filled her tank and now I feel better. (No. 76-80 yrs.)

A ninety-four old respondent, who for years "always had a car full wherever I went", now must accept transportation from her friends. For one of these, she recently "hooked a mat because she takes me to the

bowling alley". For others who sometimes take her to card parties, she says - "I often pay their way in". Whether or not paying "their way in" or "filling the tank" is equal to the provision of a ride, the elderly woman does "feel better" and thereby preserves her identity as a giver and not just a receiver. For identity maintenance, what is important "is not reciprocity per se", but, the "belief that there is reciprocity" (Matthews, 1986a:243-244).

Involvement in a stable friendship network contributes to self-continuity in later life. Respondents' commitment to their "old friends", and their perception of them as "the best", may be related to the fact that so much of self has been invested in them. To the extent that a person is what he has been, life long friendships may be particularly important to an older person because memories of a former self (or selves) are embodied in these relationships (Hess, 1972). Erikson (1959:102) speaks of self-continuity as "...a persistent sameness within oneself" and "a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others". Participating in a stable friendship network means involvement with others who "share with the older person the knowledge of who and what he was before he grew old" (Blau, 1973:113) and this functions to preserve sameness of identity. Since many of the respondents have lived most, if not an entire lifetime within the same community, and been involved in enduring local friendships, it has been possible for them, as older persons, "to continue 'to be'" and not to be relegated to the status of "has beens" (Blau, 1973:114).

Blau has found that those who participate in a stable friendship group or clique less often consider themselves old than those who do not participate in such groups. The stability of these relationships "prevents mutual awareness of the gradual alterations taking place among the participants". Consequently, these "recurrent gatherings of the same people lend a sense of continuity to each participants' identity" (1973:108). Friends (as reported in an earlier chapter) often confirm the older woman's view of herself as 'not old'. It may be that friends do not notice oldness in each other because, if alterations have occurred, they have occurred to them also. As one respondent (a member of an enduring informal bridge club and friendship clique) put it, "all my friends got old with me" (No. 71-75 yrs.). Other respondents also commented on the fact that, in the experience of growing old, they and their associates shared a mutual situation.

We are all in the same boat. (No. 79-73 yrs.)

I guess they are all in the same shoe as I am. (No. 108-86 yrs.)

Friendship relations in later life provide much of the social integration that is necessary if identity is to be sustained. Some respondents were drawn into social activity by the encouragement or friendly push of one of their close associates. They began to attend the local senior's club because a friend had coaxed them to go, and they attend various events such as church suppers and card parties because they have friends with whom they can go. ("Everything we do, we do together" (No. 42-71 yrs.)). The companionship and accompaniment of another often encourages both to get out and can be especially important

to widowed women. After her husband's death, going places again can be very difficult for an elderly woman on her own ("I minded going places alone" (No. 20-84 yrs.)) but less so if she can go with a friend. If an elderly woman lives alone and has the good fortune of owning a car, a friend who consents to go with her is welcomed company and each an encouragement for the other to go.

Sometimes she takes me places with her, to the valley, Kentville and around, she lives alone. (No. 49-66 yrs.)

By the same token, not having a friend to go places or do things with can result in an elderly woman staying home, disengaging or dropping out of the activities in which she was once involved. Several respondents indicated that they had withdrawn from certain social activities, at least in part, because the friend who usually went with them was no longer going, or because their special friends were no longer there.

The more senior ones were dropping out. A number of us gave up at the same time. (No. 57-90 yrs.)

I don't miss it now because a lot of those woman are gone. (No. 43-88 yrs.)

I'm not really interested now, the people there are all different ones now. (No. 48-86 yrs.)

Others complained that they would like to do certain things and go more, if only they had a friend who would accompany them.

\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't want to go and I don't want to go alone. (No. 28-80 yrs.)

The friendship network also contributes to identity maintenance in old age as an arena where many of the personal attributes (e.g. "thoughtful", "considerate", "trustworthy", "good-natured", "sincere",

"sympathetic", "helpful" and "kind") that comprise important components of the older woman's identity are realized and confirmed. It is within this network that one's conception of self as a certain type of person is validated by significant others, where reputations such as, "staunch friend", "one who can always be depended on" or, "guardian angel" are brought into being and kept alive. There is pride in knowing that one has always been a "real friend", that not only do I confide in others but I have been confided in, and can be counted on to keep another's secrets - "I hold a good many secrets my dear, some good and some bad" (No. 103-91 yrs.). These friendship ties provide the elderly woman with the opportunity of extending her nurturing and expressive role beyond her family, who now need her nurturing less, to others who need and appreciate her more. The knowledge that one is considered by another as her "true friend", that one is still of use to another (even if only in the ability to lend a sympathetic ear) helps to sustain the older woman's sense of being and worth.

There is also, in itself, a certain amount of status in having friends and being known to others as one who has "many". As reported earlier, most respondents claimed to have many friends and several women included in their TST response statements like, "I have a lot of friends". When asked, "About how many friends would you say you have?" these respondents proudly proclaimed their status as one who has many.

Oh my gosh don't ask me, I have loads of friends my dear. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

If I were to tell you about all of them, there wouldn't be paper enough. (No. 14-84 yrs.)

When it comes to teas, I find it hard to stop at thirty-five. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

There was little evidence of friendships as a source of negative, rather than supportive or positive ties. Perhaps, in contrast to family members who feel they can be forthright in their opinions and actions, friends need to be cautiously supportive even if this entails being a little less than honest. One's friends are more strongly motivated to be willing accomplices in the identity management process since they also need a more or less dependable source of support for their own idealized self-conceptions. Also, while it is difficult to dispense with ascribed ties to family members, one can (especially if one is lucky enough to have several) sever one's ties with unsupportive friends.

That a friendship, if it is not supportive, can indeed be invalidated or redefined was illustrated in one case involving an eighty-eight year old widowed respondent. This woman said, that when she recently complained about her health problems to her 'friend', she was surprised to find that she did not receive the supportive sympathy she expected, but was told instead that she perhaps "ought to go to a nursing home". The respondent then said to the researcher - "and I thought she was my friend".

#### SUMMARY

This chapter has examined the friendship networks of older women and found that most of the elderly respondents in this study have a number of friends and more importantly, the majority have at least one



'close' or intimate friend. Most friendships are localized, with well over half the respondents having at least one close friend who is also their neighbor. Friends see each other quite often and regular telephone contact is typical. Most friendships have existed for many years. Most intimate associates are women and most are age peers. True friendship, it was found, is built on trust. To have a 'close' friend is to have a confidant, someone who can be depended upon "to be there" whether for assistance or just companionship.

The vast majority of the respondents appear to be satisfied with their friendships and very few wish to have more. The quality of one's relationships is felt to be more important than the quantity of ties. Friendship is very important to widows and they are no less involved with friends than other respondents. The life long friendship networks of widowed respondents were found to exhibit a considerable degree of stability with almost three-quarters saying that their friendships changed very little following their husband's death. Many of those who did find that they had fewer friends soon after the death of their spouse, made new friends or rekindled old relationships with women who were now also widowed. Indeed, some women found themselves with more friends in widowhood than they had ever had before.

On the whole friendships were the source of supportive ties and the friendship network was found to contribute positively to identity maintenance in later life. As such, ties of friendship appear to be a sound base upon which to build investments of self. Friendships with age peers provide the elderly woman with the opportunity for involvement in reciprocal relationships where those of similar status "depend on and

give to each other equally". Emotional support and other types of assistance can be exchanged with less likelihood that identity will be jeopardized. Respondents not only received from their friends, most gave as well, and this giving contributes to feelings of usefulness, helping to sustain self-esteem. Though friendships with younger people tend to be in some ways asymmetrical, older women do contribute something to these relationships or they would not likely be sustained. These associations can also be the source of informal roles such as "adopted grandmother", "mum" or "advisor".

Friendships, it was argued, support the older woman's view of herself as an independent self' and 'secure self'. Stable friendships contribute to self-continuity, ensure that meaningful reputations live on, and reassure the elderly woman that, though she has grown older in years, she is still the same person she once was. Friends are integraters and elderly friends encourage one another to keep involved in the social interaction that is essential if self-identity is to be sustained. Especially important, the friendship network is an arena where those personal attributes that were earlier shown to be prized components of the older woman's identity, are maintained. Thus, elderly friends are allies in the process of identity management, confirming each for the other, that while others may define me as an 'old woman', to my close friends, I am an important person and a respected and cared for human being.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 One of these later reported that her daughter was her only close friend. Although immediate family members such as children or siblings were not recorded under the category 'close friend', more distant kin such as cousins or sisters-in-law were. However, close friends of this type were in the minority. No respondents reported that their spouse was their close friend.
- 2 A number of respondents listed more than five, however, five was the maximum number of close friends recorded.
- 3 Only two of the seven respondents, who said they had less than five friends, were over the age of eighty. Only one of the four, who had no close friends at all, was over eighty, and only 36% of those with only one close friend were of that age.
- 4 Difference in health status is also a factor here. However, the fact that self-perceived health is not quite as good for the apartment-dwelling respondents as it is for the community-dwelling (55% fair/poor versus 41% fair/poor) should be offset by the advantages of proximity (e.g. elimination of transportation as a problem).
- 5 Distance may be a factor here since more of the apartment-dwelling have their nearest close friend living outside the town (25% compared to 8% of the community-dwelling). Even though, in most cases, these friends do not live all that far away, any distance, no matter how minimal, if it prohibits walking to a friend's house, can act as a constraint on frequent face-to-face contact.
- 6 Seventy-five percent in the apartment-dwelling sample both called a friend and received a call this recently. In the nursing home sample, respondents telephoned more recently (50% a week ago or more) than they were phoned (33.4% a week ago or more).
- 7 Letter writing is also uncommon in the non-community-dwelling samples where 83.3 percent of the nursing home respondents and 87.5 percent of the apartment-dwelling reported that they either did not write their close friends at all or wrote rarely.
- 8 N=86 since eleven respondents have only one close friend.
- 9 An age peer is defined here as a close friend whose age is within ten years of the respondent's age. Thus, a friend who was ten years or more younger was considered to be a 'younger' friend, ten years or more older, an 'older' friend.

- 10 As might be expected, a greater proportion of the nursing home sample (83.3%) have at least one friend who is younger than them, and more are older. However, even though the mean age of the apartment-dwelling and community-dwelling respondents is similar, considerably fewer of the former (41.7% versus 61.8%) have at least one younger friend. Thus, while this setting may enhance the opportunity for developing friendships with one's age peers, it may not be advantageous for the development of friendships with younger people.
- 11 Though respondents had previously been asked, "Who do you feel to be 'close friends'?" rarely did any of them ask what was meant by the term and thus the researcher had no need to offer explanations which might have influenced their own definition of it.
- 12 If reported at the time when the question on exchange of help was asked, some of this type of assistance was included in the category 'other'. Transportation, for example, was usually recorded here. Among the apartment-dwelling respondents these "little things" included, making beds, help with laundry, taking out the garbage, gathering mail and mailing letters, sharing cabs, and checking on each other.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### NEIGHBORING AND LEISURE PURSUITS

Chapters Five and Six have illustrated that the majority of the elderly women interviewed in this study find support for meaningful identities within their family and friendship networks. This chapter demonstrates that there are yet other avenues wherein the self-meanings and self-esteem of older women can be developed and affirmed. The first part of the chapter examines the older woman's relations with her neighbors; the second looks at how elderly women spend their leisure time focusing primarily on their organizational involvements. As the data illustrate, for those who desire it, within these networks also there are numerous opportunities for constructing meaningful identities and obtaining the necessary support that sustains them.

#### THE NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORK

For most of the elderly women in this study, neighbors are another available social resource. Ninety-five of the community-dwelling respondents (94.1%) reported that they had substantial contact (i.e. had contact with more than simply to say "hello") with at least one of their neighbors.<sup>1</sup> While fifteen of these respondents (15.8%) had substantial contact with only one of their neighbors, a majority (64.2%) had such contact with from two to four. An additional 20 percent had contact with four or more of their neighbors. The mean number of neighbors interacted with was 2.7.

It would appear from the respondents in this study that, as chronological age increases, the proportion of elderly women having sustained contact with neighbors (particularly contact with more than one neighbor) decreases (Table 7.1). The older the elderly woman the more likely it is that she has outlived her 'old' neighbors ("they are gone too you see" (No. 43-88 yrs.)) and younger people are now living next door ("not now, they are all young now" (No. 23-91 yrs.)). Thus, while most (about 62%) had contact with at least one neighbor who was no more than ten years older or younger than themselves, approximately 42 percent of all neighbors interacted with were less than sixty years of age.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-six respondents (27.3%) had contact with at least one neighbor whose age was in the twenties or thirties and fifty-four respondents (56.8%) had contact with at least one whose age was in the forties or fifties.

Although neighbor's age and the length of time that they have been a respondent's neighbor need not necessarily be related, they often are. Thus, for our respondents, neighbors comprise a mixture of persons who are both younger and older than themselves who may also be both 'old' (i.e. long-term) and 'new' (more recent) neighbors. This mixture reflects the fact that, in recent years, there has been an influx of new and generally younger people into Bridgewater. Thus, while approximately 41 percent of all neighbors have been a respondent's neighbor for more than twenty years, 43 percent have been a neighbor for only ten years or less. Also, while about 62 percent have at least one neighbor who has been a neighbor for more than twenty years, half (50.5%) have at least one who has been their neighbor for no more than

TABLE 7.1

## CONTACT WITH NEIGHBORS RELATED TO AGE OF RESPONDENT

Amount of Contact	<u>Age Categories</u>		
	65-74 (N=47) %	75-84 (N=41) %	85 and Over (N=13) %
No Contact	4.3	7.3	7.7
Only One	10.6	17.1	23.1
Two or More	85.1	75.6	69.2

five to ten years and 22 percent have at least one who has been their neighbor for less than five years.

Similar to friendships, most of the neighbors that respondents are in contact with are women. Of the male neighbors listed as "in regular contact with", only thirteen (5% of all neighbors listed) were men who were not the husbands of female neighbors.

Most of the respondents who are in touch with their neighbors are in frequent contact. Thus, 46 percent of the community-dwelling have daily contact with a neighbor (see Table 7.2), while 88.4 percent are in touch with a neighbor as often as once a week. Contact with neighbors in the apartment sample is even more frequent. Every respondent in this sample had contact with at least one neighbor and almost 87 percent said that they were in touch with a neighbor every

TABLE 7.2

## FREQUENCY OF CONTACT WITH NEIGHBORS

How Often In Touch	Samples			
	Community-Dwelling (N=95)		Apartment-Dwelling (N=30)	
	N	%	N	%
Several Times a Day	8	8.4	6	20.0
Every Day	36	37.9	20	66.7
Every Two or Three Days	17	17.9	3	10.0
About Once a Week	23	24.2	1	3.3
Every Couple of Weeks	5	5.3	-	-
About Once a Month	5	5.3	-	-
Less Than Above	1	1.0	-	-

day, if not several times a day. As respondents themselves pointed out, frequent contact with neighbors, in buildings such as these, is almost inevitable since, doing laundry, picking up mail, putting out garbage, and so forth can all be occasions for contact. Also, residents share a common social room where neighbors are likely to be encountered.

THE NATURE OF RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORS AND THE  
CONTRIBUTION OF THIS NETWORK TO IDENTITY MAINTENANCE

Most described their relations with neighbors as "warm" and "friendly". However, there was a definite tendency for respondents to



talk about the way in which neighboring relations had changed over the years. It can be concluded that basically two styles of neighboring now co-exist in the town. In the 'old style' of neighboring (usually typical of long-time neighbors, and favored by many respondents) visiting back and forth was frequent, with neighbors often dropping in unannounced any time of the day. In the summer, they often spontaneously got together outdoors. Neighbors got together just to share a cup of tea and a freshly baked dessert, and even now some elderly long-time neighbors get together in this manner.

We are back and forth all the time. We sit out together in the summer. We can run in on each other and feel good about it. (No. 71-75 yrs.)

We are back and forth all the time. We pop back and forth, we aren't fussy what time of day it is. (No. 47-76 yrs.)

They come here anytime. She runs in here anytime wanting to know if we're having a cup of tea, she makes desserts and brings them. (No. 91-79 yrs.)

The 'new style' of neighboring (usually encountered where the respondent's neighbors were younger) is best described by the typical comment, "we're friendly but we don't visit a lot". In fact, such neighbors never came to the house without "telephoning for permission first" and are often perceived as being "too busy" to take the time to drop in for a cup of tea. Most, who complained about this perceived change in neighboring relations, lamented the loss of the old style and the closeness they had shared with their former neighbors.

Neighbors aren't like they used to be. We're friendly but we don't visit a lot. One time neighbors used to come and spend an evening, now they are always going. (No. 32-87 yrs.)

Times have changed - the old fashioned cup of tea - it's changed....The old neighbors are all gone. There are just transients now for neighbors. I'm friendly with them but not close. (No. 50-70 yrs.)

Two respondents, who had been very close to their old neighbors, deeply regretted this change and described the changes, as they saw them, in considerable detail.

We knew everyone on this block, there wasn't an evening that someone wasn't in. Years ago they were neighbors, you know what I mean? You'd be out in the yard and they'd be over right away. Today, there's so much going on, they don't have time. Years ago, when the mothers were home and they had a minute while the kids were in school, they'd drop in for coffee or a cup of tea. (No. 62-86 yrs.)

It used to be once a week we would have sing songs. If they smelled my brown bread or my ginger cookies, they would be right over and we'd have a pot-luck lunch. When the \_\_\_\_\_'s moved that was the last straw. I had a letter from them last week, we were very close. \_\_\_\_\_ was my next door neighbor and we were just like sisters. \_\_\_\_\_, we were always together, did our quilts together. I used to go up through the woods, now it's an avenue. Now there is no contact like there used to be. We were like a big happy family years ago. Now it's all changed, you don't know who's next door. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

Typically, talk about change in neighboring style was associated with a reference to changes in the neighborhood itself, primarily the fact that new people had moved into the town.

It's just as though you lived in the city, you don't know who lives next door. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

So many people have moved here and are strangers to us. It's a very transient town. (No. 54-72 yrs.)

New people usually meant younger people and a mismatch of life-stage interests and activities. Younger neighbors apparently just didn't have the time available for what many of these elderly respondents considered

to be 'proper neighboring'. Relationships with new neighbors are different, not just because they are new and younger neighbors, but because the world has changed. Interests have become more individualized, cars take people elsewhere, and television entertains people in their own homes.

Today people don't visit back and forth because T.V. takes their interest. (No. 86-71 yrs.)

The phone and T.V. has ruined relationships, you don't go as often, people don't go like they used to. (No. 82-82 yrs.)

Today, they all have their own thing. (No. 87-82 yrs.)

Still, most appeared to be adjusting well to these changes and the new 'norms' of neighboring, perhaps because most still had at least one 'old' neighbor in their neighborhood network. Eighty-one percent had contact with at least one neighbor who was 60 years or older. Thirty-nine women (41%) associated with at least one neighbor who was in their seventies, while twenty-two women (23%) had contact with a neighbor who was 80 years or older. Also, many did develop satisfying relations with younger neighbors. In many such cases, the elderly woman had discovered that her younger neighbor had much more to exchange and share than had been anticipated.

Neighbors were often described not only as, "the very best", "wonderful", and "very friendly", but as "helpful", people who could be depended on as a willing source of assistance, should it be needed. Even if they were never called upon to help, neighbors - because of the perception of them as 'being there' should they be needed - also contribute to the elderly woman's independent and secure self.

We have a good neighborhood, they are all willing to help. (No. 8-74 yrs.)

Very friendly, the kind you could call on if you needed to. (No. 26-86 yrs.)

