

**Managing transition: a longitudinal
study of personal communities in
later life widowhood**

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Abstract

Many older women experience the loss of a spouse or partner in later life. Social networks and social support are widely thought to help buffer such traumatic events and ease subsequent transitions. This longitudinal study considers the significance of personal communities in managing the transition of later life widowhood. A series of qualitative interviews were conducted with twenty-six older widows over a period of eighteen months. Personal community diagrams were used to identify the structure of the women's personal communities, allowing for the development of a typology. The content or expressive characteristics of these relationships were explored further through the women's experiences of Christmas and the exchange of Christmas cards.

Content and thematic analysis revealed four core types of personal community among the older widows in this study, comprising different combinations of family, friends and others. The continuity and discontinuity of these social relationships, as well as the re-arrangement of family and friendship practices, demonstrate the multifaceted and ever-shifting characteristics of personal communities during the transition of widowhood. The findings also illustrate the diverse, complex, and often paradoxical nature of personal relationships within structurally similar personal community types, which is often compounded by multiple transitions in addition to widowhood itself. Using the lens of personal communities over a period of time reveals that the management of transition incorporates not only social relations, but also personal agency, and flexibility. These combined factors appear to be more important to adaptation during later life widowhood than personal community type. The findings help to re-frame the existing dialogue on later life widowhood and social support.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The starting point of this thesis stemmed from a combination of academic, professional and personal concerns. First, my interest in the concept of social capital, which was the topic of my Masters thesis (Collins, 2002). Second, my (then) role as an Occupational Therapist working with older people in the community, and third, the experience of being alongside my mother as she became an older widow. I began to question how and indeed if people's social relations help them to manage a transition such as widowhood, whether some social networks are more helpful than others, and what was the impact of transition on personal relationships during this process.

Since my initial interest was in social capital, and its potential to mediate the transition of later life widowhood, I returned to this concept in a preliminary review of the literature. Social capital has been defined as 'stocks' of non-material resources based on reciprocity and trustworthiness that are embedded in networks, interaction, connections and group memberships (Coleman, 1990; Calhoun et al., 1993; Putnam, 1995, 2000). Associational life and public policy contribute to these 'stocks', which may be used to benefit both individuals and communities (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1991; Collins and Rushing, 2003). In recent years social capital has been cited as influencing health and quality of life (Kawachi et al., 1997; Berkman, 2000; Green et al., 2000; Hendryx et al., 2002; Petersen, 2002). However, it has also been suggested that social capital has the potential to exclude in terms of ethnic, class, gender, and age divisions (Hardin, 1995; Adkins, 2005; Colclough and Sitaraman, 2005). Moreover, measuring social capital may be problematic as it is difficult to quantify (Stolle and Rochon, 1998; Morrow, 1999; Campbell et al., 1999; Campbell, 2000; Baron et al., 2000; Sixsmith

and Boneham, 2002). To this end, although still relevant, social capital seemed an inadequate concept in terms of fully addressing the concerns of this thesis.

One of my initial concerns was with how and indeed if people's social relations help them to manage a transition such as widowhood. Existing studies have shown high levels of social support and participation to be linked to improved health status, lower mortality rates, and a mediation of the effects of life transitions (Reich and Zautra, 1989; Bowling, 1994; Momtaz et al., 2009). However, this area continues to be under-researched in regard to specific groups and in particular contexts. This thesis explores the transition of later life widowhood as experienced by a group of older women. This cohort is of interest as there are larger numbers of older widows than older widowers (Hirst and Corden, 2010), they are largely 'invisible' and are often perceived as vulnerable members of society, as discussed by Chambers (2005). Indeed traditionally much of the literature concerning widowhood and social relationships depicts older widows as the passive recipients of support (Morgan, 1989). However, many older women go on to experience a period of independence and personal growth following bereavement (Lieberman, 1996; Hurd, 1999; Davidson, 2001a; 2001b; 2002; Chambers, 2005). Importantly, previous studies have generally approached the transition of widowhood retrospectively rather than being alongside older widows as they experience the process of change. This study through prolonged engagement explores change as it is happening and as events unfold.

A further query of mine was whether some social networks are more helpful than others during transition. Although the social support network types of older people in Britain have been identified by Wenger (1991, 1997), the network types of older widows have not been examined specifically and not over time

particularly. The scarce literature that does pertain to social support network type and widowhood appears to be contradictory. Previous studies have associated widowhood in later life with a dependency on local family (Wenger, 1991, 1997) and with restricted networks (Litwin, 2001). However, more recently Fiori et al. (2008) found a 'friend-focused' network type to be associated with the older widows in their sample of older people suggesting a widening of the support networks of these women during widowhood.

At the beginning of this study I also questioned what was the impact of transition on personal relationships. Rather than focusing on relationships in terms of social support received, I was more interested in the older widows' active engagement with their social ties in a wider more fluid sense. To this end, the concept of personal communities seemed to be a more appropriate lens. Personal communities have been described as social relationships that provide structure, meaning, and everyday social capital (Wellman, 1990), and more recently as reflecting the diversity of contemporary ties with family, friends and the wider community (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Chambers et al., 2009). Therefore this study explores the personal communities of older widows during transition rather than their social support networks.

In order to explore the nature and complexity of the older widows' personal communities during transition as well as the structure, this research adopts a multi-method approach and a longitudinal design within a qualitative framework of subtle realism:

'This perspective acknowledges that there is an underlying single reality that is to be explored, but argues that the various parties or players will have different views and explanations about what is happening'

(Finlay and Ballinger, 2006: 238)

This theoretical stance allows for the exploration of the older women's individual experiences of the transition of widowhood as well as for the examination of their personal communities during the change process. In addition, it encompasses the use of multiple methods allowing for a triangulation of data and a 'thick' description of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2003). To this end, personal community diagrams (based on those of Antonucci, 1986 and others) identify the structure of the women's personal communities allowing for the development of a typology, while in-depth interviews explore the content or expressive characteristics of these relationships. Moreover, as this study involves the ongoing participation of older widows over a period of time, it allows for the exploration of their social convoys: the network of social relationships, which move with them throughout their life course (Khan and Antonucci, 1980).

Due to the unfolding nature of the study and the iterative process involved, it became apparent during the initial fieldwork that Christmas is both an emotional and a telling time in the change process. Indeed Christmas can be viewed as a microcosm of individual personal communities, revealing the qualitative dimensions of the women's social ties and practices during transition (Bocock, 1974; Allan and Crow, 1989; Coppet, 1992; Allan, 1996; Morgan, 1996; Chambers et al., 2009). Therefore following baseline interviews, subsequent interviews focussed on the women's experiences of Christmas and the exchange of Christmas cards, that is who they received cards from and who they sent cards to.

To summarise, the aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal communities of a group of older women as they experience the transition of later life widowhood.

1.1: Outline of the thesis

The thesis, which has resulted from addressing this aim, is organised into four sections:

Section One

This section of the thesis comprises two chapters, the literature review chapter and the methodology and methods chapter. Chapter 2: Literature review, provides an overview of the topic framed by the aim of the study. The chapter examines the existing literature and previous research conducted in the subject area. The theoretical understandings of the transition of later life widowhood, older widows and social support, social support networks and personal communities, as well as social ritual are defined, discussed, and critiqued. This chapter provides the justification for the thesis and culminates with the research questions of the study. Chapter 3: Methodology and methods, outlines and justifies the methodological approach taken and the methods adopted in order to address the research questions identified in Chapter 2. The chapter also addresses the ethical considerations, and the problematic issues encountered and resolved during the research process. In addition the chapter details the analysis of the data, and discusses the validity and reliability of the research.

Section Two

This section of the thesis is concerned with the structure of the personal communities of the older widows in this study and presents the findings from the women's personal community diagrams constructed and revised over three

stages. Chapter 4: The personal communities of older widows, identifies the baseline personal community types of the women at stage one. Six baseline types, composed of different combinations of family, friends and others, are presented and discussed. Chapter 5: Mapping social ties over time, identifies longitudinal changes in the women's personal communities, including shifts in personal community type at stages two and three. Four of the six baseline types are apparent at the end of the study, two 'family-types' and two 'friend-types'. Section two concludes with an appraisal of the personal community diagram data and identifies additional research questions addressed in the following section.

Section Three

This section of the thesis is concerned with the content of the personal communities of the older widows during transition and presents the findings from the women's discussion of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards during the second and third interviews. The emotional aspects and meanings of relationships with family, friends and others are located through a number of themes. Chapter 6: Continuity, social relations and autonomy, illustrates the importance of both social and personal continuity in the older widows' experiences of their transition in everyday life. This chapter demonstrates that having a degree of personal independence alongside robust social relationships, as well as continuing to make a valuable contribution to personal communities, is crucial to positive adjustment regardless of personal community type. Chapter 7: Discontinuity, change and mediation, highlights the significance of discontinuity during transition, as well as the re-arrangement of family and friendship practices during the change process. This chapter illustrates the importance of flexibility within personal communities, regardless of their type, when personal change

occurs. Chapters 6 and 7 also reveal challenges within personal communities which may impede rather than facilitate transition. Importantly, these challenges demonstrate the complex and often paradoxical nature of relationships within structurally similar personal community types.

Section Four

This section comprises the concluding chapters of the thesis. Chapter 8: Understanding transition through personal communities, discusses the overall findings in relation to the existing literature in order to make broader analytical statements about the thesis and what it tells us about managing the transition of later life widowhood. The chapter considers the various factors that facilitate transition, the challenges encountered during the process, and the older women's diverse and often multifaceted experiences of their personal communities in later life widowhood. Importantly, this chapter identifies a conceptual framework which incorporates not only social relations, but also personal agency and flexibility within personal communities. Chapter 9: Conclusion, evaluates and critiques the thesis and my learning more broadly. The chapter returns to the research questions, considers the contribution of the findings to the existing knowledge base and the implications for practice with older women who are widows. The limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are also considered in a reflective account of my journey as a researcher.

This chapter has introduced the thesis, including the starting point and context of the research. In addition, the chapter has stated the aim of the study, and provided an outline of the thesis structure. The following section goes on to review the existing literature in-depth, and to explain the methodology and methods in detail.

Introduction to Section One

This section of the thesis comprises two chapters, the literature review chapter, and the methodology and methods chapter. Chapter 2: Literature review, provides the rationale for this study. The chapter identifies and critiques current understandings of the transition of later life widowhood, older widows and social support, the categorisation of social relationships, and the exploration of relationships through social ritual. Research questions are stated at the end of this chapter. Chapter 3: Methodology and methods, outlines and justifies the methodological approach taken and the methods adopted to address the research questions. The chapter also describes and critically evaluates the ethical considerations and data analysis used in the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature framed by the aim of the study identified in the previous chapter. To reiterate, this is: To gain an in-depth understanding of the personal communities of a group of older women as they experience the transition of later life widowhood. In addition to clarifying terms and definitions, this chapter identifies previous studies conducted in the subject area, recognising their strengths and weaknesses, in order to identify gaps in the literature. The literature was searched using manual library and electronic database searches. (Refer to Appendix 1 for an example of a literature search, including the databases accessed, the key terms searched for and a search history).

First, the chapter discusses the theoretical understandings of the transition of later life widowhood, including the negative and positive aspects of widowhood, and the various factors that influence adaptation. Second, it discusses the later life widowhood and social support literature, including the benefits of social support, and the role of family, friends and other ties in the management of transition. Third, it discusses the categorisation and structural components of social relationships including social support networks, personal communities and social convoys. Finally, it discusses the literature pertaining to social ritual, in particular the celebration of Christmas and the exchange of Christmas cards, and how these may further develop understandings of personal relationships and family practices during transition. The chapter concludes with the research questions arising from the literature review.

2.1: The transition of later life widowhood

'Because transition is a process by which people unplug from an old world and plug into a new world, we can say that transition starts with an ending and finishes with a beginning'

(Bridges, 2003:5)

As discussed in Chapter 1, widowhood in later life is more common for women than for men. In England and Wales, between 1971 and 2001, twice as many women as men experienced the death of a spouse (Hirst and Corden, 2010). In Great Britain in 2007 twenty-three per cent of women aged sixty-five to seventy-four were widowed, rising to sixty-one per cent of women aged seventy-five and over (General Household Survey, 2007). Older widows are more prevalent than older widowers, partly because women tend to marry older men, live longer, and because older widowers tend to remarry (Hareven, 1981; Bennett, 1998; Binstock and George, 2001; Hirst and Corden, 2010). Indeed older widows will on average live another fourteen years after the loss of their spouse (Stroebe et al., 1994), and they will usually live alone (Hirst and Corden, 2010).

Widowhood in later life can be seen as more problematic, than in earlier life, as spousal loss may aggravate existing age-related health problems (O'Bryant and Hansson, 1996; Bennett, 1998; Binstock and George, 2001). However, it could be argued that older widows may experience less trauma than their younger counterparts, as death in old age is less unexpected and may relieve the surviving spouse of the burden of care-giving (Stroebe et al., 1994; Hurd, 1999; Keene and Prokos, 2008). Indeed Morgan and March (1992), in a study utilising focus group interviews, found that in their sample of widows and caregivers, widowhood was

associated with increased social interaction whereas care-giving was associated with increased social isolation.

The negative and positive aspects of widowhood

Many studies suggest that widowhood is detrimental to health and well-being. For example, older widows are more likely to report low levels of well-being and perceived social support than their married counterparts (Lubben, 1988; Thuen and Rieme, 1997), and be at greater risk of hospitalisation (Laditka and Laditka, 2003). Moreover, widowhood has been associated with depression, loneliness, and mortality (Norris and Murrell, 1990; Bennett, 1997), as well as alcohol abuse (Gomberg, 1994; Byrne et al., 1999), and social anxiety (Dykstra and De Jong Gierveld, 1994; Van Baarsen et al, 1999). The negative aspects of widowhood may be exacerbated by issues such as physical and psychological dysfunction, which are more prevalent in later life (Bernard et al., 2004). However, a prospective longitudinal study conducted in the USA by Bonnano et al. (2004), found the majority of the older widows and widowers in their sample to demonstrate resilience following their loss despite the negative aspects of the transition.

Widowhood can also lead to a loss of social roles and challenge personal identity. Social roles, such as that of being a wife, not only describe relationships but also the activities associated with those relationships. Women may experience social role loss during widowhood more acutely than men as traditionally the role of wife is perceived to be more important to a woman's self identity than the role of husband is to a man's (Bowling and Cartwright, 1982). For example, Davidson (2001b) found through her interviews with older widows and widowers in the United Kingdom that men are more likely to experience social role loss following

retirement. Indeed older women are more likely than older men to maintain ties with work colleagues following retirement (Barnes and Parry, 2004). Roles then are crucial to personal identity, which explains why the loss of a role can cause stress and lead to a loss of self-esteem, especially in the absence of finding a new, replacement, role (Hagedorn, 1995; Blair, 2000). In a study exploring adaptation during the transition of retirement, Barnes and Parry (2004) found that their sample of older British men and women had to re-negotiate their personal identities as well as their social relationships.

In addition to coping with emotional loss, practical issues such as having to move residence and difficulties with finances may also have to be considered during widowhood (Lopata, 1996). While older widows tend to have greater sources of social support, older widowers tend to have greater financial resources (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Stevens, 1995). Furthermore, in a study utilising secondary data from the General Household Survey in Britain, Arber et al. (2003b), found that older women are more likely to experience decreased mobility and are less likely to own a car than their male counterparts which impairs their ability to socialise. Traditionally many older women have depended upon their husbands for financial support. They may have performed unpaid labour in the home, and therefore not receive a pension through an employer, leaving them with fewer resources in widowhood (Vincent, 2003). However, it is anticipated that in the future older widows will be less dependent on their husbands, due to performing paid work outside of the home, and as a consequence will have greater resources of their own to draw upon (Lopata, 1979; Chambers, 2005).

More recently Chambers (2005) and others have criticised much of the earlier widowhood literature for focussing on the problematic aspects of the

transition. Indeed, stereotypes of widows, especially older widows, are common and generally negative throughout the world, reflecting both ageist and sexist attitudes (Owen, 1996). This is reinforced in much of the existing widowhood literature, which 'tends to homogenise women' and focus on the problematic aspects of 'loss and bereavement' (Chambers, 2005:4). In her study incorporating research findings and existing literature on widowhood in Canada and the USA, Matthews (1991) argues that the personal change associated with later life widowhood can have positive as well as negative consequences. Indeed it has been suggested that one year after bereavement most widows start to rebuild their social lives and establish a new identity (Lieberman, 1996). For example, Carr (2004) in a prospective study conducted in the USA, found that older women who were dependent on their husbands had the lowest self-esteem prior to bereavement in her sample. However, these women had the highest self-esteem following bereavement. This suggests that the women's sense of independence increased as they discovered that they were able to manage on their own.

Widowhood then can be a period of growth, development, and liberation, resulting in new friends and social activities in the remaining years of life (Chambers, 2005; Hurd, 1999; Davidson, 2002) in contrast to the responsibility of providing care experienced by many older women (Graham, 1985; Morgan and March, 1992; Davidson, 2001a). Indeed there is evidence to suggest that social participation and leisure time, such as activities with friends, actually increases for widows over the long-term, around two to three years, suggesting a compensatory effect and new-found freedom (Lopata, 1973; Ferraro et al., 1984).

Adaptation during widowhood

The death of a spouse is ranked as one of the most stressful life course events, and coping with a transition such as widowhood can be a lengthy process sometimes spanning several years (Barrett and Schneeweis, 1981; Bennett, 1997; Sugarman, 2001). With respect to the timing of transitions, it appears that involuntary and unexpected life transitions are more likely to cause personal and social disruption to individuals and hinder effective adaptation (George, 1993, Binstock and George, 2001). Sugarman (2001:144) has described the 'transition cycle' as a 'general pattern' of responses to an event such as later life widowhood, this consists of seven stages: 'immobilisation', 'reaction', 'self doubt', 'accepting reality and letting go', 'testing', 'search for meaning' and 'integration'. In addition, a 'transition phase' has been identified by Bankoff (1983) as taking place during the one and a half to three years post-bereavement period where social roles and relationships are re-established by the surviving spouse. Moreover successful adaptation to the loss of a spouse in later life is dependent on what Costello and Kendrick (2002) call a 'psycho-social' transition, with the bereaved learning to cope during the early stages of widowhood often with decreased social support. It has been suggested that many people in transition tend to withdraw from the outside world and restrict their social contacts to a small trusted group (Stroebe et al., 1994). Studies indicate that on average emotional loneliness decreases within six months to two and a half years following bereavement, although social loneliness can continue for much longer (Van Baarsen et al., 2002).

In the psychology literature a number of normative stages have been identified as occurring during the life cycle. Each stage has the potential to cause emotional angst and has to be resolved in order to move on to the next stage

successfully (Erikson, 1980). Similarly it has been suggested that the sequences of life course transitions are dictated by norms which predict an appropriate order, such as entry into adulthood, retirement, and widowhood (Binstock and George, 2001). A longitudinal study conducted in France by Degenne and Lebeaux (2005) found that personal networks, particularly relationships with family members, were instrumental in managing the transition to each stage of the life cycle. However, more recently stage theories, such as Erikson's (1980), have been criticised particularly in their approach to ageing. Rather than being viewed as a time for passive reflection and decline, the later stages of life are now more likely to be viewed as a time for active engagement (Biggs et al., 2006; Green, 2010). For example, older women who take on additional roles and new activities have been found to adapt more successfully during widowhood (Lee and Bakk, 2001). Others have argued that stage theories are deterministic and that transitions are not always normative or 'scheduled' but unique to the individual and their interaction with others (Denzin, 1989). Indeed, Barrett and Schneeweis (1981) in their study found little evidence to support the existence of distinct stages of adaptation during widowhood.

To this end older widows, rather than being a homogenous group, will have different experiences of life (Jamieson and Victor, 2002), which they carry with them from childhood. For instance some age cohorts may carry with them traditions of a reliance on family, which was common in their youth (Elder, 1978), in addition:

'Collectively there is now a degree of heterogeneity and diversity within individual life courses quite distinct to the dominant patterns of previous eras'

(Allan and Jones, 2003:6)

The individual consequences of transitions, such as widowhood, are complex, and may depend on factors, such as gender, culture, and socio-economic differences (Carr and Utz, 2002). Chambers (2005) adopted a life history approach with a group of older widows in the United Kingdom, which revealed individual differences in their experiences of widowhood, as well as the importance of skills developed over the life course. In an earlier study, Stevens (1995) examined the well-being of older widows and widowers using a mixed methods approach in the Netherlands. The findings of her study suggest that women develop a flexible approach throughout their lives, which helps them to cope with widowhood in later life.

Previous experience of a transition such as widowhood, as well as the inclination to be self-sufficient, are also thought to assist in adaptation (Ben-Sira, 1985; O'Bryant and Morgan, 1990; O'Bryant and Straw, 1991; Sugarman, 2001). For example, a recent study conducted with a sample of older widows and widowers in the USA by Rhee (2007), found psychological well-being to be associated with individual characteristics such as mastery. Similarly successful adaptation during retirement is more likely if a positive rather than negative view is taken during the transition, for example, 'moving into retirement' rather than 'leaving work' (Barnes and Parry, 2004:221). This corresponds with the suggestion that taking an active rather than passive approach during the change process is beneficial (Blair, 2000), and that adaptation, change and growth are possible throughout the life course (Baltes et al., 1980).

Continuity theory suggests that general patterns and habits, that are consistent even in new circumstances or in the face of new challenges, contribute to a constant sense of self (Atchley, 1999; Craib, 1998). Indeed it can be argued

that transitions are made easier if individuals take a part of the past with them into the here and now (Bridges, 2003). For example, older people encountering life course transitions such as retirement have been found to use continuity as a 'bridge' between the past and the future (Nuttman-Shwartz, 2008). Moreover, engagement in familiar occupations and routines has been found to facilitate adaptation during widowhood and other transitions related to later life (Howie, 2002; Lysack and Seipke, 2002; Ludwig, 1997). In a study of recently widowed older adults in the USA, Donnelly and Hinterlong (2009) found the continuity of voluntary work to be important to their participants during widowhood. In addition to life experience, other resources traditionally viewed as assisting adaptation during widowhood include income, education and social support (Lopata, 1979). Indeed social support, particularly emotional support from friends, has been found to assist in the role transition from being married to being single (Bankoff, 1983).

The literature reviewed in this section of the chapter illustrates that many of the seminal studies of later life widowhood have been conducted in North America (Lopata, 1973; Matthews, 1991, for example). Although more recently influential studies have been conducted in Britain, including Chambers (2005) and Davidson (2002), these studies have employed a retrospective approach, aside from Bennett's (1998, 2005) longitudinal studies. Indeed as Carr and Utz (2002) observe, there is a need for further prospective longitudinal data regarding later life widowhood. Furthermore, the British studies conducted by Chambers, Davidson, and Bennett have been concerned with widowhood in the context of life histories, gender differences, and gerontological psychology, respectively. To this end a longitudinal study of personal communities during later life widowhood may further reveal the process and management of transition as it is happening.

2.2: Older widows and social support

The way in which older people manage later life transitions then is influenced not only by their pathways to old age, but also by their social relations. In a recent cross-sectional study conducted using quantitative measures with older widows in Malaysia, Momtaz et al. (2009) found a strong and significant association between psychological well-being and social networks. Although there has been a lack of research that links micro and macro evidence regarding transitions, it appears that being embedded in social networks helps to buffer and mediate the effects of transitions for both the individual and larger society (O'Brien and Cherry, 1979; Holahan and Moos, 1981; Hagestad, 1990; George, 1993). Sources of informal social support include family, friends, and neighbours, as well as groups and organisations (McIntyre and Howie, 2002), and these ties with the community make up a large proportion of the social capital that older people draw upon in their day-to-day lives (Wellman, 1990; Gray, 2009).

Although more recent research suggests that social capital may assist individuals through life transitions, Sixsmith and Boneham (2002), found through in-depth interviews that many of their participants (residents of a socially deprived community in England) had difficulty accessing social capital. In fact they remark that 'the life transitions of these people were not interpreted in terms of a single event or phenomena, but revolved around a complex series of momentous events' (p129). Sugarman (2001:151) terms this 'concurrent stress'. This may be particularly relevant to older widows because of their life course position including the socio-economic challenges associated with ageing and gender (Arber et al., 2003a). However, close relationships with family and friends, as well as the belonging associated with the membership of organisations and clubs, appear to

act as 'stability zones' or 'anchors' that offer support and assistance when coping with transitions such as widowhood and ill health (Toffler and Pedler, 1970; Wenger, 1994; Boneham and Sixsmith, 2006).

The benefits of social support during widowhood

There appears to be a positive relationship between social support and adaptation during widowhood, and various types of social support have been defined in the widowhood literature. These include empathy and intimacy, practical assistance, sharing knowledge, and approval of new lifestyles (House, 1981; Bankoff, 1983). In addition to these types, Lopata (1994) identifies gifts or food and social or church activities. O'Bryant and Hansson (1996) describe assistance due to a physical or mental impairment, while Barrera (1986) points to frequency of contact and the feeling of having adequate support. Indeed studies have found that emotional support appears to moderate the negative consequences of bereavement, particularly in the initial stages (Bankoff, 1983; Littlewood, 1992; Prigerson et al., 1993).

In a study utilising surveys to identify the lifestyles of American widows and widowers, Lopata's (1982) findings suggest that social networks can re-engage older widows and widowers following bereavement. This corresponds with Moen's (1998) assertion that social capital can be promoted in older people through volunteer programs and career development following retirement in the USA. Indeed Li (2007), in a North American study, found that the widowed members of her sample were more likely to engage in voluntary activities than those that were not widowed. Similarly in an earlier British study, Jerrome (1981), found the majority of her sample of older women experiencing transitions to belong to voluntary associations. It has been suggested that social interaction itself helps to

boost the body's immune system, and that strong social ties, associated with practical and emotional assistance, help to lower levels of stress (Putnam, 1995, 2000). Furthermore studies with older adults in the USA have found self-efficacy, arising from positive social relations, to be associated with psychological well-being (Fiori et al., 2006). Indeed high levels of social capital are associated with greater practical assistance, emotional support, and social belonging in later life (O'Rand, 2001) as well as informal and formal social ties, trust and collective action (Liu and Besser, 2003).

However, the benefits of social support described above may not be readily available to all. Studies conducted in the USA suggest that older widows tend to have smaller social support networks and less contact with their network members than their younger counterparts (Lund et al., 1985). In addition, older widows living in urban areas are more likely to live alone than their counterparts living in rural areas (O'Bryant and Hansson, 1996). Other North American studies suggest that White older widows are more likely to live alone than older widows belonging to other ethnic groups (Pelham and Clark, 1987); however, older ethnic minority women are more likely to experience social deprivation than their White counterparts due to having fewer resources prior to widowhood (Angel et al., (2007). In a longitudinal study Pevalin and Rose (2002) found gender, age and residential mobility, all factors of relevance to older widows, to be associated with reduced social capital, social participation and contact with friends. Furthermore older people, especially those living in deprived urban areas, may be more likely to experience social exclusion (Scharf et al., 2001). Indeed the retired population as a whole are often marginalised in terms of their access to resources (Marin, 2001; Hockey and James, 2003). It is therefore vital to consider structural inequalities,

such as income and health when researching ageing and the life course (Robert, 2002).

Moreover the transition of widowhood itself may bring about changes in social support. In a study analysing secondary longitudinal data conducted in the USA, Ha (2008), found later life widowhood to incur both gains and losses in support. For example, although the widowed members of Ha's sample were more likely to experience support from family and friends they were less likely to have a confidant than the non-widowed members. Furthermore, Ha's findings suggest that 'patterns' of social support are developed over the life course. This concurs with Atchley's (1999) continuity theory discussed earlier. However, although social support may change over the life span, research indicates that positive social relations assist older widows in coping with the decreased social and economic resources associated with later life widowhood (Antonucci et al., 2002).

Family support

Traditionally family relationships have been instrumental in helping older people, particularly older women, to manage life transitions. For example, the findings of Tomassini et al.'s (2003) study, utilising secondary data from Italy and Britain, indicate that older women in Britain are more likely to receive support from family than their male counterparts. However some researchers have suggested there has been an erosion of mutual kin support and filial responsibility, especially among the middle classes, which may have led to increased social isolation for some older people (Hareven, 1981, 1992; Gans and Silverstein, 2006). In addition, studies in the USA and Canada suggest that extended kin appear to offer little support during widowhood (Lopata, 1978; Wellman, 1990), and the

continuation of ties with family of the deceased spouse becomes voluntary rather than obligatory (Finch, 1989).

In an influential study examining the buffering hypothesis, conducted in the USA, Wilcox (1981), found that high-density networks that include close relationships with family promote dependence in widowhood. Conversely, low-density networks that include contact with less well-known members foster the development of new social roles. Similarly, in a later longitudinal study conducted in rural Wales, Wenger (2001), found that older women without children tended to be more independent and self-sufficient during widowhood. This corresponds with the concept of strong bonding ties which provide support within the community, and weak bridging ties which extend across communities to wider networks, providing access to greater resources (Granovetter, 1973; Wellman, 1990; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Sabatini, 2005). A further disadvantage of high-density networks during widowhood is that family members are likely to be close to the deceased, and will therefore be experiencing their own grief, and as a result may be less able to support the bereaved spouse (Eckenrode and Gore, 1981; Littlewood, 1992). That said, more recently other studies have indicated that dense social networks are related to high levels of self worth, trust and confidence (Morrow, 1999; Campbell, 2000), and are more likely to provide emotional support than heterogeneous networks (Van Baarsen et al., 1999). Indeed it has been suggested that female family members such as mothers, daughters and sisters are the main providers of emotional support in social networks (Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

Other studies have found that ties with siblings may become more important for childless women and that life course events such as widowhood

appear to reinforce sibling relationships over time (Connidis, 1992). In the absence of adult children, for example, when a widow is childless or has children that have emigrated, ties such as nephews and nieces are called upon (Allan, 1983; Wenger, 1984; Finch, 1989). It is important to consider sibling relationships in addition to those with intergenerational kin, as these ties may extend for the longest period of a person's life course (Blieszner, 2006; Chambers et al., 2009). However, sibling relationships may have negative as well as positive aspects. For example, competition between siblings developed during childhood may be carried over and lead to hostilities in later life, although positive re-appraisal of past conflicts may lead to feelings of well-being (Bedford, 1998).

In addition to sibling ties, relationships with other family members, particularly adult children, may be a source of added stress and unhappiness (Gottlieb, 1983; Antonucci et al., 1998), and may impact on the support available during later life widowhood. In a study using narrative interviews with a group of older widows in Canada, Van den Hoonaard's (2001) findings identify both positive and negative experiences of relationships with adult children during widowhood. This may be due to the complexity of intergenerational relationships. For example, some studies suggest that parents may be more interested in continuing close family ties than their children who may be more interested in self-reliance, which may lead to parents overestimating family cohesion and understating family friction (Finch, 1989; Jerrome, 1993). More recently, the term 'intergenerational ambivalence' has been used to describe 'contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring that cannot be reconciled' (Luscher and Pillemer, 1998:416). There is also evidence to suggest that individuals tend to overstate their input to family relationships and understate the input of others (Marsden,

1990). This relates to the feeling of having adequate support in widowhood (Barrera, 1986) discussed earlier. Indeed studies suggest that loneliness may be exacerbated in widowhood when there is incongruence between expected support and tangible support (Stevens, 1989; Dykstra and De Jong Gierveld, 1994). Moreover, the findings of a more recent study conducted in the USA by Scott et al. (2007) indicate heterogeneity and complexity in levels of satisfaction with social support during widowhood: 'Some widows reported consistently high levels of satisfaction, whereas others reported substantial day-to-day fluctuation' (p254). This may be due to individual differences in the biographies of families (Chambers et al., 2009), including how support is perceived.

Reciprocity in family support is seen by some researchers as cyclical consisting of largely balanced exchanges between kin over a length of time. Indeed balanced exchanges of support between generational kin have been associated with less loneliness whereas unbalanced relationships with children have been associated with a greater degree of loneliness in middle and old age (De Jong Gierveld and Dykstra, 2008). However, parent-child support may be reversed in later life (Merz et al., 2008), due to transitions such as widowhood and ill health, and roles may have to be re-organised (Ray, 2000a). This generalised reciprocity may strengthen family relationships whereas unbalanced dependency may weaken them (Finch, 1989; Jerrome, 1993; Allan, 1996), for example:

'Chronic illness brings individuals, their families and wider social networks face to face with the character of their relationships in stark form, disrupting the normal rules of reciprocity and mutual support'

(Clouston, 2003:139)

The assumption that the family is a stable provider of positive support in old age and through transitions such as later life widowhood then may be over simplistic (Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke, 2008; Ryan and Willits, 2007; Birditt and Antonucci, 2008). Indeed Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1991) point to the normative sense of obligation and commitment which may be involved in children and grandchildren caring for older relations. It is this sense of obligation, or morality, which sets 'given' family relationships or what Allan (1996:11) calls 'primary and secondary kin' apart from 'chosen' relationships with others such as friends (Pahl and Spencer, 2004a). For example, Morgan (1989), in a study utilising focus groups with older widows, found that the women in his sample tended to view relationships with non-family network members as more positive and flexible than those with family network members which often involved obligation related to family illness and other negative life events. This concurs with Birditt et al.'s (2009) longitudinal study conducted in the USA, which found that the older people in their sample were less likely to report negative relationships with friends than with family members. This may be due to older people having more time to devote to their friendships following retirement and also the voluntary nature of friendship.

However, more recently Stuijbergen et al. (2008) found that positive parent-child relationships were associated with providing support, particularly social support, to older parents, rather than normative obligation. Again this may be due to individual differences in the biographies of families (Chambers et al., 2009), including how support is perceived. It may be that giving and receiving social support is viewed more positively than giving and receiving practical support, as the latter may be associated with greater dependency and normative obligation.

In addition, although members of a family may not change during a transition such as later life widowhood, 'individual identities' may change and relationships may need to be 're-defined, re-negotiated and actively demonstrated' (Finch, 2007:72). For example, Heinemann (1983) in a study of family support among a sample of urban, widowed women in the USA, found that family relationships and roles had to be re-negotiated as the women made the transition from being married to single. However, this negotiation is also influenced by the quality or emotional aspects of family relationships. As Allan (1996) observes family relationships have histories that impact on how they respond or adapt to changes.

As discussed earlier in this chapter despite popular stereotyping and a preoccupation with filial responsibility when discussing intergenerational relationships in later life (Chambers et al., 2009), the vast majority of older people remain active for most of their lives, exerting choice in their family relationships and practices rather than being the passive recipients of care (Jerrome, 1993; Blieszner, 2006; Bonder, 2006; Chambers et al., 2009). Indeed increasingly many older women and men provide childcare for their grandchildren while their adult children are at work, which may actually reinforce intergenerational relationships (Shapiro, 2000). Moreover, parents and grandparents are more likely to give support, particularly financial support, to their children and grandchildren than to receive it (Hoff, 2007). However, despite the positive aspects of caring for grandchildren, providing long-term childcare may become a burden as demonstrated in the recent Spanish grandparents strike (Tremlett, 2010).

Support from friends and other ties

Along with family, friends can act as a resource when needed, and studies have shown that those with a number of friends are less likely to experience loneliness (De Jong Gierveld and Dykstra, 2008). Stevens (1995) found in her Dutch study, that older women with a diverse array of supports, including friends and neighbours as well as intergenerational kin, demonstrated a greater degree of adaptation during widowhood. However, as Stevens' sample comprised people aged sixty to seventy-five living independently, her participants may have found it easier to access social support than an older more dependent group. Elements of friendship include 'sociability', 'practical support', 'emotional support', and 'confirmation of identity' (Allan, 1996:107), these elements correspond with the types of social support defined in the widowhood literature (House, 1981; Bankoff, 1983; Lopata, 1994; O'Bryant and Hansson, 1996; Barrera, 1986). Indeed in a seminal ethnographic study conducted with a group of older middle-class women in Britain, Jerrome (1981:175) found that her sample adopted a range of 'friendship strategies' during later life transitions such as retirement and widowhood. These included: developing existing friendships, establishing new friendships, extending ties with neighbours, strengthening relationships with siblings, and joining organisations – although the latter did not always lead to the formation of friendships.

In an earlier study conducted in the USA Vachon (1979), found that during the first two years of bereavement friends were cited as being most helpful followed by family of origin and adult children. In addition friends, and new friends associated with larger heterogeneous networks, appear to become more important over the course of bereavement, particularly during the transition phase of

widowhood, described earlier. During this period widows are thought to rebuild a social life and make the adjustment from being married to single (Bankoff, 1983, 1986; Ferraro et al., 1984; Lamme et al., 1996).

However it has been suggested that unlike family relationships, which tend to offer unconditional support, friendships generally consist of conditional, reciprocal support. Indeed when the balance becomes unequal through a change in social status, such as widowhood, for example, friendships are likely to end (Allan, 1996). In a study conducted with older widows and widowers in the North West of England, Bennett et al. (2005) found that the older women in their sample were more likely to report the loss of relationships with married friends than the older men in their sample. That said, older people because of their life course position are also likely to have a number of enduring friendships (Jerrome, 1993; Blieszner, 2006). Studies suggest that reciprocal and non-reciprocal support takes place in long-term friendships over a period of time. In some circumstances when an imbalance of support occurs, due to illness, for example, 'friendship is bestowed as a gift' (Jerrome, 1990:61). Indeed older women sometimes use the phrase 'like a sister' when referring to their intimate friends (Jerrome, 1990; Chambers, 2005; Chambers et al., 2009).

Support and companionship from other widows and widowers appears to aid adaptation during widowhood, and is particularly beneficial to individuals with low social support (Vachon et al., 1980; Lee and Bakk, 2001). In a longitudinal study involving interviews conducted over a twelve-month period in the USA, Morgan et al. (1997) found that the recently widowed women in their sample increased their ties with other widows. Other studies have found that peers provide instrumental and emotional support as well as the opportunity to participate in the

systems of reciprocity and exchange associated with social capital (Peters and Kaiser, 1985). Indeed ties with those in a similar position may assist in the formation of a new identity during transition (Allan, 2006).

In addition to family and friends, social outlets and participation in organisations such as the Church and activity groups provide the opportunity for new contacts, support, and companionship following bereavement and other age related losses (Jerrome, 1988; Hurd, 1999). North American studies have found widowhood to be associated with informal as well as formal social engagement (Donnelly and Hinterlong, 2009). In a longitudinal study employing mixed methods conducted with older widows in the USA, Scott et al. (2007) found informal groups to be an important resource to their sample during the early stages of bereavement. However, although studies have found an increase in religious affiliation immediately following bereavement (Brown et al., 2008), other studies have found extrinsic religiousness to be related to poorer adjustment in widowhood (Rosik, 1989). This may be due in part to the 'vertical' ties linked to formal organisations, such as the Church, being less likely to encourage the mutual cooperation associated with social capital than the 'horizontal' ties related to informal social networks (Putnam, 1995). Indeed participating in meaningful leisure activities, including socialising with family, friends, and neighbours, appears to assist adaptation in widowhood, increase well-being, and reduce levels of stress (Norris and Murrell, 1990; Stevens, 1995; Patterson, 1996; Veenstra, 2000; Lee and Bakk, 2001; Howie, 2002).

This section of the chapter indicates a number of gaps in the literature. First, much of the widowhood and social support research has focussed on the impact of the transition on the individual and on the support received, aside from

the studies of Morgan (1989) and Morgan et al. (1997), which examined the personal networks of older widows in the USA. Indeed, O'Bryant and Hansson's (1996:452) discussion identifies 'an obvious shortage of theory for conceptualising and understanding widowhood in the context of the family'. Although more recent North American research has considered family relationships during widowhood (Van den Hoonaard, 2001, for example) there remains a lack of longitudinal research in the British context.

Second, much of the existing literature concerning support during later life widowhood is contradictory in terms of the type and timing of support, as identified previously by Chambers (2005). For example, some studies have found the support of friends and wider ties to be more helpful than family (Wilcox, 1981; Wenger, 2001), whereas other studies have indicated the benefits of family support (Van Baarsen et al., 1999; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). To this end, a longitudinal study exploring personal communities during the change process may reveal the wider impact of the transition, and may further ascertain whether certain relationships are more helpful than others.

2.3: Categorising social relationships

Studies have found a strong relationship between social network type and levels of support and well-being in older people (Wenger et al., 1996; Litwin and Landau, 2000). For example, it has been suggested that older people with large social networks are less likely to develop an activity of daily living disability and are more likely to recover from such a disability (Mendes et al., 1999). Moreover, De Jong Gierveld (2003) in a study incorporating surveys and interviews with a sample of older people living alone in the Netherlands, found larger networks, comprising twenty-three or more members, to be associated with decreased

loneliness. The older women in the sample were also found to have greater social support than the older men. This concurs with the findings that older widows tend to have greater social resources than older widowers (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Stevens, 1995).

In addition, older people who feel they have supportive networks tend to participate more in social activities and rate their quality of life as good (Bowling et al., 2002), and robust social networks are thought to facilitate adjustment during retirement (Barnes and Parry, 2004). The size of social networks is thought to be influenced by factors such as personality, culture and social class. Traditionally members of the working class have tended to have smaller, more proximal kinship networks, whereas members of the middle class have tended to have larger, more distal friendship networks (Barnes and Parry, 2004). It has been suggested that the friendships of middle class women in later life have a 'hedonistic quality' (Jerrome, 1981: 175). In addition, studies conducted in the USA have found lower levels of education to be associated with smaller networks (Antonucci et al., 2003). However, in a study conducted in the Netherlands, Stevens (1989) found well-being in widowhood to be associated with the quality of social support rather than network size.

A study conducted in the USA by Zettel and Rook (2004) utilised seven interviews over a twelve month period in order to examine the social networks of older women who had been widowed between three and thirty months. Their findings suggest that three types of 'substitution' take place in social networks during widowhood. These share similarities with the 'friendship strategies' previously identified by Jerrome (1981) including the development of new relationships, the re-establishment of social ties, and the reinforcement of existing

relationships. The older widows who had been widowed for a longer period of time were more likely to report new relationships than those that had been widowed for a shorter period of time. However, the authors also found that higher levels of substitution were related to lower levels of psychological well-being, which questions the compensatory advantages of substitute ties. They suggest that this may be due to the substitute relationships being 'unilateral', rather than reciprocal.

Social support network types

A social support network is not a person's total social network but forms what Wenger (1991:149) calls the 'core'. For example, Wenger found that the social networks of the older people in her study ranged in size from two to eighteen, but that on average their social support networks ranged from five to seven. In order to establish social support network types individuals are asked to name a set of people, such as relatives, friends and neighbours, who are important to them, and to define what kind of support or resources they offer them (Litwin, 1995). Various types of social support have been defined in the widowhood literature, as discussed earlier, including, practical help, advice and emotional support (House, 1981; Bankoff, 1983).

When researching and establishing social support network types, different researchers employ different methods. Wenger (1991, 1997) in her studies, for example, conducted quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, whereas Litwin (1995, 2001) and Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra (2006) utilised network inventories, secondary data and cluster analysis. In a later study Fiori et al. (2008) employed a network mapping procedure and cluster analysis. Therefore variations are apparent 'according to the definition of social network adopted and the method of network analysis utilized' (Litwin, 2001:517). The way in which these constructs

are viewed is of consideration. As VanLear et al. (2006:93) note 'some typologies treat relationships as static categories, and others view them as passing through different types over time'. In a longitudinal study of the social support networks of older people residing in rural North Wales, Wenger (1990), utilising surveys and interviews, found that most social support network types, particularly 'family dependent networks' (see below) remained stable over a four year period. Shifts between network types were also evident and these were often associated with widowhood, deteriorating health, changes in family support, and residential mobility.

Wenger (1991, 1997) has identified five social support network types in her samples of older people aged sixty-five and over, and seventy-nine and over, respectively, living in rural communities in North Wales. Based on size, content and function, each type represents different lifestyles, has different strengths and weaknesses, and different implications for risks, such as isolation, loneliness and depression. Table 2.1 provides an outline of Wenger's (1991, 1997) social support network types.

Litwin (1995) and Litwin and Landau (2000) have identified four social support network types in their samples of older people aged sixty-two and older, and seventy-five and older, respectively, living in Israel. They used criteria based on size, composition, percentage of intimate ties, frequency of contact, duration of ties and geographic proximity. However, it is network composition that 'constitutes the basis for their respective labelling' (Litwin, 1995:161). Table 2.2 provides an outline of Litwin (1995) and Litwin and Landau's (2000) social support network types. The most common 'Diffuse ties network' shares some similarities with Wenger's (1991, 1997) most common 'Locally integrated support network' type.

Table 2.1 Outline of Wenger's (1991, 1997) social support network types

<i>Locally integrated support network</i>	<i>Wider community focused support network</i>	<i>Local self-contained support network</i>	<i>Local family dependent support network</i>	<i>Private restricted support network</i>
Strongest and most prevalent type	Common among those without local family (living more than fifty miles away)	One of the least common types, privatised and home-based	Lack of formal support, pressure on kin	One of the least common types, contains few local family
Informal support from geographically local family, friends, neighbours and community groups	Informal short-term reciprocal support from friends, contact with neighbours, and a high commitment to community and voluntary groups	Heavily reliant on neighbours, family live more than five miles away, low participation in community groups	Primarily reliant on local family, often an adult daughter, some involvement with neighbours, low community contact	No local social support, low or no community contact, may rely on family living more than fifty miles away
High levels of support and morale, low levels of risk	Associated with the middle class and migration. Risks include a dependence on paid help	Associated with the childless, those that never married and rural communities. Risks include low morale	Common among older widowed and highly dependent people. Risks include low morale	Associated with migration, the widowed, loners, the mentally ill and older people who have outlived their peers. Risks such as social isolation and low morale are high
Size of networks is large (seven plus)	Size of networks is large (eight plus)	Size of networks is average (five to six)	Size of network is small (one to four)	Size of networks is small

Table 2.2 Outline of Litwin's (1995) and Litwin and Landau's (2000) social support network types

<i>Kin network</i>	<i>Family-intensive network</i>	<i>Friend-focused network</i>	<i>Diffuse-ties network</i>
Comprises mainly relatives and adult children	Comprises on the whole adult children	Comprises mainly friends	Similar in construct to the 'Kin network' with some variance in the number of friends and adult children
Offers high levels of support and intimacy	Offers the least support and intimacy of all the types	Lacks intimacy, most ties secondary	Ties numerous but lack intimacy, most ties secondary
Average of ten members	Average of four members (smallest and least common type)	Average of nine members (moderate size)	Average of eleven members (most common type)

In a later study looking at social support network type and morale in old age in Israel, Litwin (2001) used a different typology involving different criteria. In this sample of people aged sixty and over he identified five network types drawing on criteria of marital status, number of local adult children, frequency of contact with their children, friends and neighbours, frequency of attendance at synagogue and social clubs. Table 2.3 provides an outline of Litwin's (2001) social support network types. People with the 'Diverse network' or 'Friends network' reported the highest morale, those with the 'Family network' or 'Restricted network' the lowest. This corresponds with the low levels of morale Wenger (1991, 1997) found in her 'Local family dependent support network' and 'Private restricted support network' types.

Table 2.3 Outline of Litwin’s (2001) social support network types

<i>Diverse network</i>	<i>Friends network</i>	<i>Neighbours network</i>	<i>Family network</i>	<i>Restricted network</i>
Most prevalent type	One of the less common types	One of the less common types	One of the least prevalent types	One of the least prevalent types
Likely to be married, have one child living close by, have frequent contact with their children, friends and neighbours, and attend synagogue	Similar to ‘Diverse network’ type but less contact with neighbours	Less likely to be married, frequent contact with children and neighbours is reported but not with friends	Average of five children who they see often, they also attend synagogue frequently	Less likely to have a spouse, have less contact with adult children and little or no contact with friends or neighbours

In 2006 Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra in a study on network type and mortality risk in old age in Israel, identified six types of network based on the same criteria as Litwin (2001). The six types are ‘Diverse’, ‘Friend-focused’, ‘Neighbour-focused’, ‘Family-focused’, ‘Restricted’ (see above) and ‘Community clan’. The ‘Community clan’ type, not previously identified in Litwin’s (2001) study, has the most members and people with this type are the most likely to have a spouse. In addition, people with this type are more likely to have contact with children living close by as well as with friends and neighbours, they are also more likely to attend a place of worship. Lower risk of mortality was linked to the ‘Diverse’, ‘Friend-focused’ and ‘Community clan’ types. Those with ‘Restricted’ types had a higher risk of mortality.

More recently Fiori et al. (2008), in their cross-cultural study of older adults aged sixty and over, found the common social network types of 'Diverse' 'Restricted', 'Friend-focused' and 'Family-focused' in both Japan and the USA. Negativity regarding relationships was higher amongst the Americans with the 'Family-focused' type, which may be due to close contact with family leading to emotionally charged relationships incorporating both positive and negative aspects, as discussed earlier in this chapter. 'Diverse' types tended to be associated with the younger and more highly educated whereas 'Restricted' networks tended to be associated with the older and least educated individuals in the sample. Cross-cultural differences included two types of 'Friend-focused' (supported and unsupported) and two types of 'Restricted' (structurally and functionally) networks in the USA and an additional 'Married and distal' type in Japan. Overall there were no differences in well-being by type in the Japanese sample. In the US those with the 'Functionally restricted' network type, that is those with low levels of support from their members, had the poorest health. Survival rates were highest amongst the 'Diverse' and lowest amongst the 'Structurally restricted' types, as with Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra's (2006) earlier findings. 'Friend-focused' network types were associated with the older widows in the study suggesting that these women were gaining support from friends following the death of their husbands.

An earlier cross-cultural study conducted by Antonucci et al. (2001), found widowhood and illness to be associated with smaller social networks in France and Germany, but not in the United States or Japan. In addition, as the study was cross-sectional and focussed on the structure of social networks, the authors identify the need for further longitudinal research exploring the quality of social ties

over time. However, a more recent study conducted by Dykstra and Fokkema (2010), found a typology of late life families within and across eleven countries in West Europe (excluding Britain) which challenges the existence of cross-cultural differences in social networks. Four types of late life family were identified from the survey data. First, 'Descending familialism': frequent contact with family residing nearby, and support from parents to children. Second, 'Ascending familialism': frequent contact with family living nearby, support from children to parents. Third, 'Supportive-at-distance': frequent contact with family that do not live nearby, and financial help from parents to children. Finally, 'Autonomous': little contact with family that do not live nearby, and little exchange of support. Interestingly the findings do not indicate reciprocal support between older parents and their adult children in any of the four types. Rather it seems that the 'Descending familialism' type may shift to become the 'Ascending familialism' type over time. This corresponds with the assertion that parent-child support is often reversed in later life (Merz et al., 2008), discussed earlier.

The importance of network type for ameliorating social isolation, loneliness and depression may have implications for promoting increased social contact and interaction among older people (Wenger et al., 1996; Litwin 2001; Wenger and Tucker, 2002; Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006). As VanLear et al. (2006:106) comment 'typologies act as tools for organising our knowledge and understanding about human relationships' as well as being 'theoretically important variables in their own right'. However, on a cautionary note there appears to be a persistent stereotype in society of the older person as unwell, dependent and isolated (Wenger, 1984), whereas in reality the majority of the older population continue to

function as well, independent, contributing citizens, often reciprocating support to family, friends and neighbours (Guterbock and Fries, 1997).

Personal communities and social convoys

An alternative way of exploring the informal social ties of people on an individual or micro societal level is to look at their 'personal communities', which include family, friends, neighbours, and work or leisure associates (Wellman, 1990; 1996). These can be seen as 'networks of significant others' rather than the 'exchange networks' (Milardo, 1992), associated with the social support network types of older people previously discussed, although there is often a degree of cross-over (Allan, 2006). Rather than focussing on social support, 'personal communities represent people's significant personal relationships and include bonds which give both structure and meaning to their lives' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006:45). As such they may be considerably larger in size than social support networks. For example, Wellman (1990:198) suggests 'an estimated average of 20 stronger, active ties (5% of all actual ties) and 380 weaker ties'.

Wellman and Wortley (1990:580) have made the distinction between 'ascribed ties', family relationships which provide 'stable support'; and 'achieved ties', friendships and ties with neighbours and wider organisations which provide 'adaptive support'. Similarly, Pahl and Spencer (2004a: 201), identify 'given' relationships associated with 'high commitment', which generally consist of family ties but also include 'fictive kin' such as godparents, and 'chosen' relationships, which consist of both non-family and family ties. Their findings also demonstrate 'suffusion', that is a blurring between 'given' and 'chosen' ties. This concurs with Wellman's (1990) suggestion that sibling relationships share many of the characteristics of friendships, and that close friends often take on the attributes of

family members, such as that of a sister as discussed earlier (Jerrome, 1990; Chambers, 2005; Chambers et al., 2009). However, although friendships are to an extent chosen, choices are influenced by factors such as age, class, gender, employment, domestic situation and existing friends (Antonucci et al., 2003). Additional factors such as age-related illness, frailty and disability, as discussed earlier in this chapter, may also have an impact on how friendships are established and maintained.

This apparent increase in the flexibility and negotiation of social relations may well reflect wider societal changes. In contemporary society family networks consisting of three and even four generations are now common (Jerrome, 1993; Harper, 2005), and the structure of family relationships is more varied and complex due to an increase in the incidence of divorce, lone parenthood and remarriage (Allan, 2008; Chambers et al., 2009). As Chambers (2005:3) remarks 'Unlike the current generation of older widows, there is a greater likelihood that future older women will have experienced divorce and remarriage'. However, studies suggest that adult stepchildren may feel less filial obligation towards step-parents than their own parents (Ganong and Coleman, 2006) and step-grandparents than their own grandparents (Allan et al., 2008). Indeed Van den Hoonaard (2001) found in her Canadian study, that of the five older widows in her sample with stepchildren, only one continued to have a close relationship long-term.

Members of personal communities have been identified using diagrams consisting of three concentric circles, a hierarchical mapping technique originally developed by Antonucci (1986). However, although diagrams are 'simple, yet highly effective' (Allan, 2006:662) frameworks for identifying the social

relationships of people, their limitations include that people may construct them normatively, that is place close family in the centre due to social expectations (Finch, 1989). For example, studies suggest that older people tend to include more family members in their diagrams, especially sons and daughters (Pahl and Spencer, 2006). In addition, the diagrams are thought to concentrate on the structure rather than the content of social relationships (Hareven, 1978; Wellman, 1990; Pahl and Spencer, 1997, 2004a, 2004b; Phillipson et al, 2001; Antonucci et al. 2001; Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

Spencer and Pahl's (2006) study utilised qualitative interviews, as well as the use of a personal community map (see above), with a sample of adults aged between eighteen and seventy-five living in various locations across Britain. From this data they were able to identify a typology of personal communities, classified by the centrality and number of family and friends. Building on earlier typologies (Pahl and Spencer, 2004a, 2004b) they identify five types of personal community. Table 2.4 outlines Spencer and Pahl's (2006) personal community types. In general 'family-type' personal communities tend to be more local and 'friend-type' less local (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). In an earlier British study Phillipson et al. (2001), found the majority of the older people in their study of social networks and social support, to have 'family-based' networks which reciprocate emotional and practical support when it is needed.

Table 2.4 Outline of Spencer and Pahl's (2006) personal community types

<i>Friend-based personal community</i>	<i>Family-based personal community</i>	<i>Neighbour-based personal community</i>	<i>Partner-based personal community</i>	<i>Professional-based personal community</i>
<p>Includes the 'Friend-like' and 'Friend-enveloped'</p> <p>Consists of mainly chosen ties and fewer family than friends</p> <p>Suffused roles are apparent in this type</p> <p>The 'Friend-like' differs from the 'Friend-enveloped' in that friends are placed in the centre of maps along with close family</p>	<p>Includes the 'Family-like' and 'Family-enveloped'</p> <p>Consists of mainly given ties and fewer friends than family</p> <p>The 'Family-like' includes some chosen as well as mainly given ties, the 'Family enveloped' includes mainly given ties</p>	<p>Consists of mainly given ties, neighbours equal or outnumber family and friends, and are placed in the centre of maps</p>	<p>Consists of chosen and given ties, and a partner, or partner and family, are placed in the centre of maps</p>	<p>Consists of mainly given ties, 'professional supporters' are placed in the centre or second circle of maps</p>

Allan (2006) in his discussion of social networks and personal communities, points to the usefulness of the social convoy approach (Antonucci, 1986) in mapping social relationships over time. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) suggest that in

order to understand the present relationships of older people, it is necessary to gain a history of their past relationships. Each individual has a 'social convoy', a network of relationships that moves with them throughout their life course, this relates to Wenger's (1987) suggestion that older people have social support networks that have evolved over a lifetime. Some researchers have suggested that families as well as individuals develop throughout the life course (Hareven, 1978; Allan and Jones, 2003). Although the structure of the convoy may change, with some members of the convoy leaving and new ones joining, the convoy continues to provide support. As Spencer and Pahl (2006:45) remark:

'Personal communities provide a kind of continuity through shared memories, and help to develop a person's sense of identity and belonging; although their composition may alter as an individual moves through the life course, a core part of their reality does not change'

Close emotional relationships appear to be stable and less susceptible to change than less close relationships (Lang, 2000). Wellman et al. (1997) in their study of change in personal communities utilised surveys and interviews a decade apart with a sample of adults aged eighteen and over in Canada. They found that ties that persisted over time tended to be family members, provide social support, and keep in frequent telephone contact. Similarly in a longitudinal study involving older adults in the Netherlands, Klein Ikkink and van Tilburg (1999) found that relationships with close family were more likely to be continued than relationships with extended family, friends and neighbours.

