Same-Sex and Cross-Sex Relationships

Hiroko Akiyama, Kathryn Elliott, and Toni C. Antonucci

The University of Michigan, Institute for Social Research.

The University of California, San Francisco.

This study examines same-sex and cross-sex close relationships of older adults using a national probability sample survey. Specifically, we focus on three relational characteristics: psychological closeness, geographical proximity, and support exchange. These characteristics are examined with four types of close relationships: spouse, children, siblings, and friends. Results indicate that although older persons tend to have more women in the network and receive more support from those women, they are not necessarily closer, either psychologically or geographically, to the women than to the men in their network. The data also suggest a noticeable shift from same-sex alliance to female salience in the networks when older men, as well as women, become widowed and require more support. The findings are discussed in light of three principles which have guided research on sex differences in close relationships: relation hierarchy, femaleness, and sex commonality.

A n individual's location in the social structure influences the opportunities, resources, demands, and constraints that he or she is likely to encounter in life. Such structural conditions shape the individual's life experiences—including the nature of one's relationships. Sex is indisputably a powerful component of structural milieu that cuts across societies as does social and economic class, race/ethnicity, and age. The goal of this study was to examine how sex affects the nature of relationships between older adults and the people in their immediate social environment, i.e., their personal networks. Specifically, we examined different roles occupied by male and female spouses, children, siblings, and close friends in the personal networks of older men and women. Capitalizing on a unique national probability sample with detailed information on individual network members, we sought to identify sex-specific patterns in their relationships and inquire into their etiology.

It is well documented in the literature that sex differences are significant in structuring personal networks of older adults (see Antonucci, 1990, for a review). Older men and women have personal networks that differ in size, composition, and support exchanges. In general, women are likely to have a larger network with greater diversity and to engage in support exchanges which exceed men's in terms of the variety and amount of support. Married men tend to rely on their wives for all types of support. In contrast to the level of attention which this line of research has given to the sex of older persons, the sex of network members has not received adequate attention. It is known that male and female network members typically provide different types of support to older persons (Brody, 1990; Cantor, 1983; Horowitz, 1985; Sheehan & Nuttall, 1988; Stoller, 1990). Older men and women relate to their family members or friends of the same- and cross-sex distinctively. For example, in an elderly parent–adult child relationship, the processes predictive of the filial obligation of sons and daughters are reported to differ with respect to mothers and fathers (Finley, Roberts, & Banahan, 1988). Thus, the nature of support relationships is affected by not only the sex of older persons and the sex of network members, but also by combinations of the two sexes. In order to shift our research focus from a description of sex differences to an inquiry of their etiology, it is imperative to move to an increased level of sex specificity, such as same-sex and cross-sex relationships of older men and women.

Prior research on sex of network members can be summarized under three principles: (1) relation hierarchy; (2) femaleness; and (3) sex commonality. First, according to the principle of relation hierarchy, the key factor which determines who provides which form of support for older persons is the primacy of the relationship. Thus, the serial order depending on availability is/would be: a spouse, then children, siblings, other relatives, and friends/neighbors (Cantor, 1979; Cantor & Little, 1985; Chappell, 1992; Shanas, 1979). Sex of older persons or network members makes little difference in the provision of support.

Second, the principle of femaleness theorizes that sex differences in personal relationships are a function of the femaleness of the dyad. The more women included in the dyad, the closer the relationship (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Gold, 1989; Troll, 1994). Daughters tend to have more frequent interactions with elderly parents than do sons (Rosenthal, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). The mother-daughter dyad is the closest of all parent-child dyads because it includes two women (Chodorow, 1978; Troll, 1989). There is greater closeness and less conflict in both mother-son and father-daughter dyads than in father-son dyads (Suitor, Pillemer, Keeton, & Robison, 1995). Studies of sibling relationships in old age have documented that sisters are the closest and most involved sibling dyads, with sisters-brothers somewhat distant, and brothers the most distant (Cicarelli, 1993; Gold, 1989; Suggs, 1989).