I could call on any one of them and they would be right there. They would do anything for me if I had to ask- I don't, but they would. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

Though not as many respondents received assistance from neighbors as from family and friends, there is evidence that neighbors actually do provide assistance. Approximately 69 percent of the respondents reported that they received some type of help from a neighbor in the past year, while 65 percent said that they had given it (see Tables 7.3 and 7.4). Though there were notable exceptions, neighbors, like friends, do not, as a rule provide major forms of assistance (e.g. heavy household chores, home repairs, personal care in illness). Family remain the chief source of this type of help, probably because, having given a lot to her family, the elderly woman feels they owe her more and, "after all, they are your own flesh and blood". Likewise, although neighbors sometimes provide emotional and moral support, this kind of assistance is more likely to come from the older woman's family and close friends.<sup>3</sup>

A lot of the assistance exchanged between neighbors is similar to the "little things" that respondents said they exchanged with their friends. Keeping an eye out for, or "checking on" each other, is a typical example and though the effort expended in providing it is usually minor, this kind of assistance can be very meaningful to the receiver.

TABLE 7.3

## ASSISTANCE RESPONDENTS RECEIVED FROM NEIGHBORS

Types of Help Received	<u>Community-Dwelling</u>	<u>Apartment-Dwelling</u>
	Percent of Respondents Receiving Help <sup>1</sup> (N=101)	Percent of Respondents Receiving Help <sup>2</sup> (N=30)
Provide a Home	-	-
Financial Help or Loan	-	-
Advice	11.9	10.0
Personal Services (e.g. Errands)	25.7	60.0
Help with Household Chores	8.9	10.0
Home Repairs	11.9	-
Personal Care in Illness	4.0	10.0
Emotional or Moral Support	28.7	23.3
Other Kinds of Help Not Mentioned	50.5	86.7

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample (N=101), 31 community-dwelling respondents (30.7%) said they did not receive any help.

<sup>2</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample, however one respondent, from whom information was not obtained, has been omitted, thus (N=30). In this sample 3 respondents (10%) said they had not received help.

TABLE 7.4

## ASSISTANCE RESPONDENTS GAVE TO NEIGHBORS

Types of Help Given	<u>Community-Dwelling</u> Percent of Respondents Giving Help <sup>1</sup> (N=101)	<u>Apartment-Dwelling</u> Percent of Respondents Giving Help <sup>2</sup> (N=30)
Provide a Home	-	-
Financial Help or Loan	-	-
Advice	3.0	13.3
Personal Services (e.g. Errands)	16.8	40.0
Help with Household Chores	-	-
Home Repairs	-	-
Personal Care in Illness	2.0	13.3
Emotional or Moral Support	25.7	33.3
Other Kinds of Help Not Mentioned	47.5	60.0

<sup>1</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample (N=101), 35 (34.6%) of the community-dwelling said they did not give help.

<sup>2</sup>Percentages are based on the total number of respondents in the sample, however one respondent, from whom information was not obtained, has been omitted. 8 (26.7%) respondents said they did not give help.

We decided that where they are alone and I'm alone, we should make a point of checking on each other. (No. 15-78 yrs.)

If they see my car's not out of the garage for a couple of days, they come in. (No. 63-71 yrs.)

He keeps a check on me when he knows I'm alone at night. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

If they don't see me out, they call me. (No. 51-74 yrs.)

As with neighbors of all ages, when one or the other is away, these respondents and their neighbors often keep an eye on each other's homes, water the plants, take in the mail, and sometimes provide food and water for a cat or a dog. Exchanges of food are common, especially in times of illness or bereavement.

\_\_\_\_\_ had open heart surgery and I took up food. (No. 16-73 yrs.)

\_\_\_\_\_ came over the other night and brought me a loaf of brown bread and I share with her. (No. 69-82 yrs.)

He gives me fish and I supply him with fresh lettuce. (No. 90-66 yrs.)

Like exchanges between friends, exchanges between neighbors are generally reciprocal. Since what is given is generally not a major type of assistance, it is easier for the elderly woman to return a favor, thereby maintaining her self-image as a giver. Even if she is unable to reciprocate a neighbor for a particular service rendered, she may retain her image as a giver by similarly assisting someone else. Thus, an eighty-nine year old housebound respondent, who lives alone, is checked on by her younger next-door neighbors. In turn, she does the same thing - via the telephone - for an elderly neighbor down the road. He too is

ill and housebound and she calls him regularly, "just to see if he's all right". Even those who are less physically able can find ways of assisting a neighbor. The same elderly respondent, referred to above, is able to retain her view of herself as one who has always been willing to do for others, at least in part, by drawing upon her accounting skills to help neighbors prepare their income tax forms. Another eighty-four year old respondent retains feelings of usefulness in providing emotional support and encouragement to a depressed neighbor. An eighty-two year old respondent provides child care for one neighbor and accompanies a second elderly neighbor who cannot go out alone. A seventy-six year old, despite poor health, still feels useful to others because she finds "a lot of little things" to do that preserve her image of herself as a giver and one who is helpful to others.

I have a neighbor who is not very well, she's depressed. I sit and talk with her, hoping I can help her. I encourage her. (No. 20-84 yrs.)

I'm of use to Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ taking care of her little girl, and my neighbor \_\_\_\_\_, she can't go shopping alone. (No. 69-82 yrs.)

Because I do a lot of things around here for people, not much mind you, a lot of little things - and outside too, not all that much, but I still do em. (No. 140-76 yrs.)

Thus, while elderly neighbors may not always be able to give "in equal measure" (see Hochschild, 1973) most still manage to give. While their younger neighbors sometimes provided them with transportation, mowed their lawns, or removed snow from their walkways, elderly women usually in some way reciprocated, perhaps by - paying for the gas, baking bread or cookies, or providing child care. While the young man next door mows the lawn for one elderly respondent, she, in turn, lends



him tools and ladders, and often provides after school care for his young children. And, whether she is called upon or not, in the same way that the older woman feels her neighbors are there for her, should she need them, she can also believe that she too is there for them.

I know they are there if I need them and they know where to find me. (No. 64-71 yrs.)

Thus, in 'being there', being "friendly" and "helpful", even in old age, one can retain one's identity as a "good neighbor".

Since, in the apartment sample, most respondents were status similars, most neighbors were "social siblings" (see Hochschild, 1973:64-66), with pretty much the same needs to be met and ability to give, and exchange relations tend to be reciprocal. Also, most give and receive the same type of goods and services. Cabs are shared and newspapers exchanged, items purchased for another when one is out shopping. Recipes, baked goods, and food are shared. When one resident is ill, another may "do light housework", gather the mail, or bring her a meal. Keys are exchanged and, when one is away, the other keeps an eye on her apartment and waters her plants.

Many of these exchanges resemble those Hochschild observed among the elderly widows of Merrill Court who were involved in a similar type of "checking up system".

Neighboring is also a way to detect sickness or death. As Ernestine related, "this morning I looked to see if Judson's curtains were open. That's how we do on this floor, when we get up we open our curtains just a bit, so others walking by outside know that everything's all right. And if the curtains aren't drawn by mid-morning, we knock to see" (1973:53).

Several of the apartment-dwelling respondents told the researcher that neighbors regularly checked on one another. One woman described a recent experience where, during illness, she had tried to make herself a cup of tea and forgot and left a burner on. Because she had left her door open, her next door neighbor was able to come in and turn it off. This woman told the researcher, "when you're sick like that, you leave your door open"; doors are left unlocked so that a sick individual's neighbor can keep an eye on her, perhaps bring a bowl of soup or make her a cup of tea. Neighbors are always on the look out for anything unusual and if someone fails to appear, or is not heard from by a certain time, their neighbors soon investigate.

It's just like this here, if I got up in the morning and I didn't go out all day, there would be someone here to see if I was okay. We're like one big family. (No. 140-76 yrs.)

There was also more giving and receiving of certain types of help such as personal services and personal care in illness, than there was in the community-dwelling sample. It may be that this type of assistance was required more here because more were afflicted with health problems. About 55 percent reported their health as being only fair or poor, compared to 41 percent of the community-dwelling.<sup>4</sup> Also, it is easier to bring a neighbor an item from the grocery store, take out her garbage, or make her bed, if she lives only a few feet away.

Although much of the exchange between neighbors in the apartment-dwelling sample was reciprocal, there were some within this setting, whose identity as a giver, and an independent 'not old' person, was not as easily maintained. While 90 percent in this sample said that

they had received some type of assistance from a neighbor, only 73 percent said that they had given it. During the discussion of assistance exchanged among neighbors, a number of the respondents, each referring to the same individual, spoke of all the help that was being given to her.

We did what we could do of her work, whatever the homemaker didn't do, we worked it out between us. (No. 115-74 yrs.)

A number of respondents were providing assistance to a second woman as well.

Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, I help her out a lot. I take her meals. Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ is quite sick and everyone is taking her meals. They do that in here. (No. 123-69 yrs.)

In this context, it is significant that one respondent imputed to the recipient the status of a dependent - "she more or less depends on me" (No. 129-73 yrs.). It indicates that while the nurturing role is beneficial and status enhancing for the nurturer, it can be an identity threatening experience for the "poor dear" who must accept being nurtured. The term "poor dear" is borrowed from Hochschild who observed that elderly widowed respondents at Merrill Court developed "a shared system of ranking" where hierarchial distinctions were made, based upon the fortunate advantages that some of the old women had over the others. The hierarchy "honored residents at the top and pitied 'poor dears' at the bottom" (1973:59). Those who were lucky enough to have good health won honor and status, those in poor health were referred to as "poor dears" and acquired the inferior status of "have nots". Thus, when elderly women take it upon themselves (even if the motive is one of

genuine altruistic concern) to provide a lot of assistance to one who cannot return it, they acquire for themselves a position of identity-enhancing advantage, usually at the expense of the self-image of another.<sup>5</sup>

#### LEISURE ACTIVITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Analysis of the family, friendship, and neighborhood networks of older women has revealed that the view of elderly people as "alienated", "old and alone", is not substantiated in the small town context described here. Data on their leisure time involvements further debunk these conventional notions. Later life is often conceived of as a period of endless free time, with nothing to do; a period of diminishing social involvement. The stereotypical depiction of the little old, white-haired woman, sitting in her rocking chair knitting or sewing, or doing some other form of fancywork, is still very much with us. However, the majority of the elderly respondents studied here, are busily involved in a number of different activities and, where health has permitted it, involvements appear to have changed little over the years.

Sixty-five of the community-dwelling respondents (64.3%) belong to at least one organization or informal group. Forty women (39.6%) belong to two or more, while eighteen women (17.8%) belong to three or more groups. Most, who hold memberships, attend their groups regularly (Table 7.5). Slightly more than half (52.3%) attend as often as twice a month or more, while about 91 percent attend as frequently as once a month or more. These figures indicate that rate of attendance is high,

TABLE 7.5

## GROUP AND ORGANIZATIONAL ATTENDANCE

<u>Categories</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>%</u>
Every Day	-	-
Every Couple of Days	2	3.1
Weekly	15	23.1
About Twice a Month	17	26.1
Once a Month	25	38.5
Less Than Above	6	9.2
<hr/>		
Totals	65	100.0
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since most of the associations to which these women belong, do not meet more than once or twice monthly. In addition to regular attendance at monthly or bimonthly meetings, members devote considerable time to attendance at special events and the planning and carrying out of various sorts of projects (e.g. suppers and teas, craft sales and bazaars, and various other fund raising events such as the annual spring fling)<sup>6</sup> associated with their groups.

However, as Table 7.6 illustrates, the likelihood of involvement decreases in advanced old age. However, the difference is notable only for the eighty-five and over age group. Prior to that there is little difference among the age groups in the proportion of women belonging to

TABLE 7.6

## ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERSHIP RELATED TO AGE

Number of Memberships	Chronological Age Categories					
	65-74		75-84		85 and Over	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
None	14	29.8	14	34.1	8	61.5
One	14	29.8	9	22.0	2	15.4
Two or More	19	40.4	18	43.9	3	23.1
Totals	47	100.0	41	100.0	13	100.0

an organization. These findings support Cutler's (1977) research finding of both high and stable levels of organizational involvement among older people. He concluded that, under conditions of similar socio-economic status,

only toward the very late stages of the life cycle does the increasing prevalence of infirmities and mobility limitations begin to lower association activity levels appreciably (1977:471).

Thus, it is not age alone but an associated deterioration in health or ability that discourages associational involvement in later life. Of the six members in this study, who attended their groups irregularly, three were under the age of seventy-five. Two of these women said poor health interfered with their involvement, while the

third attended her group infrequently because of her husband's illness. Some of the women, who did not belong to any organizations at all, also said that they had given up their past involvement because of a deterioration in either their own or their husband's health. Several others said that lack of transportation prevented them from participating, and because of a strong desire to preserve independence, they would not accept transportation from others.

I can't walk and I think I'm too independent to ask them. (No. 62-86 yrs.)

I got no way of getting back and forth and I don't want to be asking others to drive me back and forth. (No. 98-86 yrs.)

Thus, not all who have curtailed their involvements in old age can be said to have voluntarily disengaged from associational activity.

At least a third of the thirty-six women, who did not belong to any organization, said that they never had belonged to such groups. Most of these respondents described themselves as lifelong independent types.

I never had the inclination to join, just not the type. (No. 46-68 yrs.)

No, I'm not a joiner. (No. 137-75 yrs.)

These elderly women cannot be said to have disengaged from such activity because they never were involved in the past, having been the type of person who never did "care a lot for that sort of thing".

The extent of organizational involvement in the seniors apartment sample is somewhat lower with only fifteen women (48.4%) holding membership in at least one group or organization and only six (19.3%) belonging to two or more associations. Involvement for these

women is also less varied with most belonging to either a church related group or a senior's club. While 80 percent attend a group as often as once a month or more, frequent attendance pertains primarily to the senior's club where many go weekly. Of the eight women, who belong to a group other than the senior's club, only five (33.3%) attend as regularly as once a month or more. Lower levels of involvement in this setting may be due to health problems and disabilities, as well as the need for assistance with transportation (both buildings are located at town extremities) being more prevalent than among the community-dwelling. Though they rarely have the opportunity of attending, five of the nursing home respondents (50%) are members of at least one organization. That these memberships have been retained suggests that belonging to an association can be very meaningful to older people and they maintain interest even when they are no longer able to actively participate.<sup>7</sup>

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND GROUP  
INVOLVEMENT TO IDENTITY MAINTENANCE

"I've been honored at the hospital auxiliary I don't know how many times - that gives your ego a boost. (No. 77-82 yrs.)

For most of these elderly women leisure activity is a continuation of what has been a lifelong pattern of involvement. While for men the worlds of work and leisure tend to be separate realms, for women (at least for most of the present generation of female elderly) work and leisure activities have been intertwined. Elderly women, thus,



do not experience the same abrupt shift from 'work' to 'leisure' experienced by men. Though a few respondents had taken up new involvements in later life, most of those who now belong to an organization or formal group have belonged for many years. Only four (6.2%) of the community-dwelling respondents who now belong to an association said they had joined an organization recently.

Several are charter members of an organization, while others proudly revealed that they held lifetime memberships or had become honorary members. After many years of involvement in a particular association, the participant can come to develop an attachment to it, so that, like an "old friend", it comes to hold a special meaning for her. The following respondents each had one particular group that they felt was most important to them. As the last respondent explains, after so many years of involvement, one can begin to feel that such a group has come to constitute a meaningful part of oneself.

It's the first one I belonged to and still it sticks with me. (No. 4-82 yrs.)

My church group, because we have had the same group since the 1940's. (No. 6-81 yrs.)

The Eastern Star, because I'm a charter member. (No. 11-71 yrs.)

Church group, because I've been going for 50 years and it's sort of like a part of you. (No. 60-74 yrs.)

Years of continuous organizational activity and involvement in community life, like a stable friendship network, contribute to self-continuity in later life. Years of participation in the same group, surrounded by a membership that has remained relatively unchanged, reinforces the elderly woman's sense of sameness of self. She is less

likely to perceive of herself as 'old' if she continues her life long routine of attending the same monthly or bimonthly meetings. Because she has (gradually) grown old with fellow members, who have also been attending with her year after year (working beside her, baking for teas and annual suppers, planning and executing special events), they are not likely to view her as an 'old' woman either. If she has slowed down, well, they have too.

Even if an individual is no longer able to attend regularly, but, "pays her dues", she can still feel that she is a member and experience self-continuity in her lifelong belonging. A ninety-five year old nursing home respondent retains her membership in two organizations, though attending only one of these and only on occasion. She explained that after 50 or more years of involvement (I've been a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ for years and years and years" (No. 102)), she has become very attached to her "group" and would never consider giving it up. A second resident, also in her nineties, still very much perceives of herself as a member of her church group, to which she too has belonged for years and years. Though rarely able to attend, she has managed to remain connected to it and her fellow members - "some of the women were here the other day, a lot of them come to visit me". She is thinking of having "the group" hold one of their meetings outdoors at the home - "they said they would hold it in my room if I wished; I'll always belong to my group, I think a lot of that (No. 103). For a third eighty-nine year old lifelong member of her church group, the attention she receives from this group is a source of pride and meaningful validation of her perception of herself as one who still counts.

I try to keep those [membership dues] up. I went to the senior's christmas party. I said I was going come hell or high water, and I really held court [i.e. so many people made a fuss over her]..."Oh \_\_\_\_\_ it's so good to see you". (No. 110)

Organizational activity also contributes to identity management as a forum or sphere where the elderly woman is guaranteed the opportunity "to do" for others, and thereby fulfill her need to be needed, to be productive and useful.<sup>8</sup> The majority of the groups, to which these women belong, are service oriented organizations thus enabling elderly women to extend their nurturing and expressive role beyond their family. Within associations such as these, her identity as "one who does for others" continues to be validated.

Though there is a degree of social activity associated with most associations, the groups to which these women belong, occupy positions on a continuum from the primarily social and/or recreational (e.g. the senior's club, bridge clubs and the curling club) to the primarily service (e.g. the hospital auxiliary and the literacy society). Only six (5.9%) in the community-dwelling and six (19.3%) in the apartment-dwelling belong to the primarily social groups. Of the total number of memberships (N=181) the largest proportion (64.1%, 116 memberships) are in associations that focus on providing some type of assistance or service. As members of, a women's church group, the I.O.D.E., the Women's Institute, the Hospital Auxiliary, the Legionettes, and either of two lodges, many of these women were participating in such purposeful activities as - visiting the sick and housebound, knitting and sewing for the "needy" or the hospital gift shop, baking for pantry sales, suppers and teas, selling tickets on raffles, and the planning and

executing of any of a number of other projects designed to raise funds for the hospital, scholarships and other worthy causes.

Significantly, when asked if any one group was more important to them than another, many selected a particular organization because it was one that promoted "doing good" and "helping others".

Red Cross, because it's helping others. (No. 17-70 yrs.)

Missionary Society, I think you can do more good. (No. 45-83 yrs.)

The Hospital Auxiliary, it's doing such good work. (No. 77-82 yrs.)

Some of those who no longer belonged, or were no longer able to attend these organizations, continued to contribute their service. Unable to participate as fully as they once did, these women found ways of helping out ("I help out in any way I can"). Thus, a seventy-six year old respondent, confined to her home because of illness, telephones members reminding them of meetings and upcoming events and always gives a donation to fund raising projects. Another sixty-nine year old woman, who dropped out of her church group when her husband became ill, bakes for pantry sales, teas and the annual church dinners as well as canvasses for donations to the auction held at the "Spring Fling". Thus, even if a decline in health prohibits full participation the elderly woman never need totally sever her tie to a valued organization. By becoming a member of the telephoning committee, donating "sugar bags and tea", or continuing to pay her dues, she can hold onto the feeling that she is still a contributing town citizen and a useful person.