Moreover Allan (1996) points to the continuation of ties with primary kin, such as parents, children and siblings, as opposed to secondary kin, such as grandparents, grandchildren and aunts or nieces, which may be more transient.

This may be due in part to the legal implications of family relationships, such as marriage and inheritance, for example. In a study investigating the stability of personal networks over time with a group of recently widowed older women in the USA, Morgan et al. (1996) utilised interviews and two network diagrams, one for family and one for non-family, at seven points of time over a twelve month period. Their findings identify a core of close ties, mainly family members, who consistently appear in diagrams, and a periphery of ties, mainly non-family members, who were 'visible' at one or two points throughout the year. In addition, more ties were made than lost, so that there was an overall increase in network size. The authors call for a more dynamic approach incorporating the use of longitudinal data in order to explore the shifting nature of personal networks. Indeed 'this is as much a substantive issue as it is a methodological one' (Heath et al., 2009:658).

This section of the literature review has further highlighted a number of gaps in the existing knowledge base. First, although the social support network types of older people have been identified, the wider network types of older widows have not been examined specifically, and not over time particularly. In addition, the existing studies regarding social support network types in later life, aside from Wenger's studies in the 1990s in rural communities in North Wales, have been conducted with samples of older people in Israel, the USA, Japan and West Europe.

Second, the literature that does pertain to social support network type and widowhood appears to be contradictory. This corresponds to the contradictions in the type and timing of social support during widowhood discussed in the previous section of this chapter (p35). Wenger's (1991,1997) studies have associated

widowhood in later life with a dependency on local family, and Litwin's (2001) study with 'Restricted' networks. However, more recently Fiori et al. (2008) found their 'Friend-focused' network types to be associated with the older widows in their sample of older people suggesting a widening of the support networks of these women following bereavement.

Third, most of the personal community and social convoy research has been conducted with adults in Canada (Wellman, 1990) and with older people in the USA (Antonucci, 1986), for example. Although more recently personal community types have been identified in Britain (Spencer and Pahl, 2006), this research employed a cross-sectional design with a broad sample of adults. Moreover, there appears to be very little research exploring the impact of change on personal communities. This is particularly so in regard to longitudinal data or what Allan (2006:665) terms 'the routine natural history of personal communities'. To this end, a study incorporating the lens of personal communities over a period of time may reveal more about the structure and content of significant relationships during later life widowhood.

2.4: Exploring relationships through social ritual

'Our Christmas card lists are maps of who we know and who we care about. But Christmas is not just a time to write cards; it is also a time to reflect on what all these relationships mean'

(Small, 2003:61)

As identified in the previous section of this chapter, there is a need for further longitudinal research exploring the quality of social ties over time during widowhood (Antonucci et al., 2001). Christmas celebrations and the exchange of Christmas cards may be a further means of exploring the content in addition to the structure of personal communities and social convoys. Certain days of the year are 'special' or significant and are steeped in ritual and symbolism. Birthday and Christmas celebrations are not only 'ritual performances' but also social resources as family and friends are brought together 'routinely' once a year, giving people the opportunity to reinforce kinship ties (Bocock, 1974; Allan and Crow, 1989; Coppet, 1992; Allan, 1996; Bytheway, 2005; Shordike and Pierce, 2005).

The ritual celebration of Christmas dates back over four thousand years, with similar festivities tracing back to the early Mesopotamians. Christmas as we know it today is a result of a variety of factors: a celebration suppressed by Christianity, a larger middle class with greater leisure time and financial resources, and a growing commercialisation (Coppet, 1992). However in the UK, Christmas remains a quintessential family celebration full of meaning and emotion, as exemplified in the continued popularity of classic books such as 'A Christmas Carol' and films such as 'It's a wonderful life'. Indeed it has been suggested that the 'traditional family Christmas' contributes to psychological well-being (Mind, 2003). However, the celebration may also have negative consequences, including

family friction, financial burden and loneliness (Nursing Times, 2008; Mind, 2009). Moreover, according to the WRVS (2005), over one million older people are likely to be alone over the Christmas period.

Christmas may be even more significant during a transition such as later life widowhood. As well as serving as a means of reinforcing social identity and norms during a time of flux and uncertainty, Christmas celebrations may also reveal changes in social relationships. Indeed Searle-Chatterjee (2001:190) asserts that the exchange of cards and gifts over the Christmas period 'give material form to, and thus make incarnate, some of the underlying realities of social relations in Britain today'.

Family ritual and Christmas

Studies of family life in Britain have indicated the continued importance of kinship ties to the social and personal identities of individuals on an everyday basis (Young and Wilmott, 1957; Phillipson et al., 2001). Family practices are an important means of studying family relationships (Morgan, 1996), indeed for Morrow (1999:746) social capital is 'rooted in the processes and practices of everyday life'. As discussed earlier in this chapter a transition such as widowhood can lead to a change in social roles and daily activities, and can also affect relationships with family and friends (Sugarman, 2001). Indeed studies have found transitions to have an impact on family practices. In a cross-sectional study conducted in the USA, Pett et al. (1992), found late life divorce to necessitate change and negotiation in family rituals, particularly Christmas, Thanksgiving and birthdays. However, their findings also indicate the positive and liberating aspects of this change, including the opportunity to participate in different types of

celebrations. To this end the family should be seen as a process or lived experience rather than as a fixed arrangement (Hareven, 2000; Allan, 1996).

Families then are not simply viewed as structures in society but also as 'sets of activities which take on a particular meaning' (Finch, 2007:66), many of which are mundane and continuous (Chambers et al., 2009). Indeed family relationships may be reinforced through the routine occupation of sharing meals (Ludwig, 1998), and through traditions, values and belongings passed from generation to generation (Roberto and Stroes, 1995; Shordike and Pierce, 2005; Hunter, 2008). For example, in a study which involved narrative interviews with older women in New Zealand, Wright-St Clair et al. (2005) found that the family ritual and sharing of special foods involved in Christmas celebrations contributed to the women's construction of positive self and family identities. Indeed Meske et al. (1994) found Christmas to be one of the most important family rituals to older people, particularly older women. Their sample of elderly respondents in the USA rated the positive aspects of 'strengthened relationships', 'maintaining family contact', 'togetherness and sharing memories', and 'promotes communication and enjoyment'. Although negative aspects were not viewed as a problem for the majority of the sample, they included 'noise and disruption' and 'too much work' (p25).

These routine activities or rituals may be particularly important as families change over a period of time (Finch, 2007; James and Curtis, 2010) due to transitions such as later life widowhood. Indeed being involved in the social ritual of Christmas may be the sort of 'everyday occupation' that 'plays a dynamic part in holding the individual in a meaningful social world' (Hannam, 1997:74). As discussed earlier in this chapter the continuation of everyday practices has been

found to assist in adaptation, helping to ease the flux of change, normalising, and providing routine (Ludwig, 1997; Atchley, 1999; McIntyre and Howie, 2002).

Kaufman (1986) suggests that individuals refer to 'life-long themes' when they are faced with change. These themes help individuals to make sense of life events and shift from 'linear' to 'cyclical' time associated with the wider social belonging inherent in rituals such as Christmas (Kuper 2001; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). For example, Shordike and Pierce (2005) found that it was important to older women and their families to continue holding the Christmas meal in the matriarchal home and remain central to the celebrations, even if they did not cook the Christmas meal themselves. This corresponds with Barnett's (1954) assertion that women have traditionally been at the centre of family celebrations such as Christmas (Kuper, 2001), including sending the cards, buying the gifts and meal preparation (Caplow, 1982; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). In addition, women can be seen as 'kin keepers' particularly when changes in family rituals such as Christmas have to be re-negotiated (Pett et al., 1992). This concurs with the suggestion that female family members are the main providers of emotional support in social networks (Wellman and Wortley, 1990), as discussed earlier.

However, according to Cartledgehayes (2003) in her ethnographic account, the grief of widowhood may be exacerbated over the Christmas period by the pressure to participate in and maintain former family rituals. Indeed flexibility and personal choice, which is without the imposition of family and others, has been found to be more useful to adaptation and discontinuity (Ludwig, 1997; Shordike and Pierce, 2005). This may be difficult during the Christmas period when pressure to conform to a celebration with family, as in the past, is high (Kuper, 2001; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). Moreover, as discussed earlier in this chapter,

family relationships and practices may be further complicated in contemporary society by practical considerations such as the increase in geographical dispersion of family members (Chambers et al., 2009). This may be especially relevant over the Christmas period. For example, as families evolve it becomes more difficult to decide whose family to spend Christmas day with which can lead to tension, although this is often resolved through alternating (Kuper, 2001) to this end:

'People discuss and contest the meanings of Christmas even as they participate. They make creative changes while they are engaged in discussion'

(Searle-Chatterjee, 2001:177)

One could argue then that the idealised notion of the 'traditional family Christmas' may be particularly difficult to achieve during a transition such as later life widowhood and may lead to disappointment.

Wider social ritual and Christmas cards

Christmas cards can be seen as symbols or emblems of Christmas, they are also a means of maintaining social relations, particularly with geographically dispersed network members (Bocock, 1974; Allan, 1996). Indeed North American research suggests that receiving Christmas cards, particularly from long-distance friends, has a positive effect on self-esteem and happiness (Medical News Today, 2003). Across the world many people send Christmas cards to their family and friends, and in the United Kingdom the post office handles over seven hundred million cards in the weeks leading up to Christmas (Royal Mail, 2010). In addition, the exchange of Christmas cards may be relevant to the discussion of social convoys as 'the custom ensures that people retain scattered links as potential

resources for the future and as links with the past' (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001:177). In a seminal study conducted in the USA, Johnson (1971), found that the retired people in her small convenience sample were more likely to report reciprocal cards than the younger people. In addition, cards were more likely to be exchanged with family members and with those 'on an equal social footing' (p27). In their study of social network size based on the exchange of Christmas cards in the UK, Hill and Dunbar (2003), found frequency of contact to be determined by factors such as emotional closeness and geographic distance. Their findings also indicate that the number of kin in networks is comparatively stable over time, this corresponds with the personal community and social convoy literature discussed earlier (Lang, 2000; Wellman et al., 1997; Klein Ikkink and van Tilburg, 1999).

Social bonds with friends in particular are often reinforced through the annual exchange of Christmas cards (Bocock, 1974; Allan, 1996), and often include a letter (Johnson, 1971; Hill and Dunbar, 2003). In a North American study examining contact in long-distance friendships with a sample of women aged forty-five and over, Finchum (2005), found that: 'The annual Christmas card mentioned by almost all of the women, although just a once a year contact, served to keep the perception that the friend was still a friend' (p100). Although studies have found older friendships to provide continuity during later life (Jerrome, 1981), according to Allan and Adams (2007), there remains a lack of longitudinal research exploring friendships over the life course and examining the role of friendship networks in affirming identity and managing life events. To this end, the exchange of Christmas cards may reveal friendships that have evolved throughout the life course (Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

Friendships may become more important at certain times, following divorce or widowhood, for example, however, 'the normative and institutional framing of family and friendship ties remain distinct in many important regards' (Allan, 2008:10). These include the obligatory versus non-obligatory exchange of support, and the notion that blood is thicker than water, as discussed earlier in the chapter. This distinction is manifest in Christmas day celebrations in Britain, for example, with most people choosing to spend the day with their immediate kin (Allan et al., 2008), whereas New Years Eve is often spent with friends (Kuper, 2001). Indeed 'it is the eating of a special meal together which is the high point of this civic ritual of the family' (Pimlott, 1978:172).

In contrast to Christmas cards, which may be sent to many, including geographically dispersed ties, the exchange of Christmas gifts is confined to a smaller circle of actively supportive ties. These generally include close family and friends, indicating the special value of these relationships and reinforcing these bonds (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). In a study examining Christmas gifts and kin networks conducted in the USA, Caplow (1982) found that close kin were expected to give gifts annually, usually during a family get-together. In contrast gifts to non-kin generally cost less and did not require 'ritual' giving. Indeed gift giving can be seen as a means of reinforcing intergenerational relationships (Bell, 1968; Caplow, 1982). It has been suggested that children symbolise generational links and ease family tensions during celebrations such as Christmas; they are also the focus of gift giving, although this generosity is often extended to older relatives and those that live alone (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). Although industrialisation coupled with urbanisation has all but extinguished the custom of exchanging handmade gifts, replacing them with mass produced manufactured

items, increasingly fewer but more expensive gifts are given to a smaller network of family and close friends (Kearl, 1994). However, it has been suggested that gifts for loved ones are 'decommoditized' through meticulous wrapping and embellishment to make them appear more unique and special (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001:184).

It seems, in the West at least, that Christmas remains a very symbolic time, entrenched in ritual and tradition. In addition, Christmas celebrations may also reveal changes in social relationships (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). However, the few studies that have examined the ritual of Christmas and the exchange of Christmas cards in the context of transition have been conducted in the USA. Indeed Pett et al. (1992:550) call for 'A longitudinal and more qualitative examination of the process of change in family rituals' including 'the ways in which evolving family rituals underscore and facilitate relationship changes in families'. To this end, a study incorporating multiple methods of enquiry, including the use of Christmas and Christmas cards as discursive tools, may give a more detailed account of personal communities and family ritual during the change process.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter has highlighted the lack of longitudinal qualitative research exploring the personal communities of older widows experiencing transition in contemporary Britain, thus providing the justification for, and the relevance of, this thesis. Much of the existing literature concerning the social network types of older widows concentrates on the problematic aspects of the transition and the need for social support (Wenger, 1991; Litwin, 1995), rather than exploring their wider personal communities, particularly in the context of the changes associated with late modernity (Allan,

2006). Moreover, most of the personal community and social convoy research has been conducted in North America (Wellman, 1990; Antonucci, 1986), and although more recently personal community types have been identified in Britain (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) this research employed a cross-sectional design with a broad sample of adults. This gives rise to my first research question:

- What are the personal community types of older widows?

Much of the later life widowhood and social support literature has focussed on the impact of the transition on the individual and on the support received, aside from the studies of Morgan (1989) and Morgan et al. (1997), which examined the personal networks of older widows in the USA. In addition, much of the social support literature is contradictory, particularly in regards to the type and timing of support (Chambers, 2005). This prompts my second research question:

- Are certain types of personal community more helpful than others during the change process?

Many of the seminal studies of later life widowhood have been conducted in North America (Lopata, 1973; Matthews, 1991). Although more recently studies have been conducted in Britain (Chambers, 2005; Davidson, 2002) these studies have employed a retrospective rather than a longitudinal approach (Carr and Utz, 2002). Moreover, Morgan et al. (1996) and Heath et al., (2009) call for a more dynamic approach incorporating the use of longitudinal data in order to explore the shifting nature of personal networks. This gives rise to my third research question:

- Does a longitudinal design reveal change in personal communities and social convoys during widowhood?

The social ritual literature indicates that Christmas celebrations and the exchange of Christmas cards and gifts may be a further means of identifying and exploring social relationships during widowhood (Bocock, 1974; Allan and Crow, 1989; Coppet, 1992; Allan, 1996; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001; Bytheway, 2005; Shordike and Pierce, 2005). This prompts my fourth research question:

- Do multiple methods give a more detailed account of personal relationships during the change process?

The few studies that have examined Christmas celebrations in the context of transition have been conducted in the USA (Pett et al., 1992; Cartledgehayes, 2003). Moreover, there is a lack of research exploring widowhood in the context of the family rather than in terms of family support (O'Bryant and Hansson, 1996). This gives rise to my fifth research question:

- What impact does later life widowhood have on family practices?

The following chapter describes and discusses the methodological approach and methods adopted in order to address the research questions identified above. This includes a consideration of the ethical issues pertaining to the study of widowhood in late life, and the validity and reliability of the research conducted.

Chapter 3: Methodology and methods

Introduction

This chapter outlines and justifies the methodological approach taken and the methods used in conducting the study in order to address the research questions identified from the literature review. First, the chapter discusses the theory and philosophy of a subtle realist approach within a qualitative framework to researching personal communities in order to gain a multilayered perspective. In addition, the employment of a longitudinal design in order to capture the process of transition and unfolding events over time is discussed.

Second, the methods adopted during fieldwork are discussed, including the sampling strategy and the pilot study. Data collection, including the use of three semi-structured in-depth interviews, the discussion of Christmas cards, and the construction of personal community diagrams over an eighteen-month period are outlined here. Third, the chapter considers the ethical issues and challenges involved in researching the sensitive social phenomenon of widowhood and in conducting longitudinal research with older women.

Finally, the analysis of the data is outlined. This includes the content analysis of the older widows' personal community diagrams, which led to the construction of a typology. The inductive thematic analysis of the women's interview transcripts, including the discussion of their Christmas cards, using NVIVO computer software is detailed here. The validity and reliability of the research are also given consideration at the end of this chapter.

3.1: Methodological approach

As this research is concerned with gaining a detailed understanding of the personal communities of a group of older women as they experience transition, a qualitative methodology involving in-depth interviews was deemed to be appropriate for this study. Rather than simply measuring a phenomenon qualitative research aims to understand it from the perspective of the individual who is experiencing it (Green and Thorogood, 2004) revealing subjective meanings (Guba, 1990; Silverman, 2006). Although a quantitative methodology, incorporating the use of surveys or questionnaires, would have identified the structural components of the women's social networks, such as their size and composition, it would not have explored the content or complexity of these ties (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Indeed the initial focus of this study was on social capital and its potential to facilitate adaptation during a transition such as widowhood. However, as the study progressed the focus shifted away from social capital towards the concept of personal communities as this seemed to be a more appropriate lens for capturing both the structure and meaning of social relationships (Wellman, 1990, 1996; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Moreover as previously discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the difficulties in measuring social capital are well documented (Stolle and Rochon, 1998; Morrow, 1999; Campbell, 1999, 2000; Baron et al., 2000; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002).

In order to explore the structure and content of the older widows' personal communities during transition, this research adopts a multi-method approach and a longitudinal design within a qualitative framework of subtle realism (Mays and Pope, 2000). The research questions identified in this study arose from the literature review but also from the researcher's ideas about ontology: the nature of

reality; epistemology: the nature between the knower and the known; and methodology: how best to determine knowledge (Guba, 1990). The knowledge claims associated with subtle, or as it was earlier termed critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979; Cook and Campbell, 1979), recognise the existence of an underlying solitary reality. However, the approach also acknowledges that individuals have different experiences and perceptions of that reality (Finlay and Ballinger, 2006; Walliman, 2006). To this end, subtle realism 'is able to link the subjective understandings of individuals with the structural positions within which those individuals are located' (May, 2002:57), in this case older widows' experiences of their personal communities during transition. This approach enables an examination of the similarities and differences in the structure of networks, as well as an exploration of the quality or meaning of individual personal relationships. Subtle realism then has the potential to illuminate the complex and often contradictory nature of social relationships with family, friends and others, thus confirming the particular appropriateness of this qualitative approach to the research questions identified in this study (Hammersley, 1992; Mays and Pope, 2000).

Alternative qualitative perspectives were considered when designing this research, including discourse, narrative and grounded theory approaches. However they were not deemed to be as appropriate as subtle realism for a number of reasons. Discourse analysis focuses on the use of language influenced by underlying factors such as class and gender; discourse itself is viewed as a mode of communicating meaning (Bryman, 2001). As this approach is more interested in identifying the different ways of talking about a phenomenon than in understanding 'real' experience (Silverman, 2000), it is not compatible with this study's focus on older widows' experiences of their personal communities during

transition. A narrative approach is concerned with revealing perspectives through individuals telling stories of their lives. It is often adopted in life history research (Bryman, 2001). For example, Chambers (2005) adopted a feminist, biographical approach which revealed 'multiple narratives' of later life widowhood. However the narrative approach has been criticised for its focus on 'form' rather than on 'real' events (Silverman, 2000). Furthermore this research is interested in understanding the process of transition as it is happening rather than gaining a retrospective view of later life widowhood. Grounded theory has been described as an approach that explores qualitative data inductively and systematically (Silverman, 2000). It is also thought to be an appropriate methodology for examining an unfamiliar area (Bowen, 2008). However as this study adopts the lens of personal communities, in order to examine the structure and explore the content of older widows' social relationships during transition, it builds on previous personal community research (Wellman, 1990, 1996; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Although this study does not adopt grounded theory as a methodological framework, it draws on the perspective during data analysis to ensure data saturation (Bowen, 2008). Data analysis is discussed fully later in this chapter.

Furthermore these alternative approaches are of the view that knowledge is socially constructed and that 'multiple constructed realities' exist (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:295). Although constructivist approaches highlight the importance of subjectivity and human agency, they refute the role of social structures and norms in influencing social meaning and action (Houston, 2001). In addition constructivist approaches can be seen to reproduce or construct 'a *new* version of reality' (Ward, 1999:3) rather than represent reality (Meyer, 2003). As such these approaches are not compatible particularly with two of the research questions identified in the

previous chapter: First, what are the personal community types of older widows? Second, are certain types of personal community more helpful than others during the change process? The categorisation of social relationships into types, as in this study, is consistent with the knowledge claims associated with subtle realism rather more than those associated with discourse, narrative and grounded theory approaches. Moreover although subtle realism recognises that objectivity cannot be fully attained by the researcher, the approach aims to achieve a form of 'modified objectivity' in order to represent reality (Guba, 1990) rather than reproduce it. Reflexivity is discussed fully later in this chapter.

In addition to the strengths of subtle realism it is also important to recognise the problematic issues and limitations associated with the approach. For example, although Harre (1972) acknowledges that the social behaviour of individuals is determined by normative expectations or societal rules, he also notes a methodological dichotomy or dualism. Indeed some researchers have viewed the approach as lacking in a true ontological foundation (Searle, 1999). That said, other theorists have suggested that the major advantage of subtle realism is that it offers a 'middle perspective' (Finlay and Ballinger, 2006:238) and a 'pragmatic compromise between several extremes' (Seale, 1999:469). In later works Harre (2000, 2001, 2002) argues against the possibility of developing sound causal explanations of social phenomena proposed by many subtle realists (Pratten, 2009). However, Houston (2001) suggests that subtle realism enables researchers to both *understand* and *explain* human behaviour, in this instance older women's experiences of their personal communities in later life widowhood.

A further argument for the appropriateness of subtle realism as the methodological backdrop to this study is that it emphasizes 'critical multiplism',

including the use of multiple methods of data collection, which decreases the likelihood of misinterpretations being made during the research process (Guba, 1990). The use of multiple methods, rather than a single method of data collection, can be seen to address the complexity of health (Duncan and Nicol, 2004) and social care (Houston, 2001) research and thus may be more useful to practice (Meyer, 2003). Indeed previous studies of personal relationships have described the benefits of using multiple methods in order to obtain a variety of perspectives and deeper understandings (Wenger, 1999; Charania and Ickes, 2006; Scott et al., 2007).

In addition to the use of multiple methods, the approach of subtle realism also advocates prolonged engagement with participants (Angen, 2000), this can be seen to increase the validity of qualitative research (Cresswell, 2003). As discussed in the previous chapter, recent qualitative studies of later life widowhood conducted in Britain, such as Chambers (2005) and Davidson (2002), have largely employed a retrospective rather than a longitudinal approach (Carr and Utz, 2002). Although Bennett's (1998, 2005) studies were longitudinal, they were concerned with the psychological, rather than the sociological, aspects of the transition. This study employs a longitudinal design as it is concerned with the transition *of* widowhood and what happens after a period of bereavement. This differs to much of the existing widowhood literature, which is largely concerned with the transition *to* widowhood (Carr and Utz, 2002), and social support and adaptation in the initial stages (Bankoff, 1983; Littlewood, 1992; Prigerson et al., 1993). Indeed the longitudinal approach adopted in this study captures unfolding events over time (Bryman, 2001; Vaus, 2001) and provides an insight into the process of transition

as it is happening rather than a retrospective snap shot (Wenger, 1991; Ray, 2000a; Charania and Ickes, 2006). As Seale (1999:470) observes:

‘Subtle realism involves maintaining a view of language as both constructing new worlds and as referring to a reality outside the text, a means of communicating past experience as well as imagining new experiences’

Moreover this study addresses the need for longitudinal research to explore the shifting nature of personal networks (Morgan et al., 1996; Feld et al., 2007; Heath et al., 2009) and social convoys (Kahn and Antonucci, 1980), as well as the impact of change on personal communities (Allan, 2006) identified in the previous chapter.

3.2: Methods

Since this study is concerned with both the structure and the content of the older widows’ personal communities it incorporates the use of multiple methods of enquiry (Creswell, 2003; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). To this end, this study uses personal community diagrams to identify the structure of the women’s personal communities, allowing for the development of a typology. In addition to the diagrams, in-depth interviews, including the discussion of Christmas and Christmas cards, explore the content or expressive characteristics of these relationships. The personal community diagrams used in this study are based on those used in previous studies (Antonucci, 1986; Wellman, 1990; Pahl and Spencer, 1997, 2004a, 2004b; Phillipson et al, 2001; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). A copy of the personal community diagram used in this study can be found in Appendix 2. As discussed previously the hierarchical mapping technique using diagrams consisting of three concentric circles offers an uncomplicated, useful

means of identifying significant social relationships (Pahl and Spencer, 2004b; Allan, 2006) and examining social relations over time (Fiori et al., 2008). This technique involves individuals being asked to name people that are very close and important to them in the inner circle, and those that are less close but still important to them in the middle and outer circles of their diagrams. Using this method enables the older widows, rather than the researcher, to establish the significance of their social relationships (Van der Poel, 1993). Although the diagrams have their benefits they also have their limitations. As already discussed people may construct them in accordance with normative expectations (Finch, 1989; Pahl and Spencer, 2004b), in addition, they are thought to concentrate on the structure rather than the content of personal communities (Khan and Antonucci, 1980; Pahl and Spencer, 2004a; Fiori et al., 2008). However, this study uses other methods of data collection in addition to the diagrams in order to capture the content of personal relationships, moreover limitations in one method may be compensated by the use of other methods (Creswell, 2003).

The older widows' lived experiences and subjective meanings of their personal communities during transition are explored through a series of in-depth interviews (Hockey and James, 2003; Chambers, 2005; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). In addition, the second and third interviews use Christmas and Christmas cards as discursive tools in order to reveal individual experiences and social relations in a more fluid sense (Plummer, 2001). Moreover the discussion of Christmas and Christmas cards allows for the further exploration of the older widows' family practices (Morgan, 1996; Chambers et al., 2009) and social convoys (Kahn and Antonucci, 1980; Allan, 2006) during transition. The in-depth interviews conducted in this study follow a semi-structured format (Patton, 2002),

in that interview schedules were designed and worded in order to establish rapport and address the research questions of concern in an open and flexible manner (Silverman, 2006). For example, questions asked during the first part of the initial interview included: Can you tell me a little about yourself? How has your life changed since being widowed? The rationale for including these questions was to generate background information and context for the women's experiences of transition. Questions asked later on in the initial interview included: Can you tell me about the people that are important to you, such as family, friends and neighbours? Are you closer to some more than others? The rationale for including these questions was to explore the qualitative aspects of the women's social relationships. A full copy of the initial interview schedule used in this study can be found in Appendix 3. The multiple methods of data collection utilised in this study are consistent with the methodological approach described above and are deemed to be appropriate to the research questions identified at the end of the previous chapter (Mays and Pope, 2000).

Sample

Interviews were conducted with an opportunistic purposive sample of twenty-six older widows in the area of North Staffordshire, UK. This area comprises both urban and rural communities. A purposive sample consists of 'information rich cases' selected for in-depth study (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009:173). In this case women over the age of sixty-five who had been widowed between one and three years, experiencing the transitional phase of widowhood previously identified (Bankoff, 1983). Several of the older widows in the achieved sample had been widowed less than one year and were slightly younger than sixty-five. However as these women wanted to participate in the study, and as the

study was longitudinal and they would be experiencing the transitional phase of widowhood during the fieldwork, they were included. Indeed the sample in this study shares similarities with Zettel and Rook's (2004) North American sample in terms of length of time widowed. Their study examined the social networks of older women who had been widowed between three and thirty months. In a qualitative study such as this a smaller sample size is more appropriate in order to explore individual experiences in detail (Silverman, 2000). Originally I had aimed to recruit between twenty and twenty-five participants, small enough to explore the women's experiences in-depth, but also large enough to allow for some attrition during the longitudinal fieldwork, as it happened I had twenty-six respondents. At the time of the first interview the women were aged between sixty-two and ninety, this age range incorporated both the 'young-old' and 'old-old' (Litwin and Laundau, 2000).

The type of purposive sampling used in this study was opportunistic as the older widows were eventually accessed on a voluntary basis via a newspaper article, organisations for older people, and through family and friends. A copy of the open letter sent to participants and organisations can be found in Appendix 4. During the initial stages of recruitment I spent many hours telephoning, writing to and visiting various clubs and organisations. However, many of the older widows I was introduced to had been widowed for some time and as such were no longer experiencing transition. In addition, although gatekeepers can be a valuable means of accessing difficult to reach participants (Sin, 2005), they can also sanction access (Mirza, 1995) and influence sampling by picking out individuals that they think may be the most appropriate to the study (Seidman, 1998; Berg, 1999). At this point I had just fifteen participants and decided to ask family, friends and the older widows that I had already recruited if they knew of any recently

widowed older women who would be willing to participate in the study. Although snowballing can provide access to hidden groups such as older widows, it can also lead to a narrow sample (Lee, 1993) and following this strategy the sample still only consisted of seventeen participants. I then contacted a local newspaper that ran a weekly page dedicated to addressing the issues of older people. After placing a small article on this page outlining my research and asking for volunteers, I recruited a further nine respondents.

Asking for volunteers may have elicited a certain type of older widow, volunteering is often associated with the middle class and those with religious affiliations, as well as 'do gooders' (Thomas and Finch, 1990). However, more recently a strong commitment to informal volunteering has been identified in working class communities (Boneham and Sixsmith, 2003). One of the strengths of this sample is that the women came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Employing a combination of strategies, including the use of gatekeepers, snowballing and advertising, led ultimately to a more diverse sample (Sixsmith et al., 2003). Table 3.1 includes information about the participants. In addition to the strengths of the sample, the limitations include that the women had been widowed for different periods of time and may have been different ages. It is recognised that these other variables may have had an impact on the management of transition in addition to the women's social relations. However, as this study is concerned with the transition *of* rather than *to* widowhood this is less of an issue, as the focus of the study was not on the women being at the same stage of transition. Indeed as the sampling in this study was opportunistic, it was dependent on the older widows who responded.

Table 3.1 Information about the participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Length of time widowed</i>	<i>Accessed via</i>	<i>Housing, location, driving status</i>	<i>Prior or current Occupation</i>	<i>Number of children</i>	<i>Health status</i>
Anna	86	Six months	Family member	Privately owned Semi-detached house, small market town, non-driver	Various – factory worker, housewife	Two	Frail, asthma
Marilyn	73	Three years	Family member	Housing association semi-detached house, small market town, non-driver	Various – office worker, cared for husband until he died, still works part time as a cleaner	Two	Good health
Beatrice	62	Three years	Live at home scheme (volunteer)	Privately owned semi-detached house, outskirts of a city, driver	Home help and community carer, still performs voluntary work at the Live at home scheme, cares for mother	Two	Good health
Amy	66	Three years	Community exercise class	Housing association bungalow, small market, town, non-driver	Part-time factory worker	Six	Fair health
Doreen	62	Nine months	University of the third age	Privately owned semi-detached house, small market town, driver	Nurse, health visitor, cared for husband until he died, still performs voluntary work	Four	Good health

Participant	Age	Length of time widowed	Accessed via	Housing, location, driving status	Prior or current Occupation	Number of children	Health status
Veronica	79	Three years	Local newspaper article	Privately owned bungalow, semi-rural location, driver	Office worker, cared for her mother and her husband until they died, voluntary work at hospice, currently studying part-time at college	None	Fair health, arthritis
Jessie	79	Six months	Polish club	Privately owned semi-detached house, suburbs of a city, non driver	Housewife, cared for her mother and her husband until they died	One	Frail, arthritis
Mary	81	One year and eight months	Local newspaper article	Privately owned semi-detached house, semi-rural location, non-driver, unable to use public transport	Pottery worker, cared for husband with help of district nurses until he died	Four	Poor health, limited mobility, arthritis, asthma, vertigo
Elsie	90	One year and six months	Age concern (friend of volunteer)	Privately owned semi-detached house, suburbs of a city, non-driver	Various – factory worker, cared for second husband until he died	Two	Good health
Clarice	83	Two years	Local newspaper article	Warden controlled flat, suburbs of a city, non-driver	Various – nurse, office worker, warden	Ten, plus three step-children	Fair health, recent fall

Participant	Age	Length of time widowed	Accessed via	Housing, location, driving status	Prior or current Occupation	Number of children	Health status
June	74	Two years	Pensioner's convention (friend of member)	Privately owned terraced house, suburbs of a city, non-driver, unable to use public transport	Various – shop worker, housewife	Two	Poor health, limited mobility
Hannah	68	Two months	Polish club	Privately owned semi-detached house, suburbs of a city, non-driver	Pottery worker	Two	Good health
Moira	68	Two years	University of the third age	Privately owned semi-detached house, outskirts of a city, non-driver	Electronics company worker	Four	Fair health, heart condition, arthritis
Jane	74	One year and four months	Local newspaper article	Privately owned semi-detached house, suburbs of a city, non-driver	Various – shop worker, pottery worker, cared for husband until he died	Two	Fair health
Beverly	64	Three years	National women's register (friend of member)	Privately owned terraced house, a city, non-driver	Various – office worker, cared for her husband until he died	Two	Good health
Cathy	70	Two years and six months	National women's register	Privately owned detached house, suburbs of a city, driver	General practitioner	Two	Good health

Participant	Age	Length of time widowed	Accessed via	Housing, location, driving status	Prior or current Occupation	Number of children	Health status
Alice	75	Two years and six months	Local newspaper article	Housing association bungalow, semi-rural location, non-driver, difficulty using public transport	Police force worker, still sits on local council	Two	Poor health, reduced mobility, arthritis
Megan	79	Two years	University of the third age	Privately owned bungalow, suburbs of a city, driver	Various – Armed forces, school secretary, cared for husband until he died	One	Good health
Minnie	72	One year	Local newspaper article	Privately owned semi-detached house, a city, non-driver	Various - Housewife, currently performs voluntary work at the British Heart Foundation shop	One	Good health
Delores	81	Two years	Local newspaper article	Privately owned terraced house, a city, driver	Various – housewife, currently volunteers at Church	Three	Good health
Patricia	72	Two years	Local newspaper article	Privately owned flat, suburbs of a city, non-driver	Nurse, cared for her husband until he died	None	Fair health, recovered from stroke
Flora	79	One year	Live at home scheme	Warden controlled flat, a city, non-driver	Pottery worker, cared for her husband until he died	Three	Fair health, heart condition
Gloria	77	One year	Live at home scheme	Warden controlled bungalow, a city, non-driver	Various – housewife	Four	Fair health, anaemia

Participant	Age	Length of time widowed	Accessed via	Housing, location, driving status	Prior or current Occupation	Number of children	Health status
Julia	75	One year	Age concern (friend of volunteer)	Housing association semi-detached house, a city, driver	Office worker	One adopted	Fair health, heart condition
Deirdre	72	Two years and six months	Live at home scheme	Privately owned semi detached house, a city, driver – but no longer owns a car	Print worker, cared for her husband until he died	Four	Fair health, recent fall
Molly	70	Eight months	Local newspaper article	Housing association semi-detached house, a city, non-driver	Office cleaner, cared for her husband with the help of the hospice until he died	Two	Fair health

Data collection

Informed consent was gained with all of the women and the project, how the data would be used, the right to withdraw at any time, and the assurance of anonymity were explained in full. A copy of the informed consent form used in this study can be found in Appendix 5. Further ethical issues are addressed fully later in this chapter. Semi-structured interviews took place in each woman's home and on average lasted between forty-five minutes and one and a half hours. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. I chose to undertake my own transcription as this can be seen as the beginning of interpretive analysis (Bird, 2005; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) moreover transcriptions were verbatim in order

to improve 'literal accuracy' (Miller, 2000:84). In addition, field notes and a reflective diary were kept throughout the course of the study in order to record the context of the interviews, the non-verbal communication of the participants, as well as my own thoughts and feelings (Rose and Webb, 1998; Chambers, 2005; Finlay and Ballinger, 2006). The diary and field notes were drawn upon and contributed to the ethical considerations of this study as well as the analysis of the women's personal community diagrams and interview transcripts.

Pilot interviews were conducted with four older widowed women, who did not take part in the main study, to ensure that the personal community diagram and initial interview schedule acted as appropriate data collection tools. These four women contacted me after I had recruited a sufficient number of participants to the main study but were happy to take part in the pilot study. Both the personal community diagram and interview schedule appeared to work well as discursive instruments therefore no modifications were made prior to the main study.

Interviews were initially conducted with the twenty-six women recruited to the main study in the summer of 2004. The purpose of these interviews was to establish a baseline, explore the women's life histories and the impact of widowhood using the piloted interview schedule, and their personal communities utilising the piloted personal community diagram. The women were asked to 'name people that are very close and important to you' in the inner circle and 'name people that are less close but still important to you' in the middle and outer circles of their diagrams. Some of the women with impaired vision or decreased manual dexterity requested that I annotated on their diagrams for them. These entries were related back to the women to ensure that I had understood them fully. Initial entries to personal community diagrams were annotated in black ink.

A second set of interviews took place with twenty-five of the women in the winter of 2005. The focus of the second interviews was the shared social event of Christmas, the women were also asked to save their Christmas cards and talk the researcher through them. This acted as an additional means of exploring the content of social relationships in everyday life as well as family practices and social convoys during transition. A copy of the letter sent out to the participants in Christmas cards prior to the second interview can be found in Appendix 6, Appendix 7 contains a full copy of the second interview schedule. The ongoing experiences of the women were also discussed, and their personal community diagrams revisited – the women were asked to comment on any changes within their network and to add members if they wished. Second stage entries were annotated in red ink to distinguish them from the initial entries.

At this stage, using a recursive and iterative approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009), I conducted a preliminary analysis of a subset of the first and second interviews and referred back to my initial aim and research questions as well as the existing literature prior to further data collection. Originally I had planned to conduct a series of three interviews at six monthly intervals. However, after conducting the second interviews it became apparent that Christmas was a particularly significant and telling time in the change process. As discussed in Chapter 1, Christmas can be viewed as a microcosm of personal communities, revealing the qualitative dimensions of the women's social ties. Therefore rather than returning to interview the women after six months during the summer of 2005 I decided to wait and re-interview them after twelve months. This allowed for a further exploration of the impact of change on the women's family practices and social convoys as identified in the research questions.

A third and final set of interviews took place with twenty-one of the women in the winter of 2006. These interviews focused on the changing experiences and social worlds of the women over a longer period of widowhood, the shared social event of Christmas and Christmas cards for a second year, and other significant events such as birthdays and anniversaries celebrated over the year. Letters were sent out to the participants in Christmas cards prior to the third interview, a copy of this letter can be found in Appendix 8. A copy of the third interview schedule can be found in full in Appendix 9. Personal community diagrams were revisited for a final time and the women were given the opportunity to consider them and make any changes. Third stage entries were annotated in green ink to distinguish them from the initial and second stage entries.

3.3: Ethical considerations

Ethical Issues

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Keele University Postgraduate Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of fieldwork. A copy of the Postgraduate Research Ethics forms can be found in Appendix 10. In addition, the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2002) was adopted to guide the research process. Informed consent was gained with all of the women ensuring voluntary participation in the study, as outlined earlier in this chapter. According to Vaus (2001) the timing of consent is a contested issue when conducting longitudinal research as data collection is not a one off event. Therefore written consent was obtained at the beginning of initial interviews and ongoing verbal consent gained prior to subsequent interviews. This is consistent with the ethical principles of autonomy, 'having respect for people', and justice, 'treating people fairly' (Gilhooly, 2002:213).

The women were assured anonymity and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity and confidentiality. Some of the women chose their own pseudonyms and others were happy to be assigned them by the interviewer. Interview transcripts were anonymised and audiotapes destroyed once data analysis was complete to further protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants (Israel and Hay, 2006).

Problematic ethical and methodological issues involved in the longitudinal study of widowhood in later life include the sensitivity of bereavement, that changes observed in relation to transition may occur due to the process of ageing, and attrition (Vaus, 2001). One of the women died in between the first and second interviews, and four of the women were unable to complete the third interview due to ill health or for personal circumstances, for example, one of the older widows Cathy, had recently lost her son. It was decided not to return the transcripts to the women due to the sensitive nature of the material, involving bereavement and family relationships, which may have caused emotional distress to the women, and also to their families in the event of their death. Although 'member checking' is thought to increase the internal validity and credibility of research (Finlay, 2006) this was outweighed by the need to adhere to the ethical principle of non-maleficence, to do no harm (Gilhooly, 2002). As Israel and Hay (2006:110) comment 'researchers may have to assess the relative weight of a diverse array of potential harms and benefits'. Indeed according to Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009:284) 'every choice the researcher makes (to share or not to share, when to share and what to share) has inherent ethical difficulties'. Throughout this study the women were sent regular updates on the research process and sent a final summary report outlining the findings of the study once complete.

Tensions faced during a longitudinal study

I have experienced a constant tension conducting a longitudinal study between being 'ready' to go back into the field, and keeping the women engaged in the study over long periods of not interviewing them. I had a fear that the women would lose interest in the study and withdraw (Vaus, 2001; Charania and Ickes, 2006). I employed strategies to try and combat this, sending the women regular updates on the research process and keeping in touch with Christmas cards. Some of the women responded with letters and phone calls about their news, as well as through Christmas cards. A copy of the update letters sent to participants during and following the fieldwork of this study can be found in Appendix 11. Indeed Tinker (1998) points to the length of time given by busy participants to longitudinal studies and asserts that feedback is essential if people are to feel their time has been well spent. Similarly Sixsmith et al. (2003:587) stress 'the importance of maintaining access, trust, and credibility' by sharing knowledge with participants throughout the research process.

Another issue is the one of being alongside the women as events in their lives unfolded, I feel privileged that the women were so willing to share intimate details of their daily lives with me over an extended period of time. In addition to interviewing the women, I have been invited for meals, shown family photographs, and been given Christmas presents and cards, Ray (2000b: 16) refers to this as 'being privy' to 'daily intimacies'. At the beginning of the study I felt guarded in talking about 'myself' as a researcher, as time went on though I began to invest my personal identity into the relationship I was developing with the women, and talked freely about my own personal circumstances when asked. As noted by Oakley (2005:226) there can be 'no intimacy without reciprocity' when conducting

longitudinal in-depth interviews. Interestingly in December 2008 when I sent out Christmas cards with an update and informing the women that I was expecting my first child in March 2009, I received an increase in responses and good will messages reflecting the importance given to family and intergenerational ties by the older widows.

Reflexivity

With the above issues in mind, I have to acknowledge that throughout the fieldwork of this study I had been going through a parallel transition alongside that of the widowed women. My transition involved becoming, and being a divorced woman, and subsequently meeting a new partner. Although Steier (1991:4) and others talk about '*personal ity*' being 'traditionally, banned from research', more recently the process of engaging in reflexivity has been viewed as adding to the credibility and confirmability of findings (Mays and Pope, 2002; Smith, 2006; Finlay, 2006). As outlined earlier I kept a reflective research diary and as the study progressed I recognised many of the loss issues and challenges to personal identity that the women were experiencing, as well as ones that they were not. For example, I would not be married to the same partner for life, I also had to negotiate the 'stigma' of being divorced. In addition, not having children, as many of the women did, I experienced an awareness of being childless, which became more acute as I talked to the women about their personal communities and experiences of Christmas. At thirty-seven and with no long-term partner the very real possibility of never becoming a mother myself was heightened by my conversations with the women.

In 2004-5 I too had to reconstruct my social life, developing and expanding my own personal community. Losing my most significant other led to other and

new members of my personal community assuming more importance in my social world as an unmarried rather than a married woman. For myself as for the women, Christmas was a very emotional and symbolic time of the year, whereas in the past I would have created a Christmas around my husband, I too had to spend it with 'another' family. These are not necessarily negative experiences but they are significant and telling events in the change process.

The issue of distance between the interviewer and interviewee, particularly when both are women, and when the study involves repeated interviewing has been discussed by Oakley (2005). For her 'personal involvement is more than dangerous bias: it is the condition under which people come to know each other and admit others into their lives' (2005:231). The interactive process of the interviews conducted, that is the investment of me as researcher and the older widows as participants, was illustrated in particular by one of the women, Beatrice. During the third and final interview in 2006 Beatrice reflected on the change she had noticed in me as well as in herself over the last eighteen months: 'You look well this time, you do look nice as if you've changed a lot, yeah, yeah, yeah you look nice, you look well'.

3.4: Data analysis

Personal community diagrams

The personal community diagrams were used in this study not only as a discursive tool but also as a means of identifying the personal community types of the older widows. The personal community diagrams were analysed for their content based on the composition and centrality of the women's ties (Pahl and Spencer, 2004a, 2004b; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). The composition of ties was established during the first stage of analysis. This involved grouping the women

according to the balance of numbers of family, friends and others, including neighbours, in their diagrams. This process led to the identification of five categories. The first, 'family only', consisted of only family members. The second, 'predominantly family', was made up mainly of family members with fewer friends and others appearing in the diagrams. The third, 'predominantly friends', included mainly friends, with fewer family and others appearing in the diagrams. The fourth, 'predominantly other', consisted of a larger combination of friends and others, with fewer family members appearing in the diagrams. The fifth, 'mixed', was made up of an equal number of family, friends and others appearing in the diagrams.

The second stage of analysis involved grouping the women in terms of the centrality of family, friends and others in their personal community diagrams, that is where ties were placed within the three concentric circles. This process established three categories. The first, 'family only', included only family members in the centre of the diagrams. The second, 'friends as well as family', included friends as well as family in the centre of the diagrams. The third, 'others as well as family' included others such as neighbours and church ministers in addition to friends and family members in the centre of the diagrams.

Following on from this, the third stage of analysis involved combining the balance of numbers and centrality of ties, this led to six baseline personal community types. These included the 'family only', 'concentrated family', 'diluted family', 'friend with family centrality', 'friend with mixed centrality', and 'mixed with family centrality' types. Analyses of personal community diagrams were repeated at stages two and three of the study resulting in four personal community types at the final stage. These included the 'concentrated family', 'diluted family', 'friend with family centrality' and 'friend with mixed centrality' types.

The personal community types were analysed further in order to examine their characteristics in more detail. This included looking at the number of intimate ties, those placed in the centre of diagrams, and secondary ties, those placed in the middle and outer circles of diagrams. Further analysis included looking at family in terms of the number of generational ties, for example, siblings and cousins, and intergenerational ties, for example, children and grandchildren. In addition, friends were distinguished in terms of being individual, for example, best and close friends, and collective, for example, belonging to the same clubs and churches. Others were then examined in terms of their informal roles, for example, neighbours, and formal roles, for example, doctors. Analyses of the women's personal community diagrams can be found in Appendix 12. The findings from the older widows' personal community diagrams constructed and revised over three stages are presented fully in Chapters 4 and 5.

Interview transcripts

Data analysis of the interview transcripts in this study involved the use of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis identifies patterns and themes as well as contrasts (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) and 'aims to identify and describe the contents of an individual's perceptions, ideals and values' (Luborsky, 1994:205). As a method thematic analysis can be realist, reflecting the experience and reality of interviewees, and constructionist, identifying the effects of societal discourse on interviewees experience and meaning making. In addition, it can operate between the two as a contextualist method, underpinned by theories such as critical realism. Thus 'thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of reality' (Braun and Clarke,

2006:81). The method used in this study is contextualist as it is consistent with the subtle or critical realist approach discussed earlier in this chapter.

In addition, the thematic analysis adopted in this study takes an inductive or bottom up approach, in that the themes identified were soundly linked to the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As discussed earlier in this chapter, data analysis of the interview transcripts drew on a grounded theory perspective. The interview transcripts were read and re-read, 'open coded', 'categories generated', and 'key issues' conceptualised (Burnard, 1996:279; 1991). According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996:26) coding is a means of 'generating concepts' from raw data, interpretation takes place when the broader themes are related back to the 'bigger' picture, including the research questions and existing literature, in order to move towards theorising.

The NVIVO qualitative data analysis software was also used to assist in the analysis of the interview data (Bazeley, 2007; Lewins and Silver, 2007), as the three stages of interviews generated a vast amount of detailed material. In addition to coding and retrieving the data the software also supports the development of theoretical concepts (Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Gibbs, 2002). As discussed earlier in this chapter, I conducted a preliminary analysis of a subset of the first and second interviews and referred back to my initial aim and research questions, as well as the existing literature, prior to conducting the third interviews. Following completion of the third stage of interviews seven of the cases transcriptions were coded, examples of initial nodes included 'active participant' and 'family negotiation'. These codes were then clustered and categorised into tree nodes, examples of tree nodes included 'personal identity' and 'relationships'. Following this, major thematic categories were developed with sub codes, examples of major

thematic categories included 'process of change' and 'barriers'. This process was then repeated with the final eighteen cases transcriptions with codes being added as necessary, until no new codes were generated and the conceptual themes began to be repeated. This point in the analytic process can be seen as data saturation (Bowen, 2008). Purposive sampling, multiple methods of data collection, and prolonged engagement in the field, all strategies employed in this study, are also thought to contribute to theoretical saturation (Wray et al., 2007). As data or theoretical saturation was deemed to be achieved at this point, it was not necessary to recruit additional participants or to conduct further interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Following this, a refined list of conceptual themes was developed, which included 'remembering the past, looking to the future' and 'negotiating the journey'. Analyses of the women's interview transcripts can be found in Appendix 13. A further period of sorting and resorting of the conceptual themes took place as the findings Chapters 6 and 7 were written and re-written as part of the analytical process.

The analytic process revealed a discrepancy between some of the older widows' personal community diagrams and personal narratives from their interview transcripts, suggesting that these women may have constructed their diagrams in accordance with normative expectations (Finch, 1989; Pahl and Spencer, 2004b). Although these discrepancies were noted and are discussed in Chapter 8, they were not pursued in the context of the in-depth interviews with the participants for pragmatic and ethical reasons. First, the discrepancies only became fully apparent during the process of data analysis following completion of the final stage of interviews. Second, to the degree I did recognise a discrepancy between some of the women's diagrams and their narratives during the interviews, I felt some

discomfort in raising the issue with them. These women may have perceived this line of questioning as intrusive and emotionally distressing (Gilhooly, 2002; Israel and Hay, 2006), especially given that they were experiencing the sensitive social phenomenon of widowhood.

Validity and reliability

The qualitative framework adopted in this study can be seen to increase validity as it embraces subjectivity revealing the 'lived reality' of the older widows' experiences of their personal communities during transition (Pawson, 1999:25; Silverman, 2006). Validity was improved further in this study through the use of triangulated methods and prolonged engagement in the field (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998; Mays and Pope, 2002; Cresswell, 2003). By using interviews, personal community diagrams and an unfolding development of focus on Christmas and Christmas cards over a period of time, a weaving together of different strands of data became possible. This led to a more nuanced picture of personal communities in everyday life. In addition, field notes and a reflective diary were kept throughout the course of the study providing detailed background and participant information. This can be seen to increase the trustworthiness and rigour of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Rose and Webb, 1998) as well as the transferability of the findings (Finlay, 2006).

Reliability was increased in this study through the inclusion of an audit trail, demonstrated by clear accounts of data collection and analysis, including dated software documents in the Appendices (Finlay and Ballinger, 2006). In addition, reliability was further increased by conducting pilot interviews to ensure that the personal community diagram and initial interview schedule acted as appropriate tools (Silverman, 2006; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). Furthermore transcribing

taped interviews verbatim (Silverman, 2006) and using thematic analysis, as in this study, 'lends an aura of legitimacy, replicability, and predictability to qualitative findings' (Luborsky, 1994:205). Moreover as this study's findings are consistent with those of previous findings from personal community diagrams, in identifying network typologies broadly consisting of family and friends (Fiori et al., 2008), this data may be more generalisable.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined, discussed and justified the methodological approach and methods adopted in order to address the research questions identified in the previous chapter. In addition, the chapter has considered the strengths and limitations of the study, including the ethical and problematic issues encountered and how these were resolved. Finally the chapter discussed the strategies adopted throughout the research process in order to increase the validity and reliability of the empirical data.

The following two chapters present the findings from the women's personal community diagrams, that is the structure of their personal communities. The subsequent two chapters go on to present the findings from the women's interview transcripts, that is the content of their personal communities.

Introduction to Section Two

This section of the thesis is concerned with the structure of the personal communities of the older widows in this study and presents the findings from the older widows' personal community diagrams constructed and revised over three stages. Chapter 4: The personal communities of older widows, identifies the baseline personal community types of the women at stage one, addressing the research question - what are the personal community types of older widows? Chapter 5: Mapping social ties over time, identifies longitudinal changes in the women's personal communities, including shifts in personal community type at stages two and three, addressing the research question – does a longitudinal design reveal change in personal communities and social convoys during widowhood? The section concludes with an appraisal of the personal community diagram data and identifies additional research questions to be addressed in section three.

Chapter 4: The personal communities of older widows

Introduction

This chapter identifies the personal community types of the older widows in this study through the analysis of their personal community diagrams at the first stage of interviews. The findings in this chapter establish a starting point for the longitudinal data that follow in the thesis.

First, the chapter outlines the size and composition of the women's personal communities, including the centrality of personal community members. Family appear to be central to the personal communities of the majority of the older women in this study. Second, the chapter presents a typology of the older widows' personal communities. Six types are apparent, composed of different combinations of family, friends and others. Only one of the twenty-six women's personal community diagram data did not fit into any of the types identified. Finally, the types are outlined and case studies and examples of personal community diagrams are given to illustrate each type, including the anomaly. Pen portraits of all of the women obtained from the initial interviews are provided in Appendix 14, and some brief portraits appear here alongside the given case studies. Accounts from the initial interviews are included to illustrate what the women were saying about their social relationships as they constructed their diagrams. Some of the women had been widowed longer than others, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the information in this chapter reflects their position during the first stage of interviews.

4.1: Personal community diagrams at stage one

Personal community diagrams were used as tools to identify and describe the structural framework of the women's social ties, as analysed in the methodology and methods chapter. Although size of network, frequency of contact and geographic proximity of network members are considered, the emphasis of this study is to explore the nature of personal communities in terms of social relationships with family, friends, and others. Therefore the structural criteria for establishing personal community types focuses on the balance of number of family, friends and others, and the centrality of those ties.

Size of personal communities

The number of people included in personal community diagrams during the first interview ranged from six in the smallest personal community, to thirty-four in the largest personal community. The average number of personal community members in this sample was twenty, the median twenty-three, and the mode seventeen. Therefore if we take this to be an average-size personal community, personal communities with fewer members than seventeen are described as small and those with more than twenty-three large. The distribution of personal community size in the sample at the first stage of interviews is as follows:

Small <17	10
Average 17-23	9
Large >23	7

Composition of personal communities

The number of family members included in diagrams ranged from two to twenty-three. This included 'fictive kin' such as stepchildren and godchildren (see literature review, p44). The number of friends ranged from zero to sixteen. This included neighbours and ex in-laws who were primarily deemed to be friends. The number of others ranged from zero to twelve. Others largely consisted of neighbours, but also included people such as shopkeepers, counsellors, home carers, ministers and gardeners.

Centrality and balance of personal community members

When completing their personal community diagrams the women were asked to name people very close and important to them in the inner circle and people less close but still important to them in the middle and outer circles, as discussed in Chapter 3. It is useful at this point to define some of the terms used in this and the following chapter:

- *Immediate* – blood relatives such as children, grandchildren and siblings placed in the inner circle of diagrams.
- *Less immediate* – blood relatives such as cousins, nieces and nephews placed in the middle and outer circles of diagrams.
- *Close, intimate or primary ties* – family, friends or others placed in the inner circle of diagrams.
- *Less close or secondary ties* – family, friends or others placed in the middle and outer circles of diagrams.
- *Out of area* – personal community members residing some distance away, whereby daily or weekly visits were less common.
- *Individual friends* – stand alone friends, such as best and close friends.

- *Collective friends* – friends belonging to the same clubs or organisations.
- *Informal others* – neighbours, shopkeepers, gardeners.
- *Formal others* – professionals, such as doctors or members of the clergy.

Inner circle

All of the women placed family members in the inner circle of their diagrams, with fifteen of the women placing only family members in the inner circle. The remaining eleven women placed a combination of family, friends and others in their inner circles. Family members placed in the inner circle tended to be immediate, mainly children and grandchildren, but others included siblings, and parents were some times included. Friends placed in the inner circle were referred to as 'best' or 'closest' friends. Only women with very few close family or with close family that lived out of the area or overseas placed neighbours and others in the inner circle of their diagrams, suggesting that neighbours and others assume more importance in the absence of family.

Middle circle

Eight out of the twenty-six women placed a combination of family and friends in the middle circle of their diagrams. Five placed only friends, four only family, four friends and others, three a combination of family, friends and neighbours/others, one neighbours/others, and one only others. Family placed in this circle tended to be less immediate, such as siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, but some of the women included less close children and grandchildren. Friends placed in this circle were deemed 'good', neighbours tended to live next-door or next door but one.

Outer circle

In the outer circle, eight women placed only friends, seven women friends and neighbours, two women family and friends, two women only neighbours, one woman family, friends and neighbours/others, and one woman friends and neighbours/others. Five of the women did not place any members in the outer circle of their diagrams. Family placed in this circle tended to be less immediate, such as distant cousins. Friends from organisations and other neighbours were also common in this circle.

