LIFE-CHANGE EVENTS AND WOMEN'S SUPPORT TIES: AN OVER TIME NETWORK ANALYSIS

by

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ABSTRACT

Network analysis, as an intellectual tool, has been applied to the study of social support. Network analysts examine the content and structure of a variety of networks in order to understand the impact of social structures on individuals or groups. However, few studies document the dynamic processes of networks over time. The research in this area regarding women's social networks have, typically, compared women's psychological levels of adjustment against traditional psychological norms in order to determine adaptive coping measures in networks.

This research is a retrospective investigation of women's perceptions of their support networks before and after they have negotiated a life-change event (LCE). The data for this study were collected during nine, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in participants' homes. Interviews were structured around a life-change event of each woman's choosing. Participants determined a "before" and an "after" period with regard to their LCE in order that over-time changes could be discerned in their support networks. For each of these periods, participants listed names of people they considered to be supportive and then completed questionnaires concerning these people and relationships. A total of four sociograms - diagrammatic representations of people in support networks - were also completed: two represent the number, or range, of support people in a network, and two represent the social interconnections, or density, within this network. One sociogram for range and one for density was

completed for the "before" and "after" periods. Participants were asked to compare their "before" and "after" sociograms.

Information from the questionnaires, sociograms and taped interviews was analyzed, qualitatively and quantitatively at two levels: the level of individual relationships and the level of overall network structure. Findings suggest that, in general, a quantitative analysis of sociograms reveals structural and relational changes. For example, networks increase in range by an average of three support people from "before" to "after" the LCE; density appears to decrease slightly "after" the LCE. The circles drawn to represent individual support people are closer to the participants' circles in the "after" sociograms.

Emotional caring and feeling unconditionally accepted by support people appear to be key elements of support for these participants. Although valued, instrumental kinds of support are considered symbolic of, and secondary to, emotional caring. Emotional caring was perceived to engender highly valued feelings of self-acceptance. A third of the women expressed some concern for their perceived inability to reciprocate support during their LCE. The formal support received from doctors or therapists was seldom represented in sociograms although this support appears to be significant.

The nature of particular life-change events appears to influence the relational and structural content of support networks. Two intriguing patterns of support networks emerge: 1) women who associate their LCE's with stigma, seek support initially from formal sources (e.g., a doctor or psychotherapist) before consulting with supportive friends; 2) key members in large networks where women have experienced

sudden and traumatic loss (e.g., death of son, death of spouse) help to "spread the word" to other network members and sometimes involve people from "outside" the network to support the woman in crisis.

Notwithstanding the apparent changes from "before" to "after," participants did not talk in terms of their networks as having *changed*. It appears that range, more than density, may affect perceptions of network stability; that is, only in the case where a network range tripled from "before" to "after" did a participant speak in terms of actual change. Inconsistencies with regard to measuring density, however, must be taken into consideration.

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Blow through me, Life, pared down at last to bone,
So fragile and so fearless have I grown.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh
from her poem "Bare Tree"

LIFE-CHANGE EVENTS AND WOMEN'S SUPPORT TIES: AN OVER TIME NETWORK ANALYSIS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One Woman's Support Story

One evening, about three years ago, "Wendy" and her husband "Rob" tucked into bed for the night. They had been happily married for seven years. Two hours later, Wendy's life changed irrevocably - Rob, a teacher in his thirties, suffered a heart attack. He died the next day in hospital. The loss was devastating; Wendy explained to me that "it changes every aspect of your life. I was a different person from that moment on." She and Rob "were very independent people, but joined at the hip." With his tragic death, Wendy wondered, "what is my litmus test going to be now?"

Until that night Wendy had, for the most part, felt in control of her life. She was a writer, she held interesting jobs and she travelled. She made new friends and kept in touch with old ones. She met and married Rob, her first husband, when she was in her late twenties. They shared a love of writing, research and the arts and they enjoyed spending time with friends at dinner parties. They were both involved on the boards of community societies. Wendy says that, with Rob's death, "it was the first time in my life I was vulnerable ... I had always supported other people."

When the ambulance arrived that night, efforts were made to stabilize Rob before he was taken to the hospital. Wendy accompanied him to the hospital where doctors gave her some assurance that Rob would survive. They were unwilling,

however, to suggest that he would escape permanent brain damage. Although she was still in shock, Wendy hung onto the faintest hope; she began to imagine the recovery process and how disabled Rob might be. Tragically, less than two days later, Rob's condition worsened and he died in hospital without regaining consciousness.

Wendy and Rob were part of a large social network, but when Rob died, Wendy "didn't know who to call first." Her own doctor happened to be working at the hospital at the time of Rob's death:

> She showed up - she heard ... Half the people in the world were there. Every time the elevator would open another wave of people would get off ... It was like jungle drums. It just was out there in the community.

For the first few days, there were cards and flowers, food left on her doorstep and "constant phone calls." Her best friend flew from Britain to stay with Wendy for three weeks and "a lot of sustenance came from very lengthy long distance phone calls from friends in the Pacific Northwest." Eventually, Wendy spent her first night alone in the house since Rob's death and the people around her resumed their normal schedules.

A month later, Wendy went to the library to find books about grieving and loss. She read them and kept a journal of her experiences. She also began to lose weight, something which concerned her doctor:

> I would go in for my appointment and she would very cleverly schedule me before her lunch - she never ever said 'You have to go now.' Amazing. She just listened. She was just fabulous, really supportive, really sweet.

Wendy's doctor found the name of the only psychiatrist taking new clients and Wendy began these visits:

> You don't know what your coping skills are, if you have them. You don't know who you are and how you will cope with the whole process. You don't feel that there's that much of you left.

Among her circle of friends, Wendy was the first person to experience the death of someone close; "no one had even lost a parent at that point." Rob's death "sent shock waves" through their community of friends. Nonetheless, the majority of Wendy's friendships and the people she considered to be supportive continued to stay in touch with her after Rob's death:

> For the most part, the survival rate of the friendships and the deepening of the friendships is really wonderful... I think relationships that existed just got better. The strong bonds were there... There's just a real connection with somebody who's along on this ride with you... One of the things that I've recognized is that, again with experiencing tragedy, the people who come through it with you - how much more precious they are afterwards.

During that first winter after Rob's death, Wendy spent much of her time at the home of friends of hers and Rob's. This couple had just had a baby and Wendy felt she "could just go over in the evening and we'd make dinner and cuddle with the baby, watch tv and it was just cocooning basically, to get me through that time."

Not all of Wendy's friends, however, understood and accepted her personal grieving process. According to Wendy, some friends were very critical about the way in which she was 'doing' her grieving and "gossiped amongst themselves" about her. One friend even sent her a letter outlining his complaints and listing the reasons why some people couldn't stand to be around her. This was a surprising and devastating blow to Wendy who thought that she was handling things well and had the support of all her friends. Another couple was "a tremendous support in the aftermath" of Rob's death but eventually became totally estranged from Wendy - "I don't see them at all."

In this case, Wendy now believes that Rob's death:

> probably stirred up a lot of emotions in [this friend] and she does have some emotional problems... I would think the main reason that we no longer see each other - and it sounds schoolyardy - but I think she became jealous as my relationship with [the couple with the new baby] intensified.

Ultimately, several people that Wendy considered to be "close" friends before Rob's death were no longer part of her social and support networks after he died. She experienced these changes as a loss, and felt sad and hurt:

> You mourn it like you mourn anything and you go through a real grieving process for company that you really enjoyed, similar interests ... we had fabulous times together and it's really sad but I guess you just get to a point and you feel I can't do anything more and I just have to go on.

Wendy experienced another blow at her job during this stressful time. She received an evaluation that included the comment "poor communication." Wendy suspects now that this criticism more accurately reflected her co-workers' inability to communicate about Rob's death; their discomfort was obvious to Wendy because they never asked about her situation. She applied for, and got, a medical disability leave.

Not quite a year had passed since Rob's death when Wendy was doing some errands downtown one day. She remembers:

> catching a glimpse of myself in a window and thinking, 'My God - I look normal!' And anybody walking by on the street would just see this regular person, so it really made me look at people differently. I don't assume anything anymore.

* * *

Scope and Significance of this Research

"Wendy" told me her story one morning as we sat in her living room. The traumatic event around which our conversation revolved is certainly not a common one; the sudden death of her young husband could hardly be considered part of the normal course of life events for most women. I believe, however, that other women who have negotiated a significant life-change event can relate to elements of Wendy's experiences: the suddenness that dramatically alters the routine of everyday life; feelings of grief, anger, frustration, loneliness and fear; loyal friends who stand guard; professional help; new faces that offer support and old friends who, for reasons of their own, disappear from the scene.

"Wendy" is one of nine women with whom I conducted in-depth interviews. These interviews focused on the "before" and "after" periods of a significant life-change event. The women spoke at length about a particular event's effect on their everyday lives and how it influenced their perceptions of their supportive relationships. Using diagrammatic representations, the women described and compared their "before" and "after" support networks and explained how these influenced, and were influenced by, the life-change event.

For the most part, sociological and psychological studies of social groups, or networks, neglect *ongoing* friendships (Derlega and Winstead, 1986; Eckenrode and Gore, 1981; Minor, 1983; Wilcox, 1981). Instead, social network studies focus mainly on the *number* of social relationships and the kinds of support people give and receive. In this research I explore both the nature of women's supportive relationships and the organization and interconnectedness of these relationships in support networks; my focus is the over time dynamic of change in women's support networks.

Clearly, my research assumes that "significant life-change event" and "support networks" are part of a dialectic. A change in one likely results in change in the other; that is, a crisis situation changes (worsening or improving) and likely affects the feelings and behaviour of people in one's support network, in part because of the tension that necessarily exists between negotiating a personal experience and individuals or groups of individuals who do or do not respond. Similarly, if a support person's behaviour changes, the individual in crisis may experience more, or less, anxiety as this behaviour becomes part of the crisis situation. Thus, regardless of its nature, a life-change event may transform both the individual and the support network of which that individual is a part.

This study contributes to a greater understanding of the social world experienced by women, particularly the supportive relationships that are part of complex social networks which shift and change. Although my research is not longitudinal, it nonetheless contributes to our knowledge of social interaction as a dynamic *process*. Because a friendship is oftentimes tested during a time of crisis, studying women's perceptions of their support networks before, during and after a significant life-change event promotes a deeper understanding of social ties in general - what holds us together, what separates us and keeps us apart. Examining this allows us to more fully describe the difficulties as well as the pleasures associated with being part of a social world that may or may not respond in supportive ways during a time of crisis.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. In Chapter Two I consider the literature in social support from the perspectives of network analysis and social psychology and discuss the ways in which my research builds on previous studies. In

Chapter Three I review the methods used in my research, and provide a brief description of the women who participated in the study. Chapter Four begins with a brief summary of the women's life-change events and continues with a report of my findings. Finally, in Chapter Five I summarize and discuss the implications of my findings and suggest how future research might address the issues I raise.

CHAPTER TWO

NETWORK ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

My study of women's support networks over time draws on sociological and social psychological literature in network analysis and social support. This chapter begins with a brief history and discussion of these two perspectives, including a discussion of why a network approach to support is a useful analytical tool. The second section of this chapter summarizes studies relevant to my research; in this section, particular attention is paid to methodological concerns. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how my research contributes to the literature.

Network Analysis

Contemporary network analysis is considered by its proponents to be an intellectual tool for the study of social structures (e.g., Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982; Wellman, 1988). Two basic tenets of network analysis are: first, individuals participate in a social system that involves many other individuals and, second, by examining the concrete relations between and among individuals and groups, it is possible to discern various levels of structure in a social system. Knoke and Kuklinski (1982) among others, stress these relational and structural aspects of network analysis. They argue that, "the vast bulk of social research" relies on attribute measures of social phenomena (intrinsic characteristics of people, objects or events), whereas relational measures "capture emergent properties of social systems that cannot be measured by simply aggregating the attributes of individual members" (p. 11). Whether researchers study "whole" networks and seek to describe the structure of social relations in a particular

system, or "egocentric" personal networks that are defined from the standpoint of focal individuals, relational analysis takes into consideration the connections *between* units rather than examining the units' characteristics.

While network analysis researchers most often focus on relations between people, other types of units have also been studied (e.g., corporations (Carroll, 1986) civic groups (Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982), nation states (Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982)). The specific network linkages between units that researchers investigate are determined by theoretical considerations. Knoke and Kuklinski (1982) list common types of relational content examined by network analysis researchers: transaction relations (e.g., in gift-giving or economic sales and purchases); communication relations; boundary penetration relations, (e.g., corporation boards of directors with overlapping members); instrumental relations, (e.g., people contacting one another in efforts to secure valuable goods, services or information, such as a job); sentiment relations, (e.g., those in which individuals express their feelings of affection, admiration, deference, loathing, or hostility toward each other); authority/power relations; and, kinship and descent relations, (e.g., role relationships among family members). In some cases it is necessary to investigate more than one type of relationship, or "multiplex" relations between units (Knoke and Kuklinski, 1982).

Historically, social network analysis has its roots in the sociology, anthropology and psychology of the mid-20th century, although network themes and ideas can be found in the classics of these disciplines (e.g., see Simmel, 1955). In the first volume of Sociometry: A Journal of Inter-Personal Relations, Moreno (1937:342) analyzed techniques for "the statistical treatment of social configurations." These social configurations, or networks of people, were regarded as more than the sum of the

experiences and feelings of the individuals who formed these networks; rather, the social situations in which individuals are embedded (e.g., families, churches, industrial units or cultures) are considered an appropriate "sociological frame of reference" (p. 346). However, neither the psychological nor the social component alone was considered by Moreno to be sufficient for analysis:

> The ultimate sociometric frame of reference could be neither of these series of data exclusively, but the social configurations in which they are interwoven as a whole. Therefore, a pertinent form of statistical treatment would be one which deals with social configurations as wholes, and not with single series of facts, more or less artificially separated from the total picture. (p. 347)

Moreno "assumed that networks exist" (p. 360) and proposed that the study of "chain-relations," or social relationships between two people, promotes a deeper understanding of the structure of the social world, both at a predictive and a theoretical level. Moreno's work is rooted in his therapeutic orientation - he was a practicing psychiatrist in Vienna before moving to the United States - and his aim was to determine how psychological well-being is related to structural features of networks.

To facilitate his analysis Moreno (1937) devised the sociogram, a schematic illustration of network data consisting of circles, representing individuals or groups, and connecting lines, representing their social relationships. Moreno considered the sociogram to be "an accurate reproduction" (p. 358) of network data as well as a tool for exploratory purposes. Mapping the structures of networks allows researchers to visualize channels of communication and to see how one individual could influence another.

In the 1950s, American sociologist George Homans derived micro-level theoretical principles that formed the basis for developments in network analysis. Homans believed that the "grand theory" approach of some of his colleagues - in

particular, Talcott Parsons - was too abstracted and that social theory should be built up from an understanding of small-scale social interaction (Homans, 1951). To this end, he attempted to synthesize the large body of literature on small-groups (Homans, 1951). For this project Homans drew on the experimental work of social psychologists and the observational work of sociologists and anthropologists, and applied Moreno's sociometry as a methodological framework (Scott, 1991). The theoretical framework Homans constructed to explain group behaviour grew out of models of early small-group researchers. He considered groups to have an internal system (relations among group members) and an external system (physical, technical and social contexts of group behaviour). Drawing from his case studies, Homans' induced propositions about the internal systems of groups, such as: people who interact frequently with one another will tend to like each other; and, the more often people interact, the more they will like each other. He argued that internal systems develop into complex social configurations, divisible into sub-groups within which there is a high degree of group feeling and intimacy. These sub-groups of informal associations are called cliques.

In an independent line of research occuring about the same time, experimental social psychologists (e.g., Bavelas, 1948) studied communication processes in networks in laboratory settings. In these experiments, groups of participants were seated such that only certain pairs could communicate. The groups had to solve a problem through these restricted communication channels. The results permitted researchers to produce graphic representations using points and lines to depict the channels of communication. Two examples of structure deciphered during these studies were the "circle" and the "star." In the circle model, communication flowed in a ring, whereas in the star model one person could communicate with all the others but they were only allowed to

communicate with the center person. These experiments led to the insight that there are important properties of group structures and properties of individual locations within these structures.

