

Patterns of Social Relationships and Psychological Well-being among the Elderly

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On the premise that social relationships among elderly adults differ in terms of the most significant, dominant figure, this study aimed to examine: (1) whether there were qualitative differences in supportive functions in family-dominant and friend-dominant affective relationships, and (2) whether "lone wolves", who were deficient in human resources, had difficulties in maintaining their well-being. A total of 148 Japanese, over the age of 65, both living in communities and in institutions were individually interviewed about their social relationships using a self-report type method, the Picture Affective Relationships test, and their well-being was assessed using Depression, Self-esteem, Life satisfaction, and Subjective health scales. Results showed that there were no differences in psychological well-being between family-dominant and friend-dominant participants, but those who lacked affective figures had lower scores in subjective well-being than did their family-dominant and friend-dominant counterparts. The generalisation of these findings to other cultures is discussed.

In the past decade, the positive influence of social relationships on psychological adjustment throughout the human lifespan has been fairly well established (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Harel & Deimling, 1984; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Lewis, 1982; Nestmann & Hurrelmann, 1994; Sarason & Sarason, 1985; Sauer & Coward, 1985; Smith & Baltes, 1993; Weiss, 1974, 1975). Research using the elderly as subjects has consistently shown that the number of social relationships one has is positively correlated with one's happiness and psychological adjustment (Antonucci & Jackson, 1987;

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Felton & Berry, 1992; Krause, 1987; Lang & Carstensen, 1994). Moreover, researchers have been investigating the qualitative characteristics of social relationships by asking subjects about the people who effectively provide different kinds of psychological functions for them, because some studies suggest that the amount or frequency of social interactions cannot sufficiently predict well-being (Duff & Hong, 1982; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Porritt, 1979; Ward, Sherman, & LaGory, 1984).

In the quest to understand the qualitative nature of social relationships, researchers are investigating whether kin are necessarily more capable than nonkin of enhancing older persons' psychological adjustment. Much of the literature confirms that elderly people are firmly embedded emotionally into the kin context (e.g. Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Cicirelli, 1989; Lang & Carstensen, 1994), and many studies indicate that family members are more effective than friends in fostering satisfaction and/or a sense of well-being in elderly people (Connidis & Davies, 1990; Felton & Berry, 1992; Field & Minkler, 1988; Heller, Thompson, Trueba, Hogg, & Vlachos-Weber, 1991; Lang & Carstensen, 1994). In a similar vein, some studies indicate that friends' general function is as informants or companions rather than as emotional supporters (e.g. Blieszner & Adams, 1992).

Other studies, however, consider nonkinship figures such as friends to be competent substitutes for family members as providers of psychological support (Bossé, Aldwin, Levenson, Workman-Daniels, & Ekerdt, 1990; Jones & Vaughan, 1990; Lam & Power, 1991; Larson, Mannell, & Zuzanek, 1986), especially among childless and/or widowed people (Connidis & Davies, 1990; Lang & Carstensen, 1994), or among elderly women (Beckman & Houser, 1982). In addition, studies of friendship among the elderly point out that best friends, old friends, or close friends who can exchange comparable social resources function as confidants (Blieszner, 1993; Roberto & Pearson-Scott, 1986; Shea, Thompson, & Blieszner, 1988), especially among widowed women (Gallagher & Gerstel, 1993; Roberto & Pearson-Scott, 1984) and nursing home residents (Bitzan & Kruzich, 1990). Moreover, it is suggested that in elderly adults the bereavement felt on the loss of a close friend is similar to that experienced when one loses a family member (Sklar & Hartley, 1990). Thus, findings regarding the contribution of kin and nonkin to well-being among the elderly are not consistent (Antonucci & Jackson, 1987; Blieszner, 1994).

