



Published in final edited form as:

J Gerontol. 1991 September ; 46(5): S270–S277.

Key Relationships of Never Married, Childless Older Women: A Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

The key relationships of never married, childless older women, that is, those relationships described as central, compelling, enduring, or significant throughout their lifetimes, were explored in this study. Analysis of qualitative, ethnographically based interviews with 31 women indicated that the key relationships they describe fall into three classes: ties through blood, friendships, and those we label “constructed” ties (kin-like nonkin relations). We report on types of key interpersonal relationships of these women and also examine limits to these key relations, describing some strategies these women have adopted for gaining kin-like relations and the problems inherent in them for the expectation of care in later life. Theoretical work by anthropologist David Schneider concerning American kinship as a cultural system is used to explore dimensions of these relationships.

While much gerontological research focuses on marriage and parental status of the older person, more than 20 percent of older Americans have no children, and some 5 to 6 percent have never married. American culture is strongly pronatalist, marriage is normative, and key relations are articulated on the basis of a cultural ideology of shared biogenetic substance (“the blood tie”; Schneider, 1980). Given an alternative set of life paths that does not include affinal and filial relations, never married, childless elderly women may become involved in relationships that are central to them and enduring and that, while nonstandard, are enriching and generative.

Based on lengthy qualitative research conversations with 31 never married, childless women age 60 and older, interviewed as part of a larger project on childless older women, this article has two aims. First, it reports on types of and attitudes toward key interpersonal relationships of these women. Second, it examines limits to these key relations, describing some strategies these women have adopted for gaining kin-like relations and the problems inherent in them for the expectation of care in later life. It should be noted that the theoretical perspective taken here, deriving from cultural anthropology, emphasized the role of cultural meaning in the analysis of social relations. It is different from, and must be viewed as complementary to, the approach usually taken in kinship and support studies in gerontology.

A choice was made to focus here on never married, childless older women because their situations are compelling in that they lack connections of parenthood and marriage from which the pool of later-life caregivers is often drawn. Further, our focus on this group illuminates the nature and limits of the cultural ideology of kinship upon which many key relations are usually based. Certainly, the issues and findings reported here for our informants may be extended to women in other parental and marital statuses for whom these

issues are no doubt germane; however, this is beyond the scope of this report. Further, in addressing these aims, we introduce a body of theoretical work on American kinship that has sought to outline the cultural ideology of connectedness informing how Americans in general reckon ties with kin.

Background

By key relationships we mean those ties that informants indicated were central, compelling, enduring, or most significant throughout their lifetimes. The types of relationships that these women identified as central to them included a variety of blood relationships such as being a daughter, a sibling, an aunt, or a niece. These women also identified a number of key relations that, although, not based on specific blood ties, could be likened to them. These included fictive parenthood, consociation with a nonrelated family, and same-generation companionate relations with other women. Because these are relationships that are neither based on blood ties nor receive sociolegal sanction, but rather are made through the actions and intentions of individuals, we have labeled these “constructed” ties. Further, almost all the women identified significant friendships and the closest of these were portrayed as “sister-like.” Never married, our informants had no personal affinal ties at all.

Two basic concerns were apparent in our interviews. Informants utilized a vocabulary from the standard cultural typology of relationships to describe their own relations. Many compared their own key relationships to those deriving from notions of shared biogenetic substance, being married and having children. Further, to simplify a complex set of feelings, in such a comparison they could see their key relations in one of two ways: (a) they viewed them as problematic on a variety of bases because they were not the same as the cultural norm; or, (b) they saw them as equally or even more successful than central relations based on normative cultural premises, because their relationships have been the object of considerable individual effort resulting from joyful shared experience. Thus, some informants argued that they had better relationships than those women with families of their own or that they had avoided the many problems associated with parent-child relations and with marriage. Almost all were cognizant of their lives and relationships as being different from “the norm,” but most, despite this, felt that their relationships had great merit and authenticity and provided meaning in their lives. However, some clearly had questions about the sufficiency of these relations to provide a setting for caregiving, should it be needed. Both blood ties and ties of marriage served as possible models for the key relationships that these women did have. The blood tie was the more significant and more utilized model, but in a few companionate relationships, it was clear that these were conceptualized, in a way, as marriage-like.