I'm an honorary member but I still pay my dues because it helps out. (No. 103-91 yrs.)

In this context, it is useful to compare the relative attraction of traditional community organizations with the more recently established local seniors' club. Established associations that had been attended for years were much more popular and meaningful to most of these women than the seniors organization. While the former organizations contributed to self-continuity, the latter group represented discontinuity. While the former allowed the elderly woman to see herself as unchanged - the same person she has always been, doing the same things she has always done - the latter signified a major change in her life and announced her oldness. Indeed, some refused to attend this club because they viewed it as a group created for "old people", and since they were not yet old, it was not appropriate for them.

I'm not a senior citizen, I haven't had time to be one.  
I don't have time, I have too many other things to do.  
(No. 17-70 yrs.)

That's where I can't confess that I'm a senior yet.  
That, I'm not interested in, I wouldn't waste time from  
my reading. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

I don't feel that I'm old enough to go, isn't it awful.  
(No. 63-71 yrs.)

God no, I'm not at death's grave yet. (No. 70-66 yrs.)

I don't consider myself to be an old foggy like some of  
them are. (No. 121-73 yrs.)

Only about 20 percent of the community-dwelling respondents belonged to the seniors club.<sup>9</sup> Of those who did not belong, 14 percent said they did not attend due to lack of transportation, and 14 percent said they did not go because of their health. Most (about 80%) said that they did not attend because they just were not interested. They

claimed that nothing went on there that appealed to them. According to most, card playing or bingo were the major (some maintained the only) activities engaged in ("all they do is play cards"). Several had attended once or twice and stopped going because they said they didn't enjoy it. These women rejected the senior's club because it did not provide them with meaningful leisure activity, it did not offer the opportunity to be productive and useful, nor the pursuit of pleasurable recreation and social interaction.

They become wrapped in themselves, they're just interested in one thing. They are for themselves. (No. 16-73 yrs.)

I don't need that, that's for the birds. I don't care for those sort of things, they play cards. (No. 2-69 yrs.)

Organizational involvement also contributes to identity maintenance as a source of informal roles and status attainment. The established associations permit elderly women to expand or extend their lifelong roles, and provide a setting where they can exercise and display their personal skills and valued assets. Within these groups, the opportunity for leadership is available for those who desire it and holding office in one of these organizations can be a valued source of social status and self-esteem. Eighteen of the community-dwelling respondents (27.7% of those who hold at least one membership) were currently holding at least one office in an organization. Some of these women had held the same position for as long as fourteen years or more.

Even a past-presidency can have identity supportive value. When the question, "Do you hold office in any of these organizations?" was asked, there were many who listed themselves as past-presidents, former

secretaries and treasurers, and noble grands. While holding office may be a temporary formal role, the knowledge that one has previously had such positions can be an ongoing source of social status, and personal pride as well as a means of building a valued reputation. Two cases illustrate the extent to which meaningful former identities and past experiences can be discovered in an elderly woman's biography. An eighty-one year old respondent, who, at the time of the interview, was a member of five organizations currently holds office in one. However, this woman is also, a past-secretary of the local branch of the \_\_\_\_\_ Society (a position she has held for a number of years), a past-president of her church group and a former coordinator of the \_\_\_\_\_ (another position she has occupied for several years). Upon her recent retirement from the latter position, she received a certificate and award in recognition of her valued service. The second example is a seventy-four year old respondent who has cut back on her extensive involvements in community groups. However, she derives pride from the fact the Hospital Auxiliary was started in her home - "we started the Hospital Auxiliary right here in this room" (No. 58), and she also derives satisfaction from having been a contributing member of another charitable organization that has instigated a number of worthwhile community projects. In addition she has been a part of a number of 'firsts' including - the construction of the town swimming pool and the founding of the first town library.

Out of memories of such past experiences, the present is given its meaning and our identities are woven. Thus, although roles once played are now relinquished, and others substantially transformed, as

the years progress, who I am now is always in some way connected to who I was then. Within the context of a small community, a reputation that has been built over the years, can live on, not only in the elderly woman's mind but in the minds of others. Most of the people, who know her today, also knew her then; knowing her for years, they have witnessed her accomplishments and she theirs. In the course of the interview, respondents proudly revealed framed certificates marking charter, honorary, and life memberships and various awards and trophies granted in recognition of years of devoted service. All were testimony to formerly held identities that are still very much alive and meaningful.

Certificates and awards are treasured possessions because of the meanings associated with them. They call attention to past achievements and former identities. Such documents confirm for the old woman and for others the legitimacy of the status claims she now makes. These symbolic objects also serve as cues, or reminders, of "symbolic networks", because of their association with meaningful ties and relationships with significant others. As Lowenthal and Robinson (1976:451) suggest, in later life, "former networks, or networks envisioned by the individual but not necessarily participated in, may be as meaningful, or more so, as those where social interaction currently takes place". Symbolic networks may "continue to serve as meaningful frames of reference long after active involvement in them has ceased" (1976:451). Similarly, McCall and Simmons, point out that "once legitimated identities may stick around for a long time in an individual's identity-set",



these formerly legitimate identities have a somewhat hollow ring about them, but they are nonetheless important as a source of comfort to the aging person and as a means of relating to the people who 'knew him when' (1978:220).

Participation in community organizations is also beneficial to identity maintenance in later life in that it provides a context for "appearing" (see Myerhoff, 1978:143-145). It is important to older people that they continue to be visible (Myerhoff, 1978). Yet, in our youth-oriented society opportunities for such visibility are rare. When the elderly are noticed at all, it is not usually to honor them but to pity them, to draw attention not to their strengths but to their weaknesses. But, in her organizational membership, the older woman continues to be 'somebody'; as a long-time member her contributions and achievements (both past and present) are respected and honored and she is made visible to others. Within this setting, almost anyone who wishes it, can find some opportunity to be noticed for, as Myerhoff informs,

Even people without claims to being of special worth could 'appear' by their own devices - having their name entered in the minutes, making a motion, being a member of the board, holding an office, organizing and running an activity, hanging a painting on the wall, being mentioned by name over the public address system, being quoted by someone - all were markers of existence and a degree of worth (1978:145).

During the data gathering period, the researcher was amazed at the number of respondents whose photographs she was able to identify in the town newspaper. Fiftieth and sixtieth associational anniversaries, years of continuous devoted service, eldest members, founding members, worthy projects and special events - all received attention in the local

newspaper and provided the occasion for an elderly woman's 'appearance'. Several of the respondents showed the researcher newspaper clippings revealing their former appearances, as self-validating reminders of memorable moments when they had held center stage. Being photographed as the eldest member cutting the anniversary cake or the recipient of an award for years of dedicated service to one's association, an elderly woman could take pride in herself and find satisfaction and a feeling of worth in knowing that she had made a public appearance.

In addition to occupying leadership or executive positions, almost everyone contributes in some way to the running and preservation of the organization - "two of us look after bridge club, set up tables and get things organized" (No. 8-74 yrs.). This is especially true of small organizations where every membership retained and payment of dues does indeed "help out" and is therefore valued. There are committees to be served on, worthy projects to be planned and hard-working conscientious people required to carry them through. Thus, one may, as a number of respondents revealed, be serving on the alter guild or the telephone committee, or be occupying such informal positions as: "chairperson of the sick and visiting committee", "co-ordination of callers", "hostess chairman", "convener of the sewing committee" or "the hospital auxiliary volunteers", or the association's "pianist".

Within the organizational life of their community elderly women also find the opportunity to publicly display personal skills and abilities that they have developed over the years. Hosting the monthly meeting of her church group, baking for a pantry sale or supper, sewing or knitting for a bazaar or the Hospital Auxiliary gift shop, all are

occasions for an elderly woman to bring her homemaking skills to the attention of others. Cherished reputations such as "a good cook", "a tidy housekeeper" or one who can make "the best apple pie in Bridgewater" have been most likely earned through years of participation in these community organizations. Most of this activity also provides elderly women with the opportunity to continue to perform the kind of 'work' they have been doing for a lifetime. Abilities or expertise acquired over the years need not be put on the shelf when they can find expression within this arena. A woman's nurturing skills need not go to waste as long as she can serve on the sick and visiting committee. If an individual possesses a particular skill (e.g. a former typist, a retired pianist, or simply, a woman who can drive a car) that the others do not, she can become an especially valued member.

Because ours is a society that has traditionally emphasized productivity, work and activity are deeply instilled cultural values. This poses a problem for those who must retire from work and find within their leisure pursuits a meaningful justification for their existence. To protect identity, retired persons must establish the worth of their leisure activity.

If leisure activities are to provide a new role, the retired person must engage in some meaningful activity, appropriate in terms of cultural values, which will afford him a rationale for a social identity and a concept of self (Miller, 1968:366).

There are, as Miller informs, ways that older people can continue to maintain feelings of worth and protect their self-conceptions. One, is to introduce aspects of work into leisure (e.g. the handicrafts person finds a market for what she makes); another, is to subjectively define

as 'work' what is objectively defined as leisure. That elderly women are able to preserve their identities as useful and productive human beings by defining what they do in their leisure time as work has been noted by other researchers. Matthews (1979a) found that her elderly widowed respondents had learned to "attach new meaning to old activities". Crocheting, cleaning house, even watching television, became defined as "keeping busy" and by keeping busy, elderly women were demonstrating to themselves and others that they were still active and not yet old. Similarly Hochschild found that elderly women distinguished between work and "pure" fun (1978:39-40).

Similarly activity within these community organizations may be objectively defined as activity that women engage in during their leisure time. However, much of it resembles the household labor that has been the lifelong occupation of these women and is thus considered purposeful and meaningful by those who engage in it.

#### THE CHURCH AS A UNIQUE ORGANIZATION

Of all the community organizations, the church and the groups affiliated with it deserve special mention because of the role it plays in the lives of many of these elderly women. Church related associations comprise the largest category of associational involvement, making up about 35 percent of the total number of listed memberships. About 62 percent of the community-dwelling respondents said that they were involved in some type of church group activity. Participation in church related activities is also characterized by a high degree of stability with only fourteen of those currently involved (22.2%) saying

that they were any less involved than they had been when they were in their fifties. Most of those who had decreased their involvement, did so because of a decline in their own or their husband's health. Eight respondents (12.7%) said that they were actually more involved now than they had ever been, usually because they found they had more free time. Almost three-quarters (74.3%) of the community-dwelling respondents attend church.

'Church member' in itself can be a meaningful informal role and a source of self-continuity. The regular Sunday routine of year in and year out attending the same church, seeing the same familiar faces, even sitting in the same pew on the same side of the church, cannot help but reinforce a perception of sameness of self. For many, church life and religious experience has been a central part of their lives since childhood. Indeed, it can be, for some individuals, an 'inherited part of self', a part of family tradition that has become an expression of intergenerational continuity connecting the elderly woman to family members who have gone on before her.

My father was a deacon for 30 years. We went twice on Sunday and we walked. (No. 68-70 yrs.)

I sang in a choir for 53 years. I belonged to the alter guild as a young girl, taught Sunday school and I go to church twice a week. (No. 73-79 yrs.)

My mother was a christian and I'm going to hang onto what she taught me. (No. 127-94 yrs.)

Religion was always a part of my life, mother was always religious. (No. 138-65 yrs.)

Being a church member also fosters a feeling of connectedness or belonging for those who have come to identity themselves as one of a

family of the children of God. In this setting everyone, young or old, is made to feel equally important. At Sunday service, elderly women are fussed over and the minister (or priest) greets them and calls them by name. When they fail to attend, genuinely concerned fellow members enquire about them and send greetings home with their family members. Old people become visible when their birthdays, anniversaries, or achievements are publicly announced on Sunday morning. When they are ill or hospitalized, the congregation is informed and prayers are given for them.

Church life provides the ideal opportunity for both formal and informal 'doing for others' and sanctions the belief that one should.<sup>10</sup> The church and its affiliated groups are also the source of numerous informal roles (e.g. church organist, choir member, elder, member of the visiting committee or the alter guild, and so forth) and there seems to be a job for anyone who is willing to serve. Within this setting, age, if not irrelevant, is certainly not of primary concern. Most all church related activities and events are attended and participated in by people of all age groups. Both young and elderly women are called upon to greet members at the door and pass out church programs, to prepare quarterly reports for mailing or personal delivery, to bake for and serve at church suppers and teas, to make sandwiches and desserts for monthly meetings and church luncheons, and to teach Sunday school and serve on committees.

People meet others and develop friendships through their church. This is especially useful for those who are new residents of the community. A seventy-nine year old respondent, for example, said that

she first met two of her closest friends when they visited her seventeen years before as members of the church welcoming committee. Others developed close friendships with women who attended the same church, women's group, or were members of the same church choir. Of the seven respondents who were relative newcomers to the town (residents for less than 10 years), four had turned to the church as a source for developing new relationships, while a fifth respondent, who had been living in the town for less than two years, was considering church attendance as a possibility for meeting people.

I go to church and meet people that way. (No. 15-78 yrs.)

I met an awful lot through church. (No. 100-71 yrs.)

In some ways I take it (church) as an outlet for making friends. (No. 97-70 yrs.)

For many of these elderly women, whether they are currently attending church or participating in church related activities, their church life and religious experience has been a lifelong source of beliefs and values that continue to influence their interpretation of the meaning of life and self.

#### SUMMARY

In part one of this chapter relations with neighbors were examined illustrating that almost all of the elderly women in the community-dwelling sample have substantial contact with at least one of their neighbors and these relations constitute yet another source of meaningful identity supportive ties. The assurance that one's neighbors are there if they are needed and that "they are always willing to help

out", contributes to the older woman's identity as an independent and secure self. Because neighbors, in general, do not provide major types of assistance, it is usually possible for the elderly woman to find some way of reciprocating for favors received, and thereby to maintain feelings of usefulness and self-esteem. Because relations with neighbors, like friendships, are voluntary and more equal than relations with family, they can enhance the older woman's morale, contribute to feelings of self-respect and connectedness as a human being.

This network, like the friendship network, is an arena where interpersonal skills are displayed and meaningful dimensions of self (e.g. "easy to get along with", "friendly to everyone" and "one who is always willing to help out") are realized and affirmed. It is within this sphere that one's reputation as a "good neighbor" ("people speak good of me") is established and kept alive. If the elderly woman is fortunate enough to have retained at least one or two of her 'old' neighbors, this network can also contribute to her sense of sameness or self-continuity.

Part two examined the leisure activity of elderly women debunking the myth that most elderly people are forced to deal with idleness and endless leisure time. Most of the women interviewed in this study are busily involved in numerous activities. Most have for years focused much of their leisure time involvement on participation in the organizational life of their community and many continue to do so.

Involvement in these associations was found to contribute to identity maintenance in many ways. A lifelong pattern of continuous involvement in an ongoing routine of familiar surroundings, faces, and



events reinforces a feeling of self-sameness. Participation in the activities associated with these groups provides the opportunity for pleasurable activity and social interaction. More importantly, these activities enable older women to continue involvement in meaningful, purposeful activity where they can continue to feel useful and needed and maintain self-esteem. Within this sphere they find the opportunity for the enactment, validation and preservation of such meaningful identity components as - "good standing citizen", "one who does for others", one who is "hard-working", "thoughtful and kind", and most important, one who is busy and active and thus 'not old'. Organizational involvement is also a source of informal roles and status attainment, a setting where reputations based on previously held informal roles and former achievements live on, and are retained as meaningful components of the elderly woman's current sense of self.

The church was described as unique among the community associations to which respondents belong. Comprising the largest category of organizational involvement, it plays an important part in the lives of many of these elderly women. Life within the church and its affiliated associations was found to be a wise identity investment where the elderly woman finds self-continuity, a sense of belonging, personal recognition, and opportunity for visibility irrespective of her age. Herein is found meaningful activity in the giving of service to others in an atmosphere where the value of service to others is collectively sanctioned. The influence of religion in the lives of some of these women is all pervasive, influencing their interpretation of the meaning of life and self.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Couples were recorded as contact with one neighbor. Two of the six respondents (5.9%), who said they had little or no contact with their neighbors, did actually have a lot of contact with one next door neighbor, however, one of these neighbors was a daughter, the other a son and they were not recorded as units in the respondent's neighborhood network. At least two of those without contact, were self proclaimed independents. The first stated, "I'm not a person to run in and out and if I wanted something I would call on them but I like to be independent" (No. 12-77 yrs.). The second said, "They are all as neighborly as I am" (She doesn't "mind saying hello" when she's outdoors but) "I can't stand to stand and chat" (No. 58-74 yrs.).
- 2 It should be noted that data on neighbors ages is based on respondent's estimate of their neighbor's age and most had difficulty providing an exact estimate. Typical replies to the question, "Can you please give me some idea of this neighbor's age?" were, "in the sixties" or "around eighty". This again draws attention to the fact that many of these women did not pay a lot of attention to chronological age.
- 3 Keep in mind here that some of the neighbors who provide emotional or moral support may well be friends since many have neighbors whom they consider also to be their close friends.
- 4 Despite the fact that the self-reported health status of many of these women suggested that their health was quite good, since health impairment or disability was one of the criterion which qualified an elderly person for admission to one of these apartments, one would expect to find that many of the residents would be afflicted with some type of functional impairment.
- 5 There may be some consolation, and hope for identity management, in knowing that I would help if I could and that there are things I can do (like lending) if I'm asked to. Thus, while this apartment-dwelling respondent said that she received a lot of assistance - "I don't think in the years I've been here, I've gone once to get my mail. \_\_\_\_\_ also takes my cheques to the bank and pays my rent" - when asked if she gave any help, she replied that she did not, but - "well, if there's anything I got, I'd lend or give them, anything in the world". There may also be some justification for one's status as receiver in that, "they all know I'm not well". The distinction between 'illness' and 'oldness' can be an important one. One of the nursing home respondents made this clear to the interviewer - "I guess I should think of myself as being old, but I don't. I don't put age there at all, it's just that I'm sick" (No. 107-82 yrs.).

- 6 The 'spring fling' is an all day fund raising event in aid of the local hospital. Hospital Auxiliary members and community volunteers (many of whom are older women) spend months planning and preparing for this affair.
- 7 Of these five women, one had attended her group once in the past year. Two others had attended several times, transportation being provided by the daughter of one of these two members.
- 8 One respondent maintained that organizational involvement helped her adjust to widowhood. She described feeling "lost" after the death of her husband. Finding herself on her own after years of raising five children and months of nursing a dying spouse, she began to think - "No one needs me". At about this time, she received a telephone call requesting her assistance in the Red Cross. She has been very actively involved in this organization ever since and says that her need to be needed was fulfilled by the Red Cross - "Red Cross was the answer" (No. 17-70 yrs.)
- 9 Thirty-five percent of the apartment-dwelling sample were members. Other studies have also found that senior's clubs, or similar organizations designed exclusively for seniors, are not attended by a large proportion of the older population (Trela and Simmons, 1971; Harris and Associates, 1975; Atchley, 1980). Trela and Simmons report that the major reasons that people did not join or participate in such an organization were "focused on alternative activities or an ambivalence toward the center". Some of the ambivalence was related to the feeling that this was an organization for 'old' people and many felt that they just weren't ready for it.
- 10 While the researcher became aware early on that many of these women shared in an individual ethic of 'doing for others', it was not until she observed a monthly women's church group meeting that she was reminded that a commitment to serving others is collectively endorsed and promoted as a religious principle. The 'business' component of this meeting (attended mostly by elderly women) focused primarily on determining who to do what for? Who was ill enough to qualify and just what should be done for the recipient? Would she receive a potted plant or a fruit basket? Also, at this same meeting everyone was given something to do and a great deal of deliberation centered around who would be designated for each task (e.g. who would bring what to the upcoming church luncheon?)

