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older adults' experience of family life
linked lives and independent living

a qualitative analysis of interviews with thirty-six older adults

DR MARY BREHENY AND DR CHRISTINE STEPHENS
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY, MASSEY UNIVERSITY, PALMERSTON NORTH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project investigated the ways that older adults in New Zealand experience family life and social relationships today. Thirty-six interviews were conducted with people aged 55–70 years living in various situations across New Zealand. The interviews were analysed qualitatively using a phenomenological approach, to contribute to understanding of the experience of family life and relationships for older people in the 21st century. Families were an important connection for most participants, and their importance was not always based on their experience of immediate support, but rather on a sense of permanent 'blood' connection. Although family ties were not always uncomplicated, many participants indicated that these ties endured even when contact was not maintained. Contact with close family members was important to many of the participants, and many maintained contact through international travel and telephone, text and email. Participants also maintained a strong sense of themselves as independent people. This independence was often related to the primacy of the nuclear family and their changing role in this family as they aged. One way that issues of independence were managed was through reciprocity. Participants linked their lives to those of others through acts that benefited both parties, allowing them to feel a sense of connection and to reject the position of dependency. These ways that older adults experience social connections have important implications. Older adults reflect strong social conventions of independence as well as firm ties to family and community. Policies need to acknowledge older adults' concerns about independence and their preference for reciprocating help. On a wider scale, social connections could be read as examples of interdependence, rather than via the dichotomy of independence and dependence. Some participants spoke of the privilege of caring for older parents and the appropriateness of their children caring for them as they age. This reflects a wider understanding of social connections and reciprocity across the life span, rather than the moment-by-moment forms of reciprocity.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Older Adults in New Zealand

Ageing is the critical demographic change now taking place in New Zealand. The post-war baby boomers start moving into the 65+ age group in 2011 and the median age of New Zealanders will move from 35 in 2004 to 46 in 2051. Those 65 and over will move from 12 percent of the population in 2004 to 26 percent in 2051 (Grant, 2006; Statistics New Zealand, 2004). Increased life spans will extend the shared lives within families, so that four generation families may soon be the norm for most New Zealand families (Petrie, 2006). Identifying the factors that enhance independence and wellbeing among older adults is often claimed in policy documents to be of vital importance to New Zealand (Ministry of Social Development, 2001).

1.2 What is the Family?

The families of older adults seldom conform to a nuclear family structure centred on adults and children sharing a household. McPherson (2000) provides a definition that is more in keeping with the family life of older adults, which is described as:

> characterised by a loose, informal set of kin relationships involving an interlocking set of nuclear families which may be geographically dispersed and economically independent but are bound by a sense of obligation based on affective relationships and the exchange of mutual aid services (pp.69–70).

This definition, and the notion of defining family generally, implies a stable and fixed concept of the family. However, the 'family' is dynamic, and the meaning of family depends upon the social context in which it is used (Gilbert & Powell, 2005). Families are not static; they are constantly changing in the context of environmental, economic, political, cultural and social changes (Rodman & Sidden, 1992; Stacy, 1993). Recent changes in family structure have been understood by some family scholars as indicating a decline in family life and family values (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Alternatively, these changes can be viewed as a reflection of the ability of the family to purposively adapt to social and economic changes (Grundy, 2005; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006).

Defining the family and understanding the meaning of family life needs to take into account both the speakers' personal history and their current social context. The family lives of older people are the culmination of a lifetime of experience (Connidis, 2001). Particular to older adults are their individual support structures, which will have changed markedly over their adult years. This has been conceptualised as a 'support convoy' and reflects the dynamic nature of support across the life span; as individuals age and move through life transitions, members of their support convoy can be added or lost. In interviews with older adults it is important to understand the history of the relationships in order to understand their current support arrangements.

1.3 Importance of Family

Family relationships are the most important relationships individuals have, as they contribute to health and wellbeing; and they are associated with the exchange of assistance (Shapiro, 2004). A recent study of social capital in New Zealand found that families remain the most important social connection for everybody (Stephens, 2006). A British study found that family events are mentioned most often as the most important events in people's lives (Scott, 1997). When older adults are asked to name those who are important to them, family members are most often identified, and children and spouses are central to maintaining social ties (Phillipson, Bernard, Phillips, & Ogg, 2001).

Families are a major source of social support and wellbeing across the life span, and lack of good family relationships at any age is associated with negative physical and psychological health consequences. Nearly two-thirds of those requiring care are cared for by a network of family members (Petrie, 2006). It is estimated that over 80 percent of the support received by older adults is provided by family members (Merrill, 1997), and the immediate family tends to dominate the social support networks of older adults (Petrie, 2006; Phillipson et al., 2001). Partners are an important source of family support. A New Zealand study found that older people in partnered households live longer, stay healthier and feel better than those without partners (Barrett, Twitchin, Kletchko, & Ryan, 2006). Furthermore, rather than relying on younger people, most older adults draw upon their own generational peers for support (Phillipson et al., 2001).

Research on caring for older adults has drawn attention to the difficulties of familial care-giving. However, there is much less attention to the role of family support when family members are still healthy (Fingerman, 2000). Many older adults report that family are available to provide emotional support, although practical support such as household chores is less often provided by children as they are often geographically distant and have work commitments (Phillipson et al., 2001). This focus on caring for aged parents also downplays the reciprocity of support between older adults and family members. Research suggests that many older adults provide childcare, financial assistance and emotional support to family members (Connidis, 2001; Petrie, 2006; Phillipson et al., 2001). Many older adults report acting as confidants to their children, being available for emotional support, advising them on decisions and providing financial support. Rather than being a burden, older adults provide more support to younger family members than they receive in return (Grundy, 2005). Increasing concern with individual responsibility in later life means that older adults avoid family responsibility for care and support, as they fear becoming a burden on family members as they age (Kemp & Denton, 2003).

1.4 Family Formation

There have been considerable shifts in family formation over the last few decades. Changing patterns of family structure have been well documented. However, the meaning and nature of family relationships in this context have received much less attention. Research on changing family structures has focused predominantly on the impact of family structure on the lives of children (Houseknecht & Sastry, 1996) and ignored the impact on older people. These changes may influence the ways that families provide and receive emotional, physical and financial support in older age. For example, an English study found that older adults are much less likely to live in multi-generational households, and much more likely to live alone or with a partner than they were 50 years ago (Phillipson et al., 2001). In addition, women's increasing entry into paid employment and increasing rates of divorce and remarriage may change the nature of family support to relatives as they age (Kemp & Denton, 2003).

A major change in family formation is the increase in step-families and blended families. An increasing number of those entering later life in the next 25 years in New Zealand will have experienced marital disruption and sole parenthood (Statistics New Zealand, 2004). Research has suggested that many adult children consider current and former step-parents as family (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006), and are understood to have family obligations towards older step-parents (Coleman, Ganong, Hans, & Sharp, 2005). However, the boundaries of family can be ambiguous and shifting (Stewart, 2005). Consequently, changes in family formation may have complex effects on the family life and support of older adults. Acceptance of diversity in family life is often discussed; however, idealised family structures around married couples, children and grandchildren are often portrayed. Although these structures reflect family life for many, they also make invisible alternative family structures that contribute to health and support in older age. Cowan (1993) argues that "we need to listen to family members themselves, and to discover how different kinds of families fulfil different familial functions" (p. 552).

1.5 Summary

There is evidence that, despite changes in family formation, family remains an important structure in adults' lives (Stephens, 2006), and that changes in family formation may be positively related to community life rather than evidence of family decline (Hughes & Stone, 2006). The literature on the family and community lives of older adults establishes that these relationships are of enduring importance as people age. What we wish to establish is the ways in which these relationships are important. Analysis of the experience of 'being family' and 'doing family' is a recognised gap in the literature on family life (Daly, 2003). Rather than providing the definition of family life, the purpose of this research study is to explore how, why and when participants define particular aspects of their lives 'family life' (Scott, 1997). The results of this study will contribute to understanding of the function and importance of family relationships for older people in this century in New Zealand. These understandings are an important prerequisite of framing social policy that will contribute to a positive identity for older adults.

This study focuses on the importance of families and family support on the social identity and wellbeing of ageing people. It will examine the role of the family in the lives of older adults, and whether it reflects the well documented changes in family formation patterns. To address these questions, an in-depth qualitative enquiry will investigate important social connections for older adults, and the role of the family in their lives.

2. METHOD

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways that older adults in New Zealand experience family life and social relationships. This study explored how participants understand particular aspects of their lives as family life, and how they experience being a member of a family in older age. To address this, the research examined important social connections for older adults, the nature of family life and family change over time. A phenomenological approach was used to foreground the experience of family life for older adults.

2.1 Participants

Thirty-six older adults were interviewed about their family situations and their personal understanding of the role of family life and support for older adults. The participants were part of a longitudinal study of older adults, "Health, Work and Retirement (HWR)" (http://hwr.massey.ac.nz), and had volunteered to be interviewed as part of this study. They were selected from a large pool of potential participants (941 participants from the postal HWR survey volunteered to be interviewed) on the basis of the information provided in the HWR survey. Ten interviews were conducted in the Manawatu region, two in Nelson and nine in Northland by one research assistant. A second research assistant completed 15 interviews in the urban Auckland area. These geographical areas were selected to provide examples of large and small urban and rural settings. Participants were chosen to include both those who had contact with family and friends and those who did not. Of the 36 participants, 23 reported having contact with both family and friends, seven reported contact only with family, four reported only contact with friends and two participants responded that they had no contact with either. Twenty-two participants were legally married or partnered, five had never been married and nine were separated, divorced or widowed. Sixteen participants were men and 20 were women. Twenty-nine participants reported only New Zealand European ethnicity, two reported only Māori ethnicity, one reported both New Zealand European and Māori ethnicity and three an 'other' ethnicity. Accordingly, this sample is broadly representative of the ethnicity of older New Zealanders (Statistics New Zealand, 2004). This demographic information was based on participants' responses to the postal questionnaire.

The participants were aged 55–70 years and were evenly spread across these ages. Although there is no definitive consensus on age groupings, this age range is often classified as the 'young old' (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005). It was chosen for this study as it includes some still within the usual working age range for older adults, some who are currently retiring and some who have been retired for a number of years. This group includes those making the transition into the older age (aged 50–60 years) as well as those classified as of older age (Callister, 2005). Most of the participants continue to have good health and live in their own homes without the need for regular care or support. This age group is important to interview, as they can reflect upon their own family lives in the context of relatively good health and current ability to manage. Many have previously nursed ailing parents or themselves have elderly parents requiring care. These experiences contribute to their understanding of family life, as they reflect on their positions in the family now and anticipate changes in the family as they age. Most of the participants have adult children or adult nieces and nephews, and many have grandchildren. Some also have adult grandchildren and young great-grandchildren. Some have elderly parents or parents-in-law; others are the oldest generation in their family. It is important to acknowledge the difference in individual circumstances as well as the systematic differences across the age groups included.