Because these women did not use major components of kinship — marriage and parenthood, for example — but did recognize the centrality of these ties, a description of the ideology underlying American kinship is required in order to highlight the uses they made of cultural models of kinship. The culturally central notion of the blood tie is integral to what it is to be a relative in American culture. David Schneider, in a series of analyses of the cultural content of American kinship (1972, 1980, 1984), has noted that in American kinship, relatives highlight the sharing of possession of a material thing (biogenetic substance, “blood”) that binds their disparate selves permanently and indissolubly into a unified whole. Further, he notes, shared identity is subsumed in this conception of shared *substance* (“blood”). This form of kinship reckoning contrasts significantly with those used in many other cultures.

It is important to note that Schneider's primary interest is in the cultural, or ideational, components of kinship — that is, in the ideas and groupings of ideas that constitute a discrete cultural domain such as kinship — that influence and are influenced by behavior.

In contrast, the behavioral entailments of this ideology constitute in Schneider's view a "code for conduct" based on the widely shared notion of "love" (a cultural construct) within the family and the "enduring, diffuse solidarity" love engenders. The code for conduct specifies that individuals who are biologically related — sharing substance and identity — should offer loyalty, trust, faith, affection, help when needed, and the kind of help that is needed (Schneider, 1980, p. 50). Yet the code for conduct is not the defining feature of the relationship; it is the blood tie that has primacy and forms the basis for the relationship. Improper conduct between relatives does not alter the blood relationship and "neither can they be picked for the job. One is born with them" (Schneider, 1980, p. 46).

This totality — substance, identity, and code for conduct — constitutes a *folk model*, or widely shared set of cultural ideas or beliefs about the nature of things. The notion that this material conception of kinship is based on what the folk model views as the "objective facts of nature" and "scientific knowledge" gives credence to and solidifies the belief in the enduring nature of blood ties. These relationships are said to be part of the "natural order." In contrast, the other type of relative, i.e., a relative through marriage, is acquired by law. Because affinal relationships do not have what is considered a natural basis, but rather a sociolegal one, they are not culturally accorded the primacy of blood ties. They are not considered as "real" as relations through blood (Schneider, 1980, p. 25).

Schneider, we find, uses the ideology of primary (lineal) blood relations as a general model of kin relations and assumes in part that this model can be extended to collateral relations; his discussion of cultural kin ideology is underdeveloped in regard to collateral relations, although he does note that they appear to be individually negotiated and subject to the limitations of both geographic and "socioemotional" distance (Schneider, 1980, p. 72).

Our data show that this situation is more complex; further, some informants attempted to extend the model to kin-like nonkin. In theory, as "shared blood" grows more distant, code for conduct (acting "like family" or "like a relative") increasingly becomes the defining feature of shared identity, which is itself increasingly the object of negotiation among distant kin and kin-like nonkin. Such negotiation is undertaken variously by interaction, the creation and maintenance of voluntary norms and ties of reciprocity, and the expression of positive sentiment. For example, as we will show below, for nonprimary kin, while substance ("blood") may in fact be shared, the sharing of identity (acting like "family") must be operationalized through the code for conduct. That is, supportive behavior is used to attempt to create shared identity (a feeling of relatedness) contributing to the relationship among nonprimary kin. Further, in the case of nonrelatives who act "like relatives," while there is no shared substance and little culturally sanctioned shared identity, again, the code for conduct must be brought to bear for any identity to be shared (although in cultural terms, since there is no biological tie, this task is inherently problematic).