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MANAGING IDENTITY IN LATER LIFE: UTILIZING RESOURCES AND DEALING WITH CONSTRAINTS

All individuals do not journey the life course, nor interpret their life experiences, from the same vantage point. "One of the fundamental discoveries of biology and animal ecology is that every living organism inhabits a 'niche', or opportunity structure, which more or less routinely provides it with a modicum of necessities and comforts" (McCall and Simmons, 1978:226). As humans, given that self "arises through co-operative activity" (Mead, 1934:317), the development and maintenance of some form of opportunity structure is also an essential condition for the creation and survival of our identities. Such a niche consists not so much of material resources as - a web of meaningful relationships with others who furnish opportunities for the enactment and support of our identities (McCall and Simmons, 1978).

However, we also face constraints that impede us in our attempt to realize our identity aspirations. This study has been guided by a "choice-constraint" model of social life (see pp. 28-29). Human social life is viewed as a dialectic of choices and constraints. People possess the ability to make choices but are not free to choose among endless possibilities. Behavior is interpreted as "the result of actors deciding among structured sets of alternatives" (Fischer et al, 1977).

In negotiating and maintaining a viable identity, no two individuals confront exactly the same combination of opportunities or resources and constraints. Structural constraints (e.g. economic and

social conditions) define and limit the alternatives available. Nor does everyone possess the same ability to utilize and manage their resources, and to deal effectively with the constraints that confront them. However, while each individual's opportunity structure is unique there are certain socially structured circumstances, influencing the formation and maintenance of social bonds, that are shared. Thus, variables such as, context (e.g. geographical, urban vs rural), socio-economic status, access to transportation, attitudes toward aging and the aged, social policies (such as retirement), ethnicity, age and gender, all influence the social relations that people are able to initiate and sustain.

Advanced age is typically considered a particularly influential variable that is negatively interrelated with most others, decreasing life's opportunities while increasing constraints and limiting alternatives. Thus old age is typically viewed as a period of diminishing resources and concomitantly, diminishing social contacts. Being 'old' and female is considered to be a "double whammy" (Posner, 1980) or "double jeopardy" (Chappell and Havens, 1980) with all the more negative consequences; elderly women occupy two stigmatized statuses and face the combined effects of ageism and sexism.

The data that have been reported here, however, contradict this view of later life, illustrating that, while constraints may indeed increase as people grow older and social contacts, for many, do diminish, there are few elderly women who are totally devoid of resources, including meaningful ties to others. Most, therefore, have some control of their aging experience and continue to maintain a

meaningful and viable sense of self. This chapter elaborates further on the analysis of the way in which the elderly women studied here have managed to sustain meaningful identities in old age. It examines in detail their position in relation to four principal types of resources: (1) number of ties, (2) strength and meaning of ties, (3) context and, (4) personal resources.

#### NUMBER OF TIES

Since identities emerge and are sustained in the process of social interaction, an essential resource, if self-meaning is to be constructed and maintained, is - access to other persons, in particular, access to significant others. Thus, opportunity for enactment and confirmation of identities is found within the individual's personal social network.

According to the detailed data reported in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, the majority of the elderly women in the principal sample (i.e. the community-dwelling) have extensively populated personal networks. The family network was a particularly important source of significant others and the extent to which these women are integrated into this network, can be further illustrated by computing, for each respondent, a family network score. One point is given for each of five potentially available family members that a respondent does, in fact, have contact with (e.g. having a husband = 1 point, a child = 1 point, a grandchild = 1 point, a sibling = 1 point and a niece and/or nephew, cousin, or sister-in-law or other comparable kin = 1 point).<sup>1</sup> The highest possible total score is 5 points. The results of this computation (Table 8.1)

TABLE 8.1

## FAMILY NETWORK SCORES

Score Categories	N	%
High (4 or 5 Points)	61	60.4
Medium (2 or 3 Points)	36	35.6
Low (0 or 1 Point)	4	4.0
Totals	101	100.0

reveal that the majority of the respondents have high family network scores. No respondent was without at least one family member. As reported in Chapter Five the amount of contact with family was also high.

Friendship and neighborhood networks also displayed a high rate of involvement. Almost all (96%) had at least one close friend or confidant, while 85% had two or more close friends. Contact with friends was also frequent. Most (94%) also had contact with at least one of their neighbors while eighty respondents (79.2%) had regular contact with two or more. A majority of respondents are also involved in social interaction in the form of either informal or formal organizational involvement. Sixty-five respondents (64.3%) hold membership in at least one organization or informal group.

To get a better idea of the extent to which respondents have access to a wide range of others within their network of personal relations, a total network score was computed for each respondent. This score serves as a crude index of the range of the total set of the older woman's meaningful links to others.<sup>2</sup> In constructing this score a respondent was given one point for the presence of at least one member in each of the following potential areas of network involvement: family, friend, neighbor, fictive kin and organizational membership. Again, the highest possible total score is five points and scores are categorized as high, medium and low.

Results of this computation (Table 8.2) indicate that not only are the majority of these respondents embedded in an extensively populated kinship network, most are well connected beyond the family as well. Three-quarters of the sample fall into the high score category while only three respondents have low scores. If these low scores can be considered indicative of isolates or semi-isolates, then there are very few in this sample who fall into this category. Thus, in terms of number of ties as an identity maintenance resource, the majority of these respondents fare exceptionally well.

#### STRENGTH AND MEANING OF TIES

The data reported above indicate that the majority of this sample of elderly women are by no means lacking in sources of social involvement and are connected to a relatively wide range of others. However, the fact that ties exist, and even that interaction is frequent, is not, in itself, sufficient evidence for the existence of



TABLE 8.2

## TOTAL NETWORK SCORES

<u>Score Categories</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
High (4 or 5 Points)	76	75.2
Medium (3 Points)	22	21.8
Low (2 Points or Less)	3	3.0
Totals	101	100.0

identity support. While a personal social network provides an arena where identities can be enacted, desired validation may not be forthcoming. A second essential resource, if identity is to be maintained, is the presence of social ties that are strong and meaningful.

Network analysts define the strength of ties in various ways. Strength is sometimes defined in terms of one variable or factor, intensity, for example (see Reader, 1964:22 who defines intensity in terms of the degree to which individuals are prepared to honour obligations to one another) or multiplexity (see Kapferer, 1969:213, the implication here is that people who are bound together in a number of ways are more securely connected to each other). Others define the strength of ties in terms of a combination of elements, hence, Pilisuk and Minkler (1980:100) maintain that "tenacity, the emotional intensity

of the ties, the expectation of their durability and availability, and the degree of intimacy or confiding which occurs among the exchanges" all combine to determine the overall strength of ties. Similarly, Granovetter (1973:1361) defines the strength of a tie as a "(probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie". In terms of the above definitions, according to the data presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, most of the respondents in this study have many strong ties.

However, the existence of strong ties tell us little of the function of such ties. Is a tie strong (or weak) in what sense, in terms of emotional support, material support, or some other factor, and according to whose judgement, - the respondents or the researchers? The researcher's interest in the tie will generally influence the definition of strength employed and this must be specified. Thus, for the purposes of this research, a strong tie is one that provides support for one or more of the older woman's self-conceptions and the researcher thus needs to investigate the content of her network, or the meanings that she attributes to her relationships (see Mitchell, 1969).

When the content of respondent's ties was investigated, most of them were found to be meaningful and the source of support for their numerous self-conceptions. In particular, many interesting cases of subjectively meaningful ties were discovered whose strength and meaningfulness would have been obscured had they been examined only from an objective viewpoint. Thus, for an elderly woman who has never had any children of her own, a young neighbor woman has become a very strong

tie. Much more than a neighbor, she is just like a daughter ("I think of her as a daughter"). A woman in her late eighties, who has lost her only daughter, has developed an unusually close relationship with her daughter's daughter. An eighty-nine year old never-married, childless woman, whose only living family consists of an elderly niece by marriage, has developed a strong and meaningful tie to her employee, a woman who has become not only a dependable housekeeper but a close friend and confidant. A seventy-seven year old woman, with sons but no daughters, feels very close to a former boarder, a woman whom she says is "just like the daughter I never had". Her housekeeper of 30 years has become her confidant and is treated like one of the family. A former work colleague has become another respondent's close friend and living companion. A never-married childless respondent's tenants of many years have become her fictive kin and the beneficiaries of her home and property. In two cases, what began as purely instrumental ties, when an advertisement was placed in the newspaper in search of an employee (a caregiver and a chauffeur), has turned into very close friendships. An elderly never-married next door neighbor became another respondent's adopted family member, whom she cared for in her dying days. A young man met via a ham radio has become "almost like a grandson" to a nursing home respondent. These represent only a few of the many interesting subjectively meaningful relations described by respondents.

It was also discovered that what are generally assumed to be positive ties can sometimes be negative ones, particularly in terms of identity support. Thus, an elderly woman's wayward son has become a

reminder of her failure as a parent rather than a source of motherly pride. A daughter, who insists that her elderly mother become dependent on her, shatters her mother's 'not old' self-image. While a husband-wife relation is generally considered to be the source of a positive and central identity bestowing self-other bond, enhancing a woman's sense of self, this is not necessarily so. Thus, one respondent's second marriage to a reclusive non-companionate man, did not provide her with the companionship and opportunity for social involvement that she had hoped for and, in addition is an unhappy reminder of an unwise decision that she has made. For several other respondents, while their tie to their spouse was in general positive, it was also negative in the sense that, because these husbands were ill, they hindered their wives integration or access to meaningful relations with others. Thus, one woman, whose husband was very ill and who requires her constant care and attention, said that she had to give up "my friends, I can't contact them anymore because I'm tied to the house" (No. 79-73 yrs.). This same woman has not, since her husband became ill, attended the two organizations in which she holds membership. Another seventy-two year old respondent, whose husband is also ill, does not belong to any organizations or groups and says, "I couldn't go anyway, I don't like to leave my husband alone" (No. 37). A third illustration, a seventy-six year old woman, who was once very actively involved socially but now devotes almost all her time to the care of her ailing spouse, says, "I can't do the things on the outside that I would like to, but...my duty to my husband comes first" (No. 95.).

Despite this evidence of the existence of negative content, it can be concluded that the majority of social ties for these woman are positive and strong. Part of their strength as sources of identity support lies in the fact that these links to others are the source of meaningful and durable interpersonal relationships. More than casual relationships, these stable social bonds have become a dependable recurring supply of legitimation for the older woman's identities (McCall and Simmons, 1978). The strength of these elderly women's ties also lies in the fact that so many of their relations are with 'significant others'. In their discussion of the social process of reality-maintenance, Berger and Luckmann distinguish between significant others and "less significant others" or the "chorus". While almost all others encountered in everyday life play a part in reaffirming an individual's subjective reality, significant others occupy a central position as "the principal agents" and are particularly important for the ongoing confirmation of his/her identity.

To retain confidence that he is indeed who he thinks he is, the individual requires not only the implicit confirmation of this identity that even casual everyday contacts will supply, but the explicit and emotionally charged confirmation that his significant others bestow on him (1967:150).

Thus, in terms of the strength and meaning of ties as a resource, the majority of respondents again fair well.

#### CONTEXT

The characteristics of the place where people live (e.g. rural versus urban, suburbanism vs inner city) affect the structure and

composition of their social ties (Fischer and Jackson, 1977) and can thus influence their aging experience. The nature of the community—its layout, social institutions, transportation system, the age structure of its population and so forth — influences the choices and constraints people face in building and maintaining their social ties and constructing meaningful lives (Fischer, 1982). While ties in small rural communities (as was found in this study) tend to be multi-stranded and localized, it is generally assumed that city life is characterized by single-stranded and more widely dispersed ties (Fischer, 1982). As Fischer has discovered, city life can be advantageous in that it provides more access to others and thus more choice in deciding with whom to interact and form relationships. However, for elderly people, geographically extended relations can be problematic since physical and financial constraints often prohibit mobility. Frequently, they are constrained to seek associates from the nearby community or even the immediate neighborhood<sup>3</sup> (Fischer and Jackson, 1977; Fischer, 1982).

For the elderly women interviewed in this study, the nature of the community in which they lived was a resource contributing positively in a number of ways to their identity maintenance in old age. Typical of many small towns, it contains within its population a relatively large proportion of older people so that those who are elderly can benefit from the availability of a sizable pool of age peers. Some studies of elderly people suggest that the availability of age peers contributes to social integration (Rosow, 1967) and that older people benefit from ties with people of their own age (Arling, 1976). More importantly, it is a community containing a sizable population of

elderly people who have grown old together. Of the 101 community-dwelling respondents, only thirteen (12.9%) had lived in the town for less than twenty years. The majority of these women have thus spent most of, if not, their entire lives in this town and many have travelled very little outside of it. It is therefore not surprising that their personal networks tend to be localized and multiplex. This feature of their networks benefits identity maintenance in that the opportunities for role enactment and identity support are frequent. Many attend the same church, belong to the same women's church group and share membership in one or more other organizations. Almost everyone attends the same community events. Members of different churches attend one another's church teas and suppers. Thus, there are many occasions for interaction with the same significant others, other than family, in a variety of settings.

Also, because the town has been a relatively progressive community, local employment opportunities have helped to prevent extensive out migration of younger people in search of employment elsewhere. Thus, most of the respondents have at least one child living in the area (and concomitantly, usually one or more grandchildren). This circumstance, creates a setting where social involvement with both younger as well as older people is possible if it is desired.

Another advantage of this community as a place in which to grow old, is the availability of social institutions in which older people can continue to participate. Because this town has had a relatively wide selection of community organizations, elderly women have had the opportunity for a social life outside and independent of their

involvement with their families. This contributes to the older woman's sense of independent self with one's own interests. Also, as previously noted in Chapter Seven, within the organizational life of their community, elderly women have found the opportunity for developing new roles or, as was the case for many, of maintaining informal roles that had lasted a lifetime. Through this avenue elderly women find the opportunity to enact and obtain support for their numerous identity-components.

Kaufman (1980) has emphasized the way in which cultural milieu contributes to identity formation. Culture, she argues, provides the raw materials with which the individual constructs a self. People incorporate the values of their cultural milieu in giving meaning to self. The cultural milieu of the elderly women interviewed in this study enhances identity maintenance in old age. For the most part, community or public ideology reinforces their personal ideology. Thus, the value that elderly women place on neighborliness, genuine friendship, good worker and doing for others is reflected in and reinforced by the organized life of the community. Older people thus find public support for such personally valued identities as - "one who does for others", "one who is friendly and neighborly", one who "when given a job, I do it" - because these are qualities that are promoted and valued in the community as a whole.

Because of the size of the community and its general stability, it is a setting where meaningful reputations have been easily established and maintained. Myerhoff has also drawn attention to this



as an advantage of small stable communities as contexts for the aging experience.

In stable societies where the elderly have lived together for their entire life span, one's accomplishments during the productive years can be used as standards of worth and honor. Those accomplishments are ever-present in the memory of peers who serve as natural witnesses (1978:142).

Thus, in contrast to rapidly changing urban areas in small stable communities one can draw upon past accomplishments and contributions to the community to substantiate status claims in old age.

For a number of elderly town women, their status as 'old women' was over-ridden, or at least tempered, by the status they had acquired from former identities and often by virtue of their connection to notable others. Typically these women continued to be identified in terms of roles they no longer played. Thus, a former physician's wife is still recognized as such and treated accordingly. Her former status thus continues to be an important part of her social and felt identity. Another respondent was known as much as the daughter of her locally famous mother, as she was as herself. Much of her time in her later years is focused around administering her mother's art collection, accepting awards, and attending dedication ceremonies in honor of her mother's work. While such 'big fish in a small pond' are generally a minority and others do not have access to such sources of status, there are many ways of gaining lifelong recognition in a small town. Personal qualities such as honesty, generosity, and dependability, are "not changed by age" (Atchley, 1980a) and can continue to be the source of recognition. Thus, a woman who managed well despite the fact that she

was widowed when very young and in the midst of rearing her children declares as her greatest satisfaction - "to think that I have provided myself with a living since my husband died, without depending on anyone. All my friends give me credit" (No. 64-71 yrs.).

Also, as already noted in a previous chapter, a small community is a setting wherein there are opportunities for older people to continue 'to appear' and thus, to continue 'to be'. Almost any type of personal achievement is almost certain to receive newspaper publicity including a birthday celebration marking the attainment of advanced age, being the first resident of the local nursing home and thus given the honor of cutting the ribbon at opening ceremony, senior citizen of the year, eldest, honorary and lifetime members and the recipient of an award in recognition of years of service to an organization.

Also, no doubt due to the size of the town, several older women had acquired reputations and the status of role model because it was felt that they were women who 'knew how to grow old'. These were individuals whose lifestyle and attitudes exemplified the adopted norms of how to be 'not old'. One of these role models was a ninety-four year old woman who was fussed over wherever she went and praised for her stamina and abilities. The talk of the town because of her active lifestyle and social life, this respondent told the researcher, "they call me the go-go girl" (No. 127). There were others, in their eighties and nineties, who were frequently talked about and praised for their ability to "keep going" and "keep young".

Another important advantage of being a lifelong resident of a small stable community such as Bridgewater is that an elderly woman "may

assume that she has a known biography" (Matthews, 1979a:97) and hold the feeling that "she is known as a person rather than as an old person" (1979a:99). Most of the elderly women in this study were lifelong residents of their community, surrounded by others who had aged with them, fellow church goers, organizational members, lifelong neighbors and friends who knew each other as persons rather than 'old' persons.

Maintaining reciprocity in their relations with others is one way in which elderly women attempt to retain an image of themselves as independent and therefore 'not old'. However, it has been argued in earlier chapters that an elderly woman's identity may be protected, even when there is asymmetry in her exchange relations, if she is able to convince herself that to receive more than she is able to give is acceptable since others know that "I've done a lot to help other people out over the years". Lozier and Althouse (1975) suggest that the inability to reciprocate in exchange relations may be more easily managed and dignity preserved in a small community where the older individual has accumulated a degree of social standing, or a legitimate store of "social credit", that justifies the support that now must be received from others.

#### Continuity and Change: Two Bridgewater, 'The Old' and 'The New'

It is important to distinguish between the environment as "an objective world 'out there'" and the environment as "the world as experienced" (Strauss, 1969:141) and between "actual" and "experienced" personal continuity (1969:132). Perhaps more unconsciously than consciously, the elderly women studied here have established a degree of

control over the way in which the socio-cultural changes occurring in their community actually effect them. In this way they are able to minimize threats to their identities. As Strauss informs us, humans are able to minimize identity change while living in a rapidly changing environment by creating "islands of stability".

Even in a milieu marked by rapid social change, men seize opportunities for forestalling and minimizing personal change; they appear to establish, with at least partial success, islands of stability (1969:141).

Respondents were protected from many of the changes that had occurred, both in their immediate community and the wider world, because they had available to them a 'community within a community'. While they lived in and were part of the wider community of their town, they were also members of what might be referred to as the local 'social world of the elderly'<sup>4</sup> (see Unruh, 1983). This is not to say that the elderly women of Bridgewater are segregated from the young or that they do not participate in the life of the wider community but that much of their social life revolves around activities where older people comprise a substantial proportion, and often a majority, of those involved. Thus, while social change is going on around them, within their own social world there is stability. Here they share with their peers a culture and outlook on life that binds them to the 'old Bridgewater' and while not totally insulated from the 'new Bridgewater', they are to a degree shielded from it.

Much of their social involvement is centered around a lifelong pattern and occurs within familiar settings. Indeed, it is because of their commitment to this pattern of involvement that they have, in their

old age, access to a meaningful social world. Unlike those elderly who find themselves in situations where community must be intentionally created, these women are living out their later years within an 'aged community' that has occurred almost serendipitously.<sup>5</sup> Bolstered by a collectivity of age peers, they can better absorb and incorporate the changes that are going on around them than if they were to face them alone. Within this world they are less constrained, less likely to be reminded of age, bodily changes or disabilities. Though there may be little opportunity for status on the outside, here they find meaningful sources of status and dignity and continuity in the beliefs and values they share with others.