The centrality of the network members suggests that family form the most intimate social ties for most of the women in this study, with friends, neighbours and others appearing more frequently in the less close middle and outer circles of the diagrams. However, some of the women may have felt obliged to include family in their inner circles as this is a normative expectation, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 (p46, p68).

4.2: A typology of personal communities

From analysis of the personal community diagrams it was possible to identify six different personal community types among the older widows in this study at stage one. These included 'family only', 'concentrated family', 'diluted family', 'friend with family centrality', 'friend with mixed centrality', and 'mixed with family centrality'. As discussed in the previous chapter, a series of analytical stages (p83) were completed in order to establish the personal community types.

Although different personal community types are apparent among the older widows in this study, there is a 'blurring of boundaries' as with any typology, and it is important to note that not everyone fits neatly into a distinct type. One of the women in this study did not fit into any of the types at stage one.

The types are constructed empirically and are only illustrative of the personal communities of the older widows in this study and are thus not general or exhaustive. A study with a different population may lead to the identification of different types of personal communities. However, the typology identified in this study shares some similarities with the existing social support network and personal community typologies outlined in Chapter 2 (Wenger, 1991,1997; Litwin, 1995; Litwin and Landau, 2000; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Similarities and differences are discussed fully in Chapter 8. Table 4.1 outlines a typology of the personal communities found in this study, including their characteristics.

Table 4.1 Typology of personal communities found in this study

<i>Family only</i>	<i>Concentrated family</i>	<i>Diluted family</i>	<i>Friend with family centrality</i>	<i>Friend with mixed centrality</i>	<i>Mixed with family centrality</i>
Family members only	Majority family members	Majority family members	Majority friends	Majority friends	Equal number of family, friends and others
Family only in centre of diagram	Family only in centre of diagram	Friends and others in centre of diagram along with close family	Family only in centre of diagram	Friends and others in centre of diagram along with close family	Family only in centre of diagram
Mainly intimate ties	Mainly secondary ties	Mainly intimate ties	Mainly secondary ties	Equal number of intimate and secondary ties	Mainly secondary ties
Small networks	Majority average or large networks	Varies	Small or average networks	Majority small networks	Average or large networks
2 of the women had this type	8 of the women had this type	6 of the women had this type	4 of the women had this type	3 of the women had this type	2 of the women had this type

4.3: Personal community types

This section of the chapter outlines the personal community types identified in this study. Case studies and examples of personal community diagrams are given to illustrate each type, including the anomaly. Although only one personal community diagram is included per type, a number of telling accounts given by the older widows as they constructed their diagrams are included to fully illustrate the characteristics of each type. As the 'concentrated family' personal community type is the most common, a greater number of accounts are included to encompass a range of experiences.

The 'family only' personal community type

This type of personal community is one of the least common in the sample, two of the women had this type of network, Marilyn and Hannah. This type is made up of family members only with no friends or others appearing in the diagrams. Most family ties in this type are intergenerational and intimate, only around one sixth of family ties are generational and none of these are intimate. Ties all live locally and are seen between daily and weekly. One of the women, Hannah, visits a club once a week. The two women with this type also have the smallest personal communities in the sample.

Figure 4.1 is an example of a 'family only' personal community diagram. Hannah lives alone in a large semi-detached house in the suburbs of a city. She has lived there for fifty years. She is sixty-eight years old and attends church every week. She does not drive. She moved to England from Poland following the end of the Second World War and worked in the potteries industry. She married and had three sons, her first husband died at the age of forty-three.

At the time of the first interview, Hannah had lost her second partner of twenty-one years just two months earlier. She felt that being widowed had affected her health and well-being, she said that she was forgetting things, and was 'suffering' and sad. She was also having difficulty sleeping. Before her partner died, Hannah and he had many shared interests as she explained:

I had a good life with Peter. He had a little car and we'd been going out, not out for meal or anything like that you know, just seeing the countryside you know. And we would go once a week to the Polish centre. And we had been going church regular, every Sunday for the mass.

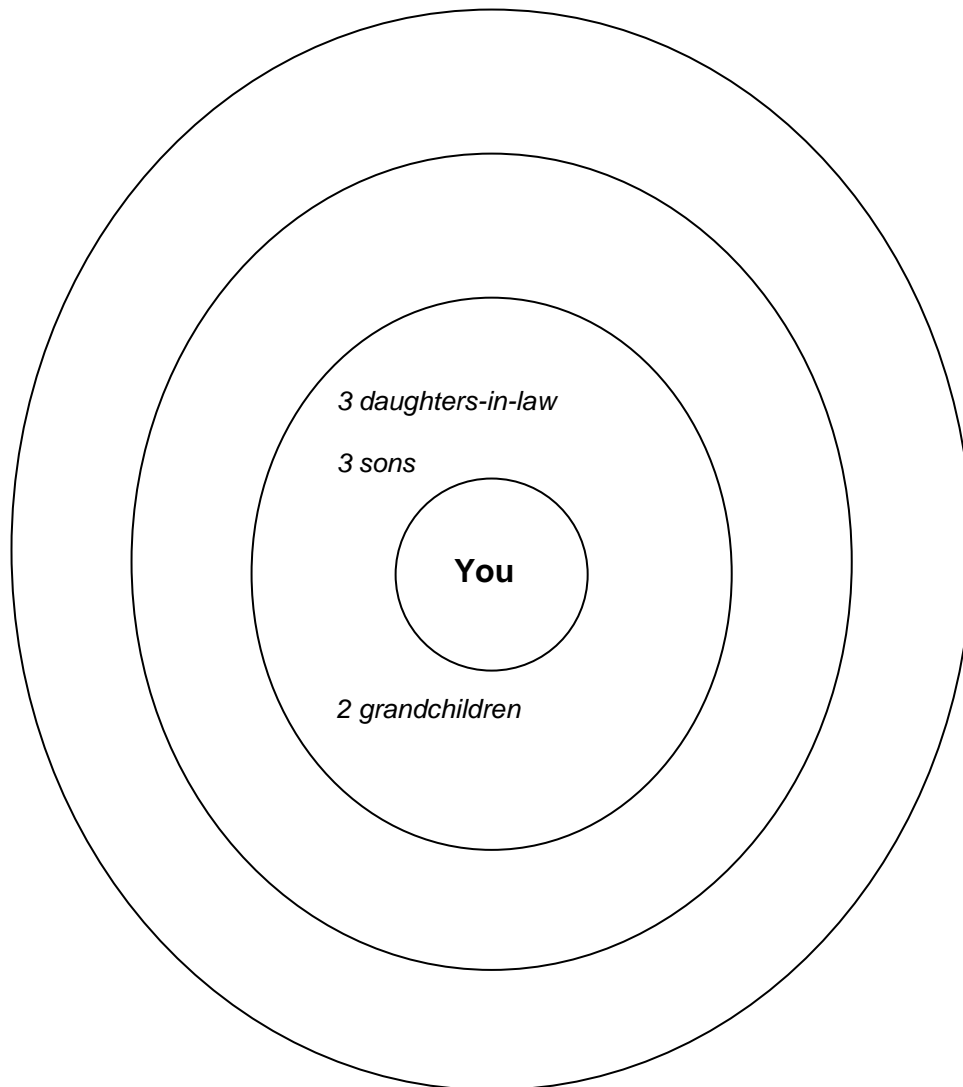
Throughout the initial interview the importance of family to Hannah is very evident and this is demonstrated as she constructed her diagram:

I've got my three sons, three sons and their wives and their children, the grandchildren, they are the closest, definitely. I feel secure with them. Because having a family, you cannot expect any one else to devote so much time to you as they do.

Hannah placed eight intergenerational family members in the inner circle of her diagram, three sons, three daughters-in-law and two granddaughters, which reflects the intimacy of these ties. Consisting of eight, Hannah's personal community is smaller than average and is the second smallest in the sample.

Figure 4.1 Example of a 'family only' personal community type

Hannah's diagram



Marilyn, whose personal community consisted of just six members, is seventy-three years old and had been widowed for three years at the time of the first interview. Although Marilyn's two children provide practical support, Marilyn highlighted the constraints to family relationships:

Well I don't see them that often. They're all so busy you know, they've all got work to do and their own family and their own house and their gardens to look after. So I don't really see a lot of them. Only when Gill comes to take me shopping and Peter comes to do the lawns and that's it you know...

Generational family contacts can be even more difficult to maintain due to age and disability, as Marilyn explained in this account concerning her sister and brother-in-law:

Well she's got, her back's going, she's got arthritis and she can't walk very well, so she, and my brother-in-law he goes to dialysis three times a week and he's got angina. You know they just can't come and visit me because they are too ill.

Although family are central to Marilyn's personal community these relationships are constrained by a number of factors.

The 'concentrated family' personal community type

This type is the most common, eight of the women had this type of personal community: Alice, Clarice, Beatrice, Julia, Mary, Deirdre, Amy and Doreen. This type is made up of a majority of family members with fewer friends and others appearing in the diagrams. All intimate ties in this type are family members: only family members are placed in the centre of diagrams. This type is made up mainly of secondary ties, most members are placed in the middle and outer circles of diagrams. Six out of the eight women had a majority of secondary ties in their diagrams. Most family ties are intergenerational, the highest number in the sample, and the majority of these are intimate. Around half as many family ties are generational and even fewer of these are intimate. Most friends are individual, and all secondary ties, around one third of friends are collective. Five of the eight

women included informal others and one woman a formal other in their diagrams, all of these ties were secondary.

Six of the eight women have between one and seventeen close ties that live out of area, most of these contacts are seen every one to two months and are in telephone contact either daily or weekly. However, one woman's close family live in Australia and are only seen every one to two years. Ties that do live locally are seen either daily or weekly. Five of the eight women belong to between one or more clubs or organisations that they visit weekly. Personal communities of this type tended to be of an average or large size.

Figure 4.2 is an example of a 'concentrated family' personal community diagram. Beatrice lives alone in a semi-detached house on the outskirts of a city. She has lived there for nineteen years. Aged sixty-two, she is the youngest woman in the sample. She worked as a 'home help' for thirty-two years and retired at fifty-eight due to ill health. Beatrice has two sons, one of whom lives in Spain. She drives and is the main carer for her elderly mother.

At the time of the first interview she had been widowed for three years. Her husband died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of fifty-two, shortly after taking early retirement. Beatrice and her husband had a limited social life due to working different shifts but were able to spend more time together once he retired. She reflected on this during the initial interview:

We were like passing ships sometimes. Because I sometimes worked seven days a week, so he could be on nights, and he came in and I went to work. After we retired we were both at home which was a lovely time...er... Because he'd always done shift work and so we were able to do things we'd never done like go shopping together and things like that. And it was a lovely time. It was a short time really.

As with Hannah, family are important as highlighted by Beatrice as she added members of her family to the inner circle of her diagram during the initial interview:

I've got Mother haven't I? And then I've got my two sons, sister...er...grandchildren, so that's my immediate family. Oh I've got my daughters-in-law, there you are that's the family. I think grandchildren are good for you, they bring you out, you know, they do, they take your mind off things.

However, unlike Hannah's 'family only' personal community, Beatrice went on to add secondary ties, friends to the middle circle, and neighbours and friends to the outer circle of her personal community diagram:

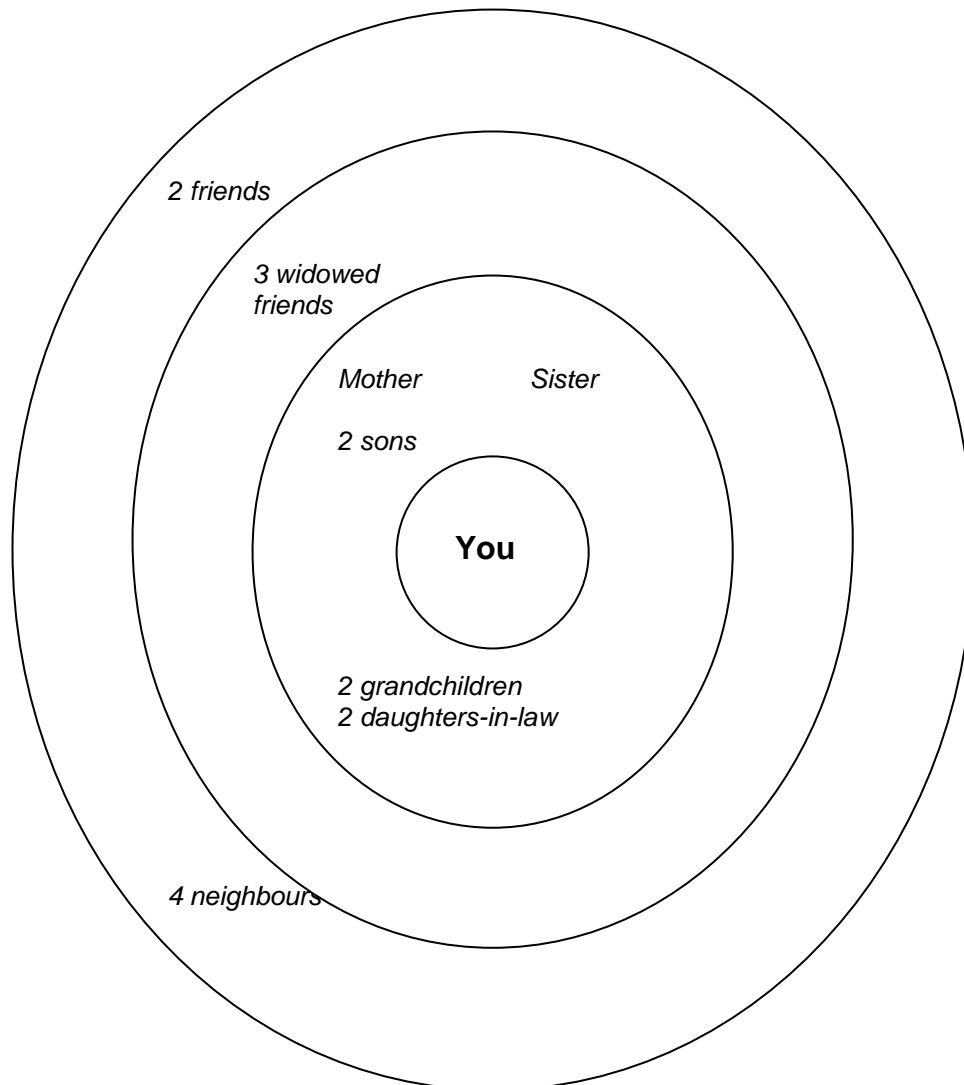
The friends I go out with are May, Arlene and Beryl, and those are all widows. And then...er...Sarah across the road, these are neighbours. Amy she came and sat with me once a week at night. And...er... there is Beverly.

Beatrice had interests and friendships outside of her marriage prior to widowhood as a result of her and her husband working different shifts, this may explain why Beatrice places friends as well as family in her personal community diagram.

Beatrice's personal community is of average size, consisting of seventeen members, eight of these ties are intimate, her mother, sister, two sons, grandson and granddaughter, and two daughters-in-law. Nine are secondary, three widowed friends placed in the middle circle, and two friends and four neighbours placed in the outer circle.

Figure 4.2 Example of a 'concentrated family' personal community type

Beatrice's diagram



Amy aged sixty-six, has a personal community consisting of thirty-three members. She had been widowed for three years at the time of the first interview, and although she placed close family in the centre of her diagram she described the negative as well as positive implications of having dense, geographically proximal family ties:

I've got six children and they smothered me. I had to tell them to leave me alone (laughs). I'd get in the house and the phone would go 'Your tea is on the table come across'. And I'd got it coming from three different sons. I said 'I can't be two places'. So the youngest one, I used to go there for me tea, I used to go the other one for me dinner, and me daughter she was at my side all the while, and me grandson, them two still are. And er now I'm trying to break away from them. They don't like it (laughs).

Doreen, aged sixty-seven, had been widowed for nine months at the time of the first interview. Like Amy she has a large personal community consisting of thirty-four members. However, unlike Amy whose children live close by, Doreen's children, who are placed in the inner circle of her diagram, all live out of the area, which appears to reinforce her independence and demonstrates their family practice:

Oh every week I have contact with my children. And er sometimes more, you know. My eldest daughter is probably the one who rings more but we just ring one another when we feel we need to...er... I don't ring, I wouldn't ring everyday...I think they've got their lives and I've got my life to lead. And I'm too young to be thinking I'm going to rely on them yet because we're not that kind of family.

Doreen is active in her local church as well as in the U3A. She explained the importance of wider ties during the early days of widowhood:

There are friends from the church and most of those just came to see me here you know. They had never been to our house before but they made the effort to come and see me here, which was good, yeah. I never felt isolated.

For Doreen these are friends in a wider sense, and are not annotated individually on her personal community diagram, rather they appear as 'friends of church' in the outer circle of her diagram.

Deirdre, whose personal community consists of twenty-five members, is seventy-two years old and had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview. Although Deirdre placed members of her intergenerational family in the centre of her diagram, she was also keen to retain her independence and continue to mix with people of her own age. As she explained:

You don't like to think that you are imposing on your children. You don't like to be dependent on your children. I wouldn't want that. So I've tried to say 'Look carry on with your own life, do what you've got to do, I'm alright'. I think going out and being on the committees and going out and helping other people really has been a big help to me...you know going out and still meeting people of me own generation.

Deirdre placed five friends from her committees in the outer circle of her personal community diagram.

Julia, aged seventy-five, had been widowed for one year at the time of the first interview. She has a personal community consisting of seventeen members. As Julia's intimate intergenerational family, her daughter and grandchildren, live in Australia, she relies on the local generational support of her sister whose husband is terminally ill:

She's been ever so good. But she likes her own life, which I can't grumble because we don't know how long her husband's going to be here for, or well enough to go out for. They've been absolutely wonderful. Otherwise I don't know what I would have done. I mean one part of me said 'I could go and live in Australia, Jayne would have me at the drop of a hat', you know, go there. But er it's leaving everything behind, you know, seventy-five years worth of living.

When Julia's sister is unavailable she relies on the support of a younger friend she used to work with who she placed in the middle circle of her personal community diagram:

I said to her 'My sister is going away in a fortnight again'. I said 'Can I rely on you if I need you?' And she said 'Of course you can...if you want anything you ring me'. So I feel a bit better knowing that I've got somebody around me.

Julia's account demonstrates the difficulties faced by older widows whose intimate intergenerational family members are geographically dispersed and unable to give immediate support when it is needed.

The 'diluted family' personal community type

This is the second most common type of personal community, six of the women had this type: June, Jessie, Anna, Jane, Molly and Moira. This type is also made up of a majority of family members, with fewer friends and others. However, unlike the 'concentrated family' type, this type also has intimate ties with friends and others as well as family, that is friends and others appear in the centre of diagrams as well as family members. Unlike the 'concentrated family' type, this type of personal community is made up mainly of intimate ties: four out of the six women had a majority of their ties in the centre of their diagrams. Most family ties are intergenerational and all of these are intimate, almost a third of family ties are generational and almost all of these intimate.

Most friends, two thirds, are individual, and around a third of these individual friends are intimate. The remaining third of friends in this type are collective and are placed in the middle and outer circles of the women's diagrams. Four of the six women included informal others, one of which was intimate, and four of the women included formal others, two of which were intimate. Most of the women with this type have between two and eight close ties that live out of area, and most of these are seen every two weeks to two months. However, one of the women with this type has siblings living in Australia who she has not seen for

'years'. Ties that do live locally are seen between daily and every three weeks. The majority of the women with this type of personal community belong to between one and two clubs or organisations that they visit on a weekly basis. Personal communities of this type tend to vary in size: two of the women had small networks, two average and two large.

Figure 4.3 is an example of a 'diluted family' personal community diagram. Jane lives alone in a semi-detached house in the suburbs of a city. She has lived there for nineteen years. She is seventy-four years old and does not drive. Jane was born in the area, and is one of six children. She left school at fourteen and worked in a delicatessen and then as a painter in the pottery industry. She met her husband at a dance and they married at Christmas when she was twenty-two, she has two daughters. Jane had been widowed for one year and four months at the time of the first interview. She had cared for her husband who died of cancer. During the initial interview she was tearful at times and said her life was 'terrible' since being widowed. She said she was still grieving and had developed a skin condition following her husband's death.

Prior to being widowed Jane and her husband shared a number of interests. They enjoyed socialising and were active members of the local British Legion club where they had many friends. Jane reflected on this during the initial interview:

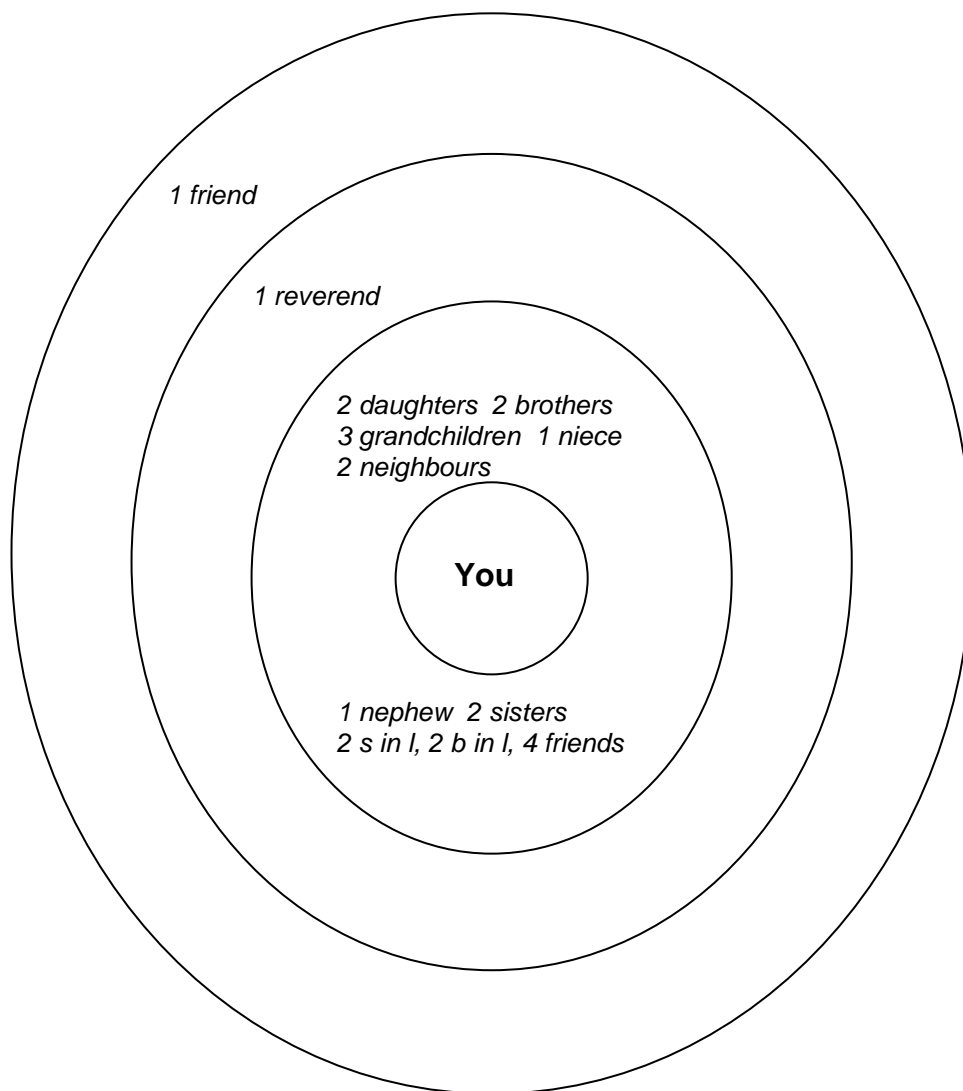
We used to go to the British Legion. He used to go a couple of times a week with Henry, a friend of ours, and Jess and me used to go up on a Thursday with them to have a game of bingo with the social committee. And we used to go and enjoy that.

Since her husband died Jane has been with her friends to the British Legion but has found it upsetting, preferring to go out more to family events:

I go to see the girls' concerts and anything that goes on with the grandchildren. My eldest granddaughter plays the trumpet, and she's in the youth brass.

Figure 4.3 Example of a 'diluted family' personal community type

Jane's diagram



In contrast to Hannah and Beatrice, who placed only family in the inner circle of their diagrams, Jane highlighted the importance of friends and neighbours as well as family when she added intimate members to the inner circle of her diagram:

Henry and Jess are my closest friends, I haven't seen them for sometime but we keep in touch, he helped me so much during his funeral...I'll put Sally and Phil next door because they're always there for me.

Jane's personal community is of average size, consisting of twenty-three members. The majority of her personal community ties are intimate, twenty-one, and include two daughters, three grandchildren, one niece, one nephew, two brothers, two sisters in law, two sisters, two brothers in law, four friends and two neighbours. Only two are secondary, a reverend placed in the middle circle and a friend placed in the outer circle.

Moira, aged sixty-eight, had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview, and has a personal community consisting of twenty-seven members. She described how her existing close friendships have continued into widowhood and how she has made new friends through joining a group:

I've got friends, ten of us used to go out together, we used to go on holiday together and I still go out with them, you know. We go for meals on a Saturday, and we still go on holiday together, you know they've been marvellous they have, really, really marvellous...When you go for meals there's nine of you, although they don't make me feel alone, because the women all sit together on one end of the table and the men on the other, which we did before anyway...I haven't lost I've made friends, I've joined a walking club, and I've made a lot of friends there and I've been on holiday with them.

Four of Moira's closest friends are placed in the inner circle of her personal community diagram along with her family, whereas newer friends are placed in the middle circle.

June is seventy-four years old, she had also been widowed for two years, and has a personal community consisting of fifteen members. In addition to family and a close friend, June also included two ministers in the inner circle of her diagram:

Mathew and Sarah from church come to see me, you know. But I've always had faith in the church. I think sometimes it's that that pulls me through, you know.

In addition to his formal role as a minister, Mathew is also involved in family celebrations, such as June's granddaughter's graduation party: 'Mathew is always invited because he is like a friend not a minister, he's young and he's with it, so I mean I mix across there with them'. The above accounts demonstrate the blurring of family, friends and others and the apparent 'suffusion' of these relationships in this type of personal community (Spencer and Pahl, 2006).

The 'friend with family centrality' personal community type

This is the third most common personal community type, with four of the women having this type: Flora, Cathy, Gloria and Delores. Unlike the three types outlined above this type consists of a majority of friends, with fewer family and others appearing in diagrams. Although more friends appear in the diagrams, only family members are placed in the centre of diagrams. This type of personal community is made up mainly of secondary ties, with all four of the women having a majority of these ties in the second and third circles of their diagrams. Most family ties are intergenerational, and almost all of these are intimate: around one

fifth of family ties are generational and intimate. All friends are individual, the highest number in the sample, and all are secondary ties. One of the four women included an informal other, one a formal other, these were secondary ties. All four women have either one or two close ties living out of area who they see every one to six months. Local ties are seen between daily and weekly. All of the women attend between one and three clubs or organisations weekly. Personal communities of this type tended to be smaller or average in size.

Figure 4.4 is an example of a 'friend with family centrality' personal community type diagram. Flora is seventy-nine years old and lives alone in a warden controlled flat in the city. She has lived there for one year, having moved just after her husband died. She does not drive. She has always lived in the area, and worked in the pottery industry when she left school. She married her first husband when she was seventeen and had one daughter before they divorced. She was married to her second husband for fifty-one years. They had two daughters.

Flora's husband had cancer and died three weeks after she had a heart bypass, so it was difficult for her to grieve due to her own illness. Prior to his death Flora says her husband was disabled and that she cared for him. She described a largely home-based social life with her husband, and although they did go away on holiday, this was still partner-focused: 'We never used to go out other than to visit children, go on holiday, holiday was the mainstay, we used to like to go abroad'.

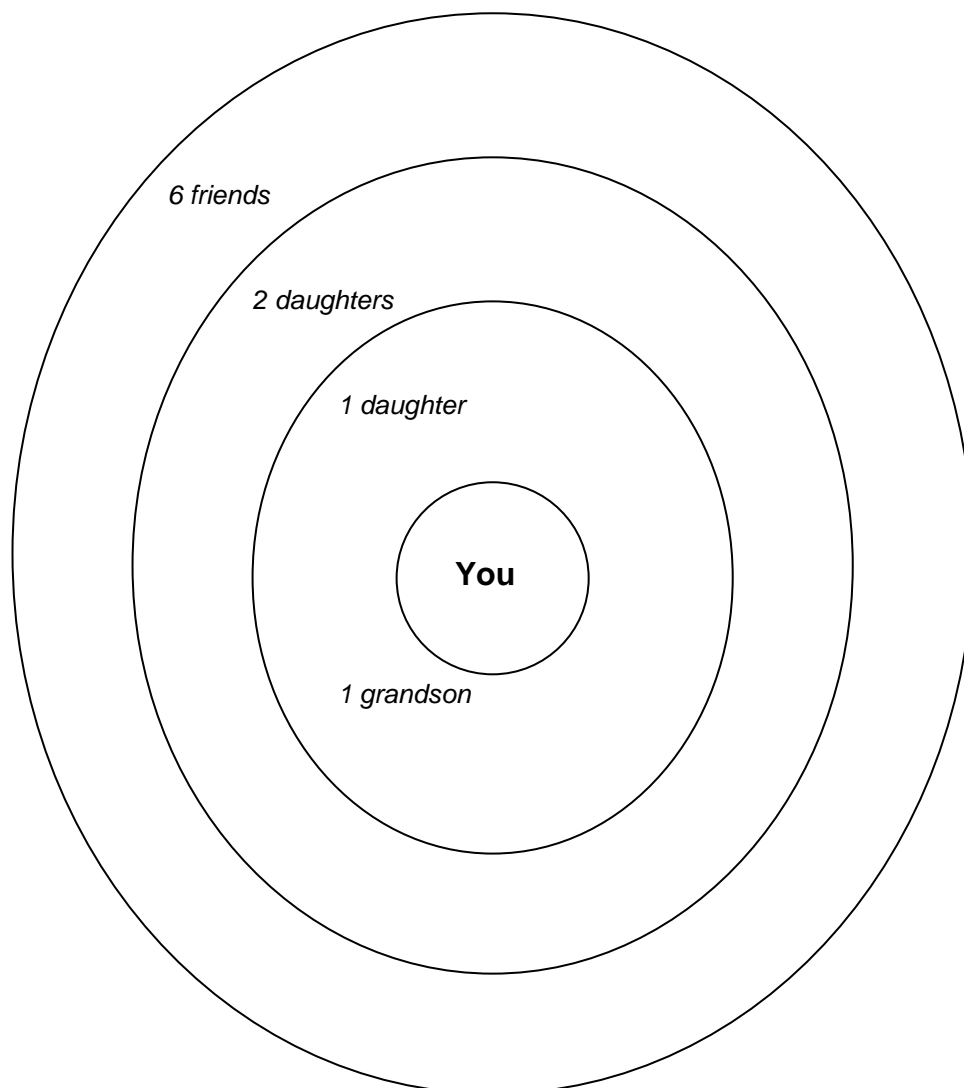
Although the majority of Flora's personal community are friends, like Hannah and Beatrice she emphasised the importance of family when adding members to the inner circle of her diagram, in particular her youngest daughter and grandson:

My daughter, her name's Miriam but I call her Mim. And then I've got the grandson, Tim and they are the very closest, they still, I phone Miriam every morning, nine o'clock at work (laughs). And the girls at work say 'Your mum, nine o'clock', you know. And then I phone at night time after six.

Flora's personal community diagram is smaller than average, consisting of ten members. Two of her ties are intimate, her daughter and grandson, and eight ties are secondary, which include two daughters placed in the middle circle, and five friends and one friend/neighbour placed in the outer circle.

Figure 4.4 Example of a 'friend with family centrality' personal community type

Flora's diagram



Gloria aged seventy-seven, who has a personal community consisting of twenty-two members, had been widowed for one year at the time of the first interview. For Gloria friendship consists of reciprocal support particularly when friends are also neighbours. She described the practical support offered by her friend, placed in the middle circle of her personal community diagram, when she was caring for her husband:

Jean, she makes scones. And when Alf was here she used to bring us two fresh scones, and she's brought me, she used to make lobby with corned beef...and it was enough for us. She's ever such a good woman.

Since her partner died Gloria has provided support to an older friend, also placed in the middle circle of her personal community diagram, when she's been unwell:

Well like Annie at the top, I mean she's nearly ninety, and as I say she's in the home at the moment, but if she rang me and she said 'Can you come up I'm not very well', I've made her a cup of tea and I've gone up and sat with her until the doctor come...and I went up the shop for her to pay phone bills and things like that.

Although Gloria's most intimate ties are with her family, neighbourly friends are also a source of value and support.

Cathy is seventy years old and has a personal community consisting of fifteen members. She had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview. Although friends make up the majority of Cathy's ties they are all placed in the middle circle of her diagram:

The others are just friends, they're not quite as close as my family obviously but I don't know, I wouldn't know where to place them they're all much of a much-ness.

Cathy has known these friends for forty years and sees them regularly socially:

I'm more or less constantly in touch with these, in fact one is coming shortly for a late coffee...I seem to be out and about all of the time, well one friend and I go out for lunch every two or three weeks, and another friend comes to me or I go to her, so there is quite a lot of to-ing and fro-ing.

Cathy, a retired GP, went on to describe her friends and her own independence:

If you're constantly calling on people, it's a real pain for them. And people that I know that are widowed don't call upon me for that type of support either. We've all been professional people so, independent women always, so you know it makes a big difference. And many, two or three of them, were never dependent on their husbands either. So they were already independent when they were widowed.

Although Cathy's friends are an important part of her personal community they are very much social ties and they do not rely or depend on each other in any practical sense. Gloria and Cathy share the same type of personal community, however the nature and experience of their friendships are quite different.

The 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community type

Three women had this type of personal community: Beverly, Patricia and Minnie. This type is made up of a majority of friends, with fewer family and others appearing in diagrams. Friends and others also appear in the centre of the diagrams in addition to family members. On average this type has an equal number of intimate and secondary ties. Most family ties are intergenerational, all of which are intimate: around half as many family ties are generational and around half of these are intimate. Most friends are individual, the second highest number in the sample. Around half of these are intimate, and about one ninth of friends are collective. Two of the three women included informal others, one a formal other,

two of these ties were intimate. The three women have between one and three ties who live out of area, these being seen every two to three months. Local ties are seen between daily and two weeks. Two of the three women belong to one and two clubs or organisations respectively that they attend weekly. Personal communities of this type tended to be small in size, although one was large.

Figure 4.5 is an example of a 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community type diagram. Beverly lives alone in a terraced house in the city. She has lived there for twenty-six years. She is sixty-four years old and does not drive, she feels transport is a problem especially at night. She was born in the North of England. She met her husband at work and says she 'married young'. They moved to the area twenty-six years ago. She has two daughters. Beverly had been widowed for nearly three years at the time of the first interview and cared for her husband for several years before his death as he had rheumatoid arthritis and angina. She says she developed an allergy and felt very tired after he died.

Beverly and her husband had a limited social life during the years immediately prior to his death as he was largely housebound due to his ill health. She also says that they never had a 'big circle of friends', just a few close ones. She reflected on this during the initial interview:

I spent so many years being a carer. So at first I thought I'd have a lot of time on my hands but I didn't really. Because I'm able to go out, not very far a field but into town and places. And I've got a friend I meet, and I've got other friends in town that I meet a couple of times a week for a coffee and a chat.

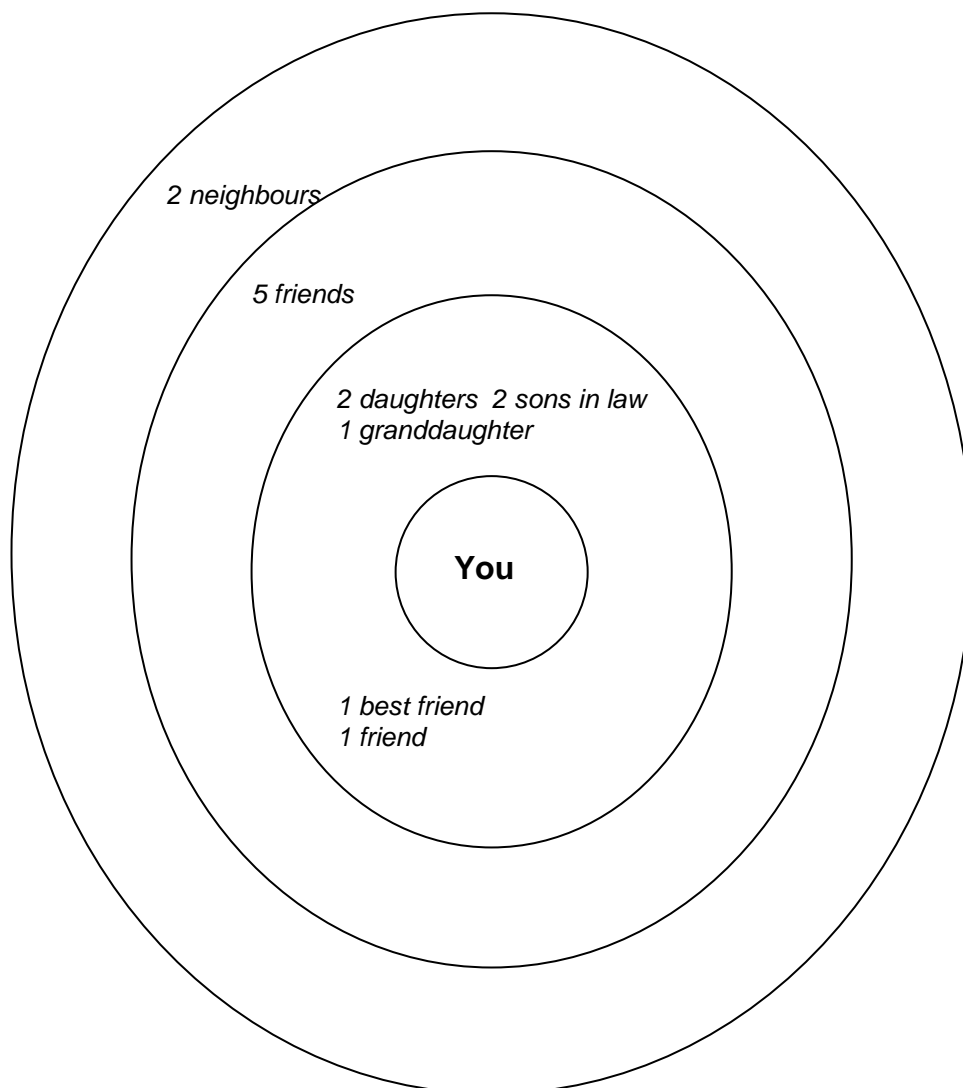
When adding members of her personal community to the inner circle of her diagram, Beverly talked about the importance of close friends as well as family:

I would say Alice is very important, she's really...to me she's a friend. And I'll put May on there, she's my best friend, we go away together, and she's been a widow, is it thirteen years now? So she was very good.

Beverly's personal community is smaller than average, consisting of fourteen members, seven of whom are intimate:- two daughters, two sons-in-law, one granddaughter, and two friends. Five friends were placed in the middle circle and two neighbours placed in the outer circle of her diagram.

Figure 4.5 Example of a 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community type

Beverly's diagram



Patricia, aged seventy-two, has a large personal community consisting of thirty-four members. She had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview and does not have any children. For Patricia, close friends and associates, placed in the inner circle of her personal community diagram, step in when family are not available. In some instances formal support is also viewed as friendship. Patricia described a trip out for her birthday with her two home carers, who are placed in the inner circle of her personal community diagram: 'The home helps took me and another lady, a friend of mine, well they were their friends but they're mine as well now, to lunch'.

Minnie is seventy-two years old and had been widowed for just eleven months at the time of the first interview. Her personal community consists of thirteen members. Minnie placed two friends in the inner circle of her diagram alongside family members. She described the importance of one of these friends in the early days of widowhood:

There's Louis. I mean the day after I buried Reg, because I do a lot of walking, I thought to myself 'I'll go for a walk', you know. And as I was walking along the main road there, who should I see coming out of the front door but Louis. And she'd lost her husband previously, and she said 'Oh Minnie come in and have a coffee'. She goes to our church, and from then on she rang me at half past seven and she was there at half past seven for three months and we'd go for a walk, hail, rain or snow. So I think you can put her in the centre somewhere because she was really, she was there, hail, rain or snow, she'd be there.

Close friendships may be particularly important to Minnie as her family support is restricted due to her son and grandchildren recently moving out of the area and the recent widowhood of her sister. As she explained: 'I seem to get more help from outside of my family if you know what I'm saying, really if I'm honest with you'.

For Beverly, Patricia and Minnie, close friendships can be as important as family relationships and this is reflected in their personal community diagrams as friends are placed alongside family in the inner circle.

The 'mixed with family centrality' personal community type

This type of personal community, like the 'family only' type, is one of the least common. Only two of the women had this type of personal community, Megan and Elsie. The type consists of an equal number of family, friends and others. However, only family appear in the centre of diagrams. Both of the women had a majority of secondary ties. Most family ties within this type are intergenerational, the second highest number in the sample, and almost all of these are intimate. Only around one tenth of ties are generational and none of these are intimate. Unlike the other types, most friends are collective, and all are secondary ties. Around a third of friends are individual, and these too are all secondary. One of the two women included an informal other as a secondary tie. Both women have between four and five ties that live out of area, these are seen between one and four months. Local ties are seen between daily and weekly. Both women belong to either one or two clubs or organisations that they visit weekly. One of the women had an average size personal community, the other a large size personal community.

Figure 4.6 is an example of a 'mixed with family centrality' personal community type diagram. Elsie lives in the suburbs of a city and does not drive. At ninety years old she is the oldest member of the sample. She has always lived in the area. Her father became mentally ill when she was thirteen and her mother died when she was sixteen, so she had to raise her younger siblings. She worked

in various industries including a munitions factory. She married her first husband when she was eighteen, and had two children. Her first husband died in 1968.

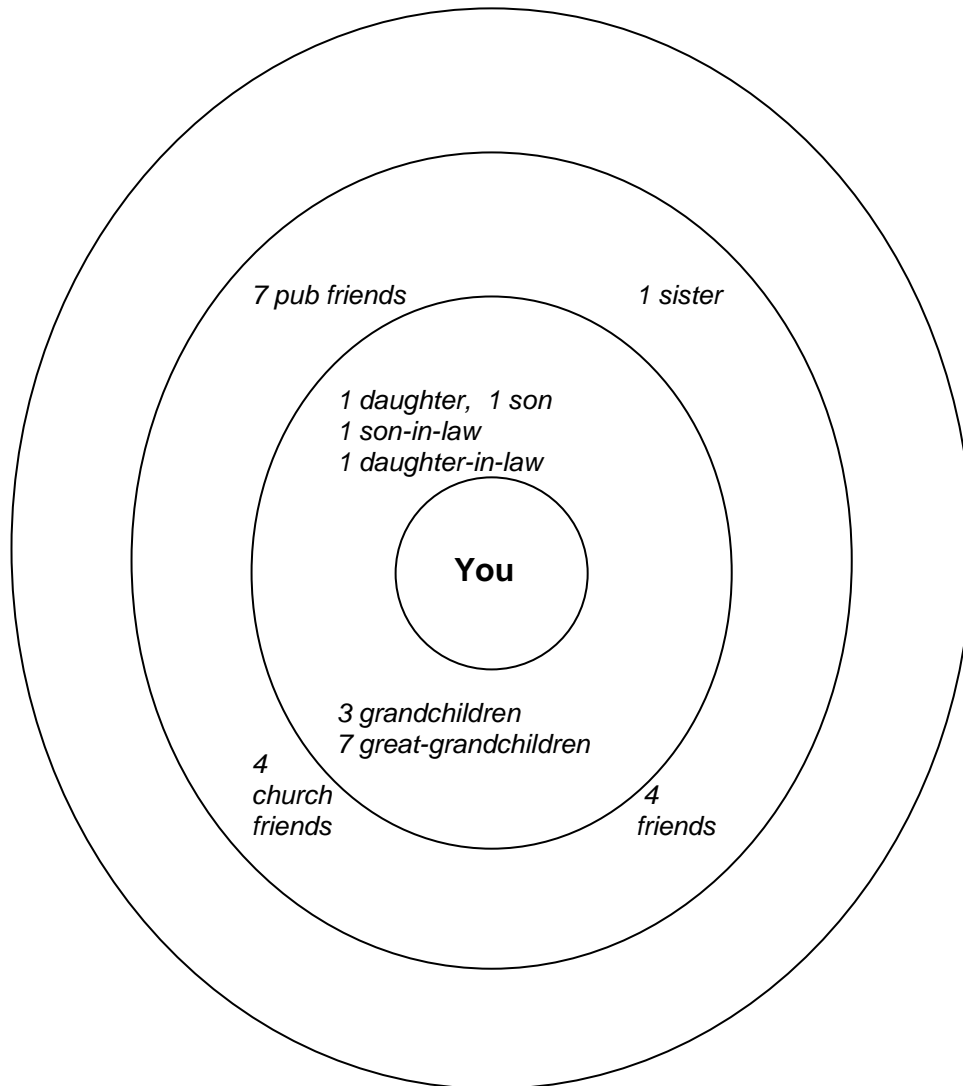
She met her second husband, who was also widowed, while volunteering for the Red Cross and married him in 1970. She had been widowed for one year and six months at the time of the first interview. Her husband was not well for two years and she cared for him until he died. She feels widowhood has affected her health and well-being and she says that she lost a lot of weight. Before she was widowed Elsie and her husband shared many interests, and enjoyed holidays with the family and socialising with their many friends at local clubs and pubs: 'We've had some really lovely holidays together, mostly with Cheryl and Don, and Bob's sisters'. During the initial interview Elsie placed members of her family in the inner circle of her diagram reflecting the intimacy of these ties:

There's Cheryl me daughter and Don me son-in-law. Then there's my son and his wife, Jack and Liz. Who else? Grandchildren...then I've got seven great-grandchildren.

Intergenerational family make up all of the intimate ties in Elsie's personal community. Generational family are placed as secondary ties along with friends: 'I mean I've got me sister Mabel, and then me friends'. Elsie's personal community is larger than average, consisting of thirty ties, fourteen of these are intimate, including her daughter, son, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, one grandson, two granddaughters and seven great-grandchildren. Sixteen are secondary, including her sister, four neighbourhood friends, four church friends and seven pub friends placed in the middle circle of her diagram.

Figure 4.6 Example of a 'mixed with family centrality' personal community type

Elsie's diagram



Megan aged seventy-nine had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview. Her personal community consists of twenty-one members. Megan described her relationship with close intergenerational family, who she moved to be closer to when her husband became ill:

My son, my son, without a doubt yes, without a doubt, he just lives over there, I could throw a stone into his garden, he's very close. I see him everyday, he rings me up and we go out together. He is very supportive and his wife and two children, so it's nice having family...we walk his dogs every morning, and quite often we go out together and things like that, probably do our shopping together. So no, without a doubt he is my greatest support.

Although Megan has an active social life outside of her family, her relationship with her son and his family are of crucial importance, which is reflected in her personal community type.

Anomaly

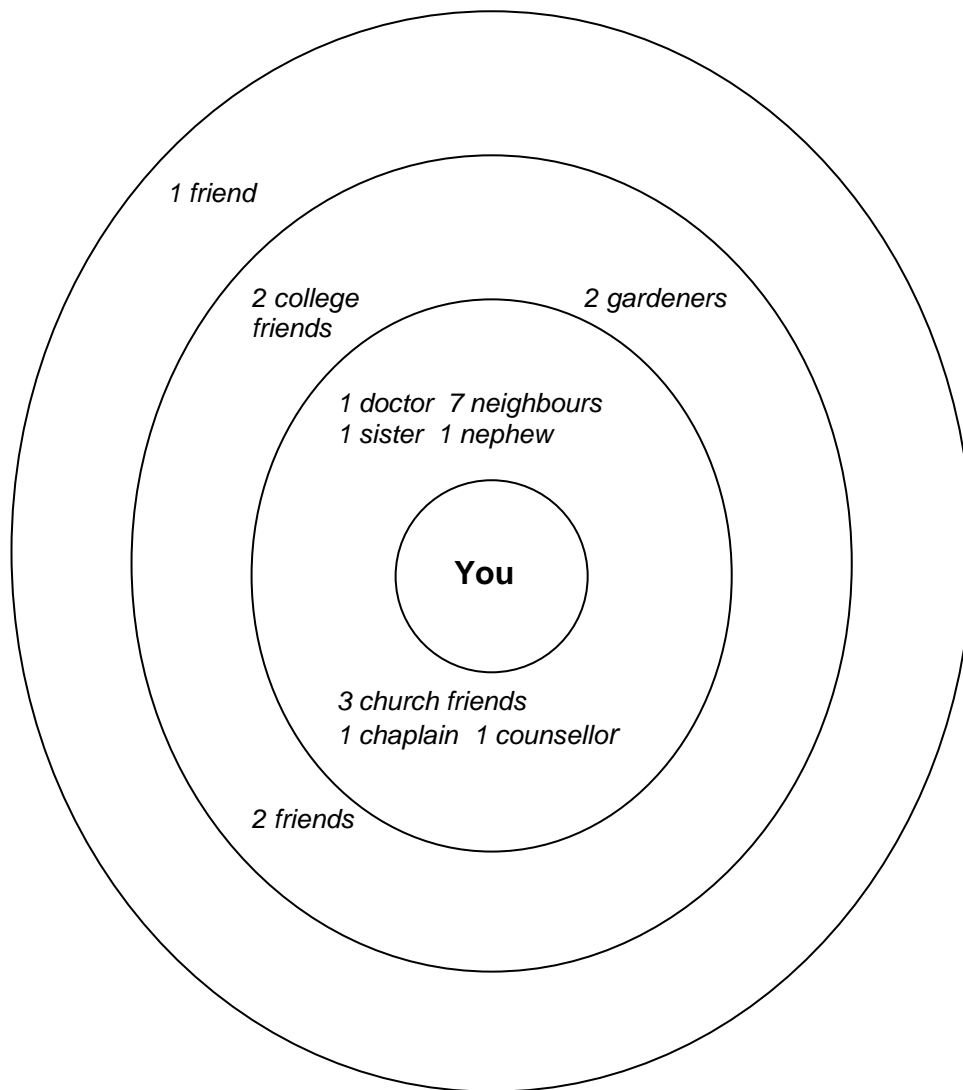
One of the women, Veronica, did not fit into any of the personal community types at stage one. Figure 4.7 shows Veronica's personal community diagram. Veronica lives alone in a bungalow in a semi-rural location. She has lived in her house for twenty years. She is seventy-nine years old and drives. When she was fourteen she worked initially in a printer's office and then learned shorthand and typing, which led to various office jobs. She met her husband through the Church when he was in training to become a minister.

Veronica married at the age of twenty-three. She and her husband were unable to have children, and she has very few family members, just one older sister and a nephew. She retired early to care for her father and then her mother. She had been widowed for nearly three years at the time of the first interview. She cared for her husband when he became ill with cancer and says: 'It's been an ongoing scenario of caring one way or the other'. She and her husband shared most interests and their social life revolved largely around the Church, with most of their friends being fellow ministers or church members. Veronica reflected on this during the initial interview:

Fred was always by my side and sitting with me in church or whatever...when your husband has had the same faith, and you've had such a lovely marriage, you know you've never really split apart in what we've done. Because everything's been done together, we've wanted to do it.

Figure 4.7 Anomalous personal community

Veronica's diagram



Veronica's personal community is of average size, twenty-two members, and is made up predominantly of 'others', with others as well as family and friends placed in the centre of her diagram. The majority of Veronica's ties are intimate. The inner

circle of Veronica's diagram consists of a doctor, seven neighbours, her sister and nephew, three church friends, one chaplain and one counsellor. Secondary ties include two friends, two college friends and two gardeners, placed in the middle circle of her diagram. She placed one 'remote' friend in the outer circle. The majority of her friends are collective and over half of those are intimate.

Veronica included seven informal others, all intimate, and five formal others, three of which were intimate, in her diagram. Most of her ties are local and are seen between daily and every few months. She is a member of two organisations that she visits weekly. Although Veronica included her two family members in the inner circle of her diagram along with close friends, neighbours and others, they do not seem to be particularly 'close' emotionally:

I am just thinking about relatives and my nephew, once every three months, and that is under compunction I think (laughs). Er my sister I don't see unless I go to her, which I always do, she never comes here, so it's one way traffic I'm afraid...so those are the nearest, I don't know about dearest (laughs).

Veronica's personal community contains the fewest number of family members with one of the highest numbers of formal others and the highest number of intimate formal and informal others. Veronica's lack of close kin may account for the inclusion of predominantly others in her personal community. This is demonstrated in an account Veronica gave during the initial interview:

A lovely doctor, Jill, who is a Christian, she's a Roman Catholic, prayed for me right from the start, she does now, and she put her arms around me and loved me every time I used to go and see her. Her support has been wonderful, all the doctors were lovely, but she in particular, she became almost more like a friend, she has yeah.

In this instance it is a 'formal' other that provides emotional support, in other personal community types in the study this is provided by close family or friends.

Conclusion

This chapter has established a baseline of the structure of the women's personal communities, presenting data from initial personal community diagrams and interview transcripts. It has outlined the older widows' personal community types and elaborated on them by giving accounts of the women's relationships with family, friends and others.

Six personal community types are apparent, all of which are made up mainly of local members that have frequent contact. However, those with the 'friend with family centrality', 'friend with mixed centrality' and 'mixed with family centrality' types tend to have close ties that live out of area. In addition, more women with the 'friend with family centrality', 'friend with mixed centrality' and 'mixed with family centrality' types belong to groups and organisations. It can be seen that women with the 'family only', 'concentrated family' and 'diluted family' types are less likely to be members of clubs and organisations. It is possible that women with 'family-oriented' personal communities may feel less in need of attending clubs and organisations due to greater and closer ties with family members. In contrast those with 'friend' and 'mixed' type communities may be more likely to attend groups and organisations due to less local family support.

On the whole the women's accounts of their social relationships reflect the structure of their personal community types. However, they also highlight differences and discrepancies between what some of the women say about their social relationships and where social ties are placed in their personal community

diagrams. This suggests that some of the women may have constructed their diagrams with normative expectations in mind.

For the majority of the older widows in this study family relationships are central to their personal communities, as reflected in the structure of their personal community diagrams. However, the women's accounts also reveal that although family can offer positive support and affirmation, they can also be a source of negativity and restriction. These relationships are not all straight-forward and some may present challenges in later life widowhood.

Friends are also an important component of the women's personal communities. Some older friendships are continuous and described as close and almost like family, whereas newer friendships may form from shared interests and neighbourliness. In addition, community ties with informal and formal others are an important feature of many of the women's personal communities. For many social interaction through community resources and organisations increased when they became widowed.

Although the women's accounts largely reflect their personal community types, they also highlight diversity in terms of background, age and time widowed. The following chapter goes on to explore the structure of personal communities over time through the analysis of the older widows' personal community diagrams at the second and third stage of interviews.

Chapter 5: Mapping social ties over time

Introduction

The previous chapter identified the personal community types of the older widows at stage one. This chapter goes on to explore the structure of the older widows' social relations over time through the analysis of their personal community diagrams at the second and third stage of interviews.

First, the size and composition of personal community diagrams at stages two and three are outlined, including the centrality of members. Overall there was an increase in members of personal communities between stages one, two and three. A greater number of friends were added particularly during the second interview, although family continued to form the most intimate of the women's social ties throughout.

Second, longitudinal changes in personal communities are outlined including shifts in personal community type, four types are apparent at the final stage of interviews. Accounts from the second and third interviews are included to illustrate what the women were saying about their social relationships while revisiting their diagrams. In addition, examples of personal community diagrams are given to illustrate alteration and constancy over the three stages.

Finally, the longitudinal data are discussed in relation to the baseline data presented in Chapter 4 in order to examine change and stability in the structure of the women's personal communities during a period of widowhood.

5.1: Personal community diagrams at stages two and three

In addition to constructing personal community diagrams during the initial interview, the women revisited their personal community diagrams during the second (six months later) and third (after a further twelve months) interviews. This enabled them to add members and to document any changes in their personal communities. Appendix 15 outlines the women's personal community diagrams at stages one, two and three. Twenty-five of the original twenty-six women took part in the interviews at stage two and twenty-one at stage three (see Chapter 3).

Size of personal communities

The number of people included in personal community diagrams during the second interview ranged from eight in the smallest personal community to forty-five in the largest. The average number of personal community members at the second stage of interviews was twenty-three, the median twenty-six, and the mode twenty. Therefore if we take this to be an average size personal community, personal communities with fewer members than twenty are described as small and those with more than twenty-six large. The distribution of personal community size in the sample at the second stage of interviews is as follows:

Small <20	10
Average 20-26	5
Large >26	10

The number of people included in personal community diagrams during the third interviews ranged from ten in the smallest personal community to forty-seven in the largest. The average number of personal community members at the third

stage of interviews was twenty-five, the median twenty-nine, and the mode twenty-four. Therefore if we take this to be an average size personal community, personal communities with fewer members than twenty-four are described as small and those with more than twenty-nine large. The distribution of personal community size in the sample at the third stage of interviews is as follows:

Small <24	10
Average 24-29	4
Large >29	7

In addition to gaining members some of the women lost members of their personal community, five women had lost six members overall by the second interview, these included friends and a vicar. By the third interview eight of the women had lost ten members overall, these included a sibling, friends and a neighbour. Table 5.1 illustrates the average number of personal community members at stages one, two and three overall. Table 5.2 illustrates these by personal community type.