2.2 Data Collection

Letters providing information about the study and inviting participation were sent to people in each pre-selected area who had indicated an interest in participating in an interview on their HWR survey. Approximately twice as many information letters were sent as interviews required. Subsequently, those contacted were telephoned to request their participation and arrange an interview. The majority of those contacted agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted at a place agreed upon with the participant (usually their home) and were audio-taped. Most of the interviews were 40–120 minutes duration.

At the interview, the participants were provided with an additional copy of the information sheet, given the opportunity to ask questions and asked for their formal agreement to participate. The interviews were semi-structured, and questions were developed around three

main topics. The first topic explored important social connections, and asked participants to discuss people who were important in their lives and the ways in which these people were important. The second set of questions was about family connections and included questions such as: Who do you think of as your family? Who considers you part of their family? The third set of questions discussed the ways families had changed over the years, and understandings of the causes of these changes (see Appendix A). The recorded interviews were transcribed and a copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for checking and release before analysis. Ethical approval for this project was gained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

2.3 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using a phenomenological approach to the data. Phenomenology endeavours to describe how the world is constituted and experienced. Experience is revealed through a person's reflection on their lived situation and through participation in the world (Ashworth, 2003). Meaning develops out of relationships in a social context. We live in an 'interpreted' world and are ourselves interpreters of experiences (Hein & Austin, 2001). Phenomenological research seeks to understand human experiences by attempting to capture the way the phenomenon is experienced by the individual in the particular social context (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This experience needs to be studied from the individual's perspective, so the phenomenologist researcher is interested not only in the psychological meaning of the phenomenon, but also what it was like for the individual to live through and experience it (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). In this analysis phenomenology involves understanding the role of the family and support from the perspective of the experience of the participants. Rather than viewing this as an essentially private experience, it is located within a particular physical and social environment. In this way, older adults' experience of 'being family' and 'doing family' are understood as both personal and public accounts, which reflect changes in the wider social context. Changes in family structures may highlight the ways that families are part of the participants' daily lives. This directs attention to the norms and functions of family life and how families may change to maintain or resist important social roles.

Phenomenological analysis necessarily reflects the experiences of participants, and the analysis provided takes account only of the ethnicity, socio-economic status and cultural experiences of these participants. These aspects may influence family life, and a different group of participants might provide accounts that differed systematically according to these categories. In addition, the phenomenological approach foregrounds individual experience, and as such may provide a limited account of wider social influences on family life. Family life is constrained by the prevailing social and political context, which may be absent in a focus on participants' individual experience. This limitation can be addressed by situating the participants' experience within a wider social context.

Each transcript was read and re-read to gain an understanding of the content and the complexity of the language used, and to note initial observations about the data. These initial comments included questions, summary statements and language use. They were grouped by themes that captured the essence of the text. The themes that emerged were organised into related clusters or natural groupings according to shared meanings. To report the results of this analysis, the themes were outlined, explained and accompanied by some quotations from the participants to illustrate the interpretation of the data. A distinction was made between the participants' comments and our interpretation of them (Willig, 2001). Names, occupations and place names were altered in quotations to maintain the participants' anonymity. Participants were also allocated pseudonyms to identify the speakers. Ellipsis indicates a gap in the quotation to improve readability. Square brackets have been used to provide additional detail to clarify extracts.

3. RESULTS

Two major groups of themes emerged from the analysis, which we have labelled 'linked lives' and 'independent living'. Linked lives includes several themes relating to the fundamental importance of the different relationships shaped by family structure. These themes are the importance of family, understandings of who counts as a family member, the enduring links of family relationships and relationships with spouses, partners, children and grandchildren, and siblings. The second group of themes, independent living, included independent individuals, independent nuclear families and encouraging independence in children. The implicit contradiction between linked lives and independent living was played out in examples of people caring for elders and a desire on the part of the elders to avoid becoming demanding parents. Participants used the social resource of reciprocity to manage this apparent contradiction. These results are structured according to these two groups of themes, followed by discussion of reciprocity.

3.1 Linked Lives

During the interviews participants described their relationships with spouses, parents, children and grandchildren, friends and neighbours. They discussed important contacts in church and community groups, and the ways they contributed to their social networks and improved their wellbeing. Family relationships were particularly important, and represented enduring connections between lives, even when there was little or no current contact. Friendships were also important, and many participants reported friendships that had been sustained since childhood and continued to provide support and company. In the extract below, Matthew illustrates the importance of linking lives with others, and shows how meaning is not made by experiencing life individually, but by sharing your life with other people.

> Matthew: If you're on your own completely then I think they're lacking, they're lacking in perspective, you've got someone else and you've got a different perspective on the same things you're looking at so you understand it far more yourself. I can remember sitting in the van up north, I don't know if you've been right up north but it's a rather special place. And I can remember watching the sun set. I was sitting there with a fishing rod and life just seemed empty on my own because you see something that is so beautiful and yet unless you can share it with someone it doesn't mean as much.

The importance of shared experience emerged in relation to being with others for both the special and beautiful times as Matthew describes above, and the difficult and painful times. Steven describes the fundamental importance of knowing that others are there to console and comfort you after a loss.

> Steven: Yes, we don't always have the answers but when I lost my Dad I could see that people would come to the door to console us and they were stammering, they didn't know what to say but they showed up and that said it all, and you don't have to be a rocket scientist to stick with people that are in trouble and to help them.

3.1.1 Importance of family

Most participants responded to general questions about important social connections by discussing their families. Many people understand family as a vital part of their lives, essential to their happiness and future plans.

> Steven: Well I try and imagine what it's like. Growing old was a big crisis for me and I try and imagine what it might be like without a family. It would be horrible I think.
>
> Barbara: There are priorities that would leap to mind I think. They are priorities, I think of them when I make a lot of decisions about what I want to be, where I want to be, who I want to be with.
>
> Betty: Yes because they are my family, we have our disagreements. I don't agree with a lot of the things that they say and do but they are part of me, they are part of our life and I love them unconditionally, regardless, and I can't help it.

This discussion of family has a strong theme of inevitability. The importance of family is taken for granted and the connection with family is not optional. Here Andrew and David explain that, though you may have more contact with friends and they may be very important, the closeness of family is something different and more fundamental.

> Andrew: I've got friends that I see often that in some respects are like family. But I would never say they are as close as my sister and myself. In

that respect, I mean it's a funny thing. You sort of think about it sometimes. Family, you can be distant, but at first thought you think well that's my family, that's the closest people to me. Because that's what you're supposed to say I suppose. … you take for granted that families are close. I always find it almost incomprehensible when you get families that hate each other. To me that's incomprehensible you know, how can it be?

David: Like I have my group of guys that we go golfing together and we meet at the club on a Wednesday night and have a few beers together and Sue has her bowling mates and a few of her girlfriends around the area … but they are not anywhere in the same intimate involvement as what our close family would be.

Peter: We've started in the family going through deaths and things like that and suddenly you realise the closeness and it becomes really valuable and I think for me anyway when I'm living in Auckland and I watch the disregard people have for each other, there is very little evidence of people who have any respect for each other and you go into a family environment where there is the respect and there is the regard, you go 'this is valuable'.

Peter demonstrates the importance of family in linking people's lives through unconditional regard. The emphasis is on the value of people who will always have a place for you.

3.1.2 Who are family?

Participants differed in who they included in their families. The participants lived in various situations, including living with spouses and partners, living with parents, children and grandchildren and living alone. Some reported contact with family or friends or both, some with neither. In spite of this variation in circumstances, the participants responded readily to questions regarding who they considered to be family. Their recitations of family typically started with children and grandchildren if they had these connections, and they were understood to be their central family.

Karen: Well I've got three children, two girls and a boy, … and I've got one granddaughter who is six and I've got a grandson who is 11.

Betty: My family is, well my husband is there, my four children and grandchildren and their extended families. My second son is married, his wife is a little bit older than him and she has got children and grandchildren and they've been brought into the family group as well and guess my other daughter, eldest daughter's partner because they are not married but they've been together for years, and I mean they come in on the verge of the family when there's gatherings and that and we get on extremely well with them. And my two little friends, I've included them in my little family group.

Oliver: Um, well my brother and his wife and their two sons whom we see very very rarely, but are family members and we always have a good time when we meet.

Peter: So the other brother's wife also died last year. It was not a nice year last year and I had grown very very close to her. We were very fond of each other and the beauty of that which is relevant to your survey is that she has a family of four and they have made an offer to me which doesn't have its borders on it yet but they want to be able to assist me financially to go and buy a property. Because they have lost both their parents now they feel very close to me and it's wonderful, because I don't have any children of my own.

For others, family included people who were linked by blood but whom they had never met or with whom they had extremely limited contact.

Andrew: I've got my uncle, my mother's younger brother, his wife and his two boys and a girl. So I know all them, don't see them that often but I know them yes … . My sister, brother, their kids, my uncle, his kids, they've got kids who I don't know, I've met but that's all. I've got three cousins there. I've got family, my father's, I've got a cousin who I've met a few times. He's got two sisters who I've only met once, since I was about 10 years old, about five years ago and I can't remember their names. … I suppose that's what you would think, when you think of family.

This extract shows how family is also experienced through awareness of kinship connections rather

than solely through personal contact with the people listed. Andrew describes family relationships as including people he knows, but equally some he has only met a few times and others whose names he cannot recall. Thus, family here is not about regular support or personal commitment to the people listed, but about a way of making connections that extend from his own parents and siblings. These people matter because they can be traced back to close family members who have shared the speaker's life. They can also be linked back to his childhood and thus provide a link to the past.

Other participants included people whose lives had been linked with theirs by marriage, and by relationships through their children or other wider family members.

> Barbara: My three children, my partner, I would say my brother, his family and my partner's son and his wife and their children definitely, definitely family. My partner has got another son that I've never met; he would be family if I ever met him. … There is also my, well she would have been my step-daughter, it was a child that sort of turned up out of the blue that was my husband's, my ex's child. She is actually I think divorced now and she has got three or four children all sort of late teenagers, she's family. … So she was family definitely because I made sure that the children knew about her and that they contacted her and that they knew they had a half sister and very definitely family. To emphasise to them that they know that it's not just somebody that happened in and out of your father's life years ago, that is definitely family. … And my partner's family, we're having Christmas with them, it's definitely family and I suppose in a way my partner's son's wife's mother, she's family too because she will be there at Christmas and she's Susie's mum, we've got to know her really well and I like her, we get on well. Even though we don't see each other it's kind of like we're still family, there is still a good connection there and she's their grandma properly whereas I'm not so she has a definite place in that family.

This quote shows the way the participants listed the mechanics of these relationships as justifying the importance of the connection: your partner's son's wife's mother has a claim to family membership through these connections. Although the speaker adds that she likes this woman, the connection is not about liking but about the extensive links that can be made from your own close connections outwards to include additional people. The connection with the step-daughter is also about the blood connection with the children, and this is repeatedly described as "very definitely family". This person is an important link in the children's lives through the link with their father.

The following extract also shows that shared aspects of our lives with people in the past may also qualify them as family members. Ruth explains that her late mother's partner is still important to her because of the long time he lived with her mother. Similarly she considers her ex-husband family, and explains this through the connection with the children they share and the friendship they have been able to maintain. The family connection is also illustrated by the help they would be prepared to provide for each other.