Such inconsistencies are inevitable if researchers examine psychological functions by referring only to broad social categories, such as family members versus friends. As it is reasonably assumed that we each voluntarily select suitable figures for ourselves and assign appropriate psychological functions to each of them (Carstensen, 1987, 1991, 1992; Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Takahashi, 1990), the significance of a figure occupying any given social category varies with the individual. Thus, classifying a

variety of figures by predetermined social categories does not in itself indicate their particular functions. It is presumptuous to conclude, for instance, that a friend is a surrogate figure and is not enough of a supportive resource, even when a person expressly selects the friend as a more significant figure than any family member. In line with this reasoning, we should pay more regard to subjective evaluations of social relationships (i.e. individual assignments of psychological functions to each of a constellation of social figures). Some researchers have begun to make such investigations and have suggested that subjectively important figures can provide greater support as confidants than others (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Crohan & Antonucci, 1989).

In this study, we tested the hypothesis that there would be no differences in the quality of well-being among elderly people displaying different subjectively significant patterns of social relationships, by adopting a method designed to assess these patterns. That is, we proposed to classify participants into several groups in terms of the most significant figure (i.e. the person named by each individual as dominant in his/her framework of social relationships). By focusing on the dominant figure, we hoped to gain deeper insight into each individual's subjective evaluation of the people who mattered to them than has been shown in previous studies.

Our earlier research using the analysis of the dominant figure among younger generations has successfully indicated its utility (Inoue & Takahashi, in prep.; Takahashi, 1974, 1986, 1990; Takahashi & Majima, 1994). First, based on the dominant figure in each social framework, we identified several patterns of social relationships and showed how individuals concurrently maintain multiple significant figures: the dominant figure, who is expected to satisfy most of the psychological functions, and one or more other figures, who fulfil less critical functions. We were thus inclined to predict that there are similar kinds of patterns of social relationships among the elderly, such as spouse-dominant, child-dominant, and friend-dominant patterns.

More specifically, using the classification of social relationship patterns based on dominant figures, this study examined whether there would be qualitative differences in the supportive functions between friend-dominant and family-dominant elderly people. We were sceptical about generalising that nonkin were, at best, substitutes for kin members. Rather, we anticipated that, among friend-dominant elderly persons, the friend, as the central figure of the personal framework, could support psychological well-being as effectively as a dominant figure who happened to be a family member. However, isolated "lone-wolf" people would probably show difficulties in psychological adjustment, because they did not have sufficient social resources (Bryant & Rakowski, 1992; Parmelee & Werner, 1978; Rook, 1987).

METHOD

Participants

To investigate the subjective framework of social relationships, we planned to ask elderly adults to participate, who differed in terms of gender, marital and parental status, housing conditions, and living locations. Previous research suggested that such demographic and social contextual variables would have some influence on the construction of social relationships. To reflect the variety of present residential settings for the elderly in Japan, our participants were drawn from: (1) community-dwellers in large cities (i.e. metropolitan areas); (2) those in medium-sized cities (i.e. cities with a population of 100,000–200,000); and (3) institution-dwellers in medium-sized cities. These three groups together comprise 52% of the total age over-60-year-old population (Statistics Bureau, 1995).

As summarised in Table 1, the community-dwelling sample comprised 61 females and 47 males: 60% lived in their homes in Tokyo, and 40% in a medium-sized city located 90 minutes from Tokyo by train. The community-dwellers were all volunteers recruited from the membership of local senior organisations or social activities programmes for seniors: 21–32% of the elderly people contacted agreed to participate. In addition, 40 volunteers living in two homes for the elderly in the medium-sized city were investigated. This was because few such institutions exist in large cities like Tokyo, where the cost of land is very high. Forty percent of the people in each of the institutions agreed to participate. Because in a previous analysis (Takahashi, 1987), fewer friend-dominant and Lone-wolf persons were identified among the institution-dwellers than among the community-dwellers, a larger proportion of community-dwellers was studied here.

No one in either group had any severe mental or physical disorders. All subjects were literate and 53% of females and 68% of males had attended school for 12 years or more. All the community-dwelling participants and 95% of the female and 85% of the male institution-dwellers had been married. The spouses of 87% of the males and 53% of the females living in the community were alive. Ninety-eight percent of the community-dwellers and 62% of the institution-dwellers had at least one child. Forty-nine percent of the female and 40% of the male community-dwelling participants lived with one of their children and the child's family, and the others all stated that they met with one or more of their children at least a few times per year. Only 16% of the community-dwelling sample lived alone. Those in homes had lived there for 2–84 months. The stated reasons for coming to the home were that the participants were unmarried, divorced, widowed, childless and/or being unable to get along well with their spouse and/or children. In fact, although the spouses of six females and five males were alive, they lived apart except for one couple.