Table 5.1 Average number of personal community members at stages one, two and three

<i>Average number Of members</i>	<i>Stage one</i>	<i>Stage two</i>	<i>Stage three</i>
Mean	20	23	25
Median	23	26	29
Mode	17	20	24

As can be seen from Table 5.1 there was an increase in members overall in the sample between stages one, two and three. Table 5.2 illustrates modest increases in the 'family only' and 'concentrated family' types, and the 'mixed with family centrality' type remains relatively stable over the three stages. More significant increases are apparent in the 'diluted family', 'friend with family centrality' and 'friend with mixed centrality' types, the anomalous personal community also increased significantly in size.

Table 5.2 Average number of personal community members at stages one, two and three by type

<i>Average (mean) number of members by type</i>	<i>Stage one</i>	<i>Stage two</i>	<i>Stage three</i>
Family only	7	9	10
Concentrated family	21	22	23
Diluted family	21	27	30
Friend with family centrality	18	22	25
Friend with mixed centrality	20	27	34
Mixed with family centrality	26	25	26
Anomaly	22	31	46

Composition of personal communities

During the second interview twelve of the women added family members to their personal community diagrams, with twenty-three family members being added overall. These consisted of siblings, nieces, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and cousins. Fourteen of the women added friends to their personal

community diagrams: sixty-two friends were added overall. Two of the women added three others overall, including neighbours and a day centre manager.

At the third interview five women added family members to their personal community diagrams. Ten family members were added overall. These comprised grandchildren, great-grandchildren, brothers-in-law, an ex son-in-law and great-nieces. Eight of the women added friends to their personal community diagrams, thirty-one friends were added overall. One of the women added three others (neighbours). Table 5.3 illustrates the composition of diagrams by family, friends and others at stages one, two and three.

Table 5.3 Composition of diagrams at stages one, two and three

<i>Number of members overall</i>	<i>Stage one</i>	<i>Stage two</i>	<i>Stage three</i>
Family	251	274	284
Friends	193	255	286
Others	69	72	75

As can be seen from Table 5.3 family and friends make up the majority of members of personal communities throughout the three stages. Most family members and others were added during the initial interview. Although most friends were also added during the initial interview, friends were added during the second and third interviews in greater numbers than family or others.

Centrality and balance of personal community members

Members were added to the circles of the women’s personal community diagrams during the second and third interviews as follows:

Inner circle

Six of the women added members to the inner circle of their personal community diagrams during the second interview. These included three stepchildren, nine grandchildren, one great-grandchild, three cousins, and one friend. Four of the women added members to the inner circle of their personal community diagrams during the third interview. These included one grandchild, three great-grandchildren, and one friend.

Middle circle

Thirteen of the women added members to the middle circle of their personal community diagrams during the second interview. These included one brother, one sister-in-law, one aunt, one niece, two great-grandchildren, forty friends, one day-centre manager, and one neighbour. Six of the women added members to the middle circle of their personal community diagrams during the third interview, including three great-nieces, one ex-son-in-law and twenty-two friends.

Outer circle

Nine of the women added members to the outer circle of their personal community diagrams during the second interview. These included one cousin, twenty-one friends and one neighbour. Five of the women added members to the outer circle of their personal community diagrams during the third interview, including two brothers-in-law, eight friends and three neighbours.

The composition of the women's personal community diagrams at stages two and three suggest that family continue to form the most intimate of the women's social ties, with friends and others appearing more frequently as secondary ties in the less close and important middle and outer circles of the diagrams. Table 5.4 outlines the centrality of ties at stages one, two and three.

Table 5.4 Centrality of ties at stages one, two and three

<i>Number of ties by centrality</i>	<i>Stage one</i>	<i>Stage two</i>	<i>Stage three</i>
Inner circle	252 (Family 206) (Non-family 46)	272 (Family 226) (Non-family 46)	277 (Family 230) (Non-family 47)
Middle circle	156 (Family 40) (Non-family 116)	201 (Family 49) (Non-family 152)	227 (Family 52) (Non-family 175)
Outer circle	105 (Family 4) (Non-family 101)	128 (Family 5) (Non-family 123)	141 (Family 5) (Non-family 136)

As can be seen from Table 5.4 most ties were added to personal community diagrams during the initial interview. Only twenty intimate ties, those appearing in the inner circles of diagrams, were added at stage two and only five at stage three. Overall secondary ties, those appearing in the middle and outer circles of diagrams, make up the majority of personal community members and were added in greater numbers than intimate ties during stages two and three. This suggests that the ‘core’ of personal community members were included initially during stage one.

5.2: Personal communities, change and stability

As the personal community diagrams were used at three points over the study it was possible to chart any changes as they happened. Although some of the women's personal communities in terms of size remained relatively stable over the course of the three interviews, others grew quite significantly. The analytical process described in Chapter 3 was repeated at stages two and three in order to establish personal community types. Table 5.5 outlines shifts in personal community type over the course of the study. Shifts took place in all of the personal community types except the 'concentrated family' type, suggesting that this is the most stable.

Table 5.5 Shifts in personal community type

Case	Stage one	Stage two	Stage three
Marilyn	Family only	Concentrated family	Concentrated family
Hannah	Family only	Concentrated family	Concentrated family
Jessie	Diluted family	Anomaly	Diluted family
Jane	Diluted family	Friend with mixed centrality	Friend with mixed centrality
Moira	Diluted family	Anomaly	Diluted family
Flora	Friend with family centrality	Mixed with family centrality	Friend with family centrality
Delores	Friend with family centrality	Friend with mixed centrality	Friend with mixed centrality
Beverly	Friend with mixed centrality	Diluted family	Diluted family
Megan	Mixed with family centrality	Mixed with family centrality	Concentrated family
Elsie	Mixed with family centrality	Concentrated family	Concentrated family
Veronica	Anomaly	Friend with mixed centrality	Friend with mixed centrality

Table 5.6 illustrates the prevalence of types at stages one, two and three. Six types of personal community and one anomaly are evident at stage one, five types and two anomalies are evident at stage two, and four types and no anomalies are evident at stage three. Examples of change and stability in personal communities are outlined below. As in the previous chapter, although only one personal community diagram is included per type, a number of telling accounts are included to fully illustrate change and stability in each type. The ‘concentrated family’ personal community type remained the most common throughout the three stages therefore a greater number of accounts are included to encompass a range of experiences.

Table 5.6 Prevalence of types at stages one, two and three

<i>Personal community type</i>	<i>Stage one</i>	<i>Stage two</i>	<i>Stage three</i>
Family only	2	0	0
Concentrated family	8	11	11 (-1 participant)
Diluted family	6	3 (- 1 participant)	4 (-1 further participant)
Friend with family centrality	4	2	2 (-1 participant)
Friend with mixed centrality	3	5	4 (-1 participant)
Mixed with family centrality	2	2	0
Anomaly	1	2	0

The shift from 'family only' to 'concentrated family'

At the first stage of interviews two of the women had the 'family only' type of personal community, Marilyn and Hannah. During the second and third interviews both women added friends and others to their personal communities shifting their types from 'family only' to 'concentrated family'.

Figure 5.1 illustrates Marilyn's personal community diagram over the three stages. During the second interview Marilyn added two friends to the outer circle of her diagram, one is Hilary a widow who lives nearby, and one is Amy who had been to visit since the initial interview six months earlier and who had recently sent a Christmas card:

This (card) is from my friend, I've got a photograph up there with her cat, I took the photograph when I was at her house. Amy, she's got a car and she comes and we have something to eat and then she usually takes me to her house and we have a coffee and see the cats.

Twelve months on during the third interview Marilyn talked about spending more time with her friend Hilary and a new male companion:

I've got a friend who lives next door but one and we go on holidays together. We go on coaches and we go to Bournemouth and Scotland, we did last year, and we are booked to go this year as well...and I've got a friend, a man friend.

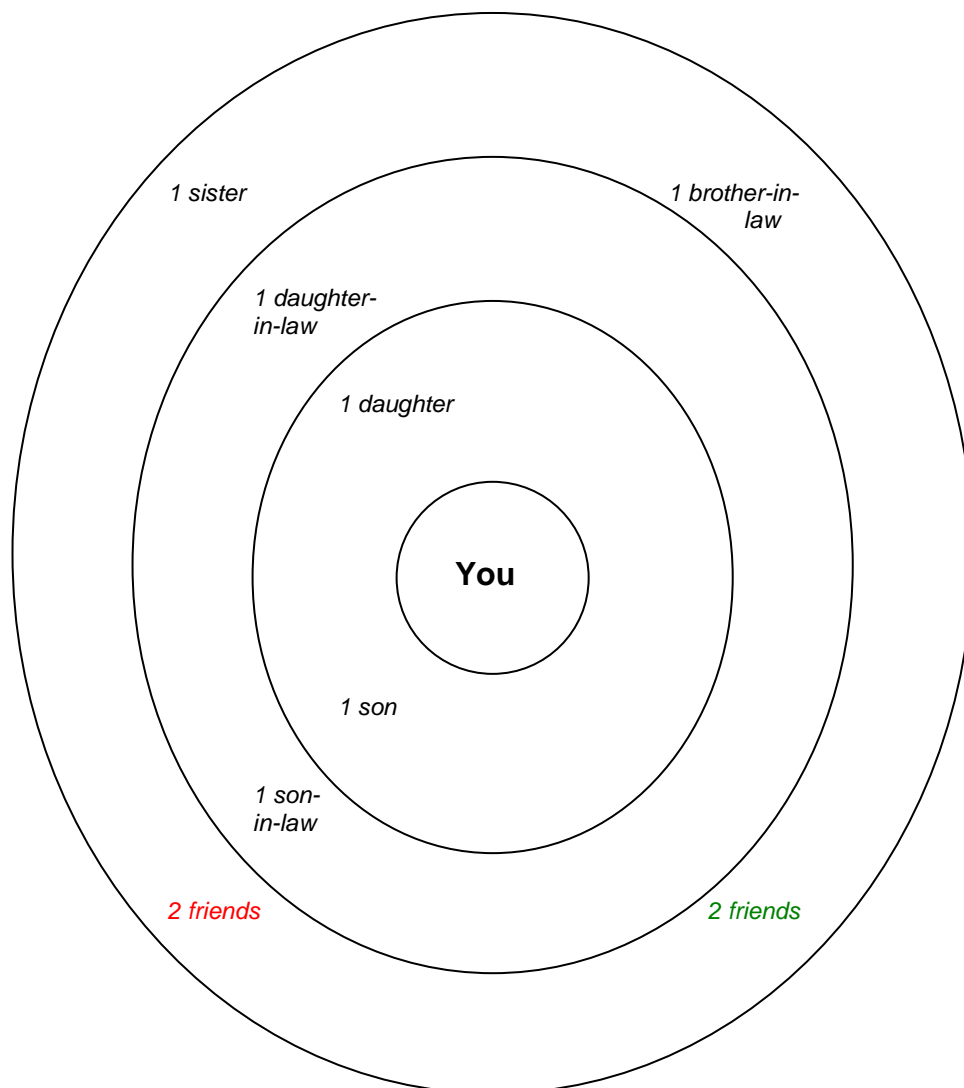
Marilyn added two more friends to the outer circle of her diagram during the third interview:

Hilary's sister, Maureen. I'll put Mo and I don't think I've got any more friends...er I've got Amy, Hilary, Mo, er and Jessica, I knew her from a long time ago...but recently we've met up again, you know.

During the third interview Marilyn reflected on the changes that had occurred since the initial interview eighteen months ago: 'The first time you came I was a bit dull and down and that...you know, but with going out, it's brought me out, you know, myself'. Marilyn's increase in social ties outside of the family over the eighteen-month period demonstrates the dynamic nature of personal communities in a relatively short space of time.

Figure 5.1 Marilyn's diagram over the three stages

1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage



During the second interview Hannah added her day-centre manager and a neighbour to the middle circle of her personal community diagram. The day centre appears to have become more important to Hannah over the last six months:

Oh yes, yes twice a week, I do go there, yes, yes. Enjoy it because a lot of people are, er all pensioners, it's all a lot of widows, yes...and they are all friends and we are all in the same situation, we've lost somebody.

The increased importance of the centre to Hannah is reflected as she added Joanna to her personal community diagram in addition to her family:

Oh er that lady that runs that centre, she's priceless, because she's doing it, a lot of older people, she's like our mother, Joanna, she's the very important one...she's very, very clever and supportive, yes definitely, she always welcomes everybody, she's there for a hug and a love.

Twelve months on during the third interview Hannah's personal community diagram remained the same and although she described having many acquaintances at the centre she chose not to add them individually: 'I've got them I like er...er I love them all, but not very close...my family is first, and er you know, it's just like that, yes, yes keep it the same'. Although family still make up the intimate ties in Marilyn's and Hannah's personal communities, they have widened their networks to include others.

The stable 'concentrated family'

During the first stage of interviews the 'concentrated family' type was the most common, with eight of the women having this type of personal community. At the second stage of interviews three of the other women's personal communities shifted to this type, Marilyn, Hannah and Elsie, and at stage three Megan's

personal community also shifted to this type. No shifts were apparent from the 'concentrated family' type, suggesting that this is the most stable and frequently occurring personal community type in the sample.

Figure 5.2 illustrates Deirdre's personal community diagram over the three stages. Although gains and losses are apparent in Deirdre's 'concentrated family' personal community they are modest and her personal community type is stable throughout the three stages. During the second interview Deirdre talked about significant family events that had taken place since the initial interview six months earlier:

I went to University to watch me granddaughter graduate yesterday, and that was lovely, that was a lovely day. And me other daughter who's forty-five there (points to photograph) she graduated this year...so I'm quite proud of that.

Deirdre added two friends to the outer circle of her diagram during the second interview, one is her ex-boss Jack who visits her once a week, and the other is Chris who she had been on holiday with since the initial interview:

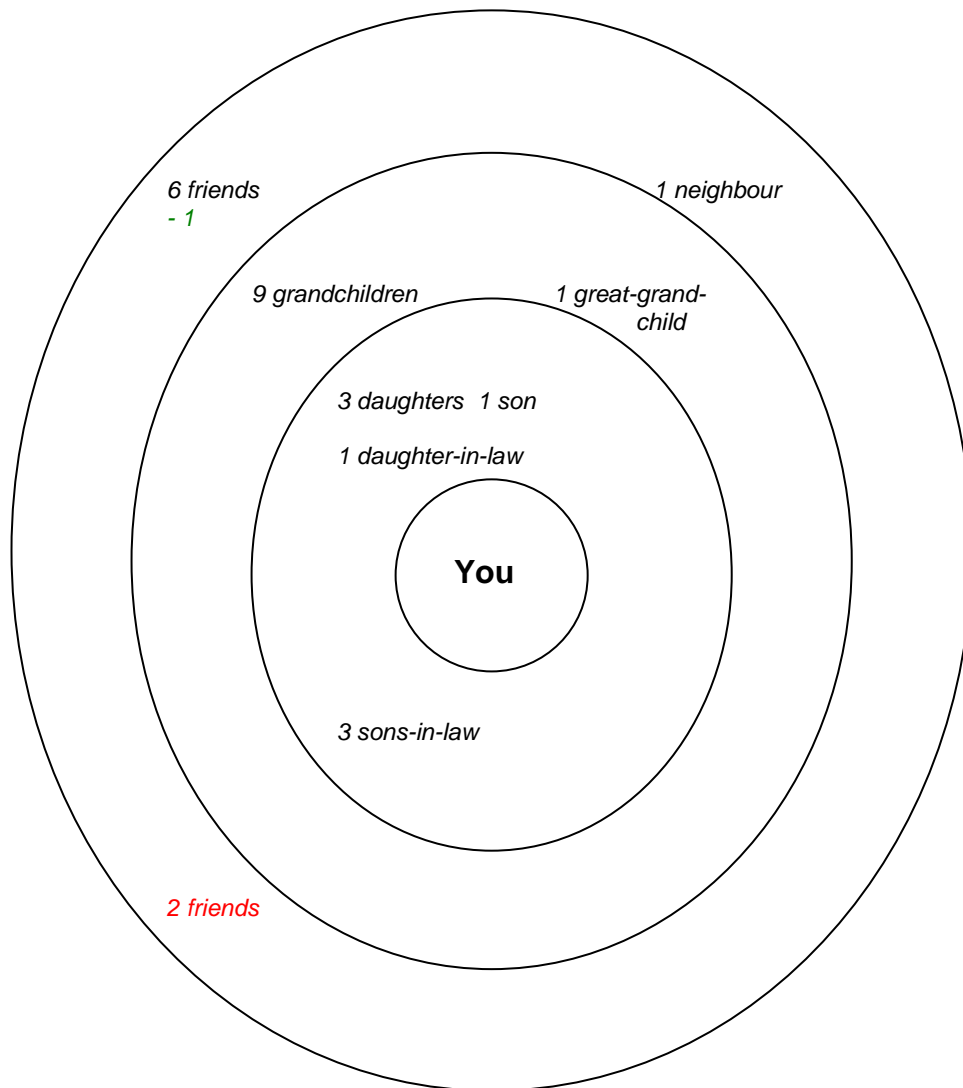
Chris. This is who I've just been to Malta with...she's just an acquaintance really but we went to the Isle of Wight last year because she's on her own.

During the third interview Deirdre talked about significant family events that occurred during the twelve months since the second interview:

I went out to Thailand to see my grandson, er and me and his other nan. We went to Borneo, you know. It's a long flight...I really enjoyed it, it was such an experience.

Figure 5.2 Deirdre's diagram over the three stages

1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage



During the third interview, Deirdre reflected on the loss of one of her friends placed in the outer circle of her diagram but also the constancy of the rest of her personal community:

Pam's disappeared. Me friend Pam she's got a boyfriend, yeah...she's out of the picture all together. I don't see her at all now...we used to go everywhere together as well...so that's one that I've...and there's no extra people to put in. But they are the same apart from Pam.

Close family continue to play an important role in Deirdre's life as reflected in the accounts she gives of significant events over the last eighteen months.

Beatrice's personal community in terms of size also remained relatively stable over the course of the study. However, the six months between the initial and second interview had been a busy time for her as she had visited her son in Spain and had been on holiday with her three widowed friends. During the second interview Beatrice added two new friends, Eileen and Don, to the middle circle of her diagram:

They came to live next door to me mother, and Don hadn't been out for many years until he come to live here. So I introduced them to the club, you see, so that got them coming out and socialising again.

Sadly Beatrice also lost a friend from the outer circle of her diagram:

Sally's died, she's passed away, yes she has. I've missed her very much...she sent for me at the last and thanked me for being such a very special friend...and she died. And I've lost Sally and I really miss her.

The following twelve months were also busy for Beatrice, she reflected on this during the third interview:

Very stressful year last year...er mother was ill. So cutting it down she went into hospital in July and didn't come out until September...what can I say, my life at the moment is in a rut because my life revolves around me mother...so Monday to Sunday it's me mother's time.

Although Beatrice's 'concentrated family' personal community has remained relatively stable her role as a carer for her mother has increased over the eighteen-month period.

During the six months between the initial and second interview Doreen had lost of a friend from the outer circle of her diagram. She also added an aunt of her deceased husband to the middle circle of her diagram during the second interview: 'Paul's relatives have been very good, especially his auntie Elsa, so I will add her, she's been great at keeping in touch, you know'. Twelve months later during the third interview Doreen described a busy year including her continued voluntary work and trips away with both her granddaughter and the U3A. In addition, Doreen's brother-in-law had died and she had new next-door neighbours. She reflected these changes in her diagram:

My brother-in-law who's just died, shall I just put that he's died...I should have put him on before shouldn't I? er...I'm going to put my new neighbours on here...I know I'm a good neighbour to them because they've told me that...they are really nice neighbours I must say.

Doreen's personal community is stable overall, although some losses and gains are apparent, and relationships with her deceased husband's family continue into widowhood.

Mary added her sister-in-law/friend to the middle circle of her diagram during the second interview while going through her Christmas cards:

This is off Sylvia who lost her husband, it's two years this year, George's brother, our best man at our wedding he was, she's my best friend. She comes.

However, during the six months between the initial and second interview, there had been some problems with relationships in Mary's family:

There has been a lot of friction between that daughter and my youngest son...they don't come together, they're not here together. And their dad wouldn't like it, you know, he wouldn't like it, he'd like the four of them to be here for me, you know what I mean.

These problems appear to have escalated twelve months later during the third interview:

Peter, and his wife Helen, doesn't come anymore...it's because, Sarah is back...me sister says I've got a funny family, we should all be together, but what can I do, I haven't fell out with none of them, I don't believe in falling out.

Although Mary's personal community in terms of size remained fairly stable over the course of the study, frictions within the family have placed a strain on relationships resulting in Mary seeing less of her children.

Clarice lost a friend from the middle circle of her diagram and added another friend to the middle circle during the second interview. Clarice also described a period of family friction that had taken place during the six-month period between the initial and second interview culminating in her daughter taking over her finances:

For several nights after Debbie had taken this over...when I went to bed at night, on the one occasion I felt sure that my husband had come into the room, because I heard his voice so clearly and he said to me 'Clarice what are you letting other people interfere with your life for, you've always managed yourself'...and I honestly thought that he was in the room. It was so real, yeah.

Twelve months later during the third interview, Clarice reported that her sister-in-law/friend from the inner circle of her diagram had gone into a nursing home, which resulted in her seeing less of her. Clarice had also been away on a touring holiday and although she had enjoyed the break she described having to make a difficult choice between that and a family birthday celebration due to financial constraints:

It was a choice that I had to make...between having my dinner party and everybody taking part, or me having my holiday...I'm just sad that it had to be either the holiday or the dinner for the family. My mother had a special birthday...eighty-five, she had a party for the family then. But mother's family wasn't as big as mine.

Again although Clarice's personal community is stable in terms of size and type, she has had to face a number of challenges over the eighteen-month period.

Julia's daughter had visited her from Australia during the six months between the initial and second interview. Julia also added three friends from church to the outer circle of her diagram during the second interview.

Unfortunately family problems over the last few months had left Julia feeling a little low:

Well up and down really, er I think er...after John died I dealt with it better for the first six months than I have done the last few, the last twelve months. Er but we've got a lot of family trouble, me sister's husband has got cancer and he's struggling, you know...it's slowly getting worse. Er me brother was taken into hospital with a heart attack er...and the phone has just been going mad, you know. So really there is nothing that can give me that lift...

In addition to her brother and brother-in-law's illnesses, Julia described difficulties with her own health: 'I mean I am...I think a lot of my trouble is not feeling well, is the fact that I've got this heart trouble, and I think a lot of the trouble is that'.

Twelve months later Julia was unable to participate in the third stage of interviews due to hospitalisation and ill health. Although this type of personal community appears to be the most stable, the above accounts demonstrate that family relationships can often provide challenges as well as support. In addition, the management of transition may be compounded by other factors such as the loss of family and friends, providing care to others, financial constraints and ill health.

The 'diluted family'

This was the second most common type of personal community at stage one. Six of the women had this type, and at stage three four of the women had this type. However, one 'diluted family' personal community, Jane's, shifted to the 'friend with mixed centrality' type, and two, Jessie and Moira's, shifted to 'anomalous' at stage two and back to 'diluted family' at stage three. One of the women, June, died in between the first and second stage of interviews. Figure 5.3 illustrates Jane's personal community diagram over the three stages. During the second interview Jane added fourteen friends to the middle circle of her diagram. These included two old friends who she had met up with since the initial interview:

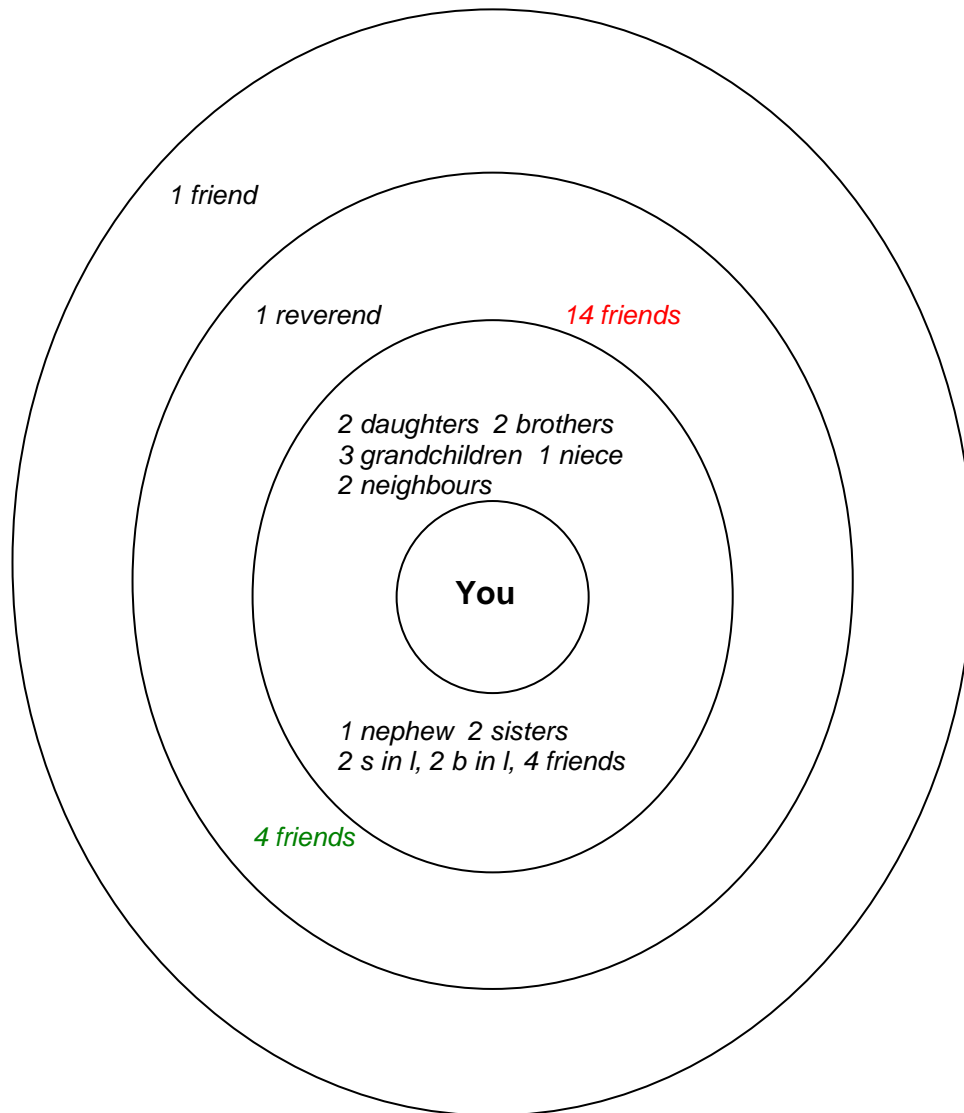
Kath and er Marjorie. These are me work friends, who, you know, we went to a funeral together and then they came up for a cup of tea. And I said 'Have we got to wait for a funeral until we get together?'...I've been to Kath when I go to the clinic on a Tuesday. So I call and see Kath because she's across from the clinic.

Jane also added a couple that had offered her support during the last six months and another recently widowed friend and her sister:

Jen and Don. Don comes and does me trees, just lives the other side...Annie and Joan, they live along here, but she's just been made a widow, beginning of September, and she's got her sister with her.

Figure 5.3 Jane's diagram over the three stages

1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage



Twelve months later during the third interview Jane added four more friends to her diagram. These included friends who had recently sent her a card for her seventy-fifth birthday:

Alice, Ryan and Jonathon. I see them a lot, and she's very, very nice, and she never forgets me birthday or Christmas, my daughter's friend...there are lots of people but these are the ones that I'm close to.

Jane's personal community has continued to grow throughout the eighteen-month period with the addition of friends old and new.

In terms of type and number of members, Jessie's personal community remained stable over the course of the study. Jessie had been widowed for just six months at the time of the initial interview. Six months later during the second interview Jessie added three friends to the outer circle of her diagram:

I have two more friends er they come like once a fortnight, I used to be a big friend to his mother, she was er an elderly woman, but she was very good company and well I think she's been gone about six years now. But er him and his wife come once a fortnight...you could put Lorraine and Gareth...Jenny, yes you can put her on...I've got to know her more now she comes to the club.

A year later during the third interview, Jessie described being diagnosed with a heart condition:

I sort of go short of breath, if I go outside, you know. And I think 'Oh I'm a bit frightened to go anywhere like not on me own'. So...er I'm not really going anywhere, only if me daughter takes me.

In addition, Jessie had less contact with three of her friends, including two close friends from the inner circle of her diagram:

Yeah well I don't see them now because...there's another sad thing around...well they've found out he's got cancer, prostrate...so I don't know, I don't ring her like, because you don't know if he's going to come to the phone do you...

Although Jessie's personal community remained constant in terms of type and size over the eighteen-month period, the deterioration in her and her friend's health has led to a loss of contact.

Moira had been away on a number of holidays with her friends from the U3A during the six months between the initial and second interview. She also lost a member from the outer circle of her diagram when her vicar retired. However, she added six members to her diagram, including two grandchildren to the inner circle, and four friends to the middle circle:

I know who I haven't put down here, the other four who we go out with at the weekend. Because I'm not so close to the other four, I'm friendly with them, very friendly, I mean we even exchange Christmas presents and that.

A year on Moira described how she had been in hospital for a knee operation and had been away on a number of holidays with her son and daughter-in-law as well as with her sister and brother-in-law. During the third interview she added her new grandson to the inner circle, and a friend and her two brothers-in-law to the outer circle of her diagram:

I've known Louise for a while, but I seem to have had more to do with her the last twelve months, you know. She's really nice, she came up to the hospital to see me, and she's been coming here and taking me out when I couldn't walk very well...I've got my sisters down but I'll put their husbands on, Den and Paul, he takes me everywhere in the car.

Although Moira's personal community type remained the same, her friends and family have grown over the eighteen-months and have been particularly important to her during a period of ill health.

Molly had been widowed just eight months at the time of the initial interview. Six months later she had been to visit her sister and had applied to do some voluntary work. During the second interview she added a new great-grandchild

and her grandson's partner to the inner circle of her diagram. Molly also lost a member from the inner circle, her son's partner:

Kerry me son's girlfriend, the mother of the baby, she's split. She's going back to...she goes in two weeks time...so that's been absolute hell. Because me son doesn't really know where he is.

Twelve months later Molly also lost one of her sisters from the middle circle of her diagram:

Yeah that was a blow to me...because I had all the responsibility, you know the funeral...all the mither and everything. So that really knocked me back...

More positively she had been away on holiday, started her voluntary work with the WRVS and joined a craft class making cards. She also added a new friend to the middle circle of her diagram:

Well I've known her for years, but she works at the WRVS and we work together and she does the craft class on a Friday. We've got quite close actually, because she lost her husband.

Although Molly's personal community in terms of type and size remained relatively stable over the eighteen months of the study, she encountered many negative as well as positive life changes.

The 'friend with family centrality'

During the first stage of interviews this was the third most common personal community type. Four of the women had this type. However, this became one of the least common at the second stage and the fewest women, only two, had this type at stage three. Flora's personal community shifted at stage two to the 'mixed

with family centrality' type and back to the 'friend with family centrality' type at stage three. Delores's personal community shifted to the 'friend with mixed centrality' type at stage two and remained this type at stage three. Figure 5.4 illustrates Delores's personal community diagram over the three stages. During the second interview Delores added a cousin and a close friend to the inner circle of her diagram who she had been in touch with and seen during the last six months:

I'm putting Marion my cousin on...well I've never seen her for...must be forty years...but we're always in touch and know what's going on in our families sort of thing...I can't see Ida on this close one...that's the one that's got dementia...I've been up to see her this last few months.

Delores also talked about her increased activities at church and added several church friends to her diagram during the second interview:

I mean I did go to things before, a lot of things, but not as much as I do now. I mean I knew people but I seem as though I've got to know them better, you know.

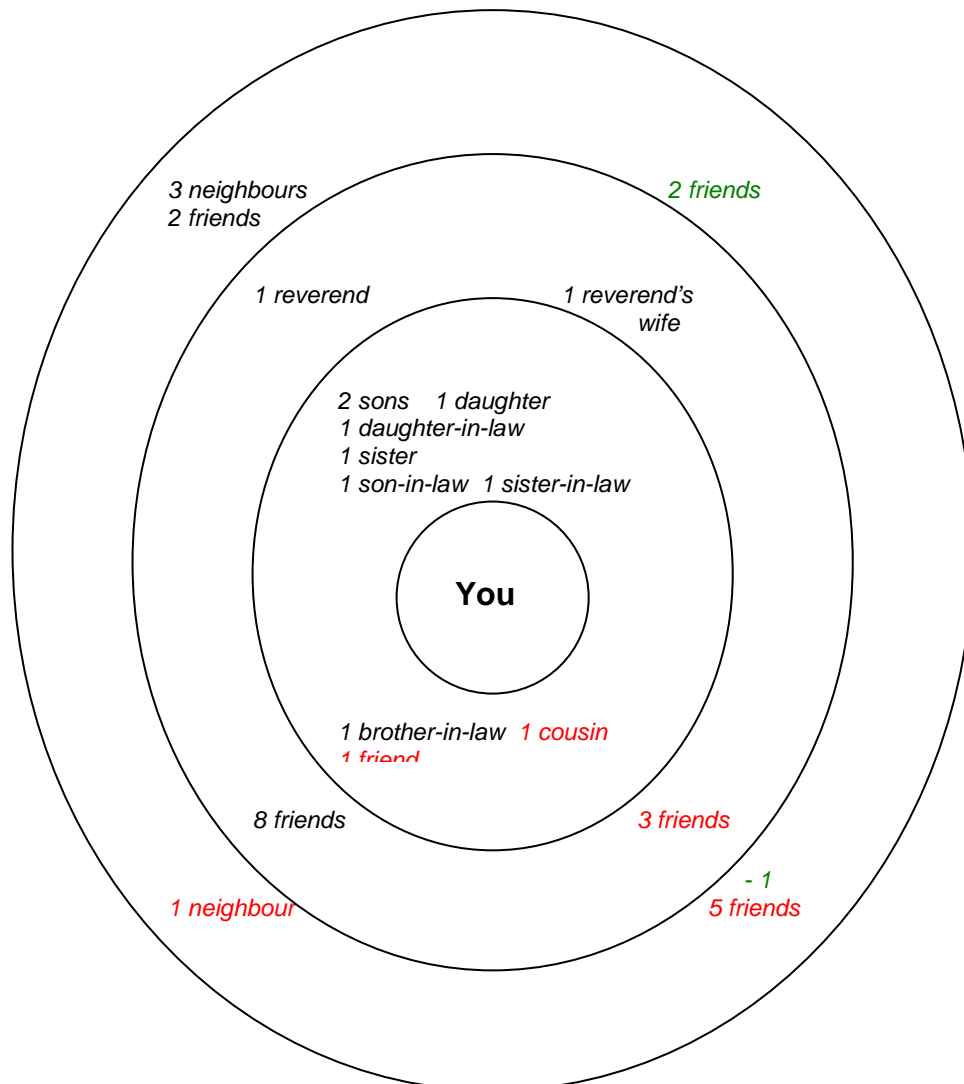
During the third interview a year later Delores talked about two weddings, her granddaughter's and a church friend's, and five funerals she had been to since the second interview. One of the funerals was that of a church friend added to her diagram during the second interview: 'Wilma she died so shall I cross her out...yes that's the one I went to see about a fortnight before...'. In addition to her loss Delores also added two friends to her diagram, including a recently widowed friend from church:

I'll put May on, I've got quite friendly with her lately, because she lost her husband as well, I mean I've always been friendly with her but I've got a bit more friendly, you know...because she's on her own now.

Delores's personal community has continued to grow over the course of the study as she has become more involved with members of her church.

Figure 5.4 Delores's diagram over the three stages

1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage



During the second interview Flora described how she had been away with a friend from the outer circle of her diagram for Christmas. She also added two great-grandchildren to the middle circle of her diagram. Twelve months later during the third interview Flora had celebrated her eightieth birthday with a hundred and fifty of her family and friends at the local community centre:

I was proud that I was eighty and I could walk about and I can see, and do all these things. I miss my hubby of course, but er...I more or less invited close ones and then I left it open...but it worked out brilliant, really, really brilliant, and I thought I enjoyed the night of my party...didn't enjoy the build up, but the night of my party, I felt that...'Oh they've all come!' Nobody had let me down, you know.

Flora also added two new friends who live in the same sheltered accommodation as her to the outer circle of her diagram. She had started to socialise with these and other friends at weekends:

Saturday night down the big room here, we usually have, we've started paying fifty pence a week for sandwiches, and we all take a bottle down, you know...it's just friends roundabout I've got, and across here, and a friend down there, and they said, er they don't always want to stay in and watch telly, it's something, somewhere different to go, and with being all women together, you know.

Flora's closest daughter had separated from her husband during the previous twelve months. She reflected on this as well as her own transition:

If somebody had been telling me I'd be going out like I am...I wouldn't have believed them, and talking, I'd really forgot how to...converse with people somehow or other, you know. So it was very, very awkward at first...now I can understand me daughter now, she's going into a phase, she's put everything into her marriage...and...she was all her husband and her son.

Flora experienced an eventful eighteen months going away for Christmas for the first time and celebrating a milestone birthday with members of her personal community. In addition she has supported her daughter and grandson through a difficult period.

The 'friend with mixed centrality'

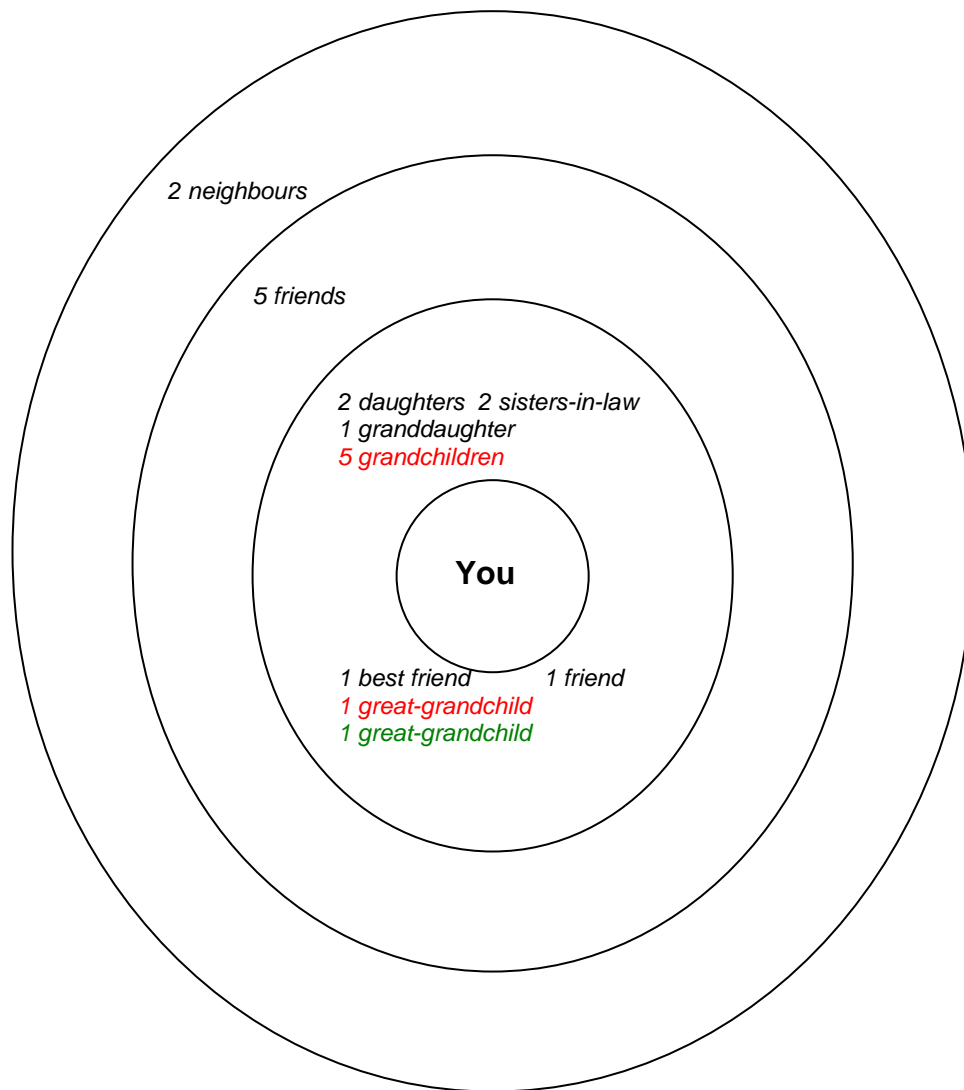
Three of the women had this type of personal community at stage one, five at stage two and four at stage three, making it the second most common type in the sample along with the 'diluted family' at the final stage. Three of the women's personal communities, Jane, Delores and Veronica, shifted to this type at stage two. One of the women's personal communities, Beverly's, shifted from this type to the 'diluted family'. Figure 5.5 illustrates Beverly's personal community diagram over the three stages.

During the second interview Beverly added five grandchildren and one great-grandchild to her diagram after seeing them at Christmas: 'I mean obviously I've got me grandchildren...but I don't see them that often, but they are important to me so I will add them on'. Twelve months later Beverly had moved house and had been away on holiday with her best friend. She also had a new great-granddaughter to add to her diagram during the third interview:

We've had a new baby, that's her in the pink dress there...there's Kelly...no I think that's (diagram) pretty much the same. It's only a small circle really I have.

Figure 5.5 Beverly's diagram over the three stages

1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage



Patricia's personal community type remained stable over the course of the study, however, during the second interview she added two cousins to the inner circle, six friends to the middle circle, and three friends to the outer circle of her diagram. Twelve months later Patricia had lost a cousin from the inner circle, she

added two friends to the middle circle and added one friend, Kathleen who she had been on a cruise with, to the inner circle of her diagram:

She's a widow, and oh she's ever such a lovely person, oh she's such a nice person, and she's had a heck of a life with her first husband, and she was really happy with her second husband, and he died, and er, and after her husband died, she came to the club...yes, yes we've become very, very close.

During the third interview Patricia reflected on her personal community, which had continued to grow over the eighteen months:

Yes well I've got a lot of friends, and I feel sorry for people that don't mix and have got no one. Because people have only got to miss me a day and they are phoning up to see if I'm alright, it's lovely.

Minnie's personal community type also remained stable. However, at the time of the second interview Minnie had increased her voluntary work and been away with a friend from the middle circle of her diagram for Christmas. Minnie also added two friends to the outer circle of her diagram who she had recently started to see more of:

Oh well Mary, well I mean er. See I don't see these people as much, I'm telling a lie there, because the last three weeks, they go dancing across the school there, and when I first lost Reg they said 'Why don't you come?' and I went once and it was too much for me, so I never bothered again. Now I started going there three weeks ago...just for a couple of hours on Wednesday afternoon, you know.

During the six months between the initial and second interview Minnie had increased her activities and widened her circle of friends. Unfortunately Minnie

was not able to participate in the third stage of interviews due to ill health and hospitalisation.

The shift from 'mixed with family centrality' to 'concentrated family'

At the first stage of interviews two of the women had the 'mixed with family centrality' type of network, Megan and Elsie. At the third stage of interviews their personal communities had shifted to the 'concentrated family' type. Figure 5.6 illustrates Megan's personal community diagram over the three stages. During the second interview Megan moved three of her family members from the middle to inner circle of her diagram. She had been on holiday with her goddaughter during the six months since the initial interview and had planned a holiday with her cousin and a day out with her niece:

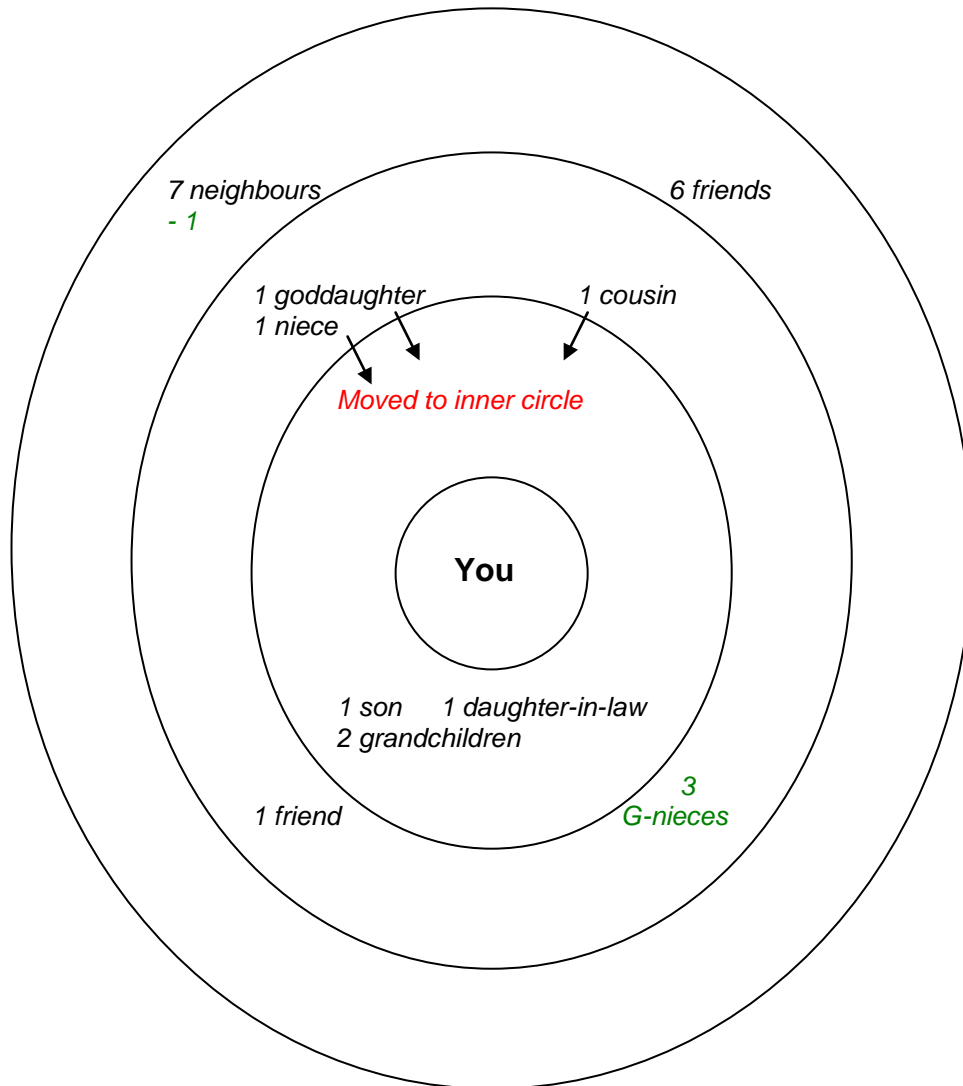
I think er probably cousin Maureen comes into that inner one...she is taking me on a cruise on the 3rd of September for my birthday...yes, and the one (Amy) that's taking me to the Ritz and Charlotte is the one that went with me to Italy...so these three are very close.

A year on Megan had celebrated her eightieth birthday with a family meal and a holiday with her cousin. She lost one of her neighbours who moved and added three great-nieces to her diagram during the third interview, one of whom had been to visit recently:

She's a lovely girl, ever so sweet, they came to visit me a fortnight ago, she came with her little girl, they just stayed for the day...they are an offshoot of Amy...so it's er Jo...and Beth and Sarah, great-nieces. They belong to Amy.

Figure 5.6 Megan's diagram over the three stages

1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage



During the six months between the initial and second interview Elsie had been away with her daughter and son-in-law on holiday. She also lost two friends from the middle circle of her diagram:

Shirley, I don't see her now, she used to live next door, I don't know what's changed her, she's changed like, you know, but she was a really, really good friend...Geoff now has left our church, he's had some kind of illness and he's had to leave, yeah.

Twelve months later Elsie had been away on holiday with her friends from the pub. She also reflected on the loss of her friend and the stability of the rest of her personal community when revisiting her diagram:

I don't see anything of Shirley, I don't know why she just...she was a wonderful friend and now I don't hear anything from her, I know she lives over that way but she won't tell me where she lives...I think everything else is the same.

The shift from anomaly to 'friend with mixed centrality'

During the first stage of interviews one of the women, Veronica, did not fit into any of the personal community types. However, by the second stage her personal community evolved to become a 'friend with mixed centrality' type. Figure 5.7 illustrates Veronica's personal community diagram over the three stages. During the second interview Veronica talked about members of her church and she added several friends to her diagram:

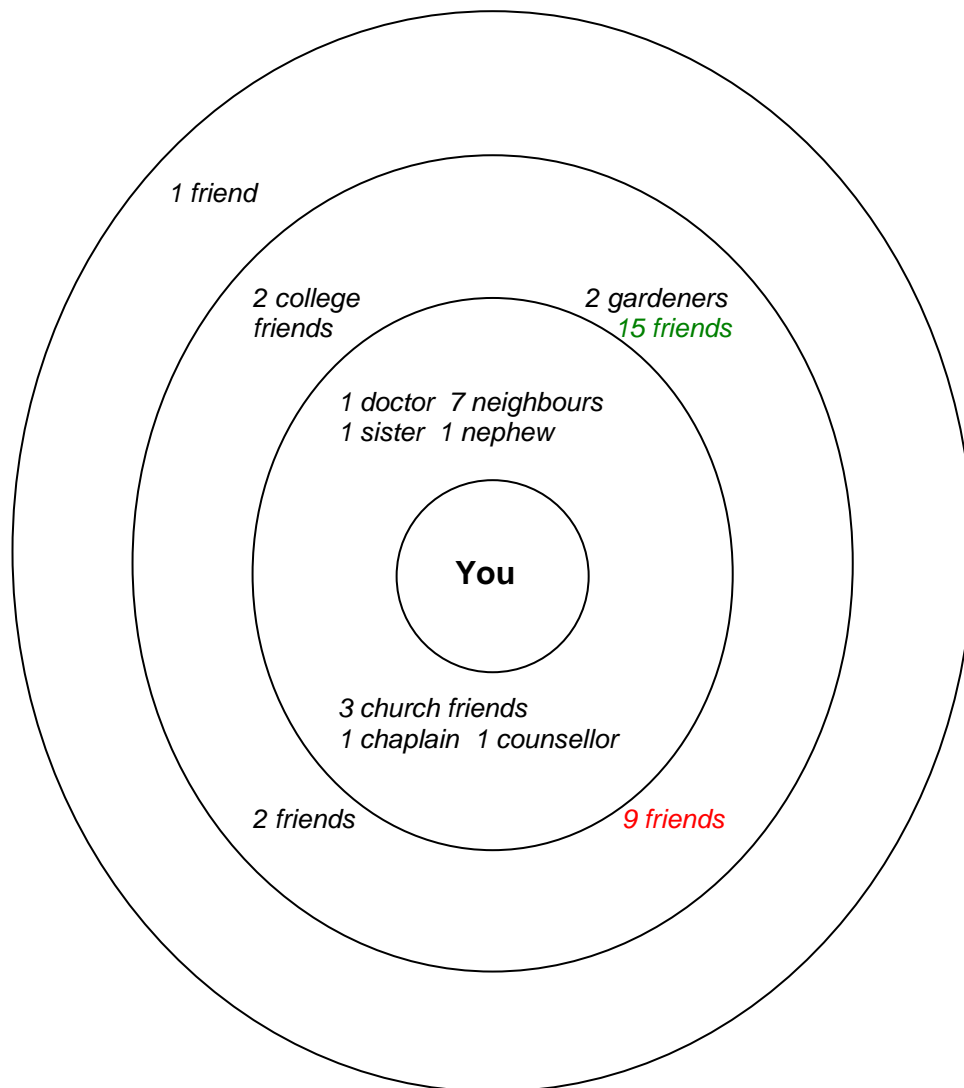
I've made new contacts, I've made a lot of new contacts at church...Bella, yes a nice lady Bella is, she's helped me through bereavement, she lost her husband a number of years ago, and she can relate to all the feelings I've got, even now she does.

Twelve months later Veronica had joined a (different) local church due to a period of illness and difficulty driving, during the third interview she added many more church friends to her diagram:

With going to this church again you see, with me going on a Sunday night and not to...it's re-acquainted me, you know...oh there are lots of people yes, Brian and Lorna, and this because of this re-association you see...I've connected up with these people again, yes...Jack, known him from a lad, he goes there...Mary she lost her husband two years ago. These people mean such a lot to me you know.

Figure 5.7 Veronica's diagram over the three stages

1st stage, 2nd stage, 3rd stage



Conclusion

This chapter, through the analysis of the personal community diagrams at stages two and three along with the women's accounts from the second and third interviews, has demonstrated longitudinal changes in the structure of the women's social ties. These changes, including shifts in personal community type, reveal the

dynamic nature of social relations over a period of time. However, stability and continuity are also apparent and point to diversity and complexity within the older widows' personal communities. The number of personal community members increased throughout the study, all but one of the remaining twenty-one women's personal communities increased in size, and eight of the women's personal community types had shifted by the third stage of interviews. However, thirteen of the women's personal community types remained stable, the majority of these had the 'concentrated family' type, and overall family continued to form the most intimate of the women's social ties throughout the study.

The empirical material included in Chapters 4 and 5 is only part of the story of the thesis. It only tells us about the structure of the women's personal communities during the change process. As discussed in earlier chapters, the limitations of the personal community diagrams are that the data they provide may be normative and somewhat static in nature. Therefore the diagrams may not fully reflect the nature of the women's social relationships. Moreover the diagrams are likely to be largely a representation of the women's primary and geographically local ties. As a practical tool the design of the diagrams only allows a finite number of ties to be included. In short the data derived from the diagrams alone does not provide a complete picture of the older widows' personal communities during transition.

The women's accounts in Chapters 4 and 5 start to reveal the inherent complexities of social relationships within similar personal community types. Although social relationships can be a source of support they are often complex and at times challenging. Moreover, factors such as the loss of family and friends, providing care to others, financial constraints and ill health, appear to further

compound the management of transition in widowhood. This gives rise to a further research question to be addressed in the following section of the thesis:

- Does the content of the women's personal communities correspond with the structure of their social ties?

The construction of the diagrams over three stages does indicate change in the older widows' personal communities. Shifts in personal community type, including a widening of relationships beyond the family unit, are apparent for some of the women. Nonetheless the diagrams only provide us with a snapshot of that change. They do not detail the process of negotiating transition or how the women and the members of their personal communities adjust to their new situation. This prompts a further research question to be addressed in the following section of the thesis:

- What does the continuity and discontinuity of social relationships tell us about managing change?

The following two chapters of the thesis, through thematic analysis of the women's second and third interview transcripts, reveal the content of the women's personal communities during transition, that is the qualitative aspects of their relationships with family, friends and others during the change process.

Introduction to Section Three

This section of the thesis is concerned with the process of change and the content of the personal communities of the older widows during transition. The emotional aspects and meanings of relationships with family, friends and others are located through thematic analysis of the women's discussion of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards during the second and third interviews.

Chapter 6: Continuity, social relations and autonomy, and Chapter 7: Discontinuity, change and mediation, build on the findings of the previous section and address the original research questions: Are certain types of personal community more helpful than others during the change process? Does a longitudinal design reveal change in personal communities and social convoys during widowhood? Do multiple methods give a more detailed account of personal relationships during the change process? And what impact does later life widowhood have on family practices?

In addition, this section addresses the further research questions identified at the end of the previous chapter: Does the content of the women's personal communities correspond with the structure of their social ties? And what does the continuity and discontinuity of social relationships tell us about managing change?

Chapter 6: Continuity, social relations and autonomy

Introduction

This chapter locates process and meaning in relation to the older widows' experiences of their transition and personal communities in everyday life, and in particular, continuity. Continuity includes looking back at the past, but also taking part of the past forward into the future. Different aspects of continuity are situated in three over-arching themes. First, 'Family, intergenerational ties and tradition' encompasses the positive aspects of family relationships, including the reinforcement of ties through family practices, established roles and lineage. However, this theme also demonstrates the negative aspects of kinship during transition, including family friction and relationship strain. Second, 'Friendships, organisational ties and reciprocity' illustrates the various characteristics of friendship, the cyclical reinforcement and maintenance of associations, ties with the wider community, and continuing to make a positive contribution to personal communities. Finally, 'Personal continuity and activation' demonstrates the permanence of self in later life widowhood, including personal independence, approaches developed over the life course, and the maintenance of a constant identity. However, this theme also illustrates the dependence of some of the older widows which limits their ability to move on.

The Christmas period itself is a cyclical time when memories of the past are stimulated and thoughts of the future are generated with the coming of a New Year. Christmas may be viewed as a routine occasion, like birthdays and anniversaries, in that it takes place annually. However, many of the women's experiences illustrate that it is also a useful reference point, or marker for locating process in a wider sense as it evokes thoughts of the past, present and future.

Megan, for example, spoke for many of the women during the early days of widowhood, as she talked about special days as being a particular time for looking back and remembering: 'Many times of course there's Christmas time and birthdays, things like that, but apart from that I think I've done reasonably well'. In Marilyn's discussion during the early days she also reflected on meaningful personal as well as cultural celebrations as being significant, having lived in Scotland with her husband for part of her married life: 'But some days are harder, like today would have been his birthday, it's birthdays, Christmas' and New Years especially for Scottish people'. As well as being a cultural celebration New Years Eve is also an anniversary for Patricia. She explained during the third interview how it continues to be a symbolic and difficult time for her: 'Well usually I er, towards New Year, it was New Years Eve I met my husband, and I was getting a bit weepy'. In addition, some of the women had lost their family members over the Christmas period itself and this was a particularly poignant time for them, Elsie for example, talked during the second interview about missing her second husband over Christmas, but also acknowledging the loss of her first husband who died around the same time of year:

Yeah, it wasn't quite so bad this year as it was the first year. As I say it's that time of the year when you do miss, you know. It was my er, Jack's dad, he died in the December, just before Christmas, and of course Christmas was worse then, than when I lost Bob.