> Ruth: Then one other person I would consider family who actually isn't family but it's an elderly man who lived with my Mum for a long time, about 17 years. He has actually been another important person in my life. … Another person I kind of consider family and he probably considers me family as well is my husband who is the father of my older children and we've always been really good friends and you know, once again the family thing there would come through as if either of us needed help the other would provide it. You know it's still that type, really really important, so he would probably consider me kind of family.
>
> Susan: My mother-in-law used to say the two of you divorced each other but we haven't divorced you.

Susan also illustrates continuing support from family members connected by marriage after the marriage has ended.

In these ways the participants included a wide range of people and relationships within their definition of family. Sometimes these relationships are qualified, for example by describing the person concerned as someone "who actually isn't family", or is on the "verge of the family" or "their grandma properly" to indicate that a distinction is being made. These qualifiers indicate graduations of family memberships and indicate that participants experience these relationships differently from the 'real' family connection of both shared genetics and shared history, which is required of 'genuine' family members. They clearly include a range of connections and relationships, and degrees of connection and relationship, within the notion of family.

Family serve to maintain people's links with the people who are important to them over the generations. Including wider family members recalls links to the past and establishes links to the future. Karen explains how she maintains contact with cousins and aunts as a way to manage links with her past and set up a system of links for her children in the future. She anticipates her children continuing this communication after her death.

> Karen: I think cousins, because at home I've only really got my brother and two of my mum's sisters are still alive so I only hear from them once a year. I always make sure I send them a newsletter because they're well in their 80s now so what I've done is tried to contact a lot of the cousins which is really good because I think once we go our kids should really, you've got to keep up that communication you know.

> Mary: I knew nothing about my other family but anyhow I have since received some photos of my Mum and Dad's wedding and they were very nice. I was thrilled to get them actually and I have since handed them over to my son along with a lot of other photographs, the few that I do have of my family because he is doing a wall in his house …of all his bits and pieces of family and also the lady that is living with him of her family and all her sons and daughters and all their families as well.

Mary, too, demonstrates connections to the past and into the future are being made through her son's construction of a wall of photos. The photos are being used to link the lives of these families physically in one place. Members of these families are brought together on this wall across wide spans of time. Recently acquired photographs of Mary's parents' wedding are included, even though Mary had no knowledge of her father until after her mother's death.

Peter looks forward to the possibility of living to see the next generation of nieces and nephews born in his large extended family. This provides an important family link far into the future for Peter, which he experiences as particularly special as he has no children of his own.

> Peter: So yes I had nieces and nephews who are only 10 years younger than I am and I have ended up in the family being a great-great-uncle because of the oldest children having children and that's the stage they're at at the moment. If I live a bit longer I could possibly become a great-great-great uncle.

Family connections are not just about structural relationships over the generations. Family is also lived through special shared moments. Sandra shares a memorable shopping trip with her mother-in-law many years ago, which helps her to convey the special relationship they shared and the importance of this colourful woman in the early years of her marriage.

> Sandra: I loved my mother-in-law, she was just fabulous. She and I were like mates. I had some hilarious moments. She was a tailoress so she used to make lots of clothes and I can remember going to Smith and Caughey's with her and she used to do amateur dramatics when she was younger and so she could put on the posh accent and she always dressed beautifully because she used to make a lot of her own clothes or she would remodel clothes that she's bought. This particular time she was going to a wedding and she needed to buy something. We went to Smith and Caughey's and I can remember vividly sitting on the floor of the change room in hysterics. She was telling this woman what a dreadful dress this was

> and how could she possibly sell something that was so bad. She managed to get a 20 percent discount because the woman was so embarrassed because this woman with this very loud voice was saying 'Oh and look at the state of this thing, it is so badly made'. She then took it home and took it apart and remodelled it and turned it into something else. She turned it into something totally different which was really gorgeous and went off to the wedding looking absolutely a million dollars.

Story-telling such as this shows a moment of connection that has linked lives together through memories. Families connect in many ways, through distinct shared moments, through links to the past, through linking family relationships to other families in a network of complex connections and through anticipation of a shared future.

3.1.3 Family ties are never broken

One of the unique characteristics of family is that the ties of family can never be broken. Family ties are about much more than just contact or shared experience. They provide a connection between people even when contact is lost. Many of those interviewed reported relationships with family members that were strained, or where no contact was maintained. This did not influence whether these people were considered family, because it was understood that family ties could never be broken, as Ruth says below:

> Ruth: I also consider my brothers family but it's kind of an estranged situation and I'm fine with that but having said that there are still family ties there that are never never broken no matter what.

> Harry: I've got two sisters and three brothers and we only communicate with one of them. [INT: Do you think of them as family?] Well you've got to haven't you?

> Betty: One sister I don't have nothing to do with. And I've got a brother, which occasionally he might ring and occasionally he might come down sort of thing. We don't have a lot to do with. [INT: Do you think of them as part of your family?] Yeah I still do. … Yes, you can't cut off blood can you?

Both Harry and Betty indicate that these relationships are not a matter of choice, but a matter of obligation. Harry says "you've got to" think of these people as family; and Betty explains that "you can't cut off blood". This is not to suggest that you must keep contact with these people; the contact is optional but the family connection is obligatory.

Similarly, Michael and Chris describe an estrangement from their children, but this does not change the fact that they are considered family.

> Michael: I suppose basically my family is my Mum and the two kids although they obviously don't want to know anything about me.

> Chris: Yes, well I have two sons from a previous marriage. I don't have any contact with them. … Before they went to university I lost contact. It's one of those things that happen in lots of families. You can't always pin it down.

For Margaret, the primary importance of blood connection was given weight through the willing of money to family members rather than friends.

> Margaret: In some ways blood's thicker than water, does that sound stupid? … I mean, well one thing I'm quite clear in my will I'm going to leave my money to my nieces and nephews because even though I don't have as much to do with them as a lot of my friends. I mean, blood's thicker than water.

For Anna, the permanence of a family connection means that although she may not be currently interacting with family members, she has no doubt that this will be rectified eventually.

> Anna: Yes I sort of feel as though some days I'm sort of like out on this limb on this family tree but no doubt at the end we'll all come together somewhere.

For Anna and for many of our participants, the permanence of family ties always allows the possibility of re-connecting at some later date. Unlike other relationships, family relationships can never be severed conclusively.

3.1.4 Like family

Lives are linked not only through family. People also expressed a broader sense of lives lived together, which provides continuity. One way of expressing the importance of these relationships is to describe them as 'like family'. The following extract from Neville shows how the naming of someone as 'Uncle' accords them the status and importance of family membership.

> INT: Would these people think of you as their family as well?
>
> Neville: Oh yes. Actually it's quite funny because my niece that I was talking about, she and her husband have got a bach and it's been in his family for generations and they come up to that and they've got their set of friends, these set of friends are persistent in calling me Uncle Neville.

Quite often these 'almost family' relationships begin with connections to family, and through shared experience family membership is attributed to the person. Gillian describes how connections with parents and neighbours and the sharing of lives linked together in these ways elevates these relationships to that of extended family.

> Gillian: We've got, all families I think have, what do you call it, people who become almost family because they have been known all your life as coming in and out to the family to see the family so it's my Mum and Dad's friends, or neighbours or whatever, who I have seen all my life because they have become my Mum and Dad's friends … and they are no relation but they just are friends yeah who you see at all the 'dos', the family outings, the family gatherings, they are always invited and become extended family sort of.
>
> Betty: And my two little friends, I've included them in my little family group. … I'm including them because as I say we got very close over the last few years so I include them and when have something I always invite them. They are just there.

Betty also mentions friends whose lives have been linked together by the sharing of important milestones. They provide a sense of connection to the past and a sharing of the public celebration of important life stages. By sharing these special family celebrations they become entwined with family and are experienced as part of the extended family. The importance of these people in participants' lives is expressed by granting them the status of family members. This reflects the central place that family holds in determining the importance of social connections.

One of the ways participants expressed the importance of friendships was to compare these relationships with family relationships. Margaret and Kathleen, for example, draw upon the notion of family and use the title of mother to explain their experience of connection and friendship with older women.

> Margaret: I've got a, I call her my honorary mother, but she's just been wonderful to me, she's in her mid-80s and her place is a home away from home for me. I lost my mother 18 months ago and she's been a real support person.
>
> Kathleen: There is another lady there who is older who I could talk to as sort of a substitute Mum in a way. My mother died when I was young so that made quite an impact and it's been nice to find motherly people.

Margaret and Kathleen use the strength of relationship associated with the idea of "mother", and the idea of a "home away from home", to explain the importance of these women in their lives. The significance of the relationship cannot be expressed in terms of friendship alone, and requires reference to the tie of family to fully express the way Margaret and Kathleen experience these relationships. Similarly, Susan compares the relationship she has with a close friend with a sense of sisterhood, which she does not experience with her own sister.

> Susan: I mean I have a sister, one that I don't get on with, for various reasons but [my friend] she's the sister I would like to have had.

Important church and community groups and work colleagues were also experienced as resembling a family in providing emotional support and shared celebrations. Judith and Kathleen describe their

church community as a church family because it gives them comparable emotional support; while Mark describes community groups as providing the kind of fellowship and connection that he experienced in his early life through family and the marae.

> Judith: Getting emotional support for myself has always been through my women friends basically. At the moment I have a church family and they are a big support in my life.
>
> Kathleen: I was at church yesterday and I thought they are my family, they are a different family but they are my family and like any family there is some you like and some you don't and some that are more special to you but it is very important.
>
> Mark: Yes it is. For me the requirement for family is still the same. It's still the same as it was when I was a kid and how it is today but we compensate for personal family with other people and other things. That's why I joined Rotary, that's why I joined the gym, that's why I joined the golf club. It's because of that fellowship. Those sorts of things are replacing what I grew up with and what I had close to the marae. I had cousins over here, now it's the golf club or it's the Rotary club.
>
> Sandra: Oh they [work colleagues] are part of the family. They know what goes on. We talk about things. If I have a problem I talk to them. They talk to me. It's life, it's there. … We celebrate birthdays together and things like that. We all tend to work Christmas so we tend to have a good Christmas at work together. Quite often up until last year we've worked New Year's Eve together as well. We've shared in the joys and the sorrows.

Sandra describes her work colleagues in ways that are strongly reminiscent of the functions of family. They have knowledge of each other's families and share in problems and celebrations. They share special occasions and celebrations, and have provided support in difficult times.

3.1.5 Spouses and partners

Although there were variations as to who were included as family and the extent of these networks, some relationships were commonly experienced as having primary importance. They were those with partners and spouses, children and siblings, grandparents and grandchildren. These core groupings can be seen as firmly based on the socially constructed nuclear family, which includes generations of parents and children, with its specific set of interrelationships. These groupings also accommodate variations and shifts over time in the basic nuclear family structure.

Most of those who had a spouse or partner indicated that the relationship with this person was the most important connection in their lives. Many participants, however, found it difficult to articulate the vital importance of the relationship, as Neville's hesitancy illustrates. The importance was nevertheless taken for granted and essential.

