

Neighbors in retirement housing were surveyed to identify distinguishing characteristics and natural helping styles of interactants within a dynamic informal support system. Findings confirm a typology of three neighborhood exchange types: (1) high helpers, who exhibit a quasi-professional style of helping without reciprocation; (2) mutual helpers, who show an interdependent style of give and take; and (3) neighborhood isolates, whose social ties and help sources are primarily outside the neighborhood. Service models suggested by natural helping styles include volunteer programs and self-help group interventions.

Key Words: Social supports, Social exchange, Informal helping

Natural Helping Among Older Adults¹

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A massive unregulated social welfare system exists naturally which provides more services, security, and hope for the future than all our agency help together. This ubiquitous system of informal assistance through family, friends, and neighbors is the major source of help for the elderly, yet little is known about the characteristics of natural helpers. Knowing what motivates and shapes the exchange of give and take in natural relationships will pave the way for harnessing this resource and expanding its potential to provide for our growing numbers of elderly.

Natural Neighbors: The Volunteer Block Worker

Undisputedly, families help the most. But family care may wane in the coming decades as a lower birth rate (fewer caregiving children) and more working women make elder care a greater burden. On the other hand, neighbors offer nearby help and ensure the presence of an ongoing people-pool from which friendships may be formed. Studies of friendship patterns show that proximity is a consistently strong determinant of social ties (Lowenthal & Robinson, 1976). In addition, the neighborhood is a convenient central location for service provision. It is an especially important delivery approach for a geographically restricted, sometimes "block-bound" elderly population.

Recently, the idea of self-selected volunteer service providers has interested program planners involved in community intervention. Collins and Pancoast (1976) first discovered "natural neighbors" and described them as central neighborhood helpers. Smith (1975) focused on nurturant individuals who specifically adopted elderly neighbors, and Valle (1981) has located "servador" networks — similar helpers in Hispanic communities. These writings

have renewed the battered, forgotten image of "good neighbor" in the dress of modern service provider within a natural welfare system.

A Perspective of Social Exchange

In an attempt to learn about these indigenous service providers, natural helping relationships are considered within a social exchange perspective (Chadwick-Jones, 1976). Social exchange theory is based on behavioral assumptions; therefore, social interaction is seen as being motivated by rewards and punishments. For a relationship to continue, both participants must find interaction more beneficial than costly, implying a reciprocity of benefits. Numerous studies have found reciprocity to be a preferred and prevalent aspect of relationship (Krebs, 1970).

This study is based on the assumption that helping behavior can be motivated by direct reciprocity and by indirect rewards, such as congruence with helping values or empathy for others. A social exchange typology forms the basis of the analysis: "High helpers" represent an apparently unidirectional exchange pattern in which neighbors give but are not directly reciprocated. Presumably their rewards are indirect. "Mutual helpers," on the other hand, both give and take actively so that reciprocity and exchange form the basis for their relationships. "Neighborhood isolates" neither give nor take actively with neighbors, so they are disengaged from neighborhood interaction. "Dependents," who take more than they give, complete the typology; however, too few respondents were classified in this last category to constitute a distinct group.

Helper Characteristics

Selection of characteristics which might describe natural helpers is based on a voluminous social psychological literature on prosocial behavior. These experimental studies (mostly of college students) identified a number of personal dispositions related to helping. Sociability (outgoing, attractive as a

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friend, and skilled socially with good community relations) has been related to helping (Gergen et al., 1972; Krebs, 1970). Empathy (Krebs, 1975) and adherence to a "norm of social responsibility" have also proved to be related personal factors. Schwartz (1977) found that the personality dimension "Ascription of Responsibility" interacted with social values to promote helping. These characteristics represent enduring personal qualities that might carry over and motivate helping in ongoing relationships as well as in one-shot, experimentally contrived helping events.

This study addresses the question "What demographic, social, health, and personality characteristics are related to social exchange types — high helpers, mutual helpers, and neighborhood isolates?"

Method

Age-segregated housing developments were chosen as a likely environment to study neighborhood helping patterns. A sample of 67 elderly was drawn randomly to represent residents of two purposively selected, age-segregated housing developments within a single middle-income community. Site samples were similar in sex distribution, marital status, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and amount of help given and received. They differed in age and religious affiliation. Since site samples did not differ on the dependent variables, help giving and help taking, samples were combined for a total of 67 respondents. This combined sample was then subdivided into exchange type groups on the basis of give and take scores so that mutual helpers had high give and take ($n = 22$), high helpers had high give and low take ($n = 20$), and isolates had low give and take ($n = 25$).