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Two Groups

Demographic Characteristics	Community-dweller		Institution-dweller	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Sample size	61	47	20	20
Age				
Mean	73.4	74.1	77.7	75.7
SD	4.4	6.9	7.8	6.8
Marital status				(%)
Married	52.5	87.2	30.0	25.0
Widowed	45.9	10.6	45.0	50.0
Divorced	1.6	2.1	20.0	10.0
Never married	0.0	0.0	5.0	15.0
No. living together				
Mean	2.0	2.2	–	–
SD	1.5	1.4	–	–
			(%)	
Alone	18.0	12.7	–	–
With only spouse	32.8	46.8	–	–
With a child and his/her family	49.1	40.4	–	–
No. of children				
Mean	2.7	2.6	1.8	2.1
SD	1.3	1.3	2.5	1.8
Mths in institution				
Mean	–	–	47.8	43.2
SD	–	–	34.4	32.1

Measures

Patterns of Social Relationships. The patterns of social relationships of individuals were assessed by a self-report type method, the Picture Affective Relationships test (PART) for Elderly People, which was constructed by the first author (Takahashi, 1987, 1990). The term "Affective Relationships" refers to the central and relatively stable social relationships that are essential for survival and well-being (Takahashi, 1990). We assume that affective relationships serve to satisfy the need for affective interactions (i.e. the need to have emotional ties with significant others). "Affective" refers not only to receiving help and support from others, but also to giving support and care to others and to sharing emotional experiences with others.

The PART consists of two sets of 12 cards, one set for females and one set for males. Each card illustrates a daily life situation in which affective behaviours toward another person may be induced. Six types of psychological functions are measured. Each pair of cards depicts imaginary

situations representing each of the following six functions: (1) seeking proximity (e.g. "With whom would you enjoy talking?"); (2) receiving encouragement and help (e.g. "When you were sick, who would you like to be with?"); (3) receiving emotional support (e.g. "With whom could you feel the most stable and comfortable?"); (4) receiving reassurance for behaviour and/or being (e.g. "If you could not decide what to wear when going out, whom would you like to consult with?"); (5) sharing information and experience (e.g. "If something pleasant happened to you, who would you like to share it with?"); (6) giving nurture (e.g. "Who is the person who you would like to help if he/she were in trouble?").

During the test session, having been instructed to suppose the major figure in the picture was him/herself (see Fig. 1), the participant was shown each card and asked to answer the question pertaining to each picture with the name of a person and their relationship to the subject. The relative strength of the need to relate toward each figure was represented by the number of times that figure was the answer to the question on the card. The functions of each figure was inferred from the situations in which the given figure was selected. The PART was designed to assess the level of need toward each of the figures by asking participants to differentiate which of the functions they assigned to each figure. According to the total score, the figure who was nominated most frequently was designated as dominant, and the participants were classified according to their relationship to the dominant figure chosen.

Operationally, a person who answered "nobody" or "by myself" for six (half) or more cards, was designated as falling into a "Lone-wolf" pattern. Among the remaining subjects, the dominant figure determined the pattern

