

Do Age Differences in Close and Problematic Family Ties Reflect the Pool of Available Relatives?

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Older adults consistently report having fewer close and fewer problematic social ties than do younger adults. Yet, prior studies have not explicitly examined associations between the availability of living relatives and the nature of family ties in later life. One hundred sixty-four individuals ages 13 to 99 described their networks of close and problematic social ties. Then they provided information about specific living relatives (e.g., spouse, mother, father, sons, daughters, siblings, grandparents, and grandchildren). Older individuals reported more living relatives than did adolescents or young adults. Although individuals of all ages tended to name the majority of living relatives as close social contacts, most adults did not name all available relatives as close contacts. Age differences emerged with regard to naming relatives as problematic social ties. Older adults were less likely to indicate that their relatives caused problems. Findings are discussed in terms of an extension of investment theory, the availability hypothesis, which suggests that individuals with few living relatives are likely to view more of these relatives as close ties and fewer of these relatives as problematic.

THE family serves as a primary milieu for positive and negative social ties throughout adulthood (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997; Fingerman & Bermann, in press; Troll, 1988). Indeed, although the overall size of social networks generally grows smaller with age, individuals tend to place greater emphasis on close family relationships as they grow older (Ajrouch, Antonucci, & Janevic, 2001; Antonucci, 2001; Carstensen, Gross, & Fung, 1997; Lang & Carstensen, 1994). Yet researchers have not looked at whether adults feel close to all available family members as they age or whether selection processes are also evident in this social context. Nor do researchers know whether adults of different ages experience family ties as irritating or annoying to the same extent. Although older adults report fewer problematic social ties than do younger adults (Rook, 1984; Walen & Lachman, 2000), it is not clear whether this pattern is true for relatives. The family arena is particularly interesting to study because people have little freedom in selecting the individuals to whom they are related. Thus, the pool of available living relatives may contribute to the nature of family ties in adulthood.

The importance of the pool of available social contacts is highlighted in literature pertaining to the oldest old individuals. Researchers have attributed the diminished social networks of oldest old individuals to the fact that they have outlived people whom they once might have named as close or problematic social ties (Johnson & Barer, 1997; Troll, 1994). On the other hand, Carstensen and her colleagues (Carstensen, 1992, 1993; Carstensen et al., 1997) have argued that if mortality accounted for age differences in social network size, loss of social ties would be evenly distributed across close and peripheral social ties; this is not the case. Rather, older adults report having as many close social ties as do younger adults, particularly in the family realm (Ajrouch et al., 2001; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987). Thus, it is not clear whether the availability of living relatives is an important factor in determining close ties across adulthood or only for the very oldest adults. Indeed, few studies have specifically compared oldest old individuals to younger age groups. This study looks at age differences in close and

problematic family ties as a function of the size of the available pool of living relatives across adolescence and adulthood.

First, we considered the pool of family members available to individuals of different ages. Limited research pertaining to oldest old adults has suggested that individuals may find their social resources depleted as family members in their own generation die (Johnson & Barer, 1997; Troll, 1994). Indeed, very elderly adults may outlive family members in the generations below them (Johnson & Barer, 1997). Although findings on this issue are scant, we hypothesized that oldest old adults would report fewer living relatives than would adults in younger age groups. We then considered associations between the pool of available relatives and the tendency to list family members as close and problematic social ties.

Close Social Ties and Available Living Relatives

Several theories suggest that older adults may be more sensitive to the availability of relatives than are younger adults. Socioemotional selectivity theory indicates that adults place a greater value on their close social ties (particularly family) as they approach terminations such as death (Carstensen, 1992, 1993, 1995). The convoy model (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) indicates that life context (e.g., work roles, children in the home) contributes to age differences in the composition of social networks. We examined the available pool of family members as a social context. Prior studies have indicated that adults of all ages list five to seven intimate social contacts when asked to describe their social networks and that most of these social contacts are family members (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Fingerman & Griffiths, 1999; House, Kahn, McLeod, & Williams, 1985). If oldest old adults have fewer relatives, these remaining ties may play a particularly important role in their social networks.