In the 1950s, British social anthropologists used the framework of social networks to emphasize conflict and change, rather than integration and cohesion (Barnes, 1954; Bott, 1957; Mitchell, 1969). According to Scott (1991:27): "The work of [these] Manchester anthropologists, with its emphasis on seeing structures as 'networks' of relations, combined the formal techniques of network analysis with substantive sociological concepts." These field researchers, studying prescribed behaviour within specific cultures, argued that not all social groups have clearly definable boundaries and that social ties extend across groups and institutions. They investigated actual configurations of relations which they saw as arising from conflict and power.

Studies of post-WWII migrants who had left culturally homogeneous villages to live in urbanized cities focused on the assumed social isolation and potential behavioural problems of these transplanted people. Instead, network researchers discovered that the migrants formed strong supportive ties in their new settings and retained strong ties to their rural homeland (e.g., Mitchell, 1969). Mitchell (1969:12) conceptualized the "total network" of a society as "the general ever-ramifying, ever-reticulating set of linkages that stretches within and beyond the confines of any community or organization." For Mitchell, "partial networks" were the focus of attention, where individuals are identified and their direct and indirect links to each other are traced.

Elizabeth Bott's (1957) research on English families focused on partial networks of husbands and wives. From this research, she developed the first quantitative

measure of network structure. She referred to the number of relationships, or ties, within a family as "knittedness." In contemporary network analysis this measure, now called density, is one of the most often used to determine the degree of social interconnections within and between networks. It is assessed as the proportion of actual relations to the total number of possible relations among a set of people. The anthropological perspective combined with Bott's mathematical tool paved the way for more complex mathematical analyses that seek to discern "the social structure inherent in underlying patterns of behavioural exchange" (Wellman, 1988:22).

Until the 1960s, researchers investigated egocentric networks (interpersonal, informal networks of focal individuals). Sociograms were closely associated with this type of analysis. Although a useful invention, and one that is still widely used by contemporary network researchers, sociograms become problematic when the number of lines and circles on one page are numerous and thus difficult to interpret. A more manageable approach involves matrix representation (Galtung, 1967), in which units are represented by rows and columns, and relations among units are represented by numbers. The properties of a network can be examined through algebraic manipulation of such a sociomatrix.

Several sophisticated analytical techniques have been developed in order to identify specific network structures. Recent innovations in network analysis techniques have evolved from the concept of structural equivalence (Lorrain and White, 1971). If, for example, two individuals in a network have similar kinds of relationships (roles) with other individuals, these two individuals are said to be structurally equivalent to one another, even though they may not have a relationship with each other. Social positions are occupied by individuals who are said to be "interchangeable" (Burt, 1982).

One example of a technique that developed from the concept of structural equivalence is block modelling. By aggregating sets of individual positions into larger, structurally equivalent sets of positions or "blocks," it is possible to determine both the overall pattern of connection and the underlying structure of networks (Breiger, 1976). In her work on the relational basis of attitude, Erickson (1988) asserts that block modelling reveals whether block members have more, or less, multiplex ties and therefore agreement on a wider or narrower range of attitudes.

Another important aspect of network structure is the strength of ties. Building on White's (1963) work on interlocking networks, Granovetter's (1973) network analysis of Boston area job changers revealed that, contrary to intuition, respondents were more likely to find employment through contact with a person they did *not* know well, or a "weak tie," than with someone they did know well.

Since Granovetter's early study, some researchers have paid close attention to the ways in which tie strength can be defined and measured. For example, Marsden and Campbell's (1984) research begins where Granovetter's (1973) notion of defining tie strength on an "intuitive basis" (p. 1361) leaves off. Marsden and Campbell note the contributions of analysts who have measured tie strength by such factors as frequency of contact, duration of contact, provision of emotional support, social homogeneity, emotional closeness, the overlap of memberships in organizations and the overlap of social circles. According to Marsden and Campbell, the most common measure has been the emotional "closeness" of a relationship.

Marsden and Campbell (1984) differentiate between indicators and predictors of tie strength. The indicators they used were: closeness, time spent in the relationship, breadth of topics discussed and the extent of mutual confiding. Respondents were

asked to categorize network members as 1) acquaintance, 2) good friend, or 3) very close friend. The results indicate that "closeness" is the best indicator of tie strength, where closeness is defined as "emotional intensity" (1984:498).

Many of the concepts and ideas of network analysis have found their way into the study of social support. I discuss this in the next section.

Social Support

Whereas network analysts generally agree that their approach examines both the attributes of individuals or events and the relationship between these units of analysis, within social support literature, however, a clear definition of "social support" has been somewhat problematic (Carveth and Gottlieb, 1979; House et al., 1988; Thoits, 1982; Turner, 1981; Vaux et al., 1986). In general, social support research focuses on the individual and the social conditions under which psychosocial needs are negotiated. Hobfoll and Stephens (1990:455) propose the following definition of social support:

> those social interactions or relationships that provide actual assistance or a feeling of attachment to a person or group that is perceived as caring or loving . . . [this definition] encompasses both social connectedness and supportive interactions.

In the 1970s researchers in social epidemiology became interested in advances in network analysis. Cassel (1974a, 1974b, 1976) argues that psychosocial processes are important in disease etiology and that social support plays a key role in stress-related disorders. The role of social support in coping with stress remains a major focus of research in this area, where individuals' social networks are used to determine the structure of the flow of various types of resources. These studies indicate a positive relationship between the presence of social support and physical and mental health

(e.g., Cobb, 1976; Eckenrode and Gore, 1981; Fleming and Baum, 1986; Hirsch, 1981; Hobfoll and Stephens, 1990; Silver et al., 1990; Wilcox, 1981).

The idea that the presence of social support has a positive effect on health has generated two rival hypotheses in the study of social support: the "stress-buffering hypothesis" (e.g., Thoits, 1982) and the "direct effects" hypothesis (e.g., Cobb, 1976). This controversy has generated discussion on the interplay between theory and methodology. The stress-buffering hypothesis posits that the presence of social support provides a "buffer" between an individual and her or his potential experience of stress, thereby reducing the likelihood of physical and mental illness. Unlike Wellman's (1981) supposition that network ties should be considered as a contingency and that networks are not bounded, or closed, systems, the stress-buffering hypothesis "assumes that social support resources are stable and ongoing features" (Eckenrode and Gore, 1981:50). Within this literature support networks are characterized as having definable boundaries and properties, limiting them to "aggregates of potentially helpful affiliates" (Eckenrode and Gore, 1981:51). In this approach stress and social support are considered essentially as independent variables.

In contrast to the buffering hypothesis, proponents of the "main effects" hypothesis maintain that the effects of social support on stress symptoms are direct and instead of protecting an individual from the negative impact of stress, support may be important for decreasing stress symptoms (e.g., Albrecht and Adelman, 1987). In their review of the controversy within this literature, House et al. (1988) contend that studies indicating buffering effects may be confounded by the absorption of direct effects, and because support does not buffer some stress relationships, theories should target the sources and types of support that buffer particular kinds of stressors under certain

conditions. They argue that "the more appropriate research question is not whether both effects exist, but when, how, and why each occurs" (p. 295).

A Network Analysis Approach to Social Support

Whereas studies of social support tend to be psychological and individualistic, a network approach to social support promotes an understanding of individuals as being embedded within a broader social-structural context. This perspective does not necessarily impose limits on the agentic capabilities of individuals, but rather, acknowledges their location within a social *system*. This theoretical perspective has important implications for policy development. According to House et al., (1988:314):

> Failure to take account of macrosocial determinants of social relationship structure and content can lead to overemphasis on policies that focus on changing individuals - policies which may incorrectly and unfairly blame the victim and ultimately be ineffective.

Literature in social support offers insight into the ways in which people's support ties influence their negotiation of life-change events. Incorporating a network analysis approach and techniques further facilitates the discovery and study of social structures, that is, how personal networks of support ties can be understood in relation to large-scale social phenomena (Vaux, 1988).

Foremost among these studies is Wellman's (1979) classic study of social support in the network context. In 1967-8 Wellman's Toronto-based research group asked "East Yorkers" for information about each member of their social network. These studies provided new evidence to counter the mass society arguments of the 1960s that contended that rapidly increasing urbanization led to experiences of social isolation. Instead, Wellman's results revealed that, in general, individuals formed supportive ties

with family, friends, neighbours and co-workers, received a variety of resources from these relationships, and did not necessarily feel socially isolated. These studies also indicated that people received support from individuals who were geographically distant, thus contributing to the growing belief that networks are not tightly bounded units of analysis (e.g., Wellman, 1988).

Shulman (1975) compared findings from the first East York study with those from a sub-sample of respondents (n=198) re-interviewed one year later in one of the first over time social network studies. The data were collected by means of a structured interview in respondents' homes. This sub-sample was asked to provide information about their closest relationships; researchers set six "intimates" as the maximum. The results indicated the primacy of kin and friend relationships, where kin accounted for 40.8% of all persons named; the majority of relationships had been sustained for 11 years; 87% perceived their relationships to be of the same degree of closeness one year later; and, the nature of close relationships varies with life-cycle changes, where, at each stage of life, people tend to establish and maintain networks of relationships that reflect their needs at that time.

Wilcox (1981) also examined changes over time in a study of 50 newly separated or divorced women and their adjustment to "marital disruption." The women in this study were divided into two groups of 25, after undergoing a battery of psychosocial tests. One of these groups was determined to be "successful" in adjusting to their separation or divorce and the other group was labelled as being "unsuccessfully" adjusted. During their interviews, the women were asked to provide researchers with the names of network members six months prior to the separation and at the time of the interview. Researchers looked at the range and density of these

before/after networks and found that the "successfully adjusted" group had less dense postdivorce networks than the "unsuccessfully adjusted" group. Referring to the literature, Wilcox argues that lower density networks are usually associated with more flexible norms and can provide access to a greater variety of roles.

In Wilcox's (1981) study, the preseparation networks did not differ much in terms of the number of kin present; however, the postdivorce networks of the "unsuccessfully adjusted" included more family members. Wilcox suggests that networks composed mostly of family are likely to be closely knit (dense) and family members may be perceived as interfering too much.

Minor (1983) designed a panel study of former heroin addicts to measure over time characteristics of support. He notes that, although there are a number of analyses of "closed" networks (e.g., factory workers), there is "a paucity of methodological discussions about measuring open ego networks over time" (p. 89). The participants in Minor's study were asked questions about their social network in relation to "a difficult life transition stage" (p. 90), in this case, the struggle for a drug-free life. A questionnaire was developed to obtain in-depth data on people viewed as key supportive relations in participants' struggles. The questions referred to the six month period prior to the interview and took two hours to administer. At each interview wave, in-depth descriptions of network members were obtained in order to check across-time reliability in the reports of network members' attributes. To measure density, each respondent was asked to place the relations among network members on a five-point scale. Minor argues that panel interviews should be designed to optimize the detection of "true change" in variables. In the case of the former heroin addicts' networks, the panel waves were six months apart; although a relatively short time

between waves, the researchers believed it to be adequate, given the population. Minor concludes that "an important area of methodological research in network analysis will be the development of inexpensive techniques for measuring ego networks over time" (p. 99). This concern is reflected by Wilcox (1981:110-111) who stresses that support networks are:

> dynamic in nature... they are in a near-constant state of flux. The dynamic nature of people's social lives should be reflected in the tools we use to assess their lives.

Hirsch's (1981) research on young widows and returning women college students documents how these women's social networks foster adaptive coping. He suggests that both groups of women experienced high levels of stress given that they were in the midst of "major life changes" (p. 156). Like the newly divorced women in Wilcox's (1981) study, these women completed a series of "standard" tests to measure their mental health which was then determined to be "at approximately the midpoint between the means for clinical and normal populations" (p. 156). The women's networks were analyzed at the level of individual relationships (dyadic level) and at the level of the network as a system. On the dyadic level, two variables were measured: the provision of five types of support and friendship categorized as either multi- or unidimensional. Here a relationship is multidimensional when individuals engage in at least two kinds of activities together and it is unidimensional when only one type of activity is engaged in with another person. On the network system level, the main variable assessed was network density. The results indicate that multidimensional friendships were "significantly" (p. 157) related to self-esteem, satisfying socializing and tangible assistance. Density was negatively related to mental

health; that is, the more interconnections within a network, the lower the mental health of the participant.

In his analysis and discussion of these results, Hirsch (1981) suggests that the young widows and the mature returning students needed to look outside their families for support in their new lives - the widows to develop new social interests and the students to develop contacts at school. Consequently, "developing intensified involvements outside the family sphere emerged as an overarching requirement for social adaptation" (p. 157). Low density, multidimensional networks were determined better suited to support non-family life and to enable people to cope in general.

Although two of these studies look at support networks at different time intervals (Shulman, 1975; Minor, 1983) and two investigate women's experience of support as it relates to a life-change event (Wilcox, 1981; Hirsch, 1981), none of these researchers speculate about the over time changes in support networks. Shulman (1975) notes that networks of relationships tend to reflect individuals' needs at a particular time, however he does not document the process by which differences in network structure and content emerge. The studies by Wilcox (1981) and Hirsch (1981) compare women's psychological adjustment with network structure, after a life-change event. These studies focus on individuals' adaptive coping and not the dynamic process between individuals and their support networks. Minor's (1983) before/after retrospective panel study was designed to measure over time characteristics of support; however, the questionnaire captured only the differences in responses regarding support people and did not facilitate the documentation of *how* these networks changed.

All of these studies share a common methodological concern: whether informants can accurately reconstruct their own networks. I now turn to a consideration of this question.

Methodological Concerns

The issue of subjectivity is controversial within both network analysis and social support literature; that is, there is debate over whether or not asking individuals to name and discuss their support ties provides an "accurate" picture of what is "'really" going on. However, many researchers argue for privileging individuals' experiences, noting that social support can best be considered as a personal experience rather than a set of objective interactional processes (e.g., Heller and Swindle, 1983; Procidano and Heller, 1983; Turner, Frankel and Levin, 1983; Vaux, 1988) . The social support literature in the field of health provides compelling evidence in the "highly consistent finding that it is the perception of social support that is most closely related to health outcomes" (Sarason et al., 1990:17). Wellman (1992a) notes that in network analysis, perceived support correlates with observational data on support actually received.

In contrast, in the first of a series of articles on "informant accuracy," Killworth and Bernard (1976; Bernard et al., 1984) argue that, according to their research results, "people simply do not know, with any degree of accuracy, with whom they communicate" (1976:283). These researchers studied five groups of people in order to assess the accuracy of respondents' reports of their social interactions: a group of 33 members of the elite deaf community; 58 members of a fraternity; 44 employees of a research firm; 34 graduate students; and 44 ham radio operators (Bernard et al., 1984; Kashy and Kenny, 1990). Every person in each group was asked to recall the

frequency with which s/he interacted with every other member of the group. Respondents' reports were compared with those of trained observers or electronic aids (as in the case of the hard-copy print-outs from the special telephones used by deaf respondents). In all five studies the results indicate a low degree of accuracy in the self-reports. Killworth and Bernard point out that if such self-reports are inaccurate, they are therefore invalid, and the data used in other self-report studies may also be invalid.

Given the strong convictions of Killworth and Bernard (1976; 1984), other researchers have responded to these claims of inaccuracy and validity. Knoke and Kuklinski (1982) argue that the groups in Killworth and Bernard's studies are hardly typical and that the level of interaction among all members of such groups is likely to be unusually high. Also, sending observers into rooms at 15 minute intervals in order to code the frequency of interaction is itself a questionable technique for measuring data. Based on their own research of informant accuracy which employs an interactive design and statistical procedures that model two-sided social interaction, Kashy and Kenny (1990:60) conclude that "informants are fairly accurate in recollecting how frequently they interact with other people... People do know, to a reasonable level of accuracy, with whom they spend their time." Bernard et al. (1984:507) compare the inaccuracy of respondents' reports with the level of accuracy required in the natural sciences, contending that "it is almost unthinkable" that the use and acceptance of such loosely constructed error bounds would find their way into natural science journals. However, comparing the reliability of the behaviour of humans with that of atoms is not, I believe, a particularly constructive comparison.