Another line of research supports the principle of sex commonality which posits that same-sex dyads are closer than cross-sex dyads. In a study of the helping networks of community-dwelling older persons, Stoller (1990) observed that, when older persons identified support providers other than a spouse, they showed a tendency to name someone of
the same sex. Rossi and Rossi (1990) examined sex symmetry in help exchange between elderly parents and adult children. They found that while daughters were much more likely than sons to provide mothers with personal care/support (i.e., comfort, sick care, and advice), sons and daughters were equally likely to provide fathers with comfort and sick care. Sons were also more likely than daughters to provide advice to fathers. Given women's family specialization in personal care/support, this finding suggests that people do feel especially at ease in same-sex parent-child relationships. It also lends partial support to the sex commonality principle. Same-sex siblings are noted in the literature for having the most intense feelings for one another, whether positive or negative (Bank, 1982; Cicirelli, 1993; Gold, 1989). The gerontological friendship literature is consistent in suggesting that cross-sex friendships among the elderly are relatively rare, while most older people have same-sex close friends (Chown, 1981; Wright, 1989). Besides immediate family members, same-sex friends are cited most often as sources of support in old age (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987a; Griffith, 1985).

A review of the literature concerning sex differences in close relationships clearly indicates the significant impact of marital status on the personal network of older persons. It is perhaps the strongest factor to influence the structure and nature of the entire personal network (Dykstra, 1993). The literature has documented that changes in marital status lead to restructuring of an older person's network and profoundly affect his/her relationships with children, grandchildren, siblings, and friends (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987b; Blieszner & Adams, 1992; Lopata, 1979; Sollie & Leslie, 1994). It is also known that there are significant sex differences in the impact of marital status on close relationships. While the literature consistently suggests that marital status differentially affects the personal network of elderly men and women (Dykstra, 1993; Lopata, 1979; Troll, 1994), empirical research is scarce and inconsistent about how marital status influences their same-sex and cross-sex relationships. Some research identified an increased significance of cross-sex children and siblings for the widowed to provide help in sex-stereotypic domestic tasks previously performed by a late spouse (O'Bryant, 1988). At the same time, the literature widely recognizes the important roles of daughters, sisters, and female friends in the lives of widowed men and women (Chappell, 1992; Lopata, 1979). Given that a spouse is normally identified as the closest network member in all aspects, it is conceivable that the presence or absence of a spouse intrinsically affects both same-sex and cross-sex relationships of older persons. Furthermore, a marked difference in marital status between men and women in the older population makes it crucial to examine personal networks of the married and the unmarried separately; otherwise, observed differences might actually reflect confounded effects of sex and marital status.

In sum, a review of the literature on older persons' close relationships highlights three principles: relation hierarchy; femaleness; and sex commonality. These three principles are obviously not congruous. Findings are often contradictory to each other. Since few studies have systematically looked at the sex of both an older person and the network members, there are not sufficient data to determine the generalizability of these principles and to explicitly link them with the etiological question of why sex differences occur. The present study aims at a systematic investigation of same-sex and cross-sex close relationships among different relational characteristics and relation types using a national probability sample of community-dwelling older adults. Specifically, we examine three basic relational characteristics: psychological closeness, geographical proximity, and support exchange in four types of close relationships: spouse, children, siblings, and friends. Sex and marital status of older respondents, sex of network members, types of relationship, and relational characteristics will be systematically examined. The major questions to be addressed are fourfold:

1. Do the size and composition of older men and women's personal networks differ in terms of same-sex and cross-sex relationships?
2. Are sex differences in same-sex and cross-sex relationships consistent across relational characteristics: psychological closeness, geographical proximity, and support exchange?
3. Are sex differences consistent across relationship types: spouse, children, siblings, and friends?
4. Does marital status differentially affect same-sex and cross-sex relations of older men and women?