Although theories of hierarchical compensation suggest that individuals substitute different social contacts for family members they never had (e.g., Chatters, Taylor, & Jackson, 1986; Connidis & Davis, 1990), we did not expect to find such substitutions compensating for depleted family resources in the

current study. For example, according to this substitution model, childless older adults may have strong ties to a niece or nephew. The situation may be different with regard to family members an individual once had, however. When individuals outlive their spouse, siblings, and children, they may turn to fictive kin or new friends (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997), but substitutes cannot make up for a lifetime of shared experiences. Rather, remaining relatives may become more important. Thus, we expected older adults to name a greater proportion of their remaining relatives as close social ties, although we expected individuals of all ages to list a similar absolute number of relatives as close social ties.

Finally, we developed a hypothesis based on investment theory (Fingerman, 1998b; Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Investment theory suggests that individuals' reactions to a given social contact reflect their investment in that relationship (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). Individuals place a greater emphasis on a relationship when they have fewer alternatives to the person in that relationship. Extending this premise to look at the family, we anticipated that older adults who have fewer available relatives would place a greater emphasis on these remaining family ties and would thus name a greater proportion of those individuals as close ties. We refer to this offshoot of investment theory as the availability hypothesis. This hypothesis does not consider the quality of the relationships in question, but rather focuses specifically on the availability of kin ties. Prior studies have suggested that individuals of all ages generally feel close to their living relatives (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999; Lang, 2000, 2001). We know little, however, about the availability of family relationships and networks of close social ties.

In summary, we expected (a) younger and older adults to report a comparable number of relatives as close social ties; (b) older adults' close family ties to represent a greater proportion of their living relatives, based on their smaller pool of available relatives; and (c) the proportion of living relatives listed to reflect the size of the pool of available relatives regardless of age.

Problematic Social Ties and Available Living Relatives

We were also interested in examining individuals' reports of problematic family ties and the availability of living relatives. As mentioned previously, although individuals select social contacts that are most rewarding in some arenas (e.g., Carstensen, 1992), they may be reticent or unable to exclude family members who are annoying. Thus, we might expect reports of problematic family ties to be constant across adulthood. Yet, studies have found that older adults report fewer problems in their family relationships (Walen & Lachman, 2000), their parent-child relationships (Fingerman, 1995, 1996; Umberson, 1989), grandparents' ties to grandchildren (Fingerman, 1998a), and sibling relationships (Bedford, 1989), and even difficult marriages appear to be less conflicted in later life (Akiyama & Antonucci, 1995; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993).

Older adults might have fewer difficulties with their relatives for several reasons. As they grow older, adults may better regulate their own emotions and the emotional qualities of their

relationships (Lang, 2001; Schulz, 1985; Troll & Fingerman, 1999). We consider this issue elsewhere (Birditt & Fingerman, 2002). Here, we looked at whether the pool of available relatives also contributes to perceptions of problems with these relatives. According to investment theory, individuals who have few alternatives to a given relationship are more likely to overlook difficulties in that relationship (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Extending this premise through the availability hypothesis, individuals with a small pool of living relatives may be unlikely to report problems with those remaining relatives. Thus, we again expected older adults to have fewer available living relatives and, therefore, to name a smaller proportion of these living relatives as problematic.

METHODS

Participants

These data are from a larger study of social relationships involving 187 individuals. Eighty-nine percent of participants were reached for a follow-up phone call after the initial interview. The 164 individuals were distributed across both genders in five age groups: adolescence/13 to 16 years ($n = 38$), young adulthood/20 to 29 years ($n = 28$), midlife/40 to 49 years ($n = 32$), young-old age/60 to 69 years ($n = 36$), and oldest old age/over 80 years ($n = 32$). Individuals ages 20 to 29 were difficult to recontact. Individuals in their 20s who were not contacted by phone did not differ from those individuals who were with regard to age, gender, educational attainment, work status, or the overall size of the close and problematic networks. There were no gender differences with regard to background variables other than marital status (only 3 oldest old men were widowed, whereas all oldest old women were). Participants generally rated themselves as being in good health ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.96$; 1 = poor, 5 = excellent). Table 1 includes additional information about the sample in this study.