Laumann et al. (1983) also comment on the effect of recall-related omissions in network research. For research that is concerned with the explanation of a specific event (e.g., Granovetter, 1973, on the use of networks to get a job), they argue that the omission of a key actor from the data and, therefore, from the overall configuration of actors in a system, "may render an entire analysis meaningless" (Laumann et al., 1983:19). Burnett (1987) argues that we are inclined to take for granted our supportive relationships, as though they are part of the social medium in and through which we go about the business of our everyday lives; it would be difficult to provide someone with an inclusive list of such relationships because we do not talk to, or see, all of these people every day.

A particularly useful method to reduce errors associated with recall is the use of prompt questions. McCallister and Fischer (1983:77) argue that respondents generally have poor recall and "without extensive probing they are likely to forget important network members." These researchers developed a procedure for assisting respondents to recall the names of network members. For their mass door-to-door survey in Northern California, they designed a series of questions to elicit as many names as possible in as short a time as possible. McCallister and Fischer's procedure is designed to identify and elicit a comprehensive list of names in 20 minutes. Researchers were especially concerned with eliciting names of "core" network members, "the part of a respondent's network that most influences attitudes, behaviour and well being" (1983:78). After asking respondents a series of questions about people likely to be sources of "rewarding exchange," researchers collected information about a sub-sample, for whom respondents then completed a self-administered questionnaire. A crude

index of density was measured by asking respondents whether pairs of names in the sub-sample "know each other well" (1983:81).

Similar to McCallister and Fischer's (1983) concerns about identifying network members, Laumann et al., (1983) assert that it is important to specify a system boundary in order to determine the appropriate extent of a respondent's network for a given study. According to Laumann et al., if a system has been specified incorrectly, this "can result in a fundamental misrepresentation of the process under study... the appropriate choice of rules remains contingent on the object of explanation for a given study" (1983:19). The belief that networks are systems that can be identified with specific boundaries is addressed by Wellman throughout his work in network analysis. Rather than seeing personal networks as clearly identifiable "systems," functioning according to their own series of explicit/implicit rules, Wellman (1981:180) emphasizes that "we cannot freeze ties in aspic." Instead, the fluid nature of the relationships between people must be considered in the context of a flexible social world that may not always fit neatly into a particular system boundary.

In his review of the literature, Marsden (1990) addresses these unresolved issues in network data and measurement. He suggests that:

> data on broad features of relationships like duration or frequency are of moderate to high quality. Most network data appear to be of better quality for close and strong ties than for distant and weak ones (p. 456).

Marsden concludes that, overall, respondents are capable of reporting on their networks in general terms but are less likely to be able to provide information on specific details, such as the subjects of conversations and the exact timing of interactions. Based on this analysis, studies of support networks that are not

necessarily focused on detailed content relations do not pose serious methodological problems with regard to "informant accuracy."

Contributions of This Research

This research addresses three issues in support network analysis that I perceive to be gaps within the literature: 1) the over time dynamic of support networks; 2) participant involvement in the construction of egocentric sociograms; and 3) non-normative psycho-social frameworks.

Although support has been acknowledged as a dynamic process, few studies have focused on the nature of this process over time. Shulman's (1975) early study re-examined participants' "close" friendships one year after the initial study, however his focus was not support *per se,* but life-cycle variations in "personal networks." Minor's (1983) investigation of the over time reliability of heroin addicts' reports of key support people involved administering the same questionnaire about the same support people at each interview wave; consequently, the focus was not on relational or structural changes in networks.

My research is an investigation of women's support networks *over time.* I analyze stability and change at the level of individual relations and at the level of network structure. Asking women to consider their support networks "before" and "after" a life-change event provides a magnifying glass through which we can see and then talk about experiences and insights in some detail. Although retrospective, this methodology facilitates the treatment of support and support networks as dynamic psycho-social processes.

A methodological contribution of this study is the construction of sociograms by *participants*. Historically, sociograms have been used by researchers to represent participants' networks. Researchers have translated the information collected in surveys and interviews into sociograms of participants' networks. This has been a valuable tool for structural analyses; however, I believe that encouraging participants to complete their own sociograms facilitates both the accuracy of reporting and the depth of personal reflection - the pencil and paper representation provides a stimulus for conversation and a reliability check. Given the exploratory nature of this research, the use of participant constructed sociograms facilitates the discovery of relational and structural aspects of support networks that models of structural equivalence (e.g., block modelling) might conceal. As well, the size of my sample (n= 9) does not lend itself to treating participants as "interchangeable" (Burt, 1982) or "substitutable" (Scott, 1991) points within structurally equivalent "blocks."

The studies by Wilcox (1981) and Hirsch (1981) on divorced women, widows and returning women students, attempt to measure coping abilities by comparing women's scores on "standardized" mental health tests with their network structures. Gilligan's (1982) research and the plethora of literature it has generated, asserts that so-called standardized psychological and developmental tests have (erroneously) measured women against middle-class, white, male norms. In my attempt to discover more about the ways in which women do and do not experience support, I do not assume a normative or "successful" coping strategy connected to satisfactory mental health. Unlike other studies in social support, I do not attempt to assess and compare coping abilities as they relate to stressful events. Instead, my research investigates women's support networks by comparing individual women's networks "before" and

"after" a life-change event. I also compare individual networks with those of other women participating in this study; however, this comparison is for the purpose of discerning relational and structural patterns of support networks over time and does not imply that some networks are more "successful" than others.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the methods that I used in my study. Specifically, I review how I selected the participants who provided me with the data, and how the data were obtained. The chapter concludes with a reflection on epistemological issues.

Selection of Participants

I used two strategies to contact potential participants: posters and word of mouth. Posters requesting participants and briefly describing the nature of the research were displayed in the window of the local woman's book shop, and were also circulated in a government office, the staff room of a treatment centre and a university department. However, of the women who contacted me about the research, none volunteered as a direct result of seeing these posters. Instead, women heard about the research through word-of-mouth: through friends and acquaintances of mine, their friends and so on. None of the participants was referred by another participant, as in a snowball sample. I know two of the women socially; however, they chose to talk about a time in their lives during which I was not considered a part of their support network. Of the remaining seven women, I know only one socially and neither of us would include the other as part of our respective support networks.

In all cases, participants telephoned me to find out more about the research and interview process and to set up a convenient interview time. After this initial phone call, I delivered to each woman's house an envelope containing the Written Consent

Form (see Appendix A, p. 96), a Participant Information Form (see Appendix B, p. 98) and a list of prompt questions (see Appendix C, p. 99). I included this list for two reasons. First, the questions provided the women with an idea of the focus of the interview and, as such, might have helped to allay some of the nervousness and apprehension associated with talking to a researcher; second, reading the questions in advance gave the women an opportunity to reflect on their answers. Since the event to be discussed in the interview might have taken place several years prior to my study, it seemed important to allow each participant time to contemplate her event before the interview so that she could recall the people and details relevant to her story. For similar reasons, Matthews (1986) apprised her respondents of the topic in advance of the interview in a study of the history of seniors' friendships through the life course. Matthews did not, however, provide the respondents with a list of particular questions.

The Women

The nine women who participated in this research all live in the Capital Regional District of Victoria, British Columbia. At the time of the interviews the women's ages were: 20, 27, 31, 39, 41, 49, 49, 51, and 52 years. According to the Participant Information Form they completed, each of these nine, caucasian women has one or more years of post-secondary education. Using education, occupational prestige and my estimate of household income, all of the women appear to be middle class.

Five of the women were married, one divorced, two were single and one woman was widowed. Two of the women were homemakers; five worked full-time outside their homes (teacher/director, two supervisors, and two clerical staff); one worked part-time as a consultant; and one was a full-time university student. Two

women had university degrees; one had a degree from a performance arts academy; four had "one or more years of university"; and two reported "one or more years of college." Five of the women had children; two had young children at home; one had a teenage son at home, and the other two women's adult children have left home. One woman's teenage son died several years ago.

People who volunteer to participate in research may differ somewhat from the general population. Although I did not, initially, ask each woman why she decided to participate, the women quite often told me - usually at the completion of the interview - they had thought it would be a "personally valuable" experience to talk about their life-change event. One woman explained that, although her life-change event happened many years ago, recently she had begun to think about it again and felt that she "wasn't done yet" with it. She had been thinking of what she might do about this sense of unfinished business when someone told her about my research. She told me that she thought "it was the perfect opportunity."

Some of the women thought of two or more life-change events they could have talked about; in these cases I asked the women to choose one and explained that I had no criteria for a "right" one. In all cases, the choice they made reflected, as one woman said, a desire to "put [the event] into some kind of perspective." Many of the women appeared enthusiastic about the interview process and what they might learn from it. Almost without exception, the women thanked me for the opportunity to look at their lives in a purposeful manner.

As well as this willingness to be candid about personal experiences, I found the women to be thoughtful, articulate and in some cases quite eloquent. These qualities are likely a reflection of education and class backgrounds; however, the unexpected

life-change also forced some women to re-examine themselves and their lives. Consequently, the experience had a tremendous impact on their ability to be self-reflective and to understand more about their own attitudes and behaviours as well as those of others.

All of the women have, at some point in their lives, attended a formal support group, seen a psychotherapist or psychiatrist, or participated in a personal development course. In general, these involvements were precipitated by a stressful experience although often the women continued their commitments well beyond the initial stressful period. As a result, they could be considered to be more aware of their psychosocial processes than women who have not had these opportunities for guided self-reflection.

The Interview Process

The women were asked to contemplate a "particularly stressful, life-change experience" they have negotiated. Each interview was structured around a "before" and an "after" period; that is, we looked at the experience of support before and after the event. Given the subjective nature of the issue and the difficulty, if not impossibility, in defining a crisis in such a way, "before" and "after" are crude temporal measures. I discussed this time frame issue with each woman and encouraged her to decide the appropriate intervals around which to discuss her experience of supportive ties. None of the women appeared to have trouble defining a "before" and an "after." Indeed, most of the women had very definite ideas as to the time frame surrounding their life-change event.

The length of the interviews ranged from two and a half to seven hours (the longest interview was divided into two sessions, one day apart), with an average of approximately three and a half hours. As the interviews were long and often intense, we usually had one or two breaks.

Generally, each interview had three stages. During the first part of the interview, I listed the names of support people recalled by participants for the period defined as "before." Initially, I relied on McCallister and Fischer's (1983) prompt questions (see Appendix D, p. 100) to help participants recall these names, especially when the event in question took place a number of years ago. After two interviews, however, I discovered that these prompts did not necessarily assist participants to remember more names (for further discussion, see Sociograms, below). Participants then completed a short questionnaire for each person on the list - Support Person Questionnaire (see Appendix E, p. 102). This questionnaire included some questions used by McCallister and Fischer (1983). Following the completion of these questionnaires, participants were asked to complete two pencil and paper diagrammatic representations, or sociograms, of their "before" networks. We then discussed their thoughts and insights generated by this process. Usually at this point we discussed the particular life-change event in some detail: what exactly it was, how each woman felt affected by it, how it affected her daily life and the lives of others close to her, how she handled the situation, and her emotional life at the time.

In the second stage of the interview, participants listed names of support people in the period "after" their life-change event. If they wanted to add any "new" names (that is, names of people who were supportive after the event and whose names are not on the "before" list), they completed the Support Person Questionnaire for each of

these new names. Similarly, if any of the "before" names were not considered to be support people after the event, these names were not listed. Using this "after" list of names, participants then drew sociograms representing the support networks after the event.

During the third stage of the interview, we discussed any differences between the "before" and "after" sets of sociograms and the nature of support in general. I then asked the women any verification questions I had at that time and encouraged them to ask me questions.

The interviews varied slightly in terms of the order of questions and completion of questionnaires and sociograms, depending on each woman's way of telling her story. In general, however, I guided each interview to follow the pattern described above.

Sociograms

As noted above, participants completed a total of four sociograms (two "before" and two "after") based on their list of support ties. A sociogram is a diagram commonly used by network analysts and is composed of circles, where each circle represents a person or group (see Appendix F, p. 103, for examples). In my research, one set of two sociograms represents the contacts each participant had with supportive others "before" (sociogram 1A) and "after" (sociogram 2A) the life-change event. For these sociograms, participants were asked to represent themselves by drawing a circle on a blank piece of paper; subsequent circles were drawn to represent each name on the list of support people. Participants were asked to consider two dimensions as they constructed these sociograms: 1) to draw the size of the circles proportionately to the perceived significance of the support available from each person, and 2) to position the

circles as close to, or far from, the circle representing themselves in order to indicate perceived degree of emotional closeness. For example, a large circle drawn very close to the circle representing the participant indicates a relationship that is perceived to offer significant support (large size of circle) and in which the participant feels emotionally close to the other person (close proximity of circle). A small circle, positioned further away from a participant's own circle indicates a support person who is perceived not to offer as much support nor with whom a high degree of emotional closeness is felt.

Two other sociograms (1B "before" and 2B "after") are intended to represent the social connections amongst the support people and do not include participants' own circles. For these sociograms, participants were asked to draw circles representing each support person in the appropriate groups or clusters (e.g., family, workmates, social friends). Lines were drawn between every pair of persons who know each other. These sociograms provide an indication of the density of the connections between and among participants' network members.

I discussed with each participant any changes that were evident in the "after" sociograms. For example, some names appeared on the "before" sociograms but not on the "after" sociograms; new names appeared on the second set of sociograms; and different placements and sizes of circles representing support ties were drawn. I encouraged participants to discuss insights gained through this process as well as the actual "real-life" experience of negotiating a stressful life-change event.

The information contained in the completed Support Person Questionnaires is similar to that in the sociograms; however, the sociograms enable participants to

develop and express a visual image of their support network. In this sense then, the use of sociograms serves at least three purposes:

1) combined with the use of questionnaires, sociograms encourage participants to think reflectively about their support ties;

2) the visual image of completed sociogram provides a non-linear representation of participants' networks - unlike the more "factual" information listed in the questionnaires;

3) participants may feel more comfortable and articulate in expressing their beliefs, feelings and insights after they have completed the sociograms because of this opportunity to reflect on their relationships and experiences.

Although initially I relied on the questions developed by McCallister and Fischer (1983) to assist participants to recall names of support ties, I did not find these questions particularly helpful; that is, asking the questions did not usually elicit any new names of support people. Instead, as each participant completed either a sociogram or one of the questionnaires regarding a particular support person, she sometimes remembered a name she had omitted. When I asked participants what helped jog their memories, they said that when drawing their sociograms they pictured the faces of the people who were in their support networks at that time and occasionally saw the face of someone they had not remembered to include on the original list.

In my literature review, I was unable to find examples of other research that employs sociograms in this way. Other analysts have designed sociograms to convey information they have gathered from data; however, these sociograms are constructed by the researchers, not by the respondents. Alternatively, by asking each woman to

construct her own sociograms, and then asking her clarifying questions about each sociogram, I have attempted to preserve the integrity of women as "knowers" (Harding, 1987) while allowing for the space in which I as researcher might pursue avenues that relate to my own research agenda.

In all of the interviews, I used the sociograms as a stepping stone to discussions of support ties. Some women appeared slightly apprehensive at the beginning of the interview, waiting for my lead and commenting lightly on whether or not their interview results would be "of much use." I had spoken to all of the women on the phone before our interview, explaining the process and asking them a little bit about themselves. I assume that any apprehension on their part had to do with meeting a stranger and participating in university research. As much as I attempted to inform my research methods with a feminist, phenomenological approach (discussed below), it is still likely that the researcher is attributed the socially more powerful role in the interview interaction (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). However, I did notice a change in the women once they began working on their sociograms; they appeared more self-confident when discussing their impressions of the completed sociograms.

Most of the women I interviewed had either seen or were aware of the concept of sociograms, whether or not they knew them by this name. One woman remarked, "I'll just think of it as a personal solar system." None of the women appeared to have any difficulty transposing information about their support ties into this format. All nine women completed Sociograms 1A, 1B, 2A and 2B.