For many of the women we interviewed, the sticking point with collateral kin and kin-like nonkin was the issue of the potential need for caregiving; in some relationships, this could be successfully negotiated, but in others it could not. As is well known, the least problematic ties are those among primary kin (Brody, 1990). However, difficulties may occur in extending kinship to include care when blood ties are nonprimary or when ties are close and kin-like but lack the blood connection. Thus again, for our informants, the notion that shared substance ("blood") confers shared identity ("family") is ideologically problematic because it requires that they attempt to establish shared identity and attendant moral obligation by

other, less culturally recognized means, such as shared experience or interests. This is particularly problematic for concerns with the permanence of relationship, which, from the perspective of mainstream American culture, inheres in shared biogenetic substance (the blood tie) and the attendant sense of enduring moral obligation among primary kin that is at the root of caregiving.

Further, many of the key relationships sustained by never married, childless older women are not supported by a formal, socially sanctioned system, such as those systems supporting marriage, adoption, and fosterage, that legally and socially create, and thereafter assume, relational “endurance.” Rather, because these women lack both the biogenetic ties and the strength of the sociolegal legitimation of marriage, key aspects of their relationships are individualized, particularly with respect to commitment and care expectations among the participants. Thus, it is not surprising that some of the most salient relationships these women develop are not blood ties, but in part are metaphorically likened to blood ties, so as to increase legitimation, in part because there is no other language to describe them, and in part because they may share many of the qualities that blood ties are said to have: they are enduring, are characterized by closeness, foster a sense of inclusion, involve continual commitment, and may be extended to provide extra support in times of need.

Method

The data were collected from 31 never married, childless women, age 60 and over, as part of a larger research project entitled “Lifestyles and Generativity of Childless Older Women.” Informants were solicited through newspapers, senior and retirement centers, former research participants, and referrals from informants. Each was interviewed in multiple (usually three) sessions, over a course of 3 to 4 weeks, for a total of 6 to 8 hours of interview time, but often more. Interviews, qualitative and ethnographically based, were audiotaped with informant permission. A first interview featured collection of background data, the elicitation of a life history narrative using a standard prompt, and the completion of a social network and social support inventory. Second and third interviews examined life achievements and accomplishments, outlets for generativity, and feelings about parental status. In addition, between interviews, each informant completed self-inventories assessing well-being, depression, loneliness, health status, generativity, and personality features. Data to be analyzed were collected through items that assessed social network expectations for support, the most important person in life at that time, generative and nurturant behaviors and relationships, and perceived patterns of interpersonal influence. Analysis presented here derives from textual examination of interview transcripts for these items and other descriptions of key relationships, and from line-by-line coding of pertinent material into categories that emerged in the authors’ ongoing discussions of informants’ relationships.

Results

Types of Key Relationships

A small literature exists on the key relationships of never married older women that addresses social isolation and loneliness, life satisfaction, and social support (Allen, 1989; Braito and Anderson, 1983; Gubrium, 1975; Rice, 1989; Rubinstein, 1987; Ward, 1979). Further, the role of these single women as parental caregivers has been examined in some detail (Allen, 1989; Allen and Pickett, 1987; Brody, 1981, 1990; Simon, 1987; Wright, 1983). None of this literature, so far as we are aware, has examined the relationship between the ideological basis of the American kinship system and the perception of and need for key supportive relationships by these older adults.

Our examination of transcribed interview material revealed that six types of key personal relationships were most frequently discussed. Two are based on blood ties, three are types of constructed relationships, and the sixth type is friendship. We will discuss each of these in turn.

Blood Ties

Key relationships based on blood ties follow either lineal or collateral lines. The lineal pattern is exemplified by the coresident daughter role — extended coresidence with parents until their deaths and provision of parental care well into adult life. Collateral relationships include aunthood — an enduring significant relation with nephews and nieces that in some cases approaches quasi-parenthood — and adoption into the collateral family, with the sibling as the main point of linkage.

Each of these relationships is based on biogenetic ties and the notions of shared substance (blood) and familial identity. Nevertheless, this material illustrates the fact that, in the cultural construction of American kinship, it is only in the lineal dimension that the relationships include the strong component of moral obligation for care. Collateral blood relations may or may not confer such moral obligation.

The coresident daughter role—This role refers to the continued cohabitation by an adult daughter with her parents until their deaths, and often includes caregiving for the aging parent. Twenty-two of the 31 women we interviewed lived with one or both parents, as an adult, until the parents' death or otherwise had responsibility for parental care.