Measure of Give and Take

Amount of give and take was determined in two-hour interviews using open-ended probing questions to elicit acts of giving and taking for specific neighbors. Acts described for a six-month period were summed to produce a measure of giving and taking.

This measure was analyzed for social desirability bias or self-aggrandizing response, which had proved to be a problem in prior network studies (Shulman, 1976). A subsample of 28 subjects (14 interacting pairs), who described interaction with another study respondent, was analyzed for level of congruence. The result showed only a slight positive mean difference between the acts one respondent claimed to give and the acts his or her collateral claimed to take. Social desirability, therefore, did not represent a major problem.

Measures of Personal Characteristics

Demographic, social, and health characteristics used to describe exchange type groups were measured by direct, forced-choice, and scaled questions.

Demographic characteristics were age, sex, marital status, ethnicity, religious affiliation, education, previous occupation, and Hollingshead Index. Social characteristics were volunteer activities, organizational affiliation, neighbor interactants named, and length of time in the apartment. Social support measures were frequency of contact with children, relatives, friends, and neighbors; a rating of help source for hypothetical need situations (a ride, sick care, a loan, talking over a problem) adapted from Brim (1974); and ratings of reciprocity and closeness for specific neighbors. Measures of health and self-care were adapted from the OARS global ratings (Pfeiffer, 1975).

Personality characteristics used to describe exchange type groups were measured using standardized or well field-tested scales: Ascription of Responsibility, a 16-item self report with adequate internal consistency which had been used in numerous studies of the relationship between helping values and behavior (Schwartz, 1977); Interpersonal Affect, a 20-item subscale of the Jackson Personality Inventory (Jackson, 1976), which was well validated and reliable and tapped a dimension close to empathy; and a bipolar self-report item measuring quiet-outgoing, which was arranged on a 7-point scale and validated by relationship to other indices of introversion-extroversion (Goodman, 1972).

Analysis

Scattergrams displaying the pattern of give and take data were used to determine definitions for the three groups. Thus, mutual helpers were those who described giving many acts (16 or more) over the six-month period and described taking similarly (within 4 acts). High helpers were those who described giving more than taking (5 or more acts). Isolates were those who described fewer giving acts (15 or less) and described taking similarly (within 4 acts). Characteristics of the three neighborhood exchange groups were then examined using chi square and ANOVA with post hoc tests (Keppel, 1973). Case by case analysis of respondents who were extreme types was used to sharpen the picture derived by statistical analysis.

Findings: Styles of Neighborhood Involvement

The Sample

The final sample was made up primarily of widowed white women in their mid-70s. Specifically, 85% were women, 57% were widowed, and 96% were white. The average age of the respondents was 76 years. The group was well educated; over 60% had completed high school, and a sizeable proportion (22.4%) had held professional or managerial positions during their working lives.

Exchange Group Differences

Variables that significantly differentiated groups of the exchange typology or trended in the analysis of variance are displayed in Table 1. Demographic vari-

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and *F* Values for Exchange Type Groups Defined by 6-Month Give-Take Measure

Variable	High Helpers (<i>n</i> = 20)		Mutual Helpers (<i>n</i> = 22)		Isolates (<i>n</i> = 25)		<i>F</i> Value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Neighbor contact	7.80	1.32	8.00	1.45	6.00	2.31	8.93***
Neighbor help source	3.35	.48	2.55	.75	3.68	1.37	9.02***
Volunteer hours	9.40	16.21	1.36	3.87	.60	2.45	5.91**
Health	3.10	1.07	2.55	.96	2.40	1.04	2.78
Quiet-outgoing	3.50	2.01	3.95	2.03	5.12	1.54	4.66**
Interactant	.90	1.07	.64	.90	.16	.37	4.85**
Apartment tenure	17.67	8.36	22.31	4.75	16.74	9.42	3.28*

Note: Variables were scaled as follows: (a) neighbor contact: a 10-point scale from never (0) to daily (9), (b) neighbor help source: a 4-point scale reflecting the number of hypothetical situations for which neighbors were not considered a help source, (c) volunteer hours per month, (d) health: a 5-point scale with 5 representing excellent, (e) quiet-outgoing: a 7-point dichotomous scale with 1 representing the most outgoing, (f) interactant: number of respondents who named this subject as an interactant, (g) apartment tenure: months in apartment adjusted for site differences.

**p* ≤ .05

***p* ≤ .01

****p* ≤ .001

ables (age, sex, ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, and Hollingshead Index) all failed to differentiate the groups. Personality scales (Ascription of Responsibility and Interpersonal Affect) also failed to show an effect, as did frequency of contact with children, relatives, and friends.