First, we will identify and compare the structural characteristics, such as size and composition, of same-sex and cross-sex relationships in men's and women's personal networks. Second, we will compare the reported closeness of men and women. We will examine same-sex and cross-sex relationships on three basic dimensions: affectional, associational, and functional ties. Prior research has often focused on a single dimension of close relationships rather than examining multiple dimensions of the relationship as a whole (see Bengtson, Cutler, Mangen, & Marshall, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990, for exceptions). Many studies that we reviewed focused on the provision of specific instrumental support, while others looked at affective ties. It is not obvious that sex differences in the provision of support are associated with sex differences in psychological closeness. We will consider whether women provide more support than men because they are psychologically closer to their parents, spouses, siblings, and friends. Third, sex differences in close relationships are presumably mediated by the social role occupied. Consistency and variations in sex differences across various types of relationships will identify relation-specific sex differences from those that are common across all types of relationships, which would elucidate the grounds for the sex differences. Finally, we will examine the effect of marital status. Although there is ample evidence confirming differential effects of marital status on the personal network of men and women, still little is known about how the presence or absence of an intimate cross-sex network member (i.e., spouse) affects the same-sex and cross-sex relationships with other network members. Answers to these questions will delineate intricate ways in which sex affects close relationships of older persons and facilitates our understanding of the etiology of the sex differences.
METHOD

Sample
Data are drawn from the national survey Social Networks in Adult Life, which was conducted by the University of Michigan, Survey Research Center (Antonucci & Akinyama, 1987b). A two-stage nationwide probability sample of 2,458 households was screened for eligible respondents (individuals 50 years or older). If the household had more than one eligible respondent, one was randomly selected. Trained interviewers administered in-home, face-to-face interviews approximately one hour in length. The response rate was 73%. The sample consisted of 718 people (298 men and 420 women) ranging in age from 50 to 95. Four hundred twenty people were married and 268 were unmarried. Among the unmarried, 95% were previously married. Health status, labor force status, and other demographic characteristics of the sample showed general agreement with major national data sets, such as the Current Population Survey of the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Measures
Network structure was established by presenting a set of three concentric circles with a smaller circle in the center in which the word “you” was written. The respondent was told, “I’m going to ask you to help me draw a diagram which we will refer to as your personal network. This is you in the middle [showing a blank diagram to the respondent]. The inner circle would include only the one person or persons that you feel so close to that it’s hard to imagine life without them. People you don’t feel quite that close to, but who are still very important to you, would go in the middle circle. People whom you haven’t already mentioned but who are close enough and important enough in your life that they should also be placed in your network, would go in the outer circle. Circles can be empty, full, or anywhere in between.”

Respondents then were asked a series of questions concerning structural and functional characteristics of the first 10 people listed in their network. Structural characteristics analyzed in this study were network size, sex, relationship to the respondent, psychological closeness, geographical proximity, and frequency of contact. Relationship was coded into 11 categories: spouse, son, daughter, brother, sister, grandson, granddaughter, male friend, female friend, other male relative, and other female relative. Psychological closeness was assessed based on the circle in which a network member was placed in the network diagram: inner circle = 3, middle circle = 2, and outer circle = 1. Geographical proximity is a measure of distance between the residence of respondent and a network member that was scored as a dichotomous variable: 1 = living within a one-hour drive and 0 = not living within a one-hour drive. Contact frequency was measured by a 6-point scale: 6 = live together, 5 = being in touch daily, 4 = weekly (or more often), 3 = monthly (or more often), 2 = yearly (or more often), and 1 = not at all.