> Neville: There is my wife … I guess she's my best friend for a start. I'm not very good at thinking of all this.

Harry, too, takes the importance of his wife for granted. Harry does not mention his wife among the important people in his life without prompting by the interviewer. When asked specifically, however, he responds that she is actually the most important person in his life.

> INT: And what about, do you have a partner?
>
> Harry: Yes, a wife.
>
> INT: So would she be one of the ones up there?
>
> Harry: Well definitely, she's actually at the top isn't she?

Steven and Deirdre's relationship was based upon companionship and support during difficult times. For both these participants the importance of their spouse was not about doing or saying anything in particular, but about strength and support when they were needed most.

> Steven: And we've always been close, we do most things together. She doesn't help me fix the car but most other things we do together and I've been through some pretty bad times at times and she's very helpful to me. Sometimes by just saying nothing, you know.
>
> Deirdre: I think for me, my husband certainly has been my rock for a long time and certainly is the most important part of my life.

Matthew: She's someone that can share my thoughts, my feelings that I have every day really and it's a new dimension on life, having someone that you can share things with.

David: In terms of being able to fulfil the plans that we both set 30–40 years ago I can't imagine me doing the things that I want to do without her and I see a lot of our friends of a similar age group who are single people, either their marriage has split up or one of them has died and things like that and they don't seem to be as contented with life as what our lifestyle seems to be so from that point of view she's immensely important for me. I love having somebody around, I love and appreciate all the things that she does to make the life that I have what it is.

For Matthew, the importance of his partner was in having someone to share his life and provide an alternative perspective; while for David, his spouse represented the shared achievement of lifelong plans.

3.1.6 Siblings

Sibling relationships were very important to most participants. They had been important in childhood and remained important in their adult lives. Mark described a close relationship in the past and currently with his large family of siblings in spite of limited recent contact. He regretted the lack of contact and as he aged he wished to establish more contact with his siblings.

Mark: But growing up was good. I can't imagine ever being in another situation. We never seemed to have enough money. We seemed to have enough food, maybe it wasn't the best of food but it was good. There was always company, people to play with, people to fight with. Cousins around, I lived near the marae and so I had cousins, I had heaps of people to play rugby with. My sisters played basketball with the marae kids. It was quite good. … Still close. As brothers and sisters we played a lot, we fought a lot, we argued, we laughed, we sang together, all those normal things. … Oh we just went our separate ways. We had our own families and our families took the majority of our focus as far as family responsibility was concerned. We lived at different provinces and different cities and even different countries. It was just one of those things you know. I'd like to get around to seeing my brothers and sisters but it doesn't happen unless you specifically planned for it.

Similarly, Sarah emphasised the importance of family leisure time with her sisters and parents.

Sarah: We had a ball when we were kids. Mum and Dad were always taking us out on picnics and for drives and at Christmas time we used to hire different baches all around the place and we used to go to different places camping and you can imagine with five girls, … no we had a ball.

The importance of a shared childhood and a shared sense of place with siblings are illustrated by Peter, who describes the family get together that allowed him to reconnect with his scattered siblings. The family reunion reconnected the siblings to the place they all grew up, and to their shared youth in a rural community.

Peter: Just to have the reunion. So we all got together on a whole day, we visited the old farmstead which is now an absolute shambles. …We went to old swimming holes at the river and we had a big barbecue and nobody wanted to go home at the end of the night which was lovely, it was really really super.

Siblings draw upon the history of shared lives, both good and bad, to sustain them as they age. As Charles explains here, the difficulties that he and his sister have shared in the past provide a bond for a future, where they will stick together to support each other.

INT: Do you think you could count on her [your sister] for support if you needed any help?

Charles: Oh yeah well we stick together pretty much. We've had to because of the mutual support, with the old man and the problems that we've had, we do stick together.

Many participants explained how the importance of a close relationship with their siblings had developed as they aged. Oliver here describes a common

experience among participants, in which the death of parents makes the sibling relationship more valuable and central.

> Oliver: Since our parents died we've actually come closer together and that's been a very important development in actual fact for us as a family in the sense there has been that whole business of separation where we've found our own lives in terms of work and family but as I say since Mum and Dad died we've actually found this coming together and the need to sort of bond together a bit more. So that's been a very significant change.

For these participants, the primary family relationship was with parents until their death. Often following the death of parents the focus of the primary nuclear family shifts to the relationships with siblings. Some saw the parent as the lynch-pin of the primary nuclear unit. Without their influence the original nuclear group often drifts apart, as described by Penny and Mark below.

> Penny: But it was never the same. I think with your mother, she holds the family together. She holds all your brothers and sisters together. …The families just go off and do their own little thing.

> Mark: When Mum went it kind of, there wasn't a reason for us going home after Mum died. It was only Mum that brought us together. I guess it allowed the family to fragment. My oldest sister, my favourite sister, she tried to keep some of the family members together but the sister, my second favourite sister, she's trying to do the same.

> Grace: I want to keep them together because I think it's really important that you have a family that's established. There's someone to come back to you know and I'm it now because my parents and my husband's parents have died.

As the nuclear family ages and parents die, the children also move toward establishing the next unit, or 'cell', as described by John below. As the children become parents, new primary units become the focus of the nuclear family relationships.

> John: So they both worked out the way they should be and we figured out they [the children] should be two years apart and everything went that well, and so that was, they were the happiest years of my life, I think, because we had this nice little family cell and we used to go away up to the bach at holidays and Christmas.

3.1.7 Children

Children are of enormous importance in the lives of those older adults who have them. In the extract below, Ruth shares the overwhelming love she felt for her children from the time they were born, which has continued throughout their lives.

> Ruth: When my children were born, especially when my first one was born and then repeated for the other two, I was overwhelmed, I was absolutely overwhelmed with love. I'd never felt that to that extent and in that way ever before and didn't know that you could feel so strongly about people so I can't necessarily tell you how important my children are except that I still have that overwhelming love for them and that is the thing that makes them important to me, they delight me, I love them, they bring fun to my life, I'm proud of them, everything about all of my children is a positive in how I feel in my own life and yeah, having said that, I am happy when they fly the nest as well because I don't need to have them on my back doorstep in order to be happy and to love them.

Although the love and unconditional positive regard Ruth feels for her children has not wavered, the relationship with them has changed over time. Most of the children of our participants were adults themselves. As such, they hold a different place in their lives from that of younger children. Ruth was one of the few participants who had a younger child still dependent on her, and she articulated this difference.

> Ruth: Well the most important person to me is my son, my youngest son. Important to me because he is dependent on me and just a big part of my life. We've been together just the two of us for more than 10 years now and yes that's it really. … Probably the dependency thing makes him the most important, because I

have two other children as well who are equally important in emotional terms but not obviously dependent on me.

The changing relationship with children as they and their children age is very important to older adults. Many participants indicated that there had been difficulties in relationships with children, but that they had been resolved as they grew older.

> Grace: I think we have stuck together a lot as a family. … My children, while they were monsters in some ways, they've turned out to be wonderful adults, strong adults who are contributing to society and whatever so I say to myself well although it all seemed at some stages that it was an absolute disaster it hasn't turned out to be.

Dependency is often replaced by friendship, as many participants indicated when describing the emotional aspects of their relationship with their children.

> Sandra: I love my kids to bits. My son and I are great friends. My daughter and I, we're not quite such great friends but we are friends. We see each other as friends rather than they see me as Mum so much.

Conversely, children also provided emotional and practical support to their parents.

> Ruth: I would say we are very close. Sometimes it feels more like they're the parents than me. I get told off for all sorts of things, I get told off for smoking, I get told off if I have a relationship with a younger man. Naughty. My children are so totally there for me in all sorts of ways, fantastic, that is a really good relationship.

> Mary: I mean the next person after that would be my eldest son and he would be the one that I would call on if anything ever happened to my husband and he knows that that would happen and he's there for me.

> Neville: They were great when my parents were on their last legs. Dad died first and I used to have to spend a lot of time down at their house. They were living in the same town but I was sort of coming home from work, scoffing tea and going down to spend the night to do a night shift to ease the load on Mum a bit and then a similar thing happened when Mum was dying and they both died at home but that puts a strain on the kids and they were great, they really were. Far more support than my brother and sister I might add.

For many of the participants, the special relationship they had with their children was also extended to their sons and daughters-in-law. Penny describes her son-in-law warmly, and explains that he has become part of her family.

> Penny: He's great. He's a quiet man, he's very nice. [INT: Fits in with the family?] Yeah. He fits in anywhere. He's really good. He's a great guy. …He's very caring. He's a real hard case; he's got a real good sense of humour about him.

Karen regretted the limited contact she had with her son; however, she maintained contact with her daughter-in-law and grandchild.

> Karen: We stayed with my daughter-in-law. We stayed with her when we were over there. She's lovely too and we get on really well.

In this way, the relationship between Karen and her daughter-in-law does not depend on a continuing relationship with her son.

3.1.8 Grandparents

Grandparents were remembered as very important in the lives of many participants in this study. They were often described as having a special relationship and time to spend with their grandchildren.

> Michael: My grandmother was there. Her and I, my grandmother was, I've got a picture somewhere, we got on like a house on fire. I used to tease her unmercifully but it was friendly teasing. I have some good memories of my childhood.

> Susan: I lived next door to my grandparents until I was five. My mother's parents, I lived next door to and my grandmother was 48 when my mother was born so I was born when my mother was 29 I think so my grandmother was an elderly lady but in thinking about where my self-esteem, my confidence comes from I think it was from the acceptance and the total acceptance of my grandparents rather than

from my parents.

George: Oh sure, yeah we had a great time when we were kids. Because our farm was all draught horses there and my granddad was a blacksmith so he did all the shoeing and you couldn't put tracks on the farm because it was all swamp so you had to use horses so we made all our hay with horses. … Yeah and of course it's marvellous when your grandfather and grandmother are part of the family as well.

The importance of grandparents in the lives of these participants was also voiced as a concern about grandchildren who grew up away from the influence of grandparents. Elizabeth describes the special relationship that children used to have with grandparents and other adults of their grandparents' age, and regrets the lack of anything comparable today.

Elizabeth: I feel sorry for a lot of kids now because they don't have grandparents. Back in those days all of those old people on that marae and there were a lot of them, they were all my nannies and my koros, the whole lot. If you needed a slap you got it, if you needed a hug you got it. It really was unconditional love because we belonged to all of them and they belonged to us.

This sense of belonging was also reflected in the links that Rachel valued from her own childhood spent with grandparents and cousins. Christmas and Easter celebrations brought several nuclear families together, and these times with grandparents linked the cousins. Rachel recounts this story in the context of her family's attempt to encourage a sense of connection among their own grandchildren.

Rachel: Well starting off this reunion like, well, not starting it but continuing it again with only a year's gap that's going to do something to bond the grandchildren together. To me that's what we had as kids. I mean there were so many cousins and it was wonderful. There might be four families at Grandma's at Christmas or at Easter or something you know there was always a place to go back to. She'd get the kids out on the veranda shelling peas or go picking plums or just walking down the beach gathering cockles and shellfish you know there were always things, and Grandpa took us out in his boat. He was a farmer but he had the first mail boat that went over to one of the islands (can't think) and a wonderful boat and he taught me all I know about fishing and the sea. He often took us fishing so life was just packed full.

