

DETERMINING WOMEN'S INNERMOST SOCIAL SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS

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MASTER OF SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examined how single women over forty determine their innermost social support relationship. A qualitative study of personal in-depth interviews was conducted with twelve single women ranging in ages 41 to 95 living in a small community in the United States upper Midwest area. The data gathered from the interviews reveal what fosters these women's close relationships, specifically, those borne out of common situations, shared interests, and/or similar experiences. The data disclose what it is in their relationships that matters to them, illuminating dimensions that sustain closeness. Important aspects of their relationships include affection and reverence for each other along with honesty and authenticity. Additionally, trust, reciprocity, proximity, active communication, longevity and history, and finally, continued shared interests further the closeness in their relationships. The research explains aspects of the close relationships of twelve single women, over the age of forty, that bring forth meaningful support in their lives.

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DEDICATION

To my dear, dear close friends who supported my academic goals,
even though it took away our time together.

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INTRODUCTION

The research for this thesis was done during the Thanksgiving-Christmas-New Year's holiday season 2017. It was my second holiday season spent without family. My parents and siblings are not in the area, and I have no biological children. My husband's, who is seventy-six, children live on the East Coast. The likelihood of spending future holidays alone is high. This is my reality. I am curious as to how others experience this same reality of whom comprises *family* if one doesn't have one nearby? I was attuned [over the holiday] to the articles and radio shows speaking of loneliness and suicide rates over this time of year. Often, the articles and talk shows highlighted loneliness from the psychological perspective. I posit that people finding themselves alone at this difficult time can be better understood from a sociological perspective.

There are many, many definitions of sociology. My definition of the discipline vis-à-vis my studies in sociology is the study of how people act towards, interact with, and react to each other within a context. The topic of my thesis is determining women's innermost social support relationship(s). I want to explore the various close relationships women have in their lives along with learning how those relationships have come to be. Hence, aligning with my sociological definition, I will examine the supportive interaction between individuals within their own spheres; their close meaningful relationships.

Social support provides an individual with the perception of feeling cared for and loved, socially valued, being able to count on others in times of need, and being viewed as a valued member of a network of communication, mutual obligation, and resource availability (Sarason, Shearin, Pierce, & Sarason, 1987; Uehara, 1990; Wan, 1982). Personal relationships, which vary in quality and depth of caring, provide sources of support depending on specific life events and problematic situations individuals encounter (Sarason et al.; Suitor, Pillemer, & Keeton, 1995).

It stands that different problems require different supportive resources therefore needing different, specific individuals (Suitor et al.). The phrase: “*Who gives what to whom regarding which problems*” (House, quoted in Suitor et al., p. 1573) is most fitting in summarizing relationships as social support since there is no one kind of social relationship serving as a single form of social support (Wellman & Wortley, 1989).

A point of inspiration for this research harkens from an article written by Jessica Olien (2013) concerning the topic of loneliness. Olien became interested in the subject from her own experience of moving from New York City to Portland, Oregon. Professional growth gave her reason to build a new life in Portland even though she knew no one. She did everything right to meet people: i.e., dating, going to parks, bars, and bookstores, and even golfing, but she “felt no connection to them” (p. 1). This statement piqued my interest in the assumption she never gained that innermost, core relationship(s). As Olien experienced, it was not the quantity of social contacts; she was missing *meaningful* connection(s). Referencing Dr. John T. Cacioppo of the University of Chicago, Olien explains that all we need in our lives are persons “on whom we can depend and who depend on us in return” (Olien, 2013, p. 4).

In this thesis, I explored how women determine their innermost social support relationships, to the level described by a woman speaking of her relationship with another friend, “So closely interwoven have been our lives, our purposes, and experiences that when separated we have a feeling of incompleteness” (Traister, 2016, p. 2). I am working on the assumption that having innermost social support alleviates loneliness. While much attention is given to the issue of loneliness—a search for ‘loneliness and isolation’ on Google Scholar produced 180,000 items (September 6, 2017), it is not the concentration of this research. In this study, I focus on how

individuals develop their core group of friends—innermost social support, thus possibly mitigating the effects of loneliness.

My research analyzed, within a qualitative study, how certain individuals determine their innermost social support relationship(s). Specifically, I asked the question *how do women define their close relationships?* I sought to explore how women determine who serves as their innermost social support. Furthermore, I wanted to know *how did they develop their close relationships—how did such relationships become significant in their lives?* Relative to my review of the literature, my research ascertained if the women's experiences in their close relationships reflect [or do not reflect] the information in the literature. The findings from this inquiry may serve to inform thereby assuage the effects of loneliness experienced by women.

This thesis begins with a review of the literature that utilized concepts and theories to inform this study's premise of how individuals define and develop their close personal relationships, followed by an explanation of the methodology that was used to obtain the data in researching this disquisition. Next, the findings from the research explain how single women, over the age of forty, create their close relationships along with how they sustain the closeness in these relationships. The findings show that various themes emerged as the women talked about what foster their deep friendships, such as the situations, interests, experiences, and contexts that provided the platform from which to build closeness. Affection, honesty, trust, reciprocity, proximity, communication, and history within their relationships surfaced as themes that explain how closeness was nurtured in their meaningful relationships. I conclude this thesis with my thoughts about the study as a whole.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature will follow the two main tenets of the research: *How do individuals, specifically women, define their close personal relationships? And how did they develop their close relationships, that is, how did such relationships become significant in their lives?* Deconstructing the tenets results in three separate areas from which sociological concepts and theories can be drawn. First, characterizations of the relationships within this realm of study are described using a further explanation of social support, prefaced by social integration, followed by discussions surrounding exchange theory, reciprocity/equity, and communal relationships. Secondly, relationships, as sources of support, are expounded. Next, literature surrounding the concepts of networks and social capital will be applied to illustrate how supportive relationships are developed and socially produced, with a look at loneliness. The literature review will conclude with reasoning as to how additional literature guided the research particularly in determining a population for the study.

Characterizations of Relationships

Relationships are defined by the level of fulfillment, connectedness, satisfaction, and support between the parties within the relationship. Wellman and Wortley (1990) surmise that personal relationships provide a sense of companionship, an interest in the longevity of the relationship(s) continuing through interactions by way of shared social contexts, and an impression that there is mutuality in the relationship, garnered by each other's need being realized and supported.

Social integration

Most relationships begin with social integration. Social integration is the "existence of certain key relationships" (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten, 1996, p. 839). It is a

term representing the number of interpersonal ties a person has, which is indicated by the number of persons available in a social environment along with actual contact with such available persons (Alwin, Converse, & Martin, 1985; Pillemer, 2000), essentially, the number of members in his/her social network. A person is deemed more socially integrated when one has more social ties (Pillemer). Those social ties are an individual's connection to others in their own environment. Hence, a highly integrated person possesses a social network of ties (Pillemar). By implication, social integration infers the structural existence of a network of social contacts and help exchanges with friends, neighbors, and relatives (Helgeson, 2003; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). Thus, social integration, with ensuing self-esteem and companionship, is shaped by higher levels of kin and non-kin support (Horwitz, Renolds, Neiderhiser, & Charles, 2014). While social integration is simply the existence of certain key relationships, social support is the “emotionally sustaining content of relationships” (Umberson et al, 1996, p. 839), that is, “social relationships through which an individual's needs are met” (Jacobson, 1986, p. 252) including “the supportive ways that different people behave in the social environment” (Helgeson, p. 25).

Social support

Social support¹, provided by individuals' primary relationships—relatives, friends, neighbors, etc., is the way resources meet the needs of persons in their relationships (Jacobson, 1986; Lipman & Longino, 1982). Relative to this current research, social support has three contexts in which supportive efforts occur: interpersonal, situational, and experiential similarity. An interpersonal context is where individuals in the relationship are sensitive to each other's needs, seeking equitable patterns of resource exchange (Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Solky-Butzel, & Nagle, 1997; Rook, 1987). The situational context is such where members respond to a situation spontaneously and distinctively (Lipman & Longino; Pierce et al.). Support also occurs

when friends and relatives share the same experiences, when there is similarity on important social dimensions (Suitor et al., 1995). Aspects of social support includes the access each has to each other, the strength and closeness of the relationship, the number of support persons one has, whether the support comes from family or friends, how the support matches the needs, the adequacy of the support, and the emotional closeness of the individuals (Sarason et al, 1987; Wellman & Wortley, 1990).

Social support is multidimensional in types of support per types of situations. There is not a single supportive function that serves ego in all circumstances and all the time; no one kind of social relationship is singly called *social support* (Jacobson, 1986; Wellman & Wortley, 1989). There are, instead, different kinds of supportive resources. The literature reveals a myriad of taxonomies by which to classify the types of support. Helgeson (2003) provides a broad umbrella under which to assess types of support. She defines “the resources that people within an individual’s social network provide” as *functional* measures (p. 25). Various dimensions (taxonomies) of support are categorized by function germane to individuals vis-à-vis situations and relationships (Pierce et al., 1997; Wellman & Wortley). Emotional support provides feelings of caring and being loved along with the comfort in knowing others are available to provide caring and security (Helgeson; Jacobson; Rook, 1987; Wellman & Wortley). Another similar classification is socio-emotional support that is the *expressed* emotions, caring, and understanding between individuals; discussing feelings and listening to concerns (Robison & Flora, 2003; Smerglia, Miller, & Kort-Butler, 1999; Whitaker, 2010). Cognitive (informational) support is the information, advice, and knowledge gained from the relationship(s) (Helgeson; Jacobson). Materials (instrumental) support is provided by tangible goods and services needed to solve practical problems (Helgeson; Jacobson; Rook; Wellman & Wortley). Companionship

is another dimension of support that provides individuals someone with whom to engage in social activities (Rook; Smerglia et al.; Wellman & Wortley; Whitaker, 2010). Financial support has also been noted as a support dimension (Stack & Eshleman, 1998; Wellman & Wortley).

Another area by which social support is key in relationships is the role that social support serves as a buffer against stressful events individuals encounter in their lives (Sarason et al., 1987; Smerglia et al., 1999; Stack & Eshleman, 1998; Wellman & Wortley, 1989). Social support has been known to lower the level of experienced strain caused by stressful situations and encounters by playing a role in helping individuals adapt to major life changes and other stresses in life (Alwin et al., 1985; Parasuraman, Greenhaus, & Granrose, 1992).

As inferred, social support is not unilateral. There can be an interactional nature to social support involving both giving and receiving by the same individual, contributing to the well-being invoked within social support (Parasuraman et al., 1992; Rook, 1987). That occurs when a supportive relationship is “characterized by equitable patterns of resource exchange” (Rook, p. 145).

Social exchange

Simmel (1971) noted, “Most relationships among men [sic] can be considered under the category of exchange” (p. 43). Social exchange is the “voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others” (Blau, 1964, p. 91). Social exchange has been deemed a central, social process underlying relations within groups, as well as between individuals (Blau, p. 4). George C. Homans (1958), one of the key figures associated with the development of exchange theory (Kivisto, 2013), observed that “interaction between persons is an exchange of goods, material and non-material,” and that this exchange can interpret individuals’ behavior; that is, one’s behavior is “reinforced

by the behavior of another” (Homans, pp. 597, 598). The term social exchange heralds from economics in that it applies social interaction in the form of giving and receiving resources on the expectation of return of resources (Uehara, 1990). Exchange underlies the notion that key social relationships are based on a level of mutual obligations, expectations, and reciprocity (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998). In analyzing social exchange, scrutiny should be on the terms of exchange between persons. This includes the *act* of exchange, the patterns of giving and receiving, i.e., mode of exchange (Cook, 2005; Hofferth & Iceland). But it can also include the content of exchanges, a comparability of benefits (Rook, 1987).