While the elderly woman may experience a sense of discontinuity in that many of the familiar town landmarks are no longer standing, she finds continuity in most of her other social experiences. She continues to attend and participate in the same community events, organizations and church. There, amid many new faces, she is comforted by the sight of the familiar faces of her long-time friends and neighbors, their children and grandchildren. Within such a setting of familiar faces and places, at least for a time, her oldness stays comfortably in the background.

Within their private or personal sphere, some of these women had also built "islands of stability" or continuity into their lives through a strategy of context management. Some, for example, had refused to change the decor of their homes to keep up with modern changes in style. The researcher found that many held on to household possessions and furnishings that, as objects of great symbolic and sentimental value,

lended a sense of continuity of their surroundings and their lives.<sup>6</sup> A degree of reality maintenance is a function of established routine (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:149-156) and some women were maintaining continuity by ensuring that they followed the same daily routine that they had been following for many years. Cooking a hot dinner for one's noon time meal, hanging clothing outdoors to dry despite the fact that it was the middle of winter and one owned a dryer, dressing for one's evening meal and eating it at the dining room table rather than grabbing a bite at the kitchen counter - all are examples of continuity management in one's immediate life setting.

#### Comparative Residential Settings

This section briefly examines the three different sample settings comparing the availability of resources in each.

Looking first at accessibility of contacts or the number of ties, a comparison of respondents overall network scores reveal that the community-dwelling sample are at an advantage in that a larger proportion of these women have access to a wider variety of ties including those made with family, friends, neighbors, fictive kin and through organizations. As Table 8.3 illustrates, three-quarters of the principal sample have high total network scores but less than half of the apartment sample do, and only 10% of the nursing home sample have scores that fall in this range.

An examination of specific networks reveals the areas of involvement where respondents in the apartment and nursing home samples miss specific types of links. The family network has been found to be

TABLE 8.3

## TOTAL NETWORK SCORES AND SAMPLE SETTING

Score Categories	<u>Samples</u>					
	Community-Dwelling		Apartment-Dwelling		Nursing Home	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
High (4 or 5 Points)	76	75.2	15	48.4	1	10.0
Medium (3 Points)	22	21.8	13	41.9	6	60.0
Low (2 Points or Less)	3	3.0	3	9.7	3	30.0
Totals	101	100.0	31	100.0	10	100.0

of paramount importance to most of these women and, as illustrated in Table 8.4, large proportions of the respondents in all three samples have access to a variety of different family members, although the apartment sample has a somewhat lower proportion of respondents having high scores. Chapter Five (pp. 177-215) provided data on the frequency of contact with various family members. To briefly summarize, while the community-dwelling are more likely to see most of their family members more frequently than respondents in the other two samples, in general, the difference among the samples is not great. That there is not more variation among these samples is an interesting finding. Since family, particularly adult children, are a major source of assistance to older people, contributing substantially to their ability to continue to live in their own homes, one would expect that elderly women, who have

TABLE 8.4

## FAMILY NETWORK SCORES AND SAMPLE SETTING

Score Categories	<u>Samples</u>					
	Community-Dwelling		Apartment-Dwelling		Nursing Home	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
High (4 or 5 Points)	61	60.4	16	51.6	6	60.0
Medium (2 or 3 Points)	36	35.6	13	42.0	2	20.0
Low (0 or 1 Point)	4	4.0	2	6.4	2	20.0
Totals	101	100.0	31	100.0	10	100.0

relocated to alternative forms of housing (in particular, a nursing home), would be much less likely to have access to family ties.

It is important, however, to determine which family ties are missing (Table 8.5). It is notable that larger proportions in the apartment and nursing home samples lack ties to key family members—children and husbands. While 65% of the community-dwelling do not now, or never did, have husbands, 90% of the nursing home sample and 97% of the apartment-dwelling are without husbands. While 14% of the community-dwelling are childless, 20% of the nursing home and 22% of the apartment-dwelling respondents are without a child.

A look at the friendship network reveals that, in terms of both availability and frequency of contact, on the whole, the community-dwelling fair better here as well. While only 4% of this group do not



TABLE 8.5

AVAILABILITY OF SPECIFIC FAMILY MEMBERS  
AND SAMPLE SETTING

Family Member Category	<u>Samples</u>					
	Community- Dwelling		Apartment- Dwelling		Nursing Home	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Husband	34	34.6	1	3.2	1	10.0
Child	87	86.1	24	77.4	8	80.0
Grandchild	82	81.2	23	74.2	7	70.0
Niece or Nephew	75	74.2	24	77.4	7	70.0
Sibling	80	79.2	25	80.6	8	80.0

have at least one close friend, 23% of the apartment-dwelling and 40% of the nursing home respondents are without a close friend. Though 96% of the community-dwelling see a friend as often as once a month only 79% of the apartment-dwelling and 50% of the nursing home sample do. Also, telephone contact is less frequent in the non-community dwelling samples. There did not, however, appear to be any difference in the quality of friendships in the three samples and once again, if satisfaction with one's friendships is any indication of the quality of these ties, levels of satisfaction were very high in all samples with the exception of the nursing home.

A vast majority of both the community-dwelling and the apartment-dwelling respondents have regular contact with at least one of

their neighbors. Despite this at least one third of the apartment-dwelling respondents made comments which suggested that establishing an identity as a "good neighbor" in this setting can be problematic. While almost everyone described their relations as "friendly", some said that they avoided visiting back and forth apparently because of a desire to protect their privacy. One must not "run another's doorstep down".

Resources, which can influence access to network ties, were also more scarce in the apartment and nursing home settings. Good health, it is safe to say is probably one of the older person's greatest resources and, on the whole, the self perceived health status of the majority of the respondents in all three settings was relatively good though somewhat higher proportions of those in the apartment and nursing complexes reported their health to be only fair or poor. Transportation is another important variable influencing the ability to initiate and maintain social relations. Though unavailability of transportation was a problem for many, regardless of setting, it was least accessible of all to those living in the senior's apartments. Community-dwelling respondents were better able to obtain transportation from people other than husbands. Rides to church, a group meeting or other activities were frequently provided by neighbors and friends, or fellow members who were driving past the elderly woman's home on their way. In contrast, providing a ride for a resident of one of the apartment complexes, in most cases, involved a deliberate 'going out of one's way' and, contributed to the older woman's feeling that she was "a bother" and to her reticence in accepting this type of assistance. Since cabs were "expensive", walking was a frequently used means of going places.

However, because of the 'suburban' location of the apartment complexes walking was, for many located there, not easy.

Many of the apartment-dwelling also considered their apartments to be "too small for entertaining", hosting a meeting or a card party, and overnight guests or extended visits were not easily managed.

You don't have the accommodations. I couldn't put more than one or two card tables in here. (No. 115-74 yrs.)

The ability to control access to others and to shape the nature of these relations of course facilitates identity management. Thus, while there are advantages for older people living in housing such as the senior's apartments studied here (e.g. since it is easier to maintain a small apartment than a home, one's identity as a housekeeper and independent person can be retained. Also, the elderly woman can feel more secure here and thus less dependent on others - "you feel more secure in these places, you can pound for help and they would come") there are also disadvantages which render identity management more problematic (e.g. in addition to those just discussed, to elderly women living on the outside, a resident almost automatically becomes the object of pity and is labeled a 'poor dear').

#### PERSONAL RESOURCES

While the women studied here share in common many circumstances, each also differs in their personal resources. Personal resources refer to the unique personal characteristics - attributes, abilities, skills and assets that a particular elderly woman has in her possession.

Perhaps one of the most important of the older woman's personal resources is herself.<sup>7</sup> Success in building a satisfying and meaningful personal network and an effective identity support system is dependent upon the ability to utilize resources and effectively manage constraints. Social ties must be mobilized and used to advantage if identity support is to be sustained, and individuals are not equal in their ability and motivation to do so. Some of these women have learned to use their ties effectively because of circumstances in their past, where they had acquired experience in dealing with problematic situations (e.g. widowhood, early life disability, financial hardship). Others, lacking in similar experiences, are less adept at dealing with the aging experience. Also, perhaps one of the most valuable personal resources an elderly woman can have in her possession is her "symbolic ability" (McCall and Simmons, 1978), for it is not entirely the objective circumstances of an elderly woman's life that determine whether or not she is able to bridge the gap between her idealized image of herself and the self she actually finds herself to be, but her creative interpretation of that objective reality.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has addressed identity maintenance in later life as a process that is negotiated with others within a framework of both resources and constraints. Examining, in detail, the position of the respondents in relation to four principal types of resources, it was concluded that although most of these older women do indeed face constraints, the majority are rich in resources which enhance their ability to maintain self-identity in old age. However, when the availability of resources within the three different sample settings were comparatively assessed on the whole, the community-dwelling respondents were found to possess an advantage.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 The family network score is not a measure of the size of the total family network. That is, it does not indicate the total number of family members a respondent is in contact with, but a total of the number of different types of kin that she has access to.
- 2 Again, this is not a measure of the size of the respondent's total personal network. It does not tell you how many family members or neighbors the individual is in contact with but whether or not she has contact with at least one person in each of the five potential areas of involvement.
- 3 As noted in Chapter 1, Fischer maintains that there can be community without propinquity since it is through our relations with others that we create community and relations need not be localized. He has discovered that although urbanism does affect personal life, it does not do so in the way usually assumed. Thus, although personal networks are less locally concentrated, satisfying personal relations are not precluded in urban settings. Also, recent studies of urban elderly have found that, contrary to popular belief, older people living in cities are not necessarily isolated and lacking satisfying personal ties (see for example, Cantor, 1975; Carp, 1975; Sokolovsky and Cohen, 1978). As Carp's results indicate one needs to distinguish between different urban locations. Elderly people who live in the inner city, for example, have more opportunity for social involvement than older people who live further from the city center.
- 4 Social worlds need not be spatially bounded but are based on "the cognitive identification of the people involved" (Unruh, 1983:33).
- 5 Several studies have described and analyzed community creation among elderly people who live among others who are also old (e.g. Hochschild, 1973; Keith, 1977). Usually these communities are viewed as a collective intentional response to a problematic situation (see Hochschild for example) and "age-consciousness" (Rose, 1962) is implied.
- 6 In one case, for example, a widowed respondents home was comfortably furnished and immaculate. Everything in it was in perfect condition but everything was antique and it appeared that little, if anything, had been changed in perhaps 30 years or more. The researcher was amazed to notice the respondent's deceased husband's eyeglasses sitting in their case on a living room end table. Her husband had been dead for at least two years. When the researcher commented on the eyeglasses, the respondent told her that she also continues to keep her husband's shaving mug just

where he left it, on their bedroom dresser. A second respondent, who had built a new home in a new subdivision, had furnished it with old fashioned pieces that had been part of her old home. She had treasured her old kitchen range so much that she insisted that it be brought to her new, and otherwise modern kitchen.

- 7 In her study of the resources and supports available to metropolitan Chicago widows, Lopota (1979) found that very often widows listed themselves as the chief provider of certain self-meanings; for example, self was listed as the chief provider of such feelings as independence and self-sufficiency.

## CHAPTER NINE

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was basically concerned with examining the older woman's experience of growing old and her interpretation of this experience and with examining the effect of the aging experience on the older woman's sense of self-identity. Two central questions guiding the research were, (1) does oldness 'spoil identity' to the extent that it is in total jeopardy or, is it possible that a meaningful and viable sense of self is somehow sustained? and, (2) if self-identity is sustained, how is it sustained?

The findings of this study highlight the importance of examining situations from the perspective of those who are experiencing them. These data illustrate that the subjective experience of being an old person does not entirely correspond with typical objective interpretations. Most of these women recognize growing old for what it is - an inevitable and natural part of the life process. Many are perplexed as to why there is "so much fuss about it".

This growing old business is natural, there's no use to fuss about it. (No. 100-71 yrs.)

In this day and age they seem to be so concerned about elderly people, the days are never long enough for me. (No. 58-74 yrs.)

While most have experienced an age-related decremental change of some type, these changes are not usually interpreted as obstacles that cannot somehow be overcome. Unlike those who see the elderly as primarily encumbered by constraints, most of these women believe that



they have some control over their aging experience. Quick to recognize and take advantage of what resources they do have, most have managed to successfully deal with their situations so that they continue to live "pretty full lives".

Their sense of personal control and tendency to interpret their situations optimistically is evident throughout the data. It is evident in the recipes they provide for how to remain 'not old': "It's all up to you" (No. 81-84 yrs.), "a person shouldn't give up - stand firm" (No. 88-78 yrs.), and in their lifestyles and approach to loneliness: "If you are lonely, it's because you don't try" (No. 141-67 yrs.). It is also expressed in their reaction to disability and illness: "All I have is this slight little stroke, I don't have an ache nor a pain" (No. 127-94 yrs.) and in the way in which they deal with limited income: "I'm used to being careful so I have enough to get along on" (No. 51-74 yrs.)

Most of these women have defied the social definition of 'old' and substituted their own blueprint of how one's later years ought to be lived. In doing so, these women are in the process of redefining the meaning of oldness. People, in their later years, may become ill and incapacitated in various ways but in their minds, they are rarely 'old'.

Choosing to look at what was retained in old age rather than to focus only on what was lost, this analysis has found little evidence to support the identity crisis view of later life. While the constraints that typically accompany the aging process do tend to increase the precariousness of identity (especially among those who are very old), the self-identities of elderly people are not so fragile that they can not be protected and preserved. Thus, the elderly women, in this study,

have been found to be creatively involved, not only in interpreting the meaning of their aging experience, but in drawing upon their resources to continue to develop and preserve their identities. They feel secure in who they are because most have managed to retain an identity in old age that is not based on precarious formal roles but which is deeply embedded within their informal role involvements and meaningful relationships to others. These informal roles and relationships provide a continuing sense of meaning and self-esteem.

#### CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

##### The Quest for Identity in Old Age

How we view the nature of the social world and our conception of the human being influence both the questions we ask and how we go about answering them. This research has been guided by a view of the social world as composed of "acting, thinking, defining, interpreting human beings in interaction with one another" (Karp and Yoels, 1982:16). Individual's perceptions of their situations and their ability to creatively act toward these situations was taken into account in attempting to understand aging as one of life's experiences. Unlike the identity crisis view, this research has taken self, rather than role, to be the important link between individual and society. Finally, human behavior is recognized as an ongoing dialectic of opportunities and constraints, individuals are never totally free, but, neither are they totally constrained.

In contrast, the identity crisis view of old age is derived from a normative theoretical framework which has tended to adopt a problem

approach to aging. From this perspective role is the connecting link between individual and society and the individual is conceptualized as, "in a sense, nothing but a bundle or summation of roles" (Marshall, 1980b:84). From this perspective the role losses of old age sever the older person's link to society and thus the ability of older people to remain socially integrated is believed to be seriously undermined. Their self-conceptions and self-esteem are eroded and they are deprived of a meaningful identity (Rosow, 1976).

If one adopts the view of this research that self is the important connecting link between individual and society, different assumptions follow. From this perspective, role losses do not by necessity lead to discontinuity, a normatively unstructured existence, social alienation, and identity loss because, roles are not the only source of social integration (cf. Fischer et al, 1977; Boissevain and Mitchell, 1973; Unruh, 1983). Social interactions across the life course provide relationships and "these relationships form the conceptual link between roles and self, because it is through social interaction that individuals acquire meanings, including views of themselves" (Hagestad and Marshall, 1980:7).

Building their identities around meaningful relationships to others, the elderly women in this study were able to maintain continuity amidst discontinuity. Lifelong self-meaning was sustained primarily because meaningful bonds developed which were "not tied to role, but to persons" (Hagestad and Marshall, 1980:6).

The perspective adopted in this study does not imply that the role losses of later life are insignificant or non-problematic

experiences. However, as the results of this research indicate, the primary significance that normative theorists have assigned to social role in the aging experience, does need to be questioned. While role as a sociological concept has a utility and significance for the researcher, it has little relevance in understanding the interpretations which older persons give to their lives (Marshall 1980b:84). Because the objects we study are themselves interpretative beings it is important that we attempt to ensure that our interpretations of the world of the aged be grounded in their conception of social reality (Blumer, 1969).

#### METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The methodological approach adopted in this study was to allow the elderly woman to express those self-meanings that were important to her identity. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, many of these women were not accustomed to self-reflection nor talking about themselves. This does not mean that they are lacking in self-meaning, but that, apparently secure in their sense of who they are, they rarely consider some of the issues and questions of concern to social researchers. Self-meanings are apparently so deeply internalized that they become taken-for-granted dimensions of identity, meaningful to the elderly woman, yet not easily articulated. It is, therefore, unwise to assume that either spontaneity or order of response is necessarily indicative of importance. As Gordon (1969:330) suggests, in assessing the responses to a TST for example, "the self-representations given by an individual may be examined for what they do not contain".

Although the TST and similar measures can be useful techniques, a multimethod approach is probably more advisable. There is also a need for further methodological developments in the area of identity measurement. For example, can one induce self-meanings from respondents who have difficulty articulating them, without influencing their response? How does one get at taken-for-granted yet meaningful self-representations.

Methodologically, it is also very difficult to deal with the conceptual notion of identity as an organization of a hierarchy of importance and a hierarchy of pervasiveness (see George, 1980; McCall and Simmons, 1978) particularly if we cannot equate the order of response on a TST with salience. Furthermore having established in this study that former identities continue to be meaningfully incorporated into the older person's current identity, how do we determine just how salient these identities are and encourage respondents to verbalize this saliency? Biographical data, as was discovered in this analysis, are definitely helpful in making inferences regarding continuity in self-meanings and understanding the relevance of former identities and past experiences for present self-conceptualization.

Moreover, because identity is a complex process and not a static entity, we need to know more about "how people come to characterize themselves in certain ways and then live with and alter those characterizations" (Breytspraak, 1984:120). Studies based on indepth qualitative longitudinal data could, for example, help us determine whether there is a shift or reordering of the hierarchical significance of self dimensions as people age (cf. Lowenthal et al, 1975; Pierce and

Chiriboga, 1979). However, the construction of a technique that could capture self as process continues to be a substantial challenge for methodologists.

This study has demonstrated the fruitfulness of using the network concept as a tool in analyzing the social relations of elderly women and the way in which their social bonds enable them to retain a meaningful and viable identity in old age. However, determining the number of ties that comprise an individual's personal network is a far easier task than determining the meaning associated with these ties. Similar to the problems incurred in asking respondents to define themselves, many women had difficulty articulating this level of meaning. In this regard it is significant that some of the ties investigated in this study, from an objective viewpoint would be typically defined as weak, but are subjectively interpreted as strong ones. Also, geographically distant ties were found to be stronger than one might expect.

These data also confirm the validity of the network theorist's warning that it should not be assumed that all ties in an individual's network are supportive ones (Wellman, 1981b). The need to investigate negative ties (particularly in a study of identity maintenance) cannot be overemphasized. Negative ties can have very important consequences for successful identity management in old age. As was discovered here, a tie can be emotionally strong and even supportive in a material sense, yet negative in that it robs the elderly woman of identity support and undermines her 'not old' identity.

There is also a problem in clearly determining the "strength of ties" and the link between the strength of ties and identity management. Future studies similar to this one, could benefit immensely from further conceptual development in the definition of the strength of ties and means for categorizing different types of ties according to the quality and meaning respondents associate with them.

