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Fictive Kin as a Component of the Social Networks of Older People

HAZEL MAC RAE
Mount Saint Vincent University

This article discusses the concept of fictive kinship and presents the findings of a qualitative study that investigated the fictive family ties of elderly women. In-depth interviews with 142 respondents revealed that 40% could actually identify a fictive family member. Moreover, it was found that these relationships appeared to be a salient and meaningful component of the social networks of these elderly women. Evidence was found to support the substitution principle, or the notion that individuals who have no kin tend to substitute for missing relatives by converting close friends into quasi-kin. It is argued that fictive kinship ought to be given more research attention. Because current demographic trends indicate that a sizable proportion of future generations of elderly people will have considerably fewer “real” family ties, fictive kin could become a very relevant research focus for social gerontologists in particular.

A substantial body of research now contradicts the once popularly held belief that most older people are cut off from others in society (Adams 1968; Shanas et al. 1968; Harris and Associates 1975; Sokolavsky and Cohen 1978; Chappell 1983; Kohen 1983; Unruh 1983). Indeed, a review of the social gerontological literature reveals that a majority of older people are meaningfully connected to a variety of others through their friendships (Hess 1972; Powers and Bultena 1976; Wood and Robertson 1978; Matthews 1986), their neighborhood ties (Cantor 1979; Wenger 1982; Mac Rae 1987), and their family relationships (Townsend 1957; Shanas et al. 1968; Sussman 1976; Johnson and

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Bursk 1977; Rosenmayr 1977; Treas 1977; Shanas 1979; Troll, Miller, and Atchley 1979; Gold 1987; Rosenthal 1987). In addition, others remain socially integrated through their participation in religious activities and church-affiliated groups, voluntary organizations, various shared interests, and leisure pursuits (Cutler 1977; Ward 1979; Moberg 1983; Unruh 1983; Mac Rae 1987; Connidis 1989).

This literature also clearly indicates that the most frequently researched of older individuals’ connections to others are their family ties. Contact with family members is not only frequent, but, in general, the quality of these relationships is also high (Bengtson and Treas 1980; Rosenthal 1987; Mac Rae 1987; Connidis 1989). Indeed, in one study of elderly women, where the majority of respondents described their family relationships as “very close,” most perceived their family ties to be their most important ties (Mac Rae 1987). Yet, although it is evident from numerous studies that family occupies a central position in most older peoples’ lives, the question “What is a family and from whose perspective?” (Sussman 1976, p. 224) continues to be largely ignored. Studies investigating the family ties of older people have generally employed a traditional definition of family and, adopting a conventional conceptualization, the researcher and not the older person decides who is or ought to be family. An unfortunate consequence of this conventional familial focus in gerontological research is the failure to tap another largely unexplored, yet important, source of close and meaningful ties in the lives of many older persons — quasi-familial ties or fictive kin.

The Concept Fictive Kin: Those Who Are “Just Like Family”

Donald Ball (1972, p. 300), addressing the issue of family definition, maintains that families in the broad sense, are constituted of three different kinds of kin, conventional kin, discretionary kin, and fictive kin. The term conventional kin requires little explanation: These are the various relatives individuals obtain through marriage or to whom they are tied by blood. Discretionary kin are “persons ordinarily distant in kinship terms, who may or may not be included as family, the decision to do so being based upon member’s inclination” (Ball
1972, p. 299). Fictive kin constitute “what might be thought of as non-kin kin”; their “actual kin ties are imaginary and ‘as if’ ” (Ball 1972, p. 300). A more explicit definition is provided by Marvin Sussman (1976, p. 26) who describes fictive kin as “adopted members who take on obligations, instrumental and affectional ties similar to those of conventional kin.”