Emerson (1976) explains that the focus of exchange theory is the social process of moving value. It is recognized that the underpinnings of social exchange include the reciprocity obligations created by exchange (as opposed to the actual value of what is exchanged) along with the social complexity of exchange (Uehara, 1990). For instance, exchange amongst rural family members holds a norm of giving more often than receiving since the giver has more control over the conditions of exchange (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998).

Buunk and Prins (1998) advance the fundamental exchange theory to explain the concept of exchange orientation. People may have an orientation [in dyadic relationships] to be concerned about the reciprocal exchange in their relationships. They expect immediate and comparable returns on the rewards² they have given and, conversely, feel stress when they cannot readily reciprocate in like fashion when receiving reward(s) from another. They seek mutuality from others [in their relationship] in goods, services, privileges, and affection (Buunk & Prins).

Clark and Mills (1979) define an exchange relationship as one where members in the relationship operate under the assumption that when benefits are given, there is an expectation of

a like benefit will be given in return. When an initial benefit is received, the recipient is now obliged to return a comparable benefit. Each member is concerned with the balance of benefits exchanged (Clark & Mills). In other words, is the exchange of value equitable?

Reciprocity and equity

It is noteworthy, vis-à-vis theories surrounding relationships, that equity and reciprocity play a role in developing and maintaining close social relationships. Reciprocity is defined by the proportional level of help, affection, and attention given to one another in a relationship (Buunk & Prins, 1998). This is supported by the equity theory that states that people generally do prefer reciprocity in their relationships (Buunk & Prins).

According to equity theory, partners in a social relationship expect to contribute and benefit from the relationship proportional to what the other contributes and benefits. Upon evaluation to determine fairness, if there is any imbalance (inequity), a partner will feel distressed until equity is restored, thereby detracting from satisfaction with one's relationship (Rook, 1987; Schafer & Keith, 1981; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Incorporating social exchange, Adams (1963) explains that "whenever two individuals exchange anything, there is a possibility that one or both of them will feel that the exchange was inequitable" (p. 4). When one gives more to a relationship than what one receives, there will be feelings of unfairness and resentment, whereas feelings of guilt occur when one receives more than what one gives (Rook, 1987). To restore equity to the relationship, persons in the relationship can increase or decrease their inputs or outcomes (Schafer & Keith). This concept of inequity supports one of the defining features of social exchange, reciprocity (Molm, 2010).

Molm (2010) defines reciprocity as "the giving of benefits to another in return for benefits received" (p. 119). She expanded her review of reciprocity to include Simmel's (1950)

viewpoint that “social equilibrium and cohesion would not exist without the ‘reciprocity of service and return service’” (quoted in Molm, 2010, p. 119) and Gouldner’s (1960) suggestion that a “‘norm of reciprocity’ helps assure that people help others who have helped them in the past” (quoted in Molm, 2010, p. 119). According to equity theory, individuals generally prefer reciprocity in their relationships (Buunk & Prins, 1998). Most friendship relations are characterized by one-on-one reciprocity (Buunk & Prins; Wellman & Wortley, 1989). Individuals believe that if their friends support their valued identity, they will likely reciprocate support (Weisz & Wood, 2005).

Norms of reciprocity characterize a close friendship. Reciprocity is in the form of help, affection, and attention; there is a “voluntary interdependence and intimacy along with being based upon common interests, equality, and trust” (Buunk & Prins, 1998, p. 2). When a relationship has reciprocal characteristics in the form of resource exchange, then those in such a relationship possess a sense of well-being through the benefit of social support in such a relationship; yet if one perceives a lack of reciprocity in the relationship [with a best friend] then one can experience loneliness (Buunk & Prins) suggesting that meaningful social support may be lacking.

Individuals within an exchange relationship or possess an orientation towards seeing relationships in terms of exchange, expect immediate rewards if they have given benefits and, in turn, feel most uncomfortable if they cannot reciprocate in like fashion to a benefit received (Buunk & Prins). Persons with this propensity of approaching their social [dyadic] relationships look for reciprocity from the other in terms of support, i.e. emotional, instrumental, and informational—*if I help you, I should be able to expect that you will help me in return*. The problem with exchange relational approach is that individuals high in this orientation neglect the

idea that not everyone has the same type of needs; therefore, this exact tit-for-tat orientation would be detrimental to developing close relationships (Buunk & Prins).

Communal relationships

Two types of relationships are within the auspice of social support, exchange relationships and communal relationships. As previously discussed, a benefit given in response to receiving a benefit is appropriate in exchange relationships whereas a benefit given in response to another's need is appropriate in communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979).

While all relationships in which persons give and receive benefits are social, relationships can be described where each person has a concern for the welfare of the other. There is not an expectation of equitable exchange within that relationship, but simply a motivation to respond supportively to the other's needs. These relationships are deemed communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979, 1993; Lemay & Clark, 2009). These tend to be, but not necessarily, relationships between close friends, where there is a fundamental liking for each other. These [seemingly very important] relationships follow the communal norm of taking care of the needs of one another, thus providing a sense of fulfillment and security for members of this relationship. The greater the motivation to be responsive to the other's need, the stronger the communal bond (Clark & Mills, 1993).

Not all relationships operate under the notion of *you did this for me, so I better do this for you*. Individuals help people in their sphere for the sole reason of *just because*. As opposed to exchange relationships where members are obliged to return comparable benefits in response to benefits received or expect like benefits in response to giving benefits, individuals within communal relationships give benefits as a response to another's needs or to please the other. These tend to be relationships exemplified by familial relationships, romantic relationships, and

significant to this piece, friendships (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986). These relationships encompass the concern for the other's general welfare (Clark & Mills, 1979). Contrasted with exchange relationships, when a benefit is received, the recipient does not feel a certain obligation to repay benefit. The benefit is given in response to a need or general concern (Clark & Mills, 1993).

Clark and Mills (1979) examined the distinction between exchange and communal relationships in terms of the reaction to requests for benefits (asking for a favor). In an exchange relationship, when a benefit is given, the recipient is well aware of the obligation to repay the debt and will seek opportunities to reciprocate as soon as possible. When such opportunity is presented, tension is alleviated. This provides equity in the relationship thereby increasing the affinity for each member in the relationship (Clark & Mills).

In a communal relationship, it is all about helping the other, satisfying another's need. Helping the other is unconditional, to the point that if one asks for a favor of another in light of giving a previous benefit, it may imply that the prior favor was given with the expectation of receiving something in return. This is off-putting in a communal relationship. Individuals in a communal relationship convey that there is a high enough regard for the relationship that one can ask a favor or help the other without keeping score (Clark & Mills, 1979).

This leads to the suggestion that people make the clear distinction in their social network of relationship(s) between exchange and communal. This is not so. Approaches to relationships are very individual and not necessarily explicitly characterized to be either communal or an exchange (Clark & Mills, 1979). People may restrict their communal relationship to those closest to them, yet some others may view members of their own immediate family in terms of exchange. Conversely, some may have a wide circle of communal relationships (Clark & Mills).

An exchange relationship can easily turn into a communal one as in the case of a friendship growing between co-workers. As Clark and Mills investigated, it is important that the partners in a communal relationship help the other without the idea of being paid back as it then defines the relationship in terms of exchange and not simply helping the other just because of a likeness for the other. But they are quick to add the caveat that a communal relationship can become strained if one of the partners feels that s/he is being exploited when the other offers no indication of caring for his/her welfare; the communal relationship can disintegrate (Clark & Mills). In areas of social support i.e., emotional and instrumental, there is still a certain degree of mutual give and take found to uphold levels of positive feelings toward friends in a relationship (Rook, 1987). There is still a harkening back to reciprocity in relationships.

Relationships

Supportive personal relationships, offering expressions of affection and concern, are emotionally supportive, but then also elicit instrumental support within individuals' primary relations (Lipman & Longino, 1982). Generally speaking, the most important relationships in a person's life are the longer lasting, significant relationships such as a marital relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the sibling relationship (Pinquart, 2003). Because these relationships are primary in individuals' lives, they tend to be the main sources of support (Pinquart). Questions have been posed as to how central are these relations in terms of sociability and support, and if these relations differ in support given by friends (Wellman & Wortley, 1989)? While it has been suggested that individuals look towards relationships with those like themselves in various ways, it is relationships from where individuals receive support that are deemed vital (Suitor et al., 1995).

Marriage³ has been considered a source of greater amounts of satisfaction and psychological well-being in that spouses provide closeness, sharing, and intimacy along with emotional and financial support (Alwin et al., 1985; Giordano & Lindström, 2011; Suitor, 1987; Pinquart, 2003, p. 32; Stack & Eshleman, 1998). Social contact time is obviously more within a marriage, but due to the in-the-house living arrangements, social interaction with others outside the dwelling may be constrained (Alwin et al., 1985). In its privatizing, marriage changes the types of networks to which an individual belongs; therefore, it can undermine other social relationships—couples can be so focused on each other, they exclude personal ties to others (Nyqvist, Cattan, Andersson, Forsman, & Gustafson, 2013; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). Nonetheless, marital status seems to be the context of happiness as opposed to co-habiting with a roommate or adult child (Nyqvist et al.). There is not necessarily any more or less support from a co-habitant or adult child, and it has been shown that those living with an adult child, as opposed to living with a spouse, experience more loneliness, suggesting less support in the parent-adult child relationship than the marital relationship (Nyqvist et al.; Alwin et al.).

Relationships with immediate kin (parents, adult children, siblings, in-laws) should be supportive due to cultural norms—*blood is thicker than water*, which promote family welfare, encourage kin to share resources, and cherish long-term reciprocity. Yet not all kinfolk have active relations (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Also, demographic changes in size and composition are occurring in families therefore affecting primary relations as support (Lipman & Longino, 1982). Proximity to kin may cultivate relationships. But even if such relationships are available, access to support may not be (Alwin et al., 1985; Hofferth & Iceland, 1998). It has been found that some prefer kinship ties because they take less effort to maintain than social ties

with friends (Wellman & Wortley, 1989). Individuals far from kin compensate by cultivating friendships (Hofferth & Iceland).

Relationships consist of weak ties (collection of acquaintances) or strong ties (collection of close friends/relatives) (Granovetter, 1983). Granovetter (1973) points out that a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and the reciprocal services characterize and strengthen ties (Granovetter). This suggests that strong ties align with emotional support. While strong ties make up a minority of individuals' ties, they are the majority of active supportive ties. It has been reported that emotional support provides the strongest relationship association (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Weak ties encourage people to participate in their network of acquaintances in order to gain information and knowledge (Robison & Flora, 2003), suggesting an alignment with cognitive support. An exchange of information within weak ties promotes more reciprocity (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998).