Visiting the resting place of loved ones appears to be a crucial part of remembering especially at this time of year. Mary who lost both her husband and grandson just before Christmas, talked about recently going to the cemetery during the second interview:

It was two years the 20th of December that I lost my husband, you know what I mean...I lost my grandson...of course he died on the 21st of December. So there's the 20th for my husband and the 21st for Darren... I went to both of them a week before Christmas, I went to Earnest's (grave) to take flowers, I went to my grandson's because we've got a special pot there we have, from nana and granddad.

By contrast for some of the women visiting the resting place of their deceased husband not only demonstrates their remembrance, but also provides a sense of personal satisfaction and the fulfilment of a normative obligation particularly over the Christmas period. As Veronica explained during the third interview:

There are some days, and I felt this very recently more than ever, er even though it's four years. But some days I cannot rest until I've been down to the crem, to the grave...but I feel like I've done my duty. I don't know I just feel there is something about going, making the effort, I just think 'Oh yes', you know, 'I've done it'.

In addition to Christmas the marking of other symbolic celebrations throughout the year was apparent for some of the older widows. Alice, for example, had recently visited her husband's grave, which she talked about during the third interview:

Oh well I took some (flowers) on the 9th of February because it was my mother's birthday and it happened to be Valentine's Day. So I took twelve red roses. It was my mother's birthday but Bob is in there as well, and so that's the last time I went down.

The home environment can also reflect an engagement with the past through other significant symbols. Molly who lost her husband at Christmas demonstrated her remembrance by framing and hanging a portrait of her and her husband on their wedding day. She described this during the second interview:

I put it up just before, two days before Christmas I think, in fact if I'm not mistaken it was the day he died as I had that, that I got that done and I put it up at Christmas.

A year had passed before Molly felt able to display this cherished photograph without becoming too distressed. This honouring of the past and taking a part of it forward into the future, demonstrates a form of continuity and seems to be integral to the process of transition. The following themes demonstrate how the continuity of family, friends and others, as well as the personal approaches of the older widows, are also key to this progression.

6.1: Family, intergenerational ties and tradition

Family continuity

Family are central to the personal communities of the majority of the older widows in this study, as demonstrated by their personal community types. It is no surprise then that the women's accounts of Christmas largely feature their families and the support they reciprocate. Traditionally in Western society Christmas is perceived as a family occasion, a time to get together and celebrate an annual event with close family members. The older widows' experiences of Christmas demonstrate varied and often complex relationships with their kin ranging from the positive and affirming to the negative and isolating. Women who experienced a positive and affirming Christmas gave accounts of a very special time of year, where close family ties and their kinship roles were positively reinforced helping to ease their transition. Jane, for example, during the second interview talked about Christmas being a particularly emotional time for her as it is when she got engaged and married. However, being out of the house with her family seemed to relieve her sadness as she explained:

I think I enjoyed Christmas this time but it's very sentimental. And I think if I hadn't have been out for the weekend, it took me out of myself...and like when it got towards the New Year, I was, it was a bit sentimental.

Megan talked enthusiastically and more explicitly about the salience of her family during the second interview, particularly Christmas Day spent with her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren who live close by:

Oh Christmas was lovely, I had a lovely time. Er I spent it with Andrew and his family who live over here...and we spent Christmas round there, and I went round Christmas morning, I was telephoned, 'Are you coming now? We are opening our stockings...' It was just a lovely, lovely Christmas and I really enjoyed it, and er, my son is so supportive, I, he really is, he's turned out trumps, you know.

Although many of the older widows spent Christmas in the homes of their adult children after they became widowed, Moira described during the second interview how her four sons along with their partners and children still convene in the family home on Christmas Day before dispersing to celebrate the rest of Christmas:

Christmas Day, we all come round here Christmas morning, all me sons and their wives...and they took one of them, well we all go up to the cemetery then to Jim's grave, Sam took me up there, and then he took me to Alan's and I had Christmas dinner with them. Because he's a bit of a chef he is, he cooked Christmas dinner.

In addition to spending Christmas Day with family, being involved in the preparations leading up to the event and other family celebrations throughout the year is apparent, particularly for women with the 'concentrated family' personal community type. As Megan explained during the second interview:

We did most of our Christmas shopping together and then most of the cooking and things like that... because it was my eightieth last year.

Andrew said 'It is a special year and er, we are going to do things this year'...so it's been a really lovely year.

Although Doreen's family live over fifty miles away she also took part in various Christmas activities with her grandchildren and daughter, as she described during the second interview:

Oh we went to the pantomime at the Regent, that was really good, Cinderella, and the grandchildren really enjoyed it, they really enjoyed shouting out, yeah... we went shopping...I can't remember what day because Sarah and I we both like shopping.

Continuing to contribute in some way to the Christmas meal preparation itself is important to many of the women, even if the celebrations no longer take place in their own home. Jane, for example, during the third interview said: 'you are up and down all the time aren't you Christmas, I can't sit about, I like to help out, whatever's going on anyway (laughs)'. This is also the case for Anna who despite tiring easily due to ill health, still likes to take an active role alongside her daughter and granddaughter, as she explained during the second interview:

Well Christmas Eve I helped Jane getting the, the potatoes and veggies ready for Christmas Day, and er we had a little drink in between, not much, because I don't drink much (laughs) and er... well we didn't do an awful lot, we just sat and talked, you know and, and that was Christmas Eve. Christmas Day we got up, had our breakfast, er sat round the tree and got all the presents opened and er it was lovely. Then I left Jane, I'd done all the veggies for the dinner, so I left Jane and my granddaughter to do the turkey and what have you, and er we had a lovely day.

For Megan, Doreen, Jane and Anna who have close and interactive relationships with their families throughout the year, Christmas represents an intensified period of family activity and enjoyment and reflects their personal community diagrams. Relations between these women and their families are well-balanced and

inclusive, providing them with a continued sense of belonging and a sense of purpose in later life widowhood.

In addition to immediate kin, maintaining contact with extended family is apparent for many of the older women over the Christmas period. Delores, for example, sustains a close relationship with members of her husband's family who are placed in the centre of her personal community diagram, as she explained during the second interview:

Oh that's me other sister-in-law, I've got two sisters-in-law, that's the, that's Edith yes. Oh she came, oh yes...it's my husband's sister, and er she's a widow, her husband died, oh he was about fifty-six something like that when he died, so she's been on her own a long time, but er she came.

Similarly Gloria, as she discussed her cards during the second interview, described a recent family celebration with the children of her deceased partner who she continues to see regularly and who appear alongside her biological children in the inner circle of her diagram:

'To Gloria wishing you a very happy birthday, lovely to see you yesterday, Sunday, lots of love Katie, Sally and Jessie', that's the dog, er, we went to Lindsay's for a tea, we had a tea there, they made me a cake and they sang happy birthday and everything, it was wonderful.

Immediate and extended family then can offer a valuable sense of continuity during later life widowhood. In addition, providing a sense of continuity for these family members can also be seen as an important influence. During the second interview Molly talked purposefully about her commitment to her central kinship roles of mother and grandmother even as she was grieving:

I didn't even put my cards up until Christmas Eve, yeah, I put all me decorations up, but I wasn't even going to do that, but I thought 'No I'll put them up for the children', well they're not children they're big lads, but er, I decorated everywhere because of the baby... when he came in he couldn't believe his eyes, because I have this one that hangs from the ceiling. Well my daughter's forty-two and I've had them since she was born.

Similarly for Beatrice, fulfilling her roles of eldest daughter and primary carer for her elderly mother, provided her with a significant source of continuity particularly during the early days of widowhood. As she explained:

What has really helped me in a way, when I think about it, I've always looked after me mother, always been close to me mother, and I'd even go so far as to say at times I put me mother first, do you know what I mean? Which was wrong really, but I've always been very close to her, but Brian was very good he never minded, he never used to say, he never bothered, he never stopped me from going to me mother's, and I went everyday like I do now, only now I go more often. And so because she's got worse, my mother's filled that gap for me, hasn't she? She's filled his place, actually, and er in a way that has helped me an awful lot.

However, by the third interview Beatrice appeared to be finding it increasingly difficult to balance these roles along with other commitments to her grandchildren, sister and various voluntary organisations:

I take her to the club on a Monday. Tuesday is her pension day...sometimes we go shopping, we have doctor's appointments many times most weeks...then if it's a morning one I take her down Morrison's for something to eat, an early breakfast or lunch, and then I take her to the club at night...and then Wednesday I take her to the WRVS, then it's time to fetch the children, I fetch the children Wednesdays, I pick up me mother, then I cook the tea, then I put everything out for the carer and come home...Thursday she stays in, Friday like today we'll either go shopping, and tonight I take her to the club again...Saturday, the same thing, down mother's either shopping or take her out somewhere, I meet my sister there in the afternoon...Saturday morning I either bath me mother, either Saturday or Sunday, er then Sunday, I can't get her up here now because she can't walk very much, so we have to have two of us to push her up the drive and take her down...and then I have me grandchildren every other Sunday for lunch, and me mother and me sister. And that's my week.

Family continuity then, including established kinship roles, can be seen to offer both stability and motivation during the process of transition, giving older widows, particularly those with the 'family-type' personal communities an added sense of purpose or reason to move on in later life.

Intergenerational ties

In addition to the family more generally, the special qualities of intergenerational ties were apparent for many of the older widows. In several of the women's accounts children appear to embody family continuity and lineage and this seems particularly pertinent over the Christmas period, as it is often viewed as a special time for younger family members. Megan, for example, during the second interview talked about her grandchildren: 'We er, watched all the youngsters opening their stockings, youngsters? Fifteen and twenty-one, I mean (laughs) but they still have their big stockings'. In addition, the importance Megan places on intergenerational ties beyond her immediate family is reflected in her diagram, as she added three great-nieces to the middle circle, shifting her personal community during the second interview from the 'mixed with family centrality' to the 'concentrated family' type. Another valued aspect of the Christmas celebrations for many of the women were the handmade cards received from the small children in their family. As Megan explained:

I think mostly it was probably the little youngsters who had written their own, you know, and I think that that was one of the nicest things, getting them from youngsters, it's just lovely to get them, you know... See now this is the sort of thing, I thought, that was one from little Liam... and he made it you see, er, 'designed by Liam', so you see. I thought that was lovely, I thought that was special.

As well as reinforcing relationships with existing family members, Clarice, who like Megan has a 'concentrated family' personal community type, illustrated during the second interview how Christmas gatherings provide an opportunity to meet new additions to growing families:

Well, my eldest daughter...she was having her family come home over the Christmas period. She's got an eldest son...well he was coming home and bringing his new girlfriend...and so Victoria wanted me to meet them all and then her daughter had just had a new baby er, well that's the baby's picture on the top (points to photo on shelf) and that's the little brother that's riding that bike there (points to photo next to it) that's her first child and that's the second...so she wanted me to see them, so I was invited there for Christmas.

Christmas, as well as being a time for bringing together geographically dispersed kin, also unites family members that are not seen for other reasons. For example, although Cathy is estranged from her adult daughter, Christmas is one of the few occasions she spends an extended period of time with her grandchildren as they live with their father, Cathy's ex-son-in-law, in the South of England. Cathy described this valued time during the second interview:

Before Christmas I had my grandchildren here, for five days, until the day before, until the Wednesday. So of course I then had to run around like a scalded cat to get everything done for Christmas... er, we had a load of fun, and we had to take them out and about, shopping and things, and the tree was up before that...so I had all the children's Christmas presents under the tree, and bits and pieces of stuff. So everyday they opened one parcel, and they'd shake and poke at it to see...and then their main present they took home with them...so I enjoyed that yes. Except that it was very exhausting, because they're up at the crack of dawn and they go to bed after me (laughs) but they're very, they're nice kids, I always enjoy that.

Moreover Christmas also appears to be a significant time for passing on cherished family items to the next generation. Megan, for example, talked about mementos

she had recently come across and given to her adult son, during the second interview:

I've just taken a box of cards round to Andrew this morning...they are cards of happy birthday one year old, two years old, three years old, up to six I think, when he was, his cards, and I had them in this old broken down box, er which was a Christmas card box...and I thought what's this Christmas box doing up here, and I took it down, and there was all these which I'd saved, well he's fifty-one now. So I took them round and he said 'Oh mum, you wouldn't throw those', so I said 'Well, I thought that I would bring them round, I couldn't throw them away, but I thought I'd bring them round'.

Similarly Jane described during the third interview how she had recently communicated the whereabouts of important documents to her two adult daughters, just as her parents had done to her in the past:

I've got my wills and I've said to Sharon and Diane 'Look here in this drawer the wills are there...' and they say 'Oh I don't want to know anything about that', and I say 'Look I'm not getting younger', every day I have a birthday, I'm verging, I'm coming up to eighty, which I'm not looking forward to, I don't want birthdays anymore (laughs) I wish I could knock a few off (laughs)...it was like my father, he always used to say to me 'Look in this drawer if anything happens to us, there's an envelope in there with the policies in, that's it there...'

This organising or 'putting things in order' appears to be an essential part of the moving on process for many of the older women, with valued possessions from the past and present being handed down the line and entrusted to future generations. Intergenerational ties then appear to represent continuity as a form of ancestry and are especially valued by the women with 'family-centred' personal communities.

Family tradition

The tradition of a 'family' Christmas itself can provide a sense of comfort and place in the world during the uncertainty of transition. This seemed particularly

so for the older widows with the 'concentrated family' personal community type.

Megan, for example, talked in detail during the second interview about the

Christmas celebrations spent with her son and his family and the special

memories it evoked for her:

It was a family Christmas like your Christmas cards, and er I remember the time he brought me home, Christmas night, and we walked back from his house, because it began to snow, do you remember it began to snow? And we came round, and everywhere was covered in snow, and the lights were on and the trees were, it sort of burned with the snow along the boughs...it was, it was a night to remember really, because it was like any picture post card that you've ever seen of Christmas. There was something quite wonderful.

Hannah, who originates from Poland, during the third interview also talked about

the cultural meaning and importance of family practices over the Christmas period,

both for her and her adult children:

Er the Christmas cards my sons getting all things there, and they keep them there, don't do anything just have it for memory, you know. It's like family, er family that's the Christmas, that's the days that are always like the family, in Poland that's how it's always been and we keep it like that...

For many of the women reinforcing kinship ties around the Christmas period is

customary in their immediate and extended families. Megan, for example, talked

during the second interview about the continued sense of support family provide

particularly during difficult times:

We used to have a family reunion after my parents died, to keep in touch, because you do lose touch don't you? And er I think when you are well one of a family, it makes you more resilient, you can cope with knocks, you sort of er, you are in a large family, and each has its own individual, but you are one of the family, and as a family, we were very close, we were always very close, everybody very closely knit, yeah.

Similarly for Gloria, Christmas and other symbolic events provide an opportunity for family to strengthen ties. She talked about the special qualities of family, including her immediate kin and the adult children of her deceased partner, as she discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview:

Your families do mean a lot to you don't they? Your families do, but we've had a big family haven't we? There's been ten children you see in my family, I was one of ten, but it makes a difference, and at Christmas time, you all keep in touch with each other, even if you don't see each other for a year, but when we have parties we do see each other, and when we have funerals we see each other then, they turn up, everybody turns up when there's something wrong or even like, when Alfie was very poorly, Larry came, Debbie came on my side, then there were his daughters, two daughters, and his son, and even his nephews came to see him at the hospital, er, you know, it was. Family mean a lot I think, you know.

Family continuity then, including confirming relationships with valued kin, lineage through intergenerational ties and the tradition of family practices, appear to act as stabilisers for many of the older women during later life widowhood. These stabilisers reinforce a sense of belonging and provide a sustained connection to the bigger picture and the wider world during a time of flux.

Family friction

In contrast, for a minority Christmas can be an isolating and excluding experience, a time when family friction is emphasized and the normative expectations of a family occasion are unrealised. For example, during the third interview Mary, who has a 'concentrated family' personal community type, talked about being alone throughout the Christmas period which is also the anniversary of her husband's and grandson's death:

I was here all on my own on Christmas Day...and the same with New Year, I didn't go anywhere, I was here, you know, so I was glad when they'd both gone...Christmas and the New Year, you know. So I just had the television on, to pass the time away, you know.

Mary's social and cultural exclusion is brought starkly to the fore as she described her Christmas meal, which is vastly different to the emblematic turkey and Christmas pudding that many people in Britain enjoy on Christmas Day: 'Do you want to know what I had? I had a tin of vegetable soup on Christmas Day for my dinner with a mince pie, and I had a tin of tomato soup and a mince pie on Boxing Day'. For Mary family friction between her four adult children, compounded by her being housebound, culminated in her exemption from family celebrations and spending Christmas at home alone:

I wasn't asked to go anywhere...me daughter...I've not been in her house since she's been there...I've never been in her house...and I don't go to any of them love, any of the houses, all four of them. I don't go to none of them, no.

Rather than being a positive experience and a time to re-affirm ties with close members of her personal community, for Mary Christmas simply serves to reinforce feelings of loneliness and isolation in later life widowhood. Similarly for Alice, who like Mary has a 'concentrated family' personal community, relationships with her two adult sons, particularly the oldest, are also difficult. She described how she did not feel she could rely on them for support during the early days of widowhood:

You see I never ask the boys to do anything because I don't want to think that I'm an interfering mother or mother-in-law, you know it's like treading a very thin line. I've never pushed them into doing anything they did not want.

They did behave themselves, I must say that, and that's why people can't understand why the eldest one doesn't come.

Although Alice's son had been to visit since the initial interview, for the first time in three years, it was for a particular purpose rather than to socialise or to offer support. As she explained during the second interview:

My eldest son has come over, he came to fetch me car because I am going to give it to my granddaughter, because it's her birthday this week, I've got to do the card to send...and he did come up for that. Apart from that he hasn't been up, and er, and of course he hasn't asked me to go down there.

Moreover strained family relationships are not limited to Alice's immediate kin. They are also apparent between Alice and her brother and his wife, as she discussed when talking about her Christmas cards during the third interview:

Me brother and sister-in-law who only live up the road. I mean anyone would think I'd been awkward or naughty to them, but I've still never been in their house, and sometimes they'll go up to the shopping centre, and they say 'Would you like to go up?' About every...two or three months, and I'll say 'Oh I would love to', because I never saw a Christmas shop with all the bustling crowds and decorations...so me sister-in-law sometimes comes down occasionally, now they live on the corner by the shopping centre, so he comes and he picks me up, and I sit in the back even though she's not in the front, no one sits in the front only his wife...so anyway I sit in the back, and we pick her up outside the house, and then she phones him up on the mobile to pick us up, because he only has to come from down the road...and he'll say 'I've done the lunch, the lunch is ready'...er, you know, and 'I've got the sandwiches' or whatever, and he brings me here. They don't even ask me to go in and have a sandwich...

In addition to siblings and adult children some of the older widows described feeling distanced from other intergenerational kin. Jessie, for example, who also has a 'family-type' personal community, during the third interview talked about her

disappointment in her grandson not visiting her particularly since her husband's death:

But like the boy doesn't live at home now, he lives, him and his partner live together, but it's not far from here, it wouldn't take them five minutes to come up in the car, but they don't, you know. That's er, and that was really what his er (tearful) that is what his granddad said (tearful) no he said to him, when he was in hospital 'Look after your nana' (tearful). They don't come, but I don't think boys are as thoughtful as a girl, you know, but er, no the girl's different all together, but I mean, she is like, the one that goes to the cemetery, she goes every Saturday... yes she never fails.

As with Mary and Alice, the lack of contact with significant members of her family over the Christmas period highlights the poor quality of these relationships adding to Jessie's sense of social exclusion. Although Clarice, who like Mary and Alice has a 'concentrated family' personal community, has regular contact with her ten adult children, in the second interview she described a recent argument with one of her daughters over the management of her finances. This concerned recent bills incurred through the purchase of Christmas presents for members of her large family:

I had had a slight problem with one of my younger girls...she was in a bit of a temper and she came here and she spoke to me very rudely, now I'm her mother and I don't feel that children should be allowed to speak to their mother, no matter how old they are, in that voice, you see, and there you are, and of course I put my foot down and I said 'Look you are not speaking to your mother like that', well because this caused a bit of family friction, they all sort of...clammed together, you know, and it was mother that was wrong because she shouldn't have fell out with her. However, er she has kept away for quite a while, she does come if there's anything important to be done, and I can cope with that. But I will not allow the children to take advantage of the fact that I'm older, I'm just as sensible now as I was years ago, you know, but they don't seem to think that, they think 'Oh well it's only mother we can say it', well I won't hold for that.

Later life widowhood then can disturb the balance between family relationships and lead to conflict. This is apparent in the dissonance between Clarice's determination to continue to control her own finances and the perceived interference of her adult children who seem to think that she is no longer able to manage these arrangements effectively. This resulted in Clarice reluctantly relinquishing control of her affairs, as she went on to explain:

Yeah, yes, they all came to bring presents for Christmas, and of course this particular daughter...now she is the one who has sort of taken over...of. What she's said this year has affected me a great deal, because she has decided that mother has given Christmas presents for too many years, and that now I must cease sending Christmas presents, now that is part of me, you see, and I enjoy it, but she doesn't want me to do that. So she suggested that instead of buying Christmas presents, I buy birthday presents as the birthdays come along, but it doesn't seem the same to me, because I've always done Christmas, I don't like the idea of not doing it, but she insists that I don't, so what do you do?

Indeed continuing to meet the normative obligation of buying Christmas presents for close kin can be challenging in later life widowhood. For example, for Amy, who has thirteen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren in addition to her six adult children, purchasing gifts for her growing family is becoming a financial strain and causing family disagreements. This is evident as Amy discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview:

I don't normally get them off our Jim's kids, and they did buy me one this year, well one of them bought me two (laughs) well one's had a little girl since so she wanted a present didn't she (laughs). Well last year I bought the boyfriends, some aren't married, and I bought them all, just socks, just to show I hadn't forgotten, but this year I thought 'Oh blow it, you get nothing off them', er you get the littlest card they can find. I mean the thought's there, and they walk up and they put them through, and the others will say 'Oh they're mean little devils', and I say 'No they aren't, the thought's there, and they've got their own family' and er, our lads said 'Stop buying, you're on a pension now'... I said 'When I run out of money I'll stop buying', I said 'If I didn't buy your kids, you'd have something to say', 'Yeah

but them are great-grand kids', I said 'So are yours', I've only got two great-grand kids and they're both babies, I said 'That's beside the point, they are still family aren't they?' I said 'And you can't just leave one out'. But I'm going to stop buying one or two, I'm not mean but er... I've bought our Jim's kids for years, but they're all working now so I'm going to cut them out, same as birthdays, you can't do it.

In addition, continuing to cook the Christmas meal itself for her closest daughter and grandson, who are central to her 'concentrated family' personal community, is also becoming a burden for Amy particularly due to a recent deterioration in her health. As she explained during the third interview:

Christmas Eve, me and me daughter and me grandson...they come up for Christmas Day, and Christmas Eve they come up just for the night like...although I didn't feel like it I did it and...I left mine but they ate theirs (laughs). Because I couldn't eat no fat and no this and no that...that's the worse part...

Fulfilling obligations over the Christmas period can also have negative connotations when this is incongruous with the behaviour of family members throughout the rest of the year. Veronica, for example, talked during the third interview about the restricted contact she has with her limited kin:

Two days before Christmas my nephew, who I haven't seen for six months, visited me. That was a miracle, and he came and he brought his wife along, who I haven't seen for eighteen months, and...that was nice...and yet it's got a sting attached to it, because he's my only flesh and blood apart from my sister...and he's very neglectful, and er...being Christmas, well he'd have to come wouldn't he?

When perceived normative expectations, such as spending Christmas with family or exchanging gifts and cards, are not fulfilled due to issues such as family friction and relationship strain, a form of rationalisation appears to take place. This is

illustrated by Mary as she talked during the second interview about her separation from her family particularly over the Christmas period:

The problem is they're all working they've all got their jobs, and so it makes it very awkward then doesn't it? You know what I mean...Cheryl's got such an important job up at the hospital, she goes in the morning at eight o'clock, and she doesn't get home some nights until nine o'clock at night. They're all tied up you see with their work, Paul's on shifts, you know, three different shifts. Of course Sarah walks with a stick herself.

Mary's limited interaction with her adult children is incongruent with her personal community diagram, which situates them in the centre of her social world, rationalisation then attempts to ease this incongruence. Normatively Mary's children 'should' be placed in the centre of her diagram however, when they fail to fulfil the normative expectations associated with their position there are 'legitimate' reasons, such as work commitments or ill health, for not them not doing so. This is also the case for Alice who as we saw earlier has a particularly strained relationship with the eldest of her two adult sons who lives some distance away. However, she still attempts to defend his behaviour as the following extract from the third interview demonstrates:

Martin is like that, and he won't bother, he knows there's no money now to sort out, and I've even thought about going ahead and paying for me own funeral to save them doing that, but it just seems...somehow, I think about it and it isn't morbid I'm just trying to help them, because they are busy. Well Martin isn't so busy, but I mean, he wouldn't be able to come up I suppose, well he could do because I mean he isn't working, because of his knee, he's just had another operation since I saw you on his knee, it's the sixth one. But er I just don't want to be a nuisance to anybody...my daughter-in-law doesn't say much to me, I think it's all her side, you see, it has been from the beginning, because she doesn't like any of my family, and she doesn't like any of our friends, you see. So er, I know I'm making excuses for him but he is my son...I mean he could come and see me, and er people do say that, you know...they say to me and it makes me feel worse and I don't...like to think about it.

Alice then like Mary gives a variety of reasons for the lack of contact she has with her son Martin, including his disability and his wife's negative attitude towards her, in order to avoid the pain associated with this discord. As with Mary and Alice, who both have the 'concentrated family' personal community type, justifying the behaviour of her limited family who visit infrequently is also apparent for Veronica. She talked during the third interview about the strained relationship she continues to have with her nephew:

I haven't had a card from my nephew this year, but I've got to be honest and say that there could be a reason, although you know I've been through it myself, but I never miss out on cards. But er his wife did lose her mum at the beginning of December, and Jenny the daughter was coming over from America. So whether she was very caught up in it, you know.

The poor quality of Veronica's relationships with her family, particularly her nephew and his spouse, is incongruous with their placement in the centre of her personal community diagram. Again as with Mary and Alice rationalisation is a means of moderating this dissonance. The 'concentrated family' personal community type is the most prevalent and robust among the older widows in terms of structure, as illustrated in the previous section. However, the above accounts further highlight the complexity and sometimes problematic nature of the content of these relationships particularly during transition.

6.2: Friendships, organisational ties and reciprocity

Friendships and the cyclical reinforcement of friendships

Christmas then, particularly Christmas Day, is primarily a time for family. However, the continuity of friendships is also apparent over the Christmas period, with friends featuring in the celebrations of some of the older widows, and in the exchange of cards of many of the older widows. Spending Christmas with family

was not an option for some of the women for a variety of reasons. Often on these occasions friendships came to the fore. For example, during the second interview Mary described how younger neighbourhood friends helped out and visited her over the Christmas period in the absence of her family:

I wasn't doing anything, my cards or nothing, but the girl up the road, she was sixteen on Christmas Day, and she come along and she said 'Oh you can't leave them in the envelopes', so she put them up around for me, you know...I had Melanie, who I've got down, Melanie and John, who used to live next door, she come and she brought me a bouquet of flowers, well she sent me a Christmas card and said 'I'll pop in and see you', so she did, she came, and she made me a drink, and she put the flowers in there, they're in the porch now, she put them in a vase for me, so she did come, you know what I mean?

Although these friends are not as central to Mary's personal community diagram as her family, they step in and provide much needed support and validation at a significant time when family are unavailable. Close friends were on hand the first Christmas of Molly's bereavement, providing emotional support when her family were unable to. She described her experience during the second interview:

The phone went and Alan came upstairs, he said 'It's May mum, she wants you to go over there', er well unknown to me they'd already arranged this, and the doctor said 'That's the best thing you can do, just get out of the house because nothing's going to happen'. Me son had registered him, registered the death, we'd got the undertaker, there was nothing else we could do because it was Christmas and New Year, you see, so, and the doctor said...'You go to Scotland, to your friends', because me family couldn't get on with their grieving because of me.

Although Molly was away from her family the first Christmas following her husband's death, the special qualities of the close friends she spent Christmas with are apparent, reflecting her 'diluted family' personal community type. As she explained:

They're more like family, they are, you can't really describe them because they're such genuine, genuine people, that you don't come across everyday. Absolutely wonderful, all of them, absolutely wonderful people, yeah.

Molly's experience of her close friendships is congruent with the placement of these friends in the centre of her personal community diagram alongside her family. Similarly for Moira who shares the same type of personal community, the close friendships she and her husband enjoyed during their married life continue into widowhood and are apparent over the Christmas period, as she explained during the second interview:

Well Christmas Eve I went out with the... six friends who I normally go out with, we just had a drink, we know a publican, and we went there and we just took our own little buffet with us, and we had a lovely night...I went out New Years Eve, we went to the pub again (laughs), but we only had a drink, there was a little disco on, and my son was there with his partner and her dad, because he's on his own, but they had a meal, we didn't have a meal, but we all got together there was seven of us again, and we had a great night, a really, really good night...I think New Years Eve was the best night, I like New Years Eve, I didn't think I was going to enjoy it, I wasn't sure if I wanted to go out or not...and I did enjoy it.

These strong, affirming friendships are still evident and showed no signs of fading the following year as Moira described her New Year celebrations during the third interview:

New Year I went with friends, to this pub, we had a meal, there was eight of us, and then Alan and Mandy and Mandy's dad came, not with us, but they were there... we didn't have a meal last year, we enjoyed the night, so we booked the meal this year. It was very good New Years Eve was, and I managed to dance (laughs).

For some of the older women associations have not only continued into widowhood but have also strengthened. This is evident as Alice talked about a

long-standing friend of her husband's, who does not appear in her 'family-centred' diagram but nonetheless keeps in frequent touch:

Oh that's Bob's friend, for thirty odd years, oh he rang me before you came, I said I was expecting a visitor, he said 'I'll speak to you again...' anyway. Oh he's never been married, and er, oh well, he every time, he rings me up about every other night, which is good of him, because he's lonely.

Long-standing neighbourhood friends can also provide a source of continuity. For example, Beverly's friendships with her neighbours have not only continued into widowhood but have also prevailed during the more recent transition of moving house, as her cards demonstrated during the third interview:

That's Kay and Dick, that's down at...street where I lived...and that's Lynne and Fred friends from...street, she's gone in hospital today she's having a hip operation tomorrow. Er Sarah and Len...they are friends, I've had two from them, because I put the new address on the envelope, and they sent me another one (laughs).

As we saw earlier with Molly some friendships are seen as qualitatively different to others and take on the features of family, suggesting that they are more important than other friendships. Although Flora's close friend does not appear in the centre of her 'family-centred' diagram, she is nevertheless significant. Flora talked about her Christmas cards during the third interview: 'I phone Hattie every day and she's started calling me sis (laughs) she's never had a brother or sister so we call one another sis'. As with Molly and Moira who both have 'diluted family' personal community types, contact with close friends over the Christmas period features strongly for women with the 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community type. Although Patricia traditionally spends time with her husband's niece and her cousin over the Christmas period, she was able to draw

on her neighbourhood friendships to celebrate both Christmas and New Year when her family were unable to accommodate her due to work and other commitments. As she explained during the second interview:

I've got some friends across the way. My niece couldn't have me for Christmas because she was working, so me friends across the way had me...then New Years Eve I usually go to my cousin's, since my husband died, for New Year, but she's having a fiftieth birthday this year...so they didn't have New Years, but I spent New Years Eve with some friends across the drive.

As with Mary earlier, it seems then that friendships are a particularly important resource when family members are not available to fulfil their normative 'duties' whether due to pragmatic or for more emotional reasons. For some of the older widows friends replace the role of family. Veronica, for example, who shares the same personal community type as Patricia, and like Patricia is childless, has little contact with her sister and nephew despite placing them in the centre of her diagram. She reflected on a Christmas card from a church friend during the second interview:

Oh this is from, 'Love from Sally and family' yes this is from church but some of the people from church call me auntie Veronica you see, 'To auntie Veronica God bless you this Christmas love Sally and family', but I'm not related (laughs).

Veronica described her relationship with another family she has befriended at church as she was talking about her Christmas cards. This friendship in particular has and continues to be a source of support and companionship in the absence of Veronica's actual kin:

And this is er from, you know Mo and Ron who have adopted me. This is from their daughter Diane, Diane, James, Beverly, Gill and Elizabeth...they take me under their wing as, like you would a parent (laughs). I think of them as a mother and father...they just took me under their wing as auntie Veronica, it was lovely having them as a family...they are like another family to me. And they have invited me to Scotland for a week with them at the end of April.

This blurring of the roles of friends and family is continued as Veronica reflected on a Christmas card from a close friend of her husband who has maintained contact with her in widowhood: 'This is Craig, he's a newspaper reporter, but he has actually been a friend of the family for years, and he loved Fred, he comes to see me occasionally, said he considers me, still family'. It is apparent that some friendships are viewed as characteristically different to others, those with 'family-like' qualities appear to be especially important and give a particular sense of belonging when actual kinship is limited or absent.

Many of the women's Christmas cards reveal the cyclical reinforcement of friendships made over the years, Anna for example, during the second interview added a friend who she had received a card from to the middle circle of her diagram:

And that is from a very old school friend of mine...I think we've known each other now for seventy-five years, we still keep in touch birthdays and Christmas, and she is, she will be eighty-eight in March.

Similarly as Doreen discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview, she talked about attending annual reunions with people she had worked with over the years:

Er that's a friend, that's a friend, more colleagues really, she used to be a professor of midwifery. Oh that's something we did do this year, four of us met up in...on a reunion after twenty odd years, yeah...we are going to do it

again this year, yeah it was very good...oh this is a friend who I trained with, went to school with, and we are actually having a reunion this year...er it's all arranged for April, it's a nurse reunion it's going to be, we all started at eighteen...and they, she lives in...and she's er, we've coincided it because they have a retired nurses group, so I'm going to go with her to that to meet all these other old people I used to work with, but she's made that, that's a nice card.

Although many of these ties are generally not included in the women's diagrams, they are considered important and seem to maintain a link to past enjoyable times, as Flora reflected during the third interview: 'These are from...Birmingham...and we went on holiday, it's nearly thirty years, we went to Italy, and we met this couple, and we've wrote ever since, Christmas and birthdays...' Friends make up the majority of ties in Flora's personal community and her experiences reflect the value she places on the continuity of her friendships both old and new. For many of the older widows keeping in touch with friends and associates of their deceased spouse is very important. Alice, for example, who as we saw earlier has maintained contact with one of her husband's friends in particular, expressed the importance of continuing to correspond with colleagues of her husband especially over the Christmas period. She discussed this during the second interview:

Oh that's a friend of Bob's, from the Burma Star, because you see, even though Bob's dead his real friends, that he liked, I think it's only right because he was so fond of them, so he'd been in hospital when I'd rang him, and so he is one that I'll have to ring and see how he is again.

A year later during the third interview Alice described how she continues to maintain these ties on behalf of her husband: 'Oh that's from another friend, a farmer, he was in air crew with Bob, because I still send them for Bob'.

As we saw earlier with Anna, Flora and others, Christmas cards are a traditional means of maintaining contact with distant friends. In addition to exchanging cards, some older friendships are reinforced with an annual visit and the exchange of Christmas gifts. For example, Patricia talked about her experience during the second interview:

This is a very dear couple that I have been friends with for over thirty odd years, and they still come to see me, and at Christmas they made a hamper up for me, and it was absolutely beautiful. We've been friends for thirty-odd years.

Although these friends are considered 'dear' to Patricia they are not included in her personal community diagram. However, this sense of renewal and reinforcement of older friendships around the Christmas period appears to provide a continuous thread of social belonging and place for many of the older widows during transition, particularly those with 'friend-type' personal communities.

Extending and renewing friendships

In contrast to the loss experienced in widowhood, the discussion of Christmas cards also revealed an extending and renewing of friendships during this time. For example, Megan's account during the third interview demonstrates how her close relationship with her son and daughter-in-law, who are central to her 'concentrated family' personal community, has led to the formation of new intergenerational friendships in widowhood:

'Clare and Mathew and the boys', er they live in...here, they are friends of Andrew's and Cathy's and they are friends of mine as well...this is from 'Becky and the tribe' (laughs) this is a friend of Andrew's and Cathy's and also a friend of mine now.

Similarly Cathy who also has a 'family-centred' personal community described how she struck up a regular correspondence with an old friend of her son's when her husband died as she discussed her cards during the second interview:

He's a lawyer in London, I mean we've never sent cards to him and we've never got cards back from him, but he sent me a lovely letter when Ben died, and since then I send him a card and he sends me a card.

In addition to extending friendships many of the women, particularly those with 'friend-type' personal communities, made reference to older friendships that had been renewed in widowhood, as Flora for example, did as she discussed her Christmas cards during the third interview:

Oh Liz, yes, that's the one as I've known for a long, long time and we used to work together and all that, you know, relationship build up, and then er, I think it must be ten, twelve years, her hubby died, she lost her hubby, got a family and that, and er, with me still having George, you know, we were still friends but nothing more. Any road when George died it seemed as though they all rallied round, you know, and er...we started going out.

Similarly in Patricia's discussion during the third interview she described how she has been able to rekindle a friendship, which was limited due to her role as a full time carer before her husband died:

That's from Geraldine and Jack, another person, she used to work at the same, only she was in the office and I was on the shop floor and er, oh we've known each other thirty odd years. And since Derek's died and that I've gone down there, well I couldn't leave my husband see, I couldn't go anywhere really.

Growing friendships accessed through existing family, friends and organisations as well as renewed friendships provide a sense of movement and a continuous

source of interest and personal fulfilment in later life widowhood and often reflect the older women's personal community types.

Ties with organisations and the wider community

As well as family and friends the importance of continuous ties with organisations, such as voluntary agencies and the Church, was also apparent for many of the older widows as they discussed Christmas and their cards. These associations ranged from the relatively superficial to being more 'friend-like' in nature. For many of the women affiliation with various organisations was particularly helpful during the early days of widowhood, as Minnie, who has a 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community, explained:

The Church I've always been involved in that a lot, you know, doing things like. I'm getting involved again now this next season, I don't know what it's all about but I've put me name down to go to the school, where we'll be reading with the little children, reading with them, like a mentor...and then I do two days at the heart association charity shop, two days, I go on a Wednesday for a couple of hours and then on a Saturday afternoon for a couple of hours, I can go any time I want, it's nothing hard and fast, like if I was in the town and I thought 'Oh I won't bother to go home yet', you know it's like that, I started just this year. I've got to do something, you know, to occupy my mind, and yeah I find that when I've been in there I'm okay.

Many of the older widows established or reinforced links with organisations once they became widowed. This is particularly evident for the older women with the 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community type. Patricia, for example, during the second interview described a busy time joining in activities over the Christmas period with the organisations she has joined since she became a widow:

The Wednesday before Christmas, er I've started to go to the pensioners' convention since my husband died, and er, they were having a bit of a do the Wednesday before Christmas...the Wednesday two weeks before

Christmas, I had a Christmas lunch at the luncheon club, they put one on for us, we had turkey, we had three veg, we had baked potatoes, roast potatoes, er non-alcoholic wine, er Christmas pudding and mince pies and tea, and it was all free, we also had presents each and that, we had er a game, this person asked us questions, and I had a prize.

For some of the women, such as Veronica, the ties she has made at church appear to be deeper and more 'friend-like' in character, as she explained during the second interview: 'The church people, the people from church, oh I should say most of my cards are church orientated, from friends, you know? Oh I should say thirty odd from church people, yes'. For Veronica attending various churches and associating with different people has led to the formation of some supportive friendships in widowhood, as she described during the second interview:

'Keith, Mandy and family', yes this is a couple that go to another church. I know loads of churches, loads of people, but Keith and Mandy, yes he came to tidy me garage out, got rid of a lot of cobwebs and got rid of a lot of stuff I didn't use, Keith did (laughs). And another couple, 'Joe and Amy' these are long-standing friends, yes and he was minister at the church where Andrew is now, but he's retired and what's she put, 'we do hope that you are well and we pray for you every day, every blessing always, love and prayers Joe and Amy'.

Attending organisations such as local churches involves regular contact and socialisation, which provides the potential for developing longstanding friendships in later life widowhood. This reflects Veronica's shift in personal community from anomalous to 'friend with mixed centrality' during the third interview:

Well I mean I'm meeting new people all the time, I don't know how in-depth or frequent associations will be...I mean at the churches, at the church I go to on a Sunday night, er, the minister will say, 'Turn around and shake hands with somebody behind you or in front of you or just get out of your pew or just go across', so we really get to mingle, so if there is anybody new, you start a conversation, and then talk to them afterwards when you are having a cup of tea or something like that. I mean I've recently met a lady that runs boarding kennels, who goes to that church, and I've recently put her in touch with someone who needs a cat to be housed when she

goes away, that sort of thing, but, and I will be seeing her each Sunday, it's things like that, you know what I mean.

For Minnie a friendship developed with another widow through her church has led to more direct support with her grieving during later life widowhood as she explained during the second interview:

Er there's a young woman she's lost her husband, I mean when I started going there she'd lost her husband fourteen or fifteen months ago, at the time when I started, and she said 'Oh Minnie I had a book off a friend', it was a male friend like, and she said 'Oh and it's ever so good, it's really, really helped me, you know', I said 'Oh can I borrow it off you?' she said 'Well I won't lend you mine because it's got a bit of writing in and it's personal like, you know, but I will get you one', she got it off the internet, and she came in and she would not let me pay for it, she wouldn't let me pay for it.

For women such as Patricia and Veronica, who are both childless, and Minnie, whose only son lives in the South of England, affiliation with community groups and the Church provide local support in the absence of family. However, ties with organisations are also apparent for women with the 'concentrated family' personal community and appear to offer a social outlet outside of the family. For example, although Beatrice celebrates Christmas with her mother, sister and adult children, she enjoys the New Year celebrations with the associates she has made as a volunteer since being widowed. These include new members she has recently introduced, as she explained during the second interview:

We all got together, and we all did so much food, all those on the committee and the volunteers we all went to the pub, that we go to upstairs, and we hired that private room... we all spent New Years Eve there, but we had a lovely night, so we'll do it again... Don hadn't been out for many years until he come to live here... so I took them on New Years Eve as well, and so they've met a lot of friends, and socialised which they hadn't done for a long, long time. And that's the idea of the club you see.

Similarly for Amy who lives on a tight-knit housing estate with her family, friends and neighbours, there are many Christmas events to attend in the community, as she explained during the second interview:

Oh yeah, I've been all over the place, I've been the M&M one. We went the Lion, up in the country, beautiful that was, er where else did we go... we went a party at the Crown, we went a party at the Anchor, er we went down the school, we went no end... this is from Sally, it's been made for us, when we go the school party, we go down every year, pensioners go down, and er all the kids have to make a Christmas card and they put them at the side of your plate, so that's where that one's from, and she come to me with me dinner, er 'I made your Christmas card' (laughs).

Continuing and developing ties with the wider community then can lead to an increase in social interaction as well as to the formation of new associations. In addition, the voluntary work Doreen has taken on in her local community seems to provide a continued sense of purpose and order in her life helping her through the multiple later life transitions of widowhood and retirement. As she explained during the second interview:

I'm glad to get back after Christmas to my routine, you know. Doing my mothers and toddlers, er I've done PALS this morning, I had a forum meeting on Monday. So this week's just got back to normal really, yeah.

Organisations then appear to operate on a variety of levels, they may simply provide a forum for social interaction and activity for some, generally those with 'family-type' personal communities, while for others, such as those with 'friend-type' personal communities, they provide the opportunity to develop deeper more supportive friendships in later life widowhood.

Aspects of Reciprocity

Reciprocity, particularly in the form of card exchange, is customary over the Christmas period. In addition, mutual support and the exchange of gifts, especially with close members of personal communities, are apparent in the accounts of many of the older widows. Women with 'family-type' personal communities in particular talked about the continued reciprocity that exists between family members. For example, Megan reflected on her close relationship with her son during the earlier days of widowhood:

You sort of look after children when they are little and somewhere along the line the roles are reversed, they are certainly reversed now, he's always sort of saying you know, 'You shouldn't be doing that' (laughs). But anyway he is so supportive, so supportive, he's my friend, he's my best friend... I look after myself and I help Andrew and he helps me, so it works both ways.

As well as joining in the family celebrations Megan contributed to them by accommodating friends of her daughter-in-law overnight at her house on New Years Eve, as she explained during the second interview:

She had a big party, and er they invited all their friends, there'd be about twenty-five of us, and er, we had this lovely buffet meal and er all sort of, we chatted and laughed and drank (laughs) and we had just a lovely time and saw the New Year in, and er I had four people staying here (laughs) I slept on the couch.

In addition to mutual support, reciprocity in the form of gift exchange is a prominent feature of the Christmas celebrations and many of the women discussed their gifts as well as their Christmas cards. Megan's gift list during the third interview reflected the family, friends and neighbours in her personal community diagram:

I've made a list for you, just to be of interest, you know something of interest... Sarah who is my great niece, she sent me £15 Marks and Spencer's vouchers. Maureen cousin Maureen she sent me £10 towards my pot. Mary sent me £10 towards the pot, so that was the pot, and she also sent me a...book...Amy and Paul £50. Mel and Paul who are our neighbours they sent me a tub of flowers and a card book...Annie bought me two Marks and Spencer's tea towels. Clare who is a friend of Cathy's bought me some mint crisp.

Megan also received an extra gift from her close neighbour who she supports with transportation: 'Fiona bought me three Suduko books. Oh Fiona also bought me a bottle of Baileys because she said 'You always taxi me round'. The gifts from Megan's immediate family, her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren are saved until last, indicating their special importance to her and reflecting her 'concentrated family' personal community.

In addition to family members, friends also demonstrate reciprocity over the Christmas period, and this was especially evident for the older widows with the 'friend-type' personal communities. For example, Patricia during the early days of widowhood talked about the mutually supportive relationship she has with her close friends who live nearby:

Well Enid and Arnold are good to me. But if I have anything, as I told you I went to the mini-fair, and there was food left over and that so I brought, paid for them, and I gave four to Jenny and four to them you know. And then they grow tomatoes and kidney beans and things and they give them to me. We help one another...I went there Boxing Day last year, and they came here the year before to tea.

Patricia was also on hand to support her friends, who are placed in the centre of her personal community diagram, through a particularly difficult Christmas as she explained during the third interview:

My friends didn't celebrate Christmas as such because they hadn't long lost their daughter, she was only forty-odd...so I made her a chocolate log

cake...er because she didn't want a Christmas cake or anything, I said 'This is for if anyone comes, you've got something to give them'

Moreover Patricia demonstrated the thought she had put into selecting presents for her close friends in preparation for the forthcoming Christmas, as she explained during the initial interview:

This is what I've bought them this year well I try and get things for people that I would like for myself...all those are Christmas presents, I've got a lot more to come yet, and I've bought Enid and Arnold, Enid's got a bracelet and Arnold's got a watch. Well I have to get things early because I order these from a Christmas charity thing.

Often wider reciprocity takes place with people not placed in the women's personal community diagrams. For example, as Doreen discussed her Christmas cards she described how she and her friends continue to help each other out during trying times. This was evident as Doreen talked about a specific friend she had assisted in the past and who was there for her when she became a widow:

Her son was actually murdered sixteen years ago, so we've always had a lot of support for one another, but er she's been particularly supportive, yeah. But you do find that it actually works both ways doesn't it? If you've given your support to them when they've needed it, they are always going to be coming back to you.

Neighbours also feature in the social worlds of many of the older widows and often provide local practical support despite not being included in the women's diagrams. As Cathy explained during the initial interview:

We all look after each other's properties, I mean I have the keys to two properties in case they go away, the gentleman there went away two days ago and he brought his key, and the people opposite if they go away they'll hand me the keys, because the last thing you want is the alarms going off and not being able to get in to switch them off. We do that all the time, yes.

Generalised reciprocity is also apparent between members of organisations particularly over the Christmas period. During the third interview Hannah talked about the mutually supportive atmosphere at the Polish club she attends, particularly as many of her peers are also widowed:

Oh yes, we get together everybody exchanged things there, so it's a lovely time. There's bad times to remember and good times to remember...lot of people parted, died, lot of them not with us anymore, but we do remember them...I remember them everyday, what can you do, yes.

Reciprocity in the form of mutual support and the exchange of cards and gifts is manifest in the Christmas celebrations of many of the older widows and reflects and reinforces their relationships with family, friends, neighbours and members of organisations. In addition to receiving support, actively giving support and making a valued contribution to personal communities also appears to be important to successful adaptation during later life widowhood.

6.3: Personal continuity and activation

Personal independence

Personal involvement then alongside social relations appears to be an essential facet of positive adjustment in widowhood. As the women discussed Christmas and their cards many of them talked about the importance of having a sense of autonomy alongside the supportive ties of family, friends and others. Although Megan, who as we have seen has a 'family-type' personal community, has a close relationship with her son and his family she still has a sense of independence as she explained during the early days of widowhood: 'It's nice having family, it's nice having support from someone, I try to live my own life but we are very close'. Similarly Anna described her personal approach to being

widowed during the early days in addition to the support of the close family and friends in her 'diluted family' personal community:

January, he died in January, but I got through the most difficult part I suppose. But as I say it's all will power and strength, and a lot of love from my family, and my two friends up the road.

As demonstrated by Megan and Anna having a degree of independence in conjunction with positive kinship and friendship ties is helpful during transition. However, for Beverly, who like Anna has a 'diluted family' personal community type, autonomy was essential from an early age and seems to have been helpful during later life widowhood:

I'm fortunate in the fact that I'm quite comfortable with my own company, I was an only child so I have to be, so it stood me in good stead. I always say I'm alone but not lonely, so yeah, I can find plenty of things to do...because I'm quite an independent lady, I like to do things myself if I can (laughs).

This sense of being her own agent is reiterated even more strongly during the third interview and reflects Beverly's personal community diagram which places close friends as well as family members in the centre of her social world:

I just look at it now as this is my time, er without trying to sound selfish. I married very young, and so I've always been somebody's wife, somebody's mother and this, that and the other so now I'm me (laughs). So I've kind of got that attitude, and I enjoy what I do, it might be a dull life for some people but, I quite enjoy what I do.

For Veronica developing an autonomous outlook during the early days of widowhood was a necessary and defiant act in the absence of family support and also reflected her lifelong personal faith:

I have found that I've had to get a determined, not only Christian faith, but a determined attitude on a lot of things. I have prayed that I could be my own person and strong in being so, you know... I'm soldiering on aren't I? With lovely friends to help me, so let me be independent then and not want them, you know what I mean.

Various aspects of independence are apparent in later life widowhood then including a developing sense of autonomy beyond and alongside family, and a necessity to be autonomous when kinship is absent.

Personal activation

Together with a sense of autonomy, personal activation or 'getting on with things' is also a key component in adaptation and often reflects the women's development and experiences over the life course. Gloria, for example, during the early days, after losing her second long term life partner, drew on her prior experience of being widowed as a younger woman:

You just have to go on don't you? And the funny thing was, I cried very much when it happened in the hospital there and then, and I came away and I went to see him at the funeral directors, because I did this with my (first) husband...so I was fine with that.

This personal resolve and positive outlook is apparent in many of the older widows' accounts. Megan, for example, as she talked about her attitude to widowhood during the second interview:

The grieving process, a lot of it is how you approach, and a lot of people, you just feel as though you've got to go on...you've just got to go on, and er, you know, you sort of. And other people they sit and it envelopes them, er and er, I'm not going to say that's wrong but they don't seem to be able to, they go within themselves, and it doesn't do you any good does it, you've got to go on.

Megan's determination and stoicism in the face of adversity may in part stem from her having served in the Armed Forces as a young woman during the latter part of the Second World War. An essential part of 'going on' for older widows such as Megan involves socialising and participating in interests outside of the home. Being an active participant seems to give her a sense of place and control, as she explained:

I think mostly it's friends and activity that keep you going, particularly activity. I suppose really because there are times when you feel lost, and as I say I used to just put a bit of extra make-up on and go out...sometimes it's perhaps at an emotional time and I think 'I'll do something today', and that's probably when I'm most likely to go somewhere. Yes, I go out quite regularly, quite often.

Similarly for Elsie, who struggled to raise her younger siblings after her mother died at a young age, keeping busy and getting on with things is part of her make up, as she reflected early on in widowhood:

Oh yes, well this is what I'm determined to do, you know, this is what I try to do is to keep myself occupied, you know if I didn't I think I'd go mad, I think I'd go crazy if I didn't because I've had such a lot to put up with.

The family practices and earlier careers of the older widows can also have a bearing on their approach to widowhood in later life. Doreen, for example, reflected on her attitude during the early days of widowhood:

Actually, I think being a nurse I am used to being involved with death and in my family we are always involved with relatives' deaths, so we've always said 'There's birth, life and death' so you mourn and you grieve but at the end of the day he wouldn't want us to be sad and holding ourselves back because we just aren't that kind of family anyway. So we've just got to get on with it and put up with it.

Similarly Cathy, a retired GP, talked about life carrying on in much the same way once she and her friends became widows. This seems due in part to them having had independent careers beyond their marriages and families:

We've all been professional people so, independent women always, so you know it makes a big difference, and many two or three of them were never dependent on their husbands either, so they were already independent when they were widowed...I don't know any of my friends who've been widowed who've fallen apart, nobody has fallen apart. But as I say most of them are professional people and they've just carried on as, and most of them were already independent people before their husbands died, they were doing their own thing, and I think that makes it easier.

Although Julia was unable to spend the first Christmas after her husband's death with her only daughter as she lives in Australia, she was invited to celebrate Christmas day with her nephew and his family. She reflected on her personal determination to hide any sadness and join in the activities:

Donkey's years ago when I had living aunts, my mother would take anybody in, my mother was a wonderful woman, and she'd say 'Come up to our house for Christmas, you can't stay by yourself', they'd come up, faces this long, never smile, never do anything, and I thought 'If anything happened like that I'd put a brave face on, I would never inflict that on my nephews and nieces like we had inflicted on us when we were younger (laughs)' and that's stood me in good stead really, that I remember then, I think 'Oh remember so and so when she never cracked a smile', you know. So really some of my learning and teaching when I was a child or a younger person has come out to the fore.

Like many of the older widows, Megan, Doreen and others illustrate that although their families are central to their personal communities this does not equate to their dependence on them or passivity in later life widowhood. Indeed Amy, who like Megan and Doreen has a 'concentrated family' personal community type, actively campaigned against what she perceived to be a potential threat to her family who all live on the same housing estate, as she explained during the second interview:

They wanted the tanning shop as a drop-in drug centre, to change needles, I said 'We're not having it where our kids are...' I went round and got a petition up, course I did. I've got thirteen grand kids, we don't want that on our doorstep, two of them live right on top of that shop.

Later in the third interview Amy talked about the success of the protest, which resulted in the tanning shop becoming an arts and crafts centre for the community. In addition, she had joined another action group, which involved fundraising for the local clinic. Continuing to be an active participant is also vital to many of the women with 'friend-type' personal communities, Patricia demonstrated a proactive approach during the third interview as she talked about going away for New Years Eve, which was also the anniversary of her and her husband's first meeting:

I really enjoy life, I make the best of it shall we say... so I've no time to sit and feel sorry for myself...I booked myself into the...hotel (laughs) and had a wonderful time (laughs). Oh yes there was er...a coach load of Scots people there, and there was a coach load of Welsh people, and they put me with the Scots people, and I had a whale of a time...I had a, it was really lovely (laughs).

Similarly rather than be on her own Veronica, who was excluded from her family's Christmas celebrations, explained during the second interview how she took the initiative and created her own special day:

I thought to myself 'Well I'm going to...have to spend Christmas on my own then', and I thought 'Well you are not Veronica, because you can invite people'. I invited two friends, who live just at the back here and go to church...I wasn't moping, thinking 'Oh nobody wants me', you know what I mean, I sort of made an effort to er want somebody else.

Veronica was able to draw on her own determination as well as her 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community in order to avoid isolation and exclusion over the festive period. Reciprocal relationships with friends coupled with an independent outlook enable her to manage her transition effectively despite having

limited family. Personal activation then is apparent in many of the accounts of the older widows reflecting not only their life course experiences but also their fortitude to move on in later life.

Personal continuity

In addition to personal autonomy and moving on, taking an active role in sustaining connections with geographically distant family and friends appears to be an important aspect of personal continuity. Megan during the second interview talked for many of the women when she described the annual round robin that she sends in addition to Christmas cards:

It's nice just to keep in touch, a lot of these people when I send my card...I type a letter on my computer, and send them all what I've been doing during the year, so er, it's just a way of keeping in touch, yeah.

Megan is committed to making a personal effort to continue relations with meaningful ties. Again this may reflect her history of geographic mobility, as a member of the Armed Forces earlier in her life and more recently the move to the North of England from the South to be nearer to her son and his family. This is also apparent for Clarice, who like Megan has a 'concentrated family' personal community type. During the initial interview she discussed the importance of maintaining contact with ties she has made over a lifetime:

I just keep in touch with people, and I know that it's me that does it, you know, I know if I stopped most of them would stop, but it's part of me, it's just how I am and that's it, you know (laughs)...I've got a book there full of friends, those that I made when I was a warden, those that I made while I was nursing, friends, girls that went to school with me, that I keep in touch with...I've got quite a lot of friends, you see I never miss anybody's birthday it's just a thing that I've got.