The sample was one of convenience. Participants were recruited through a variety of sources including newspaper advertisements, community and church groups, and individuals attending football games at a large university. There were no significant differences in education level across age groups for all but the teenage subsample. The teenagers were still in the process of completing their education. In keeping with the high level of education in this sample, participants' scores on the Shipley Living Scale Vocabulary Test (Shipley, 1986) were also somewhat elevated relative to the general population but were comparable to scores obtained in other studies of age group differences in adulthood (Earles, Connor, Smith, & Parke, 1997; Park, Hertzog, Kidder, Morrell, & Mayhorn, 1997).

Procedure

The initial battery consisted of a 1- to 2-hr interview followed by a brief questionnaire. Participants were contacted by telephone at least 2 weeks after their initial interviews and were asked about specific relatives who were alive at that time. We solicited the list of living relatives in a separate session following the initial interview so participants would not be tempted to go back to add living relatives that they had not named in their network of close social ties.

Table 1. Background Information Pertaining to the Sample

Background Information	Adolescents (<i>n</i> = 38)	Young Adults (<i>n</i> = 26)	Middle-Aged Adults (<i>n</i> = 31)	Young-Old Adults (<i>n</i> = 37)	Oldest Old Adults (<i>n</i> = 32)
Age					
<i>M</i>	14.71	23.81	45.00	65.01	83.06
<i>SD</i>	1.00	2.81	2.61	2.99	2.72
Education ^a					
<i>M</i>	1.79	4.62	4.84	5.11	4.94
<i>SD</i>	0.41	0.64	1.39	1.37	1.70
Vocabulary Test (min. = 10, max. = 40)					
<i>M</i>	27.39	31.76	34.06	35.76	33.05
<i>SD</i>	4.26	4.12	4.56	2.53	5.45
Religion (proportion)					
Protestant	0.29	0.23	0.48	0.65	0.84
Catholic	0.26	0.35	0.10	0.14	0.09
Jewish	0.03	0.04	0.07	0.05	0.03
Other/none	0.42	0.39	0.36	0.14	0.03
Work status (proportion)					
Employed	—	0.62	0.84	0.30	0.06
Unemployed	—	—	0.03	—	—
Homemaker	—	—	0.07	0.08	0.03
Retired	—	—	—	0.62	0.91
Student	1.00	0.39	—	—	—
Marital status (proportion)					
Married/remarried	—	0.27	0.68	0.51	0.34
Widowed	—	—	—	0.24	0.63
Divorced/separated	—	0.04	0.16	0.24	—
Single/never married	1.00	0.69	0.16	—	0.03

Note: Dashes indicate not applicable. Some proportions do not add up to 100 because of rounding to two decimal places.

^a1 = grade school, 2 = some high school, 3 = high school graduate, 4 = some college or technical school, 5 = college graduate, 6 = master's degree, 7 = advanced degree.

Background information.—Participants provided their education level, employment history, marital history, age, religion, ratings of their health, and other demographic information.

Social desirability.—A 13-item version of the Crowne and Marlowe Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Robinette, 1991) was administered. This measure assesses whether participants are trying to present a positive image to the interviewer rather than responding openly to questions that might reflect poorly on them.

Close and problematic relationships.—We examined close and problematic social networks separately. Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) social network questionnaire was used to assess participants' close ties (e.g., Antonucci, 2001; Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1993). Individuals completed a diagram by placing members of their social network into three concentric circles, based on psychological proximity. Those individuals who are most important are placed in the innermost circle, and social partners of decreasing importance are placed in each of the next two circles. Participants then provided more detailed information about the people they had named, including their relationship to these individuals and the frequency with which they have contact.

An adaptation of the Kahn and Antonucci (1980) measure was developed to assess problematic relationships. Participants

placed individuals who bother them most in the inner circle and, again, placed individuals of lessening negative emotional intensity in the next two circles. Interviewers told participants that they could name people they had already named or new people. This study is the first to use the measure in this manner. Previous studies have used the Kahn and Antonucci measure to assess negative aspects of relationships by asking about individuals within the positive network who also cause distress (e.g., Ingersoll-Dayton, Morgan, & Antonucci, 1997; Morgan, Neal, & Carder, 1997).

Living family members.—During the phone interview, participants indicated how many of the following family members were alive at the time of their initial interview: mother, father, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, grandchildren/great-grandchildren, grandparents/great-grandparents (see Appendix, Note 1). We used participants' subjective definitions of these terms and included step-relatives as daughters, sons, parents, or siblings if the participant chose to do so. Whether the participant had a spouse at the time of the interview had already been ascertained.