Network functions were measured as six types of social support given and received by the focal person: they are (1) confiding about things that are important; (2) being reassured when feeling uncertain; (3) being respected; (4) being cared for when ill; (5) talking with someone when upset, nervous, or depressed; and (6) talking with someone about one’s health. The respondents were asked to identify each network member from whom they received each type of support as well as each network member to whom they provided each type of support. A transaction of support (provision or receipt) was coded as 1 and no transaction as 0. “Support received” from a specific network member (e.g., a daughter) is the number of different types of support that a respondent received from the daughter. The value ranges from 0 to 6. Zero (0) indicates that the respondent received none of the six types of support from the daughter, whereas (6) indicates he/she received all six types of support from the daughter. “Support provided” to a specific network member was calculated in a similar way. The descriptive statistics of these five relational characteristics are presented in the Results section. However, since “geographical closeness” and “contact frequency” (.43 to .68) as well as “support received” and “support provided” (.45 to .65) were highly correlated, “contact frequency” and “support provided” are not included in regression analyses.

RESULTS
The 718 older adults (298 men and 420 women) nominated a total of 6,341 network members. Since the detailed information is available on only the first 10 network members nominated by each respondent, our analysis included 5,199 network members. Table 2 shows the composition of

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th></th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>64.66</td>
<td>10.27</td>
<td>50-92</td>
<td>64.21</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>50-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of education</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0-17</td>
<td>10.67</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income*</td>
<td>20.05</td>
<td>15.06</td>
<td>2.5-60.0</td>
<td>18.79</td>
<td>15.65</td>
<td>2.5-60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of health problems</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>0-10</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>0-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A figure represents the mean income based upon taking a midpoint of the following 8 categories from which respondents chose: under $5,000; $5,000-9,999; $10,000-14,999; $15,000-19,999; $20,000-24,999; $25,000-34,999; $35,000-49,999; $50,000 and over.
personal networks of married and unmarried men and women. The numbers in the table are the average number of people in certain relationship categories. For example, the married men included, on the average, 1.22 sons in their personal network.

Table 2 reveals notable sex differences in several aspects of network structure. First, there is a sex difference in the size of personal network. Unmarried men’s network size (5.72) is significantly smaller than that of married men (7.16), whereas marital status has little effect on the network size of women (7.37 and 7.38). Second, all four groups of older adults (i.e., married and unmarried men and women) reported having more women in their network than men. This trend is most prominent among unmarried women. They reported significantly more daughters, sisters, and female friends than sons, brothers, and male friends in their networks. Third, with respect to friends, however, respondents were more likely to include same-sex friends. Only unmarried men reported about equal numbers of male and female friends in their network.

Table 3 presents the mean scores of five relational characteristics (psychological closeness, geographical proximity, contact frequency, support received, and support provided) in same-sex and cross-sex relationships in four relation types (spouse, children, siblings, and friends). Grandchildren and “others” categories are not included due to the lack of sufficient number of cases for the analysis. The table shows a strikingly systematic pattern of differences in virtually all relational characteristics by relationship types rather than by sexes. Older men and women almost always placed their spouses in the inner circle (i.e., psychological closeness = 3) and children (both sons and daughters) mostly in the inner circle. Siblings (both brothers and sisters), however, were mostly placed in the middle circle (i.e., psychological closeness = 2), and friends of both sexes were placed either in the middle or outer circle (i.e., psychological closeness = 1). Similar systematic differences among the relationship types are observed in the rest of the relational characteristics. Such findings indicate that, in general, older persons’ close relationships are strongly determined by the relationship type rather than the sex of network members. A comparison between the married and unmarried samples suggests differential effects of marital status on men’s and women’s networks. Whereas the unmarried women reported closer relationships with their children, siblings, and friends than the married women, the unmarried men are more distant from their children but closer to their siblings and friends, particularly to female friends, compared with their married counterparts.

A further inspection of Table 3 indicates that sex differences are not consistent either across relational characteristics or relation types. Thus, using logit regression analysis, we systematically examined how the sex of network members affects their same-sex and cross-sex relationships with older respondents. This analysis involved three steps. First, we compared male and female network members in a specific relation type (e.g., sons and daughters) in terms of three relational characteristics: psychological closeness, geographical proximity, and support received. The question we asked is, “Are older persons’ relationships with sons and daughters significantly different in these three relational characteristics?” Second, we introduced the sex of older respondents in the analysis and examined same-sex and cross-sex relationships. The question we asked here is, “Are male and female network members (sons and daughters) related to male and female respondents (fathers and mothers) differently?” The third step involves the examination of significant sex effects across different relational characteristics and relation types.