#### CONTEXT AND GENERALIZABILITY

This research was also concerned with investigating the small town and rural environment as a context for the aging experience. A number of studies have explored the once commonly held view that the small rural community offers an optimum environment in which to grow old (see for example, Pihlblad and McNamara, 1965; Britton and Britton, 1972; Lee and Lassey, 1980; Wenger, 1982). However, the results of this work can be described as inconclusive. While Youmans (1977), presenting empirical evidence of the negative conditions of the rural aged, certainly is skeptical that the rural environment is somehow the ideal setting in which to live one's later years, other researchers have concluded that there are definite advantages to rural residence for the elderly. Lee and Lassey review previous research on urban rural differences among the elderly and conclude,

While the urban elderly have demonstrable advantages in terms of many "objective" indicators of quality of life, they appear to have no corresponding advantage in terms of subjective or emotional well-being, and perhaps even show a small disadvantage on such dimensions (1980:62).

In a comparative analysis of the urban and rural aged, Wenger (1982:227) has concluded that stable rural communities benefit older

residents because they "appear to provide more opportunity for integration and satisfaction for elderly people and appear to reduce dependence on the family,..." However, this British study may not be entirely comparable to American and Canadian situations. It should also be pointed out that the bulk of the studies just cited have been concerned with either the well-being, life satisfaction, or adjustment, of the aged, none of which have been investigated in this research.

The present research enables us to say that a small relatively stable community does appear to offer advantages for identity management in old age. Such disadvantages as the unavailability of a public transportation system and few formalized community support services for the aged, are probably outweighed by the availability of a sizeable number of age peers who have grown old together and who contribute to social integration (Rosow, 1967). In a small community such as Bridgewater, despite the changes that have occurred, most older persons continue to be enmeshed in a network of close and meaningful personal relations in a setting that has always been "home" and wherein their identities are deeply rooted.

However, rural life everywhere is fast becoming more urbanized so that major differences between rural and urban settings may soon have disappeared. As Britton and Britton (1972) also suggest, many of the supposed advantages of rural life for the aged are likely to be undermined by social changes which are bringing to rural environments the same attitudes, values, lifestyles and behavior patterns as those traditionally associated only with urban life. There was an awareness among respondents, in this study, that their town was quickly changing



and some were already unhappy with what they perceived to be changes in neighboring and friendship styles.

This study also allows a comparative assessment concerning the advantages and disadvantages for those older people who live in their own homes as opposed to those living in alternative residential settings. It can be concluded that elderly women living in their own homes do appear to have an advantage, having access to more resources with which to develop and maintain identity supportive ties. Our data indicate (though the effect is not as great as anticipated) that residence in a setting other than one's own home (or private apartment) is negatively associated with access to network ties and, with the ability of the older person to control the nature or content of these ties.

It is important to point out, however, that in all three settings investigated the majority of respondents have a substantial number of network ties and most of these relations are satisfying in quality. Also, one cannot, on the basis of these data, say whether a change in residence resulted in a change in network, the women in the apartment and nursing home samples who had fewer ties, may also have had fewer ties prior to the move to their present location. This is thus an interesting subject for further enquiry.

While there are advantages for older people living in housing such as the senior's apartments studied here, there also appear to be disadvantages that can render identity management problematic. One disadvantage is the difficulty of maintaining a self-view as an independent 'not old' woman whose life is essentially unchanged from

what it has always been. Residents of the nursing home and senior's apartments must also confront the perception of many elderly town residents that they had "given up" too soon. They had to deal with the awareness that those on the outside pitied them and tended to view them as second class citizens, wards of the state, or someone who "is a burden on the government". Thus in such settings, while the elderly woman's identity vis a vis the 'inside' may be in many ways more easily managed, vis a vis the 'outside', her 'not old' self-image is clearly jeopardized.

The findings of this research suggest that there is an advantage in locating institutions and apartment complexes for the elderly within local communities rather than centralizing them in large urban areas. The fact that such high proportions of the apartment-dwelling and, in particular, nursing home respondents had extensively populated personal networks is, no doubt, related to the fact that these residences are located within (or very near to) their home town. This, coupled with the fact that the community is a small one characterized largely by very personalized and localized relations, has made it easier for these women to retain their ties to significant others than it would have been had they been forced to relocate. Being able to continue to read the local newspaper, listen to the local radio station and share in the local gossip, the elderly woman was able to keep relatively well informed on the local social world, even if her mobility was restricted.

While this study has provided detailed information about the aging experience of elderly women living within the context of a small rural town, the question arises - does this research have wider

implications? Since a sizeable proportion of Canada's elderly live in small rural centers similar to this one, this study contributes to our understanding of what the aging experience may be like for them. However, as earlier studies have tended to focus more on the objective conditions of the rural aged, this qualitative study is useful in its contribution to our understanding of the rural aging experience as it is subjectively interpreted.

THE COMPETENT OLDER WOMAN: RETHINKING  
CURRENT CONCEPTIONS OF ELDERLY WOMEN

This research provides detailed knowledge about the everyday lives of elderly women, a group of considerable significance since the majority of Canada's older people are women. If the elderly women studied here are at all representative of older women in general, then current conceptions of older women need to be revised. Typically, older women have been portrayed primarily according to two stereotypical images, either as passive, helpless, depressed creatures or (in somewhat more neutral terms) as "smiling kindly grandmothers" (Giesen and Datan, 1980; Cool and McCabe, 1981). Rarely are older women seen as the competent, capable, actively engaged human beings that this study shows them to be.

According to the findings of this study and a few others (e.g. Hochschild, 1973; Marshall, 1975; Myerhoff, 1978; Matthews, 1979a), most elderly women are not passive and helpless. Old age may bring misfortune, but it rarely incapacitates. Furthermore, passive endurance is not a typical part of the ideology of the elderly. On the contrary

as most of the elderly women studied here demonstrate, most do not accept the social image of aging that is held out to them. What others define as 'problems of the aged', they interpret as natural adversities of life with which one can deal.

All too often, the assets that elderly people have in their possession are overlooked. Elderly women are not without strengths and capabilities. As this study shows competence acquired from many years of experience with life are put to work in dealing with the problems of aging.

The findings of this study draw attention to the fact that, although wife and mother have been central roles in the lives of many women, they have also had many other meaningful life experiences and relationships so that their self-identifications in old age are broader in scope, reflecting their numerous accomplishments. This may help to explain why it is that research has discovered the empty nest and widowhood to not be the debilitating identity traumatic experiences that they were often thought to be. Based on the assumption that a woman's sense of worth comes not from her own accomplishments but from the lives of her husband and children, it was believed that the loss of the roles of wife and mother would devastate women and destroy the basis of their identity. The possibility that there could be other meaningful dimensions to a woman's self which could form a tenable basis for identity in the later years was overlooked. Also overlooked, was woman's creative capacity to extend roles, redefine them, and develop new ones.

## SELF-IDENTITY: THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

We are each to a large extent the product of our socialization experience and the period during which we have lived our lives. Thus, in order to fully understand the self-identities of the elderly women studied here, and the way in which they interpret the meaning of the aging experience, one needs to consider the specific cultural and historical context within which their self-identities developed. While taught to endorse and value the North American cultural ideals of self-reliance and independence, these women also learned, very early in life, the need for interdependence, cooperation, solidarity among women, and that community was a collective enterprise. That one should and would assist another in time of need was taken for granted. Women took pride in seeing that their families had "turned out all right", an indication that they were successful wives and mothers. Being a good citizen was considered important.

The socialization experience of today's younger women has, of course, been very different, primarily due to socio-economic change and the influence of the women's movement. What implications the current emphasis on self-actualization, individualism, independence and formal careers will have for future generations of elderly women and identity management in later life remains to be seen. One wonders, however, if in old age, such women will lose the advantage that they now appear to have over elderly males in their ability to successfully negotiate the aging experience. Hopefully, they will not be so unwise as to abdicate their roles as "experts in human relationships" (Myerhoff, 1978). Since

current trends suggest that women are still doing the bulk of 'women's work', combined with the women's movements emphasis on the strengths and comfort of female solidarity, it is unlikely that women will lose their capacity for developing and sustaining the type of self-other bonds that have given such security and meaning to the identities of the elderly women studied here.

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**APPENDIX 'A'**





McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Department of Sociology  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario, L8S 4M4  
Telephone: 525-9140 Ext. 4481

January 23, 1984

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

This letter will introduce Ms. Hazel MacRae who is working toward a doctorate degree at McMaster University. Hazel is originally from Prince Edward Island, but attended Dalhousie University before coming to McMaster University to continue her studies.

As part of her requirements for her doctorate, Hazel is required to carry out some original research. For her research Hazel is interested in examining the extent to which people maintain social ties with their relatives, friends and neighbours as they grow older. She is also interested in the way in which people change how they think about themselves as they grow older.

Hazel has chosen to do this research in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia. Hazel chose Nova Scotia because she wants to return to the Maritimes when she completes her studies, and she thought that research there would help her get a job in the region. She chose Bridgewater because it has experienced a lot of change over the past few years, and she was concerned with understanding how such changes affect people as they get older.

While in Bridgewater, Hazel will meet and talk with about 100 people over age sixty-five. She will also contact town officials and other who are engaged in providing services to older residents. I hope that you will cooperate with Hazel by talking with her and providing the information that will help her. Her research will be one of the few studies we have in Canada of the experience of aging. Such studies are particularly important if we are to plan for older people in the years to come.

As her supervisor, I have helped Hazel plan her study. If you have any questions about her work, please feel free to write or telephone me at the address given above. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Ralph Matthews, Ph.D.,  
Professor

RM/hb

**APPENDIX 'B'**

IDENTITY/SOCIAL NETWORK STUDY

CODE NO. \_\_\_\_\_

RESPONDENT'S NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to begin by asking you some general questions about yourself.

1. Where were you born?

- (1) in this community ( )
- (2) in a nearby community ( )
- (3) in another N.S. community ( )
- (4) outside N.S. ( )

2. How long have you lived (a) in Bridgewater? (b) in this neighbourhood?

- |                                   | TOWN | NEIGHBOURHOOD |
|-----------------------------------|------|---------------|
| (1) Less than 5 years             | ( )  | ( )           |
| (2) 5 years but less than 10      | ( )  | ( )           |
| (3) 10 years but less than 20     | ( )  | ( )           |
| (4) 20 years or more, all my life | ( )  | ( )           |

3. Have you ever lived outside this community for more than 6 months?

- (1) Yes ( )
- (2) No ( )

- (a) If yes, where did you live? (b) For how long? (c) When? (How long ago?)
- (d) What were you doing?

A. Place	B. Length of Time There	C. When	D. What Doing

4. How long have you been living in this house/apartment?

- (1) Less than 3 years ( )
- (2) 3 - 6 years ( )
- (3) 7 - 9 years ( )
- (4) 10 - 12 years ( )
- (5) Longer ( ) Specify \_\_\_\_\_
- (6) All my life ( )

2.

5. Do you own this house or do you rent?

- (1) Own ( )
- (2) Rent ( )
- (3) Living in house of relative without rent ( ) Specify relation \_\_\_\_\_
- (4) Other ( ) Specify \_\_\_\_\_

6. Does anyone else live in this house with you?

- (1) Yes ( )
- (2) No ( )

If yes,

A. Relationship	B. Age

7. In what year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_ (Year)

8. Are you now or have you ever been married?

- (1) Now married ( )
- (2) Never married ( )
- (3) Previously married ( )

If never married skip to question 13

A. If yes, what is your present marital status?

- (1) Single ( )
- (2) Married ( )
- (3) Widowed ( )
- (4) Divorced/separated ( )
- (4) Other ( ) Specify \_\_\_\_\_

9. If ever married, has this been your only marriage?

- (1) Yes ( )
- (2) No ( )

A. If no, probe for, number of previous marriages \_\_\_\_\_

B. Reason for end of marriage (i.e. death or separation) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3.

10. If married now, or previously, how long have you been married/widowed/separated?

- |                           |                       |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) Less than 5 years ( ) | (4) 20 - 29 years ( ) |
| (2) 5 - 9 years ( )       | (5) 30 - 40 years ( ) |
| (3) 10 - 19 years ( )     | (6) over 40 years ( ) |

Specify \_\_\_\_\_

11. If now married, in what year was your husband born? \_\_\_\_\_ (year)

12. Does your husband live here with you? (1) Yes ( ) (2) No ( )

A. If no, where is he now living? \_\_\_\_\_

13. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

- |   |     |
|---|-----|
| (1) No formal schooling                               | ( ) |
| (2) Some elementary or public school (gr. 1 - 4)      | ( ) |
| (3) Completed elementary or public school (gr. 5 - 8) | ( ) |
| (4) Some high school (gr. 9 - 10)                     | ( ) |
| (5) Completed high school (gr. 11 - 12)               | ( ) |
| (6) Other training                                    | ( ) |

(Specify, i.e., vocational or technical, teaching or nursing diploma, university degree)

14. Have you ever worked outside the home for pay?

- (1) Yes ( ) (2) No ( )

If no, skip to Question 16

4.

If yes, use this format				
Actual Job	Where (Community)	When	How Long Employed	Full/Part Time

A. What sorts of work did you do?  
 B. Where? (Community)  
 C. When?  
 D. How long were you employed?  
 a. Less than 5 years ( ) (4) 20 years or more ( )  
 b. 5 years, but less than 10 years ( ) (5) Still employed there ( )  
 c. 10 years, but less than 20 years ( )  
 E. Was this full or part-time work? (1) Full-time ( ) (2) Part-time ( )

## 15. If not working now, but previously worked:

A. How did you happen to stop work when you did?

- (1) Retired by company on reaching retirement age ( )  
 (2) Unable to find work at regular occupation ( )  
 (3) Wanted to enjoy leisure ( )  
 (4) Health reasons ( )  
 (5) Did not enjoy the work ( )  
 (6) Felt that others expected you to retire ( )  
 (7) Some other reason ( ) What? \_\_\_\_\_

B. How old were you when you stopped working regularly? \_\_\_\_\_ (years)

C. Do you consider yourself to be employed or retired?

- (1) Employed ( ) (2) Retired ( )

(If respondent does not consider herself to be retired probe re why not? i.e. she is busy doing something else or perhaps considers herself to be unemployed) \_\_\_\_\_

D. If retired, when did you retire? \_\_\_\_\_ (Year)

E. Do you like being retired or would you prefer to still be employed?  
 (1) Like being retired ( )  
 (2) Prefer to be employed ( )  
 COMMENTS: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

F. Would you say that being retired turned out to be -- better, worse or about the same as you expected?  
 (1) Better ( ) (2) Worse ( ) (3) About the same as expected ( )  
 In what way? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

16. If married, what kind of job did your husband have for most of his life? (Describe actual work performed) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

17. If married and husband living, what kind of job does your husband have now? Describe actual work performed) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

In this section I would like to ask you about your means of transportation and use of the telephone.

18. Do you drive now? (1) Yes ( )  
 (2) No, never drove ( )  
 (3) No, gave up driving ( ). 18.A. Why did you give it up? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

19. If married, does your husband drive now?  
 (1) Yes ( )  
 (2) No, never drove ( )  
 (3) No, gave up driving ( ) 19.A. Why did he give it up? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

20. If now driving, do you own a car/truck?

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| (1) Yes ( )              | 20.A. Do you ever use someone else's car? (Or have them drive you?) |
| (2) No ( )               |   |
| (1) Yes ( )              |   |
| (2) No ( )               |   |
| If yes, who's car? _____ |   |
| _____                    |   |

21. What is your usual means of transportation (within the community)?

- |                        |                             |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (1) walk ( )           | (5) with family ( )         |
| (2) own car ( )        | (6) use bus ( )             |
| (3) with neighbors ( ) | (7) use taxi ( )            |
| (4) with friends ( )   | (8) other ( ) Specify _____ |

21.A Does anyone regularly help you with transportation?

- (1) Yes ( ) Who? (relationship) \_\_\_\_\_  
 (2) No ( )

21.B. Do you find that your means of transportation is adequate?

- (1) Yes ( )  
 (2) No ( ) Why not? \_\_\_\_\_

22. Do you have a telephone?

- (1) Yes ( )  
 (2) No ( )

22.A. Are you able to use someone else's phone?

- (1) Yes ( ) Who's phone? \_\_\_\_\_ How far away is it? \_\_\_\_\_  
 (2) No ( )

NOW THESE QUESTIONS ARE ABOUT YOUR HEALTH.

23. Compared to other people your age, would you rate your overall health as:

- |                   |              |
|-------------------|--------------|
| (1) Excellent ( ) | (3) Fair ( ) |
| (2) Good ( )      | (4) Poor ( ) |

24. Is your health now, better, about the same, or, not as good as it was 5 years ago?

- (1) Better now ( ) (2) About the same ( ) (3) Not as good now ( )



7.

25. How much do health problems stand in the way of your doing the things you want to do? (i.e., probe, does it keep you in the house? prevent you from doing your work or hobbies?)

- (1) Not at all ( )  
 (2) Only a little ( )  
 (3) A great deal ( )

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

26. If married, thinking about your husband, would you rate his overall health, compared to other people his age as:

- (1) Excellent ( )  
 (2) Good ( )  
 (3) Fair ( )  
 (4) Poor ( )

I'D NOW LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW YOU THINK ABOUT YOURSELF.

27. I'd like to start by asking you to give me as many different answers as you can to the question "Who am I?" Just begin, I....(If respondent is having difficulty, suggest I am .....

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

28. Would you say that, over the years, you have changed:

- (1) A great deal ( ) (3) A little ( )  
 (2) Quite a bit ( ) (4) Not at all ( )

- 28.A If changed, would you say that these changes, on the whole, have been for the better, or, for the worse?

- (1) For the better ( ) (2) For the worse ( )

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_

8.

29. When you think about yourself, do you think about yourself as:

- (1) Young ( ) (3) Elderly ( )  
 (2) Middle-Aged ( ) (4) Old ( )

29.A. If old (or elderly) about how old were you when you began to think of yourself as old (or elderly)? \_\_\_\_\_

29.B. Did anything happen that made you feel elderly/old?

- (2) No ( )  
 (1) Yes ( ) What? \_\_\_\_\_

30. How about other people close to you, do you think that they think of you as an old woman?

- (2) No ( )  
 (1) Yes ( ) Probe as to why? \_\_\_\_\_

31. When do you think that most people become old?

32. Have there been any situations recently where you felt young?

- (2) no ( )  
 (1) yes ( ) What kind of situation was that? (Probe as to who was involved) \_\_\_\_\_

32.A. Have there been any situations recently where you felt old?

- (2) no ( )  
 (1) yes ( ) What kind of situation was that? (Probe as to who was involved) \_\_\_\_\_

33. Now I would like you to select the most appropriate answer for each of the following 3 questions.

Most of the time, do you feel,

- (1) younger than people your age ( )  
 (2) older than people your age ( )  
 (3) about the same as people your age ( )

9.

34. Most of the time, do you think that you look:

- (1) Younger than people your age ( )
- (2) Older than people your age ( )
- (3) About the same as people your age ( )

35. Most of the time, would you say that other people regard you as,

- (1) Younger than people your age ( )
- (2) Older than people your age ( )
- (3) About the same as people your age ( )

36. What do the terms young, middle-aged, elderly and old mean to you. (i.e. what do you associate with these terms?)

Young: \_\_\_\_\_

Middle-Aged: \_\_\_\_\_

Elderly: \_\_\_\_\_

Old: \_\_\_\_\_

37. Is there any one person you admire a lot?

(2) No ( ) **Go to question 38.**

(1) Yes ( ) 37.A. How old is this person? \_\_\_\_\_

37.B. Can you tell me why you admire him/her? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

37.C. Are you in any way like this person?

(1) Yes ( ) In what way? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(2) No ( ) How do you two differ? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

10.

38. We sometimes hear people say: "I don't know who I really am". Do you often, sometimes, or never ask yourself, "Who am I really?"