We selected these relatives on the basis of their kinship proximity and literature indicating that these ties are central family relationships throughout life (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997; Troll, 1988). This list of relatives covers 76% of family ties that participants named in their networks. We also looked at the distribution of the 24% of family ties not assessed in the

Table 2. Number of Living Relatives and Number and Proportions of Living Relatives Listed in Each Network

Relatives Listed	Teenagers	Young Adults	Middle-Aged Adults	Young-Old Adults	Oldest Old Adults
Total no. living relatives	6.71	5.46	6.19	8.97	9.69
Total no. listed in close network	4.53	4.31	4.65	6.27	6.28
Proportion of relatives listed in close network	0.68	0.79	0.75	0.70	0.65
Total no. listed in problematic network	1.89	1.92	1.94	1.62	0.59
Proportion of relatives in problematic network	0.28	0.35	0.31	0.18	0.06

phone interview (e.g., cousins, aunts, nieces, uncles) in order to ensure that we had not systematically excluded relationships of importance to a particular age group. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no age group differences in the total number of such family ties, $F(4,159) = 1.03$, $p > .10$. Thus, we captured the majority of family relationships named by participants in all age groups. For the sake of convenience, we use the term *relative* to refer to relatives covered in the phone survey.

RESULTS

First, we considered the number of living relatives that individuals reported. Then, we examined the number of relatives that individuals listed anywhere in their close and their problematic networks. We further looked at whether the absolute number of relatives named in the networks varied as a function of extraneous variables (e.g., social desirability, vocabulary/education, frequency of contact). Then, we considered the proportion of living relatives who were named in the close and problematic networks. Specifically, we examined the availability hypothesis by considering whether the proportion of living relatives listed in these networks reflected the size of the pool of available relatives. Where analyses involved age group differences, we used ANOVA and grouped participants into five discrete categories (teenagers, young adults, middle-aged adults, young-old adults, oldest old adults). Where age served as an independent variable associated with a continuous dependent variable, we used regression analyses with the actual ages of participants entered as a continuous variable.

Number of Living Relatives

On average, participants reported that they had 6.98 living relatives ($SD = 4.47$). A one-way ANOVA looking at age group differences in total number of living relatives was significant, $F(4,160) = 7.21$, $p < .001$. Contrary to our expectation, Scheffé's post hoc tests revealed that young-old and oldest old adults had more living relatives than did younger age groups. Relatives were not evenly distributed across relationship types, however, and the category for grandchildren appeared to skew findings. Nine participants in the older age groups had more than 10 grandchildren. In addition, no teenagers were married or had children or grandchildren. Given that most participants in the 20- to 29-year-old age range were actually in their early 20s, few of these individuals were married. As mentioned previously, the majority of oldest old women were widowed, whereas the majority of oldest old men were married.

As a check on the effects of potential skews in the data, we repeated the analyses including only those family members who were within one generation of the participant (e.g., spouse,

child, sibling, parent). When grandchildren and grandparents were excluded from the total, the sample average for number of living relatives dropped to 4.58 ($SD = 2.14$). The ANOVA for age group differences remained significant, $F(4,160) = 6.48$, $p < .001$, with grandparents and grandchildren excluded. Yet, Scheffé's tests revealed that individuals in their 40s and 60s had more living relatives than other age groups. Given these disparities, subsequent analyses were conducted twice, once including grandchildren and grandparents and once excluding these relatives. Because findings did not differ substantially with regard to these separate analyses, only analyses including all relatives are reported here.

Number of Relatives Named in the Close and Problematic Networks

Table 2 shows the total number and the proportion of living relatives whom participants of different ages named in the close and the problematic social networks. We looked first at the absolute number of relatives who were named as close and problematic ties. The sample average for number of relatives listed as close social ties was 5.25 ($SD = 3.28$). The sample average for number of relatives listed as problematic was 1.59 ($SD = 1.55$).

Contrary to our initial prediction that individuals of all ages would name a comparable number of relatives as close social ties, we found age differences in the number of kin listed as close social ties, $F(4,159) = 3.09$, $p < .05$. Scheffé's tests revealed that young-old and oldest old adults named a greater number of relatives in their close circles than did individuals in other age groups.