Four major themes about this relationship, representing general tendencies and shared concerns among those in this role, emerged in qualitative analysis. First, daughters felt the relationship to be one of asymmetric reciprocity but mutual dependency. Parents were often financially dependent on their coresident working, adult unmarried daughters. Daughters, too, while voicing some ambivalence about their role, felt dependent on their continued association with their parents. For example, Miss Richards, in her fifties when her last parent died, noted, "Well, I guess maybe I shouldn't have stayed with my parents all those years. I should have gotten out and gotten myself an apartment. But it was a setup that was ... they couldn't afford to have a house by themselves. They couldn't have afforded \$500 apartments. So it was a case of necessity, so I did stay. But I really don't feel that once you're grown up, you should be living at home. It isn't a good setup, really."

The extent of parental dependency felt by these women was a salient theme in their discussions. For example, Miss Rosenberg stated that, "... when my parents were living I had them as a backup, should I say? And they would gear me or steer me in a certain direction. But after they passed away I was on my own. And I wondered at that time, How I would ever manage without them? And being independent, I had to find my way and I felt that, to me, it was an accomplishment like, getting on my own two feet, and not having to turn to them to tell me what to do. And to me that was the greatest thing I've ever done."

Second, women in this role generally viewed their relationship as morally obligatory and necessary. Miss Rosenberg noted that, "... some people said I gave too much of myself to my parents, but I never felt that way.... They felt I sacrificed a lot, but I'd do it all over again." Their care efforts required personal sacrifice and often took precedence over these women forming their own relationships and marrying. Some chose to not marry for their parents' sake, feeling that they could not both marry and care for their parents. Miss Miller told the story of a young man asking her to marry him. She felt she had to reply that, "while my mother lives I can not marry anybody. It isn't a responsibility that I'd put off on anybody else."

Third, informants who had siblings who were married or were parents felt they were somehow selected for the caregiving role because they had no such obligations. Miss Abrahams noted, "... see, I always felt that, being I was not married, that I should take the responsibility because my, you know, the others had children." Further, a few felt it would have been difficult to establish their own independent households since, as one informant put it, that was "just not done" earlier in the century.

Finally, several mentioned feeling a void or a sense of purposelessness in their lives after their parents died. Miss O'Brien bought a dog after her mother's death. She said about this, "I got him at the time there was a void in my life, after Mother died ... and he filled that void. And now he's dead and I'm back where I started from, you know."

It is important to note that these key lineal relationships of shared substance were in the past, unlike most of the other relationships discussed here. Nevertheless, this role structured much of these women's social lives, not only prior to their parents' deaths, but thereafter. Some experienced devastation with parental death; others were faced for the first time in midlife with the question of what they wanted for themselves and how they would prepare for their own later lives.

Collateral ties: the aunt role and collateral family ties—Eighteen of the 31 women described key relationships with siblings and nieces and nephews. In some cases informants were involved in a sibling's family and became like an additional member. In other instances involvement was primarily focused on the nieces and nephews, either as important persons in or of themselves, or as a result of the connecting sibling's death.

Nieces and nephews were central in the lives of most of these 18 women. Relationships were characterized by shared (family) identity and modeled on the parent-child tie. While these collateral ties featured shared positive sentiment, they were viewed, variously, as either obligatory or voluntary, rendering certainty and degree of care by collaterals for informants unpredictable and situationally distinctive. Although there were differences, most informants were extensively involved in raising and shaping the lives of these collaterals, particularly when they were young. Some told extended stories and elaborated on the features of such involvements with collaterals.

The theme of being available or "on call" for collateral families at times extended to the point at which some informants assumed the day-to-day obligations of parenting.