Work relationships often are dictated by the formal structure of organizations, but that same structure provides opportunities to personally assist each other. Company norms foster equitable treatment amongst coworkers with the expectation of being open, honest, and trustworthy with each other (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). This enables informational support. Friendships can evolve from existing role relationships within the work environment even when the relationship has a utilitarian nature to it, which can lead to possible feelings of indebtedness (Bridge & Baxter). Bridge and Baxter (1992) make the case that those in a close friendship at work can override work tensions because they have developed sophisticated, open communication lines.

Within the prism of this piece, the sources of support come from the closest of relationships. The implication of the *closest of relationships* is not in quantity of people but in

the quality of the relationships with those people—those, according to Cacioppo, “on whom we can depend and who depend on us in return” (Olien, 2013, p. 4). People feel that close friends are not just *nice to have* but an outright necessity, citing the many benefits and resources provided by their friends (Whitaker, 2010). Close relationships are based on common interests, equality, and trust; and are characterized by voluntary interdependence and intimacy, thus providing greater self-esteem, companionship, and social integration (Buunk & Prins, 1998; Horwitz et al., 2014; Weisz & Wood, 2005). Close friends share strong ties more in terms of emotional support and companionship than instrumental support (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Reciprocity enters into a close relationship with regards to the personal level of communication, commitment, and interest (Weisz & Wood). Although close friends may help each other out, it is the close bond that mitigates any imbalance in exchange. Such friends trust each other to have an understanding that favors given or received will be taken care of over the course of the friendship (Rook, 1987; Schafer & Keith, 1981; Weisz & Wood, 2005).

Relationships are connections within a social network. Networks are interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity (Wellman, 2005). This aligns with the dimensions of social support. Some state that proximity is not a necessary factor in creating social networks (Whitaker, 2010). This is true for social networks found on the Internet. When definitions of social support and social networks are explored, there is credibility to the reasoning that online social networks can serve individuals. Individuals connect online with other like-minded people. The social community is changing from “being a social network of households to a social network of individuals” (Wellman, p. 55). It must be noted that online social networks can be a source of support for individuals.

Building Relationships

Supportive relationships do not readily occur in people's lives. They are created, borne out of social networks resulting in individuals gaining social capital from which to draw resources of social support.

Social network

An individual's social network (personal network) consists of his/her set of relations amongst other persons consisting of various linkages portraying various interests (Bidart & Charbonneau, 2011; Uehara, 1990). Characteristics of one's social network include an individual's ability to contact others and vice versa, the number of people with whom one is in direct contact, the extent of interaction with one another, the meaningfulness of the relationship(s), the multi-dimensions of the relationship(s), the duration of the relationship(s), whether the relationship(s) is one-directional or reciprocal, and is likely to change over time (Alwin et al., 1985; Sarason et al., 1987; Wan, 1982). Another characteristic of networks is their permeability or sometimes impermeability. The level of access to a social network is based on the ties within the network. The stronger the ties, or the more homogenous the traits of the individuals within the network, the less permeable the network. Whereas, when networks incorporate more diverse members, both in backgrounds and experiences, the more accessible the network is to members (Flora, 1998; Robison & Flora, 2003).

Networks provide access to valuable resources. Networks afford individuals access to financial support, economic opportunities, and germane to this research, social support (Cook, 2005), allowing an exchange of socio-emotional goods (Robison & Flora, 2003). The popular term *networking* is how individuals access social capital. Social capital exists within

relationships, and networks are patterns of those relationships, where social capital resides (Robison & Flora, 2003).

Networks [of potential social support] provide the *structural* measures of individuals' social environment describing the existence, the interconnections, and the relations among its members. These measures [of potential social support] reflect the number of people or the amount of contact with people within an individual's social sphere with the former measuring the size and the latter measuring the intensity of associations (Finsveen & van Oorschot, 2008; Giordano & Lindström, 2011; Helgeson, 2003). There is an assumption that the greater number of people in one's social world and the greater amount of contact with them, the more opportunities for social support, hence a greater amount of social capital (Alwin et al., 1985). But the size and intensity of the relationships in one's social network does not say anything about the resources the network and its members might contain for the person (Finsveen & van Oorschot). Even if the quantity of interactions (the *structural* aspects of social support) is substantial, it is the quality, the degree to which individuals feel loved and valued, of social interactions that matters (Rook, 1987; Sarason et al., 1987). Bidart & Charbonneau (2011) definition for "significant persons' networks," which they explain to be:

The most important nucleus of social relationships of the ego, which includes core personal networks, persons of greatest importance to the ego, or those with the greatest impact on his or her attitudes, behavior, and welfare. (p. 272)

This definition of networks serves this current study because there is a suggestion that one's personal network does not necessarily have to be extensive or large. It is simply who are those most important to the ego, be it one, two, or a few dear friends.

About half of all supportive relationships come from the strong ties with friends, neighbors, and siblings, which make up a large portion of individuals' social network. Rarely seen friends or those living far away tend to have weaker, less supportive ties; therefore, people tend to construct strong personal ties where they live (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). While it is possible to access emotional support in long-distance relationships, proximity is best in relationships proving instrumental (tangible assistance) and companionship (Alwin et al., 1985; Wellman & Wortley, 1989; Whitaker, 2010). Though the size and intensity may not be the single most important aspects in gaining social support, they are nonetheless affected by proximity. Proximate social environment is a fundamental determinant of the availability of social support (Alwin et al.; Lipman & Longino, 1982).

Social capital

The term, *resources*, is also incorporated in the concept of social capital. Social capital, by basic definition, is people's access to resources in their social networks, which are social connections among individuals. Social capital is built from the relationships in a social network (Finsveen & van Oorschot, 2008).

Portes (1998) reviewed the many descriptions of social capital. A working definition for this project will utilize Portes' distillation of the explanations of social capital by Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Glen Loury. Social capital "stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (p. 6). Essentially, social capital is a function of the structure of a social network and the "assets gained through membership in those networks" (p. 12). Note the two characteristics of social capital. There is an aspect of a social structure (network) and there are facilitated actions (access to resources) within that structure that allow individuals to achieve their own goals (Finsveen & van

Oorschot, 2008). Operationalizing the terms resources and networks for the purposes of the current study is to imply resources to mean social support and networks are interpersonal relationships.

To illustrate how social capital is built between individuals in a network of social ties, consider emotional support. If one person provides empathy and understanding to another, that person is supplying social capital. The recipient of the gesture acquires social capital. Then again, people who convey emotional supportive goods acquire social capital. These exchanges of support occur in networks where social capital resides (Robison & Flora, 2003). It is the investment people make in their interpersonal relationships that allows them to build their social capital that can be used in their lives (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998; Wellman & Wortley, 1990).

There is also an additional dimension to understanding social capital. While it may appear that more interpersonal relations will build social capital, it is also important that the social capital is created with norms, trust, along with mutual goals, actions, or benefits (Wood et al., 2005). Therefore, seemingly abundant social capital does not guarantee genuine connections (Finsveen & van Oorschot, 2008), thus possibly explaining why Jessica Olien could not make an inner social support connection even though she availed herself to social capital through her occasions of dating, golfing, and frequenting social venues (2013).

Social production of social support

Simply stated, social support is related to social closeness, therefore people put a conscious effort into maintaining strong ties with close friends (Robison & Flora, 2003; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). While social norms dictate that best friends support each other's personal and social goals, it is intimacy, trust, and commitment that are integral to the relationship (Weisz & Wood, 2005). There are five explanations as to how social support is socially produced. Three

relate to the quality of the relationships: social closeness, i.e., intimacy and desire to be in the relationship; proximity and frequency of contact; and the number of contexts in which the relationship operates. The other two relate to characteristics of network members: available resources: e.g., education, professional opportunities; and similarities in personal characteristics: i.e., gender (Wellman & Wortley, 1989).

When people move, they start with weaker ties; it takes time to build social capital (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998). In building social capital, individuals with many family members in proximity may cultivate those relationships whereas people far from kin may cultivate relationships with friends (Hofferth & Iceland).

Individuals are more likely to develop and maintain supportive relationships with whom they have more in common—having similar social dimensions, i.e., married, single, being parents, working professionals, etc. It is these shared values and life experiences that lead to aligning with those who can relate to one's circumstances, therefore are more empathetic, hence more emotionally supportive (Suitor et al., 1995; Suitor & Keeton, 1997). This can occur during social status transitions, i.e., divorce or career change, consequently changing individuals' interpersonal relationships. Support likely varies according to an individual's specific life event or specific situation, speaking to the empathy and understanding in having the I-can-relate person in one's sphere (Suitor et al.; Suitor & Keeton).

Loneliness

In his book, *Loneliness*, Robert Weiss (1974) notes that loneliness can be a response to a deficit in relationships along with the “absence of an engaging social network” (pp. 18, 19). This addresses loneliness as what it is not. Pinqart (2003) attributes the lack of social integration and social support as the main cause of loneliness, the “perceived absence of social relationships” (p.

32). Aligning with the notion of reciprocity, loneliness can result from a discrepancy between one's perception of the quality of desired relationships and the actuality of the quality of the relationship. Therefore, one perceives the relationships to be deficient (Buunk & Prins, 1998; Rook, 1987). Simply, if one feels deprived in a relationship (e.g., with one's best friend) and that the relationship is not reciprocal, one will feel lonely within that relationship (Buunk & Prins). Individuals who feel loved and accepted in a relationship with open communication are more satisfied and less lonely in the relationship (Sarason et al., 1987).

Additional Information Guiding the Research

The intersection of the discussed concepts and theories will guide the research for this study to answer the questions: *How do women define their close relationships? And how did they develop their close relationships—how did such relationships become significant in their lives?* Threaded throughout the literature review is the overall premise that relationships are extremely important to individuals based on the support provided. From whom people receive support within various contexts is at the heart of determining individuals' innermost social support. In conjunction to the concepts and theories, additional points of discussion surfaced in the review of the literature, specifically differences in gender and relationships in the context of smaller, [rural] non-metropolitan communities.

Gender

Much of the literature included discussions surrounding gender differences within the space of social support. It is true that both non-married men and women [in the absence of children] spend time with friends, neighbors, and relatives (Alwin et al., 1985), but it is in the vein of social support that differences are salient. Women are more likely to provide emotional support than men (Wellman & Wortley, 1990), substantiated by the research indicating that

women identify children and friends as sources of support, whereas men, without a spouse, may lack any confidant (Pinquart, 2003). Women report higher levels for social support than men, including sharing intimacies both in receiving social support and providing social support to/from coworkers, relatives, friends, and adult children (Helgeson, 2003; Bellotti, 2008; Pittman & Lloyd, 1988; Umberson et al, 1996). Women are often more aware of the value of shared experiences, reciprocity, feeling loved and valued, in building friendships (Rook, 1987; Sarason et al., 1987; Suito et al., 1995; Whitaker, 2010). It also is noted that married women receive instrumental support from their husbands, but that support does not compensate if there is a lack of emotional support (Suito, 1990), suggesting a woman may or may not receive emotional support from her husband.