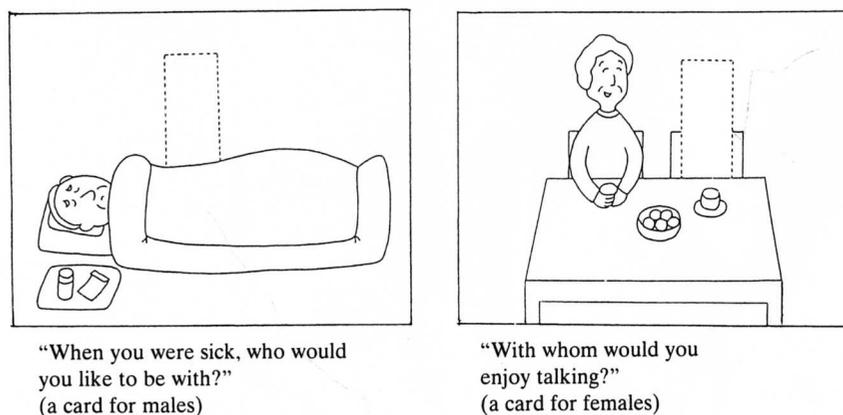


FIG. 1. Picture cards from the Picture Affective Relationships test.

for each participant. For example, if a participant nominated their spouse six times, one of the other figures twice, and so on, he/she was identified as having a Spouse pattern. However, if a person did not name any particular figure as many as three cards, or nominated two or more figures in the same number of cards, he/she was identified as unclassifiable, because it was difficult to identify the primary figure in such cases. In the case of the Friend pattern, only one friend of the same gender who met the criteria was identified as a dominant figure.

Measurements of Psychological Well-being. The participants were next interviewed to assess their emotional well-being based on four different scales. (1) The Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depressed Mood Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977), a 20-item, 4-point scale used to measure the level of depressive symptoms with emphasis on the affective component of the depressed mood in the previous week. (2) The Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a 10-item, 4-point scale used to measure the self-acceptance aspect of self-esteem. (3) A subjective life-satisfaction scale, a unitary measure of global satisfaction with everyday life on a 5-point scale where 5 = highly satisfied and 1 = very unsatisfied. (4) A subjective evaluation of health using a 5-point scale where 5 = excellent and 1 = poor.

Procedure

The participants were individually interviewed at their homes, in a room in a public community centre, or in the institution where they lived, for 40–60 minutes by one of six female interviewers, including the authors.

Results

Appearance of Patterns of Affective Relationships. As there were no significant differences in the selection of affective figures according to the city of residence, this variable was excluded from analysis. By applying the operational criterion of pattern, seven patterns of affective relationships were identified.

As Table 2 indicates, for 82% of the participants, one of the figures was identified as the dominant one. Among them, 46%, 19%, and 22% were identified as Spouse, Child, and Friend patterns, respectively. Consistent with our previous findings among younger generations, the dominant figure was assigned most of the psychological functions, especially the functions of emotional support (function 3), receiving encouragement and help (function 2), and seeking proximal interactions (function 1) over other functions. As the one to whom they sought to give nurture (function 6), other figures were often referred to. Fourteen percent of the total participants fell into the Lone-wolf pattern.

TABLE 2
Number of Participants by Pattern of Affective Relationships among Community-dwellers and Institution-dwellers

Pattern of Affective Relationships	Total	Community-dweller		Institution-dweller	
		Female	Male	Female	Male
Spouse	56	20	31	1	4
Child	23	13	4	2	4
Friend	27	12	1	11	3
Lone wolf	21	4	4	4	9
Other patterns					
Relatives	7	3	3	1	0
Daughter-in-law	8	6	1	1	0
Unclassifiable	6	3	3	0	0
Total	148	61	47	20	20

Residential settings, gender, and marital/parental status had some effects on the pattern of relationships. For example, regarding the dominant figure, the spouse was nominated significantly more often by those in the community than by those in institutions [$\chi^2(1, N = 106) = 14.15, P < .001$], and by males more often than by females [$\chi^2(1, N = 106) = 15.86, P < .001$]. Friends were nominated as the dominant figure significantly more often by those in institutions than in the community [$\chi^2(1, N = 106) = 6.06, P < .001$], and by females more often than by males [$\chi^2(1, N = 106) = 11.24, P < .001$].