Analysis

The data in this study were gathered using three techniques: oral stories, self-administered questionnaires and self-administered sociograms. The women's stories were audio-taped and later transcribed. I used these three techniques in combination while analyzing the data; that is, the information contained in the transcripts was cross-checked with the information in the questionnaires and the sociograms. I looked for confirmation, discrepancies and pieces of information that seemed to stand out as representative of a particular woman's experience or her insight. The main focus of my analysis was qualitative in that it focused on the women's words in the contexts of their stories and how they chose to represent themselves and their support ties in the sociograms. For a detailed example of this process, see Appendix G, p. 105?.

In her study of friendships through the life course, Matthews (1986:18) argues that it is important to remember that the data she obtained were oral, "that is, they were *spoken* and spoken to *someone*." This process, unlike written autobiographical stories, reduces participants' capabilities to edit or objectify their subjective information. Once a word is spoken, it cannot, unlike the printed word, be revoked. Similar to some of the experiences described by Matthews where her participants often qualified their statements about their feelings about certain people, occasionally the women I interviewed would appear self-conscious or even embarrassed about the way in which they described one of their support ties. When I asked one woman a clarifying question about the size of a particular circle in her sociogram that represented her adult daughter, she laughed, leaning forward to make the circle smaller (i.e., so it would represent a lesser degree of support): "Isn't that silly? This really should be smaller - I guess I just didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings." When describing her relationship

with a woman she feels supported by but not emotionally close to, another woman said, "I mean she does stuff for me and everything, but I wouldn't necessarily invite her to a party, you know?" As Matthews suggests, these participants may have edited their comments had they had the opportunity to see them in writing. Of course, my purpose in including these comments within the body of this paper is not to embarass anyone; instead, I argue that the words support the women's true experience, the experience that is not moderated by the "social graces" that many women feel pressured to uphold, particularly with respect to close relationships.

The stories were not simply spoken, however, they were spoken to *me*. Although some people are more comfortable talking to strangers about the intimate details of their lives, such as the case where two travellers begin to chat to one another to pass the time, in the interviews for this research my social role was not that of a stranger but of a university representative whose task it is to analyze and judge interview material. Even though I was careful to reassure each participant about confidentiality and the exploratory nature of my research (e.g., "I am in no way looking for 'right' answers here"), it is likely that individual women consciously or unconsciously censored some of their comments some of the time. Overall, however, the women seemed willing to be quite candid with me. On more than one occasion a woman said quietly to me that she had "never told anybody this before."

Listening to and transcribing the tapes gave me the opportunity to reflect on individual interviews without the added pressure of taking notes and thinking of how best to guide the conversation. The process of listening, transcribing, reading and re-reading the women's words generated insights and questions. Comparing similar circumstances and ways of describing them also led to my discerning patterns and

differences. I often reflected on my own experiences of support and life-change events in order to initiate new areas of investigation or to facilitate the explanation of a particular question or emerging theme.

I compared the women's words with their sociograms, noting the people spoken of as being supportive but not represented in the sociograms. Similarly, I noted whether or not the perceived degree of support and emotional closeness in the conversations appeared to correspond with the representative circles. On occasion a woman would alter her sociogram after discussing it with me; I listened for clues as to why the completion of the sociogram affected these decisions. In general, then, I immersed myself in the women's words and experiences in order to generate insight and discover important themes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

In order to enrich my interpretation I also used a descriptive quantitative analysis to determine the number of ties in a woman's network and the density of these ties for the period "before" and "after" the life-change event. Because of the intricacy and complexity of some of the sociograms, it is difficult, if not impossible, to simply "eyeball" the circles and their connecting lines and arrive at a conclusion. No two women drew similar sociograms, either in terms of the number or the placement of circles and connecting lines.

In calculating range, a tie was considered to be the symmetric relationship between a participant and any other person in sociograms 1A and 2A; every person thus represents one tie to the participant. However, in the case where both parents were represented in the sociogram, I considered parents to be one tie in two out of three cases. Two women represented their parents as being either one circle, or, during the discussion, described the support they received from both parents as being "pretty

much the same." In regards to her father and his new wife, one woman explained that, "obviously any support my dad would give me would be from her as well." The third woman drew her parents' circles as being interlocked; however, during the interview she described two distinct experiences of support from her mother and father. In this case, I counted her relationship with her parents as being two ties.

In the case of groups, where a woman represented a particular group (e.g., parent support group, anonymous group) as one circle in the sociogram, this was counted as one tie. The women usually perceived groups to function as one entity. On occasion, a woman represented the group as one circle but represented a particular person from that group as a separate circle. Because she perceived this as a separate, unique relationship outside of the group, I counted this as another tie.

Wellman (1992b) addresses the "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice" problem where analysts must decide if couples count as one or two ties. In his study of personal networks, Wellman counts couples as one support person and this relationship is considered to be with the person first named by the respondent as part of a particular couple. Thus, a couple referred to by a respondent as "Bob and Carol" would be considered to be one tie to Bob. In my research, I found that where women had a separate relationship with each member of a couple, they represented this in their sociograms as two distinct circles. Where a woman talked about a couple in fairly equal terms, that is, she felt her relationship was with both people, she represented the couple as one circle. In calculating the range of network ties, I counted one circle labelled with the names of two people as one tie. I considered this tie to be with the first person named as long as the transcripts also indicated that this relationship was

given priority. In one case, I counted two separate circles for a couple as two distinct ties; in this case, the participant stated clearly:

> I don't think ['Joan'] could have done the things she did without [her husband 'Dave's'] support... he didn't say anything at the time, he just cleaned out the refrigerator and took out the garbage for me."

Sociograms 1B and 2B do not include a representation of the participants. These sociograms permit the calculation of the density, or interconnectedness, of support ties; how many of the participant's support people know each of the other support people. The formula used to calculate density is:

$$\frac{Na}{N\,(N-1)/2}$$

where Na is the number of actual relationships and N is the network range (i.e., the total number of individuals in the network). Thus, density is the proportion of actual relationships among members (excluding the participant) to the total number of relationships theoretically possible. The resulting coefficient is a number between zero and one; the closer the coefficient to one, the greater the degree of interconnection in the network. The denominator (representing the number of possible relationships) is divided by two as I treated the ties in these sociograms as being symmetric; that is, I considered that if an individual was reported to know another individual I assumed that this knowing, whatever the depth of the relationship, was reciprocal. In order to compare participants' support networks "before" and "after" a life-change event, Cohen's d for effect size was calculated for both the change in range and the change in density. The resulting number indicates if the change from "before" to "after" is

suggestive of a small, medium or large effect size (.2, .5, .8). The mean, median, mode and standard deviations were calculated for range and density, for the periods "before" and "after."

Methodology and Epistemological Assumptions

In her introduction to Feminism and Methodology, Harding (1987) posits a distinction between a research *method* - a technique or way of proceeding in gathering evidence, a *methodology* - a theory and analysis of how research should proceed, and an *epistemology* - a theory of knowledge. My review of the literature in social support and network analysis indicates that, although researchers have investigated women's social and support networks, they have not necessarily been critical of the ways in which their methodology and epistemological assumptions inform their methods and subsequent analyses of women's social lives.

Social science literature often represents women's and men's social worlds as the same world; little attention is paid to the unique social world women inhabit, a world located within a structure that is largely male dominated (Bernard, 1981; Millman and Kanter, 1987). Until quite recently, studies of social and support networks have concentrated on social ties in general; that is, men's and women's ties have been considered in the same context, or women's ties have been examined and compared with traditional norms.

In this research I purposefully construct my methods to support participants' expressions of their network experiences. The loosely structured, open-ended interviews facilitate individual styles of expression as well as giving participants the opportunity to tell their stories in the manner which suits them. The use of

diagrammatic representations enables participants to construct visual images of their support networks, where they can "see" what they are talking about in order to add another dimension to a personal discussion that could otherwise become abstracted.

The exploratory nature of this study along with my goal to locate women's experiences in their social world and maintain the integrity of their perceptions led me to concentrate on a qualitative analysis of data gained from in-depth interviews. According to Driscoll and McFarland (1989:187), qualitative techniques:

> facilitate the use of [people's] experiences to modify the analysis in an ongoing fashion throughout the research process. There is a reflexive relation between the research method, the subject being researched and the researcher.

My assumption about the relevance and value of a qualitative analysis, in this case, does not imply that quantitative analyses are without value and necessarily misrepresent the experiences of women. Rather, the discovery-oriented nature of my research is concerned with understanding and describing in some detail the support experiences of women who have negotiated a life-change event. The quantitative analyses I do use are grounded in the qualitative data and build on these data to provide more information about the structure of support networks (Wilcox, 1981). The reflexivity of my interview procedures assumes that participants, as well as researchers, can "know." In order to attempt to establish women's reality in the social scientific discourse it is imperative to:

> speak from where we are as women [to] begin to make observable at least some of the assumptions built into the sociological discourse... We start, as we must, with women's experience (for what other resource do we have?) (Smith, 1987:64,69).

Traditionally, women have not been considered agents of knowledge. Many feminists argue that traditional epistemologies systematically exclude women as knowers from scientific discourse; as Harding (1987:3) notes, "the subject of a traditional sociological sentence is always assumed to be a man." I assume, however, that each woman is the expert on her own life; a woman's voice is the authentic source for her story. My interview methods were designed to incorporate women's voices and allow for both researcher and participant reflection during the process.

Phenomenological Approach and Grounded Theory

My research is informed by a phenomenological approach. It is discovery oriented and seeks to find what the phenomenon of women's support ties means to women and how they experience these ties (Luckmann, 1978; van Manen, 1990). However, whereas phenomenology "attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it," (van Manen, 1990:9) my analysis seeks to distinguish patterns and discern the broader social forces that may influence women's experiences. In this sense, my analysis is informed by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) *grounded theory.*

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory - unlike phenomenological knowledge - is derived through a process of induction; that is, theory is generated systematically from the data. Grounded theory demands that researchers "ground" themselves in the data, choosing the next research step based on the data gathered most recently, rather than proceeding on hypotheses imposed on the data. Thus, *the data drive the research.* Glaser and Strauss emphasize the processual nature of this approach, claiming it is the "central theme" of their thesis (1967:9).

Deciding on a fixed sample size, *a priori,* runs contradictory to the tenets of data-driven research. Instead, researchers must interview people until they can discern and articulate patterns and themes with social scientific concepts, and, eventually, derive theory from these data. In this research, after seven interviews I was able to discern patterns and generate some interesting insights; however, I decided to interview more women to increase my confidence in my findings. Given the constraints of time and money, I interviewed two additional women for a total of nine participants.

A grounded theory approach also informs this study in that I treated participants as experts on their own lives. By grounding this work in the words of the women and proceeding according to their comments and the insights I gain, my analysis better reflects the women's perceptions of their support ties. Similarly, a grounded theory approach facilitated my analysis in this "unchartered territory." Combining the phenomenological approach and its detailed attention to the world of lived experiences, with grounded theory, facilitates an analysis that is both loyal to the individual and sophisticated enough to generate sociological concepts.

Ultimately, the analysis of the data I collected is based entirely on my own interpretations. However, I hope that the reflexive framework facilitated an analysis that is both insightful and faithfully represents the women's experiences as they were related to me.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

I begin this chapter with a brief summary of the participants' life-change events. This is followed by three sections in which I consider the nature of network relationships, support people and the nature of "support" itself, and the structure of these support networks. I conclude by focusing on two emergent patterns of support.

The Nine Life-Change Events

Initially, I was not concerned with the particular life-change event a woman chose to discuss; I viewed it simply as a vehicle for the investigation of the dynamic character of supportive ties. I did not standardize these events, nor judge them as being more or less significant than other life events. In choosing to treat each woman as the expert on her own life, it seemed counter-intuitive to presume that I would determine which events would "count" as life-changing. However, as will become clear, I discovered that certain kinds of life-change events have a distinctive impact on support within social networks.

All of the women chose events that involved a kind of loss, and the scenes the women recounted distressed and moved me as I listened to their stories. All the women described how their life-change event prompted profound self-evaluation. In her own way, each woman asked herself questions she was either not aware of before the event, or was perhaps afraid to ask: Can I cope on my own? Who am I *really*? What is most important to me in a relationship? The answers each woman has come

to are sources of strength, although, as more than one woman said, "the path was seldom smooth." Ultimately, these women have developed a sense of having struggled through something; a passage, that, in many ways, is transformative.

* * *

A woman whose teenage son and only child died in what family members called "a gun accident," believes her son may have taken his own life. She said, very seriously, "I am convinced that I lost a few I.Q. points as a result of this experience."

A second woman described a sense of loss of self when, on her fortieth birthday, she realized her husband was an alcoholic: "The illusion mirror cracked." She understood that her life and her self had been facades she had been holding up: "It just all fell away... I saw things for the way they really were... In my gut, the truth was there."

Another woman described her reaction to her medical diagnosis of a sexually transmitted disease: "my whole image of myself was devastated by this... I felt like a totally bad person." She recalled that her initial reaction to the diagnosis was "horrified, suicidal... I had an image of a gun in my mind." That she contracted the STD while having an extramarital affair created further complications for her personal and emotional life. She described "an overflow of pain I couldn't contain."

Soon after moving to British Columbia with her husband and children, one woman's father suddenly became very ill. She flew to be with him but arrived too late; he was in a coma from which he did not regain consciousness and he died a few days later. She recalled her experience attending her father's funeral: "The fact that I held myself together, gave me a self-esteem that I didn't have before."

A woman who had been sexually assaulted by her male supervisor said, "it affected my whole vision of reality... I always think of [that time] as the worst and the best, because, I mean, through all that, I really became who I am."

A woman whose mother died told me, with tears in her eyes more than 10 years later, that "it was the single most devastating experience of my life."

For her life-change event, one woman chose a time in her life when a co-worker she hired became instrumental in encouraging her to feel more self-confident. She told me that this co-worker, now her best friend, was "the key to me getting out of myself... she almost egged me to come out [of myself]." This woman now thinks of her life as "before" she met "Sandra" and "after" she met "Sandra."

From being an acknowledged success in her career, going to school part-time and keeping a busy social schedule, a young woman's lifestyle changed dramatically when she married and had two children, all in the span of three and a half years. She described her astonishment and even depression at the difficulties in adjusting to a life where she put her own needs on the back burner:

> There was the typical thing of putting the marriage first and myself second - which my husband never did. Losing myself - putting all of my interests on hold, like, I quit painting, I quit doing all of the things I did before I got married.

After seven years of marriage to a man with whom she felt "joined at the hip," a woman's husband suffered a heart attack in bed one night and died the next day in hospital, without regaining consciousness. She was devastated: "I was a different person from that moment on."

* * *

Support Networks:
The Support People

All participants completed questionnaires about each of the people in their "before" and "after" networks. These support people were also represented in sociograms and discussed during the interview. This section presents the results based on the analysis of these three data sources.

The particular people whom participants represented in their sociograms were those people who were considered part of the support network just "before" and just "after" the life-change events described above. This "support network" is considered a part of the women's overall social networks (Wellman, 1979), that is, the people in their communities with whom they have on-going contact. The support network, however, is characterized as a sub-set of this broader social network and was defined in the interviews as "those people to whom you did or would turn to for help with personal matters related to relationships, work, finances, health, or other issues you consider to be of a personal nature."

According to this characterization the most common support person reported is a friend. Friends account for 70% of all support ties "before" and 62% of all ties "after" the life-change event. The second most common source of support reported is family

members who account for 30% of all reported ties "before" and 33% of all ties "after" the life-change event. In the sociograms, family members were usually drawn in close proximity to the participant, indicating emotional closeness, although in a few cases family members' circles are small in comparison with other circles, indicating a perception of a lower significance of support. Friends tend to be located closer to participants' circles than family members, although family members who are, or were, considered to be close friends are represented close to participants. With the exception of three support people, all of the circles drawn close to participants' circles (indicating a high degree of perceived emotional closeness) also indicate a high degree of perceived significant support (i.e., large circles compared to other circles). Participants perceive that the people to whom they feel emotionally closest are also the people from whom significant support is available. Of the three exceptions, one woman drew her parents as being emotionally close but their intertwined circles were much smaller than any of the other circles. She explained that the size of these circles is "more suggestive of how much room they took up in my life... I didn't like sharing really close personal things with them very often." Another exception is a woman who represented a married couple as being "two on a scale of five" in terms of the significance of their support "before" the life-change event. This same couple was dropped from the second set of sociograms because the relationship soured. The third exception is that where a woman represented a sister as not being a significant support. This was a young sister in whom the participant did not confide.