Rural, non-metropolitan communities

As previously discussed, social capital is borne out of social interactions. This can hold relevancy vis-à-vis a tight-knit [or rural] social environment. Social capital may be more common among rural [or non-metropolitan] community members in that they have more interaction with each other because they have known each other longer and are more likely to be related. This leads to the conclusion that rural residents tend to have stronger ties than weak ties, in part, due to a stronger sense of responsibility to each other (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998). It has been found that even in terms of support exchanges, rural families are more likely to exchange exclusively with kin more than urban families (Hofferth & Iceland). While this bonding in a tight-knit (rural) community can promote solidarity, it can be exclusionary to those not from the community, or even diverse in ideas and heritage (Flora, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Whitaker, 2010). This makes it difficult to build abundant social capital a.k.a. significant social support for outsiders to the community.

Relationship hierarchy of social support

A key factor in determining the use of supportive resources is the primacy of the relationship (Pinqart, 2003). According to a hierarchical determinant of support, spouses are the primary source of support, followed by adult children, close relatives, friends, then others. Yet, marital unions can be adversely affected when spouses rely so heavily on each other for support and comfort (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016), conversely inferring that spouses may seek emotional support from others. Furthermore, because “married people tend to be homebodies” (Putnam, quoted in Sarkisian & Gerstel, p. 364), research has shown that single people have more friends, on average, therefore are more likely to socialize and exchange help [than married people], and would feel lonely if they stayed home (Sarkasian & Gerstel). Similarly, older people rely more on friends than adult children when they feel lonely (Nyqvist et al., 2013). For the unmarried, adult children serve as an important source of emotional support (Pinqart). But what if one isn’t married nor has children living at home or are childless?

The trend of people living alone has grown from seventeen percent in 1970 to twenty-seven percent in 2012 (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013), giving way to deduce that individuals living in twenty-seven percent of US households do not have the virtue of the proximity of a spouse, life partner, or roommate as an innermost social support. These individuals must go beyond their *home* for such support. While a relative (parent, sibling, uncle, etc.) living nearby may very well serve as a close support system, if one does not have such person(s), then whom comprises of a very close relationship?

Because of the increasing proportion of people living alone, there are consequences of singly living arrangements in conjunction to the relationship between living alone and social integration (Alwin et al., 1985). A consequence for people living alone is that they tend to

develop a greater degree of contact with friends, essentially compensating for the “absence of proximate social support,” showing more extensive social integration than those living with others (Alwin et al., p. 327). Research has shown that individuals are not necessarily socially isolated due to the tendency to go outside the household to the extent that “access to confidants is as likely for persons living alone as it is for persons living with others” (Alwin et al., p. 331).

As discussed, social support comes in various forms. It can be in the form of physically helping someone with a task (instrumental support) like helping a friend move (Helgeson, 2003; Jacobson, 1986; Rook, 1987; Wellman & Wortley, 1989); or it can be in the form of caring and comfort, that is, lending a listening ear to a friend (Helgeson, Jacobson, Rook). Finsveen and van Ooschot provide two examples that capture the essence of these two forms of social support. Their study utilizes two specific aspects of persons’ support needs that align with the two forms of social support: help with household chores if sick (instrumental support) and talk to someone when down (emotional support) (Finsveen & van Ooschot, 2008; Helgeson, 2003). Per their findings regarding people seeking specific support, seventeen percent rely on other people besides relatives for “help when have the flu,” and forty-three percent do not go to family for emotional “support when depressed” (Finsveen & van Ooschot, 2008, p. 299). This infers a definable percentage of individuals seek assistance from other than family for times of needing certain social support. Again, confirming the inclination to look beyond those individuals who are married or have relatives serving as their primary support resources.

Quantitative studies have measured size of social capital in terms of number of contacts and frequency of contact, in addition to various measures of social support, network ties, and even measurements of loneliness (Finsveen & van Oorschot, 2008; Pierce et al., 1997; Pinqart, 2003; Sarason et al., 1987; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016; Smerglia et al, 1999). Finsveen and van

Oorschot also illustrate quantitative measurements in terms of the number of social networks (groups) in which individuals participate in addition to the frequency of contact with friends. Their research shows that thirty-seven percent of their respondents “participate actively” in one and two groups (Finsveen & van Ooschot, 2008, p. 300). This number of groups or organizations an individual belongs can speak to their relationship context(s). Additionally, Finsveen and van Ooschot indicate that forty-nine percent of their respondents stay in touch, “contact,” with their closest friend at least once a week upwards to several times a week (Finsveen & van Ooschot, 2008, p. 300).

While these studies specify that relationships can be measured to a certain extent, they do not determine *how* close relationships are created much less if they serve as innermost social supports. Social support is often expressed through supportive behaviors. But it is underscored through value and caring for one another in the relationship, the core of social support (Sarason et al., 1987).

This qualitative study centers around how *women* define their close relationships because women are more likely than men to seek relationships that provide social support, specifically emotional support. Additionally, this study followed that while primary relationships, i.e., those with spouses or adult children, are the likely sources of social support, particularly emotional, it is noted that a significant portion of persons seek support outside of spousal/kinship ties. Thus, the research was conducted on single women, over the age of forty.

METHODOLOGY

The research methods qualitatively sought to discover if individuals' experiences regarding the closest relationships in their lives align with the afore discussed theories and concepts presented in the literature review. The qualitative research conducted for my thesis examined how women determine their innermost social support relationships, specifically, *what fosters close relationships?* and *what sustains such relationships?* My inquisition examined personal relationships which provide [to the individuals] not only support, but also feelings of fulfillment, satisfaction, and connectedness.

Why a Qualitative Study?

I conducted a qualitative study because much of the research concerning social support, social networks, and social capital have been largely based quantitative measures, suggesting that meaningful relationships can be quantified, for example, by analyzing numbers of friends or amount of contacts with friends, inferring to mean quality relationships. Rubin and Rubin make the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research in that qualitative research is more about “depth than breadth;” rather than finding averages, it is more “about understanding specific situations, individuals, groups, or moments of time that are more important or revealing” (2012, p. 2). Understanding reasons to use a qualitative approach in research provided me the direction for my own thesis study. Qualitative research is about collecting descriptive data, using people's own words (written or spoken), and observing and recording people's behavior. It is characterized by certain qualities such as a concern for the meanings people attach to things in their lives (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). This substantiates my direction for this study. I investigated *how* people foster their close personal relationships and *what* in their relationships

sustains the closeness. This was best done by listening, in individuals' own words, what it is about their relationships that make them very important in their lives.

Study Sample

“Individuals within society are dependent on close primary relations and feelings of solidarity with others” (Alwin et al., 1985). This statement is the impetus for identifying individuals from whom to conduct the research for this study. As indicated in the literature review, not every person relies on a spouse or family member for support, and every need is not met by a single person. The target sample for the qualitative interviews was drawn from a population of women, over forty, who are currently not married, and living in an upper Midwest community. As determined by the literature review, women are more likely than men to seek out emotional support; therefore, women would be able to provide more nuanced answers to my exploratory questions as to whom provides various dimensions of support and why.

By targeting unmarried women, I was able to focus my questions to glean information about women's sources of support that were not from a spouse or romantic partner. I chose the age of forty or older to mitigate the demands of small children on my study participants, hence influencing time for other close relationships. Furthermore, by excluding women under forty women, I alleviated the breadth of certain junctures in women's lives by virtue of being in their twenties and thirties, e.g., new career paths or early courtship and marriages. Finally, I narrowed my sampling to an area in and around an upper Midwest community with a population size of approximately eight thousand five hundred. I use the pseudonym, Smalltown, as needed in lieu of the actual town, to protect the identification of the participants. I did this so that women's geographic locations were similar, therefore they could describe their individual experiences of close relationships within a general environment of a smaller, non-metropolitan community.

Participants for my study were drawn through a non-random technique combining purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling occurred when I identified fourteen potential interviewees from Smalltown, which has been my home community for more than thirty years. These are individuals I knew; whom I see at social events, community events, or professionally by either services they provide to me or within my employment. I did not know any specifics concerning their social or familial relationships, but I had enough knowledge about them to consider them as individuals who adhere to the demographic requirements of my research: currently single women and over forty years old. I was able to secure interviews with twelve participants. This was done through direct contact via phone text, face-to-face, or through social media, thus leading to employ convenience sampling. (Two potential interviewees never responded to my initial contact on social media.) The fact that the twelve participants knew me, I feel, played a role in their willingness to participate in my research. Additionally, the accessibility of the participants by way of time and location lent itself to be categorized as convenience sampling.

Although the combination of purposive and convenience sampling provided a good source of data for this research project, I recognize the possibility of drawbacks to this sampling technique. The list of identified potential participants was limited by my own knowledge and sphere of people living in Smalltown. I do not have contact with *everyone* in the area, therefore could not pull an objective sample of all single women over the age of forty, to include women of color, women who may be new to the community, and women of other socio-economic status. This sample is very homogenous in demographics. The demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1. That said, the interviews still provided conclusive information on how certain women characterize their close relationships.

Participant Demographics

All twelve participating women were currently single and over the age of forty. As indicated in Table 1, interviews occurred with women of ages in the forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties. The names in the table and discussed in this thesis are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. Five of the women never had children, one has school-aged children, and the others have adult children, over twenty years old. Five of the women were still working. Seven have college or advanced degrees. Glenda confirmed my decision to narrow the study to women rather than men and women by stating:

I don't think [men] talk about their feelings like women do. Or their heartaches.

Or any of that. I think women share a ton of that. So women's relationships are a lot different than men's.

This aligns with the previously discussed notion that women are more likely to perceive the affective side of their relationships.

Table 1

Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Children	Highest Education level	Employment	Length in Community
Deb	41	never married	no	College	self-employed	on/off 41 years
Karen	47	divorced	no	14 years	full-time	most of life
Linda	49	divorced	yes	Masters	full-time	26
Heidi	53	never married	yes	13 years	unemployed	50
Amy	57	divorced	no	Tech School	self-employed	53
Julie	64	never married	no	Juris Doctorate	full-time	55
Carla	67	never married	no	PhD	retired	16
Betty	69	widowed	yes	Jr in college	retired	30
Ellen	71	widowed	yes	Bachelors plus 90 credits	retired	43
Glenda	81	widowed	yes	College graduate	retired	60
Fran	82	widowed	yes	PhD	retired	55
Inga	95	widowed	yes	3 years college	retired	most of life

Gathering the Data

Data for the qualitative study were gathered from in-depth personal interviews. Personal interviews, in qualitative research, provide “verbal accounts of how people act and what they feel” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 88). Interviewees provide insight to experiences, motives, and opinions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This held true from the participants in my study, revealing rich data in my exploration of women’s innermost social support relationships. These women gave me, in their own words, “their perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 88).

Following an outline of twenty-two questions, I led the interviews with a question about a recent supportive conversation they had. This question set the tone in getting them to think, tangibly, about support of any kind in their worlds. This segued into questions about the close relationships in their lives, what about those relationships made them important, and moments of needing support and comfort. Ensuing questions inquired about whether they ranked their relationships in terms of importance and what factors lead to relationships lasting or not. The interviews were completed with a final question asking them to encapsulate any further characterizations of their close relationships. The series of questions allowed individual perspectives on how close relationships began and then what helped them to last. (See APPENDIX for the complete list of interview questions.)