Although fictive kin have received very little attention in studies of older people, the concept is not novel. In a number of studies, both anthropologists and sociologists have described familial-like relationships to which they have variously referred as “pretend relatives,” “quasi kin,” “non-kin kin,” “pseudo-kin,” and “fictive kin” (Keesing 1958; Giallombaro 1966; Liebow 1967; Michel 1968; Stack 1974; Shimkin, Louie, and Frate 1978; Aschenbrenner 1978; Siegal 1978). In most of these studies fictive kin are commonly described as serving a purpose; in each case, they are a valued resource enabling individuals to meet specific needs. Giallombaro (1966, p. 162), for example, discussing the formation of kinship ties in a women’s prison, describes “the family” as “a stable group to which an inmate may always turn for help in connection with any problem which may arise.” Carol Stack’s (1974) in-depth study of an impoverished Black community describes fictive kin relations in detail. She illustrates how the acquisition of fictive family members enables poor Black men and women to meet the exigencies of daily living through their exchange of various goods and services. Similarly, in his classic study of Black street-corner men, Elliot Liebow (1967) found that impoverished Black men and women of Tally’s corner converted peers into quasi-siblings. As Liebow explains, for men who were short of money and dependable ties in an unstable community, to acquire a fictive brother was to gain a valued resource. Siegal (1978), in his study of single-room-occupancy tenements, describes “the matriarch and her quasi-family of alcoholic men” and illustrates how “quasi-familial arrangements” enable these alcoholic men to survive in an otherwise hostile environment. Other researchers have described the way in which fictive kin serve as substitutes for the geographically distant kin of migrants (Michel 1968; Shimkin et al. 1978).

As previously noted, despite much apparent interest in ascertaining the social ties of the elderly, the possibility that fictive familial mem-
bers occupy a significant place within the social networks of older people has been given surprisingly little research attention. There are, however, a few exceptions, some of which should be mentioned. In his study of the family life of old people, Peter Townsend (1957) discovered that some older people had established interesting familylike ties with nonrelatives. Although he does not use the term fictive kin, he describes these relationships as resembling, in many respects, actual family relationships. More recently, Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982), discussing fictive kinship and the issue of family definition, argue that there is a need to distinguish between the everyday meaning and usage of the term family and the way social scientists tend to use this term. They warn that everyday usage is not necessarily “coincident with formal kinship” (p. 884), and drawing upon their own study of institutionalized residents, illustrate how both elderly nursing home residents and children in a residential treatment center for the emotionally disturbed frequently designated nonkin as family. Gubrium and Buckholdt found, for instance, that it was not unusual for a nursing home patient “to gossip about his or her kin, on the one hand, and refer to others as his or her real family, on the other” (p. 879). Similarly, the institutionalized children, apparently unhappy with their relations with their real parents, frequently claimed favored staff members as their mothers and fathers.

Other recent studies of noninstitutionalized elderly persons illustrate the important role that fictive kin can play as a source of support. Johnson and Barer (1990), examining the support networks of inner-city Blacks and Whites 65 years and older, discovered that Black families had developed mechanisms for preventing social isolation and meeting their social needs. Living in an unstable and less than favorable social and economic environment, these elderly Blacks expanded their networks in two ways: They included “relatives on the periphery of the kinship network (cousins, nieces, and nephews),” and extended the kinship network through the creation of fictive kin (Johnson and Barer 1990, p. 726). Fischer, Rogne, and Eustis (1990) report finding quasi-kin relationships within the support systems of the familyless elderly, whereas Barker and Mitteness (1990) discovered similarly supportive ties among the nonkin caregivers of frail older adults.
In sum, fictive kinship has received some attention within the general sociological and anthropological literature, but this concept has received very little attention within literature that focuses on older persons, and little empirical research about fictive familial ties exists. However, a few investigators have provided empirical evidence that demonstrates that some older people do in fact have fictive relatives (Townsend 1957; Gubrium and Buckholdt 1982; Johnson and Barer 1990; Fischer et al. 1990; Barker and Mitteness 1990) and that these familylike relationships appear to be important to them. Yet, little is known about the nature of these ties, what part they play in the lives of older people, and, more importantly, what these relationships actually mean to the older person. Many of the studies focusing on older people have dealt with select samples such as inner-city elderly, institutionalized elderly, familyless elderly, and frail old adults. One is left wondering about older people in general; do they also perhaps have fictive familial ties?