As demonstrated by Megan and Clarice personal continuity is manifest in the active maintenance of relationships with meaningful ties developed over the life course and seems to relate to a sense of constant identity. More specifically as she discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview, Patricia illustrated how making the effort to keep in touch with valued friends provides a means of continuity for her and reflects her life long approach to friendship:

We've always kept in touch, when I make friends I make friends for life I think...well I had to start in September I had forty odd letters in some of them...well I like to hear from everyone because er, they've all got er a certain thing for me.

Friendships may be particularly important to Patricia as she has a limited family due to various life course events, including estrangement from her parents and siblings when she married, and her and husband being unable to have a family of their own. For Veronica who shares the same type of 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community as Patricia the maintained contact of a friend of her deceased husband provides her with a meaningful source of continuity and sense of status in widowhood. As she explained during the second interview:

'Dennis and Alma', this is quite nice actually, this is a man who worked with my husband, and he was my husband's curate, and we always kept in touch, they phoned each other occasionally, and if anybody died who they'd worked with they always seemed to be there, you know, they met each other there, and he came to Fred's funeral, and I thought 'He'll drop me off after this', but he hasn't. Each Christmas he's sent me a card, you know, so Fred's the contact really...they are church people I've known for years you see, well they both used to love Fred and they've never forgotten me.

In addition to friends Veronica talked about the stability and continuity her faith provided for her during the difficult early days of widowhood and beyond: 'They've

said to me, they've all said to me: 'You've done so well, we said you would with your faith', that's what they've said, and I've said to them 'Yes, my faith has been a wonderful thing, it's been a rock, you know'. Julia also talked about her life-long affiliation with the Church during the early days of widowhood: 'Well I've been a member of the Methodist church since I was four, still attend, still do anything that I can at the church'. Julia's faith then like Veronica's provides a source of personal continuity in later life widowhood. This personal continuity, including having a sense of independence and being an active participant appears to be valued by many of the older women alongside their relationships with family, friends and others.

Dependence

In contrast to the positive personal resources experienced by many of the older widows, such as autonomy and personal activation, some of the women described the negative experience of dependence. During the third interview Mary demonstrated a growing sense of her deteriorating health and subsequent social isolation, making frequent references to the past rather than the future:

Well it's three years since Earnest went...20th of December he went. Well things like he used to help me with, that I can't do myself, you know what I mean? We used to work together then, you know...I've got worse in myself, you know what I mean?

Being an active participant in later life widowhood appears to be important to many of the women and integral to the process of letting go of elements of the past and moving on with a sense of purpose. However, for a minority of women such as Mary, who is disabled and housebound, opportunities to develop autonomy and engage in activities with others are limited. This is further compounded by a

reliance on her disunited family who are central to her personal community.

Similarly for Alice, who has poor mobility due to arthritis and lives in a rural setting with limited transport links, being able to visit friends is almost impossible. As she discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview:

Oh that's a lady who did painting, not these but in the other place, she's such a lovely lady, she's a widow, er, she sends me little, but she's painted beautiful things, yes, and er, she lives in an old peoples' bungalow. But you see it's getting there, or else I mean I would like to go and talk to her.

In addition, the reciprocal balance of friendships or potential friendships is disturbed when one party is more dependent or in need of support than the other, as Alice went on to explain:

Friends are people er... that you could say, 'Would you take me here, or would you go with me, or would you take me to the doctors?' you know, even if I paid them... like Jean here... she wouldn't take me if I didn't pay her, you see. Well I can't expect it probably, but I gave her ten pounds to take me to the dentist, and er, so I can't in all truth. You see, to me friendship, I mean we used to take people, as I say on holiday, to hospital, and all sorts of places.

Alice reiterated her dependence on others since her husband died not only for transport but also for house maintenance. Her two adult sons living out of the area, and her having to rely on paid help further compound this. As she explained during the third interview:

I'm still on the council yeah, I went the other night, I had a lift and I do that. But I haven't started anything else, and I keep on thinking, but it's getting transport, and okay you can get taxis but I mean taxis are phenomenal now, and er...so...I put it off I was going to do it while the weather was bad, because my window cleaner said he would help me, always ready to earn some extra money, to do my little room out so I can have a sofa bed in you see, and I've got all that stuff in there, all Bob's stuff in there which I haven't

done, so I said 'I'll do that, and then I'll have me carpets cleaned', you see, because these are too light, and I'll have it decorated and I'll get it nice. Because it's one of my concerns that I'm going to leave my sons with a lot of sorting out to do for their father and so on, because I've still got a lot of his RAF things, you know.

Mary and Alice share the same 'concentrated family' type of personal community in terms of structure as many of the older widows, including Megan. However, their experiences demonstrate diversity and complexity in terms of the content of their relationships. Earlier in the chapter we saw how Megan's ties with her family are robust and affirming, yet her personal autonomy also ensures that she is an active participant in managing the process of transition. Conversely Mary and Alice's experiences demonstrate both the social and personal challenges within their personal communities, including family disagreements and personal ill health, which impede rather than facilitate their adjustment during widowhood.

Conclusion

This chapter then has demonstrated the importance of personal continuity in addition to the continuity of social relations in the management of change. The family can be seen as a valuable source of continuity, giving many of the older widows, particularly those with the 'family-centred' personal community types, a sense of stability and purpose through sustained family practices and established kinship roles. Moreover intergenerational ties and tradition appear to represent a particular form of lineage and permanence during a time of flux and uncertainty helping to further ease transition.

In addition to reinforcing relationships with family, the continuity of friendships is also apparent over the Christmas period and the women's accounts illustrate the complexity of these ties. For some of the women friends take on the characteristics of family and provide much needed support in the absence of kin,

for others they simply represent a sustained social connection. However, these associations are valued and maintained particularly through the exchange of Christmas cards, and also indicate important social ties that do not appear in the personal community diagrams of the older widows. Continuing and developing ties with organisations and the wider community is also apparent for many of the women, and particularly for those with the 'friend-type' personal communities, providing a forum for social interaction and activity for some and the development of deeper friendships for others.

Moreover, the women's unique experiences and approaches developed over the life course demonstrate a form of personal continuity. Regardless of the older widows' personal community types, having a degree of personal independence alongside robust relationships with family, friends and others, as well as continuing to make a valuable contribution to personal communities, appears to be crucial to positive adjustment in later life widowhood. However, for a minority of the older widows family friction and dependence are also apparent, demonstrating relationship strain, a reliance on others and the altered balance of power in relationships during transition. The following chapter goes on to further illustrate the importance of personal impetus in making independent choices and changes to lifestyle as an older widow through aspects of discontinuity.

Chapter 7: Discontinuity, change and mediation

Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated the importance of continuity, or taking part of the past forward, in the management of transition. This chapter goes on to highlight the significance of discontinuity, or making a shift from the past, through the following themes. First, 'Christmas as a catalyst for change' encompasses the acceptable and unacceptable loss of relationships, moving on, a different kind of Christmas, a time for me, and passivity. Second, 'We are all widows' locates a commonality of widowhood, but also the feeling of being different. Finally, 'Negotiating change with others' illustrates the mediation of change in family practices and the importance of flexibility in personal communities when adjustment occurs.

As exemplified in Chapter 6, Christmas is a time to remember the past. However, it also signifies looking to the future and moving on. Patricia, for example, illustrated this during her initial interview: 'I mean you don't forget them, they'll always be, but you can't make your life around the dead, and not go out and see people'. As we saw in the previous chapter visiting the resting place of loved ones is particularly prevalent over the Christmas period. However, for women such as Beverly, who continues to visit the cemetery, especially at significant times of the year, it is not a necessary duty as she explained during the third interview:

I only go, I go up Christmas and put a wreath on...and odd times of the year. But I don't think you need to go to the cemetery because there's always something you do during the day when you think about them sort of thing, so you don't have to go to the cemetery to remember them, that's how I look at it, that's my philosophy anyway. Yeah I think you should go forward not back...

Rather than looking back, many of the older widows talked about plans for the future. Doreen, for example, during the third interview talked about a busy year ahead with members of her personal community, including her family and the organisations she belongs to:

I'm going to Egypt next week, not next week the week after. I've got a busy summer this, I'm going to Egypt with one of my children, it's their half term in... the week after ours, it's half term here next week, er but they said 'Would you like to go with us for half term', so they decided to go to Egypt...er then I'm going to France in June with the U3A. And I'm going to Switzerland to stay at my brother's house...

Similarly, despite the Christmas period being a difficult time for Molly, as she lost her husband around this time, she also talked positively during the third interview about upcoming events with her new associations:

Oh I shall definitely be going away, I like to do things on the spur of the moment... yes I think so. Somebody from the WRVS has gone to Torquay this week, to look a place out, it's called turkey and tinsel or something.

Looking ahead is also apparent in Marilyn's discussion during the third interview, as she described a busy year of activities with her new friends. However, this seemed to be tempered by an uncertainty about the future, which may reflect her life course position as an older widow:

Going on holiday, enjoying myself, doing the garden, cleaning the house, spring cleaning, er just going out in general...we're going up North, and we are going to Bournemouth again, those are already booked. And then we are going to book up for Christmas again but I don't know if we will have the same hotel. That's if everything goes off alright, because you don't know what's going to happen do you?

Special days of the year then, such as Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries, appear not only to be a reference point for remembering the past, but also a

catalyst for new beginnings and looking ahead to the future, particularly later on in widowhood, whatever it may bring. The following themes demonstrate a discontinuity with the past as the relationships, activities and personal identities of the older widows alter. The themes also illustrate how the negotiation of these shifts with significant members of the women's personal communities is essential to this evolution.

7.1: Christmas as a catalyst for change

Acceptable losses

Christmas is traditionally a time for keeping in touch and reinforcing social bonds with family, friends and other contacts as illustrated in Chapter 6. However, from the women's discussion of their Christmas cards, it is also apparent that it is a time when the loss of relationships becomes discernable. Some of these losses may be more acceptable than others, for many of the women the absence of a regular Christmas card signified the possible illness or death of the regular sender. Mary, for example, said during the second interview:

When we used to go to the miners' home, mind you she could be gone, when we used to go to the miners' home at Blackpool, we got in with this couple, and he was a miner, Jim and Beryl. Well of course every year she'd send me a card...well I've sent her a card but I haven't had one this time, so probably something has happened to her, you know what I mean? You don't know do you, from one year to another, no, no.

The possible reasons for not receiving these annual correspondences are highlighted further by Alice, as she reflected on her 'missing' Christmas cards during the second interview:

Some, perhaps one or two that I haven't had back, so I don't know whether they've er, sort of forgotten me, you know, because they're old lists, or whether something has happened to them, because they are only casual acquaintances. And of course some people that I would normally have sent to...they've died this year, or last year, you know, which wasn't very nice. And er, so er, it's just one of those things, it's getting old, and I suppose you've got to adjust to it.

Some of the older widows talked about a general decline in the number of Christmas cards they receive year on year from members of their personal communities. This is illustrated by Patricia's discussion during the second interview:

Well I have about ninety altogether. I used to have about a hundred and fifty but of course a lot of people, as you get older everyone's died you know...I know a lot of them are ill, and I know a lot of them have died, and that, so. I'm sad that they died and that, but at the same time, I'm glad that I had as many as I did, because a lot of people now, all their friends have died and that, and a lot of mine have. I had over two hundred cards at one time.

Later, during the third interview, Patricia talked more specifically about the personal losses she had incurred since her last Christmas celebrations: 'Well I've lost a cousin, and there's me brother-in-law, and I've lost er...one or two friends'. For many of the older widows this decrease in their social relations is attributed to their stage of life. For example, although Veronica was disappointed not to receive a Christmas card from some older friends she, like Alice earlier, seemed accepting of 'inevitable' age-related losses, as she explained during the second interview:

What's upset me this year, well it has upset me but I think there is a story behind it, there are three cards I haven't had, one is from a couple that we met on holiday in Scotland twenty years ago, and each year we've sent each other cards, but he was beginning to go blind and I think his wife was poorly, Jim and Jane. But I've not had a card from them this year, and so there must be a physical reason, and you don't like to ring up and say, 'Is everything alright?' Because they used to write a lengthy letter with the card

but now it's got less and less, and so it's come to nothing, you know... There were one or two omissions, but I knew that two people had passed away, and possibly a third so, you know...because it's my age now, really isn't it? And these things happen.

In addition to a lack of Christmas cards, the absence of regular attendees at Christmas celebrations can also indicate a change in valued relationships. Clarice, for example, during the third interview talked about her sister-in-law, who had recently become ill and had been admitted to a nursing home:

Well at Christmas, one of my daughters said to me 'Mother we'll go and fetch Mary out of the home and bring her to our house so she can have dinner with you'. When they went to fetch her she wouldn't come out, no they couldn't persuade her no matter how they tried...because Mary wasn't here, you know, I sort of, miss that part of it, yes, I was very upset, I was really sad that she hadn't come to have her dinner with us you see, because, right from when my husband and I got married, we've always included Mary in our Christmas dinner, yes...so it was quite sad.

Many of the older women then because of their life course position have to deal with the additional losses of family, friends and others within their personal communities, regardless of their type, during later life widowhood.

Unacceptable losses

In contrast to 'acceptable' relationship loss, as a consequence of ill health or death, discontinuity in the form of unacceptable losses was also apparent for some of the older women. These often involved an unexplained or unwanted change in relationships. Mary, for example, during the third interview talked about a previously close friend who no longer visits her:

I haven't seen her for over twelve months...she used to come for my birthday, but I haven't seen her, and Christmas, I've had a Christmas card from her, it's amongst them, yeah.

This loss may be particularly difficult for Mary, as she has limited contact with her family, particularly over the Christmas period. Indeed even long-standing friendships can change and eventually fall by the way side during widowhood. For example, as Beatrice discussed her cards during the third interview, she described how support and companionship offered during the early days by friends of hers and her husband's tailed off over a period of time:

Me and Brian had been friends with Nigel...for twenty-five years at least, and his wife died about ten years ago now, and I was very close to Julie, we used to go a lot. And then eventually he met Janice, and they were very good to me when Brian died, oh unknown good. And then eventually, I'm a very sensitive person and I pick vibes up, and I went two or three times, they'd asked me for tea and I felt, 'They don't really want me here'...and the vibes they were right, yeah, so I just put my hand up to him if I see him and say 'Hello how are you?', and I'd heard he'd been in hospital so I stopped on the bank down there, and he said 'What's up have you broke down?'...being sarcastic, and he said 'Why don't you come down any more?', and I said 'I don't come where I'm not wanted', and he said 'You said that not me'...but it was true, she stopped coming up and the children did, and I didn't feel right...now I'm the type of person I ask you straight out...but when I asked them, 'Oh no you are making it all up, it's all in your mind'. But it wasn't, so I send them a card, but I don't go anywhere where I'm not wanted.

Socialising less in general with 'coupled friends' is apparent for many of the older widows and illustrates a change in the dynamics of friendships once partners are lost. Minnie exemplifies this as she discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview:

'Thinking of you, Eileen and Ron', yeah, that's someone else who Reg used to deal with in business, you know. I mean we had a good cross section of social life, you know, right across the board, you know, but funny enough it's all gone, if you know what I'm saying, you know, which is a shame.

In addition, family relationships, particularly those with in-laws, can also alter in widowhood, perhaps because normatively there is no longer a 'duty' to keep in

touch with the remaining spouse. Beverly described her experience during the second interview, as she discussed her Christmas cards:

Er and I sent Mark's sister one, but that was the last one, I shan't send her anymore. Because I haven't heard from her for two years, so I think she just wants to sever ties, we were never very er, you know.

Similarly, for Moira the differences in family practices between her and her husband's side of the family became more apparent after her husband's death. She reflected on this during the third interview:

I don't see Jim's side of the family at all now, no...they were never very close anyway, but I've felt it just as Jim's died, they weren't very, very close when Jim was here, he was more close to my family really...you get families like that though don't you? I am from a very close family so we've just continued like that.

The absence of a Christmas card reflected the deterioration in relations between Elsie and members of her husband's family following his death. As she explained during the second interview:

It's Bob's brother and one of his sisters, and er they didn't think I took Bob's illness seriously enough... and then when his wife died, he said he didn't want me at the funeral, you know, and well, well it really hurt, but I don't take any notice, it doesn't bother me now, no.

The loss of friendships and extended family relationships is apparent for many of the older widows irrespective of their personal community type. However, for women with limited kin who rely on their 'friend-type' personal communities, the loss of friendships can be particularly difficult. For Veronica, a missing Christmas card signifies the termination of a valued correspondence she shared with an old friend of the family. She explained her disappointment during the third interview:

She was my mother's doctor, and as you know we were caring for mother for several years, she visited my mother every month, came to mother's parties and everything, and she visited me and Fred even when mother passed away, and when Fred passed away she came and said 'Was it Fred's name I saw in the funeral directors?' and I said 'Yes it was', and she was very sad, and she sent me a card for three years. But this year I haven't had one, perhaps she thinks it's time now, to drop it, I don't know, I sent her one.

The continuation of this 'friendship' may be further complicated by professional boundaries, as medics and members of other formal organisations are placed in the centre of Veronica's diagram alongside her sister and nephew. In addition, Veronica talked about another relationship change with a 'friend' who had been particularly supportive when her husband was ill and when she was first widowed:

And this is something that, she's nothing against me and I've nothing against her, when she was a chaplain at the hospice, I would see her for two years, because I kept going as a volunteer, but I couldn't go as regular with everything else that I was doing...and er, but I went just occasionally and I used to see her, but I knew that she was feeling that I should be a little bit more distant, because she was so busy, you know what I mean, and I got the message, well I think I got the message right anyway, and so she's emailed me and said 'Keep in touch and let me know what's going on', because she's left you see...so I do but she never emails back...so I think no I better let it go, you know.

Unacceptable losses, such as those experienced by Veronica and Mary earlier who both have little family support, signify a 'letting go' of once important relationships. This may reflect the fading intensity of supportive friendships and bonds with professionals offered during the early days of widowhood. This differs to family support, which may continue to be offered unconditionally for normative reasons. Just as Christmas is a time for keeping in touch and reinforcing the continuation of social ties, it is also a time when the loss of relationships, some more acceptable than others, is communicated and expressed. For some of the

older widows then acceptance and successful adaptation may be compounded by additional losses and disappointments along the way.

Moving on

In addition to the loss of relationships, the Christmas and New Year period itself seemed to signify personal change for many of the women, motivating an engagement in new activities or a change in approach to long-established practices. Patricia, for example, talked about joining a new club around the Christmas period soon after she became widowed:

Towards Christmas some elderly ladies came to sell plants for the Church, they went next door, they were talking to me, this lady Sally, I didn't know her then, but oh I was breaking my heart and she sat with me for a bit, and she said 'Now I'm going to finish giving these flowers out would you like me to come back and sit with you for a bit?' I said 'Oh yes please', so she did. Oh she was most kind and she got me into the Cameo Club for the senior citizens on a Tuesday and I went there in the New Year.

Similarly Molly, whose husband died just before Christmas, talked enthusiastically about the development of a new and very different interest for her during the third interview:

I've also started er, we have a craft class, down at er, they make cards, but I'm not very good, I made this one last night... they were supposed to be for this Christmas but I never got them finished, you've got to make them and then put your verses in...but I've done these myself...but I haven't been doing it that long, it wasn't long before Christmas, but I was so pleased with these...it's surprising what you can do.

This is a significant change for Molly, who had relied on her family to write cards for her the first Christmas following her bereavement, as her husband previously wrote all of the Christmas cards. In addition to starting a new hobby, Christmas also seemed to motivate Molly into signing up for some voluntary work:

Well I just got up one day...and did it, just before Christmas I rung Age Concern, they said 'We'll leave it until after Christmas now because of the Christmas holiday'. I went on the 4th of January and filled everything out.

For Molly Christmas is the anniversary of her husband's death as well as an annual reference point in the transition process, therefore the urge to 'move on' may be all the more fervent for her around this period. New friendships cultivated through attending organisations are also apparent in the many new cards received by Molly, which she discussed during the third interview:

That's from the WRVS, I've had quite a few from there and I didn't know half the people. Er she is a friend I've made, she does the cards as well, Amy. And that's from the, oh I've joined the Darby and Joan Club up here on a Wednesday.

Often a subtle change in quite mundane habits indicates an adjustment during widowhood. Flora, for example, talked during the third interview of not starting a calendar in the New Year, illustrating a shift in her lifestyle:

When George first died...and I relied on my calendar, and I used to put something down everyday following as I'd got something to look forward to, and this time I haven't had a calendar...and it's the first year I can remember never having a calendar...but I think I've got into some kind of, well I must have...a routine. I go a club Monday, I go a club Tuesday, I go a club Wednesday, I go out Tuesday night downstairs, I go out Thursday night downstairs, and we have a little party Saturday...(laughs).

More obvious milestones in the process of transition were evident for some of the older widows. For example, Alice talked about considering a male admirer as a companion during the third interview as she discussed her Christmas cards, something she had previously dismissed:

There's William, it's five years today that his wife died, and he stopped, he didn't ring me for a while, because you know I told you that he used to ask me to go out with him and he used to say things that I didn't think were appropriate...well...he seems to be a bit lonely to me. It's funny, he doesn't say the things he did, and I only thought the other day, 'Do you think I should give him a try?'

This change in activities and attitudes seems to signify an acceptance and moving on in life, particularly after 'being' an older widow for a period of time, regardless of the women's personal community types.

New or extended activities are often useful during the early days of widowhood adding structure and purpose to daily life when loss is at its most profound. However, they can become arduous later on in widowhood, especially given the advanced age of many of the widows. Cathy, who has a 'friend with family centrality' personal community, for example, said during the second interview:

No, I've given up the sculpting I was doing (laughs) because I was going on a Wednesday evening, and it was the kind of thing you'd quite like to do in the summer, but turning out at six o'clock in this wretched weather, er I opted in the end, I didn't know what to do, because I'd done work with terracotta when I used to go for the whole day...so I thought well I don't particularly want to do that again. So I ended up doing stone carvings, well it was a killer, because you have to use an electric angle grinder, and you had to do it out of doors, because of the dust, and wear goggles and things, and I had no interest in it, so at the end of the term, I haven't gone back, it did not appeal to me, so I just lost interest. I liked the course...but it was crack of dawn stuff, I had to be there by nine, so you had to get up early, have breakfast, you've got to take sandwiches with you, and you didn't finish until half past three, so the whole Wednesday was sort of wiped out for me, you know. I decided I'm too old to be bothered, 'Why am I putting myself through this?', I thought (laughs) doing something I'm not really enjoying.

For Cathy who had a busy career as a GP earlier on in life, making the choice to stop certain 'leisure' activities demonstrates her empowerment and acceptance in

later life widowhood. Similarly for Doreen, a retired health visitor, the many voluntary roles she has taken on since retiring and becoming a widow seem to be starting to take their toll, particularly over the busy Christmas period. As she explained during the second interview:

We had the mothers' and toddlers' party which I had to organise, er seventy-five presents I had to buy for that, it was absolute chaos, but we did have a lot there this year so er. I think one of the reasons, because we did a lot in the church as well decorating, I think one of the reasons I was so ill was that I had just done too much really.

Keeping busy through developing new skills, participating in voluntary work and extending roles appears to be helpful to women such as Cathy and Doreen, perhaps due to them having earlier careers in the caring professions. However, it can also lead to over commitment and be less useful later on in widowhood.

A different kind of Christmas

The importance of personal agency in addition to the continuity of social relationships is apparent in later life widowhood as we saw in the previous chapter. That is, being able to exert control and make independent choices. Some of the women, especially those who had been widowed for a longer period of time, demonstrated discontinuity by choosing to spend Christmas differently away from their families and homes. In the early days of widowhood Christmas can be an isolating experience even when it is spent with significant others. Flora, for example, described the first Christmas spent without her husband with her adult daughter, son-in-law and grandson:

I spent one Christmas on me own, with them...and er...no maybe I shouldn't say this, er I was with Miriam and her husband, and I don't particularly like him...It's been from the very beginning...and er, when

Miriam went out of the door he followed, you know...I felt so alone...first Christmas, you know, and I thought...'This isn't how it should be, not Christmas'.

During the second interview, Flora talked about a very different Christmas away with her widowed friend, in contrast to the previous Christmas spent at her daughter's house:

Oh it was lovely, I haven't been away, er, I've been away many, many times with my hubby, er but er, I went to me daughter's the first Christmas I was on my own... so I said to my friend 'I could do with going away, alternate, instead of having me holiday in summer having it at Christmas', and I'm ever so pleased that I did...it was really, really good, and there was a group of us, and we seemed as though we fell in with the right group. But from the word go it was really good, yeah, nice hotel, nice food and, er it snowed the day before Christmas, not a lot, but a scattering, and then Christmas Day, they took us out for an hour all among the mountains, oh and it was so beautiful, really, really lovely it was, yeah, I really enjoyed it. I ought to go again (laughs), yeah, yeah, it was really good.

Flora's Christmas celebrations included some new and enjoyable experiences for her and her companion. However, these seemed to mask an underlying sadness regarding her bereavement and her poor relationship with her son-in-law:

Christmas Eve they had a dance, and er, then Christmas Day was spent eating (laughs) and er then they had a party, a sort of party, and er, it's a long, long while since I danced, but I did get up and I finished up dancing with a Scots man (laughs) with a skirt on (laughs) I said 'I've never danced with a Scots man in a skirt before (laughs)'. But I must have enjoyed it too much...we didn't go bed until two o'clock in the morning, no I think I over did it, so since then I haven't been able (laughs) to pull myself together...But it is a really bad time, you know, Christmas, yeah, really bad. I mean I've always had me family, but I thought I'll have to do something, so then we decided to go away.

Similarly, Marilyn's Christmas during the early days of widowhood appeared to be a novel and separate event in contrast to the mundane routine of the rest of the year. As she described during the second interview:

Well Christmas Day I went my son's for a Christmas meal, you know, all of us, stayed there Christmas Day. Then New Years Eve we went to a friend's and left there at about one, two o'clock in the morning, because you've got to see the New Year in haven't you? And er then it's back to normal, boring things.

As Marilyn has two adult children she explained how Christmas Day is celebrated between the two families: 'Like this year we're going to Gill's all day on Christmas Day, so they take it in turns'. However, during the third interview, Marilyn talked about spending a different Christmas, from the usual celebrations with her adult son and daughter, away with her widowed friend:

I went with me friend and her sister and her husband, and two more friends of hers, and we had a great time...great time. The hotel was lovely and they had three different er turns on every night, and the food was excellent, and it was really, really nice, and we were walking along the sea front...because the weather was nice, and then Boxing Day they had all er carol singers outside in the main town and we went to see them, and we really enjoyed it...Her husband died on the 28th of December...you know, so it was Christmas time when he died, so she was glad really to be away from home...

As well as celebrating an alternative Christmas, Marilyn's deepening friendship has led to a general increase in her social interaction throughout the rest of the year, as she reflected:

I didn't go out a lot, but now I've met Hilary you see, she's the same temperament as me, and then she's got friends and I'm making friends with her friends, and it's quite...interesting and nice. Something to look forward

to instead of, you know winter months miserable and you're sitting here looking at four walls.

These widening friendships are reflected in Marilyn's Christmas cards, as she discussed new friends that she had met on a recent trip:

This is from friends who we went out with yesterday, and we went to Christmas, you know at Blackpool...and this is from a friend of Hilary and mine when we went to Blackpool...

In contrast to her restricted social life during the early days of widowhood, which may be due in part to her having been the main carer for her husband for several years, Marilyn has developed a newfound confidence along with her wider ties and activities, relying less on her adult children. This reflects the shift from her initial 'family only' personal community type to her 'concentrated family' personal community type:

I think I've, I'm used to being on my own now, I do more things, I can do more things myself, than asking people to do for me. I'm more independent.

After some consideration Marilyn concluded that the significant shift of spending Christmas away with her widowed friend instead of between her adult son and daughter was the right decision for her, as she reflected during the third interview: 'I've never been away before at Christmas, and we were both thinking 'Oh are we doing the right thing?' But we did, yes'. Marilyn's growing autonomy and confidence is evident in the independent choices she is making as an older widow and her shift in personal community type. Similarly, although family are central to Flora's 'friend with family centrality' personal community, for Flora discontinuing Christmas celebrations with her youngest daughter, primarily due to friction with

her son-in-law and feeling that she was a burden, proved to be successful. As she explained during the second interview:

It was really better than I really thought, you know going away at Christmas. I thought, you know, I haven't been away really, not for Christmas, I've always been home, you know, spent it at home, and er, Miriam the young one, that's Tim's mum...the first Christmas she said 'It won't be any different mum, because Tim will be there and you've always come since Tim's been born', he's twelve, but er, no it isn't the same...

Flora's discontinuation of an uncomfortable family practice in later life mirrors an earlier life course approach, which led to her ending an unhappy first marriage as a young woman. As discontinuity can be an empowering choice and provide an escape from normative obligations and family friction, it can also be perceived as a selfless act for others. This is evident as Flora talked further about her decision not to continue spending Christmas with her adult children at home:

I found it very, very hard Christmas, I was glad when it was over, and it's a terrible thing to say, but I thought I'm going to go away, you know, it isn't fair to intrude and I felt as if I was. It's their Christmas as well as mine.

For older widows, such as Marilyn and Flora, discontinuity can be seen as an enabling choice, providing an alternative to participating in family practices based on normative obligations and involving family disharmony.

As well as spending Christmas with friends, some of the older women were able to celebrate Christmas away from home with other family members for the first time in many years once they were widowed. For example, Beverly was able to visit her eldest daughter in Yorkshire after spending Christmas at home previously with her husband and daughter who lives nearby, as he was unwell and unable to travel. As she explained during the second interview:

It was different because normally Carol comes to me, so I haven't spent Christmas with Deborah for quite a few years... so I shall probably go again the Christmas after next, because this year they'll have Daisy, so I shall probably go the year after, hopefully I will be invited again (laughs). So I'm hoping to get another couple of Christmas' there, you know.

For Beverly having the freedom to visit relatives who live out of the area while she is still independent and able to travel is a new and valued experience in later life widowhood. Similarly Doreen, who like Beverly has a 'family-type' personal community, described during the third interview how she had spent Christmas at her adult daughter's house, after many years of hosting the celebrations in the family home:

I went away for, to my daughter's for Christmas, that's the first time ever...I went to Sarah, yeah, but we were all there for Christmas Day, so that was, that worked out quite well, yeah...yeah the Christmas was different, I'd never been away for Christmas...I really enjoyed it, yeah, yeah it was really good.

Although the venue of the Christmas celebrations was different for Doreen, she was still able to spend it with the whole of her family without having the responsibility of organising the Christmas meal itself. As well as altering Christmas practices in later life widowhood, some of the women chose to spend New Years Eve differently. Jane, for example, decided to cancel a party with her family in order to keep her recently widowed neighbour company, as she explained during the third interview:

I mean Sheila next door, they always had a fancy dress party see, because she's got three girls, and they said 'Mum when shall we come and get you?' she said 'I'm not coming, not now, I can't come and enjoy myself, perhaps next year but not this year'. So I went round and I asked her I said 'I was going to ask you round here'.

For Jane who has a 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community, it was important to prioritise spending time with her friend and neighbour in her time of need. For many of the older widows then, instigating a change in family practices around the Christmas period, illustrates their growing personal confidence and ability to make independent choices.

A time for me

In addition to increasing their social interaction and altering their family practices in widowhood, some of the women along with their female friends had started to take more of an interest in their well-being and personal appearance. This seemed to be a definite shift for many of the women who had spent much of their time and energy caring for their husbands prior to widowhood. Megan illustrated this as she discussed her Christmas cards during the third interview:

This is from my friend Mel, she lives down the road, Mel and I, we started to go to the community college, the health and beauty section, and we have a massage and a facial and the students do it, you see, a fraction of the price, so that's very good...

Similarly, Molly was introduced to a beauty treatment by her close friend over the Christmas period. As she described during the initial interview:

This girl came out and shouted me name, I said 'What's going on?' she said 'You're going to have a waxing', 'A what, what's that (laughs)', 'Oh' I said 'Right', so I looked at the girl and she looked at me, and I said 'Don't you think I've gone past this, whatever I'm going to have done?' 'You've never gone past it' the girl said, 'You've never gone past it'. Well I told, I think I told her Monday morning, and she said 'Oh god mum I've got come up', because she was making such a what's it about this because I'd had me eyebrows done you see, I've never had it done in my life, ever. Bill would have had something to say about that as well, all me facial hair removed you know, yeah, and I said 'You're not going to believe it Debbie', she said 'Oh mum I've got to come up', so she said 'Are you going back to your younger days?'

As well as being a new experience for Molly, whose social activities were largely centred on her husband and their involvement in the Church prior to widowhood, this shift in personal identity also seemed to surprise her adult daughter. Female family members, as well as friends, can activate this behaviour also. For example, during the second interview Gloria talked about being taken to have a manicure for her birthday by her granddaughter over the Christmas period, another new experience for her: 'The other day I enjoyed was with Destiny, when I went and had me hands, you know, I'd never had that done before, and the ladies in there were ever so nice, she was lovely'.

In broader terms, widowhood can present a new lease of life more generally in later life. For example Beverly, who was the sole long-term carer for her husband for many years, reflected during the third interview on the many personal changes she has experienced since becoming an older widow:

Yeah, well I moved, I've been away abroad, I've been away twice er, Ibiza, I went in...May, three weeks after I moved in here (laughs) so it was all systems go, and then we had a week in Benidorm at the end of September...er, I went with May my friend who I usually go away with...we've been to Scotland, we've been to London...a theatre weekend in London in August, and Scotland in December.

In addition to holidaying with her best friend May, Beverly described looking forward to the 'trip of a lifetime' with her daughter planned for later in the year:

Well in March I'm going to Egypt...and I'm going with Diane my eldest daughter...she's always wanted to go and I think the fascination was that Mark did his national service over there, he was in Cairo in that area. We are going, we are on a cruise on the Nile for a week and then we are having a week in Luxor, where we are going is where all the tombs are, so we are doing that, so we kind of pushed the boat out a bit, and we're going in a five star hotel so it should be quite nice...so we are going for two weeks on our own.

Becoming an older widow, after spending much of her adult life being subdued by a possessive husband, gave Amy the opportunity to increase her independence and activities in later life. As she explained during the third interview:

When me husband died I thought 'I'm going to make the most of it, I've been stuck in for years'...I couldn't do what I wanted, I couldn't go where I wanted. So I thought 'I'm going places I couldn't go'...and that's it.

Change and discontinuity is apparent then, in many of the older widows' activities, routines and family practices. This indicates not only their adjustment during widowhood, but also a new found freedom and sense of personal fulfilment as older women in the later stages of life.

Passivity

In contrast, some of the older women described a feeling of passivity in later life widowhood as their roles and responsibilities altered. For example, Deirdre, who like many of the older widows has a 'concentrated family' personal community type, said as she talked about spending Christmas at her daughter's house during the third interview:

Well the thing is...when you, when you are used to having a family...and you are preparing all the meals, and you are doing all the buying in, and you cook and are planning everything...er, you are like the centre and that, and then when you go out, you just have to sit there and watch everybody else, and it's, they say 'No, no you're alright, you sit there' you know. Well I prefer to be in the kitchen...and boiling the potatoes or...you know, because that's how it used to be, that's how I was brought up. I mean Christmas has always been half looking at the children opening their presents, half cooking and that, and being busy, and I don't like just sitting there...

Deirdre's experience seems to intensify her awareness of the ageing process, and her changing position within the family as an older widow. It also leads her to identify with her mother, as she went on to explain:

I sometimes think to myself... 'Well you should have understood how your mother, how my mother must have felt'... I mean she had seven children, and then, you know she said 'I sit in a corner and everybody talks over me'... you know, 'they don't talk to me they talk over me', and I felt exactly the same... I don't know... er... I think they think you lose your intelligence with your age, sort of thing...

The increasingly passive role Deirdre plays within her family, and in controlling her affairs, is further reinforced as she talked about 'de-cluttering' her house as her children had 'told' her to put her name down for a bungalow. In addition, she was also forced to withdraw from her valued role as a voluntary worker:

I've had to come out of so many things, er, like me road safety, because of different... health and that, and if you're not well enough to attend, you are easily replaced... you know. If anything... if you are not there, somebody, there's always somebody there quick to jump into your shoes...

Similarly Hannah, who shares the same type of personal community as Deirdre, also described taking a less active role in the Christmas celebrations since becoming an older widow. As she described during the second interview:

I did some cooking, yes, not like before, because I've usually been doing, quite a lot, baking and cooking, and New Year and that. But when you are happy you do a lot of things, but when you are sad you're just not the same, that's true isn't it, the will is there.

However, unlike Deirdre, Hannah's increased passivity as an older widow appears to be due in part to her own personal motivation to participate in celebrations that

just are not the same. She demonstrates an acceptance that things are different, and a disengagement from former practices. As she explained later during the third interview:

Er...it is a difference because before that I've been very busy, all having here, and this year I haven't done nothing, really much...they come in and gone, and I haven't prepared anything like before, meals, when they all were coming here, and now I cannot do that because I think it is too much, and too good a memory to remember and upsetting me.

Passivity, compounded by poor family relations in later life widowhood, can also reinforce a lack of confidence and self-esteem. For example, during the third interview Alice reflected on her inactivity and 'failure' to accomplish the goals she had set herself the previous year:

I don't seem to do anything, I was going to do this place out wasn't I? And I was going to have it decorated, and er, and all nice, and then I was going to see if I dared to go away on holiday myself see...so it's just a fact that I'm afraid of my knees going out on me, or me getting ill while I'm away and there being nobody there...I mean it's ridiculous it's only since Bob's died I've got like this...because you begin to doubt yourself. You see Martin is just the same with me, he sort of makes fun of me, and mocks me, and it's true.

For older widows such as Deirdre, Hannah and Alice, multiple transitions in addition to widowhood are apparent in later life despite them all having the most robust and stable 'concentrated family' type of personal community. The compounding influences of age-related illness and deterioration, the loss of roles within the home and family, and a wider contribution to the community in general, all pose a challenge to adaptation, in spite of the seemingly healthy structure of their personal communities.

7.2: We're all widows

A commonality of widowhood

Later life widowhood can lead to an increased identification and solidarity with female friends and family members within personal communities. Moreover as the women talked about their experiences of Christmas and discussed their cards many of them made reference to other older widows. A commonality of widowhood is evident as Molly, for example, talked about her close friends and other associates during the third interview:

Monday night I went round to Madge and we had a good laugh and, she buried her husband four years ago, and Wilma buried hers three years ago, we're all widows...Christmas they'd got a what's it up to Blackpool...er quite a few from the WRVS, all widows...and er they asked me did I want to go...

Being with someone that understands, and sharing common experiences as an older widow, is part of this identity particularly with closer friends, as Molly explained: 'She's close to me...so we are sort of good for one another, because she has some bad days as well, she does...' This is also the case for Minnie, who feels well supported by one of her friends who has been a widow since mid-life. As she explained during the second interview as she discussed her cards:

'Dear Min all the very best for the New Year, hope you have a nice break, love and best wishes Doris'. Now this a very close friend of Reg's and I, you know, she lost her husband at forty-seven, he died of cancer, and I've been able to ring her when I've been at my lowest, you know she's sort of encouraged me and she's said 'Oh yes, you will get through it', because at times you feel as though you'll never get through it, you know.

Minnie also described how she has formed a closer friendship with another older widow, who she was able to spend time with over the Christmas period. This was

particularly helpful for Minnie as she only has one adult son that lives in the South of England:

I've got a friend, she's, I think I might have told you about her, Irene, she lost her husband, it will be two years coming er the seventeenth of this month, it's two years. We've sort of struck a friendship up, from when we met in the cemetery, you know, her husband and my husband used to play football together, and er, well we saw one another out and about like. So in one sense Irene was like an acquaintance, for me like, but when I happened to see her in the cemetery we walked along the road for the bus, and we er sort of struck a friendship and we did go away together er at Christmas, we went to Spain, yeah...and I say to Irene, 'Irene we mustn't forget we were the same', you know. You see you don't realise the grief until you go through it.

Friendships are important to both Molly and Minnie, and this is reflected in their placing close friends alongside family in their personal community diagrams. In addition to feeling you are not the only one, a greater depth of understanding and insight into the feelings of others in a similar position is also apparent. As Flora demonstrated, as she talked about her female friends and family during the second interview:

Realising other people they've got their share you know, I've had this illness whatever, and ladies that have gone through the same, and you can understand them more. I can understand my sister-in-law more, she lost me brother when he was sixty.

Indeed having been widowed for some time can lead to providing support and reassurance to the more recently widowed. Patricia, who like Flora has a 'friend-type' personal community, during the second interview for example: 'And this is from another lady, her husband has only been dead recently er from the retired members, it's her birthday tomorrow so I've ordered her a bouquet of flowers'. By

the third interview Patricia had also formed a close friendship with another older widow she had met through a local group, as she described:

She's a widow, and oh she's ever such a lovely person, oh she's such a nice person...and after her husband died, she came to the Cameo (club) and as soon as she walked in I thought 'Oh she could be my friend'. She's one of those, you know, and she's absolutely gorgeous!

Although Beatrice has a 'concentrated family' personal community, she also demonstrated the strong alliance she has with her friends, who are also older widows, as she discussed her Christmas cards during the second interview:

'Friendship is a precious gift' and, which it is, and the words in that are really nice, 'you've been the best friend this world has ever seen' at the end it says, which is a lovely card to get. That's Beryl she's another one, she is the third one, and I'm the fourth, the four widows.

During the third interview, Beatrice also described inviting a recently widowed friend on a short break over the Christmas period, with her and her other widowed friends:

Oh I went to Southport... so I asked Bella... because she's on her own the same as us, she will never have anybody else the same as us (laughs) and so we went... on the coach, they get these trips up, so we went to Southport for the weekend and that was brilliant.

Beatrice makes it clear that she and her four close friends, placed in the middle circle of her personal community diagram, who she calls the 'merry widows' are out to enjoy each others company rather than to meet male companions. Indeed Bella is included in the group as she shares this sentiment as an older widow. A commonality of later life widowhood is apparent then for many of the older women,

indicating a shift in personal identity and demonstrating shared values, mutual support and socialisation with others in a similar position.

Feeling different

However, there are distinctions within this 'shared identity'. Experiencing a lack of close family, particularly intergenerational kin, in widowhood seemed to prompt feelings of resentment for Veronica, who is childless and has little contact with her older sister and nephew:

I've had a card from Joan and Harold from church, Harold died a few years ago, so Joan is in the same boat as me, we hardly ever see each other, but she's a widow, she's got a daughter, that's what gets to me, when most of my friends that are bereaved have got family...and I have to try and stop myself from feeling naughty about it, and I haven't got anybody, you know what I mean?

In addition to an absence of local family, some of the women talked about a lack of friends, and also self-confidence, contributing to them feeling different to other older widows, this seems especially true for Alice during the early days:

The lady next door you see, she's been widowed for quite a while she's got her own friends she goes out with, her children and her grandchildren live close by, so that's it. The other lady next door, she's been here two years but her daughter lives nearby, so she's moved up from Sussex, she doesn't like it...but her son comes every fortnight from Manchester, and she's got friends, they were widowed before, some of them have, er got more backbone to put it bluntly than I have, you know what I mean? I mean in the beginning, they must do, and sometimes now they say 'We think of him and miss him and so on', but they all make an effort and go on the little bus and go to town, whereas I haven't done that.

Moreover, some of the women described feeling further excluded in widowhood once their widowed friends became part of a couple again. Deirdre, for example, who like Alice has a 'concentrated family' personal community type, during the

third interview, spoke about a change in the relationship she has with her widowed friend Pam, who had recently met a male companion:

She's got a boyfriend and I haven't even had a Christmas card off her this year...no, we used to go everywhere together as well, but no she's got this...bloke, and she spends most of her time at his house. So she's just disappeared.

For Deirdre, now that her friend is no longer single like her, feelings of loss and loneliness are intensified. Even when family are on hand and are generally supportive, disagreements can also lead to older widows feeling different. For example, as Moira, who has a 'diluted family' personal community, talked about her widowed friend's recent relationship with a new partner, it was apparent that one of her adult sons disapproved of Moira ever doing the same:

James the youngest one, I mean I've never looked at anybody else but if you ever mention meeting somebody else, for companionship, because sometimes you want other conversations, other than your family, well you do, he'd be dead against that, he said so. He called yesterday and we were laughing about something, I think we were on about Celia, she had this relationship, and it's all fallen through, and it has hurt her, and I said to him, 'I feel sorry for her' and all the rest of it, and I said, 'I hope I'm never hurt like that', and he said, 'Well you never will be because you'll never have anybody else but me dad will you?', and I said 'I can't say that', and he said, 'No you won't, because you can't can you?'

Some of the older widows then, such as Veronica, Alice and Moira, feel excluded and further isolated due to a heightened awareness of an absence of family, low self confidence, or the unfulfilled hopes of meeting a new partner in later life.

7.3: Negotiating change with others

As we have seen from the women's accounts discontinuity as well as continuity is integral to the transition process during later life widowhood.

Moreover, the mediation of family practices with loved ones is apparent for the

women who decided to spend a different Christmas away from home. Rather than making an autonomous decision regarding a shift in Christmas celebrations, many of the women consulted their adult children beforehand. Marilyn, for example, during the third interview described the conversation she had with her family prior to spending Christmas away with her friend: 'Well me daughter said 'I'll miss you', you know, but then we were here for New Year so...it didn't make a lot of difference really'. Similarly during the third interview Molly, who like Marilyn has a 'family-type' personal community, described the discussion she had with her son and daughter prior to going away for Christmas with the WRVS:

Christmas they'd got a what's it up to Blackpool...and er they asked me did I want to go...and er I said 'Well I really don't know whether I want to go or not' er...I said 'I'll ring me daughter and I'll ring me son and see what they say', they said 'Well go for it mum', because they've got lives of their own, 'Go for it', so I went to Blackpool for Christmas.

Molly was able to successfully negotiate a change in family practice with her adult children. It may have been especially important for Molly to have this approval due to her previously having hosted the Christmas day meal in the family home for a number of years prior to widowhood.

As with Marilyn's and Molly's kin, acceptance and acknowledgement of change in established family practice is evident in a Christmas card from Flora's youngest daughter the first Christmas she spent away from home with her widowed friend. Flora explained during the second interview: 'Oh that's one from Miriam 'Though Christmas finds us far apart' because I was going to Scotland...'. Despite missing her mother Flora's daughter seemed to support and approve this shift by providing transportation and spending time with her when she returned home: 'Me youngest daughter she took us to er get on the bus and then of course

when I got back we had like a little Christmas get together but individual, you know, yeah'. Thoughtful negotiation then enabled Flora to successfully avoid Christmas with her estranged son-in-law and still maintain good relations with her daughter. As we saw earlier Jane, who like Flora has a 'friend-type' personal community, spent New Years Eve with her recently widowed neighbour rather than with her daughter. However, she did arrange to spend the following day with her family instead, as she explained during the third interview: 'I was going to go down Diane's for New Year...so I said 'No I won't come down I'll see you tomorrow', so I went New Years Day'.

Negotiation is also evident when Christmas is spent with the same family members but takes place in another home. For example, although Doreen, who has a 'concentrated family' personal community, had been invited by her adult daughter to spend Christmas in her home once she was widowed, this had been resisted in the early days by one of her adult sons. However, Doreen and the rest of her family were able to agree to spend Christmas together at a different location and the New Year's celebrations in the family home, as she explained during the third interview:

We've thought about it before but we've never actually done it...and er, I think it's mainly because of the bachelor son, and you think, you know, but he actually came for New Year but he said 'Oh yeah it's a good idea'...so that was, but we were still all together which was nice.

Family members then, in addition to the older widows, have to be willing to let go of the 'old ways'. Indeed for Marilyn's family an acceptance of a change in family practice may have been more acceptable as flexibility was already apparent in their 'turn taking' of the Christmas celebrations as we saw earlier.

The re-negotiation of family practices then involves discussion between older widows, such as Marilyn and Doreen, and their families, and also an inclination to be versatile and receptive regarding changes during transition.

In addition to instigating change, the older widows themselves have to be able to accept change in family practices alongside their own transition as the personal communities of others alter. Beatrice, who like Doreen has a 'concentrated family' personal community, for example during the second interview:

All the other years me sons have come here you see, but me daughter-in-law she was a grandmother last year, so she said 'Would you mind if we go there?' and I said 'No because, I've had you years', you know what I mean? It's natural that she wants to spend the first year of the child's life.

Beatrice is flexible and relaxed in her approach to change, and although her adult children do not spend Christmas in her home she still hosts the Christmas Day meal for her elderly mother and widowed sister, and is visited by her adult children and their families on Boxing Day. The acceptance of change in established family practices then appears to depend on the willingness of both the older widows and the members of their personal communities, particularly immediate kin, to be understanding during the process of transition.

Conclusion

Various aspects of discontinuity are evident in many of the older widows' experiences during transition. As Christmas is a significant, pivotal time of the year, it seems to be a catalyst for change in the women's lives, with engagement in new activities and different approaches to long-established practices taking place. However, Christmas is also a time when the loss of relationships,

particularly those with friends, is more noticeable, and this can be especially difficult for those women with limited family who rely on their 'friend-type' personal communities.

Alongside making independent choices and the pursuit of personal fulfilment more generally in later life, the recognition of being an older widow and identifying with others in the same situation features strongly in the women's accounts of Christmas, and particularly in the discussion of their Christmas cards. This further illustrates a shift in their personal identities during the change process. When this personal change occurs the re-negotiation of family practices is apparent highlighting the importance of flexibility within personal communities regardless of their type.

Chapters 6 and 7, through examining aspects of continuity and discontinuity, have indicated that although personal communities can provide positive and affirming resources during later life widowhood, they can also present a number of challenges. These challenges include friction with family members, personal dependence and increasing frailty, along with a growing sense of passivity in later life as established roles alter or are lost. This section of the thesis then, has further demonstrated the complexity and diversity involved in the process and management of later life widowhood within personal communities. Moreover, the women's accounts of Christmas and the discussion of their Christmas cards suggest that the meanings of normally linear routine experiences of their personal communities are intensified during the cyclical significant period of Christmas. The following two chapters discuss the findings analysed in Chapters 4-7, including how they relate to previous studies in the topic area and how they have addressed the research questions.

Introduction to Section Four

This section comprises the concluding chapters of the thesis. Chapter 8: Understanding transition through personal communities, discusses the overall findings of the study in light of the existing literature. The chapter considers the various factors that facilitate transition, the challenges encountered during the process, and the older women's diverse and often complex experiences of their personal communities in later life widowhood. Chapter 9: Conclusion, returns to the research questions established at the beginning and during the research process, and considers the contribution of the findings to the existing knowledge base as well as the implications for practice with older women who are widows. The chapter also provides a reflective account of my journey as a researcher and includes the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 8: Understanding transition through personal communities

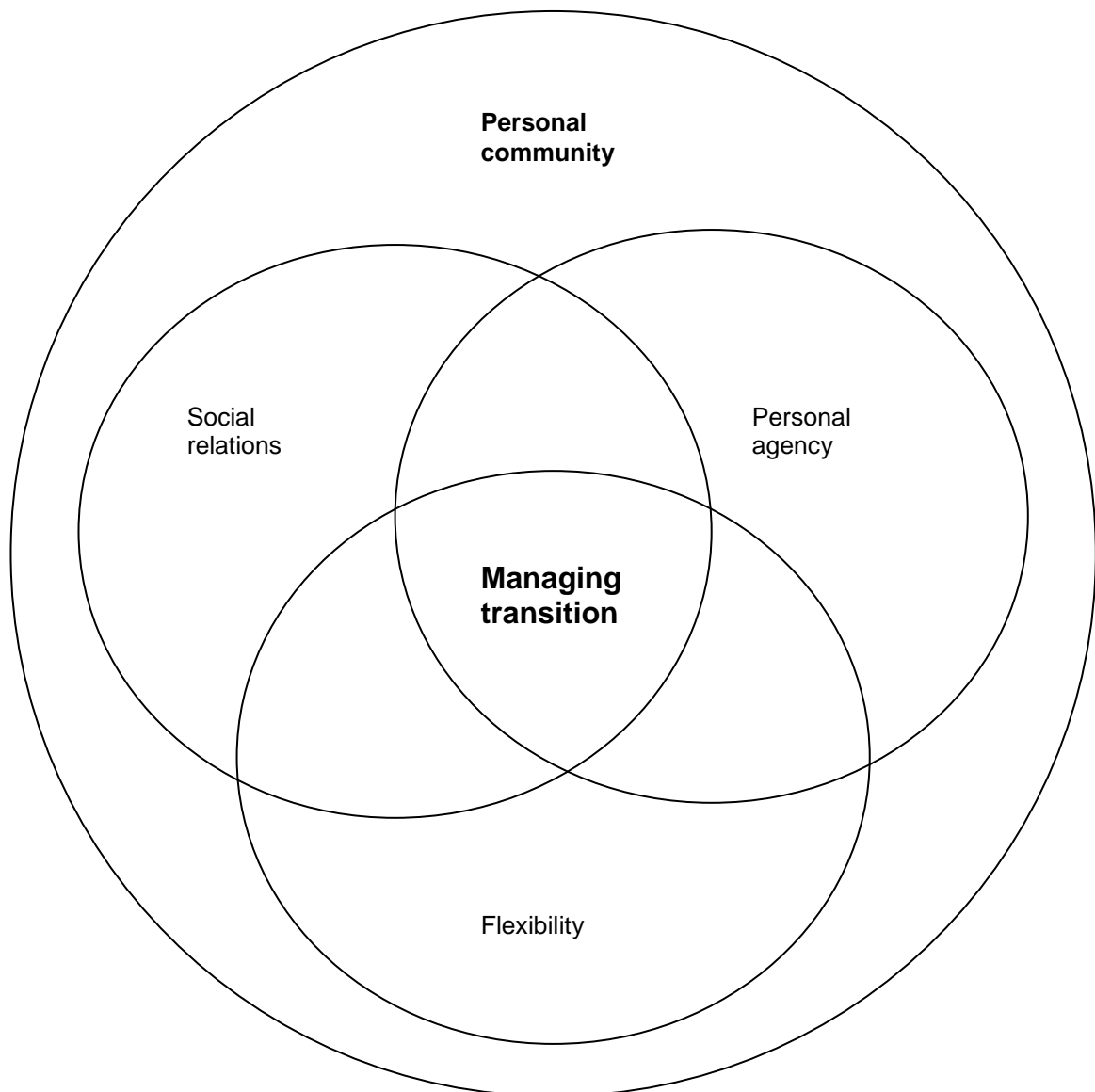
Introduction

This chapter brings together and summarises the findings analysed in the previous four chapters in order to make broader analytical statements about the thesis. The overall findings are discussed in relation to the existing literature and knowledge base. First, the chapter discusses the constancy of key members within the women's personal communities, including the older widows themselves, which provides stability and continuity throughout later life widowhood. Second, the developing personal relationships of the women, including the growth of their personal communities and the re-definition of their existing relationships during transition, are considered. Finally, the obstacles to managing transition experienced by the older widows and those within their personal communities are discussed, including the way in which the women play down problematic relationships with key members of their personal communities. The chapter then goes on to argue for the concept of personal communities as a means of understanding the multifaceted and ever-shifting characteristics of social relationships during transition, helping to re-frame the existing dialogue on later life widowhood and social support.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the starting point of this thesis was my interest in how, and indeed if, older women's social relationships help them to manage the transition of widowhood. The findings of this study demonstrate that the management of widowhood in later life depends on a number of complex personal and social factors, not simply on being the recipient of support or being 'situated' in a particular network type. A combination of social and personal resources within

all types of personal community appears to be most beneficial to transition during later life widowhood. Importantly, this study identifies a conceptual framework which incorporates not only social relations, but also personal agency and flexibility within personal communities, see Figure 8.1. The combined interaction of these three elements appears to be more significant to the process of transition than the length of time widowed, as identified in much of the existing widowhood literature (Barrett and Schneeweis, 1981; Bennett, 1997; Sugarman, 2001).

Figure 8.1 Managing transition within personal communities



Exploring the structural and emotional aspects of relationships during the change process reveals continuity within personal communities. Social continuity is apparent in the structure of the majority of the women's personal communities, as is the reciprocal reinforcement of relationships with family and friends over the Christmas period. Moreover, the women's unique experiences and approaches developed over the life course demonstrate a form of personal continuity. Indeed, continuing to make a valuable contribution to personal communities appears to be beneficial during later life widowhood. The constancy of key members of personal communities then, including the older widows themselves, provides a continuous and robust thread throughout transition.

8.1: The constancy of key members

Stability and the continuity of relationships with key members of personal communities appear to be important to the management of transition in all of the personal community types identified in this study. These relationships consist of kinship ties, which feature strongly in the two 'family-types', as well as friendships and ties with others, which are the main components of the two 'friend-types' of personal community. Indeed, the continuation of ties with these significant individuals can be seen as the hub or heart of personal communities during transition. Moreover the constancy of the older widows as key members of their personal communities is also relevant here, in that their active maintenance of relationships made over the life course adds to a sense of permanence within the personal community.