The relations that informants built with these children were very important to them and they spoke, too, of their own centrality in the lives of their nieces and nephews and of their hopes of having influenced their lives in positive and enduring ways. Informants often likened their relationships with nieces and nephews to that of a parent-child tie, an analogy in part evident in their descriptive language. For example, Miss Pierson identified her nephew as the most important person in her life right now. Asked, "What do you think that he gets out of the relationship that the two of you have?," she noted that he is "like a son to me, you know. In fact he is closer to me at times than he is to his own mother." Another informant, Miss O'Brien, commented that, "I always said, I didn't need seven kids, my sister had them for me." Following this pattern, other informants described themselves as a "second mother" to these collateral children.

However, there were questions in the minds of many of these women as to the extent that nieces and nephews would be available *to them* for care should they need it. For example, the earlier logic that these women (as unmarried younger adults) should provide help to their siblings and siblings' children was described as based on the notion that these women "only

worked” and did not have families of their own; as they grew older and observed how, in many young couples, both spouses work and parent, these women did not wish to unduly burden their relatives. They did not feel that help should be necessarily forthcoming from them because the collaterals had so much to do in their own lives.

Our informants’ conceptualization of their parental role to their nephews and nieces was based upon the notion of shared biogenetic substance and thus a sense of shared familial identity, but this could vary by the intensity of interaction and whether the sense of reciprocity and responsibility was obligatory; hence the code for conduct in instances of collaterality was variable.

Miss Pierson, who because of the death of a sister raised her nephews, articulated this when she said, “It’s a strange thing, the boys that I raised, whether it’s a mental attitude, I feel like they’re my biological children, due to the fact that they were my sister’s children. There’s some, some part of me that’s in those kids.”

Miss Chambers, who, resides with her widowed sister and her sister’s son and grandson, explained her attitude about collateral relations as follows:

I want to stand alone financially and emotionally. It’s different if you have children. They’re going to take care of you. Mostly they will. But when you don’t have children.... Who’s going to take care of me when I can’t take care of myself?

Interviewer: So your feeling is, somehow, that children are connected in a different way and that there’s an obligation there that’s different?

Informant: They are. Even grandchildren are connected in a different way, too. Like my nephew’s children. They’re connected in a different way to my sister than they are to me. I’m *Aunt* Elizabeth.

Constructed Ties

Three types of key constructed relationships were identified in our interviews. These were affiliation with a nonkin, nonaffinal family; the establishment of a quasi-parental tie with a younger person who is “like a son” or “like a daughter” to the elder; and the establishment of long-term, same-generation companionate relationships, often with another woman.

One way of understanding constructed relationships is provided if we conceptualize socially defined and sanctioned relations such as kin and affinal relations at one end of a continuum of relationships and individually defined relations, such as friendship, on the other end. Constructed relationships are likened by some informants to those with “official” cultural sanctions (such as blood ties), but are problematic and individualized because they are not really blood ties. On the other hand, while such constructed relationships are like friendships, that is, like individually negotiated relationships, they are relations in which participants try to establish greater legitimacy by metaphoric reference to the more enduring relationship of a blood or family tie. In this fashion, informants worked to overcome the limitations placed on them by the “official” system of kin reckoning.

Affiliation with nonkin families—Eleven women felt themselves to be “adopted into” or close to a family to which they were not biologically related. Stories of how this came about were varied, and there was a wide range of involvement with these families. Further, involvement could be constant or periodic, intensely incorporative, or modest.

No informant articulated the view that these relations were morally binding and should eventuate in intense caregiving. Relationships were voluntary, rather than obligatory, and

consisted of interaction and shared positive sentiments. In general, there was a good deal of affection and support, and relationships were enduring over time. For some women, if this family involvement was a myth, it was a myth in which they partially believed. For others, there was recognition that the family quality was artificial and that they were owed nothing by the family.

Miss Dean has continued to be involved with the family of the minister whose church she attended decades ago. Close to both the minister and his wife, she has also grown close to their children and has helped them get started in life through strategic gifts of money for education and house down-payments. She is included in most important family events such as holidays and graduations and is very much a member of the family. Yet she realizes that she cannot expect hands-on care from these children. She noted that one of her friends said to her, “You have always done for your Mother, Harriet, and now who is going to do for you?” After thinking her situation through, she felt that the best solution for her was to move into a retirement community so as to not “put the load” on these children: “As I got to know that family better and better, I realized that I couldn’t put the load of crisis intervention on them. That I had to make the major decision.... So that while they would continue to care for me and love me and visit me and all that, they wouldn’t need to wake up in the middle of the night and wonder if Harriet’s all right. They have said over and over this is the greatest gift I ever gave them.”