The importance of grandparents in the lives of these participants was also apparent in their own desire to be just as important in the lives of their grandchildren. As Rachel illustrates above, these participants reflected on what they valued about their grandparents and understood these things as gifts they could also give their grandchildren.

3.1.9 Grandchildren

Grandchildren were understood as a special gift, as exemplified here by John as he explains how his daughter has given him a grandchild.

John: There's my daughter, who just gave me my first grandson. Yes, just before we went away, the week before we went away. [INT: Oh, that must be very special.] Absolutely. Yes.

Susan: Our grandchildren and our children give us a lot of joy. … I was actually really surprised at how wonderful it is to be a grandmother and I know that sounds very silky and sugary. I had actually never wanted to be a grandmother and it is such a tremendous joy, it's absolutely great.

The grandchildren of many participants lived overseas, and although this did not reduce their importance to their grandparents, it did limit the amount of regular contact as described by George.

George: I've got two daughters and a grandson, they're pretty important but they're not in New Zealand so we don't see a lot of them so, now and again. We've been over to see them once.

Grandchildren were also understood to change the nature of relationships with children. Many participants either had moved closer to their children to help with grandchildren, or indicated that they would consider doing so when grandchildren were born. Although moving overseas to be near family in later life involved complex financial and social decisions, some participants

indicated that the arrival of grandchildren would be a major determining factor in these decisions. Chris describes how he and his wife have relocated to New Zealand to help care for their grandchildren to allow their daughter to work. Although they enjoy grandparenting, they also highlight the difficulty of managing long hours of care and running their own house.

> Chris: Well I'm quite happy to be a grandparent in a sense of providing care for your grandchildren not a problem whatsoever. … At one point we were feeding them every night and looking after them during the holidays; it was becoming like a full-time job but also running your own house.

Spending time with grandchildren was of great value to these participants, and many of them made changes to their lives to make room for special time with grandchildren. Participants experienced grandchildren as a way to look both back and forward, as David describes below.

> David: Because I always remember my Mum and Dad when they took us camping or to visit friends at beaches and things like that, those memories stick in your mind and I have always been a beachie person. I love boats and beaches and the outdoors and things like that and I know our grandchildren will have that same feeling when they go through life and keep visiting the property out there, it will be something pretty special for them.

David's grandchildren remind him of the memories of the outdoors established by his parents. He looks forward, not only to inspiring this same love of the outdoors in his own grandchildren, but also to his grandchildren carrying these memories with them through their lives in the same way he has. In this way, David illustrates the way contact with grandchildren makes connections with both past and future.

3.1.10 Maintaining contact

Maintaining links with family and friends was not necessarily about living nearby. Many participants stressed the importance of keeping in contact even at a distance, and kept in touch with their children, parents and siblings through international travel, writing and telephoning. One very common point of discussion was the current availability of technology to easily and cheaply maintain contact. The ease of email and the novelty of text messaging were particularly mentioned.

> Sarah: We text all the time. … I'm too slow, and then I've made a mistake and have to go all the way back again and they go so fast. But you see my elder son, he was in a flat that didn't have a phone so he would text, text, text all the time.

> Karen: I always used to write and was pretty good at writing letters but I'm even better on email because I don't have to bother going to the post office and you can do it, you think of somebody today and you think I feel like writing to them today so you do it and it's so easy.

Technological developments have increased the daily contact between relatives who live apart, but can still maintain their links on a very informal and intimate basis.

3.1.11 Summary

A very strong theme that emerged was the importance of family. Family was the basis for perceptions of belonging with a particular group, and this group was defined by an understanding of links that never break. This section has illustrated the variety of ways that older adults experience their lives as linked with the lives of others. Family relationships, encompassing both close nuclear families and extended family relationships that stretch across generations and geography, are of fundamental importance.

The importance of family ties is not necessarily about what family members do for one another, about emotional attachment or about a particular bond or sense of shared history. Most participants indicated that family were important just because of the structural relationships involved. Even without contact, people within these structural relationships are still classed as family, as these ties are not optional. In this way family relationships were strongly understood as enduring states of connection. Some participants talked of estranged family members and neglect by children or parents. Nevertheless, these people were still regarded as family. The sense of connection that these blood ties create allows reconciliation and re-engagement with some family members in later years.

Among the nuclear family group, parents, siblings and children were seen as important sources of emotional support. The nature of this support and the strength of emotional bonds shifted with time and across generations. As parents died and new families with dependent children were formed and those children became adults themselves, the supportive aspect of relationships could change as some bonds were weakened. Not all family relationships achieved this ideal of love and support. The bonds of obligation were not necessarily related to the provision of support, and many relationships within families are strained. Nevertheless, the notion of the family structure, with its bonds of obligation and support, provides the model for relationships and a sense of belonging. This model provides a metaphor that is drawn on to describe other supportive and life-long relationships. Linked lives is about a sense of not being alone or isolated, and about having a history and a present and a future with others.

3.2 Independent Living

Participants' lives were evidently linked in many ways with the lives of others; however, participants also recorded considerable concerns about the need to separate themselves from others. They were careful to present themselves as independent people. Issues of dependency were foremost in these participants' minds as they sought to avoid others becoming dependent on them and their own dependency on others. Many were also concerned not to make demands on their children's time or emotional demands. This meant it could be difficult for older adults to juggle relationships whilst preserving their independence.

3.2.1 Independent individuals

The participants were often concerned to present themselves as independent people and many described incidents that showed their ability to manage without the support of others. Anna particularly illustrates the lengths to which she would go to maintain a sense of herself as an independent individual.

> Anna: I won't let anyone help me. She [my friend] knew that I was in bed and she would come in and make me a cup of coffee and she'd say 'Do you want to go and have a shower?', 'I can do it thank you'; and when I get that tone people know leave her alone, let her fall over but leave her alone.
>
> Robert: I am sure if it came to searching around, if I was that desperate then yes I could find someone to talk to but generally I work things through myself.
>
> INT: Have you ever considered that perhaps you might move to be closer to your sister when you are much older?
>
> Andrew: No. I mean the only reason you'd do that is if you were really ill and then you'd be a burden.

Robert indicates his perception that asking for someone to talk to or help is an act of desperation. Some participants indicated that they would rather go without than ask others for help. The desire to maintain independence is closely linked to fear of becoming a burden on family. As Andrew indicates above, the support of, for example, a sibling is viewed as only necessary if you were ill; and this level of need is viewed as a burden on other family members. Karen has no suggestion as to how she intends to manage, but hopes she and her husband will be able to continue to look after each other. These extracts indicate that participants worried about their ability to manage usually in the context of future rather than current need. While Anna had ongoing health problems, most participants reported good health and no current difficulties managing, and few participants had significant health limitations.

> INT: What about have you ever thought that you know if you got frail and needed some help with kids or any friends who could you count on? How would you manage?
>
> Karen: I just hope we would be able to look after each other.
>
> INT: And your health in terms of who would be there to look after you?
>
> Anna: Well I don't look at it that way because I'm going to look after me.

The assertion that they will look after themselves was common, and participants often rejected the notion that any additional help would be needed as they aged.

Participants explained that their independence was due to their early experiences. The extracts below exemplify the strategies participants used to situate themselves as independent people, and also at times to distance them from contemporary young people.

> Barbara: I was independent, that's the way that we were brought up.
>
> Sarah: She brought us up, the five girls up, very independently. Like we had to have our independence.
>
> Robert: Both my brother and I had to be pretty independent and sort ourselves out one way or the other. … I believe it did teach independence if nothing else mind you in those days of course, 40s and 50s, there's not a hell of a lot of strife you can get into anyway.
>
> Charles: My generation they are going to get out there and bloody well do things because that's how they've grown up with that. Today's generation doesn't, it sits behind a screen for the rest of its life and it will probably be still sitting there when they die.

These extracts indicate that the speakers consider that their independence is related to their age and childhood experiences. The use of phrases such as 'in those days' separates the independence of these participants from what they observe in younger people of today. Charles explicitly contrasts his independence with the sedentary and passive life of young people. These older adults view themselves as active and engaged. Through their reports of their early family lives, the speakers position themselves as independent.

3.2.2 Independent nuclear family

This independence resulting from early values was understood to be further encouraged when the participants married and formed their own separate family units.

> Gillian: So they were always there when they were needed and always supportive if anything was wrong but I mean in those days we didn't expect our parents to actually help out. Once we were old enough to go out and get married we didn't expect parents help in that … when we got married we sort of went somewhere and set up away from them and then you had to be independent, you sort of had to weather the storms yourself, you had to get on with it and you had to make it work sort of thing.
>
> Neville: I think it was part of their upbringing that you know you've got married, that's your business and we will not interfere and I think that is what it was. And Mum and Dad hardly ever came around to our place. Mum did more after Dad had died.
>
> Oliver: But there was sort of that in our younger days there was that very much sense of being a nuclear family, of managing yourselves and not requiring, certainly not needing any other help, so we found any way that you know, it's basically managing yourselves.
>
> Richard: I remember I sort of think I even upset Mum on one occasion when she was making a comment about maybe not seeing me as much as I should and I said yeah but I've got my own family now too.

Thus, the adult is seen to gain and maintain independence from the family, and the new nuclear family unit is seen as independent from the previous generation. In turn, these older adults expected that their own adult children should become independent of parental support.

3.2.3 Encouraging children's independence

Many participants were anxious that their children should be independent adults capable of managing their own affairs. Children who were independent and managed their own lives were valued.

> Steven: The others, we help them when there's sickness in the family which is pretty often and both the other two families here they've both got four children each so it's fairly often when somebody's off colour, but they're not demanding otherwise it would be a real drag. We sort of brought them up to be reasonably independent I think, like when the eldest one first decided he wanted to buy a car and I said well, you buy a car you fix it. Don't expect me to fix it all the time and people said oh you're being too tough there, well he learnt and he still does it and he doesn't expect too much of us,

doesn't lean on us which is great. … and they're very thankful for the help, but they don't take us for granted.

Gillian: I've never had to because I think for the simple reason that I've always worked you see so they've always known it's no good looking to Mum because Mum's flat out working so we either sort it ourselves or don't do it sort of thing because Mum is busy trying to keep herself going. … But I mean I'm always there if they need me, if my daughter needs me to you know run her and her daughter to school and I'm doing an afternoon shift or whatever and it was pouring with rain…

The converse of valuing children who are independent is the principle of not imposing on the lives of those children. This was connected in turn to the way participants were treated by their own parents after setting up a family.

Anna: No, no I wouldn't have it. No way. They've got their own lives and futures to sort out and that's enough for them. They've got their own children.

George: We're not all that close to our daughters really, they've got their own lives.

Richard: Yeah I enjoy it over there and the children have got their own lives over there so you don't want to be living on their shoulder.