Two additional findings of general group difference were evident through chi square analysis of categorical variables. First, groups differed on the number of respondents who claimed that their neighbor gave more (*p* ≤ .01). Mutual helpers were more likely than both other groups to commend neighbors by designating them as the high giver in the relationship. Similarly, groups differed in the number of neighbor relationships rated as emotionally close (*p* ≤ .01). Figures indicated that mutual helpers have more close relationships than either isolates or high helpers.

A more detailed picture of each group begins to emerge with the examination of ANOVA post hoc differences between pairs (see Figure 1). Results of case analysis add to the description and provide illustration.

High Helpers

Post Hoc Results: High helpers were distinguished in ANOVA post hoc tests from mutual helpers and isolates by their activity as volunteers. High helpers, defined by more acts of giving than taking with neighbors, were the same people who volunteered time to agencies and church activities. Furthermore, they were distinguished from mutual helpers by their reluctance to rely on neighbors as a help source with hypothetical problems, such as need for a ride, sick care, a loan, or a talk. Thus, their active helping was not accompanied by a sense of support from neighbors. They were different from neighborhood isolates on variables reflecting sociability: they had greater contact with neighbors, described themselves as outgoing, and were named more frequently as central interactants.

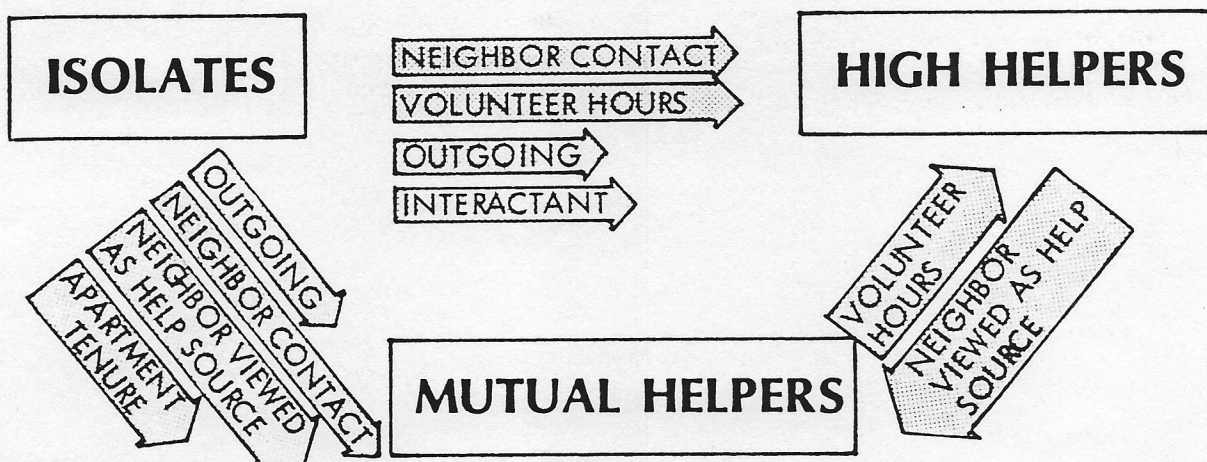
Case Analysis: Most extreme high helpers had worked as helping professionals at some point in their lives (nurses, welfare workers, and teachers). This professional socialization was coupled with unsolicited comments about family socialization to helping: religious orientation, identification with helping parents, or large families. "I was brought up that way. My mother taught us, 'If anyone gets sick . . . , this is how to make the soup!' We'd visit those who'd lost grandparents, and she would say, 'Now don't cry . . .'"

Extreme high helpers generally had at least one relationship in which they saw themselves as giving more than they received. In many of these relationships, there was no question of reciprocity because of special skill of the helper or special need of the receiver. Some of these one-way relationships had a "caseload" quality. Although liking and choice of association were always present, these relationships were not typically close. One respondent felt sufficient social distance from those she helped to refer to them as "little seniors."

Mutual Helpers

Post Hoc Results: Mutual helpers, defined by roughly equal give and take with neighbors, were distinguished from high helpers and isolates by their willingness to rely on neighbors as a help source in hypothetical need situations, such as needing a ride, sick care, a loan, or a talk. For them, the neighborhood was a supportive environment. They did not volunteer as much as high helpers did, however. They were distinguished from isolates in that they had greater neighbor contact and had lived longer in the apartment building. They were further distinguished from isolates by their rating of themselves as more outgoing.