Miss Richards, although “close” to a friend’s family, felt removed from them. The focus of the relationship was amity, holiday visiting, and occasional shared activities: “They consider me part of their family, you know. But it’s really like I’m on the outside looking in. You understand what I mean. When I go there and I see her, and her sister comes with her children and then the daughter comes with her children. And her son is there. It’s nice to be part of it for one day of the year. But then you think of all the rest of the days of the year you really don’t have that.”

Quasi-parental relations—Six of the women had relationships with younger nonrelatives to whom they acted like parents. Despite their relative infrequency, these are important because they show how individuals attempt to use the system of cultural meaning to formulate secure relations. Thus, while lacking the biogenetic tie, the content of the relationship was specifically modeled on parent-child relations. The story of Miss Scott, an 80-year-old retired teacher and librarian, illustrates the form and content of such a relationship:

Interviewer: You mentioned that he’s like a son to you, in a way.

Informant: Yeah, he’s the son I never had. He knows that too. I mean he feels very secure with me, I know.

Interviewer: How did you meet his folks?

Informant: Well, I was living on Highlands Avenue. The house had been sold.... Up on the third floor of the house was an apartment where I lived. And they bought the house, and I came along with the house. And the realtor told them that I should go with the house. Then they had three children who were small. But I kind of kept to myself until she told me she was pregnant but didn’t want the child.... I thought it was terrible that she was going to have a child that she didn’t want.... So when he was born, and the two older girls, he was their dollbaby for a while until they didn’t want anything to do afterwards. You know, the changing diapers and everything. And for some reason the child always put his arms out to me. And then I started to baby-sit them when they’d go out. They were very social. I don’t know. He just grew up in my arms.

Interviewer: Would he come to your apartment and play up there?

Informant: It was the strangest thing, at night if he'd have a bad dream or something when he was a little boy, he would climb in the dark up to the third floor to be with me. And sleep in. He was up there all the time, all the time. And it was nice for me. I thought it was great.... He was a dear little boy. And then his father beat him up one day. And he came up to me and he was gray. I had a rocking chair, I still have it. I put him on my lap and comforted him. He couldn't even cry. And we had a long talk about you know, how it can hurt and how people strike out in anger and sometimes they don't mean it. I didn't know whether his father meant it or not but I had to say something to him. And I got him calmed down.

Now a man in his thirties, this boy was described by Miss Scott as "close" and as "the son I never had." While the relationship is primarily characterized by positive sentiment, in Miss Scott's mind it has taken on aspects of an obligatory relationship. She sees him weekly at least and speaks with him several times a week on the phone. They discuss important happenings and feelings with one another. He shops for her. She is planning to leave her money and property to him at her death, because she has "no other family," as she put it. While from Miss Scott's perspective intense caregiving is out of the question (he is a man, she doesn't want to be a burden, she would move to a supportive environment first), the relationship is filial.

All six quasi-parental relationships began when the child was young; the closeness established in those early years has been sustained. These relationships were often intensely close, with a strong sense of mutual benefit, reciprocity, and obligation. In several cases the biological parent was either emotionally distant or physically absent. Informants who took on quasi-parental roles felt they themselves have been dominant forces in the lives of these young people. And, informants at times compared these ties with the culturally dominant blood tie between mother and child.

Miss Williams, who had parented two children, siblings who were not biologically related to her, felt that her influence tied her to them in ways similar to a biological parental tie, but at the same time felt some ambivalence about this comparison. She discussed these children in terms of influence on her nursing students, noting, "If you don't have biological children of your own, you have to have some way of hitching on to the future because whatever permanency one has is going to have to be through one's children or through the individuals who one has influenced. And it seems to me that it doesn't have to be biological children. I feel as much that I've influenced Karen and Dave. No that's not true. I have not influenced them as much as I would if I had been, if I had had biological children, because I didn't know them until they were well past the age of five and an awful lot of one's ideas are already formed."