The research discussed in this article was not designed to investigate fictive kinship per se; it was concerned with examining, in detail, the social networks of a sample of community-dwelling elderly women. Because the purpose of the study was to explore all potentially meaningful ties, it investigated specifically the existence of quasi-familial ties or fictive kin. Relevant to fictive kinship, the study was focused around two concerns. It was concerned with (a) investigating whether or not older persons actually had individuals within their social network who would qualify as fictive kin, and (b) if these ties existed, what were their nature and significance.

Method

This analysis is based on data obtained from participant observations and semistructured interviews with 142 elderly women living in a town of approximately 6,500 people in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada. Respondents ranged in age from 65 to 98 years old. The mean age was 76.8 years. Most were longtime residents of the community, with slightly over three quarters (76.8%) having lived in the town for 20 years or more.
An in-depth or intensive interview was used as the principal method of gathering data. Interviews were quite lengthy, the average taking at least 2 hours to complete. Participant observation was used as a second method. The researcher lived in the town for the 6 months during which the data were collected and made an effort to get to know as many of the elderly women as possible, becoming familiar with many of their activities and the settings where these activities took place.

The existence of fictive family members as meaningful interpersonal ties in the lives of elderly women was investigated by asking respondents, "Are there any people who are not related to you, who are longtime friends of your family, but whom you think of in a sense as members of your family?" Those who said there was such a person were asked how far away this individual lived and to describe the nature of their fictive familial relationship. For instance, these respondents were asked such questions as: What type of contact do you have?; About how often do you usually see this individual?; and, How close is this relationship?

**Results**

**PREVALENCE AND PHYSICAL PROXIMITY**

In this study, 57 of the 142 respondents (40.1%) reported that they had at least one fictive family member. Three others said that there had once been a fictive relative in their family; however, this individual had died. Thus, a sizable portion of this sample of elderly women did indeed have within their personal networks at least one individual whom they described as fictive kin. Moreover, the majority of these women had a fictive relative who lived relatively close to them (Table 1). Among the 57 respondents who identified a fictive family member, 87.7% had one who lived within 100 miles of the respondent, and 45.6% had at least one fictive relative who lived in the same community. Although there were few geographically distant fictive relatives, some such kin did exist: 7% had a fictive relative who lived outside the province but within the country, and three respondents (5.3%) had one living outside Canada.
TABLE 1
Distance from Nearest Fictive Relative ($N = 57$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of Nearest Fictive Family Member</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In this house</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this neighborhood</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In this community</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within 100 miles</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere in the province</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere in the Maritimes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere in Canada</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Canada</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NATURE OF FICTIVE FAMILIAL TIES: QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF CONTACT

Face-to-face contact between respondents and their fictive relatives is quite frequent (see Table 2). Close to three quarters (71.9%) see a fictive family member at least once a month, and 43.8% see one at least once a week. Moreover, although the actual amount of telephone contact was not recorded, according to many of the respondents, this type of contact was frequent as well.

Frequent contact, of course, is not necessarily indicative of quality contact. However, other data indicate that for the elderly women in this study who identify fictive kin, these relationships are a salient and meaningful component of their social networks. When asked, “How close is this relationship?”, an overwhelming majority (93%) described the relationship with their fictive family member as very close. Another four respondents (7%) described the relationship as quite close. Thus, all of the respondents who said they had a fictive family member described the relationship as a close one.

When asked, “What type of contact do you have?”, respondents provided additional data about the nature and quality of their family-like relationships, which further confirm that these are, indeed, meaningful and active social ties. The nature of these ties is also nicely illustrated in descriptions of their origin and history. A number of these relationships go back as far as early childhood, and their durability
TABLE 2
Frequency With Which Fictive Relative Was Seen (N = 57)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency Seen</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once/week</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once/month</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once/year</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once/year</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

illustrates the strength of ties that are overlooked in most studies of elderly people.