Case Analysis: A common theme of mutual helpers was a friendly communality. A typical comment follows: "When we had a blackout, we lit candles and wandered room to room — like home. There are five



□ Differentiates groups defined by six-month measure of give and take.
High helpers, $n=20$; mutual helpers, $n=22$; Isolates, $n=25$.

Figure 1. Characteristics differentiating social exchange types on ANOVA post hoc tests^a

^aStudent Newman Kuels for alpha level $p \leq .05$.
(Arrow points to group having highest value.)

of us just like sisters." Indeed, some friendship circles had traditions of exchange. One group traded samples of food. "If I get a dish from somebody, I try and put something in it before I bring it back . . . Sometimes I have to go hunting my dishes." Another woman recounted saving scraps of fabric, newspaper, paper bags, old greeting cards, coupons, and stamps and passing them on in a complex charity network ending at the Presbyterian Church, the Thrift Shop, or the Junior Blind.

Isolates

Post Hoc Results: As might be expected, the isolates distinguished themselves from mutual helpers and high helpers by their reduced contact with neighbors. They were less outgoing than mutual helpers and high helpers. They differed from the high helpers on the amount of volunteer hours worked. They also were chosen as interactants less frequently than high helpers. They differed from mutual helpers in their reluctance to go to neighbors when they needed help and in their shorter stay in their apartments.

Case Analysis: Isolates had only tangential interaction with neighbors. Most of the extreme group were basically quiet people whose aging had been accompanied by loss of relationship and by frailty (although a few appeared to be lifetime isolates). A typical comment was: "Their conversation goes back in their life, so if you haven't known them or known that type of person, you don't have very much in common." Just as extreme high helpers offered unsolicited comment about socialization experiences, isolates recalled negative parental attitudes toward neighbors. "My father taught us . . . 'Don't get involved.' We didn't have a lot of people sitting around." "My

mother never liked neighbors . . . She didn't want them running in and out interrupting her housework."

Discussion: Putting the Pieces Together

High Helpers

The findings from this study confirm the image presented by others of a servador, natural neighbor, or indigenous service provider who operates as self-selected central professional with a caseload (Collins & Pancoast, 1976; Smith, 1975; Valle, 1981). This image emerging from our data emphasizes two distinguishing characteristics.

First, high helpers volunteer — informally and with formal agencies. The relationship between one-way help-giving in informal relationships and volunteer work confirms the help exchange typology and suggests consistency across giving situations. This has been a bone of contention among experimental researchers, with one faction asserting that propensity for help-giving is situationally dependent (Gergen et al., 1972).

Second, high helpers show an uncompromising self-sufficiency and independence, even during times of need. Their reluctance to rely on neighbors when they themselves are in need is a characteristic not previously identified. This reluctance may be based on personal values against help-taking; possibly it is also based on association with persons who are unable to help. The result is that high helpers are in a vulnerable position — supportive to others but not able to enjoy the security of neighborhood support.

Motivation for the seemingly unrewarded behavior of high helpers remains an anomaly. This

study fails to identify any relationship or personality characteristic that might suggest motivation for unreciprocated giving. If high helpers seek emotional closeness by one-way helping, they do not excel in achieving it. Our measures of empathy (Interpersonal Affect; Jackson, 1976) and social responsibility (Ascription of Responsibility; Schwartz, 1977), which might suggest empathic identification or personal values as motives for giving, did not show differences among the groups. On the other hand, there are other possibilities not examined in this study, such as desire for gratitude, control, or status, which may motivate one-way involvement. Need for control or dominance was found to be related to high helping in a study of informal give and take between spouses (Burke & Weir, 1976). Perhaps a key to the dynamics of one-way helping is suggested by case study findings. Unsolicited comment about parental socialization to helping roles and professional experience in helping jobs suggest that socialization may be important in developing this interpersonal style. This stance is consistent with findings that Christians who rescued Jews from the Nazis had strong identification with a morally oriented parent (London, 1970).

Mutual Helpers

In contrast to high helpers, mutual helpers are nested in a sense of security or support from their neighbors. Perhaps they deal more with friends who are qualified to help them. They probably see dependence on others as less threatening, more human, and an integral part of relationships. Some literature suggests that equal involvement or interdependence is characteristic of enduring relationships. In a study of 200 dating couples, Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (cited in Kelley, 1979) found that couples with unequal involvement were more likely to break up over a two-year period. Another report from the same study found that the less involved person had more "say" in the relationship, cared less about the other, was the most attractive, and had alternative partners (Peplau, cited in Kelley, 1979). Our findings that mutual helpers had the closest relationships with their neighbors are congruent with this research on intimate couple relationships.