In more analytical terms, we used a network member, not an older respondent, as the unit of analysis in the logit

Table 2. Who Are in Older Adults’ Personal Networks?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Unmarried</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandson</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Granddaughter</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male friend</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female friend</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other males</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other females</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All males</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All females</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Asterisks indicate significant differences in the number of male and female network members in a specific relation (e.g., the average number of male friends vs female friends in the married men’s networks is significantly different).

*p < .05; **p < .01.
Male network members (i.e., husband, son, brother, and cross-sex relationships, the sex of older respondent and male friend) were coded 0 and female network members introduced as additional independent variables in the regression. Its interactions with the three relational characteristics were introduced as additional independent variables in the regression analysis. The dependent variable in a logit model is the male-female pair of a specific relation type (e.g., son vs daughter). An analysis was performed for each of the four relation types separately (i.e., husband vs wife; son vs daughter; brother vs sister; male friend vs female friend). Male network members (i.e., husband, son, brother, and male friend) were coded 0 and female network members (i.e., wife, daughter, sister, and female friend) were coded 1. We entered independent variables at two steps. First, the model with the three independent variables (i.e., psychological closeness, geographical proximity, and support received) was estimated. Then, in order to examine same-sex and cross-sex relationships, the sex of older respondent and its interactions with the three relational characteristics were introduced as additional independent variables in the regression model. Because spousal relations were all cross-sex, we tested only the main effect of relational characteristics on the spouse model. Also, since virtually all married respondents lived with their spouses, geographical proximity was not entered in the spouse model. For all other models, only interaction terms which significantly improved the goodness-of-fit (assessed by -2 log likelihood) of a model were retained in the final models shown in Table 4.

Table 4 reveals considerably different patterns of same-sex and cross-sex relationships across the relation types. Among the married older persons, men reported receiving more support from their wives than women reported receiving from their husbands. In statistical terms, the odds ratio of being a wife (over a husband) increases 1.37 times if the support an older person is receiving from his/her spouse...
The results for unmarried older persons are considerably different from those for their married counterparts. In a son vs daughter comparison, while unmarried mothers reported receiving more support from their sisters and female friends than brothers and male friends. As shown in Table 4, no interaction terms are significant in the male friend vs female friend comparison.

A comparison between brother vs sister also revealed same-sex closeness, but in a different relational characteristic, i.e., psychological closeness. If an older man placed a sibling in a closer circle in his personal network diagram, it is 1.27 [1/.79] times more likely to be a brother (than a sister), whereas if a woman placed her sibling in a closer circle, it is 1.26 [natural exponential of .45 = .69 + (-.24)] times more likely to be a sister (than a brother). In other words, older men reported feeling psychologically closer to their brothers than sisters, whereas older women felt closer to their sisters than brothers. The regression models for brother vs sister and male friend vs female friend produced similar results in terms of support received. Older persons reported receiving more support from their sisters and female friends than brothers and male friends.
ceiving more support from their daughters than sons, the difference in level of support fathers received from sons and daughters is not significant. In the brother vs sister model, only one main effect of “support received” is significant, indicating that older persons, both men and women, received more support from sisters than brothers. Finally, a male friend vs female friend comparison revealed that comparing with male friends, female friends of the unmarried persons are 2.04 times more likely to live within a one-hour drive. However, for psychological closeness, if an older man placed his friend in a closer circle in his personal network diagram, it is 2.41 times more likely to be a female friend (than a male friend), whereas if an older woman placed her friend in a closer circle, it is 1.19 [natural exponential of .17; the coefficient for being female friend is \(-.17 = -1.05 + .88\)] times more likely to be a male friend. These results suggest that unmarried men and women felt closer to their cross-sex friends compared with their same-sex friends. Although prior research on friendship in old age tends to focus on same-sex friends, the nature and impact of cross-sex friendship needs to be more systematically investigated.