There were also age differences in the number of kin named as problematic, $F(4,159) = 4.79$, $p < .001$. This time, the pattern fit our expectations. Scheffé's tests revealed that young-old and oldest old adults named fewer relatives as problematic than did younger individuals. On average, teenagers, young adults, and middle-aged adults named two relatives as problematic; young adults named one to two relatives as problematic; and oldest old adults named zero or one relative as problematic.

Control variables and number of relatives named as close and problematic.—We then considered associations between reports of the number of close and problematic ties and control variables. There was a small negative association between scores on the Crowne and Marlowe (1960) social desirability measure and the number of relatives named in the problematic social circles ($r = -.17$, $p < .05$). There was not a significant association between social desirability and the number of relatives listed as close social contacts. There were no sig-

Table 3. One-Way Analyses of Variance of Age Group Differences in Proportion of Living Relatives Named in Each Network

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>
Network of close social ties			
Age group	4	0.10	1.25
Error	159	0.01	
Network of Problematic Social Ties			
Age group	4	0.45	6.80***
Error	159	0.07	

*** $p < .001$.

nificant associations between scores on the Shipley Vocabulary test and the number of relatives named as close or problematic.

It is also possible that frequency of contact with relatives (rather than size of available pool) determines whether or not relatives are considered close or problematic ties. There were age differences in frequency of contact with relatives listed as close ties, $F(4,159) = 11.83$, $p < .001$, and those listed as problematic ties, $F(4,159) = 3.86$, $p < .01$. Scheffé's test revealed that on average teenagers had more contact with the relatives that they named in their networks than did individuals of other ages, but the other age groups did not differ.

Pool of Living Relatives and Close and Problematic Ties

Our research questions asked about associations between the proportion of relatives named in the close and problematic networks and the available pool of relatives. On average, participants named 73% ($SD = 0.28$) of their living relatives in their network of close social ties and 26% ($SD = 0.27$) of their living relatives in their network of problematic social ties. Over one third of participants named all of their living relatives as close ties, and over one third of participants named fewer than 10% of their living relatives as problematic ties.

Table 3 shows ANOVAs examining age group differences in the proportions of living relatives named. We had initially expected older adults to name a greater proportion of their living relatives as close ties. This expectation was based on their presumed smaller pool of living relatives. In fact, there were no significant differences in the proportion of relatives whom participants of different ages named as close ties, $F(4,159) = 1.25$, $p > .10$.

As expected, there were significant age group differences in the proportion of living relatives who were named as problematic, $F(4,159) = 6.80$, $p < .001$, with Scheffé's tests revealing that oldest old adults named a smaller proportion of their living relatives as problematic than did younger individuals of any age group.

Availability hypothesis.—Next, we considered the availability hypothesis. The availability hypothesis predicts that individuals with the smallest pool of living relatives would name most of their relatives as close ties and would name very few of these relatives as problematic ties. To examine this issue, we estimated regression analyses in which the number of living relatives and participant age (as a continuous variable) served as independent variables and the proportion of relatives named

Table 4. Regressions Predicting Proportions of Relatives Named From Participant's Age and Number of Living Relatives

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
Regression predicting proportion of living relatives named in positive circles			
Constant	0.83	.050	15.93***
No. living relatives	-0.01	.010	-2.46*
Participant's age	0.00	.001	-0.01
$F(2,161) = 3.37$, $p < .05$			
$R^2 = .04$			
Regression predicting proportion of living relatives named in problematic circles			
Constant	0.48	.050	10.12***
No. living relatives	-0.01	.010	-2.46*
Participant's age	0.00	.001	-3.28***
$F(2,161) = 13.26$, $p < .001$			
$R^2 = .14$			

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

in the positive and negative circles served as dependent variables.

As can be seen in Table 4, the size of the pool of living relatives was negatively associated with the proportion of relatives who were named as close ties. Individuals with more living relatives named a smaller proportion of those relatives as close ties. There was no significant effect for age in this regression. For problematic ties, the pattern was in the opposite direction of our expectations. Participants with a greater number of living relatives named a smaller proportion of those relatives as problematic. There was also a strong effect for age in this regression, with older adults naming a smaller proportion of their relatives as problematic above and beyond the effect of the pool of living relatives.