The interview sessions occurred over four-week period in November and December 2017. The locations of the interviews were determined by the participants, occurring in their homes, my home office, the Smalltown public library, a local restaurant, a local coffee house, and church meeting room. The interview began with an informed consent and subsequent completion of a non-identifying demographic survey by the participant. See Table 1 for survey

results. Each interview lasted twenty-five to almost seventy minutes, was recorded on my smart phone, and then transcribed. As the recordings were transcribed, I added time markers e.g., 9:38, throughout the transcription which served to identify the location of various statements made by the participants.

Interpreting the Data

The interviews were transcribed to include periodic time locations of the recordings in order to easily identify positions of phrases that may serve to glean relative information (e.g. 4:15, indicating the phrase is in the interview at four minutes and fifteen seconds). Rubin and Rubin determine that finding and labeling concepts and themes in the transcripts help to frame the information, thus speaking to the research questions. This is the process of coding (2012).

Themes and concepts appeared from the interviews, as seen in the transcripts, exemplified with phrases such as “I think it’s very important that you find like-minded people” and “we talk frequently” indicating shared interests and active communication, respectively. As the various phrases and statements in the transcriptions were analyzed, themes eventually surfaced. Themes such as shared interest and similar experiences along with reciprocity and trust provided categories from which to separate the articulated data into the two research questions: *what fosters a close relationship?* and *what sustains close relationships?*

As I reviewed the transcriptions, I logged the location (per recorded time) on a spreadsheet and equated it to a descriptive statement. The descriptive statements were then categorized into broader themes. Table 2 shows an example of the participant and the location of the statement in the transcription (11-13-PM>9:15), then matched to what was indicated in their statement, followed by categorization into an overall theme (Reciprocity). This initial coding process resulted in 135 various detailed statement indications. After reviewing what was

indicated in the statements by the participants (135 count), I was able to infer general themes that eventually became my working outline in writing the findings.

Table 2

Initial coding example

Participant and transcription location	Indicated in statement	Broad topic
11-13-PM>9:15, 29:30; 11-17-PM>1:26,12:34; 11-18-PM>7:32,15:15	(Must give first) one must put into the relationships to get anything out - treat people how you want to be treated; put effort into friendships	Reciprocity
11-13-PM>9:15, 29:30; 11-17-PM>1:26,12:34; 11-18-PM>7:32,15:16	Willing to be supportive	Reciprocity
11-29-PM2>11:40	One in the group reaches out to the others	Reciprocity
11-13-PM>9:15	It's a give and take	Reciprocity

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The data gathered from interviews with twelve single women over the age of forty followed the two research questions: *what fosters close relationships?* and *what sustains those close relationships?* The information provided by this research will first explain how these women's relationships were created followed by what qualities in their relationships sustain closeness.

Various themes surfaced as the women explained the beginnings of their closest relationships and the ensuing nurturing of such relationships. The former resulted from asking the women about how their close relationships started, during what occasions did they see their friends, and if they had any relationships that are no longer close. Their answers were contextualized within themes of having shared situations, interests, and experiences, along with being with friends in various settings and occasions. The latter was revealed as they responded to questions asking to describe their close relationships, what aspects of their close relationships matter to them, and if any are more important than others. Their relationships are nurtured following the motifs of affection, honesty, trust, reciprocity, proximity, longevity, and continued shared interest.

The explanation of the findings will follow the two research questions: *what fosters closes relationships?* and *what sustains those close relationships?* by categorizing the women's descriptions within themes under the two questions. This section will conclude with a general assessment of the participants relative to each other; giving attention to the sample of participants overall.

What Fosters Close Relationships

Most of the relationships had a starting point in the women's adult lives, which then evolved into the meaningful, important relationships today. Key themes that fostered close relationships emerged as the women described their current close relationships. These themes include: common situations, shared interests, and/or similar experiences; along with gaining depth from sharing more than one circumstance with another. One of the participants, Betty, is a widow with two grown children and grandchildren. Her social relationships, for the most part, come from her community service in the area. She and her husband came to the community as a young couple over thirty years ago. Her very best friend and husband were also new to the area at the same time. To this day, through family gatherings and shared losses, Betty holds that friendships to be most dear. Betty explained how the seed of relationships started:

I think relationships sort of grow out of something that brought you together in the first place. You don't just start a relationship when you see someone on the street and say, "Hey! I want to be that person's friend!" All my relationships ...grow out of situations that we're in, be it church, be it exercise...

Thus, the relationships in this study were borne out of common circumstances and interests, each providing the foundation from where the relationships grew.

Common situations

Except for Deb, Karen, and Heidi, who grew up in the community, the women's closer relationships began as adults. Deb has not been married with no children. Her parents and siblings still in the area. One of her close friends has been a best friend since she was six years old and continues today. Karen is divorced, also, with no children. Her current best friend has been her friend since high school. Heidi's closest relationships are with her mother and sisters.

Many of the women's friendships came from the commonality of their situations. Julie has never been married and does not have any children but is close to her siblings and father. (Her mother is deceased). Her close friendships today were borne from a group of women who shared the common situation of being professionals in positions of "authority or great responsibility." While the ability to lean on each other for support in their career standings gave them the original reason to gather, Julie explained that they became very good friends:

I still have three very close friends from this group. The group is no longer functioning as a group, but we have been with each other through divorces, deaths, children difficulties. We've been there for each other.

Julie represented how her support system of friends was produced through the resources made available in the original reason for the group to gather: similarities in their professional circumstances (Suitor et al., 1995; Suitor & Keeton, 1997; Wellman & Wortley, 1989).

Inga and Fran, both widowed with grown children, said that their closest relationships today began with living in the same neighborhood, raising children. Inga relayed that one of her best friendships started when "she lived nearby." She emphasized, "We had a wonderful neighborhood. It started a lot of these [friendships]." Fran said:

A number of my really close friends lived in the same neighborhood that we did when we moved to town...Our children grew up together. We watched out for each other's children. We ran back and forth. None of us were working at that point. We did a lot of coffee-ing together. We just maintained those friendships, which has been great.

Betty had a very similar story in speaking about how the relationship with her dear friend started:

We sort of consider ourselves sisters of the heart. Mostly because we raised our children at the same time and our families were very intermingled as far as supporting one another. We were in town together, new, without family close by so we sort of became each other's family for important things such as confirmations, graduations, weddings.

Ellen's story about her relationships has comparable beginnings. She has pockets of friends, that is, groups of friends that come from various times in her life: her college friends, her friends from a town where she started her married life and young family, and then her Smalltown friends. She explained that her "friends have come from parts of my life...I could give you a close relationship from all those areas." Ellen expanded on how the foundation(s) were built:

Then my friends from [town], that was when we first had babies. We were all [profession]. The same thing in life. We were establishing our families. We migrated to each other because of our likes and our interests. Those friendships are still so strong because of that.

Ellen said that they had their situations in common but shared interests also played a role.

Shared interests

Many of the women's relationships come from having interests in the same things with others, existing within the carapace of the women's professional lives, their community service and projects, their recreation and fitness, and shared social interests and likes.

Amy is divorced with no children, but her parents and siblings live in the area and are close to her. The crux of the relationships in Amy's sphere comes within her profession. She explained the importance of her "tribe" and the like-mindedness of those who serve as her colleagues and mentors. She said:

I think it is very important that you find like-minded people, cuz if you don't there's some that don't understand, and they'll drag you down... Those are the people that you kinda have to weed your garden.

She went on to explain how she has "*chosen*" her friends, that "I know who I want to be talking to," confirming the importance of sharing interests, the importance to her ego (Bidart & Charbonneau, 2011).

While Amy's friendships are more organic in the like-mindedness, there are others in this study whose friendships are because of shared interests in community service, community projects, exercise, and recreation. A couple of the women were explicit in the fact that they enjoy their friends within the various settings and that those are the only times they see their certain friends:

We don't see each other often except for the seasons where we work together. We still have good relationships. We don't see each other a lot, but we're always thinking of one another... We don't do a lot outside [of my service work], we're just supportive of another in our jobs... There are good relationships [with my recreation] people I would not cross paths otherwise. (Betty)

I belong to these different things, like church. Some of them I don't see except for Bible study. That's a fun friendship. Then I belong to this [card] club... They're all younger but they're people I never see otherwise. So, I see them once a month. That's kinda fun. Then I belong to [another group], which is a whole different group of people. Some of those I NEVER see if it weren't for that. They're all friends too. It's a whole different group of people. (Inga)

Similarly, other women only see certain friends in these contexts of similar interests; recognizing the compartmentalizing of their friendships; nevertheless, spoke highly of them:

The key to my friendships is a lot of it through volunteerism and sharing the same concerns for society. Those are my closet friends. When we work projects together. We got to know people like us as time went on, we found other people like us... We don't have that group anymore... But when I want to get together with someone who's energetic, and is in the heartbeat of the community, I will get together with them. (Carla)

[I get together with various people] several times a week. Not necessarily the same people. I have a group of friends at church that I probably see once a week. [Another service group] of gals are really good friends, but I don't see them that often. But I enjoy them. They enjoy me when we do get together. (Fran)

I have a lot [of close relationships]... My young friends are the ones I do physical things with, golf, rec center, aerobics, ski, whatever. I have new friends that I play [games] with, people I didn't know before. I have friends I play [cards] with... Friends are what you do with people. I don't just sit and have coffee with friends. We're doing something. So that's my friends, who I do stuff with.

(Glenda)

I lead a dual life. I have a set of friends that are my normal, everyday friends. Then I have a set of friends that are more on the faith-based side. I have friends that are forged from work... I definitely see the benefit of being part of a group. Especially when it's of shared interests. I don't do people well, but I have other

friends who are also non-people persons, so our shared interest draws us together and our lack of people skills draws us together. It's odd but it works. (Karen).

Karen also expanded on the notion of sharing interests within a group and how staying in the group plays a role in maintaining the friendships forged from shared interests:

[I had friends from another organization] but I'm not part of that organization so I don't see them as much. Those friendships are fading, without a doubt. Because I'm not in contact with them on a regular basis like I was when I was part of the organization. (Karen)

These women have constructed meaningful ties where they live, developing the interconnections, providing companionship through their shared interests (Buunk & Prins, 1998; Horwitz et al., 2014; Hofferth & Iceland, 1998; Weisz & Wood, 2005; Wellman & Wortley, 1990).

Similar experiences

People are more likely to develop supportive relationships with those they have more in common such as sharing common interests, i.e., projects, hobbies, and groups, as previously described. Having commonality in shared experiences is also a springboard for closeness in relationships. These experiences include life events such as divorce and loss of loved ones (Suitor et al., 1995; Suitor & Keeton, 1997). Some of the women spoke of how their friendships came from relating to others in experiencing losses. They gained their emotional support from the comfort and caring of those who understand their circumstances (Helgeson, 2003; Jacobson, 1986; Rook, 1987; Wellman & Wortley, 1989).

Heidi's closest relationships are with her mother and her sisters. But it was when she and her sisters went through romantic relationship breakups and divorce, that their relationships deepened:

We talked to each other quite a bit so they knew where each other was at...They were more in it than surface talk. They kinda reached out...Then they started letting more out, too. Then they would start talking more about their situation.

The more you opened up...the more intimate, in depth [our relationships became].