We grew up together, I don’t see her too often, but I talk to her on the phone often. (No. 12, 77 yrs.)

We were just kids when we started to chum together, people thought we were sisters. (No. 121, 73 yrs.)

She was my neighbor when I moved here 51 years ago. Her daughter is my godchild. We call about three or four times a week. (No. 68, 70 yrs.)

Growing up together was typical of many of these relationships, but in other cases, the fictive-familial relationship had been established on a different basis. For example, one respondent who had no siblings described her ex-husband’s cousin as fictive kin, saying, “She’s been like a sister to me.” Another respondent listed her former boss (a female with whom she had frequent contact) as fictive kin, saying, “She classes me as one of the family.” A third respondent listed her lifelong housekeeper as fictive kin. This fictive family member was included in all family get-togethers and appeared frequently in family photo albums. A fourth respondent had known her fictive sister for many years, but it seems that sharing the experience of a World War and the death of her fictive sister’s father strengthened the relationship:

She feels that I am a sister. I stayed at her parent’s house in ___ during war time. Her father died in my arms. (No. 16, 65 yrs.)
In addition to professed feelings of closeness, frequent face-to-face contact, telephoning, and the exchange of extended visits, contact between these quasi-familial members resembled family relations in other ways. For example, in some cases, various forms of assistance were exchanged. It has been well documented that family is the major source of both the material and emotional assistance that most older people receive (Shanas 1979; Chappell 1983; Rosenthal 1987). Fictive kin have also been described as a possible source of support for elderly people (Johnson and Barer 1990; Barker and Mitteness 1990; Fischer et al. 1990). Although fictive kin as a source of support were not investigated in this study, some respondents described the nature of their ties to fictive kin as an exchange of assistance that resembles the kind of material and emotional support noted elsewhere as typically provided by family. To illustrate, one respondent, referring to a fictive son and daughter-in-law said,

They took time off from work to put on our storm windows this fall. (No. 7, 69 yrs.)

Some described their fictive kin as confidants.

If I have problems, I can go to her with them. We can tell each other; it stays there. (No. 4, 82 yrs.)

As in typical family relations, other respondents spoke about doing things together, like shopping and celebrating birthdays and Christmas.

She calls to see if I’m all right. They’re outstanding friends. I always have a Christmas with them. (No. 9, 76 yrs.)

In their effort to explain to the researcher the special nature of these relationships and why the people about whom they spoke qualified as kin, these elderly women were drawing upon our culture’s imagery of family life (see Gubrium and Holstein 1990). As respondents spoke about ties that had stood the test of time, giving and receiving, intimacy and sharing, they were invoking family imagery to convey meaning and to show how persons to whom one is technically unrelated can become kin. These women’s conversations lend support to Gubrium
and Holstein’s (p. x) thesis that “family is as much a way of thinking and talking about relationships as it is a concrete set of social ties and sentiments.”

The resemblance to actual familial ties, or real kin, is further illustrated in the terms respondents used when they talked about those whom they considered fictive kin. Fictive family members were frequently referred to as “Aunt” so-and-so, “Cousin” so-and-so, and described as being “just like a sister,” “like a daughter,” “like a son,” or “like a grandson.”

Overall, however, the majority of these relationships fall into one or two categories—a siblinglike relationship (i.e., “like a sister”), or a parent-childlike relationship (i.e., “like a daughter”). Siblinglike relationships, as might be expected, generally go back a good number of years and thus the respondent and the fictive sister are usually close in chronological age.

Aunt ___, she’s just like a sister. I met her years ago in church; we got baptized together. (No. 14, 84 yrs.) (These two women talk on the phone daily and spend every Sunday together.)