Neighborhood Isolates

In marked contrast to both other groups, isolates were aloof from neighborhood interaction. They were, however, *neighborhood* isolates and not isolates generally. Neighborhood interaction does have special requirements. Neighbors must tread the narrow line between respect for privacy and social responsiveness. Neighborhood fences are a common barrier, perhaps overcome most readily by the socially outgoing. Neighborhood isolates viewed themselves as quiet people socially. Their relatively poor health and short apartment stay may additionally have deterred an approach toward relationships based on proximity instead of blood ties, common interests, or bonds of past exchange.

Suggestions for Research

It has already been well established that a relationship exists between close social ties and other life benefits, among them long life, good mental health, and life satisfaction (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Larson, 1978; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968). The research task ahead is identifying what aspects of relationships produce these benefits and discovering the motivational dynamics of helping. Defining "social supports" in terms of give and take offers a sound jumping off point in this effort. It focuses attention on the assessment of reciprocity, from which the social exchange types were derived in this study. In addition, it introduces a network variable — congruence, or the level of agreement or disagreement between participants over what is claimed as "give" and "take." Reciprocity and congruence, along with other social psychological variables — similarity, attraction, liking, and emotional closeness — are likely to be important to refining our understanding of the "supportive" nature of informal relationships.

Measurement, however, is an issue. Although a probing interview is cumbersome, it engages subjects more completely in the task of recalling give and take than the simple checklists used previously. A shorter recall period, repeated measures, or a prospective measure would add to the correct representation of highly active neighbors whose daily interactions cannot be fairly captured in a long recall period. (On the other hand, very short recall periods will reduce discrimination among those who rarely interact with neighbors.) Yet, even with a shorter recall period certain types of acts are likely to be underreported. Verbal acts and conversations aimed at helping were harder to visualize and therefore to enumerate. More work could be done toward developing a consistent index to measure both high and low interaction and verbal and concrete acts of helping. Finally, an attempt in this study to weight acts for level of effort (using 3-point scales for emotional involvement, physical exertion, and time) failed to add to the picture produced by a simple count. Evaluation of importance of an act, if such an attempt is made, is highly individual and best made by the respondent who can assess the circumstances involved: need, resources, and alternatives available.

Potential for Intervention

The helping groups identified in this study represent a manpower pool that could be developed to meet many community needs. Two distinct approaches are suggested by the natural caregiving styles of high helpers and mutual helpers.

First, the volunteering, quasi-professional lifestyles of high helpers are well suited to a paraprofessional role. Such roles might include case management for the frail, companionship for the ill and housebound, or leadership in neighborhood organizations.

The role of case manager is a particularly good example of how high helpers might make a critical

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community contribution. Although age segregated communities exclude individuals who are not able to live independently, the criteria for "live independently" tend to change as the entire community ages. Thus, a continuum of services, from housekeeper to live-in caretaker, would allow residents to live comfortably at home longer. These services could be coordinated by paraprofessional case managers (volunteer high helpers) working in conjunction with robust younger housekeepers and aides. A case management program model, which both uses and protects retired high helper volunteers, is the Helper Bank. The Helper Bank is basically a service savings program. A deposit in labor is credited into an account during early retirement. Services can be withdrawn later when needed during illness or decline. A durable sponsoring agency provides leadership and continuity over the years for this low cost program. The Helper Bank model ensures help in times of trouble for high helpers, who are typically reluctant to rely on informal neighborhood resources.

A second and altogether distinct group of programs is suggested by the egalitarian, reciprocal helping pattern of mutual helpers. Interventions based on exchange and mutuality of give and take might include self-help groups addressed to a common concern, community action projects that might engage entire friendship circles, and sponsored social events to facilitate the development of informal ties.

For example, providing organized social opportunities would meet the needs of neighborhood isolates who tend to be quiet people and relatively new to the complex. Repetitive non-intimate associations with peers in activities such as bingo games, trips, and lawn bowling give opportunity for acquaintanceship and friendship selection. More ambitious and productive programs (e.g., food cooperatives and resident operated child-care centers) would simultaneously make a community contribution and provide socializing opportunities. Basically, the more diverse the activities, the wider the appeal and therefore the greater the potential for successfully providing the option of informal involvement. These programs tend to rise and then die over time as group membership and friendships shift. Therefore, new efforts should be launched continually to keep a broad variety of social opportunities alive.

The programs described above are examples of an endless list generated by socialization needs and natural community resources. The focus on natural helping, our most prevalent and most potent source of social welfare, provides a logical and provocative starting point for professional interventions. Social exchange types identified in this study offer a foundation on which to build program models that can more closely address community weaknesses and capitalize on community strengths.

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