In the three cases where a person is represented by a large circle that is not close to the participant (i.e., there is a high degree of perceived support but not emotional closeness) this person is a family member (mother, father, brother). This

scenario can perhaps best be explained by the comment of one participant: "I mean, I know he'll always be there for me, and we love each other and everything, but we're not close like I am with my other friends." There is a presumption that family members are a given when it comes to support, whereas with other friendships there is a greater expectation that emotional closeness will be an integral part of a supportive relationship.

With respect to gender, three-quarters of reported support ties are with women; this is particularly true in the case of family members where 90% of the family members considered to be supportive are women. Where a support person is male, he is most often a family member or spouse. Other male support people are the spouses of women friends, co-workers or business associates. Excluding spouses, only one woman represented a male friend as being her closest friend (three of the five married women represented their spouse as being the closest, or one of the closest, support ties). None of the women commented specifically on this proportion of female to male supportive relationships, most likely since women are accustomed to sustaining more close friendships with women than with men. For example, in his in-depth study of the networks of 29 Toronto residents (14 men and 15 women), Wellman (1992b:98-99) found that:

> women get [emotional support] predominantly from women - and from a higher proportion of women in their networks ... Toronto women rarely get emotional support from the opposite sex - not even their fathers or brothers, much less their male friends.

One of the items on the questionnaire asks participants to report on the nature of their contact (e.g., in person, by telephone, correspondence or a combination of these). The women report that, overall, most of their contact is in person. The second

and third most common forms of contact are "mostly in person, some phoning," and "mostly by phone, some in person," respectively. This contact is maintained, on average, three times per week with support people who live in the same city as the participant. This reflects Wellman's (1992a:220) finding that "most people have contact at least once a week" with their "active" network members, either in person or by telephone.

Almost all of the support people live in the same town as the participant; the exceptions are family members or friends who have moved away or who live in the city where the participant used to live. Contrary to this finding however, Wellman (1992a) discovered that one third of East Yorkers' ties extend beyond the metropolitan area of Toronto. This difference may be explained by geographical factors; this study was conducted in the city of Victoria which is located on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Consequently, people who live in Victoria do not have the same opportunities to meet and associate with people from "nearby" cities as do East Yorkers.

For the long-distance relationships, participants in this study reported that contact is maintained through phone calls, infrequent visits and correspondence, respectively. A woman who attended her father's funeral hundreds of miles away from her support network, commented:

> You can see that my support didn't have to be there...
> They didn't have to be physically there. And I preferred
> these [support] people to the people at the funeral ...
> If you really truly feel secure, secure and deeply loved
> I think that makes much more difference and truly gives you
> support that physical presence could never give you.

In sum, participants' support people are mostly women friends and family members who live in the same city and are in frequent contact with participants. The support people perceived to be emotionally closer than others are also perceived to

offer the most significant support. Family members considered not to be emotionally close are nonetheless usually represented as offering significant support.

Support Networks:
The Nature of Ties

As well as determining *who* the support people are in a network, it is important to examine the relational content of ties. Typically, these data are obtained through questionnaires; however, I have assimilated the information gained from the questionnaires with the sociograms and the women's discussions of their perceptions of their relationships with support network members.

Because I am interested in discovering how women describe their relationships to the support people in their network, each questionnaire asks "How would you describe your relationship to this person?" This question is somewhat ambiguous by design; as well as determining the social role of an individual (e.g., brother, co-worker, neighbour) I was interested in how the women conceptualized their support ties. Most responses indicated the social role of individual support people in the participants' lives. For those people who did not fit neatly into a particular social role, the most common responses were "close friend," "very close," and "acquaintance." This corresponds with Marsden and Campbell's (1984) friendship categories discussed in Chapter Two.

When asked to describe "what kinds of assistance did you feel were available to you?", the most common response is "emotional support." The second most common response is "validation/affirmation/belief in me." In one case, when I asked for the list of support people, the participant emphasized the importance of emotional support. I suggested that she consider other kinds of support (e.g., physical, financial) and she

stressed that, within her emotionally supportive relationships, other forms of support were also available to her.

When asked for their overall impressions about sociograms 1A and 2A (i.e., the sociograms that included a representation of the participants), these women were struck by the difference in the distances between circles. The most notable difference between these "before" and "after" sociograms is the location of the circles representing the support people. For eight women the circles are noticeably closer to their own in sociogram 2A ("after"):

> [I think the difference in the second sociogram is related to] my willingness to let people closer to me and me being willing to share what I'd been through in order to get help.
>
> One of the things that I've recognized is that, again with experiencing tragedy, the people who come through it with you - how much more precious they are afterwards.

For eight of the women, one, two or three people in the "before" sociograms are not represented in the "after" sociograms. Four of these women described this as a person who was once thought to be quite supportive but was no longer so, either as an indirect or as a direct result of the life-change event. After the death of a close family member, one woman's friend did not contact her for six months; another woman's friend wrote her a "nasty letter" outlining his perception of the inappropriate way in which she was handling her grief; one woman's boyfriend blamed her for the abusive circumstances she had endured; and, a family member, initially considered very supportive, turned away. In all of these cases the women did not express anger about these former support people; instead, they talked about their disappointment, loss and

sense of betrayal:

> It was a big disappointment, especially since I'd seen her through a couple of crises. But you can't tell how people are going to respond.
>
> You mourn it like you mourn anything and you go through a real grieving process for company that you really enjoyed... we had fabulous times together and it's really sad but I guess you just get to a point and you feel I can't do anything more and I just have to go on.
>
> One [family member] who I fully expected would be the biggest support... she's the biggest disappointment of the whole thing.
>
> I took [person's comments] as a betrayal, and from then on I think I distanced myself in a lot of ways.

Possibly because these women experienced valuable support from other sources, they did not have to focus on the perceived lack of support from one particular individual. Indeed, these women reported that, however painful the loss of a support person, they have gained valuable insight into the attitudes and behaviours of themselves and others. Two women characterized this insight as an ability to be more discerning as to whom they choose to engage with on an emotionally intimate level: "I'm definitely more aware of what sort of people I let into my life ... the sort of people that accept me entirely for who I am without putting limitations on that." Another woman explained:

> It's kind of like a picnic basket. Before [the life-change event] you know that everything you need is in that basket somewhere. But after [the event], the basket is much better organized - you know *exactly* where everything is.

Another two women expressed an empathy for those who cannot cope with their own, or other people's, distress:

> I don't really blame her for [losing contact]. I mean, you can only do what you can do. And I've had situations where I couldn't handle things and I just said, 'I can't handle this.' I think we all have... I think in all of life it's the willing horses that carry the load. And some people just can't.

The importance of emotional closeness as a defining characteristic of supportive ties is also reflected in participants' definitions of social support. I asked the women to write a definition of support "based on what you have discussed with me today and what your real-life experiences have been." I decided to ask this question after I had already completed two interviews. The following are seven women's definitions (emphasis and sentence structure are the women's):

> A relationship in which I can tell the truth and show my under-side. I don't have to protect them or me. They don't see me through rose-coloured glasses. They see my warts and love me anyway.

> People who are willing to give and be given to; a respect for every feeling and experience as important and "right" which inevitably leads to full acceptance and respect for people in general.

> a circle of love - or like - or
> Similarity - or compassion
> that affirms selfhood
> encourages growth
> holds you up when you falter
> changes with time and place
> and growth

> The people that I consider my support people are people who, for the most part, are like me. They have similar values, lifestyles and ambitions. In order to be able to support me, this is necessary because I'm wanting confirmation that what I'm doing is "right." They are available mostly for socializing and some problem-solving although occasionally I have asked for more concrete support and received it - money, babysitting, help moving, etc. - (This has also been reversed.) Also, because they <u>know</u> me (the closest ones) they can help me stay focused on what my goals are if I'm wandering around lost. There is also a large history with my primary support people.

> Support is the closeness of friends who are prepared to be with you while you go through the various phases of grieving. Not trying to change your behaviour or spare your suffering - but willing to be a witness and a comfort. Professional support can also be useful - sometimes as validation - that what you are experiencing and how you are coping is "o.k." Most important is the support that comes from within and the recognition that we have the instincts and skills necessary to heal ourselves - if we want to be healed.
>
> A person or people who can listen and offer advice without judgement or self gain.
>
> Having someone who will listen to me and hear and feel what I am saying without judgement. Then I can hear what they have to say after I'm sure they have heard me.

These definitions reflect a common belief that support people are accepting of both individuals and situations; support people do not express judgement nor do they try to change feelings and behaviours. This feeling of acceptance provides a kind of reassurance, affirming a person's positive sense of self that was, presumably, shaken by an experience.

The women's definitions do not appear to emphasize instrumental, or task-oriented support. This does not necessarily mean that this type of support is not considered valuable; however, a feeling of emotional closeness and acceptance appears to be key. The women's definitions of social support are similar to the definition proposed by Hobfoll and Stephens (1990:455):

> those social interactions or relationships that provide actual assistance or a feeling of attachment to a person or group that is perceived as caring or loving . . .[this definition] encompasses both social connectedness and supportive interactions.

This definition fits with the women's definitions in that "a feeling of attachment ... that is perceived as caring or loving" could be said to correspond with emotional closeness and acceptance. However, in Hobfoll and Stephens' definition, "actual assistance" is

cited before "a feeling of attachment" and is proposed as an either/or condition. The women in my research all report emotional attachment and feelings of acceptance before instrumental kinds of support. This was true throughout the interview process as well as in the written definitions of social support. Indeed, these women appear to perceive instrumental support (e.g., housecleaning, bringing food, helping to move furniture) as being *symbolic* of a degree of caring and attachment; caring and attachment come before instrumental tasks that demonstrate this attachment. It appears that these women consider emotional support to be the umbrella under which other forms of support, (e.g., instrumental, spiritual and financial) may be included. Although these forms of support are undoubtedly appreciated, priority is given to a kind of emotional support than engenders feelings of acceptance by self and other.

A second theme in the women's definitions is the notion of reciprocity. That is, a person who is considered to be a support person is also accepted as being a person who will sometimes require support. Indeed, three of the women I interviewed recalled experiencing some concern about their inability to be supportive of their friends when they themselves were experiencing difficult circumstances (e.g., the death of a son, death of a parent and death of a spouse). Perhaps, in the case of the profound grief associated with the death of a close family member, the women were aware of the extent to which they required support or were receiving it from their network. This awareness, along with their intense sorrow, made them aware of their current inability to "return the favour." One woman expressed her concern as being related to the chances of her friends ever experiencing the same loss as she did: "if they don't have the same problem, then how could I ever repay them?" This woman

eventually chose to see a psychiatrist rather than talk "on an emotional level" with her friends.

This finding, that reciprocity is an assumed and integral part of a supportive relationship, appears to contrast with Wellman et al.'s (1988) finding that "East Yorkers do not regard exchanges of aid with network members as reciprocal contracts" (p. 175). In Wellman et al.'s study, respondents tended to be balanced in their exchanges with specific network members although, the weaker the reported ties, the more likely respondents were to expect reciprocity in their relationships. The women who participated in my study appear to be concerned with reciprocity as it relates to their own ability to "return the favour," rather than being concerned with having a favour returned to them. In general, their concern is in regard to relationships with "friends" and not family.

There is evidence to suggest that the more long-standing a relationship, the less concern there is for reciprocity (Jerome, 1990). Presumably, long-standing relationships are more likely to involve strong ties; this is reflected in Wellman's findings noted above. There is implicit in kinship relations the notion that families are a valuable and reliable source of a variety of support. This belief prevails regardless of fluctuations in feelings of emotional closeness between particular family members. With family, relationships between members are formally recognized, whereas ties with friends are more informal, and the beginning or ending of a friendship does not require institutional sanction. I suggest that because friendships are more tenuous than family relationships, a concern for reciprocity is more likely to exist among friends than among kin. Regardless of the duration of a friendship, kin relations precede and will, potentially, "outlast" friendship relations. Consequently, although the women in my

study generally reported that they feel emotionally closer to friends than to family members, they rely on the ongoing actual and potential support of family regardless of imbalances in supportive exchanges. However, because the women discussed their support networks in reference to a life-change event, perhaps the increased degree of support they experienced from "friend" support relationships magnified the perceived inequity with respect to their own ability to reciprocate. In times of major life crises, friends may be more aware of the importance and significance of their contributions and become more involved on an emotional and practical level with the friend in need. Unlike Wellman's (1992a) sample, who were interviewed about a broad range of ties, for the women in my study the experience of a life-change event magnified the degree to which other network members provided support.

A third notable aspect of the women's definitions of support is the lack of reference to the help of professional or formal support people. Seven of the nine women sought or were offered the help of either their doctor, a psychotherapist or both. However, in their sociograms, only two women actually represented the support they received. In both cases the support was ongoing for a number of weeks or months (a therapist and an anonymous group).

The support received from doctors does not appear to be insignificant. One woman recalled that her doctor:

> used to drop by on the weekends, if he was on duty, or sometimes when he was just passing by. And I didn't think anything about it especially. And he would always say, 'Oh when did you wash your hair?' And I never - it just went right over my head. And I asked him about that later and he said, 'Well because I know that you always wash your hair every day and if you had told me that you hadn't washed your hair for a couple of days I would have put you in the hospital right away.' He was watching to make sure I was okay, in his own quiet way.

Another woman described how her doctor made it easier for her to spend time with her: "she would very cleverly schedule me before her lunch - she never ever said 'You have to go now.' Amazing. She just listened. She was just fabulous, really supportive, really sweet." Two women reported that they were prescribed anti-depressants by their doctors and that these drugs made a "positive" difference in their lives, post-trauma. In her written definition of support, one woman stated: "Professional support can also be useful - sometimes as validation - that what you are experiencing and how you are coping is 'O.K.'"

A year after the death of her mother, one woman asked her family doctor for a referral to a psychiatrist. She saw this psychiatrist on a regular basis for four years, going once a week for the first six months. She said that the focus of all their interactions was the death of her mother and her continuing grief. She found his support valuable and significant but she did not include him in her sociograms. I discussed with her that other women I had interviewed had received similar support from doctors and therapists but most did not include these people in their sociograms. She replied that "she didn't even think of including him." I asked her why not and she said, laughing:

> He didn't have a choice! He *had* to be there. He was being paid... I don't owe him anything. Like my friends, if they don't have the same problem, then how could I ever repay them [if they supported me during my hard times]?

The absense of these professional supporters in the sociograms may be explained, at least in part, by some of the women's definitions of social support. By definition, a doctor or psychotherapist is in practice to help others, not to receive support him or herself. These professional boundaries preclude the two-way emotional intimacy the women in my study describe as existing in their friendships with support

network members. They are aware that it is the professional's *job* to appear sympathetic and helpful. Given the priority these women assign to emotional attachment, perhaps its absence in professional-client relationships influenced the women's decisions to exclude this support from their sociograms. Indeed, this exclusion does not appear to be the result of any conscious decision-making processes; professionals were simply not considered a part of the support network that was represented in the sociograms.

In sum, participants characterized the most common support experience as "emotional." From "before" to "after" the life-change event, the circles in the sociograms were represented, in general, closer to the participants' circles, indicating a perceived increase in the degree of emotional closeness. The women's definitions reflect the value placed on emotional support, particularly as it engenders feelings of self-acceptance during a difficult time. Some women, however, expressed a concern regarding their inability to reciprocate during a time in which they experienced extensive support from network members. The deaths of close family members and the degree of support these tragedies engendered, may, in these cases, account for some of this concern. The absence of the representation of formal support in the sociograms may be explained, in part, by the women's definitions of support, where reciprocal emotional intimacy appears to be valued highly.