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 (respondent’s home town) when she was nine, we went to school together. She is 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 also in the intimacy and emotional intensity involved. Typically, the fictive relative is referred to as something more than a friend.

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.)

And some respondents viewed their fictive sister as one upon whom they could rely if assistance were needed.

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.)
FICTIVE KINSHIP: THE SUBSTITUTION PRINCIPLE

In his study of the family life of old people, Peter Townsend (1957, p. 121) cites, “evidence of the way substitutes and replacements are found within the family circle for non-existent or lost relatives.” Widowed people saw more of their brothers and sisters than did married people. Single and childless people maintained close relations with their siblings and saw them more frequently than did people with children. Townsend explains this phenomenon in terms of what he refers to as “the familial principles of replacement or compensation” (p. 133). In a similar vein, Shanas (1979, p. 4), also reporting on the family relations of old people, writes, “where old people have no children, a principle of family substitution seems to operate and brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces often fulfill the roles and assume the obligations of children.”

Other evidence suggests that a principle of substitution may apply to nonkin as well. Townsend (1957), for example, found that old people who had no relatives turned to nonkin as apparent substitutes. He writes that “some people without relatives at hand, particularly widows, seemed to find part-substitutes in non-relatives. Those without a family sought one” (p. 153). Seeking companionship and assistance, widows and widowers established quasi-marital relationships. Those whose spouses were still alive but who had no children turned to their younger friends, treating them as substitute children. Old people who had no relatives were able to receive from their nonkin kin the kind of help which family members generally provide. In a discussion of the kinship system and the family, Robert Blood (1972, pp. 217-19) includes a section entitled, “The Conversion of Friends Into Quasi-Kin.” He notes that families with no kin often substitute friends instead, making the relationship “into a kind of kinship which can be labelled ‘quasi-kinship’” (p. 217). Blood maintains “the more urgent the family’s need for outside resources, the greater the tendency to convert friends into kin” (p. 217). He goes on to suggest that “two family situations involve particular need: those at the end of the family life cycle (aged couples and widows), and those at the bottom of the stratification system (poor families generally and Black families in particular” (p. 217). Blood cites Townsend’s findings among working class elderly as support for this assertion. It could be argued that some
of the more recent studies, cited earlier in this article, also lend support to the substitution principle and Blood's thesis that creation of fictive kin is related to need. Johnson and Barer (1990), for instance, found that inner-city elderly Blacks had more active support networks than Whites, in part because they were able to compensate for inadequate family resources through the creation of fictive kin. And Fischer et al. (1990) reported finding fictive relatives within the support systems of familyless elderly.

Concerning Blood's (1972) reference to the "particular need" of those "at the end of the family life cycle," the gerontological literature is replete with discussions of the needs of the elderly and how they are met. Although the need for assistance can be met through either a formal or informal system of support, it has been well documented that older people generally turn to the informal system of kin, friends, and neighbors first (Brody 1985; Antonucci 1990; Cantor 1991; Walker 1991). However, despite the abundance of research about how the needs of the elderly are met, little attention has been given to the probable role of fictive family members as a component of the informal support system. Drawing upon fictive kin as a way of increasing one's resources could very well be a strategy that some older and needy people use to offset what would otherwise be an overly heavy reliance on particular kin.

In the present study, the quantitative data provide some limited support for the substitution principle. According to the substitution principle, elderly women who are childless would be more likely to have fictive kin than elderly women who are not. In this study, a comparison of respondents with and without children provided support for the substitution principle. About 61% (n = 14) of the childless respondents had a fictive family member, compared to only about 36% (n = 43) of those with children (chi square = 4.91; d.f. = 1; p < .05). The comparison of widowed and married respondents provided less convincing evidence. Although widowed respondents (45%; n = 41) were more likely to have fictive kin than married respondents (27%; n = 10), the relationship was not statistically significant (chi square = 3.57; d.f. = 1; p > .05). About 41% (n = 47) of those with siblings reported fictive kin, compared to 34% (n = 10) of those without siblings, but this comparison also lacked statistical significance (chi
square = 0.49; d.f. = 1; p > .05). Because the number of childless respondents is low, it is not possible to control for the possible interaction effect of parental status. The numbers of never married, divorced, and separated respondents were so small that they were not included in comparisons.