Miss Williams identified several ways in which "her" children were "just like" real children. For example, she felt pride and satisfaction when they visited and neighbors and friends could see them. She described these feelings as "the same" as when a parent's biological children come to visit. In sum, one of the most significant aspects of quasi-filial relations is that they have the potential to develop obligatory norms and carry the moral commitment of biogenetically based filial relationships.

Companionate relationships—Eight of the 31 women described same-generation, same-gender companionate relations as key in their lives. Such relations were more than casual friendships. Rather, they generally included some of the following features: enduringness, subjective closeness, periods of coresidence, extensive traveling together such as on vacations and holidays, and in some cases involvements with the other's extended

family. For example, Dr. Helen Warren lived with Miss Anderson, a music teacher, for 25 years. Miss Anderson cared for her mother and, upon her death, moved in with Dr. Warren, who had long been a close friend. In a relationship characterized by marriage-like interdependency, they shared in the household responsibilities; and, as Dr. Warren had a busy medical practice, Miss Anderson came and helped in the office after she returned from her own job. Dr. Warren thought of her friend's family as her own "extended family" and participated in family affairs. The two spent holidays with Miss Anderson's siblings and their children and Dr. Warren has maintained relationships with them even after Miss Anderson's death. In late life Miss Anderson developed cancer and Dr. Warren cared for her for 18 months, through hospitalizations, chemotherapy, and transfusions.

Informants involved in this type of relationship exhibited varying, but usually an extensive, sense of obligation with regard to caring for each other. In one sense, these relations may be thought of as modeled on "sociolegally" sanctioned relationships such as marital ties in which such activities as caregiving are inherent. Yet, with the death of one dyad member, the relationship for the survivor reverts to one in which care may again become problematic.

Friendships

Friends were very significant in the lives of 29 of the 31 never married women. There is an extensive literature on friendships in later life (Adams, 1987; Hess, 1972; Matthews, 1983), some of which focuses on never married older women (Rubinstein, 1987; Simon, 1987). Informants described friendships with a variety of histories and circumstances; in the closest relationships, the women tended to conceptualize their friends as "sisters." However, these women did not generally feel that such relationships could provide them with certain and secure care if the need arose. Nor did they necessarily desire these relationships as sources of care, fearing the change of voluntary mutuality into dependency.

Enduringness was a characteristic of some of the most prominent friendships; several had remained close with the friends of their youth well into late life. This temporal element, as well as a significant investment in these friendships, combined to produce very close, often family-like, relationships. For example, Miss Allen described a friend as the most important person in her life right now and described their closeness in the following manner: "You understand each other better if you know each other for fifty years or seventy years or whatever it is. And complete trust of course. You trust them with decisions, they trust you with decisions. You understand each other without much talking. After all, seventy years is older than most married couples."

Miss Nichols, in discussing friendships, noted, "Family has had practically no meaning to me. Very little. My friends have been my family. And there are people out there in Michigan who really feel that I am part of their family. We call each other up on the phone. They're concerned." As Miss Nichols' statement suggests, there was a feeling of being linked to each other in a semifamilial sense.

In a few cases, these friendships did provide a feeling of security and certainty in time of need, an untapped resource upon which one could call. In this regard, Miss Nichols went on to say that, "This one friend ... she said, 'You know, Doris, if you ever need me I will come to you.' ... I mean I never had anybody say that. And if you don't have any particular family, it's pretty wonderful to feel that you have a friend ... who feels that way."

Several of the women saw their enhanced friendships as a definite advantage of not marrying. Because these women did not marry, unlike most of their peers, they often invested more in their friendships and got a lot out of them. One informant put it this way: "I think my not being married has sort of enhanced some of my relationships with my friends."