Ellen explained how her relationship with her one daughter deepened, to the point that her daughter's husband deems them best friends, when Ellen's husband, her daughter's father, died. Ellen explained that her other two children were out of the house at the time, so that experience "keeps my daughter and I joined at the hip." Heidi and Ellen's examples are how family relationships are deepened through a shared experience.

Both Betty and Carla's close friendships are more meaningful due to the loss of loved ones. Carla has never been married and does not have any children. Even though many of Carla's friends come from her community project group(s), she also explained that she has a friend of thirty-seven years and what ties them together:

We've been through sicknesses and deaths of our parents. So that bonded. Job ups and downs, sharing that conversation. Career decisions, retirement decisions...She was at my mother's bedside with me when my mom was dying. She's been there for me for thirty-seven years.

Carla also added that having experiences of loss is a common denominator in some of her other relationships:

I do tend to gravitate towards people dealing with grief. Since I've gone through it I feel I can help others deal with it. I have really close friends who are elderly. I'm very close to them. The key there is going through grief.

Betty, in responding to an interview question about supportive relationships, referenced her closest friend:

When you ask about support, she lost a son [in a crash] and I lost my husband all within about a year and a half. I think we kind of supported each other during those events. We still do... We've gone through an awful lot of things.

Karen gave a similar explanation on how deep her relationship is with her best friend:

[We have] a comfort level. We've been through everything together. Our teenage years, marriages, divorces, children, loss of parents. We've been through everything. When you share that with someone, people share that with a spouse... We've been through it all together.

She personified how sharing difficult times in one's life with someone who can relate deepens a friendship.

Karen, Betty, Carla, Ellen, and Heidi speak of the experiences that tie them closely to others. But Linda explained how not having similar experiences can come into play:

Here's the deal. All the women my age are married. They have other things going.

I don't really know where my place is.

Linda is forty-nine and divorced in a small community. She is inferring that it is hard to gain friendships when women around her are married, therefore she is unable to relate to them and them with her. Thus, she feels somewhat alienated from a group of people by the inability of not having shared experiences. This speaks to how powerful sharing experiences [or not] can be in building relationships.

Multiple contexts

Characteristics of an individual's social network include the multi-dimensions of the relationship(s) (Alwin et al., 1985; Sarason et al., 1987; Wan, 1982). This can mean the various occasions one shares with another. A few of the women, when re-counting how their relationships became close, had instances where they met a friend in one context, then sealed the relationship by sharing another occasion with that friend. I call it the *one-two scenario*. For instance, a couple of Inga's closest friendships started when they were neighbors. Then she described how the *one-two scenario* made the friendships closer:

[A friendship with one of my friends] really started when she lived nearby. Then we started going to Florida. That's when I really got to know her. [The other best friend] moved in right across the street, then she worked [for my husband] for quite a while.

Karen's *one-two scenario* was apparent in how she and her friend went from classmates to good friends:

We went to school together. But we went to the same church. That's what drew us together.

Karen and Inga's relationship grew from one and then another context, giving way to a deeper connection.

Glenda is widowed with adult children and is very active in the community. Following the *one-two step* in strengthening relationships, Glenda talked about how she expanded her friendship(s) from the singular setting of sharing an interest, i.e. a card game, to a deeper relationship:

[I start with doing an activity], then of course you grow close with people. It's then, "Come over and have a glass of wine. I have something on the stove, so come on over." One thing leads to another, or "Let's go to the band concert."

Similarly, Linda relayed that, for right now, she is getting support from her workout classes, to include her trainer. It is in this [exercise] venue that she feels the most supported, to gain not only physical strength, but mental strength from her fellow exercisers and her trainer.

Furthermore, she conveyed that she sees her classmates and trainer outside of class when they attend each other's various community events.

The *one-two scenario* is unfolding, just as Julie's close friendships from her group of professional women grew from their professional similarities to sharing life's hard knocks to having fun together:

We've been there for each other through the bad times, but we also laugh a lot.

And we travel well together. We have fun when we travel or go out for dinner.

Finally, Ellen explained how she maintains the closeness with her friends from past times in her life:

My high school friends get together every year. We take a trip. We just pick a place. We're adamant about doing that...My college friends, we just went to Australia. There were six of us single women. We get together. Four of us play golf together. There's fifteen of us that get together once a year...People here you see all the time. I'm planning a trip with some friends from here...That's how I maintain friendships.

This confirms that the quality in relationships is heightened by the number of contexts the relationship operates (Wellman & Wortley, 1989).

Betty encapsulated how relationships deepen by explaining how relationships start and grow into becoming important in her life:

I think [relationships grow deeper] because some people you just identify more with some people, or time puts you in situations where maybe you have a common interest or a common goal. So that puts you into a different relationship. Some of them might not even be really personal. Some might be work related. It's a relationship. It just isn't as deep as the one I have described where we go through life and death situations.

The women were very descriptive in their recounting of what provided the seeds from which their close relationships grew, that is, *what fosters a close relationship?* Every interview equally conveyed how the women sustain these important relationships in their lives.

What Sustains Close Relationships

The women in this study divulged what it is in their relationships that matters to them, thus illuminating dimensions of their relationships that sustain the closeness of these relationships. The important themes that emerged in sustaining close relationships include: affection and reverence for each other, an honest relationship with the ability to be authentic, trust, reciprocity in the relationship, proximity, active communication, longevity and history, and finally, continued shared interests.

Affection

A few of the women expressed reverence for the people who are closest to them. The foundation for communal relationships, those where each have a concern for the welfare of the other, is a fundamental liking for each other (Clark & Mills, 1979; Clark & Mills, 1993). When describing her friends, Amy said of one:

One of my clients I consider a really good friend and very knowledgeable women, very inspiring...I have met a lot of coool people, nice people.

Carla, too, spoke in a similar tone stating [of her friends], “We’re proud of one another.” Deb quips, “I surround myself not with a lot of people, but with good people.” Fran spoke of her relationships with her children:

With my children, those have evolved over time. From dependent relationship to collegial relationship. We talk frequently...Just being able to be friends, spend time together, enjoy one another is a wonderful support at this point in their lives and mine. I enjoy their spouses Feel very fortunate about that. We have a good time.

Glenda is most ardent about the importance of simply liking the person:

[In nurturing relationships], I don’t know about that. But people are kind. You pick friends according to how kind they are. I’m not going to pick a friend that’s unkind. You gotta like them...I think a sense of humor is important. Most of my friends are funny. The funnier ones are the most fun ones. A sense of humor is fabulous.

She states the obvious, that affinity is a key component in maintaining close relationships.

Honesty and authenticity

Many of the women stressed the importance of honesty in their relationships along with being able to be themselves. Support can be in the form of understanding, caring and being loved along with the ability to discuss feelings and listening to concerns (Helgeson, 2003; Jacobson, 1986; Robinson & Flora, 2003; Rook, 1987; Smerglia, Miller, & Kort-Butler, 1999; Whitaker, 2010). They described these qualities in various ways:

It's having a person that you tell anything to. They would accept, understand, try to assist if they could. (Betty)

I'm not afraid to say one thing to her. I don't care if it was really bad, I could tell her. (Heidi)

Comfortable, safe, fun, laughter, nonjudgmental. (Ellen)

I think at the heart it is the honesty and openness. We can say anything to each other. We've talked about anything from anal sex to divorce, to children committing crimes. I don't think there's anything off the table. It's honesty...At heart, a lot of honesty. (Julie)

[Aspects in a relationship I feel are important are] respect. And even though you might have differences, you can talk about it. You can voice your opinion.

Nobody goes home upset or mad. It's like, "Okay, this is your opinion. I see your point of view. This is my point of view. This is my opinion. We can agree to disagree." (Amy)

One can glean the subtext for comfortableness is vital in their relationships.

Both Heidi and Carla have little time for superficial relationships, as Heidi said, "surface talk." Carla said, "I don't have a lot of tolerance with just idle friendships or conversations." But the woman who spoke most emphatically about honesty and authenticity in her relationships is Deb. She has common threads in the three relationships she highlights. The first portrayal described her relationship with a set of friends:

[When I met with my friends recently] I was able to sit down and have complete, total [verbal] diarrhea...I knew I could completely be myself. I didn't have to sugarcoat anything. I could break down in tears and they hold my hand. I just love

them for that...With some friends I have to censor myself. But with these women, I don't ever have to censor myself. I love that!

She continued to characterize her relationship with her colleague:

Our relationship is getting stronger and stronger every day. I'm able to open up more and more...I never had a relationship that I had to work on like this. This is the closest thing I've ever had to being in a relationship, a marriage. To know we're not just going to give up on one another...I can't imagine not having her with me, on a daily basis.

She had similar qualities with another friendship:

We've had our ups and downs...I call him out on everything. I can be blunt. I don't have to put kid gloves on for him, nor him for me. I think it's because we've known each other for so long. We have that comfortability, "Stop being stupid!" We can be that blunt.

These statements all exemplify how close relationships are based on equality and trust, characterized by intimacy, thereby providing greater self-esteem and companionship (Buunk & Prins, 1998; Horwitz et al., 2014; Weisz & Wood, 2005).

Trust

Even though the dimension of trust in a relationship can be melded with honesty and authenticity, enough of the interviewees suggested or specifically stated the importance of trust, it must be given attention. Trust is inferred when Debbie said that "knowing that they have my back is so great, such an amazing feeling," using the words "safety" and "reliability" in her interview. Amy used words such as "dependability" and "loyalty," and then emphasized that

“TRUST is a big thing. I would say, number one thing is trust.” Betty explained the importance of trust:

There are things I would tell her that I’m not going to turn around and tell somebody else with whom I don’t have that deep feeling or trust...It’s just that level of trust that I would say something that I wouldn’t say to somebody else.

Julie shared that same sentiment, “I can tell these ladies anything and it will not go anywhere.”

Fran emphasized the point:

I think trust is a big thing. Big, big, is a big factor. If you can’t trust someone, the friendship doesn’t last...Knowing that you can rely on that person. Knowing that they have your back. Knowing that if you tell them something, it’s not going to go all over town.

Yet Linda struggled with explaining her trepidation with close relationships:

I didn’t really form any relationships [in college], any close. I was closer to guys. Guys were my friends. Who would I say? I think loyal. I don’t trust anyone. I think that’s what it is. There’s so many guys I trust. In a friendship aspect. I don’t know why.

Whether it’s in their relationships or not, trust was enough of a key element in their relationships that it surfaced in the interviews.

These women aligned with the literature that conveying that best friends support each other’s personal goals, yet it is trust, intimacy, and commitment at the heart of relationships (Weisz & Wood, 2005). A close relationship incorporates voluntary interdependency as well as equality and trust (Buunk & Prins, 1998).

Reciprocity

Social exchange is an underlying factor in relations between individuals (Blau, 1964). Relationships, in this sense, involve a certain level of mutual obligations, expectations, and reciprocity (Hofferth & Iceland, 1998). This was explicitly and implicitly detailed in these interviews. Glenda illustrated such a case when her husband died:

I've had some of my friends whose husbands have died, saying, "None of my old friends call me anymore." I thought, "Did you call them?" "Well, no." "Then DUH!" I just started right out.