Despite some inconsistency in the quantitative data, qualitative data indicate that, for many of the elderly respondents, a fictive family member may indeed be serving as a substitute for a missing family tie. Thus, nine of those who describe a sisterlike relationship have either no living siblings (three) or have a brother only (six). In two other cases, the respondent has a living blood sibling but the fictive sister has no such sibling. That some of these women were apparently substituting friends for missing kin is illustrated best in their own words:

She feels like a sister to me. I didn’t have any sister 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.)

___ was like the sister I never had. (No. 47, 76 yrs.)

Of the eight women who described their fictive family member as being like their own child, four are childless. Another, whose only child is a daughter, describes the fictive child as being “like a son.” This fictive son’s biological parents were killed when he was 16 years old, and the respondent took him into her home. He now lives in another province, but they correspond regularly and he visits her faithfully once every 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 15 years, and they have remained very close, exchanging frequent weekend visits.

The nature of the tie between these elderly childless respondents and their fictive children very much resembles the typical parent-child relation. For example, a younger couple, whom a childless respondent describes as “in many ways closer than family,” provides her and her elderly husband with the kind of assistance that children often give
their parents. 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, because this 84-year-old woman has no other kin living nearby. Her fictive daughter lives right across the street, and they have frequent contact. The young woman provides a great deal of assistance and attends to personal errands such as cashing checks and other banking business, functions generally performed only by immediate family. She is also a confidant for the older woman—as the respondent told the researcher, “I tell [fictive daughter] things I never tell anyone else.” A fourth childless respondent described her close relationship with her godson and his family, a fictive family tie that appeared to be very similar to the typical son and daughter-in-law relationship.5

They visit, remember us at Christmas, Easter, and our anniversary. They bring birthday cakes. She often calls on the phone. (No. 35, 74 yrs.)

RESPONDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT FICTIVE KIN—DO THEY DIFFER?

Despite some variation, respondents with and without fictive kin do not differ greatly. The majority of the elderly women in this study were longtime residents of this community and a majority of both those with (71.9%) and without (81.1%) fictive relatives lived in the community for 20 years or more. Although respondents with fictive kin were somewhat less likely to have spent the better part of their lives in the community, most who had lived elsewhere had not lived very far away. The majority of these women were well connected to others, with most having relatively dense personal networks. Those with fictive kin were less likely to have a spouse or partner and less likely to have a child than those without fictive kin (see Table 3). However, a large majority of respondents with and without fictive kin had at least one close friend (most had two or more) and at least one family member other than a spouse or child in their networks. Only 15 individuals in the sample had relatively weak family networks in terms of the number of members present (e.g., no spouse, child, or
TABLE 3
Network Composition of Respondents With and Without Fictive Kin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Respondents With Fictive Kin (N = 57)</th>
<th>Respondents Without Fictive Kin (N = 85)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a spouse or partner</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had at least one child</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>75.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had at least one other family member (e.g.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>98.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grandchild, niece/nephew, or sibling)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had at least one close friend</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>98.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: All but two of the respondents with fictive kin had more than one close friend in their networks.

Grandchild but a close relationship with a niece, nephew, or sibling; however, respondents with these weaker networks were almost equally divided, with 8 having and 7 not having, fictive kin.

It has been suggested that fictive kin may be a source of assistance for elderly people and that the need for support is likely to be greater among those whose economic status is low. The annual income of the majority of respondents in this study was low, with most of those both with (86%) and without (83%) fictive kin having annual incomes well below $15,000. The need for assistance among the elderly is generally greatest in late old age, in the eighties and beyond. The age distribution of these two categories of respondents is also very similar, with 30% of those with and 33% of those without fictive kin over eighty years of age. The need for assistance in later life is presumably greater when health status is poor. When respondents were asked to rate their overall health status, only a very small proportion of those with (3.5%) and those without (5.9%) fictive relatives described their health as poor. A higher proportion (44.7%) of respondents who had no fictive kin than respondents who had fictive kin (31.5%) rated their health status as fair.