It is noteworthy that, of people living with their spouse, 38% of the females and 27% of the males nominated other figures more frequently than they nominated their spouse. Such females were much more likely to prefer a child or a friend to the spouse as an affective figure that many of them were classified into the Child or Friend patterns; one out of 12 Child-pattern participants and 5 out of 12 Friend-pattern participants lived with their spouse. This is but one illustration of how individuals make their own judgements about who really means the most to them. Although social conditions, such as gender, living situation, and marital and parental status more or less constrained the patterning of relationships, individuals constructed their own frameworks of affective relationships taking into consideration the resources available to them. Only 14% of the participants were identified as exhibiting the Lone-wolf pattern. Lone-wolf-pattern elderly people were found significantly more often in institutions than in the community [$\chi^2(1, N = 127) = 12.27, P < .001$]. For four of them the spouse was alive, and 15 of them had at least one child.

Psychological Well-being of the Family-pattern, Friend-pattern, and Lone-wolf-pattern Elderly. Were there any qualitative differences in the

psychological support given to people showing different patterns of affective relationships? For example, did Friend-pattern elderly people or Lone-wolves indicate any deficiencies in well-being in comparison with people displaying Family patterns of social relationships? Each of the four well-being scores, CES-D, Self-esteem, Life-satisfaction, and Subjective health scores, was analysed by one-way ANOVAs. The significant effects of the pattern were further examined using Student-Newman-Keuls' *post-hoc* analyses ($P < .05$). In Table 3, the four psychological well-being scores of Spouse, Child, Friend, and Lone-wolf patterns are shown.

Of the four psychological adjustment scores, only Self-esteem and Life-satisfaction showed significant effects on affective relationship patterns. That is, for the Self-esteem score, there was a significant difference among affective relationship patterns [$F(3,124) = 6.00, P < .001$], and Student-Newman-Keuls' *post-hoc* analyses indicated that the Lone-wolf participants scored significantly lower than those in the remaining three patterns. The Life-satisfaction score also showed a significant difference among patterns: [$F(3,126) = 14.61, P < .001$], and Student-Newman-Keuls' *post-hoc* analyses indicated that Lone-wolf pattern participants were significantly lower in life-satisfaction than any single figure group. There were no significant differences among patterns in the scores of CES-D and Subjective health.

Next, we examined whether influences of the social contextual conditions of the participants (i.e. their gender, marital and parental status, and living situations), could explain these effects of the patterning of social relationships on self-esteem and life-satisfaction. Because of the limited size of the sample, we examined these social background variables individually. Regarding gender, a 2×4 (Gender \times Affective relationships pattern) ANOVA, conducted on both the Self-esteem scores and the Life-satisfaction scores, indicated no significant main effects of gender. The

TABLE 3
Psychological Adjustment Scores (Means and Standard Deviations) among Four Patterns of Affective Relationships

	Spouse Pattern ($n = 56$)	Child Pattern ($n = 23$)	Friend Pattern ($n = 27$)	Lone-wolf Pattern ($n = 21$)
CES-D	8.70 (8.03)	9.00 (5.42)	11.63 (7.53)	12.76 (6.06)
Self-esteem	30.47 (3.92)	28.90 (4.39)	27.74 (5.40)	26.14 (3.47)
Life-satisfaction	4.33 (0.98)	4.48 (0.67)	4.00 (1.11)	2.62 (1.60)
Subjective health	4.05 (1.15)	3.96 (1.02)	3.78 (1.22)	3.81 (1.17)

interaction between gender and the affective relationships pattern was significant only for the Life-satisfaction scores [$F(3,126) = 3.93, P < .01$]. The main effect of the affective relationships pattern remained significant in this analysis: [$F(3,124) = 5.52, P < .001$] for the Self-esteem scores; and [$F(3,126) = 15.41, P < .001$] for the Life-satisfaction scores. In both scores, Student-Newman-Keuls' *post-hoc* analyses indicated that Lone-wolf participants scored significantly lower than participants exhibiting other patterns.

As to marital status, a 2×4 (The spouse was alive and not alive \times Affective relationships patterns) ANOVA was examined for the two well-being scores. Neither the main effects of marital status nor interactions of marital status and the affective relationships pattern was found to be significant. Only the main effects of the pattern remained significant: for the Self-esteem scores [$F(3,124) = 3.46, P < .05$]; for the Life-satisfaction scores [$F(3,126) = 12.50, P < .001$]; and Student-Newman-Keuls' *post-hoc* analyses indicated that Lone-wolf-pattern participants were significantly lower in both of the scores.