- (1) Often ( )  
 (2) Sometimes ( )  
 (3) Never ( )

39. Which years do you think were the best in your life?

- (1) Childhood ( ) (6) 50's ( )  
 (2) Teen years ( ) (7) 60's ( )  
 (3) 20's ( ) (8) 70's ( )  
 (4) 30's ( ) (9) These years now ( )  
 (5) 40's ( )

(Probe well and record comments)

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

40. If you could be any age right now, what age would you most like to be? \_\_\_\_\_

Why this age? \_\_\_\_\_

41. As you grow older, do you find there are any advantages to being older?

- (2) No ( )  
 (1) Yes ( ) What are they? \_\_\_\_\_

42. How about disadvantages in being older, do you find any of these?

- (2) No ( )  
 (1) Yes ( ) What are they? \_\_\_\_\_

43. On balance, then, would you say that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, or that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages?

- (1) Disadvantages outweigh advantages ( )  
 (2) Balance ( )  
 (3) Advantages outweigh the disadvantages ( )

11.

44. Do you prefer to spend time with people your own age or, given the opportunity, do you like to spend time with all age groups?

(1) Prefer people own age ( )

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

(2) Prefer all age groups ( )

Why? \_\_\_\_\_

45. How often in the past few weeks have you felt that you are of some use to the people around you, would you say

(1) Often ( ) (2) Sometimes ( ) (3) Never ( )

Comments: (Probe for explanation) \_\_\_\_\_

46. What in your life has given you the greatest feeling of satisfaction?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

47. What in your life has given you the greatest feeling of disappointment?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

48. If you were going to live your life over again what would you change?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

49. If you were going to live your live over again what would you leave unchanged?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



13.

53. I would like to end this section by going through the following 10 statements with you. I will ask you to tell me, for each statement, whether you - strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree.

1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
9. I certainly feel useless at times.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_
10. At times I think I am no good at all.  
Strongly agree \_\_\_\_\_, Agree \_\_\_\_\_, Disagree \_\_\_\_\_, Strongly disagree \_\_\_\_\_

NOW I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR FAMILY.

54. Do you have any children who are living?

(1) Yes ( ) Number \_\_\_\_\_  
(2) No ( )

54.A. Do you have any children who have died?

(1) Yes ( ) Number \_\_\_\_\_  
(2) No ( )

If yes, can you tell me about each one, beginning with the first ever born. (Code in terms of the categories below and use the format on page 15.)

14.

54.B. Can you please begin with the child's name and age? (If deceased, write deceased in age column.)

54.C. How far away does he/she live from here?

- |                                |     |                             |       |
|--------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|-------|
| (1) in this house              | ( ) | Distance from nearest child | _____ |
| (2) in this neighborhood       | ( ) |                             |       |
| (3) in this community          | ( ) |                             |       |
| (4) within 100 miles           | ( ) |                             |       |
| (5) elsewhere in the province  | ( ) |                             |       |
| (6) elsewhere in the maritimes | ( ) |                             |       |
| (7) elsewhere in Canada        | ( ) |                             |       |
| (8) outside Canada             | ( ) |                             |       |

54.D. How frequently do you usually see this child?

- |                      |     |                      |       |
|----------------------|-----|----------------------|-------|
| (1) every day        | ( ) | (4) at least 1/year  | ( )   |
| (2) at least 1/week  | ( ) | (5) less than "4"    | ( )   |
| (3) at least 1/month | ( ) | Most frequently seen | _____ |

54.E. When did you last see him/her?

- |                          |     |                          |       |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-------|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago          | ( )   |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago           | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) more than a year ago | ( )   |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) | Last seen                | _____ |

54.F. When did you last phone him/her?

- |                          |     |                      |       |
|--------------------------|-----|----------------------|-------|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago      | ( )   |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) about a year ago | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"    | ( )   |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) | Last phone child     | _____ |

54.G. When did this child last phone you?

- |                          |     |                   |       |
|--------------------------|-----|-------------------|-------|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago   | ( )   |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago    | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6" | ( )   |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) | Child last phoned | _____ |

54.H. When did you last write this child?

- |                           |     |                        |       |
|---------------------------|-----|------------------------|-------|
| (1) a couple of days ago  | ( ) | (5) about 6 months ago | ( )   |
| (2) about a week ago      | ( ) | (6) about a year ago   | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of weeks ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"      | ( )   |
| (4) about a month ago     | ( ) | Last write to child    | _____ |

54.I. When did he/she last write you?

- |                           |     |                        |       |
|---------------------------|-----|------------------------|-------|
| (1) a couple of days ago  | ( ) | (5) about 6 months ago | ( )   |
| (2) about a week ago      | ( ) | (6) about a year ago   | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of weeks ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"      | ( )   |
| (4) about a month ago     | ( ) | Child last wrote       | _____ |



NAME	AGE	SEX	HOW FAR AWAY	FREQUENCY SEEN	LAST SEEN	YOU LAST PHONED	CHILD LAST PHONED	YOU LAST WROTE	CHILD LAST WROTE
ELDEST									
SECOND									
THIRD									
FOURTH									
FIFTH									
SIXTH									
SEVENTH									
EIGHTH									
NINTH									
TENTH									

55. How about grandchildren, are there any that you have a lot of contact with?

- (2) No ( ) **Go to question 56.**  
 (1) Yes ( ) Number \_\_\_\_\_

55.A. We can only take time to talk about three. Tell me first about the two you see most often, (for each grandchild ask:)

How far away does he/she live from here?

- |                          |     |                                |     |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-----|
| (1) in this house        | ( ) | (5) elsewhere in this province | ( ) |
| (2) in this neighborhood | ( ) | (6) elsewhere in the Maritimes | ( ) |
| (3) in this community    | ( ) | (7) elsewhere in Canada        | ( ) |
| (4) within 100 miles     | ( ) | (8) Outside Canada             | ( ) |

Nearest grandchild: \_\_\_\_\_

55.B. What type of contact do you have? (Record comments) \_\_\_\_\_

55.C. About how often do you usually see this grandchild?

- |                      |     |                     |     |
|----------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| (1) every day        | ( ) | (4) at least 1/year | ( ) |
| (2) at least 1/week  | ( ) | (5) less than "4"   | ( ) |
| (3) at least 1/month | ( ) |                     |     |

Most frequently seen \_\_\_\_\_

55.D. Now can you tell me about the one you feel closest to? How far away does he/she live from here? \_\_\_\_\_

55.E. What type of contact do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

55.F. About how often do you usually see him/her? \_\_\_\_\_

Grandchild's Name	Where Living	Type of Contact	How Often Seen
(1)			
(2)			
(3)			

56. Have you any nieces or nephews that you have contact with?

- (2) No ( ) **Go to question 57.**  
 (1) Yes ( ) Number \_\_\_\_\_

56.A. Again, we can only take time to talk about three, tell me first about the two you see most often. (For each niece/nephew ask:)

How far away does he/she live from here?

- |                          |     |                                |     |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-----|
| (1) in this house        | ( ) | (5) elsewhere in this province | ( ) |
| (2) in this neighborhood | ( ) | (6) elsewhere in the Maritimes | ( ) |
| (3) in this community    | ( ) | (7) elsewhere in Canada        | ( ) |
| (4) within 100 miles     | ( ) | (8) outside Canada             | ( ) |

Nearest niece/nephew. \_\_\_\_\_

56.B. What type of contact do you have? (Record comments) \_\_\_\_\_

56.C. About how often do you see him/her?

- |                      |     |                     |     |
|----------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| (1) every day        | ( ) | (4) at least 1/year | ( ) |
| (2) at least 1/week  | ( ) | (5) less than "4"   | ( ) |
| (3) at least 1/month | ( ) |                     |     |

Most frequently seen. \_\_\_\_\_

56.D. Now, can you tell me about the one you feel closest to? How far away does he/she live from here? \_\_\_\_\_

56.E. What type of contact do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

56.F. About how often do you usually see him/her? \_\_\_\_\_

(Use format below for question 56 using above coding categories where appropriate).

Niece's /Nephew's Name	Where Living	Type of Contact	How Often Seen
(1)			
(2)			
(3)			

57. I would also like to ask you about your brothers and sisters. Have you any brothers and or sisters who are living?

- (1) Yes ( ) Number \_\_\_\_\_  
 (2) No ( )

57.A. Do you have any that have died?

- (1) Yes ( ) Number \_\_\_\_\_  
 (2) No

18.

If yes, can we go through these in the order from the eldest to the youngest. (Code in terms of the categories below and use the format on page 19.)

57.B. Can you please begin with the name and age? (If deceased, write deceased in age column).

57.C. How far away does he/she live from here?

- |                          |     |                                |     |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-----|
| (1) in this house        | ( ) | (5) elsewhere in this province | ( ) |
| (2) in this neighborhood | ( ) | (6) elsewhere in the Maritimes | ( ) |
| (3) in this community    | ( ) | (7) elsewhere in Canada        | ( ) |
| (4) within 100 miles     | ( ) | (8) outside Canada             | ( ) |
- Distance from nearest brother/sister \_\_\_\_\_

57.D. How frequently do you usually see him/her?

- |                      |     |                     |     |
|----------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| (1) every day        | ( ) | (4) at least 1/year | ( ) |
| (2) at least 1/week  | ( ) | (5) less than "4"   | ( ) |
| (3) at least 1/month | ( ) |                     |     |
- Most frequently seen \_\_\_\_\_

57.E. When did you last see him/her?

- |                          |     |                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago          | ( ) |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago           | ( ) |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) more than a year ago | ( ) |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) |                          |     |
- Sibling last seen \_\_\_\_\_

57.F. When did you last phone him/her?

- |                          |     |                   |     |
|--------------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a week ago    | ( ) |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago    | ( ) |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6" | ( ) |
- Last phoned sibling \_\_\_\_\_

57.G. When did he/she last phone you?

- |                          |     |                   |     |
|--------------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago   | ( ) |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago    | ( ) |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6" | ( ) |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) |                   |     |
- Sibling last phoned \_\_\_\_\_

57.H. When did you last write him/her?

- |                           |     |                        |     |
|---------------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|
| (1) a couple of days ago  | ( ) | (5) about 6 months ago | ( ) |
| (2) about a week ago      | ( ) | (6) about 1 year ago   | ( ) |
| (3) a couple of weeks ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"      | ( ) |
| (4) about a month ago     | ( ) |                        |     |
- Last write sibling \_\_\_\_\_

57.I. When did he/she last write you?

- |                           |     |                        |     |
|---------------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|
| (1) a couple of days ago  | ( ) | (5) about 6 months ago | ( ) |
| (2) about a week ago      | ( ) | (6) about 1 year ago   | ( ) |
| (3) a couple of weeks ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"      | ( ) |
| (4) about a month ago     | ( ) |                        |     |
- Sibling last wrote \_\_\_\_\_

NAME	AGE	SEX	HOW FAR AWAY	FREQUENCY SEEN	LAST SEEN	YOU LAST PHONED	SIBLING LAST PHONED	YOU LAST WROTE	SIBLING LAST WROTE
ELDEST									
SECOND									
THIRD									
FOURTH									
FIFTH									
SIXTH									
SEVENTH									
EIGHTH									
NINTH									
TENTH									

BROTHERS/SISTERS

58. Are either of your parents (or your husband's parents if married) still living?

(1) No	( )	Go to question 59
(2) Yes	( )	If yes, using format on page 21 ask the following questions about each parent or parent-in-law and code in terms of categories below.
58.A. Which ones are living? _____		
58.B. How old is he/she? _____		
58.C. How far away does he/she live from here?		
(1) in this house	( )	(5) elsewhere in this province ( )
(2) in this neighborhood	( )	(6) elsewhere in the Maritimes ( )
(3) in this community	( )	(7) elsewhere in Canada ( )
(4) within 100 miles	( )	(8) outside Canada ( )
58.D. How frequently do you usually see him/her?		
(1) every day	( )	(4) at least 1/year ( )
(2) at least 1/week	( )	(5) less than "4" ( )
(3) at least 1/month	( )	
58.E. When did you last see him/her?		
(1) today	( )	(5) a month ago ( )
(2) yesterday	( )	(6) a year ago ( )
(3) a couple of days ago	( )	(7) more than a year ago ( )
(4) a week ago	( )	
58.F. When did you last phone him/her?		
(1) today	( )	(5) a month ago ( )
(2) yesterday	( )	(6) a year ago ( )
(3) a couple of days ago	( )	(7) less than "6" ( )
(4) a week ago	( )	
58.G. When did he/she last phone you?		
(1) today	( )	(5) a month ago ( )
(2) yesterday	( )	(6) a year ago ( )
(3) a couple of days ago	( )	(7) less than "6" ( )
(5) a week ago	( )	
58.H. When did you last write him/her?		
(1) a couple of days ago	( )	(5) about 6 months ago ( )
(2) about a week ago	( )	(6) about 1 year ago ( )
(3) a couple of weeks ago	( )	(7) less than "6" ( )
(4) about a month ago	( )	
58.I. When did he/she last write you?		
(1) a couple of days ago	( )	(5) about 6 months ago ( )
(2) about a week ago	( )	(6) about 1 year ago ( )
(3) a couple of weeks ago	( )	(7) less than "6" ( )
(4) about a month ago	( )	

	LIVING	DECEASED	AGE	HOW FAR AWAY	FREQUENCY SEEN	LAST SEEN	YOU LAST PHONED	HE/SHE LAST PHONED	YOU LAST WROTE	HE/SHE LAST WROTE
Respondent's Mother										
Respondent's Father										
Husband's Mother										
Husband's Father										

22.

59. Would you like to see members of your family:

- (1) more often than you do now ( )  
 (2) about as often as you do now ( )  
 (3) less often than you do now ( )

60. Here are some kinds of help people sometimes give to each other. During the past year, have you received any of the following kinds of help from family members? (If possible take note of whether help is generally given by child, grandchild, sibling, etc.)

- |  |             |            |
|--|-------------|------------|
| (1) provide a home   | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (2) gave financial help or a loan                                    | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (3) gave advice  | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (4) provided personal services, for example errands                  | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (5) helped with household chores                                     | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (6) helped with home repairs   | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (7) provided personal care in illness                                | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (8) gave emotional or moral support                                  | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (9) gave some other kind of help not mentioned, what was this? _____ | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |

61. During the past year, which, if any, of these kinds of help did you give to family members (again try to determine if help was given to child or other family member)

- |   |             |            |
|---|-------------|------------|
| (1) provide a home  | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (2) helped with child care                                      | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (3) gave financial help or a loan                               | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (4) gave advice   | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (5) provided personal services for example errands              | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (6) helped with household chores                                | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (7) helped with home repairs                                    | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (8) provided personal care in illness                           | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (9) gave emotional or moral support                             | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |
| (10) gave some kind of help not mentioned, what was this? _____ | (1) Yes ( ) | (2) No ( ) |

62. Would you say that it is - very important, somewhat important, not very important or not at all important - to be living close to your family and see a lot of them?  
 (Record comments)

- (1) very important ( ) (3) not very important ( )  
 (2) somewhat important ( ) (4) not at all important ( )

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

63. Do you feel any less close to those family members who live further away? (Probe for comments.)

- (1) feel less close ( ) (2) do not feel less close ( )

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_



23.

64. If a grandparent, how important is being a grandparent to you. Would you say:

- |                        |     |                          |     |
|------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| (1) very important     | ( ) | (3) not very important   | ( ) |
| (2) somewhat important | ( ) | (4) not at all important | ( ) |

65. What actually does being a grandparent mean to you?

---



---



---

66. How often do you have major disagreements with your children, would you say:

- |                 |     |                    |     |
|-----------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| (1) very often  | ( ) | (3) not very often | ( ) |
| (2) quite often | ( ) | (4) not at all     | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

---



---

67. Would you say that you are, in general, very satisfied, quite satisfied, not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with your relationships to your family?

- |                     |     |                          |     |
|---------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| (1) very satisfied  | ( ) | (3) not very satisfied   | ( ) |
| (2) quite satisfied | ( ) | (4) not satisfied at all | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

---



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68. Can you please describe just what your family means to you?

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69. Are there any people who are not related to you, who are long time friends of your family, but whom you think of in a sense as members of your family? (Probe re. "lost" members i.e., divorced, disowned, deceased)

- |         |     |                    |
|---------|-----|--------------------|
| (2) no  | ( ) | Go to question 70. |
| (1) yes | ( ) |                    |

69.A. How far away does he/she live from here?

- |                          |     |                                |     |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-----|
| (1) in this house        | ( ) | (5) elsewhere in this province | ( ) |
| (2) in this neighborhood | ( ) | (6) elsewhere in the maritimes | ( ) |
| (3) in this community    | ( ) | (7) elsewhere in Canada        | ( ) |
| (2) within 100 miles     | ( ) | (8) outside Canada             | ( ) |

69.B. What type of contact do you have? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

69.C. About how often do you usually see him/her?

- |                      |     |                     |     |
|----------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| (1) every day        | ( ) | (4) at least 1/year | ( ) |
| (2) at least 1/week  | ( ) | (5) less than "4"   | ( ) |
| (3) at least 1/month | ( ) |                     |     |

69.D. How close is this relationship, would you say:

- |                 |     |                      |     |
|-----------------|-----|----------------------|-----|
| (1) very close  | ( ) | (3) not very close   | ( ) |
| (2) quite close | ( ) | (4) not at all close | ( ) |

Name	Where living	Type of Contact	How often seen	Closeness

In the following set of questions I will be asking you about your friends.

70. **For all ever married**

Do (did) you and your husband do most things together or do (did) you each follow your own separate interests?

- |                                       |     |                 |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------------|
| (1) Do(did) most things together      | ( ) |                 |
| (2) Follow(ed) own separate interests | ( ) |                 |
| (3) Share(d) some interests           | ( ) | (Specify) _____ |

71. **For all ever married**

Do (did) you both share the same friends, or, or do (did) you have different friends. or, do (did) you share a few friends in common?

- |                                  |     |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| (1) share same friends           | ( ) |
| (2) have different friends       | ( ) |
| (3) have a few friends in common | ( ) |

**If Widowed**

72. When your husband died, would you say that your friendships changed:

- |                  |     |                   |     |
|------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| (1) a great deal | ( ) | (3) not very much | ( ) |
| (2) quite a bit  | ( ) | (4) not at all    | ( ) |

73. About how many friends would you say you have?

- |                   |     |                    |     |
|-------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| (1) no friends    | ( ) | (5) seven or eight | ( ) |
| (2) one or two    | ( ) | (6) nine or ten    | ( ) |
| (3) three or four | ( ) | (7) other          | ( ) |
- Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

74. Of these friends, who do you feel to be "close friends"? (People you can confide in and talk over personal matters with). Can you please give me their first names and their approximate ages (Use format on page 26 and code in terms of the categories below, ask for each close friend:

A. About how far away does he/she live from here?

- |                           |     |                                |     |
|---------------------------|-----|--------------------------------|-----|
| (1) in this house         | ( ) | (5) elsewhere in the province  | ( ) |
| (2) in this neighbourhood | ( ) | (6) elsewhere in the Maritimes | ( ) |
| (3) in this community     | ( ) | (7) elsewhere in Canada        | ( ) |
| (4) within 100 miles      | ( ) | (8) outside Canada             | ( ) |
- Distance from nearest friend \_\_\_\_\_

B. How often do you usually see him/her?

- |                      |     |                      |       |
|----------------------|-----|----------------------|-------|
| (1) every day        | ( ) | (4) at least 1/year  | ( )   |
| (2) at least 1/week  | ( ) | (5) less than "4"    | ( )   |
| (3) at least 1/month | ( ) | Most frequently seen | _____ |

C. When did you last see him/her?

- |                          |     |                          |       |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-------|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago          | ( )   |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago           | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) more than a year ago | ( )   |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) | Friend last seen         | _____ |

D. When did you last phone him/her?

- |                          |     |                    |       |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------|-------|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago    | ( )   |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago     | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"  | ( )   |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) | Last phones friend | _____ |

E. When did your friend last phone you?

- |                          |     |                    |       |
|--------------------------|-----|--------------------|-------|
| (1) today                | ( ) | (5) a month ago    | ( )   |
| (2) yesterday            | ( ) | (6) a year ago     | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of days ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"  | ( )   |
| (4) a week ago           | ( ) | Friend last phoned | _____ |

NAME OF CLOSE FRIEND	AGE	SEX	HOW FAR AWAY	FREQUENCY SEEN	LAST SEEN	YOU LAST PHONED	FRIEND LAST PHCNEED	YOU LAST WROTE	FRIEND LAST WROTE	LENGTH OF FRIENDSHIP
1.										
2.										
3.										
4.										
5.										