It is important to emphasize that a number of the kinlike relationships described in this article had been established in childhood and not in old age. It is also important to emphasize that even if a fictive relative is providing some kind of assistance to an elderly person, this does not necessarily mean that the familylike relationship was established on the basis of need. Family members typically “take care of
their own” (see Gubrium and Holstein 1990, p. 123), and so it should not be surprising to discover that fictive relatives of any age exchange support. It could also be argued that in any relationship, whether one person’s needs are being met more than the other’s and who is supporting whom are often unclear. It is very likely, for example, that the elderly women discussed in this study are meeting needs of their fictive kin. Indeed, a number of the respondents indicated that they had been and/or currently were providing support to a fictive family member. This is illustrated in the case of the respondent who gave a home to her fictive son upon the death of his parents when he was only 16. The respondent who stated: “I never forget her birthday and she never forgets my birthday” indicates that the relationship is mutually rewarding. In describing this kinlike relationship, this same respondent said that her fictive sister’s parents died when she was young and “she more or less adopted the [respondents family of orientation] family as her own.” A final example is illustrated in the case of a respondent who was sharing her home with her 80-year-old fictive relative, and explained to the researcher “When her [fictive relative’s] sister died, she asked if she could stay with me.” Because of the tendency to focus attention on the ways in which elderly people are dependent upon others, little is known about the ways in which others may depend upon them. Human relationships are complex and in order to get a better understanding of them and the nature of social exchange, more must be known about the nature of the exchange over time, what has been given and received throughout the years, and ideally from the perspective of both parties.

Summary and Conclusions

The data presented in this article further confirm that within the social networks of older people, fictive family ties actually exist. Thus, the validity of fictive kinship as a worthwhile concept for empirical investigation within both family sociology and social gerontology has been demonstrated. In this study, 40% of the respondents identified a fictive family member, and each described a relationship that would clearly qualify as fictive kinship, as this concept has traditionally been defined. Furthermore, these ties were found to be salient and mean-
ingful linkages in the lives of these elderly women. Also, some evidence was found to support the substitution principle, the notion that, in situations where individuals lack certain family members, they tend to compensate by converting close friends into quasi- or fictive kin.

It is important to note, however, that this study, like most previous studies, deals with a relatively select sample of elderly persons and, therefore, the ability to generalize from these particular findings is limited. Furthermore, this study was not designed as a specific in-depth investigation of fictive kinship, and it only scratches the surface of a topic that requires more detailed investigation. To draw attention briefly to areas of interest that might be pursued in future studies, the following are suggested as pertinent questions that could be examined. First, is this a class related phenomenon? Robert Blood (1972, p. 217) has suggested that those “at the bottom of the stratification system” are more likely to have fictive kin. That Townsend (1957) found fictive kin among working class elderly, and Johnson and Barer (1990) among inner-city Black elderly whose socioeconomic status was low, could be seen as offering support for Blood’s thesis. Also most of the elderly women who provided data for the present study would fall within the working class category. However, it would be useful to know whether people at higher levels of the stratification system also have fictive kin, and if they do, are these relationships similar to, or different from the fictive family ties found among the working class elderly? It may well be that those at higher levels do have fictive kin but researchers have simply neglected to look for them.

Second, are elderly women more likely to have fictive kin than elderly men? A number of researchers have drawn attention to the fact that men tend not to develop confidant relationships outside of marriage in the way that women frequently do (Lowenthal and Haven 1968; Strain and Chappell 1982). It would be useful to know whether men have fictive family ties, and if they do, whether such relationships are similar to or different from the fictive family relationships of women.