To ensure the stability of our findings, we conducted additional analyses. First, we divided the sample into quartiles to look at relative size of the pool of relatives and to ensure that a few cases with large or small numbers of living relatives had not skewed the findings. The quartile cut-offs for number of living relatives were 1 = 0 to 4.99, 2 = 5.00 to 6.49, 3 = 6.50 to 7.99, and 4 = 8.00+. The pattern of findings with these quartiles was nearly identical to that obtained previously. Finally, we repeated the regression analyses including scores on the Crowne and Marlowe social desirability index. This variable was not a significant predictor, and the pattern of findings remained similar to those reported in Table 4.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study partially supported the premise that the size of the pool of relatives is associated with the proportion of those relatives who are named as close or problematic social ties. In general, older participants named a larger number of their relatives as close social ties but did not name a greater proportion of their relatives. Findings did not support the availability hypothesis that individuals with fewer living relatives would name a smaller proportion of those relatives as problematic, however. There were differences in the number and the proportion of living relatives named as problematic ties, but these differences were more strongly associated with age than with available relatives who could be considered problematic.

Our findings were not as expected in part because our initial premise regarding the size of the pool of living relatives was not substantiated. Contrary to our expectation that older adults would have fewer living relatives, when grandchildren were included, older adults had more available living relatives than other age groups. When grandchildren and grandparents were excluded, oldest old adults had fewer living relatives within one generation of themselves than their middle-aged and young-old counterparts, but the same was true for young adults and teenagers. The oldest old adults may have diminished social resources in comparison to what they once had, but not in comparison to the number of relatives available to younger individuals who have not yet married or had children. Thus, our first expectations concerning the pool of living relatives were not met.

Networks of Close and Problematic Family Ties

We had initially predicted that younger and older adults would name a comparable absolute number of relatives as close social ties. In fact, older adults named a greater number of family members as close social ties than did younger adults. Moreover, adults of all ages named a comparable proportion of their living relatives among their close social ties. On the one hand, availability is an issue; the size of the network of close family ties varied as a function of the number of living relatives. Yet, even among close relatives, some form of selection or hierarchy was involved in determining who was listed in the social network. Adults of all ages listed two thirds to three quarters of their available living relatives as close social ties, leaving out other potential relatives. As has been suggested elsewhere, even oldest old adults did not feel close to all of their living relatives (Troll, 1994). In sum, individuals do seem to be sensitive to the pool of living relatives, but they consider certain living relatives more important than others.

Problematic social ties seem to function under a different mechanism than do close social ties. Oldest old adults listed fewer living relatives in absolute numbers and a smaller proportion as sources of irritation. This finding does not seem to reflect a lack of available living relatives that one could complain about. Nor does it seem to involve selection of certain relatives who are particularly emotionally rewarding and, by extension, exclusion of relatives who are not. Indeed, older adults tended to name a majority of living relatives as close ties as did adults of other ages. Moreover, older adults named a greater absolute number of relatives as close ties; they were not choosier than were younger adults in this regard.

The age difference was in the number of relatives deemed problematic. Younger adults feel both close to, and irritated by, their living relatives. By contrast, the findings suggest that older adults do not get upset with the relatives with whom they have close ties. These findings may reflect older adults' increased ability to regulate emotions and their tendency to experience fewer negative emotions on the whole (Almeida, 1998; Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Gross et al., 1997; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998; Troll & Fingerman, 1999). Future research might further consider the mechanisms that allow older adults to avoid interpersonal problems with family members.

Alternately, it is possible that older adults report fewer problems with their relatives because their relatives treat them more kindly than do relatives of younger adults. Indeed, in our

prior research, we examined incoming social stimuli in the form of holiday greetings and found that older adults received more sentimental cards than did younger adults (Fingerman & Griffiths, 1999). In other words, other people may act in a manner with older adults that allows these older individuals to respond with few negative emotions. Moreover, although healthy older adults may not receive more help from their relatives than they give to their relatives, they may derive greater pleasure from the help that they receive (Fingerman, 2000; Smith & Goodnow, 1999). This enhanced enjoyment may lead older adults to overlook faults in these kin ties.