Sarah: I'm here if my daughter wants me, but I'm not a demanding … I don't demand that my daughter be here and they let me know when they're coming over and if we're here we're here. And she rang me this morning and said 'Mum we're coming over after work to see Dad'. That's fine, come for dinner but no, I would never ever make demands on my children.

These extracts exemplify a common theme of not wishing to be viewed as a demanding parent. Many participants felt that children should not be burdened by their elderly parents. Often these participants recollected elderly family members being a burden on their parents and siblings, and did not wish this to happen as they aged. Other participants described their own experiences of caring for their parents and family members as they aged. These experiences highlight a number of independence issues for the participants as exemplified in the extracts below: issues of sacrifice and burden for the carer and loss of personal status, loss of dignity and control for the cared-for person.

Matthew: My Mum had won a scholarship to university which she turned down so that she could look after her Mum. Her Mum had Parkinson's and this would have been when she was a 20-year-old I suppose. Her Mum hadn't wanted her to stay and look after her but that is what she did … she stayed to look after her Mum; I don't expect my daughter to do that.

Sarah: I do [talk to my daughter] but I don't like bothering her. I think you don't bother your own children with mummy's problems.

Peter: My mother's parents, her father I never knew. Her mother I did know, she used to come and spend, she was farmed around the family as it were and she used to spend time with us at the farm and I can remember her dying.

Matthew: Not really no. I imagine it would be quite hard to have your spouse looking after you, it alters the whole dynamics of a relationship when you are incapacitated by age or disease or injury, something like that. So in a way it would be better to have a nurse or someone to come and look after you rather than have your spouse do it. Loss of respect I suppose. [INT: Dignity maybe.] Dignity, that's the word.

Participants sought to maintain independence to avoid the position of demand and dependency. This involved avoiding excessive emotional demands by not discussing problems with family members, and avoiding encroaching on nuclear family arrangements. The demands of caring were particularly highlighted as burdensome by the notion of being "farmed around the family" in older age. Dependence on others also figured as entailing a loss of respect and dignity, which would undermine the dynamics of relationships based on equality and capability.

3.3 Contradictions in Linked and Independent Lives

Inevitably there is some tension between the notion of family with its themes of linked lives, obligation and

support, and the notions of independence, separate spheres and the burden of caring. For Mary, these tensions are illustrated in a family story featuring the 'good' caring son, and disapprobation and embarrassment for the independent and neglectful son. Here Luke, the neglectful son, is described as immature on one hand, but also as caught up in the concerns of his own nuclear family which can be understood as legitimately precluding him from providing sufficient support to ailing parents.

> Mary: We were all together as a family for Christmas and we were standing in the kitchen and I think we were doing dishes or something and all in the kitchen talking and the question came up, because we had some other friends there as well, how would you look after your Mum if anything happened to your Dad and of course James immediately came up and he says well you know, she doesn't need to worry about anything, I'll take care of her no trouble at all, I'd look after her. And Luke, he turned around and he said oh I'd just put her out in the dog kennel and throw her a bone once a week. Which you know at the time it hurt. Nowadays it's a standing family joke because I know that he did not mean it but he in a lot of respects, although he's coming up 37 he is not a very mature 37 and he just needs to grow up a little more but I have no doubt if anything did happen he would be there. But then he's got his own family that he's got to look after first.

Luke, experienced as a neglectful, immature son, is available if required, but only to attend to a minimum level of care that is represented metaphorically through caring for his mother as if she were a dog. In this way, Luke's neglect is contrasted to the immediacy of James response of providing limitless care for his mother. Although Luke is experienced as the 'bad son' in this story, this is also described in the context of his legitimate responsibilities to his 'own' family, his partner and children. This extract demonstrates the complexity of family relationships, where the demands of family are potentially contradictory and simultaneous roles within more than one family need to be negotiated. Mary has expectations for help and support in older age, and concerns that such hopes may not be met due to both the individual failings of her 'immature' son or the contradictory nature of his multiple family roles.

Within some families these tensions are balanced (not always easily) between caring for the younger generation and maintaining independence for the elders. The following extracts show how these tensions have been managed by the participants in arranging the care of their own parents. These stories show both how they have managed the care of others and how their values of independence and care indicate their own preferences as they age.

> Michael: Oh I go down there once, twice a week. I mean I don't aim to make her dependent on me. … I still keep her independent. I go down and I do little jobs for her and I go down every Sunday to have lunch with her. I take her out, like we took her out the other week.

> Ruth: I just wanted her to have what she wanted which was basically her own life, you know make her own decisions, spend her money how she wanted and I am not sure why, I still don't know why but my brothers didn't support that and she came out and she lived with me and we were like we had one flat between us, it was just such an ideal situation. We each had our independence but she was right there and I could just make an extra dinner at night and take it to her every now and then and you know [her grandson] could pop back and forth and Mum loved it. She just loved it. It was the first time she had ever had a place on her own and she was really harassed by my brothers who for some reason didn't like that idea.

Many participants felt the need to be independent, but also wanted more contact with their children. Their children would help them when asked, but would do no more than required. In this way, the family obligation was met but not willingly, and some were not happy about this. However, these participants were also willing to recognise that their children did not always have the time to devote to their parents.

> Betty: I could call on my family, my daughters and my son yes. They are the ones I would call on, depends what it was of course. I mean I know they would be around here like a shot if I needed them. … Not as much as I would like voluntary. If I had to really ask, yeah, they would do it that time, but wouldn't come back and repeat it. I don't feel that they are there, because they've got busy lives and

their own lives and everything and I had as I say my son, my daughter, my granddaughter, she calls me Nana, she came up and she said any time you want me just ask and I thought I don't want to ask. … Alright you've got family – they should do it but they've all got lives of their own, busy and most couples now both have to work to get anywhere.

Gillian: My children would come if I put the word out that I'm crook and I need something yes, they do it. … They'll be there to do it sort of thing but they won't be hanging around pottering or you know what I mean, they would just come in and do what I've asked or whatever and then say ok Mum, you right, ok I'm off now sort of thing and they flit back and go and do their thing which is right I think.

Sandra: My son in particular. I think if anything did happen that we needed looking after he'd be the one to be there. My daughter would most probably say well I'll provide some money to help out. She's quite tough.

3.3.1 Caring

The examples quoted above also indicate that the area of greatest tension between independence and lives linked together involve the relationship of caring as older adults age. Many participants had cared for their own parents towards the end of their lives. For some this had been a difficult time, but others found this final connection with these important family members a treasured privilege. It was important for Ruth and Mary because they were able to spend this time with their mothers at the end of their lives.

> Ruth: Mum died three years ago but she had very poor health before she died and I was probably a major caregiver for her and eventually she shifted in with us and I looked after her but not for very long because she died, … and she was not well and we had always been close so I wanted to have time with her.
>
> Mary: We spent a lot of time in her last few weeks reminiscing and we had to pull the old photos out and we're going back through photo albums and it was a lovely. It was about three weeks, a lovely time that we had together as a family and extended family. Her sister came up and stayed overnight and spent time with her and Lucy came home … Tony had actually only just gone back when Mum went back into hospital so he spent time with her at home and Lucy was able to spend a day with Mum while she was still able to recognise who she was and that she was here and his sister came up ... and we had the two girls there and it was good.

Rachel also recalled the time she had spent caring for her aunt fondly.

> Rachel: I did this [cared] for my aunt so she could die at home. … It was lovely, I loved it. I do miss her terribly.

For Karen, being able to tend to her father during a time when he was unable to manage for himself was a special time.

> Karen: Eventually he couldn't bath on his own but he would let me do it and for somebody like my Dad to let me do that, and it was something really special.

Children express their love and concern for their parents in terms of plans for care, and these participants relayed these plans proudly.

> Ruth: But then my son said to me, my oldest son said to me a number of years ago, he said I don't really mind what sort of job I get, he said I want a good job, I want a job that pays money so I can look after my parents when they get old.
>
> Sarah: My younger son said he's going to build a house and it's going to have two wings, a west wing and the east wing and my girlfriend's mother said she's always wanted to live in the east wing so we'll have the west wing. … But I always get oh don't worry about the future Mum, we'll look after you.

Peter describes the treatment he looks forward to when he moves closer to his family after retirement. The care is viewed as return for the contribution to their lives that he provides.

> Peter: I think they will look after me. Because they looked after their mother, I mean it's a different sort of thing but I think I would get treatment similar.
>
> INT: Well if you've built up that relationship with them over the years.

> Peter: And I'm looking forward to building it even more. I mean we've got a very firm foundation and I'm looking forward to being much more a part of their lives that I can be while I'm here.

This picture of care and contentment did not apply to all participants. The caring towards the end of life reflected the nature of the prevailing relationships in the family, and strained family relationships meant difficulties caring or occasionally a complete absence of care. For some participants, family relationships had been characterised by physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and although the strength of family ties meant that these relationships were often maintained, caring was difficult, as Deirdre illustrates.

> Deirdre: We had boundaries and like I say, I sat with him before he died but I had boundaries, I wouldn't nurse him, I wouldn't take him to the toilet, I wouldn't get him out of bed, I would call a nurse in. I made that very clear to the nurses there and they said you don't have to do anything you don't want to. … and before he died I went home and I said to my sister, I'm not staying, I have been here, I have done my bit, I am going home to my family and I will come back later tonight and if he's still alive that's fine, if he's not, so be it. And I went back and he died within a few minutes of me being there. But life was a lot easier when he died.

In other situations, the tension between family links and implied obligations and estrangement was difficult to resolve. Barbara expresses this tension regarding the absence of contact with her mother in terms of guilt.

> Barbara: She was a horrible woman, she really was horrid. … I said 'Dad's died so I don't actually have to ever come back do I?' He [my husband] said 'Well, it's up to you'. But that was how I felt and I haven't been and I won't. I don't need to. Sometimes I feel relief, sometimes I feel a little guilty because I feel so relieved. But I feel like I'm not supposed to feel like that, I'm the daughter, there's supposed to be a duty there. … Then the other part of me thinks no, she's got no right. I sort of thought to myself no she blew those rights.

For Yvonne, too, the relationship with her parents was a complex one. She describes visiting her elderly parents as an expression of both her obligation to them and her emotional attachment to them.

> Yvonne: Now I go there, yes a little bit out of obligation, but also because I love them too. My mother and I really don't get on, in that I tolerate her.

Thus, caring for older parents may be viewed by children as a special time of intimacy with parents in which whole families can share. It may also be seen by parents in terms of reciprocity—as a return to elders for the care that younger members of the family have received in the past. This notion of reciprocity also means that when relationships had involved abuse, the caring and relationship with parents was also difficult and strained. Reciprocity was another major theme in the participants' talk about families. Reciprocity figures as an important social exchange with which to negotiate the tensions inherent in family obligations, expectations and independence, across all daily activities.

3.3.2 Reciprocity

The importance of reciprocal relationships was highlighted in these interviews. They were mentioned in relation to family relationships, friendships and neighbourhood support. Because the focus in much of this talk was on the complex management of relationships and participants' concern to maintain independence, issues of helping were often framed within an understanding of the appropriateness of reciprocal relationships. In this way helping, and receiving help and support in return, is clearly separated from the dependency from which most participants were keen to distance themselves.