Reciprocity includes a proportional level of attention (Buunk & Prins, 1998). Carla implicitly conveyed the importance of that element in her relationships:

She's a solid friend. And she's very logical and she's non-verbal. I have a lot of friends who are extremely verbal. It's hard for me to get in a word edgewise. This longtime friend is somebody I can be very verbal with. She's a good listener...Some of my friends are extremely verbal. If I need someone to talk to I am not going to call them.

Carla did not explicitly state a tit-for-tat exchange in her relationships, but she implied that if she did not feel she was equally listened to by her friends, she was not satisfied.

Amy and Fran, respectively, were much more direct in their assessments of the need for reciprocity for relationships to endure:

[A couple of my friends] are very supportive. They're there anytime. But likewise, I am back. It's a give and take. It's almost like an intimate relationship.

If you want to have a friendship or a good social relationship, there's give and

take... You treat people how you want to be treated... It's back to how you treat people is how you want to be treated.

I want to say one more thing. I think that developing these friendships is not something that just happens. I think it's something you work at. It probably doesn't seem like work at the time, but you have to make an effort... Trust, respect, just liking the people. Again, it goes back to making an effort. Because there are people in the neighborhood, women, who I think could have been good friends, but there was no reciprocal effort, ever... Friendships need to be tended.

Both align with the notion that people do prefer reciprocity in their relationships (Buunk & Prins, 1998).

Heidi and Inga, respectively, underscored that point when they spoke of the ability, or not, to reciprocate support in their worlds.

Monetary, I have relied on them. And my mom has relied on me before. I hate to say it but I'm happy she has because then I don't feel like I've always relied on her.

That's the worst thing is trying to ask people to do stuff... They say it isn't. I know it is. That's life.

Both Heidi and Inga feel guilty if they can't return the support they receive, which is a dimension in maintaining equity in a relationship (Rook, 1987).

Proximity

Friendships between people who rarely see each other or live far apart are more weakly tied, thus proximity is touted as an important element in maintaining supportive relationships

(Alwin et al., 1985; Hofferth & Iceland, 1998; Lipman & Longino, 1982; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Three of the women explained lack of proximity as a fact of life:

[Losing closeness] happens because I've moved in my life. You move. You may stay in touch but not to the degree that you've might have been. There are things you just grow away. Just by virtues of the fact of long distance... You're not really an integral part of each other's lives anymore. (Betty)

I put proximity down as a very important aspect of relationships. Proximity is extremely important. It's just a fact of life. Like some [friends]. I spent a lot of time with them last week. They're not people I would chose as my friends, but because of proximity and focus, we had a common goal, then we had a very nice three days, felt good about it... [At my workplace] I had a close circle of friends. I really enjoyed those women. But now because of proximity I haven't seen them much at all. It's funny. I don't miss them. I feel they will always be friends of mine. We vow to get together, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. (Carla)

Busyness has a lot to do with it. Time to spend with those people. Distance. I've has close friends [where I worked an hour away], who I really enjoyed. Still do enjoy them when I see them. They enjoy me. But we're at a distance... Time and distance are two things... They're busy. I'm busy. We go our separate ways. It's not what we seek out. (Fran)

All three women resigned themselves that [the lack of proximity] does play a role in maintaining their close relationships.

Karen's closest friendship went through a time when her friend moved away, explaining that "it was only 90 miles, but it was not easy. We drifted apart a little back then."

Linda opined of a friendship with someone who lived far away:

If she would live here we probably would have been best friends. She's even said that. We're the same age. Graduated same year in high school. So much in common. It's crazy.

Proximity and frequency of contact are important when attributing to the quality of relationships (Wellman & Wortley, 1989), hence their sustenance.

Active communication

Frequency of contact also comes via technology for some of these women. Aspects of social support includes access to each other (Sarason et al., Wellman & Wortley, 1990), and this is how some maintain close contact with their friends. One of Amy's professional, close relationships began when she took an online course. The relationship grew, vis-à-vis access through technology:

I know, anytime, if I have a question, I can call her on the phone, message her, email her, text her.

Amy's professional network of support is strong due to how her friends communicate:

[Conversations are] online. Some of it on the phone. We're all accessible.

Sometimes it's private messaging...One of my mentors [needed something], I [social media-ed] her back...I made a comment on [social media⁴] in one of the groups and [I received responses back].

Amy's use of technology is a significant aspect in her relationships.

Even though Karen sees her best friend three to four times a week, they visit almost daily by way of email, text, and phone call. Inga talks to her close friend also, most every day. Ellen stays in touch with her pockets of friends with holiday cards, but also through email or social

media when they line up their trips together. Betty, too, communicates with her friends whom she only sees during her community service work, appreciating the ability to stay in touch outside the venue. She also touted social media as a way to stay in touch with those far away:

I'm still in touch with these people. That's the wonderful thing about [social media]. I keep track, am 'friends' with people on [social media]...[I had a close friend nearby] but we moved. Now we're friends on [social media]. Great thing about [social media].

Communication is afforded through these women's use of technology, thus allowing constant contact with their friends.

Carla talked how social media has become a part of her life. She is quite introspective about her use of social media:

I do enjoy these superficial relationships on [social media]. A part of me wonders if it's a waste of time, or filling a need?...It's convenient and fun to banter back and forth. It's filling some kind of void, or need. It's enjoyable. I call it my hobby.

In an afterthought concerning her use of technology, Carla, in reference to her desire to being able to equally share in her conversations (reciprocity), she explained that she prefers texting with a certain friend so that she "can get a word in edgewise." Online social networks are serving some of these women in maintaining closeness (Wellman, 2005).

Longevity and history in relationships

It was evident upon review of the interviews by the respondents that most revered their closest relationships in the vein of their longevity. As indicated in the demographics of respondents in Table 1, the shortest length of time any of the twelve have lived in the upper Midwest community is sixteen years, with the average length of time the respondents have

resided in area is over forty years. Many of the women have friendships lasting well over thirty years and equate longevity and shared history as the key to their close relationships. Individual's more significant relationships are the longer lasting ones (Pinquart, 2003), as Fran attested, "I would say the women I have known for a long time I would put at the top as far as most important."

Even if they do not have the virtue of proximity with some of their friends, they do not discount the history with them. It provides them the common ground of shared memories:

You share a lot of life experiences and you can come back and have lunch and know that you had a great time. (Betty)

As far as my friendships go, I consider most of my friendships to be from the history we have...I believe friendships can last forever. I truly believe that. You have a shared memory, shared things that you can get together and laugh about that memory. It's what binds people together. (Ellen)

She and I will just drive around and reminisce. (Inga)

With all the time we've been around each other, we have a lot of history that we laugh at. (Julie)

Glenda teared up in relaying her affinity for her oldest friends:

[My mantra is] make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver, the other is gold. Makes me cry...Some of my older friends, they're just...they're just precious to me.

Carla was a little more pragmatic on the value of an old friend:

Longevity matters. I don't have to explain myself. Who my brother is...She knew my family, not just of them...She's shared important milestones.

Duration of relationships adds to the closeness of these women's relationships within their social networks (Alwin et al., 1985; Sarason et al., 1987; Wan, 1982).

Shared interests in sustaining close relationships

Common interests provide a base in close relationships (Buunk & Prins, 1998; Horwitz et al., Weisz & Wood, 2005). While it was revealed that some of these women's relationships started from sharing common interests and experiences, it also does become a factor in sustaining close relationships, or the inability to maintain such closeness.

Some friends are still at that same spot they were twenty-five years ago. And

that's where they always will be. That wasn't where I wanted to stay. (Amy)

Once we didn't have [the organization] in common. We're friendly. But now I

may bump into her once a year. We have a very short conversation. (Carla)

I feel you just grow apart. You're not as close. You don't have anything in

common anymore. (Ellen)

[I had a childhood friend] but an event changed our relationship. Circumstances,

situations, surroundings changed...It wasn't the same since. [We do not get

together,] no, not at all. (Karen)

These four women indicated that the lack of having things in common contributed to the waning or ending of some close relationships.

Glenda very much attributed sharing interests in keeping one of her closest friendships alive:

I've know her for fifty-seven years...Lot's of fun, willing to do stuff...I think that

the fact that I call her, no matter what she's doing, it's a yes!...There's no

hemming and hawing!

Glenda's closest relationship is buoyed by the fact that her and her friend's common interest provides the ability to continue to do things together, which circles back to frequent contact, thereby strengthening their friendship.

Additional Relationship Characterizations from the Respondents

Other enlightenments surfaced in the interviews with these twelve women which are worthy of mention. The women talked about the connectedness in their friendships, whether there is a hierarchy in their relationships, and the uniqueness of living alone with no adult children or siblings.

Connectedness

Even though it seems that this has been discussed, a depth in relationships emerged within the auspice of communal relationships. That is, that there is a responsiveness to another's needs (Clark & Mills, 1993). This was evidenced as the women's friends are so in tuned to them that they rarely have to ask for help. In Fran's case, when her husband died, her friends forced her to get out:

They were firm. They knew I could do it, and they insisted. I was so glad I had gone...They just knew. No, I did not have to call...They were proactive.

Julie also has a circle of friends attuned to each other's needs:

We stay in touch enough...We know each other's lives enough to know where are the potential problems.

Linda even has that connection with her trainer, indicating why he is an important person in her life:

He pushes me every week. Who expects me to hold myself accountable. Who doesn't let me let myself down. Will question me. Will call me out when I'm half-

assed. Notices when I'm off. Is in-tuned to things. Pushes me both mentally and physically.

Three women indicated that their pets provide an important source of comfort, which has been known to be effective in reducing stress (Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991). Amy claims that "dogs are good listeners." Julie states that her closest relationship was "lying at her feet." And Karen reveals, "I'm thankful I have dogs. I cry with my dogs."

Hierarchy of relationships

I asked the women if any of their relationships were more important than others. That question invited the participants to summarize how each viewed her close relationships. For instance, some cited different friends for different needs, suggesting the reason why some could not necessarily rank their relationships:

No. They all have different aspects. This person has this aspect. This person has this aspect...Everybody is equal. (Amy)

I hate to say this, but [just] one friend doesn't satisfy me anymore. I like to have a lot of friends. If I'm in this mood, I have this friend. If I'm in this mood, I'm with that friend. (Carla)

I don't think so. I really don't. Each and every one of them brings something to the table...I've never been a best friend person. I just have a lot of friends. (Ellen)

For others, the responses were slightly more hesitant in indicating importance over others:

That's a hard question to answer. I think I would have to say it depends on the degree of friendship. (Fran)

Right off the bat, I don't think so. The three special ones. I like them all. (Inga)

Some of the women were very quick to respond that they had more special relationships than others:

Oh, sure. Yeah. I think you have relationships that are definitely more important than others...Simply because you foster deeper ties with some people than other people. (Betty)

All of them who I talked [specifically] about are all pretty equally important.