**DISCUSSION**

While we have known for some time that men’s networks are often smaller than women’s, the findings from this national sample offer valuable specificity about the nature and prevalence of this sex difference. In this sample, men’s networks were smaller than women’s. It is noteworthy, however, that the network size of married men and women was not very different. On the other hand, the network size of unmarried men and women was significantly different. Unmarried men reported significantly fewer children and grandchildren in their personal networks than married men. Not only did they have fewer children in their networks but, as Table 3 indicates, they contact the children less frequently than their married counterparts. These findings appear to support the notion in the literature suggesting that married men’s connections with their network members, especially kin relationships, often operate through their wives (Troll, 1994). Obviously, what we can argue from the cross-sectional data is limited. It requires a longitudinal study to assess changes in men’s interactions with their network members before and after the change in marital status to providing more direct evidence for the role of wives in men’s connections with their offspring.

Also consistent with prior reports is that older adults, both men and women, had more female network members than male network members. However, this tendency was not consistently observed. A greater salience of female network members was most pronounced among the unmarried women. Among different relation types, sisters were more likely than brothers to be included in the networks of all four groups of older adults. However, daughters did not always exceed sons. Indeed, the married men reported more sons than daughters in their networks. As to friends, there were more same-sex friends than cross-sex friends reported in the networks, although unmarried men reported almost as many cross-sex friends as same-sex friends.

We were interested in whether older persons not only have more women in their network but also have closer relationships with women. That is, are older persons psychologically and geographically closer to and do they receive more support from female network members than male network members? Although our older respondents overall reported more women than men in their networks, there was little indication that they were psychologically or geographically closer to female network members (i.e., wives, daughters, sisters, and female friends) compared with male network members. One exception was that female friends were more likely to live closer to unmarried older persons than male friends. On the other hand, older persons were more likely to receive support from women than men. In short, our data suggest that although older persons tend to have more women in the network and receive more support from those women, they are not necessarily closer, either psychologically or geographically, to women than men in their networks. Thus, it does not appear that sex differences are consistent across the relational characteristics.

We should reiterate here our finding that, compared to the sex of a network member, the relation type (e.g., spouse, children, siblings, and friends) is more important in determining the structure and function of older people’s support networks. It suggests that the norms for adult children in relation to elderly parents are stronger than sex norms in structuring the support network. Therefore, under circumstances where daughters are not available, sons, who occupy the same type of relation in the opposite sex, are more likely to be substituted than those who have a different type of relation in the same sex (e.g., sisters).

Finally, the data reveal notable differences between married and unmarried older persons in the nature of their same-sex and cross-sex relationships. Although the respondents overall reported more women than men in their network, the data (see Table 3) indicate intimate relationships between the married respondents and their same-sex network members. The married respondents reported receiving more support from same-sex children than from cross-sex children and feeling closer to same-sex siblings and friends than cross-sex ones. On the contrary, the unmarried men and women both received more support from female network members, such as daughters and sisters, than sons and brothers.