In general, reciprocity is regarded as an important aspect of all relationships. It includes the mutual giving of assurances. In the examples below, Ruth describes a reciprocal understanding between her and her ex-husband, which involves the provision of any help that may be required at any point in the future. This constitutes an equal relationship free from any sense of demand, or the dependency that these older adults wished to avoid.

Some participants talked about reciprocity in terms of emotional support rather than practical help.

> Ruth: My husband who is the father of my older children and we've always been really good friends and you know, once again the family thing there would come through as if either of us needed help the other would provide it.
>
> Oliver: Yes, and we can actually provide people that they need to talk to from time to time because they have some stressful family situations and we're there to listen to them, so there's that two-way relationship where we can provide what we have and they provide what they can.
>
> Neville: You're giving support and you get it back too.
>
> John: My neighbour across the river, he owned the land right down and … he would give up his life for me. And we have a very rural relationship in as much that if I need something and he's got it, he would give it to me and vice versa, and we sit out in the office outside there on the deck chairs and we set the world to rights on a lot of mornings.

Reciprocity is often described in terms of the long-term repayment of support, either emotional or practical, given at some previous time. In the extract below, Elizabeth explains how her father's generosity in the past has been repaid as he ages. She uses the phrase "it's our turn" to describe the experience of sharing obligation for the needs of others.

> Elizabeth: Like even the people in the town where we lived in, you know 'oh Uncle I need some money', 'oh Uncle I need this' so he would just dish it out, you know. We used to think oh yeah there goes Father Christmas, there goes Father Christmas again, dishing all his money out, yeah you wanted meat, yeah you wanted mutton, petrol in the car, yeah yeah way you go. … But now it's coming back, you know, he doesn't have to cut wood, they just go and get it, they go hunting, they go to the garden, they bring him vegetables, whatever he wants they just bring it. Doesn't have to ask them anymore so that's great. … Dad seems to think he used to be our protector, oh he was a protector for the whole town and what really hurts him is he can't do that anymore, we're all 'hey it's our turn', you know.

Ruth also indicates a sense that reciprocal action can be undertaken at a later time. She has recently received financial help from her older children, which she frames in terms of reciprocity by recalling having been able to support them in the past.

> Ruth: Well I can't support them financially, I have done in the past, I've helped them out when I was able to. Probably support them, well definitely emotionally because they don't particularly need it but if they did.

Mark summarises the long-term reciprocal nature of caring for older adults at the end of life. Although he would greatly prefer to avoid the frailty of old age, he fully expects that his children and granddaughter will be there to provide care as payment for the care they have been lovingly given throughout their lives.

> Mark: My children will be there. I don't have any fears about dying. If I had a choice I would hope that I would die while I was working so that I wouldn't have to go through that frail stage. … My children will be there for that, my granddaughter, I guess this is why you look after them – there's some sort of payback time. I keep telling them that.

In addition to long-term exchanges, the reciprocity of relationships is carefully managed in everyday life, so that older people may maintain a sense of independence, even when they need physical help. For example, Anna immediately counters the suggestion that she has received help from friends with the ways she has been able to repay these kindnesses using her skills in knitting and tapestry. Her need for independence means that she must account for how she repays her friends, in spite of her often poor health.

> INT: So these friends have been there to provide you with support in terms of shopping or taking you to doctors?
>
> Anna: I do things for them like at the moment the tapestry I'm doing is for my friend, she wants cushions like mine so I said ok I'll do the tapestries and you provide the materials. … But I sort of pay back in my own little way. In the

winter I knit and they always want something knitted in the winter and we sort of get around it that way.

Peter also describes the management of reciprocity through the careful counting of costs with his friend. This management is to ensure that the relationship does not involve financial dependence, and becomes rather like a game where Peter and his friend try to see how closely each can make their hosting of the other's holidays of equal cost.

> Peter: The friend who comes and stays with me. We have a lovely financial arrangement actually, I go over there with no money in my pocket and he pays for everything and we keep a note so when he comes out here and does his holiday out here, because he's the one who retired at 54 and I pay for everything here. The last visit that we did, but I have to say I was only there two weeks and he was out here for a month but we came within 0.73¢. … So when I come back if I've spent £700 we exchange that and that's how many dollars he's in credit and then I start spending and we just keep seeing how close we are.

In family relationships older parents often use the principle of reciprocity to account for the concrete contributions they have given to children and the help with practical tasks they have received in return. People felt it was important for them to be able to recount times they helped in return for help accepted.

> Deirdre: We do things for them like upholstery and curtains and things if we can. They don't expect it but we certainly help them. … Our son helped paint the house and helped Dad paint that and our daughter at Christmas time she said 'Oh Mum you're so busy, do you want me to come and help you sew?' 'No dear that's fine, I can box on.' But no they are, they're very supportive and I would only have to ask and they would. I'd only have to say Dad's not well or something and they would be straight here but no they are very good. I think we get good support back.

In this extract, Deirdre clearly explains how reciprocity maintains links and independence. The children are helped, but this help is not expected, and therefore the children are viewed as independent and not demanding. The children provide help willingly to their parents; however Deirdre prefers to "box on" even in the face of difficulty. In this way, Deirdre experiences herself as a capable, independent person who is also supported well by her family and able to support her family in turn. This extract usefully demonstrates the careful management of relationships, independence and reciprocity that older adults must negotiate.

Similarly, Penny negotiates the relationship with her daughter and grandchildren with concern to provide help in the form of childcare, and yet not to impinge on her daughter's independence. This arrangement provides a point of regular contact with family members and provides assistance without placing demands.

> Penny: But I see my daughter every, I don't know, I don't really live in her pocket sort of thing. But I look after the children now and again, maybe every second week or something like that. We talk a little bit more on the phone. I like to have my space and I gather she would, you know, like to have her space.

The balance between reciprocity and independence is carefully managed. There is also concern that gifts or favours might be viewed as the beginning of an obligation that participants wished to avoid. For example, Sandra was concerned to accept gifts from her brother for fear this would set up a sense of debt between them.

> Sandra: That's how it started and when the kids were young it was nice and there used to be jam for the kids and that was nice but I moved on from that sort of; I don't want to be beholden to him.

> Elizabeth: I've really learnt to rely on myself because at the end of the day I was the only one I could depend on because there is nothing worse than asking people for favours or whatever and then they think oh you know, if someone says to me I'm going to do this for you I expect them to do it. No excuses because that's what I would do for them, so I expect the same in return, it doesn't always happen.

Elizabeth similarly viewed favours as potentially difficult territory, as there is an immediate sense of

obligation. Expecting the favour to be returned has the potential to cause disappointment and discord.

The management of giving and receiving and balancing family obligations depends on both parties having equal need for the relationship. Here Margaret describes the equality of her relationship with the woman who has become an honorary mother to her since her own mother's death. Because neither of them have close family at Christmas they can enjoy each other's company without any sense of dependence. This would not be the case if Margaret should choose to spend Christmas with her wider family, as their lack of reciprocal need of her company can make her feel quite outside of the family.

> Margaret: You know my honorary Mum, she really enjoys having me too because she's got no family of her own. We spend Christmas together and it's wonderful. I mean I could spend it with the rest of the family but they've all got their families, all their children and grandchildren and partners and things like that and sometimes I can feel quite out of it.
>
> Betty: Well yes I have a friend or a couple of friends who are older than me that I sort of look after and take in, go around and do things for them. They are important at the moment because you know, we all go to cards together but they come up here and play cards and we do the horses. And occasional meals I have them up here for, yes they are important to me. … Company, company and social and I think because I feel needed, I suppose that's the other one. They've got nobody else. One has family but the other one is 82 and she's got nobody here. I keep an eye on her, she's good company. … Yes, we all get something from it, one would say so.

Betty describes how she cares for friends who are less able to care for themselves and provides practical assistance with meals and running errands for them. This is understood as not entirely altruistic because, in return, Betty receives their good company as well as a feeling of being needed in their lives. The statement that all parties benefit from the relationship is important in understanding the function of this relationship.

3.3.3 Summary

Reciprocity is carefully managed in all aspects of daily social life, and not less between members of families. Families must balance the tension between the obligations of linked lives, and the need for emotional and practical support of ageing parents on one hand, and the need to demonstrate independence as one reaches maturity, and then to maintain personal integrity into older age on the other. One of the social frameworks for managing this balance is reciprocity. These participants indicate that reciprocity can be managed through a number of strategies. At times the exact cost of financial or support arrangements is calculated to ensure that there is equivalence of giving and receiving. Contact is also managed to ensure that the relationship is equally valued by all parties to avoid its being viewed as burdensome. Management of reciprocity was also indicated in the avoidance of favours that might create an obligation.

Regarding the longer term, younger people must consider how they will care for their parents who have cared for them in the past. Today when young parents are often working this obligation is met in various ways, ranging from plans for total care, through constant emotional support, to support for practical help only. Parents who have provided for themselves financially and consider themselves independent do not always call on this life-long obligation for care in their later years.

In the short term, daily relations between family members are also managed in terms of reciprocity. Parents provide emotional support and practical support in the form of money, household chores and childcare. In return, they feel that they are entitled to emotional support in the form of ongoing contact with their children without engendering perceptions that they are being demanding or burdensome. Brothers and sisters also provide reciprocal emotional and practical support in Christmas gatherings, hospitality or access to the bach. This practical support often extends to help with small needs, such as being picked up at the airport. In this way, family relationships provide a web of obligation for support, which must also be managed in terms of equality of giving.

4. DISCUSSION

Families are of fundamental importance in shaping the lives of older adults. Families represented an important connection for most participants, and their importance was not always based on experience of immediate support, but rather on a sense of permanent connection with others. Many participants indicated that family ties endured even when there was no contact between family members. Contact with close friends and family members was nevertheless important to many of the participants, and was often maintained through travel and telecommunications. At the same time, participants also maintained a strong sense of themselves as independent people. Reciprocity was one way that they managed issues of independence; they linked their lives to others through acts that benefited both parties, allowing them both a sense of connection without dependency.

4.1 Family

This analysis indicates that the participants do not experience family life in a single consistent way. These older adults describe families that span many generations and stretch across siblings, cousins, nephews and nieces, and grandchildren. Many of them make considerable efforts to maintain these relationships, but these extensive family ties are not credited with the central importance of the nuclear family. A much narrower qualification for inclusion in family is used when membership includes the right to make demands on family members.

Both extended and nuclear families are important to older adults, but they appear to function in different ways. Petrie (2006) reports that fewer than half of older adults had regular face-to-face contact with members of their extended family, and concluded that such family is unlikely to be an important part of the support network. Rather than providing regular contact and support, the present study suggests that the extended family serves rather to provide a sense of history and place, which acknowledges parents and grandparents, and through these links, siblings and cousins.

The nuclear family is experienced as a structure that requires intensive effort to maintain; and outsiders, even from within the wider family, are careful not to make demands or intrude upon this exclusive unit.