[With the two closest] proximity makes them close. (Deb)

Sure. The gold ones are my older friends. I've had them for a hundred years and would trade them for anything. Those are my most important ones. (Glenda)

I'm neglecting my closest friend on earth is my sister. I could not get through life without her, nor she without me. (Julie)

Absolutely! Again, the levels, in my opinion. Immediate-tight, you consider family. The next level, not as tight...To be part of my circle is rare. I don't let people in...My best friend, the one I consider family even if not family. (Karen)

Yes. My gym relationships...I would put gym ahead of anyone. (Linda)

These responses indicated who are important to these women. When aligned with their previously highlighted statements, their answers make sense. For instance, Amy, Carla, and Ellen enjoy their friendships in the various forums, whether professionally or in a companionate fashion. Fran, Inge, and Glenda had relayed that their long-time friendships were the most meaningful, so it makes sense that their old friends are the most important to them. Betty, Deb, Julie, and Karen indicated one or two relationships to be at the pinnacle of their friendships. The statements they provided support that proximity and similar experiences cemented their friendships. Linda said that her relationships at the gym are the most important in her life, which

were the relationships from where she felt the most supported. Essentially, those people whom these women feel are vital in their lives confirm how they became important and how they remain so.

Living alone

Three of the women talked about the pitfalls of living alone, inferring the effort it takes to seek out company or help. Ellen does have adult children and is very social, but she is candid about living alone:

I have to be social there's no doubt. Living alone, I couldn't be isolated. Free time has got to be going somewhere. I love to stay home, but I would get bored. You can only clean your house so much...As a single person, your weekends can get long. You have to force yourself to find things to do and ask people to do things with. I've taken myself to movies.

When it comes to asking for help, living independently is a factor for Julie:

Since I live alone and always have, I tend to be the worst at reaching out saying "I need help or I need support."

Carla gives an explanation:

It takes a lot of energy to get yourself invited, to call someone up, or be invited and go there. Compared to people who have family where it just happens. It takes effort. I have to invent every day.

This reflects the difference between having family in proximity and not.

The findings from the research convey what these twelve women found to foster their close relationships along with the characteristics in those relationships that sustained the

closeness of them. Each woman revealed the meaningfulness of their relationships beyond the number of friends she has or how often she sees her close friends.

To conclude the findings of this research concerning people's innermost social support, Inga doesn't necessarily define it, but she knows what her close relationships mean to her:

We get along so well. We can talk about anything. I don't know how to explain it.

It feels like what a good friend means is kinda what I feel our relationships are with those people.

Yet, Betty described her *supportive* close friendship:

I think what matters most is that one person, when you are talking about support.

That one person I can always count on to go to for support if I felt I needed something or needed someone to help me get through something.

Whether it is help with a task, emotional support, or companionship, the women in the study affirmed the meaningfulness of close relationships in their lives.

As I reflect on the data provided from interviewing these twelve single women ranging in ages from forty-one to ninety-five, I can see the bifurcated quality of their relationships. It is evident that regularly seeing their friends is first and foremost in their relationships. Yet, on the one hand, reason to see each other, such as companionship and having something in common, provide the platform. On the other hand, it is the affect within their relationship(s), that keep the women *wanting* to be in these relationships. The interplay between the forum and the emotional fulfillment of the relationship nurtures and sustains their relationships. The women really love their friends, therefore spend time with them, resulting in those relationships as being a very important factor in their lives.

General Participant Assessment

The findings of the research specifically brought forth the elements that create and sustain the close relationships of twelve single women, over the age of forty. The findings categorized the individuals and their own lived experiences of their closest relationships. This section will give attention to the sample of participants overall; an assessment of the individuals relative to each other.

Many of the women have extremely close relationships with their adult children, siblings and/or parents. Betty, Ellen, Fran, Glenda, and Inga all have very deep relationships with their adult children. Betty visits her one daughter and family almost every weekend. While not to that extent, Ellen, Fran, Glenda, and Inga frequently socialize with their adult children, and consider them to be more friends than offspring. These women all expressed meaningful relationships with their friends, yet their lives had added fulfillment with the closeness of their adult children.

Heidi and Julie's closest relationships are with their parent and siblings. Julie does not have children and has very close friendships, yet she expressed her most important relationship is with her sister. Heidi does have young adult children, but most of her conversation in the interview reflected her closeness with each of her parents and sisters.

Linda is unique within this sample in that her children are school age. Child-rearing takes much of her time since she is a single mother. She attributed most of her [instrumental] support to her mother, who has moved close to help her. As discussed, Linda doesn't necessarily have close friendships. Her current circumstances of being a single mother may be playing a role in that; impeding her time to build such relationships.

Amy, Deb, and Karen are women without children. The difference I deduce between these three and Julie, as previously highlighted, is that Julie's closest relationship is with her sibling, whereas Deb, Amy, and Karen's close relationships come from their friends. They all have family (parents and siblings) in the area and spend occasions with them. I sensed that those relationships were secondary to their friendships. Nonetheless, holidays are spent with their family. With Amy, Deb, and Karen, their friendships are most important, yet traditional family time (holidays and occasions) are still spent with family.

Speaking of holidays and similar occasions, weekends seem to also be traditionally left for family. Julie did say that as close as she and her friends are, their time is mostly Monday through Friday with weekends left for family. She did qualify that with mentioning that is because her friends have their children with whom to spend weekends; and she spends her weekends with her father and siblings. Ellen, also, spoke of the weekends. When she isn't with her children, the weekends do get long. She says she has to ask people to do things with. This suggests that family [or like family] serves to alleviate a void that may be experienced at times not spent with friends, i.e., holidays and weekends. Carla is the only one who spends the holidays with relatives due to not having siblings, children, or parents. She spoke of the holidays sans the virtue of close family:

Holidays are a challenge. I'm always relieved when they're over. Some are good.

Some are not good. It's painful watching others open gifts.

Finally, Carla is the outlier in this sample, in that she does not have children, and did not grow up in the community. Her parents have passed. She does not have immediate family nearby. She does have some long-time friends and many other friends, and remains busy with her life; yet her innermost social support does not resemble the support of the others in this

study. Would she have an innermost close relationship if she had adult children, or siblings in the proximate area?

This synopsis of the participants relative to each other, suggests that family or long-time friends provide primary or supplemental support in the form of help, companionship, and emotional support. If one does not have family or like-family friends around, then does one lose that innermost social support? Moreover, if one spends time alone during traditionally family times, does that symbolically infer that one lacks innermost close relationships?

CONCLUSION

As I remarked in the Introduction, I have spent Christmases and New Years alone. This is symbolic in the sense that holidays and possibly weekends are traditionally spent with the very closest of family and friends. In comparison to many of the participants in this study, this is not common. My circumstance in having someone to spend such occasions better reflects Carla in this study. She has many close relationships yet lacks the easily defined inner-circle of family or like family. Can I conclude that if I spend such times alone, I may not have a very most inner core of relationships? Possibly. Does it matter? Possibly not.

I consider relationships to reside concentrically in one's sphere. Karen shares that perspective when she deemed her relationships to be in levels, with the "immediate-tight" to be considered family or like family. I wanted to know who comprises the core of significant people for those without the social default of romantic partner, family, roommate in their sphere. Better yet, *how* do they determine their innermost social support relationships? That question lead to my two research questions, *what fosters a close relationship?* And *what sustains those close relationships?*

This study revealed elements that can contribute to the fostering and nurturing of close relationships. The women explained that there are characteristics in their relationships that bring those relationships to a more important level in their lives. Can it be concluded that if these elements, or combination thereof, are present, will that increase the likelihood of gaining more connectedness, fulfillment, and closeness in a relationship? This can provide a foundation for further study.

Looking at some of the themes of shared interests, similar experience, multiple contexts, proximity, history, reciprocity, and active communication, I consider these to be extrinsic to

individuals in a relationship. The intrinsic characteristics of trust, honesty, and affection, I believe, coincide with loving closeness. The extrinsic elements I call attention to are the themes that I can most relate to in my own sphere of relationships. While I, and others, may not have the virtue of having close relationships to include *all* the elements, one, two, or three may be enough. For instance, I have relationships with my student colleagues that became close when we shared more than one course. Also, I have relationships with fellow students that became much closer when we shared a *Study Abroad* course experience. This speaks to the power of multiple contexts. But closeness is waning as our paths no longer cross, indicating the importance of proximity.

Another combination of elements is apparent in my relationships with my closet friend. We have known each other for over thirty years (history), went through divorces together (similar experience), and as of late, lean on each other to share political opinions (shared interests). What we are lacking is proximity. We live three hours apart. But, in similar fashion as with the women I interviewed, we talk and text frequently (active communication). I could surmise that if we lived nearby, as the women in this study, she would be my very inner-most support.

I am no longer as close to my parents and siblings for some reasons understood through this research. My parents have moved four hours away, therefore proximity has become a factor. Moreover, as I learned from Weisz and Wood (2005) that when it comes to communication, commitment, and interest level, reciprocity is important. History that comes with family ties is not enough to offset the lacking proximity and reciprocity.

Additionally, many of my old friends are now accessible since they are no longer raising children. This has re-ignited our friendships. Social media (active communication) plays a role

keeping each of us informed enough that we do not have to re-acquaint. History and active communication will provide a springboard in regaining the closeness that we've had before. The examples of some of my personal relationships illustrate how the knowledge [from this study] of various elements that contribute to closeness can serve to understand how individuals' innermost relationships can come to be and thus sustained.

This thesis explains that a sample of women do have deep meaningful relationships that contribute to the quality of their lives. Even though I may not have an inner-core of like-family people in my world, that does not mean that my life is empty. What I do know, based on my research, that, regarding close relationships, there are factors, or missing factors, that come into play in maintaining the relationships that are important to me. This information may also serve to explain why other people may not have a close inner-circle of relationships in their world as well.

ENDNOTES

¹Social support in this piece will be implied *informal support* as opposed to *formal support*. Informal support is the more individual social support provided by friends, neighbors, relatives, etc., whereas formal support is found in organizations and bureaucratic structures (Lipman & Longino, 1982).

²While Clark and Mills makes the distinction between the terms ‘rewards’ and ‘benefits’ (1979, p. 12), this research will use the terms interchangeably because various authors of the concept of exchange use each of the terms, depending on the author.

³The literature reviewed for this study predominantly discussed *marriage/married/marital union* without making any suggestions that it includes a significant, romantic, cohabitating partner. I am going to equivocate marital spouse with significant, romantic, cohabitating partner in this study.

⁴While the participants were specific in describing their preferred social media platform, the term *social media* will be the pseudonym used to represent any and all platforms.

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APPENDIX. QUESTIONS USED IN PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Can you describe a recent supportive conversation, other than one you've had with an intimate partner?

What was it about the conversation that made it feel supportive?

Did this conversation occur with a person you consider close?

Can you describe a close relationship you may have in your life, other than with an intimate partner?

Tell me about the other important relationships in your life. For each relationship explain:

How did this relationship start?

How long have you been in the relationship?

Describe the times/occasions you are with this person.

Was there an evolution to the relationship?

What aspects of the relationship matter to you? What do you think it is about the relationship that matters to the other person?

Describe circumstances when you rely on your relationships.

Do you consider any of these relationships more important than others?

If so, what makes this relationship more important to you?

How do you spend your free time?

Your weekends?

Significant holidays?

Have you ever had moments when you needed to talk to someone, but nobody was available?

Describe those times and your feelings during those times.

Do you have any relationships that were close but are no longer close or in your life?

What do you understand to be the reason the relationship changed?

Now that you've had this opportunity to think about the close relationships in your life, do you want to add any further characterizations/descriptions of those significant relationships?