In this vein, there is a finding which deserves special attention. Married respondents reported that sons in their networks live closer than their daughters do. This finding is somewhat intriguing, because there is a general belief that older persons tend to live close to and have frequent contact with their daughters. There are two possible interpretations for this finding. One is simply that sons tend to live closer to their married parents than daughters. Another possibility is that older persons tend to include sons in their personal networks if they live nearby, whereas they include daughters even if they live a greater distance away, because sons are less likely to keep in touch with their parents once they have moved away. Although the data do not provide information which directly supports or refutes either explanation, the first explanation seems more plausible than the second one. If the second explanation were valid, we would expect the married respondents to have more daughters than sons in their network. However, this is not the case. Furthermore, the first explanation is consistent with the recent report based
on the 1990 Census data that a significantly larger proportion of single adult men live with their parents than single adult women (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992). This is a relatively new phenomenon. Although the nature of such relationships between adult children and their parents has not been fully investigated, it appears that an increasing number of “resourceless” adult children continue to stay in or move back to their more “resourceful” parents’ households. In such relationships, support is more likely to flow from parents to adult children rather than the other way. Why are sons more likely to stay with their parents than daughters? Some speculate that parents have different expectations for their sons and daughters in various aspects of their lives, such as how much freedom they are allowed and how many household chores they should share. Since parents may tend to be more permissive and tolerant of their sons than their daughters, sons might feel more comfortable living with their parents. We found that sons lived closer to their married parents than daughters did. We did not, however, find a similar sex difference for the children of unmarried older persons, who tend to have fewer resources and need more support than their married counterparts. Thus, our finding appears to support the speculative explanation of the sex difference in single adults’ living arrangements which was found in the 1990 Census.

Referring back to the three principles — relation hierarchy, femaleness, and sex commonality — which have guided research on sex in close relationships, our data offer strong support for the relation hierarchy principle and limited support to the other two. The findings indicate that relation type (children, siblings, friends, etc.) is the primary factor in determining the structure and function of an older person’s support network, and sex is secondary, although both of them are decisive factors. The norms associated with specific relations appear to be more powerful than sex norms. At the same time, however, we found that married older persons tend to maintain close relationships with their same-sex children and siblings, which is consistent with the sex commonality principle, whereas women play more central roles in the network of unmarried persons, which is consistent with the femaleness principle. More specifically, our data suggest that the femaleness principle operates on the provision of support. Unmarried older persons were more likely to receive support from women rather than from men. However, we failed to find evidence of the femaleness principle in a more strict sense. That is, we did not find the most extensive support transactions in female-female dyads which were followed by female-male dyads and male-male dyads in this order. Furthermore, the data indicate that those unmarried older persons maintained a relatively similar level of psychological and geographical closeness with men and women in their networks. These results highlight the distinctive nature of relationship (or role) of women in the personal network of older persons, that is, it is more likely women who provide support to older persons when these elders require increasing care. Thus, we found support for the femaleness principle as well as the sex commonality principle only in specific relational characteristics in specific segments of the older sample.

These findings lead us to the following conclusion. Sex differences in older persons’ close relationships are complex and require our attention not only to the sex of older persons but also to the sex of their network members, relation type (e.g., children, siblings, and friends), and relational characteristics (e.g., psychological closeness, geographical proximity, and support exchange). Our data also suggest that married and unmarried persons have different relationships with their same-sex and cross-sex network members. Thus, men and women serve intricately differential functions in the various types of relation and situational circumstances which evolve around aging individuals.

The results of our analysis have implications for further development of research which inquires into the etiology of sex differences in older persons’ close relationships. First, sex differences in older persons’ personal networks are multidimensional and complex. They differ in their structure, function, and quality. Research must continue to examine complex relationships among these dimensions. Second, although the structure, function, and quality of the personal networks of older men and women are influenced greatly by their current circumstances, those networks are at the same time a culmination of their personal relationships over the life course. Research from a life-span perspective, which investigates the emergence and development of sex differences over the life course, will be a more direct and powerful avenue to identify their determinants. Finally, another promising approach is an examination of the universality and variations in sex differences among societies which differ in family system, kinship relations, and/or role expectations. Such cross-cultural comparative research will further advance our understanding of the etiology of sex differences in close relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
This study was supported in part by the National Institute on Aging, Grant AG-01632. Appreciation is extended to Halimah Hassan for her assistance in data analyses.

Dr. Richard Schulz was Editor of the Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences at the time the manuscript was submitted, and was responsible for the review process and acceptance of this article.

Address correspondence to Hiroko Akiyama, Institute for Social Research, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248. E-mail: akiyama@umich.edu

REFERENCES


Received October 11, 1995
Accepted May 14, 1996