Support Network Structure:
Network Range

Range refers to the number of support people in a network. To calculate range, I counted the circles in sociograms 1A and 2A and cross checked this figure with the names of support people on the questionnaires. For the period "before," the women reported a mean range of 7.66 support ties (median= 8, mode= 5 and 9, and standard deviation= 2.26). The fewest support ties reported is five and the most is 12. For the period "after," the mean range is 10.44 (median= 10, mode= 10 and standard deviation= 2.59). The fewest support ties reported for "after" is eight and the most is 16 (see Diagram 1, below). The increase in range from "before" to "after" represents a large effect size (Cohen's d= 1.14, see Cohen, 1977).

Diagram 1

RANGE

Before			**After**
Range= 5 to 12		1*	Range= 8 to 16
Mean= 7.66		1s 6	Mean= 10.44
Median= 8		1f 4	Median= 10
Mode= 5 and 9	2	1t	Mode= 10
sd= 2.26		1. 000	sd= 2.59
	9998	0* 8899	
	7	0s	
	555	0f	
		0t	
stem= tens leaves= units			Cohen's d= 1.14 (large)

Seven of the nine women reported more support people for the period "after" the life-changing event. In general, these new support people were actively sought for their particular intellectual, emotional or instrumental abilities although additional support people were often brought "in" by network members (e.g., family members of support people). The women's stories and sociograms appear to underscore the dynamic nature of support networks and the active role of the person in need of support (Conn and Peterson, 1989).

One of the two exceptions to an increase in network range from "before" to "after" the life-change event is a woman who had just moved to the area from another province. The number of her support ties for the period "before" and "after" was nine in both cases. The other woman reported twelve support ties for the period "before" and 10 for the period "after."

Two of the nine women included formal support groups as part of their "after" networks. They represented these groups in the sociograms as one circle, explaining that they could no longer remember all the names of the individual group members, and that they thought of the group as one entity, connected as they were by a common purpose. If these groups are counted as one support tie then, on average, the women's support networks increase by three ties in the wake of the life-change event.

With respect to the support people added to or dropped from the "before" and "after" sociograms, in general, the additions ("after") are friends and co-workers and the support people appearing only in the "before" sociograms are also largely friends and co-workers. Where the average increase in support people from "before" to "after" is three, the average number of support people dropped from the "after" sociograms is two (1.55). The most common reason participants' did not include some people as part

of their "after" support networks was that they discontinued their contact with these people and the relationships were considered severed. The second most common reason that support people were not represented in the "after" sociograms was that these people, for reasons of their own that participants' believed were related to the life-change event, discontinued their contact with participants. For seven of the nine participants, the number of support people added to "after" sociograms either equals (one case) or is greater than the number of people dropped from these sociograms. For the two other participants, one woman reported one "after" addition to the same list of names in the "before" sociograms and another woman reported one "after" addition and three support people who were not represented in the "after" sociograms.

The number of people added to or dropped from the lists of support people, and the nature of their relationships with participants, suggests that participants found it valuable, if not important, to create and sustain supportive relationships with people who actively and openly offered their assistance.

Although network range is a meaningful empirical measure, Burt (1983) argues that range is a multidimensional concept, rather than simply the sum of network members: "An actor's relations have range to the extent that they involve a diversity of actors" (1983:193). According to Burt, both the number and type of network members are necessary considerations in the analysis of networks. Overall, compared with participants, the reported support ties appear to indicate homogeneity in age, gender, marital status and whether or not there are children living in the home. These findings are congruent with much of the literature in social support and network analysis which suggests that, in general, we tend to associate with people like ourselves (Erickson, 1988).

The two women I interviewed who are active members in a number of formal and informal groups both report that the amount of support they received is due largely to their connections with these groups. Based on the information collected in the questionnaires, there is a high degree of homogeneity in one of these women's networks. The other woman is involved with a number of groups representing more diverse types of people and sees herself as a part of a large and very active social network: "If I know someone who needs something and I know another person who might be able to give it, then I don't hesitate to pick up the phone and ask her." Both of these women reported receiving support from a large number of people, many of whom they did not necessarily consider to be a part of their support network at the time of their life-change event; in both instances, relative and complete strangers called or wrote letters of sympathy. The youngest woman I interviewed also reported more of a diversity of support people, but only in the "after" sociogram. After her life-change event, she sought the support and counsel of older women friends and family members. This support enabled her to ask for and find valuable information as well as to seek the opportunities that she believes she might not have found, had her support ties remained the same after her life-change event.

The women whose support networks appear to be more homogeneous did not report that these networks are lacking in either the type, or amount, of support received. However, two of these women reported seeking initial support outside of their network. In both cases, the women felt that the stigmatizing nature of the circumstances prohibited them from seeking support directly from their support ties. I explore this aspect of the support process in more detail in the last section of this chapter.

In summary, network range increased, from "before" to "after" a life-change event, mostly due to the addition of family members, members of support groups and the friends and family of support people who "rallied round." Many of the names added to the "after" list are those of people who were actively sought for support.

Support Network Structure:
Network Density

To determine the interconnectedness among network members, density was calculated by determining the number of actual relationships to the number of possible relationships within the network. Results indicate that, in general, the women's support networks were only slightly less dense in the "after" sociograms than in the "before" sociograms; that is, participants reported that fewer support people knew each other "after" the life-change event than "before" the event. The mean density coefficient for "before" is .46, with a range from .24 to .72 (median= .43, mode= .33 and standard deviation= .19). For the period "after" the life-change event, the women reported a mean density of .42, with a range from .19 to .75 (median= .32, mode= .32 and standard deviation= .19) (see Diagram 2, below). This decrease represents a small effect size (Cohen's d= .21, see Cohen, 1977).

Diagram 2

DENSITY

Before		**After**
Range= .24 to .72	9	Range= .19 to .75
Mean= .46	8	Mean= .42
Median= .43	20 7 5	Median= .32
Mode= .33	0 6 7	Mode= .32
sd= .19	5 07	sd= .19
	73 4	
	330 3 22	
	4 2 34	
	1 9	

stems= tenths
leaves= hundredths

Cohen's d= .21 (small)

Other network analysts have found that lower density networks often provide more valuable support than higher density networks (e.g., Hirsch, 1981; Wellman, 1987; Wilcox, 1981). Wellman (1987) suggests that lower density networks are more heterogeneous than high density networks and therefore have members from a variety of roles who can provide more services. Wellman (1981:189) also argues that "density, as a summary measure of overall network structure, can mask local inhomogeneities." He recommends supplementing density with other structural indicators such as the number of clusters in a network and the extent to which these clusters have a central figure. Although Wellman's research generally examines social networks in order to determine the circumstances in which a tie may or may not provide support, it seems useful to consider these supplementary indicators in my analysis of women's support networks.

Eight of the nine woman reported at least one family member in the "before" and "after" sociograms. Although three women did not report any family member for the "before" sociogram, on average, the women reported two (1.66) family members for the "before" period (range= 0 to 4). For the "after" sociogram, eight women report the support of an average of three (2.77) family members (range= 0 to 8). These family members are mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, mother-in-law, mother-in-law's sister and sister-in-law. Although most of the women reported one or more family members in their "before" and "after" sociograms, the arrangements of the circles representing support people do not appear to be affected much by the presence of these family members; that is, more often than not, if a family member is added to the "after" sociogram for density (2B), the ties between other support people do not appear to be affected. In most cases, this represents the woman's perception that the family member

does not have a relationship with other support people, and that the family member is added into a cluster of other family members, thus increasing the density of ties among family members but not among other members of the network.

There is, however, one exception to this general pattern. The woman who married and had two children in a three year period increased the number of support people in her network from five, when she was single, to 16, after the birth of her second child. The density calculation for her "before" sociogram resulted in a coefficient of .70, which indicates a fairly high degree of interconnection between her support network members. For the period "after," however, the calculation is .23, indicating a fairly low degree of interconnectedness. I think that, in this case particularly, the density coefficient is misleading. By simply looking at the "after" sociogram in which this woman has drawn lines connecting people who know each other it appears that her network is quite dense. Most of the new support people for the period "after," are either her new in-laws, people that she has met through these in-laws or members of her own family of origin. The density coefficient in this case of .23 is the second lowest amongst the nine women.

Because the formula for calculating density is the proportion of *actual* ties among network members (excluding the participant) to the total number of ties *possible*, in this particular case, where the woman reported five support people for "before," (the fewest reported), and four of these people worked together, the proportion of actual ties to possible ties is quite close. Conversely, for the period "after," where there are sixteen reported network members (the most reported), the number of possible relationships among these members increases significantly. Even though many of these people know each other, this woman does not represent her

brother, sister, mother and father as having any ties with anyone in her large new family except her husband. This one exception is an example of how density calculations can be deceiving and a reason to examine the structure of networks using other indicators. Friedkin (1981) suggests that density is a problematic measure of structural interconnections if a network has sub-groups, and that comparisons of density measures across networks that differ in size can also be misleading.

With respect to clusters, the women usually drew particular groups of people together in order to draw the interconnecting lines between them more easily. Generally, however, these clusters are perceived as being a specific part of the overall network; that is, they are discussed in terms of "family," "co-workers," "friends in the U.S.," "friends from [a community society,]" etc. When looking at her completed sociogram representing the ties among network members "after," one woman commented, "there are four distinct groups of people there." "After" sociograms appear to have distinct clusters for seven women; however, as I did ask some women to draw their sociograms with these clusters in mind, I think it would be inappropriate to comment on any patterns or structural variation.

With respect to changes in clusters from "before" to "after," there does not appear to be any significant change except where new names were added to clusters or some names were dropped from the "after" sociogram. The one exception is the sociogram of the woman who married and had two children in the span of three years. Not only did her network range increase from five to 16 as a result of her new extended in-law family, but the person who appears to be focal in the "before" sociogram is her best friend, whereas the centre of her "after" network cluster is her new husband.

In summary, network density, on average, decreased slightly, from "before" to "after." This is likely a function of the increase in range, where additional support people, brought in by members of the support network, did not necessarily know each other. This result, however, is probably affected by both the (low) number of participants and problems with the formula for calculating density.

Patterns of Support

Based on my analysis of the women's words, their experiences, the completed sociograms and questionnaires, I discerned two intriguing patterns of support: stigma-related "out-reach," and the "jungle drums" of large networks. These patterns reflect an interaction between the nature of the life-change event, the structure of the support network and each woman's individual perceptions and beliefs about herself and her circumstances.

Impact of Stigma: "Out-Reach"

One of the most interesting results relates to the nature of the significant event three women chose to discuss. All three related to me circumstances that impute a social stigma: the diagnosis of a sexually transmitted disease, a spouse's alcoholism, and sexual assault. According to Goffman (1963:3-5), a stigma refers to "an attribute that is deeply discrediting...an undesired differentness." In the case of these three women, they experienced their particular circumstances as a kind of "blemish of individual character" (Goffman, 1963:3). Although some of the life-change events of the other six women could be seen as stigmatizing, (e.g., the suicide of a child,) none of them gave any indication that they felt stigmatized or ashamed of their circumstances.

Indeed, the woman whose troubled son died under suspicious circumstances was surrounded by other parents who empathized with the struggles of raising a "difficult" teenager. Her immediate social world had already experienced the death of other teenagers and these shared experiences led to a feeling of cohesion and belonging in this social circle.

According to Goffman (1963:7) shame is often the result of having the perception that one of one's attributes is "a defiling thing to possess." For the women I am describing as having experienced stigma, all three reported feelings of shame and guilt: "I felt very guilty... felt I didn't even deserve to take care of myself"; "I didn't tell anybody for two months... I couldn't expose my shame yet"; "I felt I had done something to cause this, that it was somehow my fault."

To some degree, these three women sought support from complete strangers. One woman phoned Alanon, an anonymous support group for the spouses of alcoholics, another woman called a local anonymous crisis line, and the third woman contacted her doctor who, eventually, referred her to a therapist. The third woman also called a priest for counselling even though she is not Catholic and does not attend any other church. After discussing their situations with these anonymous and professional sources, all three women confided in several members of their support network.

With a social stigma, the resulting sense of a "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 1963) forces an individual to continually learn to negotiate the negative reactions of others as well as her own reactions to others and reactions to the other's negative reactions to her. According to Scheff (1988:398), if we are constantly monitoring ourselves, "shame [can be seen as] the most frequent and possibly the most important of emotions, even

though it is usually almost invisible." This sense of shame is a feeling that one can carry with oneself and experience without the presence of others; its intensity, however, is perhaps increased by the response of others. Whereas, an embarrassed individual can employ a number of strategies to attempt to cover the embarrassment, a person who feels ashamed may find the emotional suffering to be too overwhelming to permit an inventory of appropriate reparatory tactics. If, according to Goffman, embarrassment is socially "uncomfortable" for the person experiencing it and for others present, then perhaps shame is socially unbearable. In this context, shame is potentially an extremely alienating experience that threatens the social bond between two or more individuals. Perceiving oneself to possess a stigma, then, is potentially a kind of social death.

The three women in my study who report circumstances that felt shaming did choose to talk to somebody about their experience and feelings; they did not decide that their circumstances should remain completely secret. Although it may not seem surprising, I find it interesting that the women did not turn to particular, close support people in their networks. One spoke, initially, with a doctor in order to be referred to a counsellor; another contacted an anonymous crisis line; and a third woman approached a formal anonymous group. Indeed, formally organized anonymous groups, doctors and psychotherapists have, as part of their professional code of ethics, a commitment and an obligation to protect the privacy of their clients/members. Women who choose to confide in these people probably assume that what they tell their doctors or group members will be kept confidential and will, therefore, not become known to anyone in their social circles.

Presumably these women's perceptions of their circumstances were such that they did not wish to reveal themselves, at least initially, to their friends. The anguish they described to me, the feelings of horror, self-doubt, despair and profound shame compelled them to believe that the people in their support network would somehow not be able to handle the information appropriately. The woman who opened the telephone book to look for the number of the anonymous group explained to me that part of the reason she phoned them first was that she firmly believed her existing support network would either not believe her "story" or would attempt to trivialize it. She felt "very ready" to confront her situation and therefore wanted to be with people who had a kind of insider's knowledge. I asked her if she was nervous when dialling the number. "No," she said, "I was terrified. But I knew it was what I had to do."

In the case of circumstances that involve stigma, the reaching out to professionals can be seen as an attempt at "impression management" (Goffman, 1959). The practical and emotional support offered by the professional may assist women in integrating the information about their particular circumstance first into their own self-concept and then into their support network. In terms of the feelings of alienation commonly associated with stigma, seeking the support of a professional (or anonymous group) may thus be considered as a bridging step in the process of eventually confiding in the members of one's support network. Part of impression management is demystifying the circumstances, putting them into a perspective that makes them seem manageable, with people who appear not to judge one as being at fault or socially unacceptable.

The thought of being stigmatized and rejected or blamed for a situation that seems so completely and negatively entwined with one's identity, appears to have

motivated the three women in my study to seek support, initially, from outside of their reported networks. To risk rejection and trivialization would be to risk social death. Learning how to manage the experience, however, with sympathetic others afforded the three women in my study the opportunity to diffuse their initial anguish in a safe environment before returning to their support network and introducing their "story." Generally speaking, these women did not report any harsh rejections once they had spoken with network members; any ensuing experiences of rejection were perceived as being the "problem" of the rejecting network member, and not as a blemish on the woman's character. It is remarkable that the stigmatizing event had so little effect on their support networks; an examination of the range and density of their networks does not reveal any striking similarities or differences.

"Jungle Drums"

For two of the women I interviewed, the shocking circumstances of their life-change event (the probable suicide of a teenage son and the sudden death of a young husband) left them feeling devastated and profoundly grief-stricken. Both of these women reported relatively large "before" networks, compared with other participants. Because one woman was involved in two formal support groups and represented each group as one circle, they were counted as only one tie; however, this is probably misleading as she received "tremendous" support from various members of these two groups after the death of her son. The other woman reported 12 support people in her "before" network, several of these ties representing couples.