The typology of personal communities identified in this study is broadly similar to existing structural typologies in terms of consisting largely of family and friends (Fiori et al., 2008). As we saw in Chapter 4, during the first stage of

interviews six types of personal community were apparent ranging in size from six members in the smallest personal community to thirty-four members in the largest. The size range of personal communities found in this study is larger than the size range of social networks identified by Wenger (1991) in her study, which ranged from two to eighteen members. The networks identified in this study may be considerably larger due to personal communities focussing on significant personal relationships (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) rather than on those that provide social support. Indeed the average number of members of personal communities identified in this study is consistent with Wellman's (1990) suggested estimated average of twenty active ties.

'Family-type' personal communities

There are four core types of personal community which are salient throughout this study, see Table 8.1. However, as there were six types at the beginning, this suggests that some sets of relationships pass through different types over time rather than remaining static (VanLear et al., 2006). The majority of the women in this study have 'family-type' personal communities, particularly the 'concentrated family' type. Indeed, eleven of the thirteen women whose personal community types remained stable throughout the study had this type. This supports the findings of Wenger (1990) who found 'family dependent networks' to remain stable over time. The findings are also consistent with those of other longitudinal studies that have found family relationships to be more continuous over time than relationships with friends and neighbours (Wellman et al., 1997; Klein Ikkink and van Tilburg, 1999).

Table 8.1 The four core personal community types found in this study

1st stage	3rd stage
Family only	
Concentrated family	Concentrated family
Diluted family	Diluted family
Friend with family centrality	Friend with family centrality
Friend with mixed centrality	Friend with mixed centrality
Mixed with family centrality	

Although family members, particularly intergenerational kin, are central to the ‘concentrated family’ personal community type many ties are secondary and include friends and neighbours. In addition, most of the women with this type of personal community have ties with organisations and clubs. This type, as well as being the most common, can also be seen as the most robust as it incorporates both strong bonding ties, which provide support, and weak bridging ties, which extend to wider networks, providing access to greater resources (Granovetter, 1973; Wellman, 1990; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Sabatini, 2005).

The most common ‘concentrated family’ type of personal community identified in this study also shares some similarities in terms of size and characteristics with Wenger’s (1991,1997) ‘Locally integrated support network’ type, the most common of her five types. In addition, the ‘Diffuse-ties’ network type, the most common of Litwin (1995) and Litwin and Landau’s (2000) four types, is also similar in construction, as is Spencer and Pahl’s (2006) ‘Family-like’ personal community type. However, none of the personal community types

identified in this study share similarities with either Wenger's (1991, 1997) 'Private restricted support network' or Litwin's (2001) 'Restricted network' types, which were associated with the widowed members of their samples. This may be due in part to the different geographic locations of the participants involved, for example, Wenger's studies were conducted in rural Wales and Litwin's studies were conducted in Israel. However, it may also point to different experiences of social relationships during widowhood in a changing society (Allan, 2006; 2008).

The majority of the women with the 'concentrated family' personal community type have some close ties that are geographically dispersed, whereby daily or weekly visits were less common, as discussed in Chapter 4. However, most of these contacts are seen either monthly or bi-monthly and are in regular telephone contact, which may explain why these ties persist (Wellman et al., 1997). One of the older widows has close family living in Australia whom she only sees yearly or bi-yearly, this can be particularly challenging when a period of illness is experienced, as we saw with Julia earlier in the thesis. For Julia her nephew stepped in to offer support in the absence of her daughter (Allan, 1983; Wenger, 1984; Finch, 1989). However, some of the older widows, such as Doreen, felt that their adult children living out of the area actually reinforced their independence, whereas others such as Amy felt 'smothered' by their adult children who lived nearby (Wilcox, 1981).

As we saw in Chapter 6, the women's accounts of their Christmas celebrations largely feature their families and the reinforcement of these kinship ties (Bocock, 1974; Allan and Crow, 1989; Coppet, 1992; Allan, 1996). Indeed family continuity, including sustained family practices and established roles, appears to ease transition by confirming social belonging (Shordike and Pierce,

2005; Kuper, 2001; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). Most of the older widows in this study spent Christmas day with their immediate family, demonstrating the continued importance of the Christmas meal as a family practice in contemporary Britain (Pimlott, 1978; Allan et al., 2008). Intergenerational ties with children were particularly important to the older widows, many delighted in the hand-made cards they received from 'little ones' and the ritual opening of presents with grandchildren and great-grandchildren (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001).

In addition to reinforcing intergenerational ties, the findings illustrate that the celebration brings together dispersed kin and eases tensions within families (Allan, 2008; Chambers et al. 2009). This not only refers to geographically dispersed family members but also emotionally dispersed, for example, as we saw earlier (p172) Christmas is the only time Cathy spends time with her grandchildren as she is estranged from her daughter. Intergenerational ties then can be seen as a form of lineage and permanence during a time of flux and are especially valued by those with 'family-centred' personal community types, and in particular the 'concentrated family' type. These ties and the tradition of a family Christmas appear to 'centre' or 'root' the older widows during a time of uncertainty (Hannam, 1997). Indeed these established patterns can often be traced back over the life course to the older women's own childhood experiences and the relationships they shared with their parents (Ludwig, 1997; McIntyre and Howie, 2002).

The continuation of close relationships with female kin of the deceased, including sisters-in-law and stepdaughters, is also apparent and supports the suggestion that female members are the main providers of emotional support in social networks (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Gloria, for example, placed her stepchildren alongside her biological children in her personal community diagram,

she continues to socialise with them on a regular basis, and they provide support when it is needed. These findings challenge previous studies which suggest that adult stepchildren may feel less filial obligation towards stepparents than their own parents (Ganong and Coleman, 2006) and that extended kin offer little support during widowhood (Lopata, 1978; Wellman, 1990; Van den Hoonaard, 2001). In addition, very often the women's sisters-in-law were also older widows, so they shared a common experience despite the absence of the primary kin member (Vachon et al., 1980; Lee and Bakk, 2001).

'Friend-type' personal communities

Although family are more central to the women's personal communities, friends are slightly more abundant. The existence of the two 'friend-types' and the profusion of friends placed in the women's diagrams points to the personal choice and increasing importance placed on friendships and non-familial ties, which is now more common in contemporary societies (Pahl and Spencer, 2004a; Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Allan, 2006; 2008). Indeed the 'friend with family centrality' and 'friend with mixed centrality' types of personal community identified in this study are similar in construct to Spencer and Pahl's (2006) 'Friend-enveloped' and 'Friend-like' types. The findings also concur with Fiori et al. (2008) who found the two 'friend-focused' network types identified in their study to be associated with the widowed women in their sample. Moreover the 'diluted family' and particularly the 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community types identified in this study demonstrate a blurring of the roles of family, friends and others and the apparent 'suffusion' of these relationships (Pahl and Spencer, 2004a; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Indeed the two women in the sample who did not have children, Patricia and Veronica, both had the 'friend with mixed centrality' type of personal

community, as did Minnie whose only son lives on the South Coast. These women's personal communities include the many friends they have made through voluntary agencies, clubs and religious organisations as well as formal others (p94), such as home carers and ministers. This concurs with Wenger's (2001) findings that older women without children tend to be more independent and self-sufficient during widowhood, although this may be out of necessity rather than choice, as we saw with Veronica (p193).

Along with the enduring presence of close friends in the structure and content of these types, the women's personal communities more generally also included 'fictive kin' such as stepchildren and godchildren (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Indeed very often these relationships were on a par with relationships with biological children, as illustrated by Gloria (p248), further highlighting the complex and varied structure of social relationships in contemporary society (Allan, 2008; Chambers et al., 2009). In addition to family and friends formal and informal others, although less prevalent, are also featured, June, for example, referred to her church minister as 'like a friend', further indicating a blurring of roles (Pahl and Spencer, 2004a).

The continuity of friendships developed over the life course is evident in this study, and very often these ties were described as 'more like family' (Jerrome, 1993; Blieszner, 2006). These findings also support the concept of social convoys (Kahn and Antonucci, 1980) and demonstrate the importance of friendship networks in affirming identity and managing life events (Allan and Adams, 2007). Molly, for example, spent the first Christmas after the death of her husband with her closest friends placed in the inner circle of her personal community diagram. This concurs with the suggestion that during the first two years of bereavement,

friends are cited as being most helpful, followed by family of origin, and adult children (Vachon, 1979). Indeed friends replace family for some of the women with limited kin, particularly those with the 'friend with mixed centrality' type of personal community. Patricia and Veronica, for example, spent Christmas with friends in the absence of kin. These findings challenge the distinction made between 'ascribed' and 'achieved' ties (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). Flora, for example, and her friend call each other 'sis' (Jerrome, 1990; Chambers, 2005; Chambers et al., 2009), and Veronica's friends refer to her as 'auntie', seeming to elevate the importance and intimacy of these non-blood ties. This further supports Pahl and Spencer (2004a, 2004b) and Spencer and Pahl's (2006) concept of 'suffusion' and concurs with Wellman's (1990) suggestion that close friends often take on the attributes of family members.

In addition, previous partnered friends also endure throughout widowhood, as demonstrated by Moira who continues to celebrate New Year with her old friends who are central to her 'diluted family' personal community. This supports the suggestion that New Years Eve is often spent with friends (Kuper, 2001). However, it challenges the proposition that the widowed may find it easier to form friendships with other single people rather than continue friendships with couples (Allan, 1996). Neighbourhood friendships also continue as demonstrated by Beverly, who still received cards and visits from her neighbours even after she moved. Indeed these neighbours were termed friends once Beverly no longer lived next door to them. These findings challenge previous studies, which tend to focus on the negative aspects of moving residence in later life widowhood (Lopata, 1996).

The findings of this study also demonstrate differences in friendships between women of different socio-economic classes with the same personal community type. For example, Gloria who is from a working class background, and Cathy who is from a middle class background, both have the 'friend with family centrality' personal community type. Within Gloria's personal community neighbourhood friends provide reciprocal, and indeed non-reciprocal, support in addition to companionship when needed (Jerrome, 1990). In contrast, within Cathy's personal community, friends are purely for socialising. These friends do not have to depend on each other for practical support as they can pay for help if it is needed; indeed Cathy's friendships appear to have a 'hedonistic quality' (Jerrome, 1981:175). These findings demonstrate the different elements of friendship identified by Allan (1996), but also further highlight the need to consider structural inequalities, such as income, when researching ageing and the life course (Robert, 2002).

The importance of friendship to the older widows in this study concurs with earlier studies, which suggest that emotional support from friends assists in the role transition from being married to single (Bankoff, 1983). However, much of the existing widowhood and social support literature tends to concentrate on the receipt of practical support and assistance from network members (House, 1981; Bankoff, 1983; Barrera, 1986; Lopata, 1994; O'Bryant and Hansson, 1996). The findings of this study illustrate that although some peers do provide instrumental support and participate in the systems of reciprocity and exchange associated with social capital (Peters and Kaiser, 1985) this is not applicable to all friendships.

Although all of the personal community types identified in this study consist mainly of local members who have frequent contact, the majority of the older

widows had some close ties with people who lived some distance away. The 'friend with family centrality' and the 'friend with mixed centrality' types in particular tended to have close ties that lived out of the area. This points to family relationships and practices being further complicated in contemporary society by the increase in geographical dispersion of family members (Chambers et al., 2009). These findings also concur with those of Spencer and Pahl (2006) in that 'family-type' personal communities tend to be more local and 'friend-type' less local.

Associate members and wider community ties

In addition to key members of personal communities, the endurance of ties with what I term 'associate' members, that is important individuals not placed in the women's diagrams, are identified through the women's discussion of their Christmas cards. Indeed as the design of the diagrams only allows a finite number of ties to be included, the diagrams may focus on the women's primary and geographically local ties, as previously discussed (p160). Christmas cards identify the women's secondary and more distant ties, their personal communities in a wider context, whereas gift exchange was limited to key members of personal communities (Kearle, 1994; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). Many of the older widows received in excess of a hundred Christmas cards annually, and some such as Clarice received two hundred and forty. These associate members may reflect what Wellman (1990) terms weaker ties within personal communities, although he estimates a rather higher average of three hundred and eighty ties.

The findings of this study indicate that the ongoing exchange of Christmas cards is relevant to identifying not only social relations (Bocock, 1974; Allan, 1996; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001) but also social convoys. The continuity of mutually

supportive social relationships, revealed in the year on year exchange of Christmas cards, demonstrates the women's robust social convoys developed over the life course (Khan and Antonucci, 1980). The continuity of friendships (Jerrome, 1981) feature strongly in the women's discussion of their Christmas cards (Finchum, 2005), these friendships are cyclically reinforced over many years, especially among those with 'friend-type' personal communities. These associate members of personal communities may only be observable at certain times of the year, such as Christmas when cards are exchanged. As we saw earlier in the thesis Anna discussed a card from an old school friend she has known for seventy-five years. In addition, Mary continued to exchange cards with an old RAF friend of her husband after her husband's death, maintaining this link seemed to be comforting for both Mary and her husband's friend. These findings concur with the earlier research of Morgan et al. (1996). Their study of personal networks during widowhood in the USA identified a core of close ties, mainly family members who consistently appear in diagrams, and a periphery of ties, mainly non-family members who are 'visible' at one or two points throughout the year.

There is also evidence in this study of relatives of the deceased keeping in touch particularly through Christmas cards, Doreen's deceased husband's aunt, for example. However, this appears to be based on the quality of the relationship before widowhood rather than on normative obligation (Stuifbergen et al., 2008). This further challenges the findings of previous studies conducted in the USA and Canada, which suggest that extended kin appear to offer little support during widowhood (Lopata, 1978; Wellman, 1990; Van den Hoonaard, 2001). Christmas

and Christmas cards then reveal relationships which may be absent from the women's diagrams but are nevertheless important and telling.

The findings of this study also illustrate the different emphasis placed on ties with organisations and the wider community. These ties ranged from being relatively superficial to being more 'friend-like'. Ties with organisations providing an outlet for social interaction and activity were more prevalent among those with 'family-type' personal communities. Beatrice, for example, continued her role as a volunteer at a local lunch club, indeed engaging in familiar occupations and routines seemed to facilitate transition for many of the older widows (Howie, 2002; Lysack and Seipke, 2002; Ludwig, 1997; Donnelly and Hinterlong, 2009).

However, developing relationships outside of these group settings was more common among those with 'friend-type' personal communities. For example, Patricia went on holiday with a widowed friend she had met at her luncheon club. It appears that these relationships supplement family, pointing further to the 'suffusion' of members of these personal community types (Pahl and Spencer 2004a). Moreover wider reciprocity takes place with people not placed in the women's diagrams, such as friends, neighbours, and fellow members of organisations. Actively giving support in addition to receiving it and continuing to make a valued contribution to personal communities appears to be important during widowhood and demonstrates everyday social capital (Morrow, 1999). In addition, the findings of this study suggest that the belonging associated with the membership of organisations as well as close relationships with family and friends appear to 'root' the older widows during their transition (Toffler and Pedler, 1970; Wenger, 1994; Boneham and Sixsmith, 2006).

The constancy of self

The findings of this study demonstrate that having a degree of personal independence alongside robust relationships with family, friends and others is helpful during transition. Indeed the position of the older widows in the centre of their personal communities appears to be substantive as well as serving as a heuristic device in their diagrams. The women's experiences demonstrate that although family are central to their personal communities this does not equate, for all of them, to their being dependent on them. Many of the older widows with 'family-type' personal communities, particularly the 'concentrated family' type, had family relationships, which were well-balanced and inclusive. This confirms Chambers' (2005) view that far too much of the earlier widowhood literature focuses only on the negative aspects of the transition and depicts older widows as the passive recipients of support. Indeed the findings of this study concur with those of Bonnano et al. (2004), who found the majority of the older widows and widowers in their sample to demonstrate resilience following their loss despite the negative aspects of the transition. Importantly, personal communities position the women as active and central in their social worlds rather than as the beneficiaries of care previously identified in social support network typologies (Wenger, 1991, 1997; Litwin, 1995; Litwin and Landau, 2000).

Various aspects of personal continuity are apparent in the findings of this study, beyond and alongside family, and also out of necessity when family members are absent. Often this independence reflects the women's earlier life experiences, for example, Megan's enrolment in the Army during the Second World War, Beverly's growing up as an only child, and Cathy's and Doreen's earlier medical careers (Jamieson and Victor, 2002). These findings illustrate the

importance of skills developed over the life course (Chambers, 2005). The findings also support the assertion that although social identities may be transient, personal identity is constant (Craib, 1998). Indeed for many of the women engaging in patterns of behaviour developed over the life course appeared to ease their transition (Stevens, 1995; Atchley, 1999; Bridges, 2003; Nutman-Shwartz, 2008; Ha, 2008). Gloria, for example, was able to draw on the experience of losing her first husband when her second long-term partner died. This supports the suggestion that previous experience of a transition, as well as the inclination to be self-sufficient, assist adaptation (O'Bryant and Morgan, 1990; O'Bryant and Straw, 1991; Sugarman, 2001).

The active maintenance of relationships made over the life course is apparent for the majority of the older widows in this study (Blair, 2000) as reflected in their year on year exchange of Christmas cards (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001; Finchum, 2005). Indeed remaining central to the Christmas celebrations appeared to positively reaffirm the majority of the women's self as well as family identities during transition (Kuper, 2001; Wright-St Clair et al., 2005; Shordike and Pierce, 2005). Moreover many of the older widows provided family continuity through conveying values and passing on belongings from generation to generation, as we saw with Megan and her son (Roberto and Stroes, 1995; Hunter, 2008). Many of the women demonstrated balanced exchanges of support with their families as well as the wider community. Amy's active contribution to campaigns and fundraising events in her local community, for example, benefited not only her immediate kin but also her neighbours, helping to reinforce these ties (Finch, 1989; Allan, 1996).

8.2 Developing personal relationships

In addition to robust and continuous social relations, the development of personal relationships during widowhood is also apparent in the findings of this study, demonstrating evolving relationships (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). These are illustrated by the shifts in personal community type of some of the women and also the growth of the personal communities of many of the women. The expansion of the older widows' personal communities, and the re-definition of existing relationships between the first and third interviews, further demonstrate the process of transition (Allan, 2006; 2008). Indeed the Christmas period itself seems to be a reference point for looking to the future and moving on, being a catalyst for new beginnings. This was particularly apparent in the third interviews, when the women were re-establishing their social relationships (Bankoff, 1983).

The growth of personal communities

Overall there was an increase in members of personal communities between stages one, two and three. Along with friends, 'new' family members, such as grandchildren and great-grandchildren, were added to personal community diagrams. Indeed the women's Christmas celebrations also illustrated growing families and provided the opportunity to meet recent additions, reinforcing generational links (Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). A greater number of friends were added particularly during the second interview, although family continued to form the most intimate of the women's social ties throughout the study. These findings concur with those of Morgan et al. (1996) who found that there was an overall increase in network size of the older widows in their study and that more ties were made than lost. All but one of the remaining twenty-one women's personal communities increased in size. Elsie was the oldest participant in the study, aged

ninety she falls into the category of 'old-old' rather than 'young-old' (Litwin and Laundau, 2000) which may explain why the size of her personal community decreased rather than increased.

The increase in personal community members challenges the suggestion that many people in transition tend to restrict their social contacts to a small trusted group (Stroebe et al., 1994). The findings also support previous research, which indicates that friendships are generally extended later in widowhood (Ferraro et al., 1984), and that a greater number of new relationships are developed over a longer period of time (Lamme et al., 1996; Zettel and Rook, 2004).

As we saw in Chapter 5, eight of the women's personal community types had shifted by the third stage of interviews. This concurs with Wenger's (1990) findings which identified shifts in social support network type among some of the widowed participants in her sample of older people over a four-year period. However, unlike this study, most of the shifts in Wenger's study were to more dependent types of network. This may have been due to changes being studied over a longer period of time, and may also reflect a greater level of increasing ill health, disability and frailty among the participants in her study.

The shifts in personal community type in this study are largely positive and indicate a broadening of the social ties of the older women during the transition of widowhood, as reflected and substantiated in their changing experiences of Christmas. These findings further demonstrate the process of change in personal relationships over time (Allan, 2006, 2008). As we saw in Chapter 5, Marilyn demonstrated a widening of her ties and a decreased reliance on her adult children when her personal community type shifted from the restricted 'family only'

to the more robust 'concentrated family' type. This change in structure was reflected in Marilyn's change in Christmas celebrations, spent with her new friends rather than her family, as discussed in Chapter 7. This corresponds with earlier research which suggests that friends, and new friends associated with larger heterogeneous networks, appear to become more important over the course of widowhood (Bankoff, 1983, 1986).

Growth and shifts in personal communities were particularly evident for those women who had cared for their husbands prior to widowhood. Indeed for some of the women who had been carers, widowhood offered a new lease of life (Morgan and March, 1992). This further supports the notion that the personal change associated with transition can have positive consequences (Matthews, 1991). Beverly, for example, during the twelve months between the second and third interview had moved house, had been away on two holidays abroad and had enjoyed several weekends away with friends. This concurs with the suggestion that most widows go on to rebuild their social lives and establish a new identity (Lieberman, 1996). In addition, the women who moved house during this study not only continued existing ties with friends and neighbours, as with Beverly, but also, like Flora, made new friends in the sheltered accommodation she moved to. This challenges the findings of Pevalin and Rose (2002) who found gender, age and residential mobility to be associated with reduced social capital, social participation and contact with friends.

Moreover growth and shifts were also significant for those who attended church. Veronica's personal community, for example, shifted from 'anomalous' to 'friend with mixed centrality' after adding nine church friends during the second interview and fifteen church friends during the third interview. Indeed many of the

women either joined organisations or extended their involvement with them during widowhood, which led to a growth in their personal communities. Molly started some voluntary work, for example, and Patricia joined a luncheon club. This concurs with existing research, which suggests that particular kinds of groups are an important resource during widowhood (Jerrome, 1988; Hurd, 1999; Scott et al., 2007; Donnelly and Hinterlong, 2009), and corresponds with Moen's (1998) assertion that social capital can be promoted in older people through voluntary work. This development of new interests, and the associated widening of ties, points to a newfound liberation and independence for some older women in widowhood.

This supports the earlier findings that suggest social participation and leisure time, such as activities with friends, actually increases for widows over the long-term (Lopata, 1973; Ferraro et al., 1984). In addition, these ties demonstrate diversity: for some, ties were superficial and served as a social outlet, for others they offered 'friend-like' relationships, further demonstrating 'suffusion' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Either way they led to the formation of new associations. This was particularly valuable for the women with limited kin who tended to have the 'friend with mixed centrality' personal community type, including Patricia, Veronica and Minnie. Again, these findings correspond with those of Wenger (2001) who found that older women without children tended to be more independent and self-sufficient during widowhood.

The findings of this study also illustrate the development of intergenerational friendships within personal communities, further challenging the existing stereotypes of older widows as identified by Owen (1996) and Chambers (2005). Megan and Cathy, for example, both established friendships with friends of

their sons following the death of their husbands. This demonstrates the heterogeneity of the women's friendships which are not confined to female friends or friends of the same generation (Jerrome, 1981; Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Moreover the findings further support earlier studies which suggest that widowhood can be a period of growth, development, and liberation, resulting in new friends and social activities in the remaining years of life (Chambers, 2005; Hurd, 1999; Davidson, 2002).

Re-defining existing relationships

In addition to the growth of personal communities, changes in the nature of existing relationships, particularly with family members, can also be seen as a development during transition as the re-negotiation of roles and practices takes place (Ray, 2000a). As we saw in Chapter 5, Beverly added five of her grandchildren and one great-grandchild to her diagram during the second interview after she had been to visit them at Christmas, shifting her personal community type from 'friend with mixed centrality' to 'diluted family'. Beverly was unable to visit them when her husband was alive as he was disabled and housebound, however following the death of her husband she was able to travel, and these relationships have developed and intensified (Morgan and March, 1992).

During the second interview Megan moved three members of her personal community, her goddaughter, cousin and niece, from the middle to the inner circle of her diagram after spending time holidaying with them. In addition, during the third interview she added three great-nieces, shifting her personal community type from 'mixed with family centrality' to the 'concentrated family' type. This demonstrates an intensification of relationships with extended kin during

widowhood, this again challenges the findings of previous studies in the USA and Canada which suggest that extended kin appear to offer little support during widowhood (Lopata, 1978; Wellman, 1990; Van den Hoonaard, 2001).

In addition to family, relationships with friends also alter during widowhood. Patricia, for example, renewed a friendship following the death of her husband, as she had more time to socialise as a widow rather than as a carer. This is consistent with the earlier findings of Morgan and March (1992). Indeed, many of the women's Christmas cards demonstrate the renewal of older friendships in addition to extending friendships (Jerrome, 1981; Finchum, 2005).

Later life widowhood can lead to a greater alliance and solidarity with female members of personal communities, as we saw with Gloria and her granddaughter, further supporting studies which suggest that female family members are the main providers of emotional support in social networks (Wellman and Wortley, 1990). This is particularly true of relationships with other older widows, such as generational friends, and kin such as sisters and sisters-in-law. This supports the assertion that life course events appear to reinforce sibling relationships over time (Connidis, 1992). However, once again this seems to depend on the quality of the relationship prior to widowhood (Stuifbergen et al., 2008) and is not applicable to all of the older widows' sibling relationships.

A commonality of widowhood is however apparent in this study's demonstration of a shift in personal identity and also shared values and mutual support with those in a similar position (Allan, 2006). These findings share similarities with those of Barnes and Parry (2004) who found that their sample of older British men and women had to re-negotiate their personal identities as well as their social relationships during the transition of retirement. The findings also

concur with those of Morgan et al. (1997) who found that the recently widowed women in their sample increased their ties with other widows. Viewing the process of transition over a period of time indicates the receipt of support from other older widows during the early days of widowhood, this corresponds with the suggestion that emotional support appears to moderate the negative consequences of bereavement (Bankoff, 1983; Littlewood, 1992; Prigerson et al., 1993). However, the findings of this study also indicate the provision of support, particularly later on in widowhood, to other older widows. This reciprocity is lacking in the existing types of social support previously identified in the literature, which tend to focus on the receipt rather than on the provision of support during widowhood (House, 1981; Bankoff, 1983; Lopata, 1994; O'Bryant and Hansson, 1996; Barrera, 1986).

The re-arrangement of family and friendship practices

The women's re-arrangement of family, and indeed friendship, practices over the Christmas period is a more subtle indicator of change than the growth of personal community membership, yet it is very telling. These findings concur with previous studies, which have found transitions to have an influence on family rituals (Pett et al., 1992).

Although the continuity of established routines features strongly in many of the women's experiences over the Christmas period, the discontinuity of certain practices is also apparent for some of the women in this study. These discontinuities appear to be facilitated by the older women's growing personal communities, including friendships with other older widows (Morgan et al., 1997). Indeed, a shift in activities and attitudes seemed to signify an acceptance and moving on in life as the women's identities altered (Finch, 2007; James and Curtis, 2010). Changes in family practices (Kuper, 2001; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001) over

the Christmas period included going away with friends, as with Marilyn, or celebrating with the same family members but in a different setting, as with Doreen, for example. Instigating a change in family practices around Christmas demonstrates the older widows' growing personal confidence and ability to make independent choices. This further indicates not only their adjustment to widowhood but also a new found freedom and sense of personal fulfilment as older women in later life (Chambers, 2005; Hurd, 1999; Davidson, 2002).

Discontinuity in this instance is a positive rather than a negative experience. Indeed, for many of the older widows in this study such discontinuity is an enabling choice, offering an escape from normative obligations and family friction. These findings challenge much of the earlier widowhood literature, which focuses on discontinuity as a negative aspect of the transition, as discussed by Matthews (1991) and Chambers (2005).

The findings of this study also illustrate that mediation between the older widows and their loved ones is common when discontinuity occurs. The women who did choose to go away for Christmas, such as Marilyn, Molly and Flora, were able to successfully negotiate 'mini' Christmas celebrations with their family members either before or after Christmas day. This flexibility appears to be useful during the change process (Ludwig, 1997; Shordike and Pierce, 2005) and also demonstrates the women's roles as 'kin keepers' during transition (Pett et al., 1992). However, family members as well as the older widows have to be able to let go of the old ways of 'doing family' (Finch, 1989; Finch, 2007; James and Curtis, 2010) and this seems to depend on the history and quality of relationships with kin (Heinemann, 1983; Allan, 1996). This negotiation involves the acceptance and acknowledgement of change, for example, the compromise of Doreen's son in

spending Christmas away from the family home. In addition to instigating change, older widows also have to accept change in family practices as the personal communities of others alter, Beatrice's son and his partner spending Christmas day with their new grandchild, for example. This supports earlier literature, which suggests that families as well as individuals evolve and develop throughout the life course (Hareven, 1978; Allan and Jones, 2003) and that the family should be seen as a process or lived experience rather than as a fixed arrangement (Hareven, 2000; Allan, 2008).

The discontinuity and re-arrangement of family practices over the Christmas period experienced by some of the older widows in this study illustrates the positive and liberating aspects of change, including the opportunity to participate in different types of celebrations (Pett et al., 1992). These findings point to the increased agency and flexibility within families, which is now more common in contemporary relationships (Allan, 2006, 2008; Chambers et al., 2009). These positive experiences of social relations can be seen to facilitate adaptation during later life widowhood (Antonucci et al., 2002).

8.3: The challenges encountered

The majority of the older widows in this study demonstrate positive, robust and flexible relationships with the members of their personal communities helping to ease their transition. However the findings of this study also illustrate that challenges to the management of change are apparent in all of the personal community types identified. This suggests that the quality of relationships (Stuifbergen et al., 2008) within personal communities is more important during transition than the structure or type of personal community, as suggested previously (Wenger et al., 1996; Litwin 2001; Wenger and Tucker, 2002; Litwin

and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006). Furthermore, for a minority of the older widows a number of social and personal constraints unite to impede their transition. Reconciliation is often compounded by multiple transitions related to the older women's life course position, such as the loss of relationships and increasing frailty, in addition to widowhood itself (Sugarman, 2001; Arber et al., 2003b; Bernard et al., 2004; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002). This may explain why much of the existing widowhood and social support literature is contradictory, particularly in regards to the type and timing of support (Chambers, 2005).

The loss of relationships

Although the majority of the women's personal communities gained members throughout the study, Chapter 7 also illustrated the loss of meaningful relationships, particularly through the cessation of annual Christmas card exchange. Indeed Christmas appears to be a time when the loss of relationships is communicated and expressed. These findings concur with those of Ha (2008), who found later life widowhood to incur both gains and losses in support. The more 'acceptable' or expected loss of relationships, through the ill health or death of members of personal communities, is apparent for many of the older widows. This indicates that the older widows, because of their life course position, have to deal with additional losses in addition to that of their spouse regardless of their personal community type (Bernard et al., 2004). For example, Patricia lost a cousin, brother-in-law and several friends over the course of just twelve months.

In addition, the 'unacceptable' loss of relationships, an unexplained or unwanted change, is also apparent for some of the older widows in this study. For example, socialising less with coupled friends (Allan, 1996), as we saw with Beatrice, and the discontinuity of ties with in-laws (Finch, 1989), as we saw with

Moira. Moreover the fading intensity of supportive 'friendships' offered earlier on in widowhood is apparent, as we saw with Veronica and her ties with the formal others placed in the centre of her personal community diagram. Indeed this 'suffusion' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) of formal and informal relationships may be problematic if it is only perceived to be so by one of the individuals involved. Veronica's friendship with her chaplain was not reciprocated over time, for example. This may be due to there being a lack of normative obligation as with family, as there is not a 'duty' to carry on giving support indefinitely (Pahl and Spencer, 2004a; Allan, 1996). Indeed, these findings support those of Rosik (1989) who found extrinsic religiousness to be related to poorer adjustment in widowhood, and those of Zettel and Rook (2004) who found that higher levels of substitution were related to lower levels of psychological well-being. This questions the compensatory advantages of substitute ties such as those of Veronica, particularly over a long period of time. Importantly, the loss of friendships is particularly difficult for those women with 'friend-type' personal communities who have limited kin and rely on their friendship networks. The loss of relationships during widowhood then can be seen as adding to a sequence of trials (Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002) and simultaneous pressures (Sugarman, 2001) associated with ageing, such as increasing ill health, disability and frailty (Arber et al, 2003a).

Social and personal constraints

As we saw in Chapters 6 and 7, a number of differences and challenges exist within personal communities which hinder rather than facilitate the management of transition. Later life widowhood can disturb the balance of relationships within personal communities and lead to conflict and a sense of

passivity as roles and responsibilities alter. This can be particularly difficult if family relationships are already strained or of a poor quality prior to widowhood (Stuifbergen et al., 2008), as we saw with Mary (p176). Indeed a lack of reciprocity and balance of support is also detrimental to some friendships, as illustrated by Alice who pays a 'friend' to take her shopping. This corresponds with the suggestion that in contrast to relationships with family, relationships with friends are not bound by duty or obligation, thus support may not be provided unconditionally (Allan, 1996).

As we have seen, normative obligations can offer helpful continuity (Chapter 6). However they can also involve angst and guilt as the older widows are pressurised to participate in established family practices, impeding their transition (Chapter 7). The findings of this study confirm earlier studies that suggest the celebration of Christmas day itself is normative, in that there is a pressure and expectation to spend time with family members (Kuper, 2001; Searle-Chatterjee, 2001). Indeed the findings also concur with those of Cartledgehayes (2003) in that the grief of widowhood may be exacerbated over the Christmas period by the pressure to participate in and maintain former rituals. Flora, during the early days of widowhood, for example, felt like 'pass the parcel' when her three adult daughters discussed whose turn it was to have her for Christmas. Rather than feeling like a negotiation of family practices (Kuper, 2001), turn-taking can feel more like an obligation if the older widow is not involved in the decision making process. In addition, we saw how Amy and Clarice, for example, were increasingly experiencing the financial strain of buying Christmas presents for their expanding intergenerational kin (Nursing Times, 2008; Mind, 2009). This concurs with earlier findings pointing to the financial hardship of older widows

(Arber and Ginn, 1991; Stevens, 1995) and moreover to the structure of family networks in contemporary society where three and even four generations are now common (Harper, 2005). Indeed as gift giving can be seen as a means of reinforcing intergenerational relationships the pressure to participate may be all the more intense (Bell, 1968; Caplow, 1982; Hoff, 2007).

Although extended activities and roles appear to be helpful earlier on in widowhood they can also lead to over commitment later on, especially given the advanced age of some of the older widows. This seemed particularly so for women who had earlier careers in the caring professions, such as Doreen, Cathy and Beatrice. Indeed for Beatrice role strain became increasingly apparent as the duties of caring for her mother and grandchildren, as well as supporting her widowed sister, became more involved alongside her commitment to voluntary work. This may be a phenomenon of contemporary society as the 'young-old' are increasingly not only caring for the 'old-old' but also providing childcare to their grandchildren. Although providing childcare may actually reinforce intergenerational relationships (Shapiro, 2000) the findings of this study indicate that it can also become a burden in conjunction with other responsibilities (Tremlett, 2010). In addition, although going away for Christmas may be novel and exciting, it can also involve extreme effort and be very tiring, as we saw from Flora's experience (p222). Although the findings of previous studies suggest that older women who take on additional roles and new activities adapt more successfully during widowhood (Lee and Bakk, 2001), the findings of this study also illustrate the need to consider the possible complications of extended roles and activities over time. It is also important to note that passivity during widowhood may be chosen rather than imposed. Indeed some of the women chose to

disengage rather than participate in the negative aspects of former practices, such as the amount of work involved (Meske et al., 1994), as demonstrated by Hannah (p231).

The findings of this study also illustrate dissimilarity between some of the older women and the other older widows in their personal communities, this concurs with the findings of Chambers (2005) whose study revealed individual differences in experiences of later life widowhood. Indeed, Veronica's poor relationship with her widowed sister, who has close family support, challenges the previous findings that ties with siblings may become more important for childless women (Connidis, 1992). In addition, Deirdre felt further social exclusion and loneliness when her widowed friend became re-partnered. This involved not only the loss of a valued friend but also reinforced her own experience of not being coupled (Allan, 1996).

Dependence and an increasing reliance on others are also apparent for some of the older widows limiting their opportunities to develop autonomy and engage in activities with others. Indeed, many of the older widows in this study reported a decline in health following the death of a husband. This supports earlier studies which suggest that spousal loss may aggravate existing age-related health problems (O'Bryant and Hansson, 1996; Bennett, 1998; Binstock and George, 2001). This can be further compounded by family friction when the support of adult children is not forthcoming as we saw with Alice and Mary. These findings support the suggestion that unbalanced relationships (Clouston, 2003; De Jong Gierveld and Dykstra, 2008) and negative social ties, particularly those associated with family members, can be a source of added stress and unhappiness (Gottlieb, 1983; Antonucci et al., 1998; Fiori et al., 2006). These findings also support earlier

studies which suggest that family relationships are more likely to be reported in a negative light than those with friends (Morgan, 1989; Birditt et al., 2009), and that individuals tend to overstate their input to family relationships and understate the input of others (Marsden, 1990).

However, the women's experiences also support the suggestion that in recent years there has been an erosion of mutual kin support and filial responsibility, which may have led to increased social isolation for some older people (Hareven, 1981, 1992; Gans and Silverstein, 2006). Indeed having a lack of support from their adult children, as well as being disabled and housebound, contributed to the social exclusion of both Mary and Alice in widowhood (Arber et al., 2003b; WRVS, 2005). Furthermore, for Alice the inability to 'sort out' her husband's belongings and to re-decorate her home seemed to be a barrier to her letting go and moving on in the process of transition (Sugarman, 2001). The findings of this study further illustrate that family relationships are complex (Van den Hoonaard, 2001; Chambers et al., 2009), and that the assumption that the family is a stable provider of positive support in old age and through ill health may be over simplistic (Lloyd-Sherlock and Locke, 2008; Ryan and Willits, 2007; Birditt and Antonucci, 2008).

Multiple and parallel transitions, such as age-related illness and the loss of relationships and roles, are apparent for some of the women in this study. The social and personal constraints discussed in this section of the chapter also reinforce the need to consider structural inequalities, such as income and health when researching ageing and the life course (Robert, 2002), which may restrict access to social capital (O'Rand, 2001; Liu and Besser, 2003).

The playing down of problematic relationships

As demonstrated in Chapters 6 and 7, dissonance between some of the women's experiences of their relationships over the Christmas period and the structure of their personal community types is apparent. Indeed, the findings of this study concur with those of earlier studies, which suggest that loneliness may be exacerbated in widowhood when there is incongruence between expected support and tangible support (Stevens, 1989; Dykstra and De Jong Gierveld, 1994). Moreover, the findings may also indicate the heterogeneity and complexity in levels of satisfaction with social support during widowhood, found by Scott et al. (2007).

Furthermore, this dissonance was often justified by the older widows through a rationalisation of the behaviour of their significant others, as we saw with Mary and Alice (p181). The apparent contradictions found in this study may arise from these older widows wanting to portray a positive image of their social relationships, particularly those with adult children, despite there being a discrepancy between their expected and actual behaviour. This concurs with the previous findings of Finch (1989) and more recently Spencer and Pahl (2006).

The playing down of problematic relationships demonstrated by some of the older widows also supports previous research, which suggests that parents tend to overestimate family cohesion and understate family friction in order to maintain an ideal norm of their family relationships (Finch, 1989; Jerrome, 1993). Indeed the seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in relationships between some of the older widows and their adult children found in this study point to the 'intergenerational ambivalence' identified by Luscher and Pillemer (1998:416).

Moreover, although many of the older widows' personal communities demonstrate an increasing emphasis on friendships and flexibility, the normative construction of some of the women's diagrams points to the salience of the distinct boundaries placed between family and friends (Allan, 2008). This demonstrates that even when relationships with family members are problematic they can still be significant (Perlman and Vangelisti, 2006).

Conclusion

This chapter has summarised and put into context the key findings of this study. Moreover, I have argued for the concept of personal communities as a means of understanding the multifaceted and altering characteristics of social relationships during transition, helping to re-frame the existing dialogue on later life widowhood and social support. Using the lens of personal communities over a period of time reveals the triadic nature of the management of transition, which incorporates not only social relations, but also personal agency, and flexibility.

The following chapter returns to the research questions established at the beginning and during the study, and considers the contribution of the findings to the existing knowledge base as well as the limitations of the research. The chapter also provides a reflective account of my journey as a researcher and includes suggestions for further study.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This final chapter evaluates and critiques the thesis and my learning more broadly. As discussed in Chapter 1, this study arose from a combination of academic, professional and personal concerns. First, the chapter demonstrates how the research questions identified at the beginning and during the research process have been addressed. Second, the chapter considers the contribution of the thesis to social gerontology. Third, the chapter examines the implications for practice with older women who are widows. Finally, the chapter concludes with a reflective account of my journey as a researcher, including the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

9.1: Returning to the research questions

- What are the personal community types of older widows?

Chapters 4-7, through content and thematic analysis, identify four core types of personal community among the older widows in this study: The 'concentrated family', the 'diluted family', the 'friend with family centrality' and the 'friend with mixed centrality'. Chapters 4 and 5 outline the types in detail. These findings are consistent with those of previous findings from personal community diagrams, in identifying network typologies broadly consisting of family and friends (Fiori et al., 2008), adding to their generalisability. The typology of personal communities (of older widows) identified in this study adds to the existing typology (of adults) identified by Spencer and Pahl (2006) in Britain.

- Are certain types of personal community more helpful than others during the change process?

As Chapters 4-7 demonstrate, the management of transition incorporates not only social relations, but also personal agency, and flexibility. These combined

factors appear to be more important to adaptation during later life widowhood than personal community type. Indeed, the multiple transitions and challenges identified in Chapters 6 and 7 may account for individual differences within similar networks, including how the women access, maintain and develop their social relations and wider social capital (Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002). These findings may further explain the contradictions in the existing literature regarding the type and timing of social support in widowhood. This builds on the work of Chambers (2005) and helps to re-frame the existing dialogue on later life widowhood and social support in the British context.

- Does a longitudinal design reveal change in personal communities and social convoys during widowhood?

As illustrated in Chapters 4-7, using the lens of personal communities over a period of time reveals the complex nature of transition as it is happening and as events unfold. As this study utilised personal community diagrams and interviews at more than one point over a period of time it was possible to identify shifts in personal community type (Chapter 5), as well as changes in personal relationships (Chapter 7). This longitudinal research adds to the retrospective studies of later life widowhood recently conducted in Britain (Chambers, 2005; Davidson, 2002, for example). However, as the older widows had the opportunity to revisit their personal community diagrams many of them added existing social ties that were omitted during the earlier interviews. Shifts then can be seen as substantive, that is an actual widening of social relationships during transition, but also as a result of the methods employed; this highlights a weakness of the diagrams if only used at one point in time (see below).

- Do multiple methods give a more detailed account of personal relationships during the change process?

The findings of this study illustrate that the data derived from the diagrams, analysed in Chapters 4 and 5, although useful only provide a surface understanding of the women's personal communities. Indeed Chapter 3 of this thesis includes a detailed discussion of the limitations of the diagrams if used in isolation (see above). However, as illustrated in Chapters 6 and 7, the themes that emerge from the women's discussion of their Christmas celebrations and their Christmas cards elaborate on and extend the structural components of their personal communities, adding to the credibility of the findings (Cresswell, 2003). The women's telling experiences of Christmas expose the deeper meanings of social relationships during transition and confirm that social practices are an important means of studying family relationships and uncovering wider social relations and convoys. This builds on the previous findings of Morgan (1996), Searle-Chatterjee (2001) and Khan and Antonucci (1980).

- What impact does later life widowhood have on family practices?

As illustrated in Chapter 6, the majority of the older widows in this study spent Christmas day with their immediate family. These findings demonstrate the continued importance of the Christmas meal as a family practice during transition. By contrast the findings analysed in Chapter 7 of the thesis concur with previous studies, conducted in the USA, which have found transitions to have an influence on family rituals (Pett et al., 1992). The discontinuity and re-arrangement of family and friendship practices over the Christmas period, experienced by some of the older widows in this study, demonstrates the positive and liberating aspects of change. These findings further illustrate the heterogeneity of the women's

experiences and add to the existing British literature pertaining to family practices in later life, including Finch (2007) and Chambers et al. (2009), for example.

- Does the content of the women's personal communities correspond with the structure of their social ties?

For the majority of the women in this study the content of their personal communities largely reflects their structure. However, for a minority of the older widows there is dissonance between their relationships with their kin and the placement of these personal community members in their diagrams. Although the 'concentrated family' personal community type is the most robust and prevalent among the older widows in this study, in terms of structure (Chapters 4 and 5), the women's unique experiences of Christmas reveal individual differences in the content of these relationships (Chapters 6 and 7). Previous studies have noted the predictive usefulness of network types, particularly in terms of identifying social support (Wenger et al., 1996; Litwin and Landau, 2000). Although these are interesting findings, importantly this study highlights the diverse, complex and often paradoxical nature of social relationships within similar networks, which may impact on the provision of family support in later life.

- What does the continuity and discontinuity of social relationships tell us about managing change?

The findings analysed in Chapters 6 and 7 demonstrate that continuity and discontinuity have both positive and negative aspects. As illustrated in Chapter 6, the continuity of strong relationships with family, friends and others appears to be a positive factor in the management of change. However the continuity of negative patterns of behaviour, particularly with family members, seems to be unhelpful. As demonstrated in Chapter 7, the discontinuity or loss of social relationships serves

to further reinforce loneliness and exclusion during later life widowhood. However the discontinuity of family practices based on normative obligation seems to be an enabling choice facilitating transition. Discontinuity in this instance is a positive rather than a negative experience. The continuity and discontinuity of social relationships, as well as the re-arrangement of family and friendship practices, demonstrate the multifaceted and ever-shifting characteristics of personal communities during the transition of widowhood. These findings challenge much of the earlier widowhood literature, which focuses on discontinuity as a negative aspect of the transition. This builds on the work of Matthews (1991) and Chambers (2005).

9.2: The contribution of the thesis to social gerontology

This thesis makes a significant contribution to social gerontology in terms of understanding both personal communities and the transition of widowhood in later life. The findings of this study are relevant to a wide range of disciplines within the field including sociology, social work, nursing and other health professions.

Although family practices in later life have been researched recently in Britain (Chambers et al., 2009), this study's focus on personal communities in later life offers a further theoretical means of understanding the social lives of older women, particularly during a period of transition. The approach of using the lens of personal communities, rather than social support networks, demonstrates the women's autonomy and active engagement with their social ties rather than their dependence on them. Indeed many of the older widows in this study continued to actively reciprocate practical and emotional support to their families and friends as well as the wider community. This research further illustrates the positive aspects of active ageing, including resilience and growth in the later stages of life (Biggs et

al., 2006; Green, 2010), challenging the negative stereotypes of older people as passive recipients in decline. This builds on the social support network research (Wenger, 1991, 1997, 2000; Litwin, 2000, 2001, for example) previously conducted. However the findings of this study also highlight the challenges to managing the transition of later life widowhood. Multiple and parallel transitions (Sugarman, 2001; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002), such as age-related illness and frailty (Bernard et al., 2004), the loss of relationships and roles, and financial strain (Arber et al., 2003b) are apparent for some of the older women in addition to widowhood itself. This research further reinforces the need to consider structural inequalities, such as income, health and living arrangements when researching ageing and the life course (Robert, 2002), which may restrict access to social support and wider social capital (O’Rand, 2001; Liu and Besser, 2003).

The two ‘family-type’ personal communities and the two ‘friend-type’ personal communities identified in this study further point to the diverse and ever-changing nature of social ties in contemporary Britain; including the prevalence of inter-generational relationships, re-partnering, and stepfamilies in later life. Fluidity and reciprocity is also apparent in the ‘suffusion’ (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) of the women’s family and friend relationships, further challenging ‘traditional’ boundaries and notions of what constitutes ‘family’ in the context of the changes associated with late modernity (Allan, 2008; Allan et al., 2008). Indeed for some of the older widows who do not have children, or who have children who live some distance away, the many friendships they have developed over the life course replace or supplement kinship. These findings indicate that increasingly significant personal relationships are determined by the flexibility and choice associated with friendship, rather than the necessity and normative obligation often, but not

always, associated with kinship. Personal communities provide a more comprehensive understanding of social relationships in later life, including: similarities and differences in the structure of networks, the types of support available, the quality of relationships, and the extent to which these complex factors influence the transition of widowhood. This adds to the existing British personal community research conducted by Spencer and Pahl (2006).

Rather than focussing on the problematic aspects of later life widowhood, this thesis also contributes to the growing body of research indicating the positive aspects of the transition and managing discontinuity and change (Matthews, 1991; Chambers, 2005, for example). Although these earlier retrospective studies recognise some diversity in the experience of being an older widow, using the lens of personal communities over a period of time further illustrates the multiplicity, complexity and fluidity of personal relationships during the process of transition. Indeed the findings of this study further demonstrate that positive and negative aspects of relationships with family members can coexist (Luscher and Pillemer, 1998) and fluctuate during later life widowhood. Contradictions and changes in significant personal relationships are more apparent, for example, during the social ritual of Christmas, particularly as families and friendships evolve (Spencer and Pahl, 2006), family members become more geographically dispersed (Chambers et al., 2009), and roles and practices are re-negotiated (Ray, 2000a).

Although the death of a spouse is ranked as one of the most stressful life course events (Barrett and Schneeweis, 1981; Bennett, 1997; Sugarman, 2001), the findings of this research illustrate that the majority of the older women in this study are practical, active and flexible in managing their social relations and lives as older widows. The experience of being an older widow in contemporary Britain

appears to be changing as personal communities become more heterogeneous and increasing numbers of older women seek opportunities to become more autonomous. This may be due to the majority of the older widows in this study having greater material resources of their own to draw upon in later life widowhood, due to performing paid work outside of the home (Chambers, 2005).

As illustrated in Table 3.1, the participants in this study, although from a relatively small geographic area, demonstrate diversity in terms of their age, education, socio-economic position, family circumstances and living arrangements. The findings of this study further challenge the earlier widowhood literature that typically portrays older widows as vulnerable and passive, and as a homogenous group. This builds on the work of Morgan (1989), Matthews (1991), and Chambers (2005).

9.3: The implications for practice with older women who are widows

Although not the focus of this study I recognise, as a Lecturer in Occupational Therapy, that the findings of this research may have a number of important implications for professionals, students and volunteers working with older women who are widows.

First, whilst the majority of the older women in this study were successful in managing the transition of later life widowhood, the findings also illustrate a range of complex personal and social challenges encountered by the participants. Practitioners should be aware that in addition to widowhood, older women may be experiencing multiple and parallel transitions associated with ageing and the life course (Bernard et al., 2004), such as changes in health and the additional loss of relationships with family and friends. These unfolding and contemporaneous

events may have a detrimental impact on the physical, psychological and social well being of older widows in the longer term.

Second, practitioners should seek out opportunities to explore the deeper content of relationships with family, friends and others when working with older women who are widows, for example during initial assessments and when planning discharges from hospital, or from other settings, to home. Although an individual's personal community may appear to be stable and robust on the surface, it may not necessarily offer ongoing tangible support. Indeed the findings of this study further illustrate that the quality of personal relationships during later life widowhood is more important than the structure or size of social networks (Stevens, 1989).

The discrepancies between some of the older women's personal community diagrams and the lived experiences of their relationships suggest a normative pressure to portray family in a positive rather than a negative light. It may be perceived as embarrassing and emotionally distressing for someone to talk openly about strained relationships with close family members, for example adult children who live nearby but are not supportive. For a minority of the older widows in this study the 'masked' lived experience of social exclusion only emerged through a number of discussions over a period of time. This highlights the need to conduct ongoing assessments with older women who are widows, rather than a single assessment that may only provide a snapshot of their lives, in order to identify those who are potentially at risk of social exclusion and isolation. It is particularly important given that the transition of later life widowhood itself has an impact on personal relationships, for example when shifts in personal identity occur and changes in family practices have to be negotiated and re-negotiated.

Indeed later life widowhood can disturb the often fragile balance of relationships within families and lead to conflict and a sense of submissiveness as roles and responsibilities alter. As the findings of this study demonstrate, although typologies as a construct are useful in identifying social ties at a general level (Wenger et al., 1996; Litwin and Landau, 2000), they do not always reflect the individual and profound meanings of personal communities over time and in everyday life.

Third, for the majority of the older widows in this study participating in the social celebration of Christmas positively reinforced their kinship ties, through the continuity of family practices and roles, helping to ease their transition. However for a minority of the older women, the Christmas period was spent alone, intensifying their feelings of loss and loneliness in widowhood. The findings of this study further illustrate that some older people are likely to face social exclusion over the Christmas period (WRVS, 2005) due to factors such as the geographic dispersion of kin, friction between family members, financial strain and poor mobility. This has implications for practitioners working in hospitals, or other settings, as attempts are often made to discharge service users prior to the Christmas period with the assumption that they would rather be at home with the support of family, friends and others. In reality this is not a viable option for all older people.

Finally, although previous research suggests that older women who take on additional roles and new activities adapt more successfully during widowhood (Lee and Bakk, 2001), the findings of this study also indicate that extended activities and roles can become burdensome over time. This is important given that older women may experience a number of simultaneous and subsequent transitions (Sugarman, 2001; Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002), associated with their age and

life course position (Bernard et al., 2004), in addition to widowhood itself. Some of the older women in this study demonstrated multiple commitments to family, friends and others, which, although a welcome distraction initially, became increasingly difficult to manage over time. These commitments included providing unpaid care for elderly parents and young grandchildren, as well as performing voluntary work in the wider community. It is also important for practitioners to note that perceived passivity during widowhood may be chosen rather than imposed. Indeed some of the older widows in this study chose to disengage rather than participate in the negative aspects of former roles and practices (Meske et al., 1994). This research highlights the need for practitioners to consider the long-term implications of promoting increased social activity and interaction among older people, suggested in earlier studies (Wenger et al., 1996; Litwin 2001; Wenger and Tucker, 2002; Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006).

9.4: My journey as a researcher

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal communities of a group of older women as they experienced the transition of later life widowhood. As demonstrated above, the findings of this study have addressed the lack of longitudinal qualitative research exploring the personal communities of older widows experiencing transition in contemporary Britain. However this in-depth understanding would not have been gained if my relationships with the participants had not been developed over the course of the study.

As discussed in Chapter 3 I kept a reflective research diary in which I recorded my experience of conducting the fieldwork for my thesis. I too have experienced a personal journey alongside an academic one. Like my mum and the older widows in this study, I have experienced multiple transitions related to life

course position and reflecting wider societal changes. These have included experiencing a divorce, meeting a new partner and becoming a mother, as well as a career change and move in geographic location. These transitions have led to my own personal community evolving. Although new and important members, such as my partner and son, have joined my social convoy, existing members of my personal community, such as my siblings and my 'self' have remained central and constant.

However, some of the older widows, including my mum, have died during the course of this study. I have been incredibly touched by the letters that I have received from the family members, particularly daughters, of these older widows. These letters often made reference to how much the older women had enjoyed my visits, indicating that these participants felt that their time had been well spent (Tinker, 1998). Alongside these discontinuities, I remain in contact with many of the older widows through Christmas cards, which often include a letter detailing significant events that have taken place over the year. Primarily I sent the women Christmas cards and letters to keep them updated and involved in the research process over long periods of not interviewing them (Sixsmith et al., 2003). Indeed sharing knowledge and experiences with participants can be seen to add to the credibility of the findings (Mays and Pope, 2002; Smith, 2006; Finlay, 2006). However over time these correspondences have become more reciprocal (Oakley, 2005), intimate (Ray, 2000b) and 'friend-like'.

The in-depth understanding or 'insider knowledge' of personal communities obtained during the course of this study may have been gained more readily as both the (lone) researcher and participants were women, and the fieldwork involved repeated interviewing over time (Oakley, 2005). Indeed the findings of

this study point to the older widows' increased solidarity with female members of their personal communities and the continued importance of their feminised roles within the family particularly over the Christmas period.

In addition to the strengths of this thesis, the limitations and restrictions are also acknowledged. First, the findings of this study are consistent with those of previous studies in identifying network typologies broadly consisting of family and friends (Fiori et al., 2008). However, the typology of personal communities identified is only applicable to the sample of (*White British*) women who took part in this study and therefore generalisations are limited (Spencer and Pahl, 2006). Second, it could be argued that this study's focus on the '*novel*' experience of *Christmas* may not be a typical illustration of the older widows' personal communities during the rest of the year. Future work incorporating different groups in different contexts is therefore recommended in order to expand and develop the findings of this research. This could include:

- A comparative longitudinal study of the personal communities of older widowed women and men in order to explore similarities and differences in types and characteristics during transition.
- A longitudinal study exploring the personal communities of older widows and/or widowers belonging to different ethnic groups, incorporating significant social celebrations other than Christmas.
- A longitudinal study exploring the personal communities of older people experiencing the transition of retirement rather than widowhood.