27.

F. When did you last write him/her?

- |                           |     |                        |       |
|---------------------------|-----|------------------------|-------|
| (1) a couple of days ago  | ( ) | (5) about 6 months ago | ( )   |
| (2) about a week ago      | ( ) | (6) about a year ago   | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of weeks ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"      | ( )   |
| (4) about a month ago     | ( ) | Friend last wrote      | _____ |

G. When did he/she last write to you?

- |                           |     |                        |       |
|---------------------------|-----|------------------------|-------|
| (1) a couple of days ago  | ( ) | (5) about 6 months ago | ( )   |
| (2) about a week ago      | ( ) | (6) about a year ago   | ( )   |
| (3) a couple of weeks ago | ( ) | (7) less than "6"      | ( )   |
| (4) about a month ago     | ( ) | Friend last wrote      | _____ |

H. For approximately how long have you been friends?

- |                                       |     |                             |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|-----|
| (1) less than 1 year                  | ( ) | (5) 15 yr. or more but less | ( ) |
| (2) about 1 year                      | ( ) | than 20                     | ( ) |
| (3) 5 - 10 years                      | ( ) | (6) 20 years or more        | ( ) |
| (4) more than 10 yr. but less than 15 | ( ) | (7) lifetime                | ( ) |

I. If friendship is recent (i.e. a year or less) How did you two meet? Where? (i.e. location, social contact)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

CLOSE FRIENDS

75. Close Friends	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1)					
(2)					
(3)					
(4)					
(5)					

28.

(Record close friends, listed in response to question 74, in grid above and ask following question)

For each of the close friends that you have listed, does he/she know any of the others? Can you please tell me who knows who else? Comments:

---



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76. What kinds of things do you and your friends do together?

- |                    |     |                       |     |
|--------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| (1) nothing really | ( ) | (5) go to restaurants | ( ) |
| (2) talk a lot     | ( ) | (6) play cards        | ( ) |
| (3) visit          | ( ) | (7) Other             | ( ) |
| (4) go shopping    | ( ) | Specify _____         |     |

77. We have been talking about "close friends", could you please tell me what you mean by "being close"? (Probe for liking, content, exchange of resources, reciprocity, obligation, etc.)

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78. When you help out someone who is close to you, how important is it that they should do the same kind of thing for you in return? Would you say that it is

- |                        |     |                          |     |
|------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| (1) very important     | ( ) | (3) not very important   | ( ) |
| (2) somewhat important | ( ) | (4) not at all important | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

---



---

79. When someone who is close to you does something for you, how important is it that you do something for them in return? Would you say that it is:

- |                        |     |                          |     |
|------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| (1) very important     | ( ) | (3) not very important   | ( ) |
| (2) somewhat important | ( ) | (4) not at all important | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

---



---

29.

80. Here are some kinds of help people sometimes give to each other. During the past year, have you received any of the following kinds of help from friends?

- |   |         |     |        |     |
|---|---------|-----|--------|-----|
| (1) provided a home   | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (2) gave financial help or a loan                                   | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (3) gave advice   | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (4) provided personal services, for example errands                 | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (5) helped with household chores                                    | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (6) helped with home repairs  | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (7) provided personal care in illness                               | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (8) gave emotional or moral support                                 | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (9) gave some other kind of help, not mentioned, what was it? _____ | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |

81. During the past year, which, if any, of these kinds of help did you give to any of your friends.

- |   |         |     |        |     |
|---|---------|-----|--------|-----|
| (1) provide a home  | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (2) gave financial help or a loan                                   | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (3) gave advice   | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (4) provided personal services, for example errands                 | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (5) helped with household chores                                    | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (6) helped with home repairs  | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (7) provided personal care in illness                               | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (8) gave emotional or moral support                                 | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
| (9) gave some other kind of help, not mentioned, what was it? _____ | (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |

82. In general, how satisfied are you with your friendships, would you say:

- |                        |     |                          |     |
|------------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| (1) very satisfied     | ( ) | (3) not very satisfied   | ( ) |
| (2) somewhat satisfied | ( ) | (4) not satisfied at all | ( ) |

A. If not satisfied, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

83. Do you sometimes wish you had more close friends or are you happy with the number of close friends you have now?

- |                           |     |
|---------------------------|-----|
| (1) wish had more friends | ( ) |
| (2) have enough friends   | ( ) |

Comments \_\_\_\_\_

84. Has a close friend or relative of yours died in the last year?

(2) no	( )	84.A. How many? _____
(1) yes	( )	

85. Have any of your close friends or relatives moved away in the last year?

(2) no	( )	85.A. How many? _____
(1) yes	( )	

86. Are there some people still living, whom you once considered to be your close friends but who aren't now?

(2) no	( )	86.A. How many? _____
(1) yes	( )	

86.B. Why are you no longer close? \_\_\_\_\_

_____
_____
_____

87. How many of your close friends are people you (if married, or your husband) used to work with? \_\_\_\_\_

_____
-------



88. Some people have a particular place where they can go and find their friends - it might be a park, club, church, restaurant, or some other kind of place. Do you have any place like that where you and your friends tend to see each other?

(2) no	( )		
(1) yes	( )	88.A. Where is this?	_____
(1) park	( )	(4) shopping centre	( )
(2) club	( )	(5) church group	( )
(3) restaurant or coffee shop	( )	(6) other	( )
		Specify _____	
(Probe for relative importance of these) Comments: _____			
_____			
_____			

89. Would you say that you feel closer to those friends that you see most often?

(1) yes ( ) 89.A. Can you explain why you feel closer?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(2) No ( ) 89.B. Can you explain why not? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Ask the next series of questions only to those people who have recently (i.e. past 5 years or less) moved to Bridgewater. Otherwise go to question 93.

90. How easy was it for you to make close friends here in Bridgewater, would you say:

(1) very easy ( ) (3) somewhat difficult ( )  
 (2) somewhat easy ( ) (4) very difficult ( )

91. How did you go about meeting new people when you moved here?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

92. Do you still maintain contact with close friends from where you used to live?

(2) no ( )  
 (1) yes ( ) 92.A. How do you maintain contact? (i.e. write, phone, exchange visits) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

32.

92.B. How often, if ever, do you see close friends from where you used to live?

- |                           |     |                    |     |
|---------------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| (1) every couple of weeks | ( ) | (4) every 6 months | ( ) |
| (2) once a month          | ( ) | (5) once a year    | ( ) |
| (3) every 2-3 months      | ( ) | (6) less than "5"  | ( ) |

Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

92.C. Do you find it difficult to keep in touch with these friends?

- |         |     |
|---------|-----|
| (2) No  | ( ) |
| (1) Yes | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

92.D. How much has your relationship with these friends changed since your move, would you say:

- |                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| (1) a great deal | ( ) |
| (2) somewhat     | ( ) |
| (3) not at all   | ( ) |

93. Have you made special efforts to make/or keep friendships with people your own age?

- |         |     |        |     |
|---------|-----|--------|-----|
| (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
|---------|-----|--------|-----|

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

94. How about people older than yourself, have you made any special efforts to make/or keep friendships with these people?

- |         |     |        |     |
|---------|-----|--------|-----|
| (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
|---------|-----|--------|-----|

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

95. How about people younger than yourself, have you made any special efforts to make/or keep friendships with young people?

- |         |     |        |     |
|---------|-----|--------|-----|
| (1) yes | ( ) | (2) no | ( ) |
|---------|-----|--------|-----|

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

33.

96. Which would you say is most important to you - your family or your friends - or can you even compare them? (Probe here)

- (1) family more important ( )
- (2) friends more important ( )
- (3) can't compare them ( )

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

97. Are there any close friends or relatives who have died or who you no longer have contact with but whom you often think about and talk about.

(2) No ( ) Go to question 98.  
 (1) Yes ( )

97.A. How important are these people to you now, would you say:

- (1) very important ( ) (3) not very important ( )
- (2) somewhat important ( ) (4) not important at all ( )

97.B. In what way are they important?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

98. Now I would like to ask you some questions about your neighbors.

Neighbor	Also named as close friend	Approx Age	Sex	How far away	How often in touch	How Long neighbors
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						

34.

Could you please tell me which of your neighbors you are in touch with (i.e. have contact with more than to say "hello", include telephone, in person, or both) First names will do, I just want to be able to keep them straight. (Use format above and code as in categories below) for each neighbor ask:

98.A. Has this neighbor also been listed earlier as a close friend?

98.B. Can you please give me some idea of this neighbors age?

98.C. Approximately how far away does he/she live?

- |                       |     |                     |     |
|-----------------------|-----|---------------------|-----|
| (1) right next door   | ( ) | (3) two houses down | ( ) |
| (2) across the street | ( ) | (4) other           | ( ) |
| Specify _____         |     |                     |     |

98.D. About how often are you in touch with this neighbor?

- |                             |     |                           |     |
|-----------------------------|-----|---------------------------|-----|
| (1) several times a day     | ( ) | (5) every couple of weeks | ( ) |
| (2) every day               | ( ) | (6) about once a month    | ( ) |
| (3) every two or three days | ( ) | (7) less than "6"         | ( ) |
| (4) about once a week       | ( ) | Specify _____             |     |

98.E. How long has he/she been your neighbor?

- |                        |     |                        |     |
|------------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|
| (1) less than one year | ( ) | (4) 16-20 years        | ( ) |
| (2) 5 to 10 years      | ( ) | (5) more than 20 years | ( ) |
| (3) 11 to 15 years     | ( ) | (6) lifetime           | ( ) |

99. How would you describe your relationship with your neighbors?

---



---



---

100. Would you say that you are - very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with your relationships with your neighbors?

- |                      |     |                          |     |
|----------------------|-----|--------------------------|-----|
| (1) very satisfied   | ( ) | (3) not very satisfied   | ( ) |
| (2) fairly satisfied | ( ) | (4) not satisfied at all | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

---



---

35.

101. Once again I would like to go through the list of the kinds of help that people sometimes give to each other. I would like you to tell me if, during the past year, you have received any of these kinds of help from neighbors?

- |   |             |            |
|---|-------------|------------|
| (1) provided a home                                 | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (2) gave financial help or a loan                   | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (3) gave advice                                     | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (4) provided personal services, for example errands | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (5) helped with household chores                    | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (6) helped with home repairs                        | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (7) provided personal care in illness               | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (8) gave emotional or moral support                 | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (9) gave some other kind of help                    | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
- not mentioned, what was it? \_\_\_\_\_

102. During the past year, which, if any, of these kinds of help did you give to neighbors?

- |   |             |            |
|---|-------------|------------|
| (1) provided a home                                 | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (2) gave financial help or a loan                   | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (3) gave advice                                     | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (4) provided personal services, for example errands | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (5) helped with household chores                    | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (6) helped with home repairs                        | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (7) provided personal care in illness               | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (8) gave emotional or moral support                 | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
| (9) gave some other kind of help                    | (1) yes ( ) | (2) no ( ) |
- not mentioned, what was it? \_\_\_\_\_

103. Would you sometimes prefer to have more contact, or less with your neighbors or, is the amount of contact just right? (Probe.)

- |                         |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| (1) prefer more contact | ( ) |
| (2) prefer less contact | ( ) |
| (3) just right          | ( ) |

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

These questions deal with informal groups or organizations.

104. Do you now belong to (or participate in) any organizations or informal groups?

- (2) no ( ) Go to question 107  
 (1) yes ( )

104.A. Can you please tell me what type of group and the name, if possible. (Use format and coding categories below while asking these questions)

Type of group:

- |   |     |               |
|---|-----|---------------|
| (1) work related group                        | ( ) |               |
| (2) political parties or informal groups      | ( ) |               |
| (3) economic groups (including unions)        | ( ) |               |
| (4) educational (courses, PTA, school groups) | ( ) |               |
| (5) religious, church related groups          | ( ) |               |
| (6) ethnic (clubs, language courses, etc.)    | ( ) |               |
| (7) social (I.O.D.E., sewing club)            | ( ) |               |
| (8) cultural (theatre, opera, etc.)           | ( ) |               |
| (9) sports, recreational (i.e. fitness)       | ( ) |               |
| (10) regular informal get togethers           | ( ) |               |
| (11) voluntary organizations                  | ( ) |               |
| (12) other                                    | ( ) | Specify _____ |

104.B. Have you joined any of these quite recently or have you belonged for several years?

- (1) joined recently ( ) Which ones? \_\_\_\_\_  
 (2) belonged for years ( ) Which ones? \_\_\_\_\_

104C. About how often do you attend?

- |                          |     |                         |     |
|--------------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|
| (1) every day            | ( ) | (4) about twice a month | ( ) |
| (2) every couple of days | ( ) | (5) about once a month  | ( ) |
| (3) weekly               | ( ) | (6) Less than "5"       | ( ) |
- Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

104.D. Do you hold office in any of these organizations?

- (2) No ( )  
 (1) Yes ( ) Which ones? \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Group	Type of Group	Joined Recently (Past 5 years)	How Often Attend	Hold Office
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				

105. Of all the groups and organizations that you have mentioned, which, if any is most important to you and why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

106. Are there any people in these groups or organizations who are especially important to you?

(2) No ( )  
 (1) Yes ( )

106.A Who is that and why do you consider them to be important? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

107. Do you attend any sort of club or centre that is for senior citizens only?

(1) yes	( )	107.A. Which one? _____
107.B. About how often do you go there?		
(1) daily or almost daily	( )	(3) monthly or less ( )
(2) weekly or less	( )	(4) yearly or less ( )
107.C. How did you find out about it?		
(1) from a friend or relative	( )	
(2) newspaper	( )	
(3) advertisement or notice	( )	
(4) doctor/minister/social worker	( )	
(5) other	( )	Specify _____

(2) No	( )
107.D. Do you know if there is such a group or centre around here?	
(2) No	( )
(1) Yes	( )
107.E. Why don't you attend?	
(1) transportation problem	( )
(2) poor health	( )
(3) don't want to go alone	( )
(4) don't like to go out	( )
(5) don't want to be with old people	( )
(6) other	( ) Specify _____

I'd now like to ask you about your involvement in specific activities.

108. First, I'd like you to tell me which, if any of these activities you do and then, regardless of how often you do this activity now, if you compare to when you were 50 years old, do you do this activity - more than at 50, less than at 50, or about the same as at age 50 (show card to respondent, if there has been a change probe as to why and record comments).





40.

109. Are there certain activities or things that you would like to do but can't for some reason?

- (2) no ( ) Go to Question 110.  
 (1) yes ( )

109.A. What are these things. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

109.B Why can you not participate?

- (1) no transportation ( ) (4) not enough money ( )  
 (2) poor health ( ) (5) no partner ( )  
 (3) don't like to go alone ( ) (6) other ( )  
 Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

110. Do you attend or take part in any religious activities of any church or religious group?

- (2) No ( ) Go to Question 111.  
 (1) Yes ( )

110.A. What is your religious denomination?

- (1) Protestant ( )  
 (2) Catholic ( )  
 (3) Other ( ) Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

110.B. As you have grown older, do you attach more or less importance to religion and have you been deeply religious all your life?

- (1) more ( ) (3) same, low ( )  
 (2) same, always high ( ) (4) less ( )

(If more or less, probe for explanation)

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

111. Thinking of how you spend your time, would you say that you are:

- (1) often alone ( ) (3) never alone ( )  
 (2) seldom alone ( )

112. Would you say that you are lonely - often, sometimes, rarely or never?

- (1) often ( ) (3) rarely ( )  
 (2) sometimes ( ) (4) never ( )

41.

113. We have talked a lot about the people who are close to you and who are important in your life in a very positive sense, is there any relationship which is also important in your life but which causes you distress (i.e. you dislike the person, or you feel angry or uncomfortable with them) (Probe for more than one such relationship).

(2) No	( )	Go to Question 114.
(1) Yes	( )	

113.A. Where do you have contact with this person? (Or these people) (i.g., family get-togethers, socially, church, etc)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

113.B. How often do you have contact with this person (these people), would you say:

(1) very often	( )	(3) not very often	( )
(2) fairly often	( )	(4) not at all	( )

113.C. How do you deal with this difficulty?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

114. It seems as though we have talked about just about everyone who is important to you. Are there any other people that you are in touch with, who we haven't talked about yet, and who we should include (i.e., minister, doctor, postman, etc.)?

(2) No	( )
(1) Yes	( )

114.A. Who is that? (Probe for nature of relationship) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Now I have a few questions on your feelings toward Bridgewater and the neighborhood that you live in.

115. Do you feel at all attached to Bridgewater?

(1) yes ( ) (Probe re. nature of attachments.)

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(2) no ( ) (Probe as to why not?)

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

116. How would you describe Bridgewater? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

117. Do you feel in any way attached to this neighborhood.

(1) yes ( ) (Probe re. nature of attachment)

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(2) no ( ) (Probe as to why not?)

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

118. What about the neighborhood that you live in, how would you describe it?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

119. Are there any places or things in Bridgewater, or this neighborhood that are special to you in any way?

(2) no ( ) Go to Question 120.

(1) yes ( )

119.A. What are these thing or places? (Probe for nature of attachment.)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

43.

120. Does this home have any special meaning or significance for you?

(2) no	( )	Go to Question 121.
(1) yes	( )	

120.A. Can you please explain why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This just about completes the questions I have for you. However, I would like to ask you just a few questions concerning your income.

121. Thinking about your financial situation, would you say you ...

- (1) have difficulty making ends meet ( )  
 (2) have just enough to get along on ( )  
 (3) you are comfortable ( )

122. Would you say that you are - better off, or worse off now than you were during most of your lifetime, or is your situation about the same?

- (1) better today ( )  
 (2) worse off ( )  
 (3) about the same ( )

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

123. Income can come from a number of sources, thinking of the personal income of yourself (and your spouse) in the last year, from which of these sources did you receive the largest amount. (Choose only one).

- (1) work and business earnings ( )  
 (2) investment earnings ( )  
 (3) your government pension ( )  
 (4) your private pension ( )  
 (5) other sources ( )

124. Is any of your income from investment or annuities?

- (1) Yes ( )  
 (2) No ( )

125. (Show respondent card.) Could you please tell me which letter on this card corresponds to your (and your spouse's) total income, before taxes, in the past year. Be sure to include income received from all sources: social insurance, pensions, support from other family members, bank interests, annuities, or anything else.

- |                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| (1) no income         | ( ) |
| (2) less than 2,000   | ( ) |
| (3) 2,000 to 2,999    | ( ) |
| (4) 3,000 to 3,999    | ( ) |
| (5) 4,000 to 5,999    | ( ) |
| (6) 6,000 to 7,999    | ( ) |
| (7) 8,000 to 9,999    | ( ) |
| (8) 10,000 to 14,999  | ( ) |
| (9) 15,000 to 19,999  | ( ) |
| (10) 20,000 to 24,999 | ( ) |
| (11) 25,000 to 39,999 | ( ) |
| (12) 40,000 or more   | ( ) |