Both of these women reported that key people in their support networks "spread the word" and "brought in their troops." That is, the women felt very

supported in a variety of tangible and emotional ways without really feeling they had done much to generate or prompt this support. The sheer numbers of people who called, sent cards, brought food, cleaned the house, took out the garbage and stayed physically present appear to have literally, as well as figuratively, surrounded these women with their love and gestures of support. At the time of the deaths, one woman was in her mid-forties and the other in her mid-thirties; both described themselves as the kind of person that usually gives other people support - when their own tragedies occurred they found themselves the focus of a concerned and supportive network:

> It's one of the very few times in my life I've taken support. I've always been very proud of being totally self-sufficient. And it has never been true, I've just always believed it to be true. I've always been the competent - the fixer, the holder-upper of other people... Then I found out that when I needed help, it was there and it was very impressive to me. I was amazed at how much help there was. Sometimes it was hard for me to take it. But I needed it and it was there, it was just amazing.
>
> It was the first time in my life I was vulnerable... I had always supported other people.

The "before" and "after" density calculations for these women do not indicate much difference in the number of interconnections among support network members (.30/.32 and .24/.24). However, in the weeks following their tragedies, the women experienced an *intensifying* of the support that they believed was already there. Although one of these women added a few names of new supporters for the period "after," she perceived this as part of the efforts of her existing support people; that is, several people enrolled their own family members to help her with household chores and to drop by to see how she was doing. Similarly, the other woman reported not knowing who to call first, from the hospital, after her husband's sudden death. One male friend apparently took charge of informing the network of supporters who then

began to arrive at the hospital. In both cases, it appears that key support people played a central role in "getting the word out": "the grass got cut, the cats got fed. The word got out"; "it was like jungle drums. It was just out there."

Both of these women - the only two of the nine participants to do so - used the word "cocoon" to describe an experience of support from a particular group of people, following their tragedies: "[The parent support group] was like a little cocoon"; "I could just go over in the evening and we'd make dinner and cuddle with the baby, watch tv, and it was just cocooning basically to get me through that time." This was a time when both women felt barely able to cope; they were not denying the deaths, but rather, were beginning to mourn. The safety afforded by a particular group - in both cases a group that had known their husband/son - gave these women the place to talk about their experiences as well as the emotional space in which to grieve openly.

According to my analysis of these two emergent patterns, it appears that both the *type* of life-change event and the *structure* of the support network affects how women seek and receive support. In particular, events that are associated with stigma, led the women in this study to seek support from "outside" their network, and events that involved the loss of a close family member resulted in the support of many network members and their friends and family.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I address the implications of my findings as they relate to our understanding of the content and structure of support networks. Following this discussion I consider both the limitations of my study and the methodological contributions to social support and network analysis this research advances. I conclude with a brief consideration of how future research might address the issues I raise.

Inherent in my idea to study support networks over time is the hypothesis that these networks are not static, tightly-bounded groups whose "members" necessarily maintain fixed roles. Based on my own experiences, I began this research with the notion that support networks change over time. According to the results based on my "before" and "after" methodology, participants' support networks are indeed comparatively different, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

On average, the women's network ranges increased by three support people from "before" to "after" a life-change event and the density of these networks appears to decrease slightly after these events. Furthermore, support people were represented closer to the women in the "after" than in the "before" sociograms, indicating a perceived increase in the degree of emotional closeness. These apparent differences suggest that, over time, support networks change, both in structure and relational content.

Presumably, *change* connotes the destabilizing of an equilibrium, a notable difference in circumstance or condition. However, social networks can hardly be considered static and stable systems, with clearly definable boundaries and social roles;

subtle and apparent shifts occur continuously as social and individual circumstances "change." Interestingly, the women who participated in this study perceive differences between their "before" and "after" sociograms; however, they do not necessarily talk about these differences in terms of change, *per se*. One woman characterized the differences as an "intensification" of support after her life-change event, and, although her "before" and "after" sociograms are notably different in structure and content, she remarked, "if you're looking for change I don't think there was any."

It appears that both the number of ties and the presence of key, emotionally close supporters affect these women's perceptions of the continuity and stability of their support networks more than the degree to which individual support people know each other. The only woman who expressed a belief that her network changed after her life-change event is the woman whose network range more than tripled after her marriage. Perhaps network range affects people's perceptions of their networks more than the degree of interconnection. If this is true, then it is possible that there are thresholds where the number, or per cent, of network members increases or decreases resulting in a perception of one's support network as having changed.

According to the women's sociograms, the largest and closest circles representing supportive friends changed from "before" to "after" in that they are larger and closer to the participant's circle "after" the life-change event. Overall, these circles represent the same people from "before" to "after" and indicate that the women felt emotionally close to these friends and confident of their support. In other words, key, emotionally close support people may provide a sense of network stability. The presence of these close relationships may be related to the significance of range in terms of the ratio of close supporters to other supporters; that is, it is not necessarily

the number of key close support people but the percent of the network that they represent which affects perceptions of network stability.

In this study, on average, density appears to decrease only slightly from "before" to "after" the life-change event. However, for four of the women, density *increased* "after" the event. Again, these differences are small and it appears that the addition of one or two family members "after" accounts for the apparent increase. Wellman (1992a) discusses the lack of consistent evidence regarding the relationship between density and social support. He suggests that low density networks ease normative pressures and enable people to have access to support from more social circles. Although Durkheim's (1897 [1951]) theory proposes that social integration promotes mental health, other researchers have found that lower density networks are more likely to provide satisfying support (Hirsch, 1980). The divorced women in Wilcox's (1981) study who adjusted more easily to their post-divorce lives had low density networks. Wilcox suggests that the number of family members present in these networks is an important factor; that is, the lower density networks tended not to have as many family members as the higher density networks. Wilcox hypothesizes that family members can often be a source of anxiety, especially when their "support" is perceived to be too controlling.

For three of the women, the nature of the life-change event affected how and from whom they sought support. In particular, these events were described in ways that suggest the feeling of stigma. As noted in Chapter Four, a comparison of the range and densities of these women's networks does not reveal any striking similarities or differences. Given that it is network range and the presence of two or three emotionally close support people that appears to affect perceptions of stability and

change, it is possible that the three women experiencing stigma were unwilling to risk disapproval or rejection from close supporters by disclosing to them the nature of the event. Because a stigma, by definition, is inextricably intertwined with an individual's identity, the potential rejection by supporters in these cases could have had devastating personal implications in terms of feelings of social isolation. Other participants report the "loss" of friends "after" their life-change events as being disappointing and upsetting; however, in these other cases, the loss was not inextricably bound up with personal identity and social connectedness.

Formal, confidential avenues of support provide the social space in which to learn how to "manage" during the crisis stage and to assimilate new information about how to reconstruct a shattered personal identity. This unwillingness to risk rejection from close support people perhaps underscores the importance the women attribute to the sense of stability and continuity in their support networks, particularly with regard to the presence of "close" supporters.

In the case of "jungle drums," where the two women with large support networks perceived that friends "put the word out" to other friends and family members regarding the particular life-change event, the significance of network range is again underscored. The more support people who knew about the tragic loss experienced by these women, the more people they enrolled in supporting the women. However, because these women were involved with two or more formal groups of people, it is unclear as to the degree to which density also influenced this pattern. Perhaps the key people who took it upon themselves to enroll other people for support were able to enroll these others because of a social connection through these formal groups. The feeling of "cocooning" both women reported, where they spent much of

their time immediately after their losses with two or three specific friends, while others continued to offer their support, suggests that both range and density play a part. The number of friends performed a variety of services for the women, while the interconnections amongst these friends enabled them to perform the instrumental services while other friends provided emotional comfort. In other words, the social connections between these people facilitated the flow of communication about support that was needed and about the well-being of the friend. It is possible that "connectivity" (Wellman, 1992), more than density, is conducive to support. People who may not necessarily maintain a relationship with particular other network members stay in touch with these members for the purpose of helping their mutual friend through a difficult time. The extra-ordinary linkages formed in these cases is probably a reflection of the degree to which network members perceived there to be a need for strong, ongoing support in the wake of tragic loss. Future research could examine density measures as they apply to whole networks as well as to clusters within these networks. A network as a whole may have a low density, whereas one or more clusters may themselves be highly interconnected as appears to be the case with the two women discussed above.

Although my findings suggest that range, more than density, affect a woman's perception of the stability of her support network, I do not suggest that range is necessarily positively associated with support. For the "jungle drums" pattern, the two women experienced sudden and tragic losses; losses which often spur close and distant acquaintances to offer support. I believe that it is more likely the continuing presence of two or three "close" friends that affect a woman's perceptions of stability or change within her support network.

Limitations

As well as the routine constraints of exploratory research (e.g., small sample size) it is important to acknowledge three other notable limitations of this research: 1) ambiguities in the definition of a "tie" and related methodological issues; 2) problems associated with recall, particularly as the events in question happened a number of years ago; and 3) the homogeneity of participants.

Although it appears that these women's support networks are less dense "after" than "before" their life-change event, the difference is small and possibly confounded both by my own and the participants' operationalizing of what constitutes a tie. For example, where I calculated a relationship with a couple as one tie, some women may consider this to be two distinct relationships, regardless of the way in which they represented the couple in the sociograms. Also, I have counted groups represented as one circle, as one tie; however, in several cases, many of the group members were supportive during the stressful time and participants considered these people "too numerous to mention." As discussed in Chapter Three, I counted as support persons only those group members who were mentioned specifically as having an ongoing relationship with the participant. All ties were counted as symmetrical, that is, the perceived degree of emotional closeness and the flow of resources are assumed to be similar between two people. It is possible that this was not actually the case for all ties in this study.

Given these problems with operationalization and subsequent calculations, it is possible that network range is notably higher for both the "before" and the "after" periods. Density co-efficients may also increase for the before period, and, depending

on who the additional "after" network members are (i.e., whether or not they know one another) these coefficients may decrease more for this period than my findings suggest.

Recall-related omissions may also cloud the results; the women chose to discuss events in their lives that occured at least two years ago - on average, the events occured six years ago. Although the use of prompt questions and sociograms facilitated participants' recall of support people, it is likely that some faces were forgotten; moreover, had the interviews taken place a short time after the life-change event, both the perceived degree of emotional closeness and the significance of support offered by support people may have been represented differently in the sociograms.

The third limitation relates to demographics: all of the women in this study are middle class, caucasian and heterosexual. The results must be considered in this particular context and should not be assumed to reflect the experiences of women who occupy different social positions.

Methodological Usefulness of Sociograms

Methodologically, this study introduced the use of sociograms as a procedure to be employed by participants, rather than by researchers only. Used in this capacity, sociograms facilitated the recall of names and the nature of support ties, as well as increasing participants' levels of comfort and their ability to discuss stressful topics in detail.

Although the completion of sociograms by participants reflects participants' perceptions of their experiences and relationships, the completed sociogram can also be used for structural analyses by the researcher. Where recall-related omissions are considered problematic, sociograms can assist participants to remember the names and

the nature of ties. Thus, the subjectivity of participant-constructed sociograms is perhaps a worthwhile trade-off.

Areas for Future Research

Although recently, there has been a substantial increase in the empirical and theoretical literature (e.g., Albrecht and Adelman, 1987; Sarason et al., 1990; Vaux, 1988), there are few studies that explore the dynamic processes of support ties over time. I believe that asking women to consider their support ties before and after a stressful personal experience provides a magnifying glass through which we can see and then talk about their experiences and insights in some detail.

According to my findings and the limitations of this research, future research on over time dynamics of networks might address some of the issues I have raised. In particular, my findings suggest that women do not perceive their support networks to have "changed" over time unless the range is dramatically increased (presumably a dramatic decrease would result in similar perceptions). The continued presence of key, emotionally close support people may also affect perceptions of change. Future research could explore this finding by employing a larger sample to detect perceptions of change in comparison with apparent structural change. My use of life-change events may affect participants' conceptions of the significance of having close, stable support relationships; future research should, therefore, examine "everyday" networks over time.

Given that the women in this study are all white, middle-class and heterosexual, future research should investigate the over time dynamics of women's support networks across class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. For example, it would be

interesting to compare my findings with studies that include women from different socioeconomic classes and ethnic backgrounds. Particularly in relation to stigma, other women may feel more, or less, constrained by a stressful situation and could, therefore, have different conceptions of their support networks and how they can be relied upon. For example, lesbian and bisexual women may develop different support strategies given the social stigma still associated with their sexual identity. Groups of women who are united because of a particular concern or interest (e.g., single mothers, women academics, sexual assault survivors) and whose membership cuts across social categories (e.g., class and ethnicity), would be a fruitful area for study.

In this study the content of relationships between participants and their support people is perceived to be mainly emotional caring; a strong feeling of closeness which engenders feelings of self-acceptance. Although participants report that their male and female support people performed a variety of services for them, instrumental support is perceived to be symbolic of, and secondary to, emotional caring. In her critical review of the literature on friendships between women, O'Connor (1991) notes that emotional closeness, or intimacy, within women's friendships is sometimes theorized as being morally superior to the findings that suggest men relate on a more instrumental basis within their friendships. Women are typically portrayed as being the caring nurturers. According to Cancian (1986), intimacy for women involves disclosing feelings of dependency and being emotionally vulnerable; the only area of personal experience that women disclose less than men is about their personal victories. Cancian argues that disembodying "intimacy" as an indicator of a close (and therefore desirable) relationship, masks the possibilities of recognizing disempowering situations. Future research should deconstruct "intimacy" in an attempt to more fully describe the

relational content of women's ties. For example, research on women in abusive relationships should pay close attention to discrepancies between traditional social roles and women's experiences maintaining disempowering "close" relationships.

The results of my study indicate that emotional closeness and mutual caring are highly valued aspects of support. However, three participants expressed a concern about their perceived inability to reciprocate support during their life-change event. These women were not concerned about receiving support, instead they were worried that they weren't able to attend to their friends' needs. As this study focuses on life-change events, it is understandable that some women felt inadequate as supporters when their own lives become trying. Future research could further explore the concepts of generalized and specific reciprocity as they relate to the type of support required as well as the range and density of networks.

The nine women who participated in this study related their experiences of support "before" and "after" a life-change event. Notwithstanding the methodological limitations of this retrospective analysis, it appears that participants support networks changed in content and in structure "after" the event; however, these apparent changes must be taken into consideration with the women's subjective experiences of whether or not their support networks "changed." Perhaps range, more than density, affects the experience of change, although high density clusters that are loosely connected with other network members may facilitate the flow of information and support. In all cases, it appears that the women actively sought support from specific people (whether from within or from "outside" their networks), underscoring the dynamic process of support. Three particular cases suggest that women are concerned about maintaining

the equilibrium of their networks, as well as their own emotional equilibrium during a time of crisis.

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APPENDIX A

WRITTEN CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant;

I am a graduate student in the department of sociology at the University of Victoria and under the supervision of Dr. David Gartrell I am doing research as part of my master of arts (M.A.) degree. The subject of this research is "Life-change Events and Women's Support Ties."

I am interviewing women from Victoria. You are one of approximately 10 participants. During the interview, I will talk with each woman about the people in her life she considers to be supportive, and about a particularly stressful personal circumstance she has experienced. I will be the interviewer for all participants.

As part of this research, I am asking you to participate in an interview that will take a minimum of two and a half hours. During this interview, I will ask you about the people in your life from whom you have received support. Most of the questions I have are meant to help jog your memory about the first names of support people, as well as some specific questions (such as their age, sex and marital status, how often you see them, etc.). I will also ask you to complete four sociograms. A sociogram is simply a visual representation of your support ties, drawn using only circles. We will discuss the kinds of support people have given you and the kinds of support you have found most valuable. We will also talk about an experience in your life that you have found to be particularly stressful and life-changing.

I am interested in what *you* have to say about the people in your life and about your feelings and attitudes during and since your stressful experience. I hope that the ideas we discuss will result in a satisfying experience for you.