This final chapter has demonstrated how the research questions identified in this study have been addressed, the contribution of the findings to social gerontology and the implications for practice with older women who are widows. The chapter has concluded with a reflective account of my journey as a researcher, including the acknowledged limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

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Appendix 1: Example of a literature search

Databases accessed

Applied social sciences index and abstracts (CSA)
and
Social science abstracts
and
Sociological abstracts

Key terms searched for

Social networks or personal communities
and
Older people or elderly
and
Older widows or later life widowhood

Search history in CSA accessed 13.10.10

Wed Oct 13 9:05:30 EDT 2010

CSA

Multiple Databases

Query: ((social networks) or (personal communities)) and ((older people) or elderly) and ((older widows) or (later life widowhood))

Record 6 of 15

DN: Database Name

CSA Social Services Abstracts

TI: Title

Widowhood and Psychological Well-being among Older Malaysians:
Mediating Effect of Social Network

AU: Author

Abolfathi Momtaz, Yadollah; Aizan Hamid, Tengku; Yahaya, Nurizan;
Ibrahim, Rahimah

SO: Source

The Indian Journal of Social Work, vol. 70, no. 3, pp. 375-390, July
2009

DE: Descriptors

*Well-being; *Widowhood; *Social Networks; *Gerontology

AB: Abstract

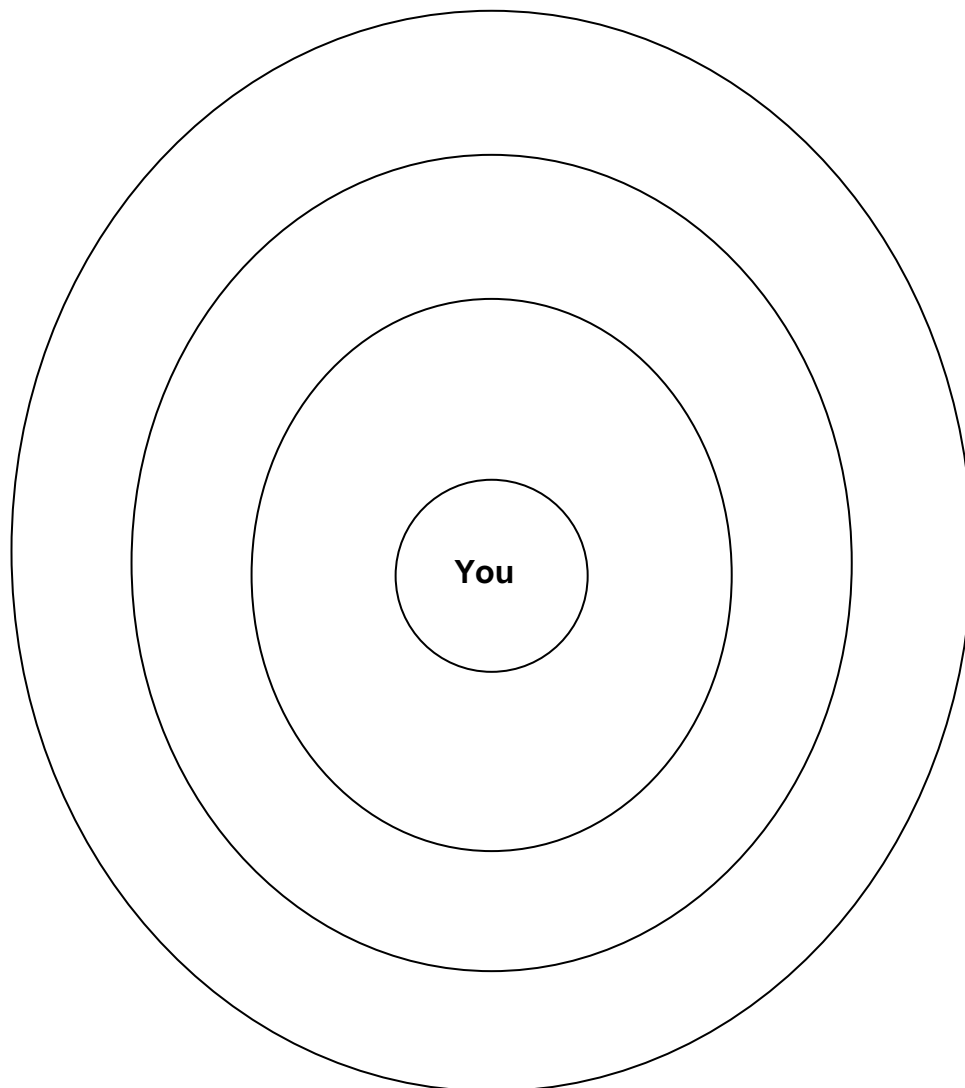
Previous studies in gerontology posit that widowhood significantly affects the psychological well-being of the elderly. This study examines the mediating effect of social network on the relationship between widowhood and psychological well-being. Data for this study consisted of 1,409 widowed and married older Malaysians. The results of a 3-step multiple regression analysis and Sobel-test ($t=-2.22$, $p<.05$) indicated that the negative effects of widowhood on psychological well-being is significantly mediated by social network. Adapted from the source document.

Appendix 2: Personal community diagram

Personal community diagram

Inner circle – name people that are very close and important to you

Middle and Outer circles – name people that are less close but still important to you



Appendix 3: Initial interview schedule

Initial Interview Schedule

Can you tell me a little about yourself?

When were you widowed, can you tell me about it?

How has your life changed since being widowed?

Do you feel as though being widowed has affected your health and well-being?

What or who has helped you most?

Can you tell me about the people that are important to you, such as family, friends and neighbours? (Fill in personal network diagram)

How often do you see or hear from them?

Do they live close by?

How long have you known them?

What kind of support do they give you?

Do you give them the same kind of support?

Are you closer to some more than others?

Do you feel you have enough support?

Can you name the activities that are important to you?

Where do you go to do the activities?

Who, if anyone, do you do the activities with?

How long have you done these activities?

Do you belong to any organisations or groups?

When and why did you join?

If you stopped going would you still keep in touch?

How long have you lived here?

Does your neighbourhood have good services?

Do you feel safe and happy here?

Can I come back in about six months, after Christmas to see you, and could you make a note of how you spend Christmas and save your Christmas cards to show me?

Appendix 4: Open letter sent to participants and organisations

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a research student pursuing my PhD at Keele University. The study I am involved in aims to develop an understanding of the different types of social networks available to older women, and to explore how such networks assist in adaptation during widowhood. Social networks may help to alleviate many of the problems associated with later life widowhood, and this type of research may have implications for increasing services that promote social support among older women.

I should like to interview women aged 65 and older who have been widowed between one and three years. Interviews will be informal and will ensure confidentiality and anonymity. If you or anyone you know would like to participate in the study please contact me on the number below for further information or to arrange an interview, if I am unavailable please leave a message and I will return your call. I would be most grateful for your contribution to this important area of social research.

Tracy Collins

Telephone...

Appendix 5: Informed consent form

Informed Consent

I confirm that the purpose of this study, and how the data will be used, has been explained to me in full, and that I have consented to take part in this study on a voluntary basis. I also understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any time and that the information I give will be treated in confidence and my anonymity assured.

Name.....

Date.....

Appendix 6: Letter sent out to the participants (Dec 2004)

December 2004

Dear

I hope you are well. I wanted to thank you again for helping me with my research on social networks and adaptation during widowhood.

The project is going well so far and I have now completed the first set of interviews with twenty-six ladies in all. I plan to keep you updated with the project as it progresses.

I am looking forward to visiting you again after Christmas and wanted to remind you to keep your Christmas cards to show me and make a note of how you spend Christmas. I hope you have a very merry Christmas and I look forward to seeing you in the New Year.

Yours truly,

Tracy Collins

Appendix 7: Second interview schedule

Second interview schedule

How have you been since I last saw you, it's been a few months now?

Are you still doing the same activities and things?

Could you tell me how you spent Christmas?
(Christmas Eve, Christmas day, Boxing Day)

How did you spend New Years Eve and New Year's Day?

Which day did you enjoy the most (and why)?

What did you do?

Can you show me your Christmas cards?

(Ask them to read them out and say something about the people who sent them – who are they, how long have you known them, where did you meet etc)

Did you send them cards?

Who were you most pleased to get Christmas cards from?

Was there anyone that you were disappointed not to get a card from?

(Look at personal community diagram)

Are you still in touch with all these people?

Is there anyone you would like to add to the diagram? (Use different colour pen)

Is it all right if I come back to see you in the summer, it will be around a year then since the first interview, and we can see how you are and how things have changed?

Appendix 8: Letter sent out to the participants (Dec 2005)

December 2005

Dear

I hope you are well and have had a good year so far. I just wanted to give you an update on the research that you are helping me with.

I have had a very productive summer; I attended an interesting conference and summer school, which have helped to develop my ideas. I am still busy analysing the interviews conducted earlier this year and last year. I now need to go back and look at other research in order to make the most of our final interview. This means delaying coming to see you until in the New Year.

However, in the meantime:

- If you have any news, changes or events that have happened to you or the people in your network since I last visited please make a note of it for the next interview.
- If you could make a note of how you spend Christmas this year and save your cards again to show me that would be great.
- If you have any birthdays or anniversaries please make a note of how you spend them and if possible keep any cards to show me.

And finally, please let me know if any of your contact details change, and feel free to get in touch with me anytime, it would be lovely to hear from you. You can contact me at the address and phone number above. Thank you again for your time and I look forward to seeing you in the New Year.

Yours truly,

Tracy Collins

Appendix 9: Third interview schedule

Third interview schedule

How have you been since I last saw you, it's over a year now?

Has anything changed in your life since then?

Are you still doing the same activities and things?

Have you been away on holiday or anything?

Have you or your family or friends had any celebrations, such as birthdays, anniversaries, or other events?

What did you do?

Do you have any cards to show me?

How did you spend Christmas this year?

And how about New Year?

Was anything different this year?

Can you show me your Christmas cards?

Are you still in touch with all of these people? (Look at personal community diagram)

Is there anyone you would like to add to the diagram? (Use different colour pen)

It's almost two years since I first contacted you, what's the same and what's different in your life now?

What do you see yourself doing over the next twelve months?

Well thank you, this has been so helpful. I will now be looking at all of the interviews, and will keep you up to date with what I find and any other developments. Feel free to contact me anytime if you've got any questions or just want a chat!

Appendix 10: Postgraduate Research Ethics forms

- Copy of Postgraduate Research Ethics Form 1 – Project Commencement
- Copy of Postgraduate Research Ethics Form 2 – Project Completion

Appendix 11: Update letters sent to participants

July 2005

Dear

I hope you are well and enjoying the summer. I just wanted to give you an update on the research into social networks and widowhood that you are helping me with.

I completed a second set of interviews with twenty-five ladies in January/February and then took a holiday in March/April to Australia/New Zealand, which was great! I hope you have managed to have a holiday too and if so I'd love to hear about it next time we meet.

Since then I have been busy typing up the interviews and starting to analyse them. I am finding lots of valuable information and because I want time to study these interviews I would like to come back and see you for a final interview in late autumn rather than summer, probably November/December time.

If you have any news, changes or events that have happened to you or the people in your network since I last visited please make a note of it for the next interview or feel free to contact me, it would be great to hear from you! You can contact me at the address and phone number above. Thank you again for your time and I look forward to seeing you later in the year.

Yours truly,

Tracy Collins

September 2006

Dear

Hope you are well and have had a good summer. While I won't be coming to do any further interviews with you, I thought you might like to hear how the project is going. Since I last saw you I have been busy analysing the information you gave me in the interviews and have started to write chapters for my thesis.

In addition to this I presented a paper outlining the research at the College of Occupational Therapists conference in June, and then a paper reporting on the different ways older widows celebrate Christmas at the British Society of Gerontology conference earlier this month. Both papers generated interest and positive comments.

I will send you a final report once the research is complete. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or comments. Thanks once again for your invaluable time and contribution.

Kind regards, Tracy

December 2007

Dear

Hope this card finds you well and that you have had a good year since I last saw you, can you believe it's Christmas again! I've had another busy year including recently moving house. I thought you might like to hear how the project is coming along. I have now completed a number of draft chapters of my thesis and am in the latter stages of analysing the information you gave me in the interviews.

The research continues to stimulate interest and an outline of the study appeared in the September 2007 addition of *Generations Review* which is a newsletter of the British Society of Gerontology. In addition to this I will be presenting a paper on 'the significance of social relationships in managing later life widowhood' at a conference in May 2008 taking place in Hamburg.

I will continue to update you on the research and send a final report once the thesis is complete, hopefully this time next year or the early part of 2009. As always please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments. Thank you again for your contribution.

Kind Regards, Tracy

December 2008

Dear

Hope you are keeping well and have had a good year since I last wrote to you. I've had another busy year and my partner and I are expecting our first baby in March – so we are very excited!

I thought you might like to hear how the project you helped me with is progressing. I am now in the final stages of analysing the information you gave me in the interviews and redrafting chapters of my thesis. I also presented a paper on 'the significance of social relationships in managing later life widowhood' at a conference in May 2008 which took place in Hamburg, Germany and was well received.

I will continue to update you on the research and send a final report once the thesis is complete, this will be delayed a little now as I'll be taking some maternity leave! As always please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments. Thank you again for your contribution and all the best for Christmas and the coming year.

Kind Regards, Tracy

December 2009

Dear

Hope you and your loved ones are well and have had a good year. I am now the proud mum of a little boy named Hywel who was born on the 28th March this year, can you believe he's cut two teeth and is crawling already – where does the time go?!

Although I have taken maternity leave from my studies, I have made some good progress with the project you helped me with. I have now completed analysing the information you gave me in the interviews and hope to have completed writing up my thesis by the end of next year.

I will continue to update you on the research and send a final report of the findings once it is complete. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments, it would be lovely to hear your news! Thank you again for your contribution and best wishes for Christmas and the coming year.

Kind Regards, Tracy

December 2010

Dear

Hope you have had a good year since I last wrote to you and that this card finds you and yours well. My little boy is growing fast and is keeping me very busy!

I just wanted to give you an update on the project you helped me with. I have now completed a full draft of my thesis and I am in the final stages of revising chapters for submission.

Once I have submitted my written thesis I have to have an oral exam. I will send you a final report of the findings of the study once the whole process is complete – at which point I will be very relieved!

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments, it would be lovely to hear from you. Thank you again for your contribution and best wishes for Christmas and the coming year.

Kind Regards, Tracy

Appendix 12: Analyses of personal community diagrams

Establishing personal community types from diagrams – balance of number of family, friends and others (initial stage of analysis)

Family only

Case	size	inner circle	middle	outer
Marilyn	6	2 family	2 family	2 family
Hannah	8	8 family	N/A	N/A

Predominantly family

Case	size	inner circle	middle	outer
Alice	11	5 family	2 family	2 family 2 friends
Clarice	14	8 family	5 friends	1 friend
June	15	9 family 1 friend 2 ministers	3 home carers	N/A
Jessie	16	7 family 2 friends	2 family 2 friends/neighbours	2 friends 1 neighbour
Beatrice	17	8 family	3 friends	2 friends 4 neighbour
Julia	17	6 family	4 family 4 friends	1 friend 2 neighbour
Mary	18	12 family	2 friends 1 friend/cleaner 1 neighbour/friend 2 neighbours	N/A
Anna	18	10 family 2 friends/neighbours	5 friends/neighbours	1 'friend'
Jane	23	15 family 4 friends 2 neighbours	1 reverend	1 friend
Deirdre	25	8 family	9 grandchildren 1 great-grandchild	6 friends 1 neighbour
Molly	27	10 family 2 priests	3 family 5 friends 2 neighbours	5 friends
Moira	27	9 family 4 friends	2 family 4 friends	4 neighbour 2 preachers 1 vicar

				1 friend's daughter
Amy	33	16 family	7 family 2 friends 1 friend/neighbour	7 friends
Doreen	34	17 family	1 family 3 friends 1 minister	11 friends 1 neighbour

Predominantly friends

Case	size	inner circle	middle	outer
Flora	10	2 family	2 family	5 friends 1 friend /neighbour
Minnie	13	6 family 1 friend 1 friend/neighbour	3 church friends 2 friends	N/A
Beverly	14	5 family 2 friends	5 friends	2 neighbour
Cathy	15	4 family	11 friends	N/A
Gloria	22	5 family 2 'step family'	8 friends	7 friends
Delores	23	8 family	8 friends 1 reverend 1 reverend's wife	3 neighbour 2 friends
Patricia	34	4 family 10 friends	2 family 3 friends 2 pastors 2 pastors' wives	2 friends 1 friend/neig 3 neighbour 5 shopkeep

Predominantly other

Case	size	inner circle	middle	outer
Veronica	22	2 family 3 friends 7 neighbours 1 doctor 1 chaplain 1 counsellor	4 friends 2 gardeners	1 friend

Mixed

Case	size	inner circle	middle	outer
Elsie	30	14 family	1 family 15 friends	N/A
Megan	21	4 family	2 family 1 god daughter 1 friend	6 friends 7 neighbour

Establishing personal community types from diagrams – centrality of family, friends and others (second stage of analysis)

Family only in centre of diagram

Case	size	composition of inner circle
Marilyn	6	2 family
Hannah	8	8 family
Alice	11	5 family
Clarice	14	8 family
Beatrice	17	8 family
Julia	17	6 family
Mary	18	12 family
Deirdre	25	8 family
Amy	33	16 family
Doreen	34	17 family
Flora	10	2 family
Cathy	15	4 family
Gloria	22	5 family/2 'step family'
Delores	23	8 family
Megan	21	4 family
Elsie	30	14 family

Friends as well as family in centre of diagram

Case	size	composition of inner circle
Jessie	16	7 family/2 friends
Moira	27	9 family/4 friends
Beverly	14	5 family/2 friends
Patricia	34	4 family/10 friends

Others as well as family/friends in centre of diagram

Case	size	composition of inner circle
June	15	9 family/1 friend/2 ministers
Anna	18	10 family/2 friends/neighbours
Jane	23	15 family/4 friends/2 neighbours
Molly	27	10 family/2 priests
Minnie	13	6 family/1 friend/1 friend/neighbour
Veronica	22	2 family/3 friends/7 neighbours/1 doctor/1 chaplain/ 1 counsellor

Establishing personal community types from diagrams – combining balance of numbers and centrality of ties (third stage of analysis)

Family only

(Only family in diagram)

Case	size	number	centrality
Marilyn	6	Family only	Family only in centre
Hannah	8	Family only	Family only in centre

Concentrated family

(Majority family/family in centre of diagram)

Case	size	number	centrality
Alice	11	Predominantly family	Family only in centre
Clarice	14	Predominantly family	Family only in centre
Beatrice	17	Predominantly family	Family only in centre
Julia	17	Predominantly family	Family only in centre
Mary	18	Predominantly family	Family only in centre
Deirdre	25	Predominantly family	Family only in centre
Amy	33	Predominantly family	Family only in centre
Doreen	34	Predominantly family	Family only in centre

Diluted family

(Majority family/friends and others also in centre of diagram)

Case	size	number	centrality
June	15	Predominantly family	Family, friends and others in centre
Jessie	16	Predominantly family	Family and friends in centre
Anna	18	Predominantly family	Family, friends and others in centre
Jane	23	Predominantly family	Family, friends and others in centre
Molly	27	Predominantly family	Family and others in centre
Moira	27	Predominantly family	Family and friends in centre

Friend with family centrality

(Majority friends/family in centre of diagram)

Case	size	number	centrality
Flora	10	Predominantly friends	Family only in centre
Cathy	15	Predominantly friends	Family only in centre
Gloria	22	Predominantly friends	Family only in centre
Delores	23	Predominantly friends	Family only in centre

Friend with mixed centrality

(Majority friends/friends and others in centre of diagram as well as family)

Case	size	number	centrality
Beverly	14	Predominantly friends	Family and friends in centre
Patricia	34	Predominantly friends	Family and friends in centre
Minnie	13	Predominantly friends	Family, friends and others in centre

Mixed with family centrality

(equal number of family, friends and others/family in centre of diagram)

Case	size	number	centrality
Megan	21	Mixed	Family only in centre
Elsie	30	Mixed	Family only in centre

Anomalies

(cases that do not fit into categories)

Case	size	number	centrality
Veronica	22	Predominantly other	Family, friends and others in centre

Number of intimate and secondary ties by personal community type

Family only

Case	size	intimate ties	secondary ties
Marilyn	6	2	4
Hannah	8	8	0
Average	7	5	2

Concentrated family (majority secondary ties 6/8)

Case	size	intimate ties	secondary ties
Alice	11	5	6
Clarice	14	8	6
Beatrice	17	8	9
Julia	17	6	11
Mary	18	12	6
Deirdre	25	8	17
Amy	33	16	17
Doreen	34	17	17
Average	21	10	11

Diluted family (majority intimate ties 4/6)

Case	size	intimate ties	secondary ties
June	15	12	3
Jessie	16	9	7
Anna	18	12	6
Jane	23	21	2
Molly	27	12	15
Moira	27	13	14

Average 21 13 8

Friend with family centrality (majority secondary ties 4/4)

Case	size	intimate ties	secondary ties
Flora	10	2	8
Cathy	15	4	11
Gloria	22	7	15
Delores	23	8	15
Average	18	5	12

Friend with mixed centrality

Case	size	intimate ties	secondary ties
Beverly	14	7	7
Patricia	34	14	20
Minnie	13	8	5
Average	20	10	11

Mixed with family centrality (majority secondary ties 2/2)

Case	size	intimate ties	secondary ties
Megan	21	4	17
Elsie	30	14	16
Average	26	9	17

Anomalies

Case	size	intimate ties	secondary ties
Veronica	22	15	7

Number of generational and intergenerational family by personal community type

Family only (majority intergenerational ties/majority of these intimate/around one sixth of ties generational)

Case	size	generational family	intergenerational family
Marilyn	6	2	4 (2 centre)
Hannah	8	0	8 (centre)
Average	7	1	6 (5 centre)

Concentrated family (majority intergenerational ties – highest in sample/majority of these intimate/around half as many generational ties)

Case	size	generational family	intergenerational family
Alice	11	4	5 (centre)
Clarice	14	1 (centre)	7 (centre)
Beatrice	17	1 (centre)	7 (centre)
Julia	17	4 (2 centre)	6 (4 centre)
Mary	18	2 (centre)	10 (centre)
Deirdre	25	0	18 (8 centre)
Amy	33	4	19 (16 centre)
Doreen	34	4 (3 centre)	14 (centre)
Average	21	5 (1 intimate)	11 (9 intimate)

Diluted family (majority intergenerational ties/all of these intimate/almost a third of ties generational)

Case	size	generational family	intergenerational family
June	15	1 (centre)	8 (centre)
Jessie	16	5 (3 centre)	4 (centre)
Anna	18	0	10 (centre)
Jane	23	8 (centre)	7 (centre)
Molly	27	4 (1 centre)	9 (centre)
Moira	27	2	9 (centre)
Average	21	3 (2 intimate)	8 (8 intimate)

Friend with family centrality (majority intergenerational ties/almost all of these intimate/around one fifth of ties generational)

Case	size	generational family	intergenerational family
Flora	10	0	4 (2 centre)
Cathy	15	0	4 (centre)
Gloria	22	0	7 (centre)
Delores	23	3 (centre)	5 (centre)
Average	18	1 (1 intimate)	5 (5 intimate)

Friend with mixed centrality (majority intergenerational ties/all of these intimate/half as many ties generational)

Case	size	generational family	intergenerational family
Beverly	14	0	5 (centre)
Patricia	34	2	4 (centre)
Minnie	13	3 (centre)	3 (centre)
Average	20	2 (1 intimate)	4 (4 intimate)

Mixed with family centrality (majority ties intergenerational – second highest in sample/almost all of these intimate/only around one tenth of ties generational)

Case	size	generational family	intergenerational family
Megan	21	1	6 (4 centre)
Elsie	30	1	14 (centre)
Average	26	1	10 (9 intimate)

Anomalies

Case	size	generational family	intergenerational family
Veronica	22	1 (centre)	1 (centre)

Number of individual and collective friends by personal community type

Family only

Case	size	individual friends	collective friends
Marilyn	6	0	0
Hannah	8	0	0
Average	7	0	0

Concentrated family (majority individual friends, all secondary ties)

Case	size	individual friends	collective friends
Alice	11	2	0
Clarice	14	6	0
Beatrice	17	5	0
Julia	17	5	0
Mary	18	4	0
Deirdre	25	1	5
Amy	33	3	7
Doreen	34	14	0
Average	21	5	2

Diluted family (majority individual friends, higher incidence of intimate ties)

Case	size	individual friends	collective friends
June	15	1 (centre)	0
Jessie	16	4 (2 centre)	2
Anna	18	8 (2 centre)	0
Jane	23	5 (4 centre)	0
Molly	27	5	5
Moira	27	7 (4 centre)	2

Average **21** **5 (2 intimate)** **2**

Friend with family centrality (highest number of friends, individual only)

Case	size	individual friends	collective friends
Flora	10	6	0
Cathy	15	11	0
Gloria	22	15	0
Delores	23	10	0
Average	18	11	0

Friend with mixed centrality (second highest number of friends, highest number of intimate ties)

Case	size	individual friends	collective friends
Beverly	14	7 (2 centre)	0
Patricia	34	16 (10 centre)	0
Minnie	13	4 (2 centre)	3
Average	20	9 (5 intimate)	1

Mixed with family centrality (majority collective friends, no intimate ties)

Case	size	individual friends	collective friends
Megan	21	3	4
Elsie	30	4	11
Average	26	4	8

Anomalies (majority collective ties)

Case	size	individual friends	collective friends
Veronica	22	3	5 (3 centre)

Number of informal and formal others by personal community type

Family only

Case	size	informal others	formal others
Marilyn	6	0	0
Hannah	8	0	0
Average	7	0	0

Concentrated family (5/8 informal others, 1/8 formal other)

Case	size	informal others	formal others
Alice	11	0	0
Clarice	14	0	0
Beatrice	17	4	0
Julia	17	2	0
Mary	18	2	0
Deirdre	25	1	0
Amy	33	0	0
Doreen	34	1	1
Average	21	1	0

Diluted family (4/6 informal ties, 1/6 intimate; 4/6 formal ties, 2/6 intimate)

Case	size	informal others	formal others
June	15	0	5 (2 centre)
Jessie	16	1	0
Anna	18	0	0
Jane	23	2 (centre)	1
Molly	27	2	2 (centre)
Moira	27	4	3

Average 21 2 2 (1 intimate)

Friend with family centrality (1/4 informal ties, 1/4 formal ties)

Case	size	informal others	formal others
Flora	10	0	0
Cathy	15	0	0
Gloria	22	0	0
Delores	23	3	2
Average	18	1	1

Friend with mixed centrality (2/3 informal ties, 1/3 formal ties)

Case	size	informal others	formal others
Beverly	14	2	0
Patricia	34	3	9
Minnie	13	0	0
Average	20	2	3

Mixed with family centrality (1/2 informal ties)

Case	size	informal others	formal others
Megan	21	7	0
Elsie	30	0	0
Average	26	4	0

Anomalies

Case	size	informal others	formal others
Veronica	22	7 (centre)	5 (3 centre)

Appendix 13: Analyses of interview transcripts

List of initial nodes

NVivo revision 2.0.163 Licensee: Tracy Collins

Project: phd User: Administrator Date: 25/01/2008 - 15:06:43

NODE LISTING

Nodes in Set: All Nodes

Created: 16/01/2008 - 13:16:00

Modified: 25/01/2008 - 14:59:47

Number of Nodes: 48

- 1 active participant*
- 2 associational life*
- 3 cards - renewed friendship*
- 4 cards - still send but do not see*
- 5 cards but do not see*
- 6 cards still send but do not see*
- 7 catalyst*
- 8 Christmas away*
- 9 Christmas past*
- 10 continuity*
- 11 different cards*
- 12 different Christmas*
- 13 different personal identity*
- 14 discontinuity*

- 15 *extending friendships*
- 16 *family Christmas at home*
- 17 *family Christmas at their house*
- 18 *family Christmas in their home*
- 19 *family early days of widowhood*
- 20 *family friction*
- 21 *family negotiation*
- 22 *family friction*
- 23 *friends like family*
- 24 *friends over Christmas period*
- 25 *friends step in when family unavaila*
- 26 *friendships limited early days*
- 27 *friendships reinforced*
- 28 *friendships widening*
- 29 *future*
- 30 *hard work*
- 31 *intergenerational*
- 32 *lost relationships*
- 33 *missing cards*
- 34 *negative Christmas*
- 35 *negotiation*
- 36 *new year with friends*
- 37 *normative expectations*
- 38 *obligation*
- 39 *organisation Christmas*

- 40 *personal identity*
- 41 *positive Christmas*
- 42 *reciprocity*
- 43 *reinforced friendships*
- 44 *renewed friendship*
- 45 *same cards*
- 46 *same Christmas*
- 47 *shared identity*
- 48 *significant days*

List of tree nodes

NVivo revision 2.0.163 Licensee: Tracy Collins

Project: PhD User: Administrator Date: 06/02/2008 - 17:05:43

NODE LISTING

Nodes in Set: All Nodes

Created: 01/02/2008 - 17:04:26

Modified: 06/02/2008 - 16:56:40

Number of Nodes: 37

- 1 (1) /Relationships**
- 2 (1 1) /Relationships/Family
- 3 (1 1 1) /Relationships/Family/family Christmas at home
- 4 (1 1 2) /Relationships/Family/negative Christmas
- 5 (1 1 4) /Relationships/Family/family friction
- 6 (1 1 5) /Relationships/Family/intergenerational
- 7 (1 1 6) /Relationships/Family/normative expectations
- 8 (1 1 7) /Relationships/Family/positive Christmas
- 9 (1 2) /Relationships/Friends
- 10 (1 2 1) /Relationships/Friends/renewed friendship
- 11 (1 2 2) /Relationships/Friends/extending friendships
- 12 (1 2 3) /Relationships/Friends/friends like family
- 13 (1 2 4) /Relationships/Friends/friends over Christmas period
- 14 (1 2 8) /Relationships/Friends/friendships reinforced
- 15 (1 3) /Relationships/Associations

- 16 (1 3 1) /Relationships/Associations/associational life
- 17 (1 4) /Relationships/Lost
- 18 (1 4 1) /Relationships/Lost/lost relationships
- 19 (1 5) /Relationships/reciprocity
- 20 (2) /Personal identity**
- 21 (2 1) /Personal identity/shared identity
- 22 (2 2) /Personal identity/catalyst
- 23 (2 2 2) /Personal identity/catalyst/Christmas away
- 24 (2 2 3) /Personal identity/catalyst/different Christmas
- 25 (2 3) /Personal identity/active participant
- 26 (2 4) /Personal identity/different personal identity
- 27 (2 4 2) /Personal identity/different personal identity/future
- 28 (2 4 3) /Personal identity/different personal identity/personal identity
- 29 (3) /Managing change**
- 30 (3 1) /Managing change/continuity
- 31 (3 1 1) /Managing change/continuity/continuity
- 32 (3 1 2) /Managing change/continuity/cards - still send but do not see
- 33 (3 1 3) /Managing change/continuity/Christmas past
- 34 (3 2) /Managing change/obligation
- 35 (3 2 1) /Managing change/obligation/rationalisation
- 36 (3 3) /Managing change/discontinuity
- 37 (3 4) /Managing change/negotiation

List of major thematic categories with sub codes

Major thematic categories with sub codes from subset of transcripts

Process of change – past/future

Relationships/Lost

Personal identity/different personal identity/future

Relationships/Friends/renewed friendship

Relationships/Friends/extending friendships

Process of change – different activities

Personal identity/catalyst

Personal identity/catalyst/Christmas away

Personal identity/catalyst/different Christmas

Process of change – different personal identity

Personal identity/shared identity

Personal identity/different personal identity

Managing change relationships

Relationships/Family

Relationships/Family/family Christmas at home

Relationships/Family/intergenerational

Relationships/Family/positive Christmas

Relationships/Friends

Relationships/Friends/friends like family

Relationships/Friends/friends over Christmas period

Relationships/Friends/friendships reinforced

Relationships/Associations/associational life

Relationships/reciprocity

Managing change/continuity

Managing change self

Personal identity/active participant

Managing change/continuity

Managing change/discontinuity

Managing change/negotiation

Barriers

Relationships/Family/negative Christmas

Relationships/Family/family friction

Relationships/Family/normative expectations

Managing change/obligation

Managing change/obligation/rationalisation

Final cases nodes and tree nodes

NVivo revision 2.0.163 Licensee: Tracy Collins

Project: PhD User: Administrator Date: 02/12/2008 - 15:03:38
NODE LISTING

Nodes in Set: All Free Nodes

Created: 18/09/2008 - 13:52:06

Modified: 02/12/2008 - 15:03:14

Number of Nodes: 36

- 1 active participant
- 2 agency
- 3 associational life
- 4 catalyst
- 5 challenges
- 6 community
- 7 continuity
- 8 discontinuity
- 9 extending ties
- 10 family continuity
- 11 family friction
- 12 family tradition
- 13 friendship
- 14 intergenerational ties
- 15 life history
- 16 looking back
- 17 looking to the future
- 18 lost relationships
- 19 maintaining ties
- 20 moving on
- 21 negotiation
- 22 new activity
- 23 obligation
- 24 over commitment
- 25 passivity
- 26 personal community
- 27 personal continuity
- 28 personal identity
- 29 rationalisation
- 30 reciprocity
- 31 reinforcing relationships
- 32 renewed friendship
- 33 shared identity
- 34 significant days
- 35 time for me
- 36 unfulfilled obligation

NODE LISTING

Nodes in Set: All Tree Nodes

Created: 18/09/2008 - 13:52:06

Modified: 02/12/2008 - 14:56:18

Number of Nodes: 56

1 (1) /Relationships

- 2 (1 1) /Relationships/Family
- 3 (1 1 1) /Relationships/Family/family Christmas at home
- 4 (1 1 2) /Relationships/Family/negative Christmas
- 5 (1 1 3) /Relationships/Family/family continuity
- 6 (1 1 4) /Relationships/Family/family friction
- 7 (1 1 5) /Relationships/Family/intergenerational
- 8 (1 1 6) /Relationships/Family/normative expectations
- 9 (1 1 7) /Relationships/Family/positive Christmas
- 10 (1 1 8) /Relationships/Family/family tradition
- 11 (1 2) /Relationships/Friends
- 12 (1 2 1) /Relationships/Friends/renewed friendship
- 13 (1 2 2) /Relationships/Friends/extending friendships
- 14 (1 2 3) /Relationships/Friends/friends like family
- 15 (1 2 4) /Relationships/Friends/friends over Christmas period
- 16 (1 2 5) /Relationships/Friends/friendship
- 17 (1 2 8) /Relationships/Friends/friendships reinforced
- 18 (1 3) /Relationships/Associations
- 19 (1 3 1) /Relationships/Associations/associational life
- 20 (1 4) /Relationships/Lost
- 21 (1 4 1) /Relationships/Lost/lost relationships
- 22 (1 4 1 1) /Relationships/Lost/lost relationships/looking back
- 23 (1 4 1 1 1) /Relationships/Lost/lost relationships/looking back/remembering the past
- 24 (1 4 1 1 2) /Relationships/Lost/lost relationships/looking back/significant days
- 25 (1 5) /Relationships/reciprocity
- 26 (1 6) /Relationships/community
- 27 (1 6 1) /Relationships/community/personal community
- 28 (1 7) /Relationships/maintaining ties
- 29 (1 8) /Relationships/reinforcing relationships

30 (2) /Personal identity

- 31 (2 1) /Personal identity/shared identity
- 32 (2 2) /Personal identity/catalyst
- 33 (2 2 2) /Personal identity/catalyst/Christmas away
- 34 (2 2 3) /Personal identity/catalyst/different Christmas
- 35 (2 2 4) /Personal identity/catalyst/new activity
- 36 (2 3) /Personal identity/active participant
- 37 (2 3 1) /Personal identity/active participant/active participant
- 38 (2 4) /Personal identity/different personal identity
- 39 (2 4 2) /Personal identity/different personal identity/future

- 40 (2 4 3) /Personal identity/different personal identity/personal identity
- 41 (2 6) /Personal identity/history
- 42 (2 7) /Personal identity/moving on
- 43 (2 7 1) /Personal identity/moving on/moving on
- 44 (2 7 2) /Personal identity/moving on/time for me
- 45 (2 8) /Personal identity/passivity
- 46 (3) /Managing change**
- 47 (3 1) /Managing change/continuity
- 48 (3 1 1) /Managing change/continuity/continuity
- 49 (3 1 2) /Managing change/continuity/cards - still send but do not see
- 50 (3 1 3) /Managing change/continuity/Christmas past
- 51 (3 2) /Managing change/obligation
- 52 (3 2 2) /Managing change/obligation/unfulfilled obligation
- 53 (3 3) /Managing change/discontinuity
- 54 (3 4) /Managing change/negotiation
- 55 (3 5) /Managing change/rationalisation
- 56 (3 6) /Managing change/challenge

Refined list of conceptual themes

Refined set of themes from transcripts

Remembering the past, looking to the future (process of transition)

Endings and beginnings

Christmas as a catalyst for change

We are all widows

Negotiating the journey (managing transition)

Social resources during transition

Personal resources during transition

Challenges to adaptation

Appendix 14: Pen portraits of the participants

Pen portraits

The following twenty-six pen portraits of the older widows in this study include information gained from the initial interviews. The brief portraits outline the women's life histories and what life was like for them before they were widowed.

Anna

Anna was eighty-six years old and had been widowed for six months at the time of the first interview. Anna agreed to take part in the study after being approached via a family member. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in a small market town, and has lived there for forty-one years. She is frail, with breathing problems and has asthma. She has two daughters: one lives fourteen miles away and the other lives over a hundred miles away. She does not drive.

Anna was born fourteen miles away, but has lived in the same market town since 1929 when she moved there with her parents. She left school at the age of fourteen and started work. She met her husband when she was eighteen, and they married after eighteen months in 1938. During the Second World War her husband was enlisted in the army for six years, Anna went to work in the arms factory while he was away. She gave birth to her first daughter in 1944 and her second in 1946. Anna and her husband used to enjoy going away on holiday and spending time together in the home and garden, she said that they had never been interested in joining clubs or group activities.

Marilyn

Marilyn was seventy-three years old and had been widowed for three years at the time of the first interview. Marilyn took part in the study after being asked by a family member. She lives alone in a semi-detached housing association house in a small market town, and has lived there for forty-three years. She is in good health and works part time a few hours a week as a cleaner. She does not drive.

Marilyn was born in the area, and worked in an office after leaving school. She met her husband, who was posted to the area with the army, at a dance in the town hall and they married when she was twenty-one. They were married for forty-seven years. She lived in Scotland for ten years with her husband, as this was where he was from originally, but they moved back to her hometown due to a lack of work. Marilyn has two children, a son and a daughter who live in the same town. Her husband had cancer for six years and she cared for him up until he died. She and her husband used to enjoy socialising at the local football club, which he supported up until he became ill.

Beatrice

Beatrice was sixty-two years old and had been widowed for three years at the time of the first interview. Beatrice was accessed via the Live at home scheme where she is a volunteer. She lives alone in a semi-detached house on the outskirts of a city, and has lived there for nineteen years. She is in good health and very active. She is able to drive.

Beatrice worked as a 'home help' and in community care for thirty-two years. She has two sons, one of whom lives in Spain, and she is the main carer for her elderly mother. Her husband died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of fifty-

two, shortly after taking early retirement. Beatrice and her husband had a limited social life up until they retired as they both worked different shifts.

Amy

Amy was sixty-six years old and had been widowed for three years at the time of the first interview. Amy was accessed via a community exercise class where she is a member. She lives alone in a housing association bungalow in a small market town. She is fairly active and healthy. She does not drive.

Amy was born in the area, married at the age of nineteen and had six children 'a couple of years in between'. She started working in a factory part-time when her youngest child was six and a half. She cared for her husband, who had two strokes, up until he died. Although her husband had an active social life up until he became ill, Amy spent most of her time at home as her husband did not like her to go out.

Doreen

Doreen was sixty-two years old and had been widowed for nine months at the time of the first interview. Doreen was accessed via the University of the third age where she is a member. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in a small market town. She is in good health. She is able to drive.

Doreen has lived in the area for thirty-seven years, although she grew up in a neighbouring county where her parents were farmers and then hoteliers. She went to grammar school before training as a nurse and eventually as a health visitor. She married in the '1960's' and has four children. She retired two years ago, and cared for her husband up until he died. She and her husband were very active in their local community.

Veronica

Veronica was seventy-nine years old and had been widowed for almost three years at the time of the first interview. Veronica took part in the study after responding to a local newspaper article asking for volunteers. She lives alone in a bungalow in a semi-rural location, and has lived there for twenty years. She is fairly active and in fair health despite having arthritis. She is able to drive.

Veronica started work when she was fourteen, although she had passed her examinations to go to high school her family could not afford for her to attend. She worked initially in a printer's office and then learned short hand and typing, which led to various office jobs. She met her husband through the church, he had just left the RAF and was in training to become a minister. Veronica and her husband were unable to have children. She retired early to care for her father and then her mother. She cared for her husband when he became ill with cancer. She and her husband's social life revolved largely around the church, with most of their friends being fellow ministers or church members.

Jessie

Jessie was seventy-nine years old and had been widowed for six months at the time of the first interview. Jessie was accessed via a local Polish club where she is a member. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for fifty-two years. She is frail and has arthritis. She has a dog and a cat. She does not drive.

Jessie was born in the area, her father died when she was just nine years old, and she had six brothers and sisters, she says her mother struggled to bring them up. She got married in 1947 to her Polish husband, and she has one daughter. She cared for her husband up until he died, his health started to

deteriorate ten years earlier. Prior to that she cared for her elderly mother. Jessie and her husband used to go to dances and socialise with friends at the Polish club. They also enjoyed going away on holiday.

Mary

Mary was eighty-one years old and had been widowed for one year and eight months at the time of the first interview. Mary took part in the study after responding to an article asking for volunteers in the local newspaper. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in a semi-rural location. She has poor mobility, arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome, asthma and vertigo. She is unable to drive or use public transport, and is housebound unless someone takes her out.

Mary was born in the area and worked in the pottery industry. She met her husband on her twenty-first birthday and got married when she was twenty-three, she has four children. The district nurses came in to help Mary care for her husband when he became ill up until he died. Mary and her husband's social life revolved around the Church, the Labour party and the Miner's social club.

Elsie

Elsie was ninety years old and had been widowed for one and a half years at the time of the first interview. Elsie was accessed via Age Concern, as she is a friend of a volunteer there. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for thirty-four years. She is in good health and very active. She does not drive.

Elsie was born in the area, her father became mentally ill when she was thirteen and her mother died when she was sixteen, so she was left to bring up her younger brother and sisters. She worked in various jobs, including a munitions factory. She married her first husband when she was eighteen, and had two

children, her first husband died in 1968. She met her second husband while volunteering for the Red Cross and married him in 1970. She cared for her husband when he became ill up until he died. Elsie and her husband enjoyed many holidays together and socialising with their many friends at local clubs and pubs.

Clarice

Clarice was eighty-three years old and had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview. Clarice took part in the study after replying to an article asking for volunteers in the local newspaper. She lives alone in a warden controlled flat in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for six years. She is fairly active and in fair health, although she fell recently and uses a walking stick. She does not drive.

Clarice is a retired warden, and worked in an office and as a nurse before that. She has been married three times and divorced twice. She was married to her third husband for thirty-one years. Clarice has ten children of her own and three stepchildren. Clarice and her husband's social life revolved around the warden-controlled complex where they lived, they also socialised a great deal with her husband's sister.

June

June was seventy-four years old and had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview. June was accessed through her friend who is a member of the Pensioner's Convention. She lives alone in a terraced house in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for thirty-one years. She is in poor health and has limited mobility. She has home carers to help with her activities of daily living. She does not drive and is housebound unless someone takes her out.

June was born in the area, she lost her mother when she was just four years old and her father raised her. She left school at fourteen and worked in a shop until she married at the age of twenty-one. She and her husband had two children. Her husband, who was a miner, died of cancer. June and her husband were active in the Church, and enjoyed spending time with their local family and friends, they also baked and iced cakes together as a hobby.

Hannah

Hannah was sixty-eight years old and had been widowed for two months at the time of the first interview. Hannah was accessed via the Polish club, which she attends regularly. She lives alone in a large semi-detached house in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for fifty years. She is in good health. She does not drive.

Hannah moved to England from Poland after the Second World War and worked in the pottery industry. She married and had two sons. Her husband died at the age of forty-three, and she was left to bring up the children. Hannah had been with her second partner for twenty-one years. Before her partner died, Hannah and he enjoyed going to the Polish club together and going out for drives in the country.

Moira

Moira was sixty-eight years old and had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview. Moira was accessed via the University of the third age, where she is a member. She lives on her own in a large semi-detached house on the outskirts of a city, and has lived there for forty-two years. She is fairly active, although she has heart problems, arthritis and has recovered from cancer. She does not drive.

Moira was married for forty-four years to her husband, who was an accountant, and has four sons. She worked for an electronics company, and retired a year before her husband died. She cared for her husband up until he died of cancer. Moira and her husband enjoyed an active social life, going out with their many friends for meals and away on holidays abroad together.

Jane

Jane was seventy-four years old and had been widowed for one year and four months at the time of the first interview. Jane took part in the study after responding to an article asking for volunteers in the local newspaper. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for nineteen years. She is in fair health. She does not drive.

Jane was born in the area, and was one of six children. Jane helped her mother look after her younger siblings while her father was away during the Second World War. Although her brothers went to high school she and her sisters were not permitted to due to financial constraints. She left school at the age of fourteen and worked in a delicatessen and then as a painter in the pottery industry. She met her husband, who was a railwayman and just out of the RAF, at a dance and they were married at Christmas when she was twenty-two. She has two daughters. She cared for husband up until he died of cancer. Jane and her husband enjoyed socialising and were active members of the local British legion club where they had many friends.

Beverly

Beverly was sixty-four years old and had been widowed for almost three years at the time of the first interview. Beverly was accessed via her friend who is a member of the National women's register. She lives alone in a terraced house in

the city, and has lived there for twenty-six years. She is active and in good health. She does not drive.

Beverly was born in the North of England, where she attended primary and secondary school. She met her husband on her first job and said she 'married young', they moved to this area twenty-six years ago. She has two daughters. She cared for her husband for several years before he died as he had rheumatoid arthritis and angina. Beverly and her husband had a limited social life during the few years prior to his death, as he was largely housebound due to his ill health.

Cathy

Cathy was seventy years old and had been widowed for almost two and a half years at the time of the first interview. Cathy was accessed via the National women's register where she is a member. She lives alone in large detached house in the suburbs of a city. She is active and in good health. She is able to drive.

Cathy has lived in the area for forty years and retired ten years ago, she was a GP. She has a son, and an estranged daughter, who she hasn't seen for 'three or four years'. Her husband, who was a consultant, was in hospital for ten months before he died of Alzheimer's disease. She has always had her own friends and interests as well as socialising with her husband as a couple.

Alice

Alice was seventy-five years old and had been widowed for two and a half years at the time of the first interview. Alice took part in the study after responding to an article asking for volunteers in the local newspaper. She lives alone in a housing association bungalow in a semi-rural location, and has lived there for ten years. She has reduced mobility and arthritis in her back and neck. She does not drive.

Alice was born in the area, and has a brother and a sister. Her mother died in her forties and her father remarried. Her step mother was reluctant to care for her younger siblings and so Alice and her husband cared for them. She has two sons. She has not seen her eldest son for two years. Alice's husband was ill for ten years with a heart condition up until he died. Prior to her husband's death, he and Alice enjoyed going away on holiday, although latterly their social life was largely home-based due to her husband's illness.

Megan

Megan was seventy-nine years old and had been widowed for two years at the time of the first interview. Megan was accessed via the University of the third age where she is a member. She lives alone in a quiet courtyard bungalow in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for five years. She is active and in good health. She is able to drive.

Megan was a school secretary for twenty years, and was in the army before that. She was married for fifty-four years and has one son who is a social worker. She and her husband moved to the area from the South of England in 1999 to be nearer to her son when her husband became ill. She feels she has made friends and is settled in the area. She cared for her husband for many years, and he was in hospital for a number of months before he died of Alzheimer's disease. Megan and her husband had an active social life prior to his illness, and a 'large circle of friends' back home in the South of England and throughout the country dating from their time spent in the Armed Forces.

Minnie

Minnie was seventy-two years old and had been widowed for almost a year at the time of the first interview. Minnie took part in the study after responding to a

local newspaper article asking for volunteers. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in the city, and has lived there for forty-six and a half years. She is active and in good health. She does not drive.

Minnie met her husband when she was fifteen years old and they married when she was twenty-two, she says they had a 'wonderful happy marriage'. She has one son and two grandchildren who have recently moved out of the area. Minnie's husband died quite suddenly, although he had had a heart transplant thirteen years earlier. Minnie had a very good social life with her husband, he was an amateur cabaret singer, and they 'went everywhere together'. As well as socialising with friends, they went to keep fit classes three times a week.

Delores

Delores was eighty-one years old and had been widowed for almost two years at the time of the first interview. Delores took part in the study after responding to a local newspaper article asking for volunteers. She lives alone in a terraced house in the city, and has lived there for forty-five years. She is very active and in good health. She is able to drive.

Delores was born in the North of England, and moved to the area when she was twenty-three with her husband, they met when he was stationed in the army in the village where she lived. She was married for fifty-six years, and has three children. Her husband died following a short illness. Prior to his death Delores and he went out for a trip in the car nearly everyday. Delores said her husband did not like to do anything without her, and they had not been able to have a holiday for thirteen years due to his arthritis and decreasing mobility.

Patricia

Patricia was seventy-two years old and had been widowed for almost two years at the time of the first interview. Patricia took part in the study after responding to a local newspaper article asking for volunteers. She lives alone in a second floor flat in the suburbs of a city, and has lived there for eighteen years. She very active, and in fair health at present, although she experienced a stroke some years ago. She does not drive.

Patricia was born in a neighbouring county, and was the oldest of three children. She has a younger sister and brother. She met her husband at a dance when she was visiting her auntie, they married when she was twenty-four and moved to the area. She helped her mother run a bed and breakfast prior to getting married, and worked on and off in nursing once married. She has no children, but is very close to her niece. Her husband was ill for five years prior to his death. Before her husband died Patricia said they went everywhere together and had a good circle of friends. They enjoyed going away on holiday but their social life was curtailed once her husband's health deteriorated.

Flora

Flora was seventy-nine years old and had been widowed for one year at the time of the first interview. Flora was accessed via the Live at home scheme, where she is a member. She lives alone in a warden controlled flat in the city, and has lived there for one year. She is fairly active, despite having heart problems. She does not drive.

Flora was born in the area, and worked in a pot bank when she left school. She married her first husband when she was seventeen, she had one daughter with her first husband before they divorced. She was married to her second

husband for fifty-one years, they had two daughters. Flora's husband had cancer and died three weeks after she had a heart bypass, and so it was difficult for her to grieve. Prior to his death Flora said her husband was disabled and that she cared for him. She described a largely home-based social life with her husband, although they did go away on holiday.

Gloria

Gloria was seventy-seven years old and had been widowed for almost a year at the time of the first interview. Gloria was accessed via the Live at home scheme where she is a member. She lives alone in a warden-controlled bungalow in a city, and has lived there for three years. She is active, although she does have anaemia. She does not drive.

Gloria was born in the area, and is one of ten children. She left school at fourteen and met her husband when she was sixteen. She married her husband when she was twenty-one and had four children. Her husband died suddenly in 1980. Gloria had been with her second partner for twenty-three years. Prior to her partner's illness Gloria and he had an active social life, going to the pub, and dancing three times a week. They also enjoyed going on holiday. Once her partner became disabled he and Gloria started to go to the Live at home scheme at the local cricket club.

Julia

Julia was seventy-five years old and had been widowed for one year at the time of the first interview. Julia agreed to take part in the study after being approached by one of her friends who is a volunteer for Age Concern. She lives alone in a semi-detached housing association house in the city, and has lived

there for thirty years. She is fairly active, although she has a heart condition. She is able to drive.

Julia is a retired office worker and was married for fifty-two years. She said she and her husband were 'childhood sweethearts'. She lost a baby at birth and nearly died. She has one adopted daughter who now lives in Australia. Prior to her husband's death, Julia and he enjoyed going to cricket and football matches and were members of the local bowls and swimming teams.

Deirdre

Deirdre was seventy-two years old and had been widowed for two and a half years at the time of the first interview. Deirdre was accessed via the Live at home scheme. She lives alone in a semi-detached house in the city, and has lived there for sixteen years. She is active, although she recently fell and fractured her wrist. She is able to drive but no longer has a car.

Deirdre was born in the area, and was one of six children. She passed her eleven plus and received a scholarship to go on to high school, she opted out at the age of fourteen though as she felt she did not fit in with the wealthier girls at the school. She went on to work in a printers, and married her husband when she was twenty. They were married for almost fifty years and had four children. Her husband, who was a retired miner, was in and out of hospital for the last five years of his life. She and her husband did not have much of a social life during the few years before he died, due to his illness and dependence on oxygen.

Molly

Molly was seventy years old and had been widowed for eight months at the time of the first interview. Molly took part in the study after responding to an article in the local newspaper asking for volunteers. She lives alone in a semi-detached

housing association house in the city, and has lived there for forty-eight years. She is in fair physical health. She does not drive.

Molly had an unhappy childhood, her parents drank and she and her brothers and sister were brought up in children's homes. They were separated when they went into care and did not see each other again until Molly was eighteen. She worked all her life as a cleaner in offices from the age of fourteen. Molly met her husband when she was seventeen and they married when she was nineteen. They were happily married for fifty-two years and had two children. Her husband had emphysema, and she cared for him for the last twelve months of his life, supported by the hospice. Before she was widowed Molly and her husband sang together in a concert party and were active in the Catholic Church, they also enjoyed dancing.

Appendix 15: Personal community diagrams at stages one, two and three

Personal community diagrams at stages one, two and three

Family only

Case	Diagram stage one	stage two	stage three
Marilyn	6 – family	8 – adds 2 friends to outer circle	10 – adds 2 friends to outer circle
Hannah	8 - family	10 – adds 1 day centre manager and 1 neighbour to middle circle	10

Concentrated family

Case	Diagram stage one	stage two	stage three
Alice	11 – 9 family and 2 friends	12 – adds 1 cousin/friend to outer circle	12
Clarice	14 – 8 family and 6 friends	14 – adds 1 friend to middle circle, 1 friend died	14
Beatrice	17 – 8 family, 5 friends, 4 neighbours	18 – adds 2 friends to middle circle, 1 friend died	17 – no longer in touch with friend in outer circle
Julia	17 – 10 family, 5 Friends, 2 neighbours	20 – adds 3 friends to outer circle	N.A.
Mary	18 – 12 family, 4 friends 2 neighbours	19 – adds 1 sister in law to middle circle	19
Deirdre	25 – 18 family, 6 friends 1 neighbour	27 – adds 2 friends to outer circle	26 – no longer in touch with friend in outer circle
Amy	33 – 23 family, 10 friends	35 – adds 1 brother to middle circle and 1 friend to outer circle	37 – adds 2 great grandchildren to inner circle
Doreen	34 – 18 family, 14 friends, 1 neighbour, and 1 minister	34 – 1 friend died, adds 1 aunt to middle circle	37 – adds 3 neighbours to outer circle

Diluted family

Case	Diagram at stage one	stage two	stage three
June	15 – 9 family, 1 friend 2 ministers, 3 home carers	N.A	N.A
Jessie	16 – 9 family, 6 friends, 1 neighbour	19 – adds 3 friends to outer circle	16 – no longer in touch with 3 friends
Anna	18 – 10 family, 8 friends	20 – adds 1 niece and 1 friend to middle circle	N.A
Jane	23 – 15 family, 5 friends, 2 neighbours, 1 reverend	37 – adds 14 friends to middle circle	41 – adds 4 friends to middle circle
Molly	27 – 13 family, 2 priests, 10 friends, 2 neighbours	29 – adds 1 great grandchild and grand sons partner to inner circle	29 – sister died, adds 1 friend to middle circle
Moira	27 – 11 family, 9 friends, 2 preachers, 1 vicar, 4 neighbours	32 – adds 2 grand children to inner circle, 4 friends to middle circle, 1 vicar leaves outer circle	36 – adds 1 grand son to inner circle, adds 1 friend and 2 brothers in law to outer circle

Friend with family centrality

Case	Diagram at stage one	stage two	stage three
Flora	10 – 4 family, 6 friends	12 – adds 2 great Grandchildren to Middle circle	15 – adds 3 friends to outer circle
Cathy	15 – 4 family, 11 friends	15	N.A
Gloria	22 – 7 family, 15 friends	25 – adds 3 of deceased partners family to inner circle	25 – adds 1 ex son in law, 1 friend died middle circle
Delores	23 – 8 family, 10 friends, 3 neighbours, 1 reverend and reverend's wife	34 – adds 1 friend and 1 cousin to inner circle, 3 friends to middle circle, 1 neighbour and 5 friends to outer circle	35 – adds 2 friends to outer circle, 1 friend died

Friend with mixed centrality

Case	Diagram at stage one	stage two	stage three
Beverly	14 – 5 family, 7 friends, 2 neighbours	20 – adds 6 grandchildren to inner circle	21 – adds 1 great grandchild to inner circle
Patricia	34 – 6 family, 16 friends, 2 pastors, and their wives, 3 neighbours, 5 shopkeepers	45 – adds 2 cousins to inner circle, 6 friends to middle circle, 3 friends to outer circle	47 – adds 1 friend to inner circle, 2 friends to middle circle, 1 friend died
Minnie	13 – 6 family, 7 friends	15 – adds 2 friends to outer circle	N.A

Mixed with family centrality

Case	Diagram at stage one	stage two	stage three
Megan	21 – 7 family, 7 friends, 7 neighbours	21 – moves cousin, niece and god daughter from middle to inner circle	23 – adds 3 great nieces to middle circle, 1 neighbour left outer circle
Elsie	30 – 15 family, 15 friends	28 – 1 friend moved, 1 friend left church middle circle	28

Anomaly

Case	Diagram at stage one	stage two	stage three
Veronica	22 – 2 family, 8 friends, 7 neighbours, 1 doctor, 1 chaplain, 1 counsellor, 2 gardeners	31 – adds 9 friends to middle circle	46 – adds 15 friends to middle circle