Third, how prevalent is the phenomenon of godparenting within modern day families? Although only three or four respondents in the present study referred to their godchildren as their fictive kin, godparenting was not in itself investigated here; it is possible that more
of these women were also godmothers but neglected to mention this. It would be of interest to know how many parents of the current generation have chosen godparents for their children; also, what is the nature and strength of the godparent-godchild relationship? Is it probable that a godchild could, for example, become a substitute fictive child for an elderly godparent who has no children of his or her own?

For researchers whose intention is to investigate the meaningful social ties of older individuals, the findings of this study indicate the need to explore a broader range of social connections than has traditionally been the case (see also Unruh 1983). Some of the respondents in this study talked about the assistance they received from their fictive kin. Previous research has also shown that a fictive family member can be a valued resource for an elderly person (Townsend 1957; Johnson and Barer 1990; Fischer et al. 1990). Thus researchers, concerned with investigating the social support networks of older people, may well be missing pertinent data if they fail to include fictive family ties in their research. Also, for those whose research focus is the family life of older individuals, it would seem that much could be gained if they allow their respondents to provide their own definition of family. Marvin Sussman (1976) maintains that the response to the question "whom do you consider to be family"?

is far more critical in evaluating the meaning, significance, and probabilities of family relationships of older persons than those estimates made by organizational functionaries described by social scientists. (p. 225)

Some of the familylike relationships found among the elderly respondents in this study were lifelong, established in childhood and carried on into old age. In addition, previous studies have described the fictive ties of much younger people. Thus, it would seem that all family sociologists, not only those whose interest is the family of later life, need to give attention to "rethinking what family is and how it comes into being in our experience" (Gubrium and Holstein 1990, p. 56).

Finally, it could be argued that the concept of fictive kinship is likely to become even more relevant for both family and gerontological studies in the years to come. As current demographic data indicate, a
sizable proportion of future generations of older people will have considerably fewer real family ties. Many will have few or no brothers and sisters, and most will have one or at most two children. Is it perhaps more likely, then, that researchers will find larger numbers of fictive kin in the not too distant future? Can we expect that those who are childless (or those whose only child is a son or a daughter) will reach out to a fictive son or daughter? Will those who lack siblings reach out to a fictive sister or brother? And, if they do might these fictive family members be just as supportive as actual kin? These are interesting research questions that will need to be addressed.

NOTES

1. Referring to North American society, Ball (1972, p. 299) gives the following as an example of discretionary kin: "when siblings marry, whether or not their respective spouses are related to one another is a matter of their discretion."

In this discussion of kinds of kin, Ball ignores adopted children. In the study presented in this article, adopted children are categorized as conventional kin.

2. The research reported here is part of a larger study that was concerned with examining social network involvement and identity management of elderly women living in contrasting settings. The total sample of 142 respondents is actually comprised of respondents drawn from three different settings. The primary sample consists of 101 elderly women residing in their own homes or private apartments within the community. The second consists of a sample of 31 women drawn at random from a population of seniors residing in two local senior apartment complexes, and the third consists of 10 female residents of the local nursing home. The equivalent of a systematic sample, the community-dwelling sample was obtained by knocking on the door of every fifth house on a street; the entire town was covered. The apartment-dwelling were selected by placing all apartment numbers in a box and randomly drawing each successive interview from it. The nursing home sample represents, with few exceptions, almost the entire population of a wing containing the "more well elderly."

3. The equivalent percentages for the individual samples are: 41.6% of the community-dwelling, 35.5% of the apartment-dwelling, and 40% of the nursing home sample.

4. Because familial status of respondents' fictive family members (i.e., whether or not these individuals were lacking an equivalent family tie) was not systematically investigated, it is not possible to say how typical these cases may be.

5. Two other respondents described fictive-kin relations that were based, at least, in part on godparenting. One of these, a 70-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—"My daughter and my godchild grew up together and they are the best of friends." (No. 68)
REFERENCES


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