As to parental status, a 2×4 (Having children and no child \times Affective relationships pattern) ANOVA also indicated no significant effects of parental status or of interactions of parental status and pattern. Only the main effects of the affective relationships pattern was significant: for Self-esteem scores [$F(3,124) = 5.51, P < .005$]; for the Life-satisfaction scores [$F(3,126) = 12.96, P < .001$]; and Student-Newman-Keuls' *post-hoc* analyses indicated that Lone-wolf-pattern participants were significantly lower in both of the scores.

However, 2×4 (Community and institution \times Affective relationships pattern) ANOVAs indicated a significant main effect of the living situation on the Self-esteem scores and the Life-satisfaction scores [$F(1,124) = 3.97, P < .05$; $F(1,126) = 4.74, P < .05$, respectively], but the main effect of affective relationships patterns was also significant [$F(3,124) = 2.85, P < .05$; $F(3,126) = 10.16, P < .001$, respectively]. Thus, although community-dwellers were higher in self-esteem and life-satisfaction, effects of the social relationships patterns were maintained across living situations.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the authors aimed to address results in previous gerontological literature that had made inconsistent assertions regarding whether family members are necessarily more effective emotional support providers than friends. As we predicted, and consistent with previous studies of adult friendships (e.g. Blieszner & Adams, 1992), the present results indicate that there were no differences in psychological well-being among people displaying affective patterns that were based on the identification of a

dominant affective figure. This result suggests that an elderly person who selects a friend as the most dominant figure can live with just as much self-assurance as one whose pattern is family-dominant. Consistent with previous research, the lone-wolves, those who were not able to call on significant others to fill as many functions, suffered from low self-esteem and a lack of life-satisfaction. Thus, the findings confirm our hypothesis that although we need social relationships with others for our well-being, we cannot assert, a priori, that one form of relationship is always better than another.

These findings were based on a new subjective description of social relationships adopted for this study, in which patterns of social relationships were identified in terms of the most important dominant figure in each individual's framework. Consistent with our previous research among younger people (Inoue & Takahashi, in prep.; Takahashi & Majima, 1994), there are several different patterns of social relationships among the elderly. For some people, family members are more important than friends, but for others, in contrast, friends are more important than the spouse or children as psychological support-providers. If we assume that everybody has freedom of choice in selecting figures on whom to call for emotional support, we cannot gauge such support solely on the kin versus nonkin dichotomy.

Although this study supports partially the previous observation that the individual assortments of social figures are limited by one's social contextual conditions, such as gender, marital and parental status, and living situation, we could also claim that within and beyond such constraints, each elderly person selects appropriate figures for him/herself. In fact, it is indicated, as suggested by previous Western studies, that widowed females are more attached to friends than are their male counterparts (Lang & Carstensen, 1994), and people who were never married and/or are childless show difficulties in developing social relationships (Connidis & Davies, 1990). However, it is also true that some married females have been found to construct Friend-dominant relationships, and others have reported a Child-dominant pattern, even while living with their spouse. These facts confirm that more or less autonomous choices of significant others are made by elderly people. Thus, investigators who are concerned with social support cannot sufficiently predict the efficacy of psychological support without considering individual subjective assignments of functions to certain figures, and it is likely that the mode of assessment of this study will be useful in future studies.

Are the present findings peculiar to elderly Japanese or can we apply them to elderly people in other cultures? We believe that although human beings universally construct their own social frameworks (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980; Lewis, 1982; Weiss, 1974), the selection of significant others is affected by customs and values surrounding people in their daily situations. In this vein,

research into different societies, where both a nontraditional culture of marital relationships is developing and where the obligatory family system is maintained, will be informative in understanding nonkin contributors as emotional supporters. At present, it is assumed that the proportions of friends versus family members as important figures will vary with cultural-historical factors, but we can assume that the relationships between the patterns of affective relationships and psychological well-being will stay the same.

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