Finally, cohort differences in the experience and expression of emotion may contribute to age differences in individuals' likelihood of listing relatives as problematic social ties (Charles et al., 2001). Although the findings in this study did not appear to reflect social desirability considerations, it is possible that individuals who were raised in different social climates have varying degrees of tolerance for their relatives' misbehaviors. Thus, the oldest old adults may have accepted their relatives' irritating behaviors when they were young adults, whereas the teenagers in this study may still be annoyed with their relatives in late life.

The Availability Hypothesis

There appears to be limited support for the availability hypothesis with regard to close social ties, but findings must be interpreted with caution. In keeping with initial predictions, regression analyses revealed that individuals with fewer available living relatives were more likely to make maximum use of these ties by viewing most or all of them as close social contacts. Yet, these findings with regard to close ties might be interpreted in more than one way. Researchers have suggested that adults of all ages name five to seven people as close social ties across social contexts (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Fingerman & Griffiths, 1999; Grossman, D'Augelli, & Hershberger, 2000; House et al., 1985). Therefore, individuals with few living relatives may name all of them to keep their number of close ties stable. If this alternate explanation is correct, the inclusion of all living relatives as close ties would still reflect who is available to be named; individuals with more available family members would name fewer of them. Yet, the smaller pool would not drive this pattern as is suggested by the availability hypothesis; rather, the need for five to seven close ties would. Future studies should attempt to disentangle these two possible explanations for the findings in this study.

At the same time, findings for problematic ties did not support the availability hypothesis. There was a strong age effect for the likelihood of naming few or no relatives as problematic above and beyond the effect for the pool of living relatives. Older adults named fewer relatives as problematic. As has been discussed, this finding is in keeping with current theory on emotion in later life (e.g., Carstensen et al., 1999; Troll & Fingerman, 1999). Intrapyschic factors associated with age are a likely explanation for the decrease in reports of problems in family ties. Individuals may simply experience fewer irritations as they grow older, particularly in the interpersonal arena. Alternately, extrapsychic factors such as treatment by other people or cohort differences may explain these findings.

Future Research

There are several areas where future research might illuminate some of the findings from this study. First, it is important to note limitations to this study, including the homogeneous sample, the skew in the number of individuals in their 20s who were available for the follow-up interview, and the cross-sectional nature of the data. Moreover, we only asked about a few types of living relatives. These types of relatives included the majority of family ties listed by individuals of all ages. Troll (1988) argued that these types of relatives are the ones that individuals of different ages use in defining their families. Yet, the propensity to define family around mother, father, siblings, and offspring may be specific to European American populations (Bedford & Blieszner, 1997). Researchers have found that the size of social support networks, and the proportion of kin in those networks, varies with ethnicity (Ajrouch et al., 2001). Future studies might include multiple ethnic groups and incorporate subjective definitions of kin. Adults of all ages also have friends whom they consider integral to their social networks. Other studies might address the available pool of friends and close and problematic social ties.

Findings from this study also provide fodder for longitudinal research examining how availability of living social contacts contributes to individuals' definitions of close and problematic social ties. Secondary analyses of longitudinal data have indicated that individuals increasingly select social ties that are emotionally rewarding as they grow older (Carstensen, 1992) and that individuals are increasingly satisfied with their social contacts with age (Lansford, Sherman, & Antonucci, 1998). Prospective longitudinal studies might include questions about what happened to social contacts who were listed at previous waves but are not listed at present (Lang, 2000). Researchers could also ask about living kin at each wave.

Data from the current cross-sectional study revealed that individuals do not list all of their close relatives in their social networks. There is no explanation for why some relatives are listed and some are not. By looking at changes in social networks over time, researchers will gain insights into whether some relatives are selected "out" of networks over time, are lost due to death, or were never considered important. Indeed, as was mentioned previously, there has been little attention to past relationship quality in research on social networks in late life. Some relatives may simply never develop close affinities. Moreover, the mechanisms guiding definitions of problematic ties may differ from those that influence definitions of close ties. Some relatives may be problematic throughout life but remain in the network of close social ties. Problematic ties have not been examined longitudinally, but future research could fill this gap and provide important information about the nature of social ties across the lifespan.

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Appendix

Note

1. We also asked about child and parent-in-law relationships, but these relationships were only available to individuals who were married or whose offspring were married. These relationships are not included in the analyses presented here.