My goal is to analyze the discussion from your interview in order to better understand your experience and that of other women. I am interested in the kinds of support you have received: what you have most appreciated, what you found disappointing, how these support people did or did not help you during the particularly stressful time, and ideas and insights you have now about women's support ties. As part of my thesis, I will write about what you and the other women participants have shared with me during the interviews. Sometimes I may use your exact words, and sometimes I will write more generally, and paraphrase some of the information I have learned during the interviews.

So that I can listen carefully to what you are saying and not have to bother too much with my pen and paper, I will be audiotaping each interview. This audiotape will later be transcribed by me. Only an identification number will be written on your interview tape. Once I have completed my research, all audio tapes will by erased or

destroyed. In all written materials and oral presentations, I will not use your name or the names of the people you discuss with me. Transcripts will be typed with identification numbers and in final form the interview material will use pseudonyms. All written and audio material will be kept in a locked cabinet.

You are most welcome to ask me any questions you have before, during or after the interview. I would like you to feel as comfortable as possible. There is no 'right way' to do this interview! When I have completed my thesis, I will provide you with a written summary of the results. You are also welcome to borrow my copy of the entire thesis or read the copy kept in the McPherson Library at the University of Victoria.

You may, at any time, withdraw from the interview. I understand that I am asking you to talk with me about personal matters. You may be uncomfortable with the feelings and memories that may come up during the interview. I am certainly willing to talk about these feelings with you, as they may arise; however, I will respect your decision to discontinue the interview should you so choose.

* * *

I have read and understood the above information. I give my consent to participate in this research under the conditions stated above. My signature indicates only this consent and does not bind me to participate in this or any other research.

_____

Participant's Signature Date

In accordance with the University of Victoria's Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects, I am committed to protecting this participant's right to privacy and will treat her with full respect during every stage of my research.

_____

Lesley Kenny, Researcher Date

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Please complete this form of background information.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

TELEPHONE h) _____ w) _____

BIRTHDATE: ____/____/____
m d y

MARITAL STATUS (Please circle appropriate choice):

a) married c) separated e) common-law
b) divorced d) single f) widowed

EMPLOYMENT STATUS (Please circle appropriate choice):

a) paid employment, full time (OCCUPATION: _____)
b) paid employment, part time (OCCUPATION: _____)
c) currently not employed
d) homemaker
e) student: FT PT (please circle one)
f) other: _____

DO YOU HAVE ANY CHILDREN? YES NO
IF YES, WHAT ARE THEIR AGES?_____

HOW MANY OF THESE CHILDREN LIVE WITH YOU? ____ (AGES: _____)

WHAT IS YOUR FORMAL EDUCATIONAL LEVEL?

a) up to 11 years of school
b) completed high school
c) one or more years of college
d) college diploma
e) one or more years of university
f) university degree
g) other: _____

THANK YOU

APPENDIX C

PROMPT QUESTIONS

Around the issue of the particular stressful event, participants will be invited to discuss their experience in their own narrative. Examples of the types of 'prompt' questions asked by the researcher are:

* What particularly stressful personal event have you chosen to contemplate for the purposes of our interview?

* When did this event/situation occur?

* Can you pick an approximate 'beginning' time?
* Can you pick an approximate 'end' time? That is, a time when you first felt that the event was behind you and that your life had become significantly less affected by the event?

* Can you tell me about the event? How you felt at the time, what kinds of things happened?

* What was significant about this event for you?

* How did it affect others close to you?

* What were your greatest fears at that time?

* How did the event affect your daily life (e.g., tasks performed, relationships involved in)?

* Is there anything else you would like to tell me about this experience?

APPENDIX D

The following list is my adaptation of the questions developed by McCallister and Fischer (1983 [1978]) and discussed in their article, "A Procedure for Surveying Personal Networks." [In R.S. Burt and M.J. Minor, Applied Network Analysis, (1983), Beverly Hills: Sage Publications].

Question I and the questions from section II will be used to help participants remember the first names of people from whom they received support 'before' and 'after' the stressful event.

I.
"Before [the particular stressful event] occurred, who were the people you talked to about personal matters; for example, about someone you were close to or something you worried about?"

II.
1) who would care for your home if you went out of town
2) if you were working outside your home, with whom did you talk about work decisions
3) who would help care for you if you were ill and had to rest at home for two weeks
4) with whom did you engage in social activities (like inviting home for dinner, or going to a movie)?
5) [who did you talk to about your hobbies, special interests?]
with whom did you discuss questions and concerns about your body and health?
6) who was your best friend(s)
7) who did you talk to about personal worries?
8) whose advice did you consider in making important decisions?
9) from whom did you or could you borrow a large sum of money?
10) who were the other adult members of your household?

Questions from sections III and IV will appear on short questionnaire forms, to be completed by the participants during the interview.

III. From the list of names compiled in I and II:

1) sex of each person
2) all the role relations of ego with the named people (e.g., cousin, co-worker, friend, group member)
3) which persons respondent feels especially close to
4) which persons live within a 20 minute drive
5) which live more than an hour's drive away
6) which people they see at a favourite 'hang out'
7) (for women who do not work outside the home) which are also people who do not work outside the home
8) (for those who work outside the home) which are in the same line of work

9) which are of the same ethnicity
10) which share the same religion
11) which share the favourite pastime.
12) which have similar educational background

IV.
1) how did you meet this person
2) how many years have you known each other
3) what city does this person live in
4) how often do you get together (in person; on the telephone)
5) what is this person's age
6) what is this person's employment status
7) what is this person's marital status
8) does this person have children still living in the home? ages?
9) what is this person's formal education level

APPENDIX E

SUPPORT PERSON INFORMATION FORM: "BEFORE"

First name:_____ FEMALE MALE

Approximate age: _____ (at that time)

Occupation: _____ FULL-TIME PART-TIME

Marital status (at that time):

a) single c) divorced e) common-law
b) married d) separated f) widowed

Did this person have children living at home?: YES NO
If YES, what were their approximate ages?:_____

How did you meet this person?:

a) at work c) neighbour e) a club/group
b) at school d) friend of a friend f) other: _____

How many years had you known this person, approximately?: _____

How would you describe your relationship to this person?

_____

What kinds of assistance did you feel were available to you in this relationship?

_____

Did this person live in the same town as you? YES NO

How often were you in contact (i.e., per week or month)?: _____

Was this contact:

a) mostly in person
b) mostly by phone
c) mostly through correspondence
d) mostly in person, some phoning
e) mostly by phone, some in person
f) mostly through correspondence, some phone
g) mostly by phone, some correspondence
h) other: _____

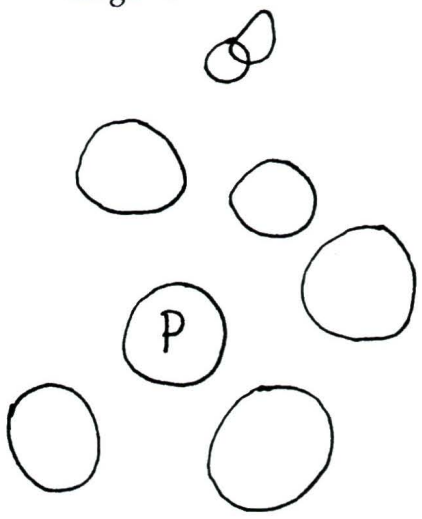
APPENDIX F

SOCIOGRAM EXAMPLES

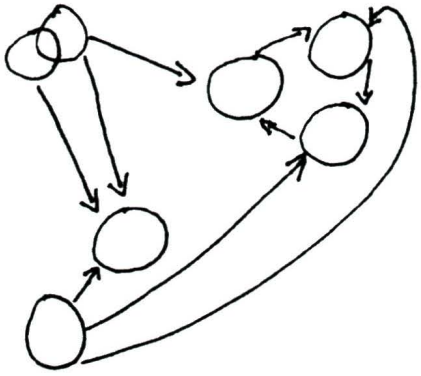
The following is an example of one set of completed sociograms. These examples reflect but are not exact copies of the sociograms of the women who participated in this study. "P" represents the participant in sociograms 1A and 2A.

Sociogram 1A: **RANGE**
range= 7

"BEFORE"

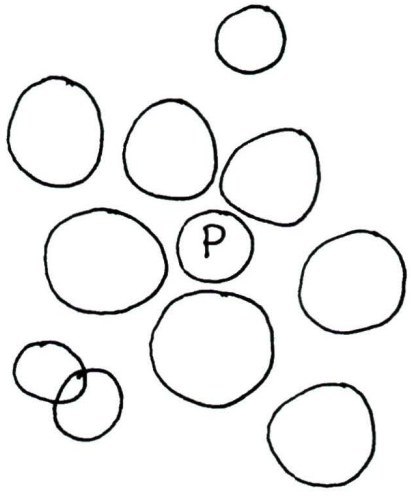


Sociogram 1B: **DENSITY**
density= .48

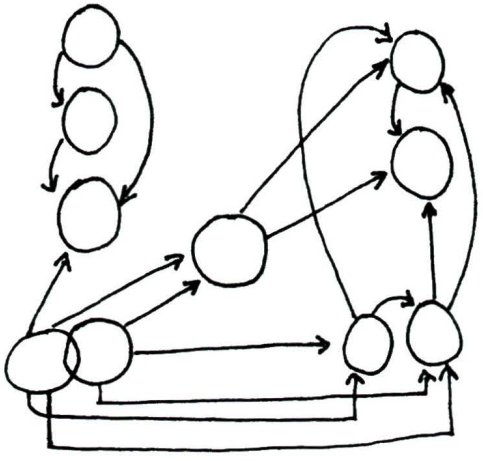


Sociogram 2A: **RANGE**
range= 10

"AFTER"



Sociogram 2B: **DENSITY**
density= .38



APPENDIX G

AN EXAMPLE OF THE ANALYSIS PROCESS

The techniques and procedures I applied to my data analysis are, for the most part, those that are commonly associated with qualitative methodologies. The use of participant-constructed sociograms in the data collection and the subsequent use of these sociograms in the data analysis is a development that I found to be particularly useful with regard to enhancing the reliability of anecdotal evidence. In this Appendix I detail my analytical process by tracking a particular example of my findings: how I came to see a pattern; how I used the data to confirm my finding; how I used the literature to evaluate this finding; and how I used the data to articulate and communicate this finding. For the example, I have chosen the issue of *reciprocity* (Chapter Four, "Results," p.59) to illustrate my process of data analysis.

Seven of the nine participants were asked to write their definition of support after they had completed and discussed all four sociograms. I asked participants to perform this task for two reasons: 1) the literature in social support does not contain an operational definition of "support"; and 2) I was interested in the women's conceptions of support and how they compared with existing conceptions and definitions within the literature.

I read and carefully re-read the definitions written in each participants' handwriting. After several readings, I began to make lists of my thoughts and of particular words and phrases from the definitions. However, I did not develop a specific coding scheme at this time by which to judge or interpret the definitions. Reading the handwriting of the participants helped to remind me of the individual

women, their stories, and the thoughts and insights they had shared with me during the interview. I could "hear" their voices in their sentence structure and often remembered small details that I had not necessarily written down at the time of the interview or gathered on audio cassette.

Some of the similarities seemed relatively obvious upon the first reading; several women used similar words and examples when explaining their understanding of "support." For example, the use of the words "accept me," and "without judgement" were a common thread.

As well as the more obvious similarities, I wanted to look further, between the lines. I typed out each woman's definition without her name being attached to the definition, then read and re-read my copy. This process seemed more removed, or objective, than the first step of reading participants' handwriting. I did not alter the spelling, grammar or sentence structure of the original writing; however, the mechanical reproduction of the women's words resulted in a more homogenized form of text. Particular names and faces were not as evident on this copy. As in the first step, I continued to make a list of words and phrases that appeared in two or more definitions.

Some of the words and phrases from different definitions eventually began to sound similar in theme and intent: "People who are willing to give and be given to"; "I have asked for more concrete support and received it... (This has also been reversed.)"; "a circle of love...that affirms selfhood." This belief that support is a two-way process, or a circle, is addressed in the literature as *reciprocity*. At this point in my analysis, I returned to the literature to read more about reciprocity as it has been theorized and examined in social support research.

A close reading of the literature at this point suggested that my finding - that the women consider support to be a mutual relationship - contrasted with the findings of some studies on social support networks (e.g., Wellman, 1988), where respondents tended to be balanced in their exchanges with other network members. I considered the circumstances around which I interviewed participants and compared this with the usually more broad range of network ties examined in other studies. I returned to the handwritten definitions and once again considered each woman's personal story and her reflections about it.

Because some of the early work on support and friendship considers reciprocity in terms of respondents' keeping a mental tally of who has done what for whom, I was at first unable to see how my finding "fit" with the literature. Clearly, there was a common thread that could be regarded as belonging to the literature category of "reciprocity"; however, after re-reading the handwritten definitions, I began to see that there was a difference between what the participants in my study reported and the results of previous support network studies.

At this point I returned to the notes I had taken during the interviews and to the transcripts of the interviews. During this reading I looked for passages that suggested a concern for, or an awareness of, reciprocal acts of support. This purposeful reading helped me to discern the segments of conversation that reflected a concern for reciprocity. Considering the results I had gleaned from the literature, I examined the transcripts to see how they were similar to results from other studies. However, something still seemed not to "fit"; that is, the women seemed to be saying something slightly different from other respondents. I then re-read the specific passages asking myself how they were different from other results. This reading led to

an important insight: the women who expressed a concern for mutual support, that is, reciprocity, were not concerned that they would "get what they give," but rather, they were concerned that they would be able to "return the favour."

With this insight, I asked myself how the women in my study differ from the respondents in other studies. It occurred to me that the circumstances around which I had structured the interviews - a life-change event - was likely an important factor. Indeed, re-reading the particular passages in the transcripts confirmed for me that the *nature* of the life-change event appeared to affect the participants' concern for reciprocity. Life-change events that involved the death of a close family member resulted in a variety of supportive gestures from a large number of people. The participants for whom this was the case were the ones who most clearly expressed a concern for their own perceived inability to reciprocate. Unlike the respondents in other network studies (e.g., Wellman, 1988), who responded to questions about a broad range of ties, the women who participated in my study discussed their supportive ties as they related to a very specific event or set of events. Because, by definition, a life-change event impacts on all, or most, areas of a person's life, the corresponding need for support can be considerable. Not everyone, however, seeks the quality or quantity of support that someone outside the situation might deem adequate; that is, we do not always ask for the help we need. In the particular case of the three women in my study who grieved the death of a close family member, the support of family, friends and even strangers, was not always purposefully solicited by the women. Perhaps, because the loss of a loved one is an experience or a fear that most people can relate to, and one that we intuitively, or experientially, understand to be emotionally and sometimes physically debilitating, as supportive friends and family members we reach

out to the person in need in a variety of supportive ways. Death and grief is such a universal experience that even weak ties, such as former acquaintances, or even strangers, are touched by the circumstance and want to offer condolences and other forms of support. When this is taken into account, it is not difficult to understand why the women in my study were concerned with their own ability to reciprocate. Some of the women used the word "overwhelming" to describe their experience of receiving support. Clearly, this feeling of being overwhelmed by kindness has two sides. If, like the three particular women in this study, we are used to being supportive of other people, and have not experienced a personal life-change event of such proportions as a death, then the amount and intensity of support we receive from others can, in itself, be a kind of stress that we may believe can only be relieved by our own reciprocal acts of support. In the case of grief over the death of a close family member, the women in this study knew that it would take some time before they were emotionally and physically able to "return the favour."

For all of the results in this study that were gained through a qualitative analysis, the analytical process relied on a systematic examination of the data and the literature, a reflexive process that engendered insights, and the interplay between these two techniques. I continually asked questions about the data, literature and my own insights. I looked for similarities, differences and anomalies; I also looked for words or phrases that stood out because they either touched me emotionally, or they appeared to reflect a strong conviction. The analytical procedure for each result differed in that the exact order of reading transcripts, referring to sociograms, going back to the literature (or, in some cases, seeking new literature), and pursuing insights, varied according to my own level of understanding and confidence. Overall, however, the process

described in this account represents the style and method with which I undertook my analysis.

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