Interestingly, very few of these women had key relationships with men. While some described men they had been close to, or nearly married when they were younger, by and large these did not appear to be significant relationships any longer. An examination of social network inventories for these 31 women (elicited using the Antonucci and Depner “bull’s-eye,” 1982) found that 27 named female friends in the inner circle (most subjectively significant or close). In contrast, almost none named men in the inner circle. The reasons for naming men included their membership in a couple to whom the informant felt close (5 cases), a quasi-filial status (3 cases), a role as a spiritual counselor (1 case), and friendship (3 cases). This pattern of low interaction has been explained by Adams (1985), who suggests that older women generally conceptualize cross-sex friendships as being exclusively romantic in nature.

Discussion

Schneider’s cultural analysis of kinship is useful in part for understanding the dilemmas that never married, childless older women face in establishing enduring and binding relationships. His analysis takes place on the level of symbols; the obligations for behavior by blood kin and relatives by marriage, while not completely beyond the scope of his work, are underdeveloped. In our view, he argues persuasively; we find that the meanings described by Schneider *are* the cultural meanings that our informants used to define themselves and their relationships and are consonant with the typology that we have developed here.

The women we interviewed actively worked to overcome the limitations placed on them by cultural definitions of relationship type and content outside the sphere of primary relations. By and large, they did this in two ways. Where there was shared substance, such as in collateral ties, informants attempted to increase the strength of ties through manipulating code for conduct to increase shared identity. Second, where shared substance was lacking, they utilized code for conduct to attempt creation of shared identity, however problematic.

In one sense, atypical persons such as childless, never married elderly are not adequately “covered” by standard kin ideology. Alternatively, one may argue that, while such persons are subsumed under a kinship ideology in which primacy is given to blood relations, they must seek legitimation in the vocabulary of primary kin for nonprimary relations, applying and working the standard tools of kin relations in attempting to make enduring relationships outside of the domain of primary lineal kin.

It appears that the “code for conduct” entailed by shared biogenetic substance and shared identity is clearest in situations of lineal relationships. The extent to which these women cared for their own parents and the extent to which they are uncertain of potential care by collaterals and others is testimony, at least, to this lineal primacy and its inherent close fit with code for conduct in the American kinship system. We have found, too, that the “code for conduct” is unclear among both nonprimary relatives by blood and in constructed relationships. It is subject to a process of often difficult negotiation in both arenas. Because lineal and primary blood relationships are culturally conceptualized as part of “the natural order” and are thus not seen as a matter of human volition, those involved in both constructed and other gray area relationships must seek out a legitimation for these ties, particularly if they view them as enduring. And in the end, there is often a sense that they fall short in ideological terms, or in terms of meaning. Informants often couched descriptions of their key relations in comparative terms: a key other was “like a kinsman,” “like a sister,” “like a son.” Further, the term “friendship” did not carry enough of the sense of what these relations were. Unfortunately, there is no pristine term that carried the exact meaning of what certain relations were, or could be.

Through lineal, primary blood relationships Americans participate in a kind of immortality. Therefore relationships, although usually centered in the present, are also conceptualized — particularly for older people — as participating and relating to the future. Many of these never married women have led generative lives both in their work and in their relationships, and their influence will continue on after they are gone. However, the fact that there is a cultural primacy given to primary kin, lineal relations, and types of relations that clearly fit definitional criteria is problematic for some of these women. Despite their involvement and influence in the lives of others they do not receive the cultural validation for their legacy as do those who have children. As Miss Richards noted, concerning the fact that she never married and had no children, “It’s hard to think there’ll be nothing of you left when you are gone.”

Acknowledgments

Data reported in this paper were collected in a project entitled, “Lifestyles and Generativity of Childless Older Women,” supported by the National Institute on Aging (grant number RO1 AG-07050). Previous drafts of the manuscript were read by Steve Albert and Susan Millar; we are grateful for their comments and insights. Project interviews were conducted by the authors and also by Helen Black, Rohini Mukand, and Ann Valliant.

We wish to express our gratitude to our informants for sharing their lives with us. All informant names reported here are pseudonyms; some details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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