Another New Zealand study similarly found that reasons for not providing live-in care to elderly parents included the impact on the respondent's own nuclear family, and a perception that care arrangements should be the result of choice, not obligation (McPherson, 1999). Strain on the nuclear family was also given as a reason for refusing to provide care to a sick family member. This provides further evidence that the requirements and demands of the nuclear family with dependent children are regarded as paramount.

Giving primacy to the nuclear family is not the only way of organising family life. However, many participants were brought up to regard nuclear family structures as the ideal and the privacy of the family as paramount. Even though many participants were raised in single-parent families because of the Second World War, the ideal of a separate two-parent domestic unit was encouraged in their own early marriage by their parents and continues to be reproduced in their own reluctance to make demands on their children who are understood to be caught up in their own lives. The primacy of nuclear family relationships is reinforced by these older adults in their interactions with their children and grandchildren, in spite of huge changes in family formation and often in spite of their own desire to spend more time with these close family members.

Relationships between parents and children are highly significant. The findings from the present study indicate that many older adults can rely upon children to provide support, and some older adults experience their children as important sources of companionship as they age. Others indicate that they are careful not to become an emotional burden on their children. Phillipson et al. (2001) also report that while parents may be able to call upon their children when help is needed, children are not always available to provide company. Although enduring ties mean children are available to their parents when needed, parents are reluctant to be dependent on children or to intrude upon their lives. Parents may only have to ask for help, but asking may be the last thing they want to do (Phillipson et al., 2001).

4.2 Changing Family Structure

Increased rates of divorce and separation in recent decades have resulted in more complex family

structures (Petrie, 2006). Many participants in the present study listed step-children and other people linked by remarriage or previous relationships to their families. There is evidence here that changing family structures provide additional close links for people. Besides their own children and grandchildren, people in this study also included step-children and step-grandchildren as important family members, and maintained links with previous partners and parents-in-law. Marriage often provides permanent links with a partner's wider family members even after the marriage had ended. However, while many of these relationships are important, they are not always accorded the status of full family membership; the 'not quite family' status was sometimes highlighted to distinguish between primary and more peripheral family members.

Previous research also suggests that those with step-families have larger support networks than those who have not remarried (Bengtson, 2001); however, re-partnered older adults often have weaker bonds with their children (Jong Gierveld & Peeters, 2003). This suggests that relationships with children may be complex for re-partnered older adults. There are indications in the present research that a wide range of connections are considered 'family', but distinctions are made as to who qualifies as a 'genuine' family member. It is likely that these understandings of family are constantly shifting, and ideas about who constitutes family will continue to change in response to continuing changes in family formation.

4.3 Independence

Participants maintained a strong sense of themselves as independent people. The strong social valuing and expectation of independence may mean it is difficult for some older adults to even imagine becoming dependent. This is reflected in the present study in the way some participants strongly resisted the idea that they might need help in the future. Older adults work to maintain their independence, and avoid social connections that may be viewed as placing demands on others (Townsend, Godfrey, & Denby, 2006). The ability to maintain independence is often viewed as a marker of ageing successfully (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, in press). These participants experience the social value placed on individual ability, and the impact of older age on family members. Individualism and independence are important to people, but so is family, and the resulting demands may be contradictory.

There is increasing emphasis on individuals' responsibility for planning and managing their own lives as they age (Grant, 2006; Townsend et al., 2006). Independence is widely understood as the hallmark of healthy adulthood (Motenko & Greenberg, 1995), and a social context of independence increasingly understands individuals as personally responsible for their own health and wellbeing (Kemp & Denton, 2003; Murray, Pullman, & Rodgers, 2003). This is particularly strongly reproduced in discourses of public health where health and wellbeing are viewed as due to making correct choices (Fairhurst, 2005). Older adults construct their identity on the basis of such accounts, as well as their own experiences (Gilbert & Powell, 2005). This has important consequences for older adults, as they reflect discussion of positive ageing, independence and contribution to the wider community. They use these widespread understandings to present themselves as the capable and useful older adult of policy discourse. Policy discourse is only one of many accounts of ageing available to older adults as they age; however, these accounts are all connected, and draw upon shared descriptions of what it means to be an older adult (Rudman, 2006).

4.4 Caring

Fear of dependency and concern to avoid being burdensome may not reflect family members' own experiences of caring for older adults. Many participants undertook care willingly as an expression of connection with and affection towards aged parents. Rather than viewing care-giving as a burdensome obligation, some carers in this study focused on the privilege of sharing time together and being able to provide special care for family members. Those who experienced caregiving as an obligation did so in the context of difficult relationships. Previous research has also found the majority of caregivers report that they gladly provided care to the elderly (Davey & Keeling, 2004), and carers may benefit from their care-giving experiences (Greene & Cohen, 2005). On a wider scale, these connections can be interpreted as examples of interdependence. Some participants spoke of the privilege of caring for older parents, and the appropriateness of their children caring for them as they age. This reflects a wider understanding of social connections and reciprocity across the life span.

4.5 Reciprocity

Issues regarding dependency were managed through reciprocity, which, along with the notion of equality of need, was important to the participants. Reciprocity is a major characteristic of intergenerational exchanges (Grundy, 2005). Townsend et al. (2006) note that their participants maintained interdependence as a central tenet, emphasising reciprocity and caring about others whilst also being careful not to become a burden. The tendency to treat independence as related to positive ageing may mean that older adults deny their need for help and support and refuse to accept assistance that they are unable to reciprocate. Accepting interdependence in older age allows older adults to make positive adjustments and to accept help where it is needed (Motenko & Greenberg, 1995). For this reason, interdependence can be understood as resisting the decline and disengagement often associated with dependence, and as a choice with positive consequences for older adults. Instead of reciprocity, where there may be concern with equal action and paying back, interdependence involves family negotiating roles and responsibilities actively as family members age.

The participants' management of reciprocity demonstrates that they attend to issues of independence and contribution that is often reproduced in the discussion of ageing populations (Degnen, 2007; Powell & Biggs, 2000). In the context of this analysis, the participants evaluate independence and reciprocity as appropriate social actions, and any perceived reduction in ability to reciprocate is carefully monitored. Practices of reciprocity reaffirm narrow boundaries of behaviour as normal and appropriate, and patterns of inequality or dependence as deviating from normality (Degnen, 2007). Older adults regulate their own behaviour in fear of becoming or being treated as dependent, and work to resist the transition to this identity. However, relations of need can be understood as part of a normal process of mutual interdependence as people develop and grow in interaction with each other (Motenko & Greenberg, 1995). Seeking and accepting help can be viewed as maintaining connectedness between people (Fine & Glendinning, 2005). This acknowledges our fundamental interdependence (Robertson, 1999) and involves a generalised expectation of giving and receiving without any counting of who gives or receives what (Vincent, 1995).

4.6 Conclusions

The results of this study have implications regarding the positive ageing and independence of older adults. Media and policy representations of later life influence the nature of older age (Biggs, 2001), as they provide morally laden messages about positive or successful ageing, and thus shape the possibilities for action (Rudman, 2006). Participants in this study experienced themselves as independent, and they are supported in this by the focus in public and policy discourse on independence and self-reliance. These accounts of older age emphasise individual independence, ways to promote self-reliance, and concerns about dependency (see Ministry of Social Development, 2001; Office for Senior Citizens, 2002). Accordingly, ageing is viewed as a process that should be responsibly managed to avoid ill health or financial dependence. However, rather than necessarily equating independence with avoiding reliance upon others, independence can also be understood as making choices and maintaining a sense of self. Achieving this may in fact involve depending upon others for help whilst maintaining a valued social role, dignity and an ability to make choices (Secker, Hill, Villeneau, & Parkman, 2003).

The stated purpose of *The New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy* (Ministry of Social Development, 2001) is to promote positive ageing across a broad range of areas, and thereby improve opportunities for older people to participate in the community. To do this, the Strategy focuses upon maintaining the independence of older people and challenging attitudes that ageing is inevitably about dependency and decline (Grant, 2006). Older adults may also attempt to reject any association of ageing with dependency, and focus on their ability to manage as they age. However, it is important that efforts to promote positive ageing do not inadvertently affect older adults' ability to admit they need help and support. Older adults are strongly self-reliant (Grant, 2006; Motenko & Greenberg, 1995) and valuing self-reliance and avoidance of dependency, rather than contexualising this in the experience of interdependence and reciprocity could have negative consequences for older adults. Whilst they may be able to ask for help, they may be reluctant to do so if this confers a stigma that they associate with dependence and need. Furthermore, other researchers have noted that many older adults attempt to become what culture indicates is desirable (Holstein & Minkler, 2003), and in the context of concerns regarding an ageing population,

this desirable identity is centred on self-reliance (Rudman, 2006). Consequently, suggesting that it is in everyone's interest to promote self-reliance in older adults (Ministry of Social Development, 2001) defines those who can and those who cannot be self-reliant as successful and unsuccessful older adults respectively.

There is a risk that by focusing too much upon the importance of self-reliance, those older people who can maintain their independent and self-reliant identity are viewed as ageing positively, while those without these resources are positioned as both ill-prepared for later life and dependent (Kemp & Denton, 2003; Rudman, 2006), while the concept of positive ageing explicitly rejects any focus on dependency and decline (Biggs, 2001). It should also be noted that positive and inclusive visions of ageing are not equally available for all older adults, and they may reinforce disparities in economic and political power and health (Greene & Cohen, 2005). The ability to age 'positively' depends in part upon social location, as the effects of a lifetime of disadvantage tend to accumulate in later life (Barrett et al., 2006; Holstein & Minkler, 2003). Therefore linking positive ageing to self-reliance and activity can reinforce disadvantage.

There are two suggestions for managing social contact and participation as regards independence. Firstly, technologies may enable older adults to age more independently and place fewer demands on their family. Alternatively, the linking of positive ageing to independence may be revised to take into account patterns of lifelong interdependence. This research supports the latter view. Instead of linking dependence with decline and disengagement, interdependence may be constructed as a stage of reciprocity and connectedness. Attitudes and values towards interdependence and obligation depend to some extent on the norms of government support and the relationship between this support and the role of family support (Petrie, 2006). Promoting the positive identity of older adults could contextualise all members of the community as strongly embedded in a social network of interdependence.

APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

Important Social Connections

Who is the most important person, or the most important people, in your life at present? In what ways are they important to you? [Ask participants to describe the ways each person is important to them. Encourage participants to describe each person mentioned.] Who else is important to you in your life? Why? Can you think of anyone else?

Thinking back to your earlier life, who were the important people in your life at that time? [For example, when you were a child, or starting work, or when you were first married, or when your children were small.]

Family

Now I want you to tell me who is in your family. Who do you think of as family? Who considers you part of their family?

Tell me about your early family; that is, your parents, brothers and sisters. Can you describe your early family? Tell me about your mother, about your father, or other important family members.

Can you tell me about your present family? Tell me something about your children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews [include any people that participants have included as part of their family].

Family Change

Now I want you to have a think about what changes have occurred over the years that may have had some affect upon your family? Are there any other things you can think of?

Before we finish, I wondered whether you had any other comments or stories you want to tell me.

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